

SUPREME COURT OF IOWA

In re Detention of Harold Williams

628 N.W.2d 447 (Iowa 2001) · No. No. 99-2055 · Decided May 31, 2001

SUMMARY

The Iowa Supreme Court reviews Harold Williams's civil commitment as a sexually violent predator under Iowa Code chapter 229A. The court rejects his equal protection, jury-size, evidentiary, and jury-instruction challenges, holding that chapter 229A is civil, rationally distinguishes sexually violent predators from other mentally ill persons, and requires an eight-person jury and unanimous verdict. The court also affirms the admission of prior-conviction and rebuttal evidence and addresses the State's cross-appeal concerning victim testimony and jury unanimity.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Iowa
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Neuman, Justice
JURISDICTION	Iowa
DECIDED	May 31, 2001
DOCKET	No. 99-2055
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Williams appealed a civil commitment judgment entered after a unanimous jury verdict finding him to be a sexually violent predator under Iowa Code chapter 229A. The State cross-appealed rulings restricting victim testimony and permitting a less-than-unanimous verdict to avoid a mistrial.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Because the action was tried at law, ordinary appellate review was for correction of legal error. Constitutional arguments were reviewed de novo in light of the totality of the circumstances. Evidentiary relevance and method-of-proof rulings were reviewed for abuse of discretion.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Iowa Supreme Court en banc opinion; precedential.
PARTIES	Harold Williams v. State of Iowa

TOPICS

equal protection

rational basis review

constitutional law

evidence

jury instructions

PRACTICE AREAS

constitutional law

civil commitment

mental health law

evidence

civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Iowa Code chapter 229A violates equal protection by treating sexually violent predators differently from persons subject to general civil commitment under chapter 229.
2. Whether an eight-person jury was constitutionally sufficient in a chapter 229A commitment proceeding.
3. Whether Iowa Rule of Civil Procedure 203(a) permits a less-than-unanimous verdict to result in release rather than a mistrial in a chapter 229A proceeding.
4. Whether evidence of Williams's prior convictions and rebuttal testimony concerning uncharged sexual misconduct was admissible.
5. Whether due process required an instruction that the State prove Williams was highly likely, rather than more likely than not, to reoffend.
6. Whether chapter 229A provides for a less-restrictive-alternative defense or requires proof that no less-restrictive treatment facility is available.

HOLDINGS

1. A classification distinguishing persons committed as sexually violent predators under chapter 229A from persons civilly committed under chapter 229 based on mental illness is subject to rational-basis review, not strict scrutiny, because mental illness is not a suspect classification.
2. Chapter 229A does not violate federal or Iowa equal protection guarantees because its different treatment of sexually violent predators and persons subject to general mental-health commitment is rationally related to legitimate interests in public protection and specialized treatment.
3. An eight-person jury is constitutionally sufficient for a chapter 229A civil commitment proceeding.
4. Iowa Rule of Civil Procedure 203(a) does not permit a less-than-unanimous verdict to determine that a respondent should be released in a chapter 229A proceeding. If the jury cannot reach a unanimous verdict on commitment, the court must discharge the jury and order a new trial.
5. The district court did not abuse its discretion by admitting proof of Williams's prior convictions or by admitting brief rebuttal testimony from victims concerning uncharged prior sexual misconduct, while restricting victim testimony in the State's case in chief.
6. Due process does not require a jury instruction that the State prove a respondent is 'highly likely' to reoffend; the statutory definition of 'likely' as 'more likely than not' is constitutionally sufficient when commitment requires proof beyond a reasonable doubt.
7. Chapter 229A does not provide a separate less-restrictive-alternative defense or require the State to prove that no less-restrictive treatment facility is available; the district court properly refused Williams's proposed instruction and special verdict form.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“We hold that rule of civil procedure 203(a) does not apply in chapter 229A proceedings. If the jury cannot return a unanimous verdict, the court must discharge the jury and order a new trial.” (at 455)

“We thus conclude that defining the statutory term “likely” as “more likely than not” or “more probable than not” will not diminish the required high level of proof.” (at 459)

“The “secure facility” issue is part and parcel of the SVP finding under the statute, not a separate issue addressed after determining the respondent is a sexually violent predator.” (at 460)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Williams was nearing release after serving approximately ten years of an indeterminate twenty-five-year sentence for second-degree sexual abuse of a five-year-old child. He had four prior convictions involving sexual misconduct with children and acknowledged extensive sexual fantasies and conduct involving children. Two psychologists diagnosed pedophilia; the State's expert opined that Williams was highly likely to reoffend unless confined in a secure facility, while Williams's expert believed less-secure treatment could be effective. A jury unanimously found beyond a reasonable doubt that Williams was a sexually violent predator.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The State commenced sexually violent predator commitment proceedings as Williams neared release from a sentence for second-degree sexual abuse. Williams received a jury trial, and the jury unanimously found beyond a reasonable doubt that he was a sexually violent predator. The district court entered a commitment judgment, ruled that an eight-person jury was sufficient, allowed rebuttal victim testimony but restricted victim testimony in the State's case in chief, and held that a nonunanimous verdict could permit release rather than a mistrial. The Supreme Court affirmed Williams's appeal, affirmed in part and reversed in part on the State's cross-appeal, reversing the nonunanimous-verdict ruling.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- In re Detention of Garren, 620 N.W.2d 275 (Iowa 2000)
- In re Detention of Morrow, 616 N.W.2d 544 (Iowa 2000)
- In re B.B., 516 N.W.2d 874, 879 (Iowa 1994)
- Exira Community School District v. State, 512 N.W.2d 787, 793 (Iowa 1994)
- Miller v. Board of Medical Examiners, 609 N.W.2d 478, 482 (Iowa 2000)
- Heller v. Doe, 509 U.S. 312, 321-28 (1993)
- Illinois v. Pembrock, 62 Ill. 2d 317, 342 N.E.2d 28, 30 (1976)
- City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center, 473 U.S. 432, 445-46 (1985)
- Martin v. Reinstein, 195 Ariz. 293, 987 P.2d 779, 796 (1999)

- State v. Mann, 602 N.W.2d 785, 792 (Iowa 1999)
- State v. Griffin, 564 N.W.2d 370, 372 (Iowa 1997)
- State v. Plaster, 424 N.W.2d 226, 229 (Iowa 1988)
- State v. Barrett, 401 N.W.2d 184, 187 (Iowa 1987)
- State v. Castaneda, 621 N.W.2d 435, 440 (Iowa 2001)
- State v. Cuevas, 288 N.W.2d 525, 530 (Iowa 1980)
- State v. Miller, 229 N.W.2d 762, 770 (Iowa 1975)
- In re Linehan, 557 N.W.2d 171, 180 (Minn. 1996)
- Linehan v. Minnesota, 522 U.S. 1011 (1997)
- In re Linehan, 594 N.W.2d 867, 876 (Minn. 1999)
- In re Detention of Brooks, 94 Wash. App. 716, 973 P.2d 486, 491 (1999)
- Addington v. Texas, 441 U.S. 418, 427-28 (1979)
- Mathews v. Eldridge, 424 U.S. 319, 335 (1976)
- State v. Monk, 514 N.W.2d 448, 451 (Iowa 1994)
- State v. Stewart, 445 N.W.2d 418, 421 (Iowa Ct. App. 1989)