

**SIGNIFICANT DECISIONS**  
**UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT AND THE COURT OF CRIMINAL APPEALS**  
**FROM SEPTEMBER 2016 TO APRIL 2017**

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### **Acknowledgement**

This paper has been the primary responsibility of my briefing attorney, Courtney Corbello. While I have had some slight hand in shaping the summaries, all the smart stuff comes from her.

-DCN

## Table of Contents

<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. MOTIONS TO SUPPRESS .....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. REASONABLE EXPECTATION OF PRIVACY -- THERE IS A REASONABLE EXPECTATION OF PRIVACY IN THE CONTENT OF TEXT MESSAGES. ....	1
B. DETENTIONS .....	1
1. <i>It is not per se objectively reasonable for the police to frisk a suspect for weapons on the basis that he or she is accused of possessing drugs.</i> .....	1
2. <i>Community Caretaking -- Police officer justified in initiating a traffic stop after seeing a car stopped at a stop light, smelling alcohol coming from the car, seeing an unconscious passenger, and getting no verbal response from the driver.</i> .....	2
C. GOOD FAITH -- ART. 38.23(B) APPLIES WHERE A SEARCH WARRANT, THOUGH LATER FOUND TO BE BASED ON AN ILLEGALITY, WAS OBTAINED BY LAW ENFORCEMENT IN GOOD FAITH AND UNDER AN OBJECTIVELY REASONABLE BELIEF THAT IT WAS VALID AND RELIED UPON APPROPRIATELY OBTAINED EVIDENCE. ....	2
<b>III. TRIAL PROCEDURE.....</b>	<b>3</b>
A. THE FOURTH AMENDMENT GOVERNS A CLAIM FOR MALICIOUS PROSECUTION BASED UPON A POLICE OFFICER PLANTING FALSE EVIDENCE EVEN BEYOND THE START OF THE LEGAL PROCESS. ....	3
B. DOUBLE JEOPARDY – COLLATERAL ESTOPPEL DOES NOT BAR RETRIAL AFTER A JURY HAS RETURNED IRRECONCILABLY INCONSISTENT VERDICTS OF CONVICTION AND ACQUITTAL, AND THE CONVICTIONS ARE LATER VACATED FOR LEGAL ERROR UNRELATED TO THE INCONSISTENCY. ....	4
C. A TRIAL COURT MAY NOT ISSUE AN ORDER REQUIRING THE STATE TO PROVIDE COPIES OF DISCOVERY OBTAINED UNDER THE MICHAEL MORTON ACT TO A DEFENDANT; A DEFENDANT IS ENTITLED TO VIEW THE DOCUMENTS, BUT COPIES MUST REMAIN IN COUNSEL’S POSSESSION. ....	4
D. CHARGING INSTRUMENTS.....	5
1. <i>Statutory provisions that say an offense “does not apply” to certain circumstances are considered defenses to an offense that the defendant must raise rather than “exceptions” that the State must disprove.</i> .....	5
2. <i>Indictment did not need to specify nature of the drug as a device or a drug.</i> .....	5
3. <i>In a tampering with physical evidence case, the specific identity of the evidence is not an essential element of the offense.</i> .....	6
4. <i>A single document can serve as an information and the complaint supporting that information so long as the statutory requirements for both are met, and the accuser is not the same person as the prosecutor who brought the charges.</i> ....	6
5. <i>An information will toll the running of limitations in a felony case even where the defendant did not waive his right to an indictment.</i> .....	7
6. <i>The statute of limitations for aggravated assault is the same as the “primary crime.”</i> .....	7
E. A TRIAL COURT HAS THE DISCRETION TO HOLD A PRETRIAL EVIDENTIARY HEARING ON A DEFENDANT’S MOTION TO QUASH AND DISMISS. ....	8
F. JUDGE WAS DISQUALIFIED FROM PRESIDING OVER CASE REVOKING COMMUNITY SUPERVISION WHERE SHE HAD PREVIOUSLY APPEARED AT A STATUS HEARING AND SIGNED A JURY WAIVER FORM AS PROSECUTOR IN THE SAME CASE. ....	8
G. JUVENILE CASE TRANSFER -- FAMILY CODE §54.02(j)(4)(A) MERELY REQUIRES A SHOWING THAT DELAY IN SEEKING A TRANSFER WAS BEYOND THE STATE’S CONTROL; TRIAL COURT IS NOT REQUIRED TO CONSIDER WHETHER DELAY WAS OPPRESSIVE. ....	9
<b>IV. EVIDENCE.....</b>	<b>9</b>
A. SIXTH AMENDMENT.....	9
1. <i>Defendant’s Sixth Amendment right to confront witnesses is not violated where trial court acted within discretion in appointing translator.</i> .....	9
2. <i>No-impeachment rule prohibiting juror testimony regarding deliberations violates Sixth Amendment where is prohibits consideration of testimony about a juror’s racial bias during deliberations.</i> .....	10

