

In the Supreme Court of the United States



STATE OF OKLAHOMA,

Petitioner,

v.

BRYCE MILLER,

Respondent.

**On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the
Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals**

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether a State has authority to prosecute non-Indians who commit crimes against Indians in Indian country.

2. Whether *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, 140 S.Ct. 2452 (2020), should be overruled.

LIST OF PROCEEDINGS

Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals

No. F-2020-406

Bryce Miller, Appellant v.

The State of Oklahoma, Appellee

Date of Final Opinion: September 23, 2021



Oklahoma District Court (Pittsburg County)

No. CF-2019-284

The State of Oklahoma, Plaintiff v.

Bryce Miller, Defendant

Date of Judgment and Sentence: June 10, 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
QUESTIONS PRESENTED.....	i
LIST OF PROCEEDINGS.....	ii
TABLE OF AUTHORITIES	v
OPINIONS BELOW	1
JURISDICTION.....	2
STATUTORY PROVISIONS INVOLVED.....	2
STATEMENT OF THE CASE.....	3
REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION.....	6
CONCLUSION.....	9

TABLE OF CONTENTS – Continued

Page

APPENDIX TABLE OF CONTENTS

Opinion of the Court of Criminal Appeals, State of Oklahoma (September 23, 2021)..... 1a

District Court of Pittsburgh County, State of Oklahoma, Journal Entry of Facts and Conclusions of Law (June 17, 2021)..... 11a

 Agreed Stipulations (June 7, 2021) 14a

 Letters Certifying Tribal Membership (March 18, 2021 and November 18, 2021)..... 17a

 Letter Verifying Crime Location (November 25, 2020) 20a

Order of the Court of Criminal Appeals, State of Oklahoma, Granting Appellant’s Request for Remand and Supplementation of Record (April 26, 2021) 21a

Supplemental Brief of Appellee State of Oklahoma After Remand and Brief in Support of Motion to Stay and Abate Proceedings (July 7, 2021)..... 27a

Pre-Evidentiary Hearing Brief of Appellee State of Oklahoma on Indian Country Remand (May 20, 2021)..... 35a

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Page

CASES

<i>County of Yakima v. Confederated Tribes & Bands of Yakima Indian Nation</i> , 502 U.S. 251 (1992)	7
<i>Graves v. Barnes</i> , 405 U.S. 1201 (1972)	8
<i>McGirt v. Oklahoma</i> , 140 S.Ct. 2452 (2020)	passim
<i>New York ex rel. Cutler v. Dibble</i> , 62 U.S. (21 How.) 366 (1858).....	8
<i>Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta</i> , No. 21-429 (Okla. Crim. App. Sept. 21, 2021).....	passim
<i>United States v. McBratney</i> , 104 U.S. (14 Otto.) 621 (1881).....	8

STATUTES

18 U.S.C. § 1151.....	2
18 U.S.C. § 1152.....	2, 8
28 U.S.C. § 1257(a)	2

JUDICIAL RULES

Sup. Ct. R. 12.7	3
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OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, dated September 23, 2021, is included in the Appendix at App.1a-10a. The order of the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, dated April 26, 2021, remanding the case for an evidentiary hearing is included below at App.21a-26a. The Findings of Fact of the District Court in and for Pittsburg County, State of Oklahoma, dated June 17, 2021, is included below at App.11a-20a. These opinions and orders were not designated for publication.



JURISDICTION

The judgment of the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals was entered on September 23, 2021. App.1a. The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under 28 U.S.C. § 1257(a).



STATUTORY PROVISIONS INVOLVED

18 U.S.C. § 1151 (in relevant part) **Indian country defined**

[T]he term ‘Indian country’, as used in this chapter, means (a) all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government, notwithstanding the issuance of any patent, and, including rights-of-way running through the reservation.

18 U.S.C. § 1152 (in relevant part) **Law governing (Indian country)**

Except as otherwise expressly provided by law, the general laws of the United States as to the punishment of offenses committed in any place within the sole and exclusive jurisdiction of the United States, except the District of Columbia, shall extend to the Indian country.



STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Thousands of state criminal prosecutions have been called into question by this Court’s decision in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, 140 S.Ct. 2452 (2020). Like in other pending petitions before this Court, this case presents the question whether *McGirt* should be overruled and, even if not, whether the State has authority to prosecute non-Indians who commit crimes against Indians in Indian country. For the same reasons given in the petition in *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta*, No. 21-429, review is warranted to examine those questions. The petition for a writ of certiorari in this case should be held pending consideration of the *Castro-Huerta* petition or, in the alternative, granted.

1. On June 21, 2019, respondent gunned down sixteen-year-old J.M.N., firing eleven shots in all that riddled the teenager’s body with bullets. Tr. II 24-25, 51; Tr. III 113-20, 161.* By all accounts, respondent and J.M.N. were friends. Tr. II 26, 42, 208. J.M.N.’s mom had a drinking problem and he didn’t like the “riffraff that was coming in and out” of her house, which meant he often stayed over at friends’ homes. Tr. II 29. The night of the killing, J.M.N. planned to spend the night at respondent’s house. Tr. II 26. It had been a good day for J.M.N.; using money he earned working at McDonald’s, he had just obtained a tattoo honoring his dad, some new clothing, and a white pair of Michael Jordan sneakers he had longed for. Tr. II 25, 27-28, 30, 35, 37, 208-10, 214. Respondent picked

* All fact citations are to the transcript of respondent’s trial (Tr.), which is available below. See Sup. Ct. R. 12.7.

up J.M.N. in his truck and they drove off together, J.M.N. sporting his new clothes, footwear, and tattoo. Tr. II 213-15. Tragically, J.M.N. never made it to respondent's house.

The next morning, J.M.N.'s dead body was found in a ditch on the side of the road. Tr. II 46-48, 46-47, 79-81. Interviewed by authorities, respondent at first lied about when he last saw J.M.N. but eventually confessed to shooting him. Tr. III 181-84. Respondent claimed J.M.N. wanted to rob someone, and when he refused, J.M.N. threatened him with a knife. Tr. III 184. However, the evidence showed that, in the week prior to the shooting, J.M.N. had a heated argument with respondent's girlfriend, S.E., which she found threatening, and respondent told S.E. he would "take care of it." Tr. IV 141-44.

Respondent was convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to twenty years of imprisonment. He then appealed to the Court of Criminal Appeals, claiming the State lacked authority to prosecute him because J.M.N. was Indian and he killed J.M.N. in Indian country.

2. After this Court issued its decision in *McGirt*, the Court of Criminal Appeals remanded the case to the trial court for an evidentiary hearing. On remand, the State argued that *McGirt* was wrongly decided and that the Indian country claim was without merit as a result. App.38a. The State also argued that the Court of Criminal Appeals had errantly denied the State's jurisdiction over non-Indian-on-Indian crime. App.36a-37a. But the State acknowledged that under the Court of Criminal Appeals' precedent, the Choctaw had a reservation under the *McGirt* standard and the

State lacked jurisdiction over this non-Indian respondent. App.37a. The court accepted the parties' stipulations that respondent's victim was a member of the Choctaw Nation and the crime occurred within the historic lands of the Choctaw Nation, finding a reservation still existed and the State lacked jurisdiction under binding precedent. App.12a-13a.

After the state district court issued its findings of fact and conclusions of law, the case returned to the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals. There again, the State argued *McGirt* was wrongly decided, but recognized that the state courts were bound by it. App.28a-29a. The State also argued that it had jurisdiction over non-Indian-on-Indian crime. App.31a. The Court of Criminal Appeals reversed the conviction. "[T]he ruling in *McGirt* governs this case." App.3a. It also continued to reject the State's position on jurisdiction over non-Indian-on-Indian crime. App.3a. Two judges wrote separate opinions.

Judge Hudson concurred in the result based on *stare decisis*, but stated his "previously expressed views on the significance of *McGirt*, its far-reaching impact on the criminal justice system in Oklahoma and the need for a practical solution by Congress." App.7a.

Judge Lumpkin also concurred in the result. App.8a-10a. He expressed his view that the Court's opinion in *McGirt* "contravened * * * the history leading to the disestablishment of the Indian reservations in Oklahoma," but concluded that he was bound to follow it. App.8a.



REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

In the decision below, the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals applied *McGirt* to free yet another criminal—this time a non-Indian—from state custody, exacerbating the crisis in the criminal-justice system in Oklahoma. As the State of Oklahoma explains in its petition in *Castro-Huerta*, reconsideration of *McGirt* is the only realistic avenue for ending the ongoing chaos affecting every corner of daily life in Oklahoma. At a minimum, the impact of *McGirt* can be partially mitigated by affirming the State’s jurisdiction over non-Indians who commit crimes against Indians on a reservation. This case thus presents still one more opportunity to end or limit the damage caused by *McGirt*. This petition should be held pending the disposition of the petition in *Castro-Huerta* and then disposed of as is appropriate, or this petition should be granted.

As explained more fully in *Castro-Huerta*, *McGirt* was wrongly decided, and the Court’s review is urgently needed because no recent decision has had a more immediate and disruptive effect on life in an American State. *McGirt* contravened longstanding precedent on the disestablishment of Indian reservations. 140 S.Ct. at 2485 (Roberts, C.J., dissenting). It did so by wrongly reasoning that historical materials showing the original public meaning of statutes may be considered in the disestablishment inquiry “only” to “clear up” statutory ambiguity. *See id.* at 2467-2468, 2469-2470 (majority opinion). But consideration of history is necessary precisely because it is unclear whether Congress’s alienation of Indian lands at the turn of the

century changed the Indian country status of the land. *See id.* at 2488 (Roberts, C.J., dissenting). Under the correct framework prescribed by this Court's precedent, it is clear that Congress disestablished the Creek territory in Oklahoma, as well as the territories of the four other Oklahoma tribes. And with that conclusion, it is clear the decision below is incorrect and warrants reversal.

Overruling *McGirt* and restoring the state jurisdiction it stripped is important not only for this case and the victim of the terrible crime at issue. As the Chief Justice correctly predicted, the "burdens" of the *McGirt* decision on the State of Oklahoma have been "extraordinary." 140 S.Ct. at 2500. The challenges from that seismic shift in jurisdiction have rippled through every aspect of life in Oklahoma. Most immediately, *McGirt* has jeopardized the State's jurisdiction over thousands of criminal cases—this case being just one of them.

Even assuming nearly half of Oklahoma properly constitutes Indian country for purposes of federal criminal jurisdiction, review is also warranted on the question whether a State has jurisdiction to prosecute a non-Indian, like respondent, for crimes committed against Indians in Indian country. The petition in *Castro-Huerta* sets forth why review of this question is urgent and demonstrates Oklahoma's continued jurisdiction over these crimes is consistent with statute and precedent. As this Court has repeatedly held, "absent a congressional prohibition," a State has the right to "exercise criminal (and implicitly, civil) jurisdiction over non-Indians located on reservation lands." *County of Yakima v. Confederated Tribes & Bands of Yakima Indian Nation*, 502 U.S. 251, 257-58 (1992);

see also United States v. McBratney, 104 U.S. (14 Otto.) 621, 624 (1881). Meanwhile, nothing in the text of the General Crimes Act, nor any other Act of Congress, prohibits States from exercising jurisdiction over crimes committed by non-Indians against Indians. *See* 18 U.S.C. § 1152.

Thus, this Court in the past has upheld state laws protecting Indians from crimes committed by non-Indians on a reservation. *New York ex rel. Cutler v. Dibble*, 62 U.S. (21 How.) 366, 370-71 (1858). And this Court in *Oklahoma v. Bosse*, No. 20A161, granted a stay presenting this and another question, indicating that these issues involve “extraordinary circumstances” where there is “a reasonable probability that four members of the Court will consider the issue sufficiently meritorious to grant certiorari” and “five Justices are likely to conclude that the case was erroneously decided below.” *Graves v. Barnes*, 405 U.S. 1201, 1203 (1972) (Powell, J., in chambers).

The questions presented in this case are materially identical to those presented in other petitions already pending before this Court, including *Castro-Huerta*. This Court should hold this petition pending the resolution of those questions in *Castro-Huerta*. Alternatively, in the event certiorari is more appropriate in this case than in another case, the Court should grant review in this case to answer the questions common to all of them.



CONCLUSION

The petition for a writ of certiorari in *Castro-Huerta* should be granted, and the petition in this case should be held pending a decision there and then disposed of as is appropriate. In the alternative, this petition should be granted.

Respectfully submitted,

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