

SUPREME COURT OF ILLINOIS

People v. Mata

217 Ill. 2d 535 (2005) · Decided December 15, 2005

SUMMARY

The Illinois Supreme Court held that Bernina Mata’s challenge to the statutory aggravating factor supporting her eligibility for the death penalty or natural life imprisonment was not rendered moot by the Governor’s commutation of her death sentence. Applying Apprendi and Ring, the court treated the aggravating factor as the functional equivalent of an element for due process purposes. The court reversed the appellate court’s dismissal and remanded for consideration of the merits.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Illinois
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Justice Kilbride
JURISDICTION	Illinois
DECIDED	December 15, 2005
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Direct appeal from a first-degree murder conviction and death sentence. While the appeal was pending, the Governor commuted the death sentence to natural life imprisonment. The Illinois Supreme Court transferred the appeal to the appellate court, which dismissed it as moot. The Supreme Court of Illinois granted leave to appeal and reviewed whether the commutation rendered moot defendant's challenge to the statutory aggravating factor supporting death or natural-life imprisonment.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed de novo the legal questions concerning mootness, the constitutional characterization of the statutory aggravating factor, and judicial estoppel.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published precedential opinion
PARTIES	Bernina Mata v. The People of the State of Illinois

TOPICS

- mootness
- appellate procedure
- due process
- sentencing
- criminal procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

criminal procedure

constitutional law

capital sentencing

appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Governor's commutation of defendant's death sentence to natural life imprisonment rendered moot her challenge to the statutory aggravating factor that made her eligible for the death penalty or natural life imprisonment.
2. Whether the statutory aggravating factor was the functional equivalent of an element of a greater offense for federal due process purposes under *Apprendi v. New Jersey* and *Ring v. Arizona*.
3. Whether defendant was judicially estopped from challenging the aggravating factor because she had sought and received executive commutation of her death sentence.

HOLDINGS

1. A Governor's commutation renders moot challenges directed solely at the judicially imposed sentence, but it does not render moot a challenge to the sufficiency of proof on a statutory aggravating factor that functions as an element of the offense and determines eligibility for death or natural-life imprisonment.
2. The statutory aggravating factor that increased the maximum penalty for first-degree murder to death was the functional equivalent of an element of a greater offense for procedural due process purposes.
3. Defendant was not judicially estopped from challenging the sufficiency of the evidence supporting the aggravating factor because her request for an appropriate commuted sentence and her appellate challenge were not inconsistent positions.
4. *People v. Watson* was overruled to the extent it was inconsistent with the holding that a defendant's due process rights are implicated by a challenge to the sufficiency of proof on a statutory aggravating factor functioning as an element.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Thus, the Governor’s commutation does not render all challenges by a defendant moot. Rather, only issues challenging the sentence are moot.”

*“Under *Apprendi* and *Ring*, the aggravating factor is the functional equivalent of an element of a greater offense.”*

“Defendant is entitled to seek judicial relief on her challenge to the aggravating factor. Thus, her claim is not moot.”

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Mata was convicted of first-degree murder for stabbing John Draheim multiple times after inviting him to her apartment. The jury found that the murder was committed in a cold, calculated, and premeditated manner under the statutory aggravating factor, making Mata eligible for the death penalty. The Governor later commuted her death sentence to natural life imprisonment, and Mata continued to challenge the sufficiency of the evidence supporting the aggravating factor.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Mata was convicted of first-degree murder in the circuit court of Boone County and sentenced to death after the jury found a statutory aggravating factor proven beyond a reasonable doubt. She appealed directly to the Illinois Supreme Court. During the appeal, the Governor commuted her death sentence to natural life imprisonment, after which the Supreme Court transferred the appeal to the appellate court. The appellate court dismissed the remaining challenge as moot, and the Supreme Court reversed and remanded for consideration of the merits.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The appellate court was directed to consider the merits of defendant's challenge to the statutory aggravating factor and her remaining contentions.

CASES CITED

- People ex rel. Madigan v. Snyder, 208 Ill. 2d 457 (2004)
- People ex rel. Smith v. Jenkins, 325 Ill. 372 (1927)
- People v. Rissley, 206 Ill. 2d 403 (2003)
- People v. Henderson, 171 Ill. 2d 124 (1996)
- Apprendi v. New Jersey, 530 U.S. 466 (2000)
- Ring v. Arizona, 536 U.S. 584 (2002)
- People v. Swift, 202 Ill. 2d 378 (2002)
- People v. Jackson, 199 Ill. 2d 286 (2002)
- People v. Ford, 198 Ill. 2d 68 (2001)
- Schiro v. Summerlin, 542 U.S. 348 (2004)
- Busch v. Graphic Color Corp., 169 Ill. 2d 325, 334 (1996)
- People v. Lawton, 212 Ill. 2d 285, 300 (2004)
- Robb v. Connolly, 111 U.S. 624, 637 (1884)
- People v. Watson, 347 Ill. App. 3d 181 (2004)
- Barack Ferrazzano Kirschbaum Perlman & Nagelberg v. Loffredi, 342 Ill. App. 3d 453 (2003)
- Bidani v. Lewis, 285 Ill. App. 3d 545 (1996)
- People v. Williams, 209 Ill. 2d 227 (2004)
- People v. Evans, 209 Ill. 2d 194 (2004)
- People v. Shum, 207 Ill. 2d 47 (2003)
- People v. Moore, 207 Ill. 2d 68 (2003)
- People v. Graham, 206 Ill. 2d 465 (2003)
- People v. Brown, 204 Ill. 2d 422 (2002)

- People v. Ceja, 204 Ill. 2d 332 (2003)
- People v. Miller, 203 Ill. 2d 433 (2002)
- People v. Lucas, 203 Ill. 2d 410 (2002)

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