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IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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SAMUEL JAMES JOHNSON, :
Petitioner : No. 13-7120
v. :
UNITED STATES. :
- - - - - x

Washington, D.C.
Monday, April 20, 2015

The above-entitled matter came on for oral
argument before the Supreme Court of the United States
at 10:04 a.m.

APPEARANCES:

KATHERINE M. MENENDEZ, ESQ., Minneapolis, Minn.; on
behalf of Petitioner.
MICHAEL R. DREEBEN, ESQ., Deputy Solicitor General,
Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; on behalf of
Respondent.

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1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 (10:04 a.m.)

3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We will hear
4 reargument today in Case 13-7120, Johnson v.
5 United States.

6 Ms. Menendez.

7 ORAL ARGUMENT OF KATHERINE M. MENENDEZ

8 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER

9 MS. MENENDEZ: Good morning, Your Honor.
10 Mr. Chief Justice, and may it please the
11 Court:

12 The residual clause of the violent felony
13 definition of the Armed Career Criminal Act is
14 unconstitutionally vague because its text and structure
15 do not set out with clarity what predicate offenses fall
16 within its coverage and what do not. Its vagueness is
17 proven by this Court's inability after repeated efforts
18 to discern a meaningful and replicable interpretive
19 framework that will guide lower courts.

20 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Ms. Menendez, just to
21 clarify, you are contesting only the residual clause,
22 not the rest of the statute. So if the statute ending
23 with -- it lists burglary, arson or extortion or
24 involves the use of explosives, you're not attacking any
25 of that. It's just the residual clause; is that

1 correct?

2 MS. MENENDEZ: That is correct, Your Honor.

3 And we believe, in fact, that the other
4 portions of this statute shed some light onto why the
5 residual clause is unconstitutionally vague. For
6 instance, the other portions of the definition tie
7 qualification for violent felony status directly to the
8 elements of the offense in question.

9 The force clause requires that the use of
10 force or the attempted use of force be an element of the
11 offense. The burglary, arson, extortion, and use of
12 explosives that Your Honor references are determined by
13 reference to the elements of the offense. A categorical
14 analysis.

15 JUSTICE ALITO: Now, I know that we are --
16 asked you to argue this vagueness issue, but when you
17 were here before, you didn't think that the statute was
18 vague as applied to your client. As I remember, your
19 argument was it's clear that your client did not fall
20 within the residual clause, largely because he was
21 convicted. The offense that's at issue is a possession
22 offense, and you argue that none of the specific
23 offenses listed is -- is a possession offense.

24 MS. MENENDEZ: You're correct, Your Honor,
25 that when -- when we were here last time, we argued that

1 it is plainly not included for the reasons you mention
2 as well as others.

3 JUSTICE ALITO: So if it's not plainly
4 included, why do we have to get to this issue at all?
5 Why should we reach out to decide a constitutional
6 question?

7 MS. MENENDEZ: Certainly, Your Honor. The
8 fact that we believe it's clearly excluded seems to be
9 at odds at the opinion -- of the opinion of the
10 Solicitor General in the United States, the Eighth
11 Circuit Court of Appeals and other courts. The fact
12 that something that seems obviously not to fall within
13 the plain definition but is still held to fall within
14 the plain definition by numerous courts reveals the
15 vagueness of the residual clause.

16 JUSTICE ALITO: But we get -- almost every
17 case that comes here involves a dispute among the lower
18 courts about what something means, about what the
19 constitutional rule is or what the statutory
20 interpretation should be.

21 So the mere fact that there's disagreement
22 about this, that shows that it's unconstitutionally
23 vague?

24 MS. MENENDEZ: This goes far beyond mere
25 disagreement, Your Honor. I can think of no other

1 instance in which the Court has endeavored so many times
2 in so few years to answer precisely the same question,
3 not merely interpreting the same 14 words, but asking
4 each time whether a single offense satisfies those 14
5 words.

6 JUSTICE ALITO: In -- in *James*, in 2007, we
7 held that the residual clause -- we said the residual
8 clause is not unconstitutionally vague. In *Sykes*, in
9 2011, we reaffirmed that.

10 Can you give me other examples of instances
11 in which the Court has overruled a constitutional
12 holding that has been twice reaffirmed within a period
13 of 8 years? Has that happened frequently?

14 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I think -- I
15 don't have a case at the ready for that question, but
16 what I can say is what doesn't happen frequently, is
17 that this Court has to grapple with such frequency and
18 is still unable to create an interpretive framework.
19 The heart of *stare decisis* is, in part, workability.
20 Precedent that remains workable and useful that applies
21 guidance to the lower court deserves greater deference.
22 And with due respect to this Court's understandable
23 hesitation to declare the statute unconstitutionally
24 vague, that precedent is simply proven not to be
25 workable.

1 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, do you think the issue
2 is whether the statute is unconstitutionally vague or
3 whether this Court's interpretations of the statute
4 create the basis for a vagueness argument?

5 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor --

6 JUSTICE ALITO: Can -- can a statute be
7 vague simply because this Court messes it up?

8 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, that is not the
9 case in this case. I don't know whether it's possible
10 for a statute to be rendered vague by poor
11 interpretation, but in this case the vagueness in here
12 is in the text and operation itself. This Court's
13 repeated efforts to discern a useful interpretive
14 framework haven't caused the vagueness, but they prove
15 the vagueness.

16 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Suppose that you had a
17 State court meeting of judges for sentencing and they
18 agreed that, within their discretion to impose a
19 maximum, that they would impose a greater sentence if
20 the defendant had a rap sheet, some previous offenses
21 which created a serious potential risk of physical
22 injury to another. Now, this is within their mandatory
23 discretion, I understand that.

24 Would you say that's poor judging, that
25 that's vague? That they'd be better off not -- not

1 saying it at all?

2 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I think that
3 judges are tasked with deciding the individual case
4 before them, so --

5 JUSTICE KENNEDY: No, no. My hypothetical
6 is the judges say as a sentencing matter, as a matter of
7 policy in this jurisdiction, we will increase your
8 sentence if you committed an offense that categorically
9 poses a serious potential risk of injury, physical
10 injury to another.

11 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor --

12 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Do you think that's bad
13 judging?

14 MS. MENENDEZ: I'm never going to presume to
15 accuse a judge of judging poorly, but --

16 JUSTICE KENNEDY: No, it's a hypothetical.
17 You can say it's bad; it's a hypothetical.

18 MS. MENENDEZ: I think that that goes beyond
19 the task of judging, Your Honor, into the task of
20 legislating. To decide that as a --

21 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, you -- you don't
22 think judges should give reasons for what they do?

