

Case Study:
The Central Park Five

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When Trisha Meili's body was discovered in Central Park early in the morning on April 20, 1989, she had been so badly beaten and repeatedly raped that she remained in a coma for nearly two weeks and retained no memory of the attack.

The brutal assault of the 28-year-old white investment banker, who had been out for a jog the night before, led to widespread public outcry and the quick arrest and subsequent conviction of five black and Latino teens—Antron McCray, 15, Kevin Richardson, 15, Yusef Salaam, 15, Raymond Santana, 14, and Korey Wise, 16—who came to be known as the Central Park Five.

But, in 2002, after serving sentences that ranged from six to 13 years for what then-New York City Mayor Ed Koch called “the crime of the century,” new DNA evidence and a confession proved convicted rapist Matias Reyes was the true, lone culprit. The charges against the five men were vacated and they eventually received a \$41 million settlement.



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When Meili was found in Central Park, more than 75 percent of her blood had drained from her body and her skull had been smashed in



This image shows a drag mark of where the victim's body was pulled across the ground

CENTRAL PARK HORROR

WOLF PACK'S



PREY

**Female
jogger
near death
after savage
attack by
roving gang**

Cop searches Central Park where jogger was attacked yesterday.

**COVERAGE BEGINS
ON PAGES 2 & 3**

*The New York Daily
News front page on
April 21, 1989.
NY Daily News Archive
via Getty Images*

The attack ignited a media firestorm, highlighting racial tensions in the city and playing into preconceived notions about African-American youth. When the five former teens convicted in the case were finally exonerated, many community leaders decried the miscarriage of justice that sent the Central Park Five to prison. The case became a flashpoint for illustrating racial disparities in sentencing and the inequities at the heart of the criminal justice system.

Attackers Described as 'Wolf Pack'

Meili's rape and attack was so severe, she lost 75 percent of her blood, suffering a severe skull fracture among other injuries. The woman, identified in the media as the Central Park Jogger until she made her name public in 2003, had been bludgeoned with a rock, tied up, raped and left for dead.

“The woman is bleeding from five deep cuts across her forehead and scalp; patients who lose this much blood are generally dead,” Meili writes in her 2003 book, *I am the Central Park Jogger*, of the attack. “Her skull has been fractured, and her eye will later have to be put back in its place. ... There is extreme swelling of the brain caused by the blows to the head. The probable result is intellectual, physical, and emotional incapacity, if not death. Permanent brain damage seems inevitable.”

With the attack occurring during a particularly violent era in New York City—1,896 homicides, a record at the time, took place a year earlier in 1988—police officers were quick to find somewhere to point the blame. An April 21, 1989 story in the *New York Daily News* reported that on the night of the crime, a 30-person gang, or so-called “wolf pack” of teens launched a series of attacks nearby, including assaults on a man carrying groceries, a couple on a tandem bike, another male jogger and a taxi driver.

Then, the *News* reported “at least a dozen youths grabbed the woman and dragged her off the path through heavy underbrush and trees, down a ravine toward a small body of water known as The Loch. It was there, 200 feet north of the transverse, that she was beaten and assaulted, police said. ‘They dragged her down like she was an animal,’ one police official said.” According to New York magazine, police told reporters the teens used the word “wilding” in describing their acts and “that while in a holding cell the suspects had laughed and sung the rap hit ‘Wild Thing.’”

A 'Media Tsunami'

The crime was splashed across front pages for months, with the teens depicted as symbols of violence and called “bloodthirsty,” “animals,” “savages” and “human mutations,” the Poynter Institute, a nonprofit journalism and research organization, reports.

Newspaper columnists joined in. The *New York Post's* Pete Hamill wrote that the teens hailed "from a world of crack, welfare, guns, knives, indifference and ignorance...a land with no fathers...to smash, hurt, rob, stomp, rape. The enemies were rich. The enemies were white."

Adding fuel to the fire, weeks after the attack, in May 1989, real estate developer (and future U.S. president) Donald Trump took out full page ads in *The New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, the *New York Post* and *New York Newsday* with the headline, "Bring Back The Death Penalty. Bring Back Our Police!"

"It was a media tsunami," former *New York Daily News* police bureau chief David Krajicek tells Poynter. "It was so competitive. The city desk absolutely demanded that we come up with details that other reporters didn't have."

