

PRESENTED AT

Robert O. Dawson Conference on Criminal Appeals

May 6-8, 2020
Austin, Texas

Article 11.07 Writs of Habeas Corpus

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I. Brief Introduction

This paper is intended to give lawyers, judges, and prisoners an overview of the procedures and law unique to Texas felony post-conviction writ of habeas corpus litigation. It first covers procedural matters and common pitfalls, and then moves into the basics of the substantive law required for the major claims seen in this arena. It is not exhaustive or comprehensive, particularly in its treatment of the substantive law governing the resolution of habeas corpus claims. However, it does contain the great majority of the elemental law in play in most cases.

One of the curiosities of habeas corpus practice is that the parties must know a wide range of law to investigate and accurately respond to writ applications, but the eventual resolution of individual claims doesn't often require resort to extensive legal analysis and argument. Decisions on the merits of writ claims are ultimately driven by the facts from the initial investigation and trial and the facts discovered after post-trial investigations. The overarching message of this paper and the accompanying talk is that the parties must know the facts of the case and should focus their arguments on those facts.

II. Habeas Corpus Basics & Modern Post-Conviction Habeas

“The writ of habeas corpus is the remedy to be used when any person is restrained in his liberty. It is an order issued by a court or judge of competent jurisdiction, directed to any one having a person in his custody, or under his restraint, commanding him to produce such person, at a time and place named in the writ, and show why he is being held in custody or restraint.” Tex. Code Crim. Proc. art. 11.01.

Despite the straightforward statutory definition, there is something mysterious about habeas corpus—it is perceived as a cornerstone of our common law legal culture, but few lawyers really understand it. As reflected by our statutory definition, habeas corpus has historically been the prisoner's tool to challenge the legality of restraint. *See Jones v. Cunningham*, 371 U.S. 236, 238–40 (1963) (providing very brief sketch of historical English practice). Through the years, the Great Writ has been modified in many ways and, despite the “old school” statutory definition, serves several different functions in Texas criminal practice. These different uses for the writ combined with the complexities inherent in the Texas court system create a bewildering maze for practitioners to navigate.

This paper focuses on one aspect of Texas habeas corpus practice, post-conviction

habeas corpus litigation in felony cases (other than those resulting in death sentences). In this setting, habeas corpus becomes available after the exhaustion of direct appeals. Post-conviction habeas corpus is used to challenge the validity of a conviction or sentence, usually on constitutional grounds. It is a collateral attack on the conviction, a new lawsuit, based on claims and evidence from outside of the trial and appellate records that must typically relate to jurisdiction or constitutional claims. Since post-conviction habeas follows exhaustion of appeals, it generally involves claims from outside the four corners of the trial record. It is not available to relitigate claims that have already been rejected, or to litigate claims that could have been litigated in the trial and appellate proceedings. Post-conviction habeas corpus proceedings, as they relate to final felony convictions, are governed by Article 11.07 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, so they are often referred to as “11.07 writs,” or just as “11.07.”

III. Texas Habeas Corpus Jurisdiction & Writ Basics

Understanding 11.07 writs requires a grasp of the constitutional and statutory scheme governing all habeas corpus writs in Texas criminal cases.

A. Constitutional Jurisdiction

Before providing habeas corpus jurisdiction, the Texas Constitution’s Bill of Rights provides that “[t]he writ of habeas corpus is a writ of right, and shall never be suspended. The Legislature shall enact laws to render the remedy speedy and effectual.” Tex. Const. art. I, § 12.

The Texas Constitution grants the Court of Criminal Appeals jurisdiction to make final determinations in all criminal cases in the state. Tex. Const. art. V, § 5(a). The Constitution also grants to the Court, and its judges, the power to issue the writ of habeas corpus, “subject to such regulations as may be prescribed by law.” Tex. Const. art. V, § 5(c). Unlike the Constitution’s grants of other extraordinary writ jurisdiction to the Court of Criminal Appeals, the Court’s habeas corpus jurisdiction is not limited to “criminal law matters.” *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court and its Justices also have the “power to issue writs of habeas corpus, as may be prescribed by law ...” Tex. Const. art. V, § 3(a).

B. Statutory Jurisdiction

Most of what the legislature has “prescribed by law” to effectuate the habeas remedy is found in Chapter 11 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. Article 11.05 provides statutory authority for the “Court of Criminal Appeals, the District Courts, the

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First appeared as part of the conference materials for the
2020 Robert O. Dawson Conference on Criminal Appeals session
"11.07 Writs"