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Robin Dahlberg
Breaking Point
When the Criminal Justice System Fails

Texts by Sara C. Appleby, Robin Dahlberg
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When the justice system fails people: six wrongly convicted individuals share their stories.

From the book:

The National Registry of Exonerations reports that between 1989 and 2024, 13 percent of all exonerated individuals in the United States were wrongfully convicted because of a false confession. A disproportionately high number were people of color. Registry data, case files, and investigative reporting reveal that many of these false confessions were obtained through psychologically coercive interrogations.—Robin Dahlberg

Created in collaboration with six exonerees, *Breaking Point* examines how guilt-presumptive, coercive interrogation practices can compel innocent people to admit crimes they did not commit.

False confessions are often dismissed as anomalies or personal failings, yet they remain one of the leading causes of wrongful convictions in the United States. Research consistently shows that coercive police tactics are a decisive factor. Once an innocent person is wrongly identified as a prime suspect, law enforcement frequently subjects them to interrogations aimed at extracting a confession rather than discovering the truth.

These methods are systematic: isolation in unfamiliar environments, prolonged and confrontational questioning, deception about evidence, fake polygraph tests, and implied promises of leniency. Under sustained psychological pressure, compliance can feel like the only way forward. Young people, individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and those with deep respect for authority are particularly vulnerable.

Breaking Point centers on the voices of the collaborating exonerees—Jeffrey Deskovic, Vanessa Gathers, Brian Halsey, Eddie Lo-

wery, Christopher Ochoa, and Raymond Santana—each of whom falsely confessed and spent years, in some cases decades, in prison. The reader is invited to enter the interrogation room alongside them, to confront the fear, tension, and discomfort they endured, and to challenge our assumptions about guilt, authority, and truth.

The book's design reinforces the psychological intensity of the interrogation room. Rendered in stark black and white, it combines altered stills from police video recordings, quiet still lifes, urban landscapes, and handwritten reflections from the exonerees. Striking close-up portraits and staged interrogation scenes sit alongside original interrogation materials, court documents, and media coverage of the trials and subsequent exonerations.

From the text *False Confessions: A Social Science Perspective* by **Dr. Sara C. Appleby**:

In sum, not only does a confession increase the likelihood of conviction, but it also continues to haunt the innocent person upon exoneration. That is why understanding the causes and consequences of false confessions is a key step toward ensuring that the legal system renders results that are fair and reliable.

Robin Dahlberg is an award-winning visual artist whose work is held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the New York Public Library. Trained as an attorney, she spent twenty years in the National Legal Department of the American Civil Liberties Union, designing and leading campaigns to reform the U.S. criminal justice system.

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Press Images



01_© Robin Dahlberg



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03_Lorenzo Montoya. An altered still from a Denver, Colorado, Police Department video recording of the 2000 interrogation of fourteen-year-old Lorenzo Montoya. During questioning, Montoya falsely confessed to murder and was wrongfully imprisoned for thirteen years before being exonerated by DNA evidence. © Robin Dahlberg



04_Tom Perez. An altered still from a Fontana, California, Police Department video recording of the 2018 interrogation of fifty-three-year-old Tom Perez. After seventeen hours of questioning, Perez confessed to murdering his father; days later, police determined that his father was alive and well. © Robin Dahlberg



o5_© Robin Dahlberg



o6_© Robin Dahlberg



o7_Vanessa Gathers. Vanessa Gathers, as a thirty-four-year-old New York City employee, falsely confessed to participating in a 1991 assault and robbery. During her interrogation, a detective yelled, screamed, and threatened her with his firearm. Based on that confession, she was wrongfully convicted and spent ten years in prison. In 2016, her conviction was vacated after prosecutors determined that the confession was false and the interrogation involved coercive and unethical conduct. © Robin Dahlberg



o8_Eddie Lowery. Eddie Lowery, as a twenty-two-year-old soldier stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, falsely confessed to the 1984 rape of an elderly woman. During an eleven-hour interrogation, detectives threatened him, denied him food and water, and blocked his requests for a lawyer and his commanding officer. Although he recanted his confession immediately, it was used to convict him; he spent nine years in prison and more than a decade on a sex offender registry. In 2002, DNA testing exonerated Lowery and identified a serial rapist as the true perpetrator. © Robin Dahlberg



09_Jeffrey Deskovic. Jeffrey Deskovic, as a sixteen-year-old high school student in Peekskill, New York, falsely confessed to the 1989 murder of a classmate during an interrogation in which he was told that he had failed three bogus polygraph exams and was threatened with violence. He spent sixteen years in prison before DNA analysis identified the real perpetrator and exonerated Deskovic. © Robin Dahlberg



10_Christopher Ochoa. Christopher Ochoa, as a twenty-two-year-old employee at a pizza restaurant, falsely confessed to the 1988 rape and murder of a young woman in Austin, Texas. During a two-day interrogation, detectives screamed at him, threatened him with the death penalty and sexual violence, and denied him access to a lawyer. After twelve years in prison, Ochoa was exonerated when DNA testing identified the real perpetrator. © Robin Dahlberg



11_Byron Halsey. Byron Halsey, as a twenty-four-year-old with a six-grade education, was interrogated for more than thirty hours in connection with the 1985 sexual assault and murder of his girlfriend's children in Plainfield, New Jersey. At the end of those 30 hours, he signed a blank sheet of paper that law enforcement officials used to draft a false confession. He spent two decades in prison before being exonerated by a DNA analysis of evidence from the crime scene. © Robin Dahlberg



12_Raymond Santana. Raymond Santana, at the age of fourteen, falsely confessed to participating in the 1989 rape of a jogger in New York City's Central Park. He was subjected to more than fifteen hours of interrogation involving threats and intimidation. He spent more than five years in prison before DNA evidence and a confession by the true perpetrator led to his exoneration. © Robin Dahlberg