23 MS. MENENDEZ: Absolutely, Your Honor. I
24 think the difference is --

25 JUSTICE KENNEDY: You absolutely do think

1 they should give reasons for what they do?

2 MS. MENENDEZ: Yes, Your Honor.

3 JUSTICE KENNEDY: And you say that this is a
4 vague reason? This is -- this is bad reasoning, bad
5 judging?

6 MS. MENENDEZ: The part of your hypothetical
7 that troubled me, Your Honor, was the idea that the
8 judges would get together and make policy decisions
9 unfettered to an individual case.

10 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, judge -- judges meet
11 all the time on sentencing policy. They -- they educate
12 each other about what sentence is and they -- and
13 they -- and they announce the policy to say in this
14 court, we want all members of the bar to know that if
15 there's a rap sheet, prior convictions that have a -- an
16 offense which categorically is a serious risk of
17 physical injury to another, we will up the sentence.

18 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I --

19 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Do you think that's bad
20 judging?

21 MS. MENENDEZ: I think that's verging into
22 legislating, and I think that that's --

23 JUSTICE SCALIA: Can -- can they -- can they
24 do that, as a matter of law, not just as a matter of
25 recommending to their fellow judges? Can they reverse

1 one of their fellow judges if -- if the fellow judge
2 does not adhere to that -- I've -- I've never heard of
3 such a thing.

4 JUSTICE KENNEDY: The hypothetical is that
5 this --

6 JUSTICE SCALIA: I agree with you, it sounds
7 like legislation to me. It's a hypothetical that's
8 fanciful.

9 MS. MENENDEZ: I would certainly be --

10 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Do you think it's bad
11 judging for a judge to say what his policy is going to
12 be for future cases?

13 MS. MENENDEZ: Yes. I think that a judge
14 should decide each case on the facts before them.

15 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, wait. There are a
16 lot of States that have guidelines and they're
17 legislated and there are committees that decide it;
18 there are judges on the committee. So -- so I don't
19 know that that's going to help us, or at least not me,
20 too much.

21 I do -- I have counted up the number of
22 splits and so forth in your briefs and the others
23 presented to us, and adding in the cases, I -- I think
24 generously on the basis of what's decided -- what you've
25 presented to us, there are 14 splits. That's over a

1 period of 20 years, and -- or so, 15 years, anyway. And
2 there are literally, really, there are hundreds of
3 different crimes, thousands perhaps, by the time you get
4 the --

5 So I can't -- I don't know how to decide
6 whether 14 is a lot or a little. I -- I'm really, I'm
7 -- I'm at sea on this, because maybe 14 is just a few.
8 I mean, after all, every statute has uncertainty at the
9 edges. Or maybe it's a lot. Help me.

10 MS. MENENDEZ: Yes, Your Honor. Two things,
11 Your Honor. I think first of all that more than the
12 number of splits is the fact that each of this Court's
13 efforts seems to answer the question before the Court
14 that has a very difficult time answering any of those 14
15 questions. I think even --

16 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, is there any example
17 that you can think of where that was a basis for holding
18 a statute unconstitutional?

19 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, in the vagueness
20 cases that we have cited, one of the things often
21 discussed by the Court is that it isn't amenable to a
22 useful interpretive framework, that it isn't being
23 consistently applied by lower courts.

24 But the second --

25 JUSTICE BREYER: I've never heard of that as

1 a criterion. I mean, the common law had a method. I
2 don't know -- and they even had crimes, you know. There
3 were common law crimes. We -- we have statutes. The
4 government cites many which use such words as "risk of
5 harm" or "reckless" or -- they use words like we have
6 here, "serious risk" or "risk of physical harm."
7 They've cited a lot. There -- there are other statutes
8 that involve words like that. Are we holding all those
9 unconstitutional?

10 MS. MENENDEZ: Absolutely not, Your Honor.

11 JUSTICE BREYER: I know. I understand you
12 think that. All I need is help.

13 MS. MENENDEZ: I'll answer your first
14 question and then turn to the focus --

15 JUSTICE BREYER: No, that is only the
16 question that I have. The first one is the one.

17 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, in addition to
18 the number of splits and whether 14 is a lot or a
19 little, 14 is -- is an enormous amount of times for this
20 Court to have to weigh in to resolve an unseizable
21 question. The exact same question, Your Honor; not
22 variance on a question, but precisely the same question.

23 But I think that we should also take
24 instruction from the lower courts and what they are
25 saying about their struggle. We have cited half a dozen

1 circuits, and these are seasoned jurists who describe
2 this as everything from a black hole to impossible --
3 impossible to meaningfully and consistently apply.

4 So we're not just talking about counting the
5 number of disagreements. We're also talking about a
6 completely unworkable framework that --

7 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, Ms. Menendez, I -- I
8 suppose this is connected to Justice Breyer's question.
9 Do you think that there's some core that everybody, in
10 fact, does agree upon? In other words, that there are
11 some offenses which people just say, well, of course
12 that fits within the residual clause. It's not the kind
13 of thing that creates splits, it's not the kind of thing
14 that creates controversy, that there's a core of
15 agreement as to what it means and that all the trouble
16 is occurring on the margins.

17 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, the margins here
18 are so much bigger than the core that even if we are
19 able to agree on a small number of things that might
20 clearly fall within the center, the fact is that the
21 vast majority --

22 JUSTICE KAGAN: What do you think is in the
23 core?

24 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I think
25 kidnapping might be in the core. A kidnapping that

1 doesn't fall within the force clause, which many would
2 do, might be in the core.

3 But, Your Honor, I think what's more
4 instructive is the fact that so many things that the
5 government even suggested are easy cases -- the examples
6 that they give on pages 8 and 9 of their brief -- on
7 closer examination, they're not that easy. For example,
8 child abuse. Now it's true that one circuit or multiple
9 circuits have held that child abuse counts, but the
10 Spencer case, which examined a Florida statute of child
11 abuse, found that it didn't account.

12 JUSTICE KAGAN: The government says that to
13 declare a statute facially vague, all its applications
14 have to be facially vague. And I guess you're
15 contesting that standard because you're admitting that
16 at least one thing that you can think of, kidnapping,
17 that there -- that that application would be
18 appropriate; is that right?