B. EXPERTS' TESTIMONY OF ABUSIVE HEAD TRAUMA BASED SOLELY ON A CONSTELLATION OF SYMPTOMS CAN BE RELIABLE. ..	11
<b>V. OFFENSES.....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. ENGAGING IN ORGANIZED CRIMINAL ACTIVITY – RECOGNITION BY VICTIM OF DEFENDANT AS A GANG MEMBER ALONG WITH EVIDENCE THAT DEFENDANT ACTED IN CONCERT WITH OTHER GANG MEMBERS WAS SUFFICIENT TO ESTABLISH DEFENDANT WAS A MEMBER OF A CRIMINAL STREET GANG. ....	11
B. VIOLATION OF A CIVIL COMMITMENT ORDER -- A CIVIL COMMITMENT ORDER UNDER HEALTH AND SAFETY CODE §841.081(A) NEED NOT BE FINAL TO BE EFFECTIVE.....	11
C. IMPROPER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATOR AND STUDENT -- DEFENDANT, A POLICE OFFICER EMPLOYED BY A SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICE DEPARTMENT, DID NOT WORK FOR OR AT A SPECIFIC HIGH SCHOOL FOR PURPOSES OF PENAL CODE §21.12. ....	12
D. BRIBERY -- THE DEFINITION OF “POLITICAL CONTRIBUTION” IN PENAL CODE §36.02(D) IS NOT LIMITED TO LEGAL POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS.....	12
E. BURGLARY OF A HABITATION -- DEFENDANT CAN BE PROSECUTED FOR BURGLARY OF A HABITATION EVEN IF HE LIVES WITH THE VICTIM. ....	13
F. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ASSAULT -- A DEFENDANT CAN BE CONVICTED OF A THIRD-DEGREE FELONY FOR ASSAULTING HIS SPOUSE, BASED SOLELY ON THEIR PAST DATING RELATIONSHIP. ....	13
G. FEDERAL CRIMES.....	14
1. <i>Bank Fraud -- State must show there was a scheme to defraud, not that the bank actually sustained a financial loss or that the intent of the scheme was to cause the bank to sustain a financial loss.</i> .....	14
2. <i>Insider Trading -- A close family relationship is sufficient to sustain a conviction for insider trading.</i> .....	14
<b>VI. JURY INSTRUCTIONS.....</b>	<b>15</b>
A. ALTHOUGH APPELLANT DENIED COMMITTING THEFT ENTIRELY, THE COURT INCORRECTLY REFUSED A LESSER-INCLUDED OFFENSE OF ATTEMPTED THEFT BECAUSE THERE WAS OTHER EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT SUCH AN INSTRUCTION. ....	15
B. DEFENDANT IN THIS CASE WAS ENTITLED TO AN INSTRUCTION ON THE LESSER-INCLUDED OFFENSE OF MANSLAUGHTER BECAUSE HE TESTIFIED THAT HE KNEW THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH DRINKING ALCOHOL, SMOKING MARIHUANA, AND SMOKING PCP DIP CIGARETTES WHILE DRIVING. ....	15
<b>VII. PLEA AGREEMENTS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
A. DEFENDANT, WHO HAD ACCEPTED THE BENEFIT OF AN ILLEGALLY LENIENT SENTENCE, WAS ESTOPPED FROM ARGUING THAT THIS SENTENCE COULD NOT BE USED LATER TO ENHANCE HIS PUNISHMENT FOR A SUBSEQUENT OFFENSE. ....	16
B. ORAL PART OF PLEA AGREEMENT WAS LIMITED TO UNFILED CASES THAT AROSE FROM SAME FACTS AS CASES TO WHICH DEFENDANT PLED, THEREFORE, PROSECUTION OF AN UNRELATED MURDER CASE DEFENDANT WAS NOT BARRED.....	16
C. WHERE THE PARTIES DID NOT UNDERSTAND THE LAW IN RELATION TO THE FACTS OF THE CASE, THE DEFENDANT WAS ENTITLED TO HABEAS RELIEF. ....	16
D. THE PROPER REMEDY FOR AN ILLEGAL SENTENCE IMPOSED AS A RESULT OF A CHARGE-BARGAINED GUILTY PLEA IS TO SET ASIDE THE PLEA AND RETURN THE PARTIES TO THEIR POSITIONS PRIOR TO THE GUILTY PLEA. ....	17
<b>VIII. SENTENCING .....</b>	<b>17</b>
A. DEATH PENALTY .....	17
1. <i>SIGNIFICANT CASE -- The <u>Briseno</u> factors adopted by Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, for evaluating an <u>Atkins</u> claim, are based on superseded medical standards that create an unacceptable risk that a person with intellectual disabilities will be executed in violation of the Eighth Amendment.</i> .....	17
2. <i>Texas Courts may not address a defense claim of intellectual disability pre-trial.</i> .....	18
3. <i>At capital sentencing, the admission of a victim's family members' characterizations and opinions about the crime, the defendant, and the appropriate sentence violates the Eighth Amendment.</i> .....	18
4. <i>Court denied Applicant's application for writ of habeas corpus in death penalty case after review of the record despite the fact that Applicant was merely a party to the capital murder.</i> .....	19
5. <i>Court stayed execution while determining whether failure to give notice to the Office of Capital and Forensic Writs within the statutory deadline require resetting of execution date.</i> .....	19