BRING BACK OUR POLICE!

What has happened to our City over the past ten years? What has happened to law and order, to the neighborhood cop we all trusted to safeguard our homes and families, the cop who had the power under the law to help us in times of danger, keep us safe from those who would prey on innocent lives to fulfill some distorted inner need. What has happened to the respect for authority, the fear of retribution by the courts, society and the police for those who break the law, who wantonly trespass on the rights of others? What has happened is the complete breakdown of life as we knew it.

Many New York families — White, Black, Hispanic and Asian — have had to give up the pleasure of a leisurely stroll in the Park at dusk, the Saturday visit to the playground with their families, the bike ride at dawn, or just sitting on their stoops — given them up as hostages to a world ruled by the law of the streets, as roving hands of wild criminals roam our neighborhoods.

they should be executed for their crimes. They must serve as examples so that others will think long and hard before committing a crime or an act of violence. Yes, Mayor Koch, I want to hate these murderers and I always will. I am not looking to psychoanalyze or understand them, I am looking to punish them. If the punishment is strong, the attacks on innocent people will stop. I recently watched a newscast trying to explain the "anger in these young men". I no longer want to understand their anger. I want them to understand our anger. I want them to be afraid.

How can our great society tolerate the continued brutalization of its citizens by crazed misfits? Criminals must be told that their **CIVIL LIBERTIES END WHEN AN ATTACK ON OUR SAFETY BEGINS!**

When I was young, I sat in a diner with my father and witnessed two young bullies cursing and threatening a very frightened waitress. Two cops rushed in, lifted up the thugs and threw them out the



Donald J. Trump

Arrest and Trial of 'The Central Park Five'

Kevin Richardson and Raymond Santana, both part of the alleged “wolf pack,” were initially arrested for “unlawful assembly” on the night of April 19, before police learned of the jogger’s attack. They were detained for hours before their parents were eventually called. Meili was found early the next morning while the teens were still at the precinct, and a link was made. In the days that followed, **Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam and Anton McCray** were also brought in for questioning. Wise wasn't considered a suspect at the time but wanted to offer moral support to Salaam.

“Five were arrested shortly before 11 p.m. on Wednesday at 102nd Street and Central Park West in connection with the pipe attack on the female jogger,” The New York Times reported the day after Meili was found. “Three were charged as juveniles with second-degree assault and unlawful assembly, and two were charged with unlawful assembly and released that night to their parents.

Four of the five teens, all from Harlem, confessed on videotape following hours of interrogation. The four boys admitted they touched or restrained Meili while one or more of the others assaulted her.

“Each of the suspects had made different errors in time and place about the jogger attack in their confessions, with most placing it near the reservoir. None of the five said that he had raped the jogger, but each confessed to having been an accomplice to the rape. Each youth said that he had only helped restrain the jogger, or touched her, while one or more others had raped her. Their confessions varied as to who they identified as having participated in the rape, including naming several youths who were never questioned. In his untaped confession, Salaam claimed to have struck the jogger with a pipe at the beginning of the incident.”

The boys later recanted and plead not guilty, saying their confessions had been coerced.

“When we were arrested, the police deprived us of food, drink or sleep for more than 24 hours,” Salaam wrote in the *Washington Post* years later in 2016. “Under duress, we falsely confessed. Though we were innocent, we spent our formative years in prison, branded as rapists.”

Also, during their initial examination, investigators recovered hairs on two of the boys which were attributed to the victim. These were the only pieces of physical evidence recovered directly linking any of the teenagers to the crime. These hairs were also then cited as a way to know that the videotaped confessions of the teenagers were reliable.

The two trials started several months later after the young men were arrested. In the first trial, defendants Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam, and Raymond Santana were tried. In the second trial, of Kevin Richardson and Korey Wise, were tried. The prosecution arranged to try the six defendants in the Meili case in two separate groups. This enabled them to control the order in which certain evidence would be introduced to the court.

During the trials, the courthouse was ringed with competing demonstrators, some claiming that the rape story was a hoax, others demanding castration.