19 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I think that it's
20 important to look at where the government's standard of
21 has to be vague in every imagined application comes
22 from. It comes from *Flipside v. Hoffman Estates*, which
23 dealt with licensing and financial fines and, more
24 importantly, where everyone agreed that the conduct in
25 question there was clearly in the core.

1 This is different in all three respects.

2 This deals not only with an onerous sentencing penalty,
3 but a mandatory one where Congress has acted to take
4 discretion away --

5 JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, you're not answering
6 the question, though. The question is whether you agree
7 with the government that so long as there is something
8 that is clearly within the core, it's not vague. Do you
9 agree with that or disagree with that?

10 MS. MENENDEZ: I do not agree with that,
11 Your Honor. I think that that's unworkable.

12 JUSTICE SCALIA: I suppose you could have a
13 statute that criminalized annoying conduct, right? And
14 according to the government, that would not be
15 unconstitutional, because there's some stuff that is
16 clearly annoying, right?

17 MS. MENENDEZ: Yes, Your Honor.

18 (Laughter.)

19 JUSTICE SCALIA: So that's a perfectly good
20 statute according to the government, yes?

21 JUSTICE GINSBURG: What do you do with all
22 of the statutes that are cited in the appendix in the
23 government's brief that they say uses such language as
24 "serious risk of physical injury to another," the same
25 words that are used here? Except this says "potential."

1 What do you -- the -- the government suggests that all
2 of those statutes would be vulnerable under your
3 reading.

4 MS. MENENDEZ: Thank you, Your Honor.
5 The -- the term "serious risk" is not on trial here.
6 None of those with the, perhaps, possible exception, we
7 believe, of the two described on the first page come
8 even close in operation or function to what the residual
9 clause does. In almost every one of those cases, it's
10 either part of a limiting definition, it's subject to an
11 additional limiting definition, or it's one of several
12 elements which help narrow the conduct.

13 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Or -- or is it also that
14 in most of the statutes that were cited, it depends on
15 the facts of the particular case? It's the opposite of
16 the categorical approach.

17 MS. MENENDEZ: And that is a very important
18 distinction, Your Honor, absolutely.

19 JUSTICE SCALIA: Which means it's up to the
20 jury and juries, you know, don't -- don't have to be
21 clear. They can be vague.

22 MS. MENENDEZ: Well, juries are routinely
23 tasked with the question of something -- whether some
24 individual conduct, not an abstract imagination of
25 conduct, but actually what the defendant did constitutes

1 a serious risk. That, combined with the fact that it's
2 usually part of a much narrower statute, prevents those
3 from being vague.

4 In addition, Your Honor, with respect to
5 your question, not one of those statutes, not one has
6 given rise to the expressions of frustration from lower
7 courts. The 14 disagreements --

8 JUSTICE BREYER: Yes. But then, look,
9 that -- that's -- you've got -- you've got that. But
10 it's not -- that can't be. There's something odd about
11 this statute that's causing the problem and I can't put
12 my finger on it. And what you've done is simply point
13 out that courts have had difficulty with it. Well, that
14 isn't enough, I don't think.

15 Why? The words seem clear enough. What is
16 it about this that's led to this difficulty? It
17 certainly isn't a problem to identify many cases where
18 there is a serious risk of physical harm. But there's
19 something that's given rise to this, and I haven't yet
20 been able to articulate it to -- to myself. You've
21 thought about it more than I.

22 MS. MENENDEZ: I've thought about it a lot,
23 Your Honor. I think there's several things that give
24 rise to the confusion.

25 One is the fact that it asks judges to

1 answer of -- an almost impossible-to-answer question.
2 They have to imagine whether an offense in the abstract,
3 and frankly, in its ordinary case, presents a
4 substantial risk. How to even select the ordinary case
5 is something the statute gives no guidance about. And
6 what degree of risk is required, where to get the
7 information regarding the risk; it's completely
8 imaginary and subjective and it's the --

9 JUSTICE ALITO: Suppose the -- suppose the
10 question of whether it's a serious potential risk of
11 physical injury to another were a factual question
12 submitted to the jury to be determined on the basis of
13 what your client did. Would that be unconstitutionally
14 vague?

15 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I think that
16 would go some direction towards solving the problem
17 because it would require fact-specific analysis by the
18 jury.

19 JUSTICE ALITO: Is that a yes or a no?

20 MS. MENENDEZ: I think that if it still had
21 the -- had the -- I think that would avoid the vagueness
22 problem, Your Honor.

23 JUSTICE KAGAN: I mean, it would create
24 other problems, wouldn't it? I mean, we'd be trying to
25 do this based on 20-year-old convictions and -- and

1 often on questions that nobody had an incentive to argue
2 or to litigate. Wouldn't that be -- I mean, that's the
3 reason we went down this road, isn't it?

4 MS. MENENDEZ: And Your Honor points out a
5 very good point about why I hesitate to think that
6 that's a solution. It's an unworkable solution, but
7 might get around the vagueness if the parties were
8 entitled both to argue it to a jury and to relitigate
9 the specific facts. But I don't think anyone is
10 imagining that recidivist statutes could function that
11 way in the courts.

12 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, I wasn't asking about
13 a recidivist statute. I was asking about a statute that
14 imposed a particular penalty for possession of -- of a
15 sawed-off shotgun. And it says or it -- someone is
16 convicted under a statute that has this language and the
17 possession of the sawed-off shotgun was -- had just
18 occurred.

19 Do you think you think that would not be
20 unconstitutionally vague?

21 MS. MENENDEZ: If the jury was asked in this
22 offense to decide whether that possession presented a
23 substantial risk beyond a reasonable doubt, I don't
24 think that would cause the same problems, Your Honor.

25 I think another thing that -- that is

1 inherent in other parts of the violent felony definition
2 that's instructive about what's wrong with this one is
3 that when it requires the question to be an element of
4 the offense, as with the force clause or, for instance,
5 burglary, you -- all you need to do is look at the
6 elements of that predicate offense to determine whether
7 it qualifies.

8 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, Congress was trying to
9 do something here and some may think it's a good thing
10 to do, some may think it's not a good thing to do, it's
11 a legitimate thing to do. And that is to impose an
12 enhanced penalty for people who -- felons who possess
13 firearms and have a record of prior convictions for
14 certain category of offenses.

15 Now, if you don't use -- if -- if the -- the
16 residual clause is held to be unconstitutionally vague,
17 is there any other way that Congress could accomplish
18 that end?