B. ENHANCEMENTS .....	20
1. <i>Failure to register as a sex offender may be enhanced with two prior felony convictions under Penal Code §12.42(d) and the specific enhancement provisions of CCP Art. 62.102 do not necessarily control.</i> .....	20
2. <i>Evidence was sufficient to link defendant to prior convictions, as required to enhance defendant's sentence.</i> .....	20
3. <i>Drug Free Zone -- The State need not prove that an accused was aware that the drug transaction occurred in a drug-free zone.</i> .....	21
C. STACKING .....	21
1. <i>If a defendant commits a second offense while on parole for a first offense, a trial court cannot stack the second sentence on top of the first sentence if parole on the first sentence has not yet been revoked.</i> .....	21
2. <i>Trial court lacked statutory authority to stack sentences of 23 years and seven years on convictions for compelling prostitution of minor and sexual assault of child arising out of single criminal action.</i> .....	21
D. DEADLY WEAPONS .....	22
1. <i>A butter knife brandished aggressively during a convenience store robbery was considered a deadly weapon.</i> .....	22
2. <i>Fire is a deadly weapon even if no one got hurt by it.</i> .....	22
E. COMMUNITY SUPERVISION -- CONVICTION FOR IMPROPER PHOTOGRAPHY UNDER STATUTE LATER HELD TO BE UNCONSTITUTIONALLY OVERBROAD ON ITS FACE COULD NOT SERVE AS SOLE BASIS FOR REVOKING COMMUNITY SUPERVISION. ....	23
H. FEDERAL SENTENCING .....	23
1. <i>Section 924(c) does not prevent a sentencing court from considering a mandatory minimum imposed under that provision when calculating an appropriate sentence for the predicate offense.</i> .....	23
2. <i>Sentencing Guidelines were not subject to a void for vagueness challenge under Fifth Amendment Due Process Clause.</i> .....	23
<b>IX. APPEALS .....</b>	<b>25</b>
A. JURISDICTION .....	25
1. <i>Court of Appeals did not have jurisdiction over a second appeal of a motion for DNA testing that was filed too late, even though defendant had received untimely notice that the trial court had denied his motion.</i> .....	25
2. <i>Court of Appeals was required to determine whether it had jurisdiction prior to considering merits of defendant's claim.</i> .....	25
B. PRESERVATION .....	26
1. <i>Court of Appeals was required to consider whether defendant preserved issue for appellate review before ruling on the merits.</i> .....	26
2. <i>If a trial court's findings of fact and conclusions of law do not mention an argument made by one of the parties at trial, that argument is still available as a "theory of law" to uphold the ruling.</i> .....	26
C. A DEFENDANT WHO RECEIVED A FAVORABLE PLEA AGREEMENT IS NOT ESTOPPED FROM CHALLENGING HIS CONVICTION IF THE OFFENSE IS LATER FOUND TO BE UNCONSTITUTIONAL .....	27
D. BY FAILING TO CONSIDER THE CUMULATIVE FORCE OF THE EVIDENCE IN THE LIGHT MOST FAVORABLE TO THE VERDICT, THE APPEALS COURT INCORRECTLY APPLIED THE JACKSON STANDARD IN ITS SUFFICIENCY REVIEW. ....	27
E. ON A MOTION FOR RETESTING OF DNA EVIDENCE, THE COURT OF APPEALS SHOULD CONSIDER ALL EVIDENCE THAT WAS BEFORE THE DISTRICT COURT, EVEN IF IT WAS NOT FORMALLY ENTERED INTO EVIDENCE. ....	28
F. HARM .....	28
1. <i>Denial of a closing argument at a community-supervision revocation proceeding is not structural error that requires automatic reversal.</i> .....	28
2. <i>Where the defendant claimed his sentence was illegal after a hearing in which his community supervision was revoked, the appellate court was correct to apply habeas harm analysis on a direct appeal.</i> .....	29
3. <i>When reviewing a trial court's decisions under Code of Criminal Procedure Art. 36.28, the harm analysis should include review of the entire record.</i> .....	29
G. REMAND WAS PROPER REMEDY WHERE COURT OF APPEALS FAILED TO ADDRESS THE APPLICABILITY OF SPECIFIC CASE LAW HEAVILY RELIED ON BY THE STATE IN ITS APPEAL. ....	30
<b>X. INEFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE OF COUNSEL .....</b>	<b>30</b>

