



n November 2, 2014, Renata Singleton had an argument with her boyfriend, Vernon Crossley. It escalated into a physical altercation — Crossley grabbed Singleton's cell phone out of her hand and smashed it. Singleton's young daughter called 911. New Orleans police came to the house, arrested Crossley, and jailed him overnight.

In the aftermath, prosecutors with Orleans Parish District Attorney Leon Cannizzaro's office tried to meet with Singleton to investigate the case, but couldn't get in touch with her. Eventually they resorted to a tactic the office had used before: sending her notices that looked like subpoenas, designed to trick her into thinking she was legally obligated to meet with them. When that didn't work, the DA's office got a material witness warrant to try to force her to testify. She was jailed for five days.

The ACLU sued Cannizzaro in 2017, alleging that Singleton's treatment was part of a pattern of misconduct; many others had received one of his fake subpoenas. The DA's office regularly threatened to jail witnesses they deemed uncooperative, and got several others thrown behind bars. Almost all of them, like Singleton, were black New Orleanians.

Earlier this year, on February 28th, a federal judge ruled that Cannizzaro's "subpoenas" likely broke the law, and allowed that part of the lawsuit to move forward (only judges can authorize subpoenas). But the judge also ruled that Cannizzaro had every right to get witnesses jailed.

Prosecutors needed Renata Singleton's testimony to make their case, explained Judge Jane Triche Milazzo. The government, "for the preservation of an orderly society," has the right to compel witnesses to speak — even witnesses who are also the victims. The ruling in Singleton's case is a reflection of broader norms: the U.S. criminal justice system systematically mistreats crime victims who fail to toe the prosecutorial line or conform to our standards of how a victim should behave