19 MS. MENENDEZ: Yes, Your Honor, I think
20 there is. I think one solution would be to both tie the
21 risk to the elements. So, for instance, you can keep
22 the same 14 words, but add in "has as an element the
23 pre" -- "creation of serious potential risk," and
24 anything that didn't fall within that, Congress could
25 simply add as an enumerated offense.

1 JUSTICE ALITO: Why does that solve the
2 problem, has as an element the creation of a serious
3 potential risk?

4 MS. MENENDEZ: Because then litigants,
5 defendants and judges would only have to look at the
6 criminal code of the State that has the predicate
7 offense and see whether it has as an element the
8 creation of risk.

9 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, an offense that
10 prohibits the possession of a -- of a sawed-off shotgun
11 has as an element the possession of a sawed-off shotgun.
12 So you'd have to decide whether that element creates the
13 risk. I don't see how that solves it.

14 MS. MENENDEZ: Under my solution, there mere
15 possession of a short-barrel shotgun would not count
16 under Minnesota law because it doesn't require the
17 possession in connection with behavior that creates a
18 risk. But if I may --

19 JUSTICE SCALIA: But the jury would have
20 found -- would have found the -- the fact of the risk,
21 right --

22 MS. MENENDEZ: Precisely, Your Honor.

23 JUSTICE SCALIA: -- in the -- in the cases
24 that you're describing?

25 MS. MENENDEZ: In my imagined solution, Your

1 Honor. But frankly, it's up to Congress.

2 JUSTICE KAGAN: So -- so what you're saying,
3 essentially, is that all the statues in the back of the
4 government's brief would count?

5 MS. MENENDEZ: Yes, Your Honor.

6 JUSTICE KAGAN: But nothing else would. In
7 other words, you have to have it listed specifically,
8 and this conduct created a serious risk of injury.

9 MS. MENENDEZ: If Congress chose that as a
10 solution, yes, Your Honor. I think that this
11 demonstrates why this needs to be left to Congress.

12 JUSTICE BREYER: Extortion doesn't have
13 that.

14 MS. MENENDEZ: Extortion is an enumerated
15 offense, and that would pose the additional solution,
16 Your Honor. Anything that doesn't have --

17 JUSTICE BREYER: Is there any crime like
18 that? What is the crime like that? I mean --

19 MS. MENENDEZ: There's 200 crimes like that.

20 JUSTICE BREYER: -- in the first one, use,
21 attempted use, threatened use of physical force, and
22 you're simply adding to those -- to those three
23 categories, you'd say, or risk -- or serious risk of
24 what?

25 MS. MENENDEZ: Has as an element the

1 creation of a serious risk or a serious potential risk.

2 JUSTICE BREYER: Of?

3 MS. MENENDEZ: Of injury to another. It's
4 up to Congress how they would choose to define it, but
5 if they wanted it --

6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But I thought --

7 MS. MENENDEZ: -- to hew closely to the
8 residual clause -- I apologize, Your Honor.

9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: No. No. Go ahead.

10 MS. MENENDEZ: If they want it to hew
11 closely to the status quo, were Congress to choose that,
12 then requiring that risk to be an element, the
13 government has collected for us 200 examples of statutes
14 that have risk as an element, they would presumably
15 count. And if there were some left out of this solution
16 that Congress wanted to -- to include, like, for
17 instance, if extortion were not one of the enumerated
18 offenses and they wanted to include it, all they have to
19 do is list it. It's a perfect congressional function,
20 Your Honors. They can hear data.

21 JUSTICE BREYER: I see.

22 MS. MENENDEZ: They can assess risk. They
23 can hear testimony. They can decide what should and
24 shouldn't count, but we shouldn't be imagining it every
25 time.

1 JUSTICE KAGAN: Are you saying that this is
2 something -- in response to Justice Alito's question --
3 that this is a way that Congress could fix the statute?
4 Or are you saying that it's a way we could fix the
5 statute? In other words, that it's an available savings
6 construction that we should feel free to adopt.

7 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I -- I don't
8 presume to tell the Court what it can and cannot do, but
9 it has strived for in now the fifth time to create an
10 interpretive framework that would solve the problem. I
11 think that my suggestion is a good one, but far be it
12 for me to say what Congress should --

13 JUSTICE SCALIA: Let me ask you something.
14 Can you get -- can you get to your suggestion from the
15 text of the statute?

16 MS. MENENDEZ: I do not believe so, Your
17 Honor.

18 JUSTICE SCALIA: I don't think so either.

19 MS. MENENDEZ: If it were in the text, we
20 probably wouldn't be in this place to begin with, Your
21 Honor.

22 JUSTICE KENNEDY: It's -- it's important to
23 me to evaluate your statement that most of the problems
24 are at the margins, not at the core. How -- how do I do
25 that? It -- it -- it's -- my assumption was the

1 opposite. I thought the margins were few and that the
2 core was -- covered a vast amount of criminal conduct.
3 Where -- where do I look to determine who's right on
4 that?

5 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I think that
6 we've grappled with that especially in our reply brief.
7 You're exactly right. In a traditional statute, the
8 core is large, the margins are gray, and the gray
9 margins shouldn't lead to a conclusion of vagueness.
10 But in this case, the fact that over, and over, and over
11 again there's disagreement about things that should seem
12 obvious, shows us that that core is smaller and smaller,
13 if not extremely small, compared to the margins.

14 Look at the easy cases -- the easy cases
15 that the government pointed to at pages 8 and 9 of their
16 briefs. On closer examination, those give rise to
17 disagreement. They're not uniformly settled in favor of
18 inclusion or exclusion. Anything that seems easy at
19 first blush really isn't. There's several splits
20 pending right now, Your Honor. And I don't mean to just
21 dismiss them as disagreements about outcome.
22 Disagreements about how to apply this Court's tests that
23 aren't going to be answered by this Court's decision in
24 Johnson and won't be answered presumably by the next
25 case down the road. The -- the question of whether

1 consensual sex offenses based on age should qualify, the
2 question of how offenses with recklessness should be
3 assessed, conspiracy to commit crimes of violence.

4 One of the easy cases that the government
5 highlights is solicitation to commit murder, but it's
6 really not that easy if conspiracy to commit a crime of
7 violence has two petitions pending before this Court
8 right now. So the veneer of ease and simplicity that
9 the government attempts to create in their writing is
10 belied by the reality on the ground.