A.	CAPITAL MURDER DEFENDANT WAS PREJUDICED BY TRIAL COUNSEL’S INTRODUCTION OF EXPERT TESTIMONY THAT BASED FUTURE DANGEROUSNESS OPINION IN PART ON RACE EVEN THOUGH EXPERT OPINED THAT DEFENDANT WAS NOT A FUTURE DANGER. ....	30
B.	DEATH-PENALTY APPLICANT WAS NOT ENTITLED TO RELIEF BASED ON AN INEFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE CLAIM THAT HAD ALREADY BEEN PREVIOUSLY FULLY LITIGATED. ....	31
C.	ELICITING TESTIMONY FROM A PREVIOUS DEFENSE ATTORNEY REGARDING POTENTIALLY PRIVILEGED COMMUNICATIONS DID NOT CONSTITUTE INEFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE OF COUNSEL. ....	32
<b>XI. HABEAS CORPUS.....</b>		<b>32</b>
A.	JUDGE HAD NO AUTHORITY TO TAKE FURTHER ACTION ON HABEAS CASE, WHERE JUDGE HAD VOLUNTARILY RECUSED HIMSELF AND A REPLACEMENT JUDGE HAD BEEN APPOINTED. ....	32
B.	ARTICLE 11.073.....	33
1.	<i>A defendant is not entitled to relief under Code of Criminal Procedure Art. 11.073 based on new evidence that would have affected punishment. ....</i>	<i>33</i>
2.	<i>Expert’s recantation of her trial testimony and her new opinion that there were no physical signs of sexual assault constituted newly available, relevant scientific testimony entitling defendants to relief under Article 11.073. ....</i>	<i>33</i>
C.	A LAB TECHNICIAN’S PRIOR MISCONDUCT IN CASES INVOLVING TESTING ALPRAZOLAM AND COCAINE IS NOT THE TYPE OF MISCONDUCT THAT WOULD WARRANT A PRESUMPTION OF FALSITY OF TESTING DONE BY THE SAME TECHNICIAN IN A CASE INVOLVING POSSESSION OF MARIJUANA.....	34
D.	A WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS IS THE PROPER REMEDY BY WHICH TO COMPEL THE BOARD OF PARDONS AND PAROLES TO PROVIDE A PAROLE-DENIAL LETTER IN COMPLIANCE WITH TEXAS GOVERNMENT CODE § 508.1411.....	34

