

# 74-year-old woman, wrongly imprisoned, released after 32 years

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Mary Virginia Jones, 74, was released Monday after spending 32 years in prison for a murder committed by another person, her boyfriend at the time, in 1981. In Jones's fifth court proceeding, the Los Angeles County district attorney's office struck a deal with her, having her plead no contest to involuntary manslaughter—a crime for which she had already served far more than enough time.

Jones had been originally convicted of first-degree murder, kidnapping to commit robbery and robbery. Though she did not kill anyone, she had driven her boyfriend, Mose Willis, and his two captives to the place where Willis shot them. She was sentenced to spend the rest of her life in prison. Mose Willis was sentenced to death and later died of natural causes while still on Death Row.

A legal team from the University of Southern California (USC) Law School's Post-Conviction Justice Project argued, in Jones's fifth trial, that previous trials had not taken into account the abusive and coercive role her boyfriend had played. Jones, they asserted, was forced at gunpoint to drive him to the scene of the crime. They also argued that Jones was a "battered woman," something none of the previous court cases had taken into account.

At the time of the crime, Jones was in her early 40s. Her parents were reported to have physically abused her. At the age of 16, she was raped by a stranger and became pregnant with a son. Later in her life, Jones's daughter was killed by a drunk driver at the age of 4.

The defense argued that when she met Willis at the age of 41, she had already gone through a series of abusive relationships with men. Jones, at the time, was working as a teacher's aide in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Willis moved into her home within a month of their meeting each other. According to the

*Los Angeles Times*, once, "after an argument, [Willis] shot at Jones and her daughter and threatened to kill both of them if they talked to authorities."

The defense team told the court that on the day of the crime, April 3, 1981, Willis told Jones that he planned to use her tax refund check to buy cocaine and then resell it. That night, Willis invited two drug dealers to Jones's house and then forced Jones and the drug dealers, at gunpoint, into a car. Jones drove the car, at the direction of Willis, to an alleyway. Willis shot both drug dealers, killing one of them.

According to Jones and her defense team, her back was turned when the shots happened. Fearing that she would be shot next, she ran from the scene to a friend's house, where she was later arrested.

In her first trial, in the early 1980s, Jones was convicted of first-degree murder, kidnapping, with the intent to rob, and robbery. According to the *Times*, the prosecution "argued that Jones was in love with Willis and would have done anything for him." The prosecution prevailed, as the jury found Jones guilty of murder in the first degree, meaning that she willfully and with premeditation aided in the shooting.

However, the first verdict was immediately appealed. In a second trial, the jury was split on all accounts. The case therefore moved onto a third trial, in which Jones was convicted of robbery and kidnapping with the intention of robbery, but not on murder charges. For these crimes, she was given an indeterminate life sentence, between 15 years and life, based on her behavior.

The state was still not satisfied, because Jones had been exonerated of the murder charge. Prosecutors filed to retry the case in 1987. During this fourth trial, Jones was reconvicted of first-degree murder.

After more than three decades in prison, Jones is free.

She read her plea in court the day of her release: “I did not willingly participate in this crime, but I believe entering a no contest plea is in my best interest to get out of custody.” Several audience members broke out with cheers when the judge declared she would be released.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 1 in 99 adults are in prison in the United States. The prison population has skyrocketed since 1970, rising by a whopping 700 percent. This far outpaces the roughly 50 percent population growth since 1970. Though the United States has only 5 percent of the world’s population, it has a quarter of the world’s prison population.

Defendants are routinely sentenced to prison for life either for crimes they did not commit or for crimes where the sentence is grossly disproportionate. A 2013 ACLU study showed that more than 3,200 people are serving life without parole in the United States for nonviolent offenses. The vast majority of these crimes are drug-related.

In 2013, a 15-year-old in Virginia who joined with two 18-year-olds to rob several other teenagers at gunpoint was given life in prison without parole. The teenager was given six life sentences even though he did not physically injure anyone and no shots were fired.



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