

SUPREME COURT OF OHIO

Christian v. Davis

2023-Ohio-1445 (Ohio 2023) · No. 2022-1205 · Decided May 4, 2023

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Ohio affirmed the dismissal of Wayne Christian’s habeas corpus petition. The court held that his equal-protection and due-process challenges to R.C. 2903.11(B)(3) were nonjurisdictional claims for which habeas corpus was unavailable because adequate remedies existed through direct appeal or postconviction relief. The court concluded that the trial court had subject-matter and personal jurisdiction over Christian.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Ohio
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per Curiam; Kennedy, C.J.; Fischer, J.; DeWine, J.; Donnelly, J.; Stewart, J.; Brunner, J.; Deters, J.
JURISDICTION	Ohio
DECIDED	May 4, 2023
DOCKET	2022-1205
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal as of right from the Eleventh District Court of Appeals' dismissal of a habeas corpus petition under Civ.R. 12(B)(6) for failure to state a claim.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo review of a decision granting a Civ.R. 12(B)(6) motion to dismiss. Dismissal is proper when, accepting factual allegations as true and drawing reasonable inferences in the petitioner's favor, it appears beyond doubt that the petitioner can prove no set of facts entitling him to habeas relief and immediate release.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Supreme Court of Ohio opinion; precedential
PARTIES	Wayne Christian v. Anthony Davis, Warden

TOPICS

- post-conviction relief
- appellate procedure
- standard of review
- due process
- equal protection

PRACTICE AREAS

Habeas corpus

Post-conviction relief

Appellate procedure

Constitutional law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Christian's equal-protection, due-process, and cruel-and-unusual-punishment challenges to R.C. 2903.11(B)(3) were cognizable in habeas corpus.
2. Whether the alleged unconstitutionality of R.C. 2903.11(B)(3) deprived the trial court of jurisdiction to sentence Christian.
3. Whether the Eleventh District properly dismissed the habeas petition under Civ.R. 12(B)(6).

HOLDINGS

1. Habeas corpus does not lie for nonjurisdictional equal-protection, due-process, or cruel-and-unusual-punishment claims that could have been raised on direct appeal or through post-conviction relief.
2. A challenge to the trial court's exercise of jurisdiction is not a challenge to the court's subject-matter or personal jurisdiction; the alleged unconstitutionality of the criminal statute did not deprive the trial court of jurisdiction to sentence Christian.
3. The habeas petition was properly dismissed under Civ.R. 12(B)(6) because Christian could prove no set of facts entitling him to habeas relief and immediate release.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A writ of habeas corpus “is not available when the petitioner has an adequate remedy in the ordinary course of law, unless a trial court’s judgment is void for lack of jurisdiction.”” (¶ 4)

“But challenging the trial court’s exercise of jurisdiction is not the same as challenging the jurisdiction of a trial court to hear the case.” (¶ 6)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Christian is serving an aggregate 40-year prison sentence for nine convictions for felonious assault under R.C. 2903.11(B)(3), involving sexual conduct with a minor by a person who knew of the person's HIV status. After his convictions and sentence were affirmed on direct appeal, he filed a state habeas petition challenging the statute under the Equal Protection Clauses of the Ohio and United States Constitutions. He also sought to vacate his classification as a sexual predator because he had not been convicted of a sex crime.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Christian was convicted of nine counts of felonious assault and received an aggregate 40-year prison sentence; his convictions and sentence were affirmed on direct appeal. In 2022, he filed a habeas corpus petition in the Eleventh District, alleging that R.C. 2903.11(B)(3) violated equal protection and that his sexual-predator classification should be vacated. The court of appeals dismissed the petition, and the Supreme Court of Ohio affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- State v. Christian, 7th Dist. Jefferson No. 07 JE 9, 2007-Ohio-7205
- State ex rel. Slaughter v. Foley, 166 Ohio St.3d 222, 2021-Ohio-4049, 184 N.E.3d 87, ¶ 8
- McDougald v. Bowerman, 161 Ohio St.3d 268, 2020-Ohio-3942, 162 N.E.3d 762, ¶ 8
- State ex rel. Davis v. Turner, 164 Ohio St.3d 395, 2021-Ohio-1771, 172 N.E.3d 1026, ¶ 8
- Stevens v. Hill, 168 Ohio St.3d 427, 2022-Ohio-2479, 199 N.E.3d 529, ¶ 8
- State v. Harper, 160 Ohio St.3d 480, 2020-Ohio-2913, 159 N.E.3d 248, ¶ 26

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

[Until this opinion appears in the Ohio Official Reports advance sheets, it may be cited as Christian v. Davis, Slip Opinion No. 2023-Ohio-1445.] NOTICE This slip opinion is subject to formal revision before it is published in an advance sheet of the Ohio Official Reports. Readers are requested to promptly notify the Reporter of Decisions, Supreme Court of Ohio, 65 South Front Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215, of any typographical or other formal errors in the opinion, in order that corrections may be made before the opinion is published.