Louis Liotta/New York Post Archives, via
Getty Images



James Estrin/The New York Times

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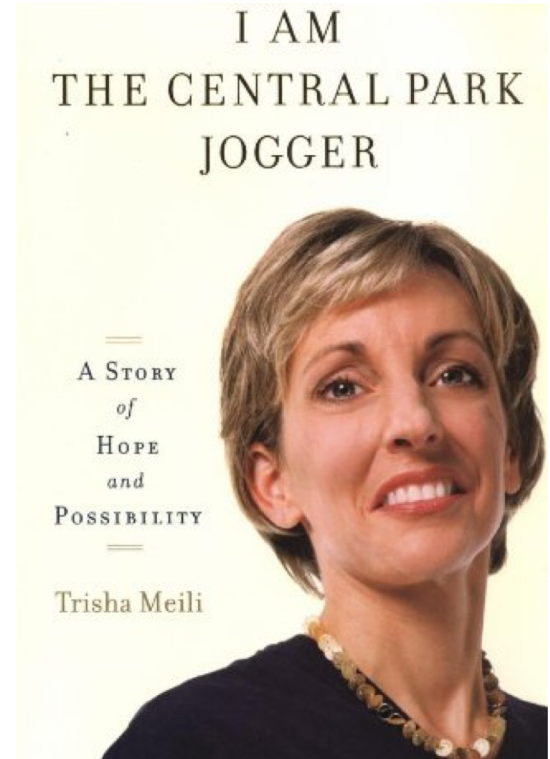
The judge (specially picked for the case) ruled that the confessions met the legal requirements for voluntariness.

During the trial, the prosecution called their expert witness Mr. Nicholas Petraco, a detective who examined the hairs when he worked in the Police Department's criminalistics division and testified at the trials.

"He found on Kevin Richardson's underpants a hair that matched the head hair of" the victim, Ms. Lederer told the jurors. "And there was a second hair on the T-shirt that matched" the victim's pubic hair. She continued: "There was yet a third hair on his jeans, on his blue jeans, that was consistent with and similar to" hair from the victim's head.

Ms. Meili also testified about her return from the doorway of death, without pieces of her life — a sense of smell, clear vision, effortless speech. She still has no memory of the crime.

Breathtaking as her appearance was, it added nothing to the proofs. For all the intimate violence and witness accounts, not one piece of scientific evidence linked any of the five to the attack. A forensic pathologist, the prosecution's own expert, could not testify that Ms. Meili had been attacked by more than one person. In closing arguments, the prosecutor incorrectly said that hairs matching the jogger's were found on the clothing of the boys.

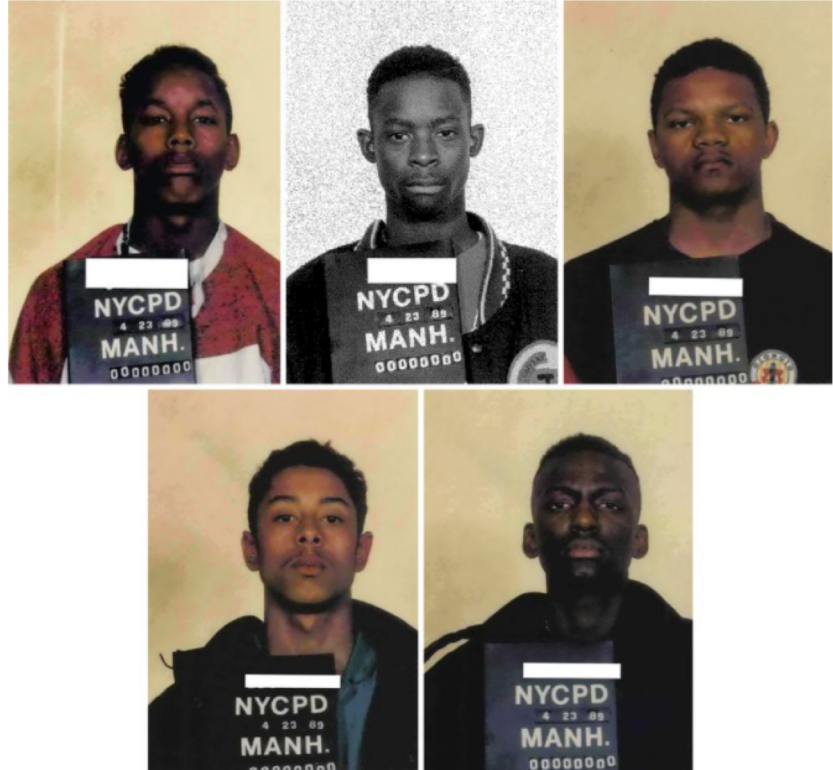


The five defendants in the Central Park jogger case, behind the table, in court in New York, February 23, 1990.