## SCOTUS/CCA Update

### Significant Decisions from September 2016 to April 2017

#### I. INTRODUCTION

This paper covers the published opinions issued by the Court of Criminal Appeals between September 1, 2016 and April 1, 2017. It also includes the significant criminal cases from the United States Supreme Court that have broad applicability, issued during that same time frame. As the terms for both courts continue, we will continue to supplement the paper with significant decisions. If you would like a copy of the completed paper or if you feel something is missing please feel free to email me though Jennifer Berlanga at [Jennifer.Berlanga@txcourts.gov](mailto:Jennifer.Berlanga@txcourts.gov) and we'll do our best to hook you up with a completed paper

#### II. MOTIONS TO SUPPRESS

**A. Reasonable Expectation of Privacy -- There is a reasonable expectation of privacy in the content of text messages.** Albert Leslie Love, Jr believed that Keenan Hubert was responsible for the death of his friend, Emmanuel Bowers, III. In retaliation, Love and two accomplices shot and killed Hubert as he sat in the passenger seat of his friend's vehicle one night. At trial, the State was allowed to introduce Love's cell phone records over Love's objections that the records were obtained without a warrant. The records involved the content of 1,600 text messages, which the State used to establish a number of key facts and elements of the crime. The State emphasized the content of the text messages throughout trial. Love was found guilty of capital murder and sentenced to death. Love's direct appeal to the Court of Criminal Appeals followed.

The Court of Criminal Appeals reversed and remanded on Love's point of error regarding the warrantless retrieval of his cellphone records. *Love v. State*, \_\_S.W.3d\_\_, 2016 WL 7131259 (Tex. Crim. App. Dec. 7, 2016) (6:0:3). Writing for the majority, Judge Yeary first distinguished between the numbers dialed, which one does not have a reasonable expectation of privacy in, and the content of the communications. Since, in this case, the Court was dealing with contents of a text message that had been

transmitted via a cell phone to a service provider and been stored in its server, the Fourth Amendment had been implicated. Judge Yeary explained that this was because text messages are analogous to regular mail and email, that is, a text message has an outside address visible to the third-party carriers that transmit it to its intended location, and also content that the sender presumes will be read only by the intended recipient. Given this, the content of Love's text messages could not be obtained without a probable cause-based warrant. Applying Article 38.23(a), which Love had relied on in his appeal, Judge Yeary stated that the trial court should have suppressed the content of the text messages. Because the text messages offered the strongest evidence of Love's guilt and were heavily relied on by the State, Judge Yeary concluded that the trial court's error was not harmless and Love's case was remanded for a new trial.

Presiding Judge Keller filed a dissenting opinion joined by Judge Hervey. Presiding Judge Keller opined that Love, in his motions to suppress and objections in a hearing outside the jury, had merely raised an objection as to the location data retrieved and had never preserved a complaint as to the content of the text messages.

Judge Meyers dissented without written opinion.

#### B. Detentions

**1. It is not per se objectively reasonable for the police to frisk a suspect for weapons on the basis that he or she is accused of possessing drugs.** Officer Alvarez received an anonymous tip that two white males, one in all black and one in a black shirt and carrying a brown backpack, were using drugs on a street corner. Acting upon this tip, Alvarez came upon Furr and a friend, who fit the descriptions, standing on a street corner located in a "high drug, high crime" area. When Furr furtively started walking away, Alvarez and another officer, Ayala, caught up to him. Furr did not initially respond when asked if he had weapons on him and also appeared out of it and under the influence of something. Ayala frisked Furr for weapons. While doing so, he found a crack pipe and two syringes in Furr's front right pocket. After seizing the contraband, Furr was no longer free to leave, according to Ayala. Ayala asked if he had any

identification, and Furr said that it was in his pocket. After removing the wallet and opening it, Ayala found two small balloons of what he believed to be heroin. Furr was charged with possession of a controlled substance. He filed a motion to suppress, which the trial court denied. Furr argued on appeal that the anonymous tip did not establish reasonable suspicion to detain and frisk him, but the court of appeals disagreed.

The Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed. *Furr v. State*, 499 S.W.3d 872 (Tex. Crim. App. Sept. 21, 2016) (7:2). Judge Hervey, writing for the majority, explained that an officer is justified in engaging in a protective frisk if he reasonably suspects that the person who he has lawfully detained is presently armed and dangerous. Judge Hervey cited to *Florida v. J.L.* and distinguished it from the facts of this case. To Judge Hervey, the officers in this case not only operated on an anonymous tip but also made a number of independent observations supporting the tip. While this justified the initial stop and the subsequent frisk, Judge Hervey was not willing to go so far as to create a rule that it is per se objectively reasonable for the police to frisk a suspect for weapons if they are accused of possessing drugs.

Judge Meyers wrote a dissenting opinion in which he stated that he would have held the stop and frisk unlawful. Judge Meyers believed the Court should “go back to the standard where we required specific articulable facts to raise reasonable suspicion that someone is engaged in criminal activity and where anonymous tips had to be independently corroborated for reliability.”

Judge Alcala dissented without written opinion.

**2. Community Caretaking -- Police officer justified in initiating a traffic stop after seeing a car stopped at a stop light, smelling alcohol coming from the car, seeing an unconscious passenger, and getting no verbal response from the driver.** On the Fourth of July, Officer Figueroa was monitoring a bar district in downtown Fort Worth. At around 5:30 in the afternoon he stopped at a red light with his windows rolled down. An SUV with its front passenger window rolled down pulled up to the light on his left hand side. He was within arm’s reach of the SUV’s open window. Figueroa smelled the odor of alcohol from the SUV

and noticed a woman hunched over in the passenger seat, motionless. The driver of the SUV, Cameron Byram, seemed oblivious to the police officer or his passenger. Officer Figueroa yelled at Byram, who did not answer. When the light turned green, Byram drove off, and Figueroa initiated a traffic stop despite not seeing Byram commit any traffic violations. Based upon evidence obtained after the stop, the State charged Byram with driving while intoxicated.

Byram filed a motion to suppress, which the trial court denied without written findings. Byram pleaded guilty, but appealed the trial court’s ruling on the motion to suppress. The court of appeals reversed Byram’s conviction, holding that Byram’s detention was unreasonable, noting first that the community caretaking exception did not apply. The court of appeals also held that Officer Figueroa lacked reasonable suspicion to stop Byram.

A unanimous Court of Criminal Appeals reversed. *Byram v. State*, \_\_\_ S.W.3d \_\_\_, 2017 WL 359791 (Tex. Crim. App. Jan. 25, 2017)(9:0). Writing for the majority, Judge Yeary explained that the community-caretaking exception applied to the traffic stop. According to Judge Yeary, determining whether an officer may properly invoke his community-caretaking function is a two-step inquiry into (1) whether the officer was primarily motivated by a community-caretaking purpose; and (2) whether the officer’s belief that the individual’s help was reasonable. Here, Officer Figueroa testified that his primary motivation was to assist Byram’s passenger. Moreover, his belief was reasonable because the passenger was hunched over and motionless along with the strong smell of alcohol coming from the window.

**C. Good Faith -- Art. 38.23(b) applies where a search warrant, though later found to be based on an illegality, was obtained by law enforcement in good faith and under an objectively reasonable belief that it was valid and relied upon appropriately obtained evidence.** A DPS officer received information that marijuana was being grown inside Bradley McClintock’s residence. McClintock lived in a second-floor apartment over a business. An open staircase on the back of the building leads from the parking lot to the second floor apartment. Officers monitored the apartment and witnessed a male



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