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**U.S. Supreme Court
&
Court of Criminal Appeals Update**

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Emily Johnson-Liu
Asst. State Prosecuting Attorney
emily.johnson-liu@spa.texas.gov
512-463-1660

Britt Lindsey
Asst. District Attorney, Taylor County
britt.lindsey@taylorcounty.texas.gov
325-674-1261

US Supreme Court.....5

Counterman v. Colorado, 600 U.S. 66 (6/27/23)5

McElrath v. Georgia, 601 U.S. 87 (2/21/24)6

Pulsifer v. United States, 144 S. Ct. 718 (3/15/24)8

Smith v. United States, 143 S. Ct. 1594 (6/15/23)8

Samia v. United States, 599 U.S. 635 (6/23/23)8

SCOTUS Preview 10

U.S. v. Rahimi..... 10

Smith v. Arizona 10

City of Grants Pass, Oregon v. Johnson..... 10

Thornell v. Jones 10

CCA (Decided Cases)..... 11

1. Fourth Amendment & Exclusionary Rule 11

1.1 Reasonable Suspicion 11

Lall v. State, PD-0700-22, 2024 WL 1289270 11

1.2 Mistake of Law 11

Daniel v. State, 683 S.W.3d 777 11

1.3 Standing..... 13

King v. State, 670 S.W.3d 653 13

1.4 Warrantless Arrest..... 14

State v. McGuire, 2024 WL 695765 14

2. Second Amendment / Tx Const. Art. I, § 23 15

State v. Villanueva, 2024 WL 695769 15

3. Sixth Amendment & Related Rights..... 15

3.1 Right to Self-Representation..... 15

Huggins v. State, 674 S.W.3d 538..... 15

3.2 Speedy Trial 15

Taylor v. State, 667 S.W.3d 809 15

3.3 Twelve-Person Jury 16

Becerra v. State, 685 S.W.3d 120 16

4. Jurisdiction and Authority 19

4.1 Trial court’s authority 19

Flores v. State, 679 S.W.3d 695 19

In re State ex rel. Wice, 668 S.W.3d 662 20

5. Pre-Trial Issues 20

5.1 Bonds..... 20

Ex parte Gayosso, 685 S.W.3d 100..... 20

5.2 Indictments & Informations..... 23

Williams v. State, 685 S.W.3d 110..... 23

Delarosa v. State, 677 S.W.3d 668 24

5.3 Calculating the Limitations Period..... 27

Ex parte Vieira, 676 S.W.3d 654 27

6. Jury Charges..... 28

Ransier v. State, 670 S.W.3d 646 28

Reed v. State, 680 S.W.3d 620 30

7. Offenses..... 30

7.1 Evading Arrest..... 30

Nicholson v. State, 682 S.W.3d 238 30

7.2 Forgery..... 31

State v. Green, 682 S.W.3d 253 31

7.3 Tampering By Concealing..... 34

McPherson v. State, 677 S.W.3d 663 34

8. Restitution 35

Johnson v. State, 680 S.W.3d 616 35

9. Bond Forfeitures 36

Green d/b/a A to Z Bail Bonds v. State, 670 S.W.3d 633..... 36

10. Ineffective Assistance of Counsel..... 37

Ex parte Lane, 670 S.W.3d 662 37

Ex parte Harris, No. WR-84,704-02, 2024 WL 590622 38

11. Habeas Corpus 38

11.1 Pretrial Writs..... 38

Ex parte Sheffield, 685 S.W.3d 86 38

Ex parte Couch, 678 S.W.3d 1 40

11.2 Habeas Discovery 41

<i>In re UTMB-Galveston</i> , 677 S.W.3d 696.....	41
<i>In re Irsan</i> , 678 S.W.3d 738.....	42
11.3 Late-Stage Dismissals	42
<i>Ex parte Woods</i> , 678 S.W.3d 733.....	42
12. New Evidence	42
<i>Ex parte Escobar</i> , 676 S.W.3d 664.....	42
13. Actual Innocence	42
<i>Ex parte Rodney Reed</i> , 670 S.W.3d 689.....	43
14. Appellate Procedure	43
<i>Rogers v. State</i> , 677 S.W.3d 705.....	43

US Supreme Court

- *Counterman v. Colorado*, [600 U.S. 66](#) (6/27/23) [5[Kagan]+2[Sotomayor]-1[Thomas]-2[Barrett]]

That an objectively reasonable person would find the defendant's words to be true threats is not enough to exclude them from First-Amendment protection. To criminalize a threat of violence, the defendant must be at least reckless about whether his words would be viewed in that manner.

