

George Norris – Overcriminalization Victim
(Mr. Norris’s Wife, Kathy, Testified Before the House Judiciary Committee’s
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security on July 22, 2009)

George Norris once had a passion for life. A father, grandfather, and elderly retiree, he turned his orchid hobby into a part-time business, importing orchids from all over the world and reselling them to local flower enthusiasts at plant shows and other events. He never made more than a few thousand dollars a year from orchid sales, but it kept him engaged and provided his family with a little extra money as his wife Kathy neared retirement. Both their lives took a sickening turn for the worse on October 2003, when federal agents stormed their property and set in motion a chain of events that eventually resulted in George’s spending 17 months in federal prison.

- On October 28, 2003, three pickup trucks full of federal agents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service appeared outside George’s home. Clad in protective Kevlar and bearing semi-automatic weapons, the government agents raided the property and forced George to remain seated in his kitchen under supervision while they spent half a day ransacking his home and seizing his belongings. The agents refused to tell George what they were searching for or what he had done to prompt such a show of force.
- The agents left the property, and for months after the raid George remained unaware as to its cause. After five months of silence from the government, George wrote a letter to the federal prosecutor’s office to inquire about the matter. In a mute response, the government returned his personal computer, which was now inoperable.
- Although the federal investigation confirmed that George had never imported or sold any prohibited orchids, he was nevertheless indicted in Miami for “smuggling.” His crime, at its core, was a paperwork violation – the orchids George had imported were legal, but a small percentage of the documentation for the orchids purchased was inaccurate. Despite every effort to comply with the law, this simple mistake resulted in a federal criminal conviction.
- George requested a venue transfer to bring the case from Miami to his home state of Texas, which the court denied. Knowing he was innocent, George fought the complicated paperwork charges to the best of his ability given his limited financial resources.
- When George and Kathy’s savings were wiped out, George very reluctantly gave up the fight and pled guilty to the baseless charges. Although his attorney indicated he might avoid a criminal sentence, he was sentenced to 17 months in federal prison.
- George, in his late sixties at the time of his conviction, entered prison with a host of medical problems including diabetes, cardiac complications, arthritis, glaucoma, and Parkinson’s disease. While incarcerated, George’s health declined even further and he has since developed depression, paranoia, and sleep complications.

In her testimony before Congress in July 2009, Kathy described the destructive impact this traumatic experience has had their family. George has become detached from his family and is no longer interested in gardening or spending time outdoors. Often afraid now to even leave his home, George is restricted by his status as a convicted felon from voting or hunting with his grandchildren, a Norris family tradition for generations. George and Kathy have repeatedly expressed their hope that, by sharing their story, they will keep other families from becoming the victims of overcriminalization.