11 JUSTICE KENNEDY: A -- a different question,
12 and it's more for the government than for you. As you
13 understand the government's position or is there common
14 ground between the parties that because this is a
15 mandatory increase, the standard for vagueness is
16 precisely the same as the standard that we applied and
17 determined whether or not a crime, in its definition, is
18 itself vague.

19 In other words, is there a different
20 vagueness standard for sentencing than for the -- a
21 statement of what a crime is at the outset?

22 MS. MENENDEZ: I -- I don't think in this
23 case it deserves a lesser scrutiny because it's a
24 sentencing provision precisely because it's both
25 mandatory and onerous in the extreme.

1 JUSTICE KENNEDY: It's as if there were a
2 new crime.

3 MS. MENENDEZ: It's as if there were a new
4 crime. And I'm not talking about for other aspects of
5 this Court's jurisprudence, but for that question.

6 And I think frankly *Flipside v. Hoffman*
7 *Estates* itself suggests that criminal statutes deserve
8 greater scrutiny even though the licensing and mere fine
9 statute that gave rise to that statement of vague in
10 every application, they deserve greater scrutiny. And
11 this is certainly one of the most onerous sentencing
12 penalties that we as Federal defenders face in our
13 practice.

14 JUSTICE GINSBURG: You say the congressional
15 cure, as I understand your argument, could only be to
16 add to the list of crimes, to add to arson, extortion,
17 or to have whereas the -- an element of the crime is a
18 serious risk. That's the only things that Congress
19 could do. Nothing else.

20 MS. MENENDEZ: Oh, no, Your Honor. I don't
21 mean to suggest that at all. Congress can fix this
22 however they see fit, and that's why it's a better
23 congressional function than asking one defense attorney
24 to --

25 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But I asked what were the

1 routes that Congress could take. One is to list every
2 crime that they think should get the enhanced penalty.
3 Another is to say this -- this statute has to have as an
4 element that the conduct creates a serious risk of
5 injury to others. Sort of those two. What could
6 Congress do?

7 MS. MENENDEZ: Well, Your Honor, I don't
8 think listing them is that difficult. Other
9 congressional enactments list a large number of things
10 that --

11 JUSTICE GINSBURG: I'm just saying, is there
12 anything else? Let's accept listing is okay. Saying
13 that the crime has to have as an element the risk of
14 danger to another.

15 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I'm not trying to
16 avoid the question. I think it depends on what they
17 want to accomplish. If they want this to apply very
18 broadly to almost any sort of felony, they can say so.
19 If they want it to apply more narrowly to things that
20 are actually violent, they can say so. The problem is
21 they didn't say much of anything when they wrote this
22 statute. Those are the two ideas I have, but I'm sure
23 there are more.

24 JUSTICE ALITO: I -- I don't want to take up
25 your rebuttal time, but just this quick question.

1 If -- if Congress assigned a committee or a
2 person to go through the criminal code of every single
3 jurisdiction and identify those offenses that didn't
4 fall within any other provision of ACCA, but met, in the
5 judgment of those -- that individual or those
6 individuals, the residual clause standard, how many do
7 you think they would come up with?

8 MS. MENENDEZ: I -- I --

9 JUSTICE ALITO: Dozens? Hundreds?
10 Thousands?

11 MS. MENENDEZ: Again, I think it -- it
12 depends on whether Congress wants this to be a narrowly
13 applied enhancement for the worst of the worst or
14 broadly applied three strikes rule. And I think if they
15 gave the commission that guidance instructed by this
16 Court's previous cases that show the hard areas of
17 questions, then the commission could decide.

18 I -- I don't think that it's necessary to
19 look at every State's code. If they just specify the
20 definitions like they did for burglary and robbery in
21 the original 1984 enactment, that would save an enormous
22 amount of question, and it would preclude them from
23 having to look at each State's code.

24 And with the Court's permission, I'll save
25 my last moments. Thank you.

1 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
2 Mr. Dreeben.

3 ORAL ARGUMENT OF MICHAEL R. DREEBEN
4 ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENT

5 MR. DREEBEN: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it
6 please the Court:

7 The Armed Career Criminal Act states, as
8 this Court noted in *Sykes*, a normative principle that
9 can be applied to various crimes with a methodology that
10 does not produce unconstitutional vagueness.

11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, we didn't say
12 anything like that in *Begay*.

13 MR. DREEBEN: I think the Court didn't
14 volunteer an opinion about the vagueness of the statute
15 in *Begay*. It did comment on that in *James*, and it said
16 that it was not unconstitutional. *Sykes* came later
17 after *Begay*, and the Court continued to adhere to the
18 idea that this statute can be applied as it has been
19 applied four times by the Court and in numerous
20 instances by lower courts without substantial
21 difficulty.

22 Now, I'm not --

23 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I didn't mean to
24 suggest in *Begay* we specifically addressed vagueness,
25 but the -- my -- my point was that *Sykes* provides a

1 particular test, but as your friend has pointed out,
2 Begay, it seems to me, points in an entirely different
3 direction.

4 MR. DREEBEN: What Begay did was conclude
5 that the similarity of the offenses in the residual
6 clause to the enumerated offenses had to be more than
7 just similarity of risk; it also had to have a certain
8 similarity in kind.

9 In Sykes, the Court noted that the phrase
10 that the Court developed in Begay, "purposeful, violent
11 and aggressive," wasn't precisely linked to the text of
12 the statute, and it made clear that for offenses with a
13 mens rea of knowingly or intentionally risk levels
14 ordinarily provide the manageable test that courts can
15 apply.

16 JUSTICE BREYER: That's true, but you see,
17 Begay sort of points to the problem in my mind. There
18 is no doubt that drunk driving does cause a risk of
19 physical injury. But could it be that Congress really
20 wanted to impose a 15-year mandatory minimum penalty to
21 a person who has two drunk driving offenses prior? It
22 seemed outside the ballpark of what they're actually
23 interested in, and that's why I've had such a hard time,
24 I think we've had such a hard time with this in part
25 because of the sentence -- you know, a 15-year mandatory

1 minimum -- and in part, because there seems like they
2 had something in mind, but it's very hard to figure out.

3 MR. DREEBEN: So I think, Justice Breyer,
4 that it may have been a little bit too ambitious for the
5 Court to try to develop a similarity-in-kind test
6 from --

7 JUSTICE BREYER: Yeah.

8 MR. DREEBEN: -- as the Court did in *Begay*.
9 That was the position of the government; four Justices
10 agreed with that, five did not. We're not asking the
11 Court to revisit that today.