Despite inconsistencies in their stories, no eye witnesses and no DNA evidence linking them to the crime, the five teens from Harlem were convicted in two trials in 1990.

- Anton McCray, Yusef Salaam and Raymond Santana were found guilty of rape, assault, robbery and riot.
- Kevin Richardson was found guilty of attempted murder, rape, assault and robbery.
- Korey Wise was found guilty of sexual abuse, assault and riot.



They all spent between six and thirteen years behind bars.

The 1989 arrest photos of the Central Park Five. Top row, from left: Korey Wise, Anton McCray, Kevin Richardson. Bottom, from left: Raymond Santana and Yusef Salaam. (New York City Law Department)

Charges Vacated After Shocking Confession

On August 5th, 1989 a man by the name of Matias Reyes followed his final victim (there had been seven other victims) into her 91st Street apartment and raped her. She managed to escape and run for help, summoning a neighbor and her doorman, who apprehended Reyes until police arrested him.

Authorities quickly identified him as the serial criminal named the East Side Slasher for the apartment invasion rapes, and Reyes confessed to the crimes in detail under interrogation. His DNA was later found to match that of three victims, including Gonzalez. Reyes accepted a plea bargain, agreeing to serve 33 years to life in prison. At his 1991 sentencing, he punched his lawyer and had to be carried out by guards. The judge recommended Reyes be imprisoned for life.

Reyes first met Korey Wise, one of the Central Park Five, when the two were imprisoned together on Rikers Island. There, they got into a fight over the television. But the two encountered each other again in 2001, in the Auburn prison yard, and had a friendly conversation.

In 2002 Reyes felt guilty for the fact that Wise was still imprisoned for a crime he had committed, and came forward to confess to raping and nearly murdering Meili in 1989. DNA testing led investigators to confirm that Matias Reyes was a positive match to evidence (semen) found at the crime scene.

“I know it’s hard for people to understand, after 12 years why a person would actually come forward to take responsibility for a crime,” Reyes said to investigators in 2002. “At first, I was afraid, but at the end of the day I felt it was definitely the right thing to do.”



Matias Reyes was serving a 33.5 year sentence for an unrelated crime when he admitted to being behind the Central Park Jogger case.

Following a lengthy investigation into the convictions, then-Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau recommended in December 2002 that all charges against the Central Park Five be thrown out. Later that month, a judge set aside the verdicts.

A year later in 2003, the Central Park Five filed a civil lawsuit against New York City for malicious prosecution, racial discrimination and emotional distress.

City officials fought the case for more than a decade, before finally settling for \$41 million dollars. According to The New York Times, the payout equaled about \$1 million for *each* year of imprisonment, with four men serving about seven years and Wise serving about thirteen.

Despite their exoneration, the police and prosecutors involved in the case maintain that they were guilty of the crime.

Where Are the Central Park 5 Now?

In the years since their release, the five men accused in the Central Park case have moved on with their lives.

- Richardson lives in New Jersey with his wife and two daughters. He works as an advocate for criminal justice reform.
- McCray lives in Georgia with his wife and six children.
- Santana also lives in Georgia with his teenage daughter and, in 2018, Santana started his own clothing company called Park Madison NYC.
- Wise lives in New York City, where he works as a public speaker and criminal justice reform advocate.
- Salaam is a published poet, public speaker and criminal justice reform advocate. He lives in George and is a father to 10 children.



Where is Trisha Meili Now?

While the focus of the Central Park Five story has often focused — with good reason — on the trial, the ensuing appeals and exonerations of the young men wrongly convicted of the crime, the victim has also tried to make sure her story was known.

Meili published a memoir in 2003, *I Am the Central Park Jogger: A Story of Hope and Possibility*. Currently, the now 58-year-old works with survivors of brain injuries, sexual assault and other kinds of trauma at Mount Sinai Hospital and Gaylord Hospital.

"I believe they gain strength, too, to move forward," she said.