SLIP OPINION NO. 2023-OHIO-1445 CHRISTIAN, APPELLANT, v. DAVIS, WARDEN,1 APPELLEE. [Until this opinion appears in the Ohio Official Reports advance sheets, it may be cited as Christian v. Davis, Slip Opinion No. 2023-Ohio-1445.] Habeas corpus—Inmate failed to state a cognizable habeas claim—Court of appeals’ dismissal of petition affirmed. (No. 2022-1205 —Submitted February 7, 2023—Decided May 4, 2023.)

APPEAL from the Court of Appeals for Trumbull County, No. 2022-T-0051, 2022-Ohio-3201. _____ Per Curiam. {¶ 1} Appellant, Wayne Christian, appeals the judgment of the Eleventh District Court of Appeals dismissing his petition for a writ of habeas corpus against appellee, Anthony Davis, warden of the Trumbull Correctional Institution.

We affirm. 1. Christian filed his petition against the former warden, Charmaine Bracy. Pursuant to S.Ct.Prac.R. 4.06(B), Anthony Davis, the current warden, is automatically substituted as a party to this action. SUPREME COURT OF OHIO Background {¶ 2} Christian is serving an aggregate 40-year prison sentence for nine convictions for felonious assault in violation of R.C.

2903.11(B)(3), which prohibits a person with knowledge of the person’s HIV status from engaging in sexual conduct with a minor who is not the offender’s spouse. His convictions and sentence were affirmed on direct appeal. State v. Christian, 7th Dist. Jefferson No. 07 JE 9, 2007-Ohio-

7205. {¶ 3} In 2022, Christian filed a petition in the Eleventh District seeking a writ of habeas corpus, arguing that R.C.

2903.11(B)(3) violates the Equal Protection Clauses of the Ohio and United States Constitutions. He further alleged that his classification as a sexual predator should be vacated because “he was convicted of no sex crime.” The court of appeals granted the warden’s motion to dismiss under Civ.R. 12(B)(6) for failure to state a valid claim for habeas relief. Christian timely appealed to this court as of right.

Analysis {¶ 4} We review de novo a decision granting a motion to dismiss under Civ.R. 12(B)(6). *State ex rel. Slaughter v. Foley*, 166 Ohio St.3d 222, 2021-Ohio- 4049, 184 N.E.3d 87, ¶ 8. Here, dismissal under Civ.R. 12(B)(6) for failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted is appropriate if, after all factual allegations are presumed true and all reasonable inferences are made in Christian’s favor, it appears beyond doubt that he could prove no set of facts entitling him to a writ of habeas corpus and immediate release from prison.

See *McDougald v. Bowerman*, 161 Ohio St.3d 268, 2020-Ohio-3942, 162 N.E.3d 762, ¶ 8. A writ of habeas corpus “is not available when the petitioner has an adequate remedy in the ordinary course of law, unless a trial court’s judgment is void for lack of jurisdiction.” *State ex rel. Davis v. Turner*, 164 Ohio St.3d 395, 2021-Ohio-1771, 172 N.E.3d 1026, ¶ 8. 2 January Term, 2023 {¶ 5} Christian alleges that his imprisonment constitutes cruel and unusual punishment and violates his right to due process because R.C.

2903.11(B)(3) is unconstitutional. Habeas corpus will not lie for nonjurisdictional claims, such as Christian’s equal-protection and due-process claims, that can be raised on direct appeal. See *Stevens v. Hill*, 168 Ohio St.3d 427, 2022-Ohio-2479, 199 N.E.3d 529, ¶ 8 (the inmate’s “due-process and equal-protection claims are not cognizable in habeas corpus, because * * * they are nonjurisdictional claims for which he had an adequate remedy by way of appeal or postconviction relief”). {¶ 6} In passing, Christian reframes his claims in jurisdictional terms, arguing that because R.C.

2903.11(B)(3) is unconstitutional, the trial court lacked jurisdiction to sentence him. But challenging the trial court’s exercise of jurisdiction is not the same as challenging the jurisdiction of a trial court to hear the case. {¶ 7} R.C. 2931.03 allocates to common pleas courts subject-matter jurisdiction over all felony cases.

As a result, here, the trial court had subject-matter jurisdiction over the case and personal jurisdiction over Christian. *State v. Harper*, 160 Ohio St.3d 480, 2020-Ohio-2913, 159 N.E.3d 248, ¶ 26. Conclusion {¶ 8} For these reasons, we affirm the court of appeals’ judgment dismissing Christian’s petition for a writ of habeas corpus. Judgment affirmed. KENNEDY, C.J., and

FISCHER, DEWINE, DONNELLY, STEWART, BRUNNER, and DETERS, JJ., concur.
_____ Wayne Christian, pro se.

Dave Yost, Attorney General, and Lisa K. Browning, Assistant Attorney General, for appellee.
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