# Louisiana man freed after 25 years on death row as conviction overturned over junk science



A Louisiana man who spent nearly 25 years on death row has had his conviction for first-degree murder overturned following a comprehensive review of forensic evidence that his legal team described as based on discredited “junk science.” The ruling was issued last week by Fourth Judicial District Court Judge Alvin Sharp.

Jimmie Duncan was convicted in 1998 after prosecutors accused him of raping and drowning his girlfriend's toddler daughter, Haley Oliveaux, in a bathtub. Central to the prosecution’s case were bite mark analysis conducted by forensic dentist Michael West and an autopsy performed by pathologist Steven Hayne. Both experts have since been linked to multiple wrongful convictions, and Duncan's defence team labelled their forensic work as unreliable and scientifically invalid.

Judge Sharp's decision to overturn the conviction followed expert testimony that the bite mark evidence was “not scientifically defensible” and that the child's death was likely the result of “accidental drowning.” Additional factors contributed to the judge's ruling, including the recantation of a jailhouse informant's testimony and evidence of ineffective legal counsel during Duncan’s original trial.

The case highlights broader issues surrounding the use of bite mark analysis in criminal trials. The Innocence Project, an organisation dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted individuals, has documented numerous cases where faulty bite mark evidence led to false convictions. In Duncan’s case, a video presented in court showed Dr West forcibly pressing a dental mould into the child's body to create the bite mark impression — a technique not disclosed to the state-appointed expert who testified that the marks matched Duncan’s teeth. Forensic dentist Dr Adam Freeman testified that the foundational assumptions of bite mark analysis are outdated and classified it as “junk science.”

Hayne, who conducted the autopsy and testified during the trial that Duncan sexually assaulted and forcibly drowned Oliveaux, faced criticism from expert witnesses for conducting a "sloppy" and “inadequate” examination. Subsequent forensic advances suggested the injuries attributed to abuse were misinterpreted, with sexual assault tests returning negative and no blood found on the child. Steven Hayne passed away in 2020.

The Ouachita Parish District Attorney, Robert Tew, has not yet decided whether to appeal the ruling, seek a retrial with new evidence, or accept the conviction’s nullification. His office commented that prosecutors are “assessing options in this case.” Duncan’s legal team, while declining to comment further, stated in court filings that the case embodies many characteristics typical of wrongful convictions.

Meanwhile, Louisiana legislators are debating a bill intended to reform the state's post-conviction relief process—an avenue used by prisoners like Duncan to present new evidence after exhausting appeals. The proposed legislation would reduce the time limit for filing petitions to within one year after a conviction becomes final. Attorney General Liz Murrill testified that this change aims to address what she described as “endless and repetitive” appeals that delay justice for victims’ families, especially in capital cases.

However, critics warn that such reforms could decrease opportunities for wrongly convicted individuals to overturn unjust sentences. Since 1989, at least 11 individuals sentenced to death in Louisiana have been exonerated. Samantha Kennedy, executive director of advocacy group Promise of Justice Initiative, voiced concerns, saying, “The state of Louisiana is reckless with the lives of human beings," and highlighted the state's poor record with death convictions.

Currently, 55 people remain on death row in Louisiana. Following a 15-year pause, the state resumed executions in March 2024.

The Independent reports that this case contributes to ongoing scrutiny over forensic methodologies used in capital cases and the complex legal and ethical questions arising from post-conviction relief reforms in Louisiana.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.propublica.org/article/jimmie-duncan-murder-conviction-nullified-death-row> - This article supports the claim that Jimmie Duncan's murder conviction was nullified by a Louisiana judge, specifically highlighting the role of discredited bite mark evidence.
2. <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/louisiana-judge-sets-aside-jimmie-duncans-conviction-and-death-sentence-based-on-no-longer-valid-bite-mark-evidence> - This resource corroborates the details of the judge's decision to set aside Duncan's conviction and death sentence due to the discrediting of bite mark evidence.
3. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2025/04/jimmie-duncan-innocence-death-row-louisiana-vacate-conviction/> - This article provides additional context on Duncan's case, including the decades-long fight to prove his innocence and the reliance on discredited forensic methods.
4. <https://innocenceproject.org/petitions/stop-the-execution-of-an-innocent-man-jimmie-chris-duncan/> - This webpage highlights the Innocence Project's involvement in Duncan's case, emphasizing the concerns about wrongful convictions due to faulty forensic evidence.
5. <https://innocenceproject.org/news/the-innocence-project-withdraws-jimmie-duncans-clemency-petition-in-louisiana/> - This article discusses the withdrawal of Duncan's clemency petition and the broader issues with Louisiana's clemency process, reflecting the challenges faced by those on death row.
6. <https://www.npr.org/sections/corrections/2023/02/20/1157746509/death-penalty-post-conviction-reform> - While not specifically about Duncan's case, this article provides context on the post-conviction relief reforms being debated, including concerns about the impact on wrongful convictions.
7. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/louisiana-new-orleans-mississippi-propublica-america-b2741161.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data