

Supreme Court Case Study 41



The Legality of Evidence Seized by the Police

Mapp v. Ohio, 1961

***** Background of the Case *****

In May 1957, three police officers arrived at Dollree Mapp's home after having received a tip that a fugitive had hidden there. Mapp, who had phoned her attorney, refused to admit the police officers. They notified their headquarters, and the officers began their surveillance of the house.

Three hours later four more police officers arrived. They knocked on the door, and when Mapp did not immediately answer, they forced the door and entered. Mapp demanded to see a search warrant. One of the officers held up a piece of paper, claiming it was the warrant. Mapp snatched the paper and stuffed it into her blouse. After a scuffle, the officers recovered the paper and handcuffed Mapp.

While this was transpiring, Mapp's attorney arrived, but the police refused to let him enter the house or have access to his client. The police then began to search the house. They did not find a fugitive in the house; however, in the course of their search which covered the entire residence, they turned up some material they deemed obscene. Mapp was charged and eventually convicted of having lewd and lascivious books and pictures in her possession, a violation of an Ohio statute.

At her trial, the state produced no search warrant, but the failure to produce one went unexplained. Mapp was convicted of having violated the Ohio law. On appeal, the Ohio Supreme Court upheld the conviction even though the evidence against her had been illegally seized. Mapp appealed her case to the United States Supreme Court.

Constitutional Issue *****

Suppose the police arrive at your house in response to a call reporting an intruder. While looking for the reported intruder, the police undertake, without a warrant, a search of dresser drawers in various bedrooms where they find a supply of illegal drugs. Can this evidence be introduced at your trial on charges of drug possession? This question involves what has been called the "exclusionary rule"—that is, a rule that evidence seized in violation of a person's constitutional rights may not be used against that person in a trial.

In *Wolf v. Colorado* (1949), a case similar to the *Mapp* case, the Supreme Court had recognized that the Fourth Amendment embodies the right of an individual to privacy but declined to forbid illegally seized evidence from being used at trial. Since the 1914 decision in *Weeks v. United States*, illegally seized evidence could not be used in federal courts. The issue in the *Mapp* case was whether or not the exclusionary rule of *Weeks*, applied to the states through the Fourteenth Amendment, also prohibited illegally seized evidence in state courts.

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***** The Supreme Court's Decision *****

The Court voted 6 to 3 to reverse the Ohio Supreme Court's decision. Justice Tom C. Clark wrote for the majority:

"In extending the substantive protection of due process to all constitutionally unreasonable searches—state or federal—it was logically and constitutionally necessary that the exclusion doctrine—an essential part of the right to privacy—be also insisted upon. . . . In other words, privacy without the exclusionary rule would be a hollow right. . . ." The Court held that this right could not continue to tolerate the admission of unlawfully seized evidence.

The *Mapp* decision was seen by the Court as the end of a double standard by which "a federal prosecutor may make no use of evidence illegally seized, but a State's attorney across the street may. . . ." Justice Clark wrote that this decision also ended an unfortunate situation in which "the State, by admitting evidence unlawfully seized, serves to encourage disobedience to the Federal Constitution which it is bound to uphold."

Clark was aware that the Court's ruling would sometimes result in criminals going free because of an error on the part of the police. To this possibility he responded, "The criminal goes free, if he must, but it is the law that sets him free. Nothing can destroy a government more quickly than its failure to observe its own laws, or worse, its disregard of the charter of its own existence."

***** Dissenting Opinions *****

Justice John Marshall Harlan dissented. He doubted the federal exclusionary rule was constitutional and suggested that, under federalism, court remedies for illegally seized evidence should be left to the states.



Questions *****

DIRECTIONS: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. According to the Court's decision, why may illegally seized evidence not be used in a trial?
2. Why, according to Justice Clark, is it better for a criminal to go free than to convict the criminal with illegally seized evidence?
3. What was the illegally seized evidence in the *Mapp* case?
4. What was the "double standard" referred to in the Court's decision?
5. Do you agree with the Court's decision in the *Mapp* case? Give reasons for your answer.