12 But once the Court did develop it, it then
13 considered in *Sykes* whether it provided a uniform,
14 universally applicable test --

15 JUSTICE BREYER: And it doesn't.

16 MR. DREEBEN: -- and concluded that it was
17 better to restrict it to crimes that involved
18 negligence, strict liability, recklessness, potentially,
19 so as not to allow it to basically subsume what's in the
20 statute. And I think that having done that, the Court
21 has given guidance to the lower courts, there has been
22 some confusion that the Court, in its opinion in this
23 case, could clear up about the relationship between
24 *Begay* and the risk test.

25 JUSTICE SCALIA: Is that all it takes? I

1 mean, can we just patch up this statute in ways that
2 have nothing to do with its text as -- as Begay didn't?
3 I -- I thought we did not have any common law power to
4 create crimes. And if that's the case, it seems to me
5 it has to be Congress that's done that.

6 MR. DREEBEN: So I agree with --

7 JUSTICE SCALIA: And if Congress hasn't done
8 it, and it hasn't done it, clearly, it seems to me our
9 job is -- is over.

10 MR. DREEBEN: So I agree with you, Justice
11 Scalia, that the Court does not have the power to create
12 common law crimes, and I don't think that it has done
13 that. It's engaged in statutory construction about
14 which members of the Court may disagree.

15 Now, if the Court believes that a
16 similar-in-kind limitation is appropriate for ACCA,
17 there actually is a textual vehicle for getting there.
18 It's the same vehicle that Your Honor used in the other
19 Johnson case, the one about whether batteries involved
20 strong force or simply offensive touching, and Your
21 Honor looked to --

22 JUSTICE SCALIA: Other laws.

23 MR. DREEBEN: -- violent felony, the word
24 being defined, and concluded that the word "violent" in
25 that definition informed what kind of force would count.

1 And I think that that was the essential impulse of the
2 Court in the Begay case to distinguish between injuries
3 that are caused by regulatory type violations, like
4 pollution, and injuries that are caused in the way that
5 the statute specifies.

6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, but that --
7 that phrase, it seems to me, could just as clearly be
8 viewed as adding confusion. And that's one -- the
9 various hundreds whatever statutes you cite, I don't
10 think -- certainly not many of them, I'm not sure any of
11 them, involved that aspect of it. In other words, it's
12 not just a question of whether it's serious potential
13 risk, but otherwise, what is its relationship to the
14 enumerated offenses.

15 MR. DREEBEN: So I think that that is not
16 such a big problem if the Court applies that the way
17 that it did in Sykes, and the way the lower courts
18 predominantly do. It is not a precise statistical
19 empirical analysis. Congress could not have envisioned
20 that this Court and the lower courts have available to
21 them statistics that for most crimes do not exist in
22 order to gauge risk levels.

23 It instead intended a judgment exercise,
24 based on experience, just like the Court did in Sykes.
25 And I want to remind the Court that eight members of the

1 Court agreed in Sykes, that flight in a vehicle from a
2 police officer in its ordinary case was sufficiently
3 risky to trigger the residual clause. There was
4 disagreement because of the particular structure of the
5 Indiana statute, which had an enhanced offense that
6 involved vehicular flight that posed a risk of
7 something.

8 JUSTICE SCALIA: I don't know what you mean
9 by a judgment exercised based on experience. What --
10 what experience do I have regarding these innumerable
11 State crimes? I -- I've not heard any case involving
12 any of those State crimes. What -- what experience are
13 you asking me to apply?

14 MR. DREEBEN: I think the same kind of
15 logical judgment that the lower courts have used, and
16 let me give an example --

17 JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, that's not
18 experience. I mean, logic is not an experience. You're
19 asking me to apply logic or experience. Which is it?

20 MR. DREEBEN: Both.

21 JUSTICE SCALIA: Both. Well, what's the
22 experience part?

23 MR. DREEBEN: Well, it may be a little bit
24 easier if I start with the logic point, and I promise I
25 will get to the experience point.

1 The logic point involves looking at the
2 elements of the offense and asking, what does the
3 conduct in this offense consist of? Let me take an
4 example which my friend on the other side has not
5 challenged: Solicitation of a child under the age of 14
6 to engage in sodomy.

7 Now, a court can look at that conduct and
8 say what that requires is that an adult attempt to
9 entice a child to a private place to engage in a sex
10 act. Is that the kind of act that is likely, as a
11 matter of logic and ordinary human experience -- adults
12 are bigger than children, sodomy requires physical
13 contact -- is it likely to produce a serious potential
14 risk of physical injury to another?

15 Courts do not have very much difficulty
16 answering that question. Similarly, in cases of
17 kidnapping, you ask what does it mean? Somebody is --

18 JUSTICE SCALIA: I suggest they have not
19 much difficulty because it's a horrific crime, not
20 because they have any basis for saying, you know, what
21 the degree of risk of serious -- potential -- a serious
22 potential risk of injury is.

23 MR. DREEBEN: Well, I don't think that they
24 have to say with precision what the degree of risk is.
25 Congress gave four exemplar crimes to try to illustrate

1 what it had in mind. Two of them, burglary and
2 extortion, involve conduct that's directed against
3 property or potentially a threat of a person. And the
4 danger that can arise is of confrontation; if the
5 burglar encounters somebody at the home, if the
6 extortionist attempts to realize the threat.

7 JUSTICE BREYER: All right, I see that.
8 Now, wait, before -- because I want you to get back to
9 the experience. The thing also that sticks in my mind
10 is that Indiana case. Do you remember the one I'm
11 talking about? Because -- because, in fact, you look at
12 the words, but they're nested -- you see they're nested
13 a set of other crimes.

14 MR. DREEBEN: Yes.

15 JUSTICE BREYER: And really you'd like to
16 know an empirical fact, how is this bit of a larger nest
17 actually used in Indiana? It might be that it's really
18 used against people who are involved in a violent kind
19 of situation, or it might not be, because there are a
20 whole lot of other ones around.

21 And now you turn to experience and say, use
22 experience -- you know, I have no idea whatsoever. And
23 Posner has suggested, I think I picked that up, go and
24 do some empirical research; why doesn't the government
25 do it? The Sentencing Commission has tried to do it.

1 It can't start. It doesn't know where to begin, there
2 are so many statutes.

3 MR. DREEBEN: So I think, Justice Breyer,
4 the very difficulty and unmanageability of the
5 enterprise suggests that it's not what Congress had in
6 mind.

