Caniglia v. Strom

(2021) __ U.S. __ [141 S.Ct.1951784]

Issue

Is there a "community caretaking" exception to the warrant requirement?

Facts

The wife of Edward Caniglia phoned the police in Cranston, Rhode Island and requested a welfare check on her husband who she feared was suicidal. She explained that she and her husband had gotten into a heated argument the night before and, at one point, he "retrieved a handgun from the bedroom, put it on the dining room table," and asked here to shoot him now "and get it over with." She left the home and spent the night at a hotel. The next morning, she tried to telephone Caniglia but he didn't answer. She called the police and asked for help.

When officers arrived, Caniglia was standing on the front porch and the officers explained to him why they had been called. Caniglia denied that he was suicidal but agreed to be taken by ambulance to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation. After the ambulance left, officers entered his home without consent and retrieved his weapons.[1]

Caniglia later sued the officers on grounds that their warrantless entry into the home was unlawful. In a pretrial proceeding, the district court granted the officers' motion for summary judgment. On appeal, the First Circuit affirmed, ruling that the officers' entry fell within the "community caretaking" exception to the warrant requirement. Caniglia appealed the ruling to the United States Supreme Court.

Discussion

In the not-too-distant past, many courts were frequently ruling that officers were permitted to make warrantless entries of homes, vehicles, and other places if they reasonably believed that an immediate entry was necessary to defuse a threat to a person or property that, while significant, did not qualify as an exigent circumstance. These became known as "community caretaking" searches because the officers' objective was to assist someone who needed immediate help on problem that was not criminal in nature. This was not uncommon because, as the California Supreme Court previously observed, many people "do not know the names of their next-door neighbors" and therefore the "tasks that neighbors, friends or relatives may have performed in the past now fall to the police."[2] One such task is conducting welfare checks, as happened in *Caniglia*.

There was, therefore, a sound basis for the First Circuit's ruling. But the Supreme Court ruled in *Caniglia* ruled there is no such thing as a "community caretaking" exception. Instead, any warrantless entry into a home can be justified only if the situation fell within the traditional exigent circumstances exception. As the Court explained, the "recognition that police officers perform many civic tasks in modern society was just that—a recognition that these tasks exist, and not an open-ended license to perform them anywhere."

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[1] **Note**: It was unclear whether Mrs. Caniglia had consented to the search, so the Court analyzed the facts as if she had not done so.

[2] *People v. Ray* (1999) 21 Cal.4th 464, 472 [disapproved on other grounds in *People v. Ovieda* (2019) 7 Cal.5th 1034, 1044.

This does not mean that officers cannot act unless they reasonably believed there was an imminent threat to life or property. Instead, the Court explained that officers in these situations must balance the need for an immediate response against its intrusiveness. And because warrantless entries into homes are highly intrusive, they will be upheld only if the need was demonstrably significant. The Court did not, however, decide this issue but, instead, ordered the Rhode Island courts to make that determination

Comment

Two things. First, the main thing to remember about these cases is that the court want officers to consider intrusions that are less intrusive and must be "carefully limited to achieving the objective which justified the entry."[3] Second, the Court's ruling will probably have little affect in California because the California Supreme Court had already ruled that "community caretaking" is not an exception to the warrant requirement. As the court explained in 2019, "[T]he community caretaking exception asserted in the absence of exigency is not one of the carefully delineated exceptions to the residential warrant requirement recognized by the United States Supreme Court."[4] POV

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[3] *People v. Ray* (1999) 21 C4 464, 472 [disapproved on other grounds in *People v. Ovieda* (2019) 7 Cal.5th 1034, 1044. Also see *Illinois v. McArthur* (2001) 531 U.S. 326, 331 ["the restraint at issue was tailored to that need"]; *McDonald v. United States* (1948) 335 U.S. 451, 459 [a "sense of proportion"].

[4] *People v. Ovieda* (2019) 7 Cal.5th 1034, 1053.