Counterman became obsessed with a local musician who was a stranger to him. Over two years, he sent her hundreds of social media messages, including some that suggested he was surveilling her and that envisioned harm coming to her (e.g., "Staying in cyber life is going to kill you."; "You're not being good for human relations. Die."). She never responded, but the fear that he was following her and would hurt her upended her daily existence and caused her to lose sleep and cancel some performances. Counterman was charged with stalking by repeated communications, which in Colorado requires communicating with another "in a manner that would cause a reasonable person to suffer serious emotional distress and does cause that person ...to suffer serious emotional distress." In short, it did not require the State to prove Counterman had a subjective intent to threaten the victim. Counterman argued that his messages could not be criminalized because they were protected under the First Amendment. The Colorado courts disagreed, and Counterman appealed to the Supreme Court.

Justice Kagan's majority decision sided with Counterman. True threats of violence (serious expressions conveying that a speaker means to commit an act of unlawful violence, which can be categorized as such based solely on their objective content) have historically been unprotected. They harm others even when the speaker is clueless that their speech will be understood as threatening. To ensure that criminalizing true threats doesn't chill speech that falls on the fully protected, non-threatening free-speech side of the dichotomy, however, the First Amendment demands the defendant have some subjective awareness that his speech will be viewed as threatening. This means that some otherwise proscribable speech (and that causes real harm) will go unpunished because the State cannot prove the defendant's mental state. But by reducing an honest speaker's fear that he may erroneously incur liability, the *mens rea* requirement provides breathing room for more valuable speech. In the same way, defamation is defamation and obscenity is obscenity, but, to punish either, the defendant must have some subjective awareness of the disregard for truth or of the character and nature of the materials he distributes to avoid the hazard of self-censorship.

The subjective mental state required is recklessness. This means that a speaker must know that others could regard his statements as threatening violence but conveys them

anyway. This less onerous standard (compared with purpose/intent or knowledge) is necessary because of the value in protecting against profound harms to both individuals and society from true threats of violence—harms that formed the basis for this historically unprotected category of speech. Recklessness is also consistent with the standard required for defamation. That standard appears to have given sufficient breathing room to non-defamatory statements. Societal interests in countering threats are at least as high (if not higher) than defamation, and the protected speech near the borderline is typically further from core First Amendment concerns than more frequently political reputation-damaging speech. While incitement of criminal conduct requires a higher mental state (intent), that is because the protected speech at the border is often only a hair's breath from political advocacy. Because the State in Counterman's case only had to prove whether a reasonable person would understand his statements as threats, not whether he was reckless about that possibility, it violated the First Amendment.

Justice Sotomayor concurred, pointing out that “because petitioner was prosecuted for stalking [for a combination of threatening statements and repeated, unwanted, direct contact with the victim], this case does not require resort to the true-threats exemption to the First Amendment.” For the same reason, less First-Amendment scrutiny is warranted than there would be for pure speech (as would occur in prosecutions for a single statement based solely on its content). She stresses the limited holding of the case: “True-threats doctrine came up below only because of the lower courts’ doubtful assumption that petitioner could be prosecuted only if his actions fell under the true-threats exception.”

➤ *McElrath v. Georgia*, [601 U.S. 87](#) (2/21/24) (9 [Jackson]+1[Alito])

A jury's acquittal on one offense that is so contradictory to that same jury's guilty verdicts on other offenses that they cannot both be true is nonetheless an acquittal for double jeopardy purposes.

McElrath suffered from delusions. He was committed to a mental-health facility and diagnosed with schizophrenia. One week after his release, he killed his mother by stabbing her more than 50 times. He told first responders he did so because she was poisoning him and asked if his actions were wrong.

He was charged with malice murder (which is like our intentional and knowing murder), felony murder, and aggravated assault. McElrath asserted an insanity defense. Although the crimes neither occurred at different times nor through distinct acts, the jury found McElrath not guilty by reason of insanity on malice murder and guilty but mentally ill on the other two offenses. Under Georgia law, the insanity acquittal results in a commitment to a mental-health facility while the “guilty but mentally ill” verdicts give

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