7 JUSTICE BREYER: All right.

8 MR. DREEBEN: What Congress had in mind was
9 identifying classes of offenses that judges are
10 confident involve serious potential risks of physical
11 injury to another, possibly the similarity-in-kind
12 inquiry when the mens rea isn't satisfied. And what
13 Congress expected courts to do was to analyze what the
14 conduct is that's involved in it, compare it to the
15 listed offenses, and see if the risks are similar. I --

16 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Does the --

17 JUSTICE KAGAN: But that -- that sounds --

18 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Does the Department of
19 Justice do any of that? I mean, an ACCA sentence, as I
20 understand it, is one that the prosecutor asks for. And
21 is there any guidance coming from the Department of
22 Justice, guidance to the U.S. attorneys who are going to
23 be asking for ACCA sentences, when they should and when
24 they shouldn't?

25 MR. DREEBEN: Yes, and the guidance keys,

1 Justice Ginsburg, off this Court's decisions. We use
2 primarily an analysis that focuses on looking at the
3 conduct that the elements of the crimes embrace, and
4 logically analyzing what does it entail? Does it entail
5 a risk of confrontation?

6 The other kind of risk that's subsumed --

7 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Is there -- is there
8 written guidance --

9 MR. DREEBEN: Yes.

10 JUSTICE GINSBURG: -- from the Department of
11 Justice to the U.S. attorneys?

12 MR. DREEBEN: Yes, there is, in the form of
13 guidance memos that we regard as work product, but they
14 involve analytical efforts to separate different
15 offenses into different categories, based on the
16 conduct.

17 And to the extent that statistics come into
18 play, and I know that, Justice Breyer, your opinions
19 have cited statistics, you've talked about the needs for
20 statistics, we think that they play the -- exactly the
21 role that the Court used them for in Sykes. First, the
22 Court talked in Sykes about what happens when someone
23 pleas -- flees from a police officer. What are the
24 risks of --

25 JUSTICE BREYER: Yeah, but what about

1 extortion? I mean, extortion, that doesn't -- I mean,
2 the other three I can see; burglary, arson, explosives,
3 sure. But what about extortion? I thought the -- it's
4 like Hobbs Act, and I would be amazed if many of those
5 involve violence, but you would know. Do they --

6 JUSTICE SCALIA: Violence by the
7 extortion -- extortee. I mean, it certainly is not the
8 first --

9 JUSTICE BREYER: He's at the other end of a
10 postal communication, or something. I mean, they say,
11 if you don't give me some money, I will, you know -- and
12 I'm in New York, you're in Hawaii, I'm going to reveal
13 such and such.

14 MR. DREEBEN: Well, I think --

15 JUSTICE BREYER: What are the facts on that?

16 MR. DREEBEN: I think that what Congress had
17 in mind was the kind of extortion where somebody
18 threatens to inflict injury on a person or property.
19 And if it's -- in order to achieve a demand. And
20 Congress was concerned that the person who makes that
21 threat poses a risk of carrying it out, which creates a
22 degree of danger. It's the confront --

23 JUSTICE SCALIA: Is that the Justice
24 Department's position, that other extortion is not
25 covered by the provision?

1 MR. DREEBEN: Well, I don't think --

2 JUSTICE SCALIA: If it's just blackmail, you
3 threaten to reveal something about the person's life --

4 MR. DREEBEN: I --

5 JUSTICE SCALIA: -- that isn't covered.

6 MR. DREEBEN: We would argue that the
7 generic definition of extortion is seeking to get some
8 property from a person with his consent by the use of
9 threats, force or fear.

10 JUSTICE SCALIA: Threat -- threats or force.

11 MR. DREEBEN: Yes, yes.

12 JUSTICE SCALIA: You add or fear.

13 MR. DREEBEN: Yes.

14 JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, I mean, fear includes
15 being afraid that some events of your prior life will
16 be --

17 MR. DREEBEN: That's right. And --

18 JUSTICE SCALIA: So -- so you -- you don't
19 assert that extortion means only the extortion that --
20 that the mafia might -- you know, pay up or -- or we're
21 going to hurt you.

22 MR. DREEBEN: I -- I think a normal method
23 of statutory construction doesn't quite get you to the
24 narrower view of extortion that you expressed in your
25 separate opinion in James I believe, but that is a legal

1 question. I mean, the government might make that
2 argument and this Court might conclude that under the
3 principle that similar words should be construed
4 similarly, extortion has a narrower meaning in this
5 statute.

6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: No. But the problem
7 is -- the problem is not what the government argues when
8 it gets into court. The problem is what the prosecutor
9 threatens when he's entered into plea bargain
10 negotiations. This is the point that Justice Ginsburg
11 touched on. You are putting the defense counsel in a
12 position where they have to interpret the vagueness in
13 making the decision when -- whether they want to plead
14 to five years or risk the mandatory minimum of -- of 15.

15 And your guidelines say a lot, but I thought
16 one of the things your guidelines say is that you should
17 prosecute the -- the maximum extent that you can, right?
18 Isn't it you should charge the maximum if you -- if you
19 charge and then the prosecutors go in and say, look, I
20 could charge you this much and -- or I could -- or I
21 could -- I mean, I could add this charge to what I've
22 got and then you'd face 15 years. And defense counsel
23 said, well, all right. Let me see if we're guilty of
24 that. And he's going to read that and have no idea
25 whether they're covered by it or not.

1 MR. DREEBEN: I think no idea is not quite
2 right.

3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: No idea is an
4 exaggeration, sure.

5 MR. DREEBEN: It is an exaggeration and this
6 may not completely answer --

7 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Not enough of an --
8 not enough of an idea to risk an extra ten years for
9 their client.

10 MR. DREEBEN: Well, these aren't charges in
11 the same way that a criminal charge is that's brought in
12 the indictment. Typically, criminal history isn't even
13 assembled until after the defendant has pleaded guilty
14 and a presentence report is being prepared. And at that
15 point the parties are more aware of whether the
16 defendant might be exposed to the Armed Career Criminal
17 Act or not. Sometimes ex ante analysis is done and can
18 be done fairly reliably.

19 Again, this Court sees cases that really
20 pose hard questions; that have generated circuit splits
21 that result in legal questions that have divided the
22 lower courts. There is a wealth of activity below the
23 surface that doesn't get to this Court in which there
24 isn't nearly as much difficulty in figuring it out.

