

No. 20-6192

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IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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JAMAL AIKEEM HUTCHINSON, PETITIONER

v.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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ON PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI  
TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE UNITED STATES

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JEFFREY B. WALL  
Acting Solicitor General  
Counsel of Record  
Department of Justice  
Washington, D.C. 20530-0001  
SupremeCtBriefs@usdoj.gov  
(202) 514-2217

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Petitioner contends (Pet. i, 8-13) that this Court's review is warranted to resolve a circuit conflict over whether a defendant who pleaded guilty to possessing a firearm as a felon, in violation of 18 U.S.C. 922(g)(1), is automatically entitled to relief on plain-error review if he was not advised during his plea colloquy that one element of that offense is knowledge of his felon status. See Rehaif v. United States, 139 S. Ct. 2191 (2019). As explained in the government's petition for a writ of certiorari in United States v. Gary, No. 20-444 (filed Oct. 5, 2020), petitioner is correct that the circuits are divided on that recurring question and that it warrants the Court's review this Term.

The petition for a writ of certiorari here, however, is not a suitable vehicle for resolving the circuit conflict. The court of appeals' brief, unpublished opinion here did not expressly address whether the failure to advise a pleading defendant of Rehaif's knowledge requirement is a structural error that entitles a defendant to relief without a showing that the error affected the outcome. Instead, applying circuit precedent, the court simply determined that petitioner had not established an effect on his "substantial rights," Fed. R. Crim. P. 52(b), because he did not show a reasonable probability "that he would not have pleaded guilty but for the [district court's] failure to advise him of the knowledge-of-status element." Pet. App. 4a-5a. Moreover, having made that determination, the court of appeals did not reach or resolve the separate plain-error requirement -- which this Court has found dispositive in two previous cases involving claims of structural error -- that the error have seriously affected the fairness, integrity, or public reputation of judicial proceedings, see United States v. Cotton, 535 U.S. 625, 633-634 (2002); Johnson v. United States, 520 U.S. 461, 470 (1997).

In contrast, the government's petition for a writ of certiorari in Gary arises from a published court of appeals decision expressly holding that a district court's failure to advise a pleading defendant of Rehaif's knowledge element "is structural" error that entitles a defendant to relief because it

automatically satisfies the third and fourth requirements of this Court's plain-error test. United States v. Gary, 954 F.3d 194, 198, 202-208 (4th Cir. 2020). Five judges of that court criticized that holding in a published opinion respecting the denial of rehearing en banc, describing it as "so incorrect" as to warrant this Court's "prompt[]" review. United States v. Gary, 963 F.3d 420, 420 (4th Cir. 2020) (Wilkinson, J., joined by Niemeyer, Agee, Quattlebaum, and Rushing, JJ., concurring in the denial of rehearing en banc). And other courts of appeals have acknowledged but rejected the Fourth Circuit's approach in precedential opinions, including in opinions that similarly address both the third and the fourth requirements of the plain-error test. See Pet. at 21-22, Gary, supra (No. 20-444); United States v. Lavalais, 960 F.3d 180, 188 (5th Cir.), petition for cert. pending, No. 20-5489 (filed Aug. 20, 2020); United States v. Trujillo, 960 F.3d 1196, 1205-1207 (10th Cir.), petition for cert. pending, No. 20-6162 (filed Oct. 23, 2020).

Granting review in Gary would put squarely before the Court a decision that addresses both plain-error requirements about which the circuits are divided. Granting review in this case would not. And the earlier-filed petition in Gary is currently scheduled for a conference that would allow for a decision on the question presented this Term, without undue expedition of briefing and argument. Accordingly, the petition for a writ of certiorari

should be held pending the Court's consideration of the government's petition in Gary, supra (No. 20-444), and then disposed of as appropriate.\*

Respectfully submitted.

JEFFREY B. WALL  
Acting Solicitor General

JANUARY 2021

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\* The government waives any further response to the petition for a writ of certiorari unless this Court requests otherwise.