25 Now, on pages 8 and 9 of our brief, which my

1 friend referred to several times, we cited 17 examples
2 of what we thought are easy cases. In the reply brief,
3 the Petitioner came back and said, well, three of those
4 really aren't easy because they're circuit splits. In
5 two of them, the splits are really because the
6 definitions, the offenses, the elements of the offenses
7 were quite different. Child abuse meant something very
8 different in one jurisdiction from another.

9 JUSTICE SCALIA: So you -- you take the
10 position so long as there's some easy cases, the statute
11 can't be vague.

12 MR. DREEBEN: I don't think the Court has to
13 go nearly that far, Justice Scalia, because in this case
14 you have four cases --

15 JUSTICE SCALIA: So you -- you don't take
16 that position?

17 MR. DREEBEN: This Court's decision --

18 JUSTICE SCALIA: I thought your brief took
19 that position.

20 MR. DREEBEN: This Court's decisions do
21 suggest that.

22 JUSTICE SCALIA: Yes.

23 MR. DREEBEN: I don't think the Court has to
24 go all the way to that position in order to conclude --

25 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, what is the standard?

1 And this goes back to what Justice Scalia was saying
2 before. I mean, there's conduct that everybody agrees
3 is annoying. There are rates that everybody agrees are
4 just -- are unjust and unreasonable. So how much do we
5 have to say that the core has shrunk and the margins
6 have taken over before we're willing to do this?

7 MR. DREEBEN: So I think the starting point,
8 Justice Kagan, is to look at whether the statute states
9 something of an objective standard or a subjective
10 standard. So in the instance of unreasonable rates,
11 that is a standard that -- an administrative agency
12 could -- could flesh that out. But for a court to do it
13 would really just involve an -- an application of
14 subjectivity.

15 JUSTICE KAGAN: But I feel as though it's
16 really the same inquiry. I mean, even as you describe
17 it, it's identify crimes where there -- you know,
18 dangerous stuff, crimes that pose a risk of -- of
19 danger.

20 How much danger? Well, as much danger as
21 these four enumerated offenses. How much danger do they
22 pose? Well, nobody's really sure. One of them seems
23 only to pose that a lot of danger in a few select cases.
24 So it's a really -- it just seems, even as you describe
25 it, as the kind of thing that Congress ought to be

1 doing.

2 MR. DREEBEN: Well, let me add one thing,
3 Justice Kagan, to your description of what courts should
4 do when they apply this analysis. First, they're going
5 to look to see if they can identify the ordinary case.
6 Then they're going to try to determine whether the risk
7 is essentially, I think, analogous to the burglary
8 extortion risk of confrontation or the arson explosives
9 risk of unleashing a direct -- a destructive force. And
10 then finally there may be some cases where the Begay
11 analysis applies.

12 But this is the really important point that
13 I want Your Honor to think about in this context: If
14 the Court is not satisfied that on any one of those
15 issues, the government loses. Not because the statute
16 is vague, but because if the Court is not confident that
17 an offense fits within the -- a normative criteria that
18 Congress has established, the tie goes to the defendant.

19 JUSTICE SCALIA: So there's no so much thing
20 as a vague statute.

21 MR. DREEBEN: Well, no. I think --

22 JUSTICE SCALIA: You're saying whenever the
23 statute is vague, the government loses on the Rule of
24 Lenity; therefore, there's no such thing as a vague
25 statute.

1 MR. DREEBEN: I think the kinds of things
2 that are vague statutes as reflected in this Court's
3 opinions are either those where there's a tinge of First
4 Amendment or other protected activity, like in the
5 annoying example, or cases like L. Cohen where the
6 standard is unreasonable rates. And sure, everybody
7 would agree that some rates are unreasonable, but it's
8 a -- it's a very subjective standard.

9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But what do you
10 think --

11 JUSTICE SCALIA: The hardest -- the hardest
12 part of this -- of this test is determining what is the
13 typical case of -- of -- of this particular violation.
14 What is the typical case of extortion? To take one of
15 the four enumerated -- what is the typical case of
16 extortion? You seem to think the typical case is the --
17 you know, I'll break your leg unless you pay up. See, I
18 would have thought the typical case is, you know,
19 I'll -- I'll disclose something about your -- your life
20 unless you pay up.

21 MR. DREEBEN: And I think that if the Court
22 is faced with that kind of conundrum, it looks to
23 reported decisions of convicted cases, as the Court
24 indicated in James, and it attempts to determine whether
25 it can identify the ordinary convicted case. And if it

1 cannot conclude that the ordinary case involves the
2 greater degree of violence, then it will conclude that
3 the government has not prevailed.

4 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: What about one that
5 you think is easy, kidnapping? What if the statistics
6 would ever show that in 40 percent of the cases, they're
7 talking about the parent that does not have custodial
8 rights, you know, taking the child from school and
9 not -- not returning him or her, whatever. I mean, that
10 doesn't pose, I would say, not a serious risk of
11 potential violence. The parent is not going to harm --
12 harm -- harm the child. And yet you say that's an easy
13 case.

14 MR. DREEBEN: Well --

15 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Maybe it's easy if
16 it's at the margin, if one percent of the cases are. I
17 don't know whether kidnapping is prosecuted more often
18 in a case like that or in another, you know, more, you
19 know, violent case where it's extortion for money as
20 opposed to just wanting more custody of the child.

21 MR. DREEBEN: So we -- we would have to
22 undertake the effort to try to persuade a court of what
23 we thought the ordinary case was. And if we failed, if
24 we did not muster whatever the Court thought it needed
25 to understand that --

1 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But how do you --
2 how do you do that? Do you look at every charged case
3 of kidnapping in the State of Arkansas, if it involves a
4 law from Arkansas?

5 MR. DREEBEN: We would look at the reported
6 cases in Arkansas. We would look to see whether --

7 JUSTICE BREYER: The -- the reported cases.
8 The problem is --

9 JUSTICE KAGAN: But you know -- you know,
10 Mr. Dreeben --

11 JUSTICE BREYER: No. I want to just get to
12 Justice Kagan's earlier question, if that's all right.
13 Is it? Okay.

14 Because for the reasons that you've heard,
15 I'd just like you spend now or sometime before you sit
16 down, a minute on the suggestion of limiting it through
17 the use of the -- your appendix, which you heard
18 described a minute ago.

19 MR. DREEBEN: Yes.

20 JUSTICE BREYER: Because looking at the
21 language, I think it is possible within the language to
22 go to that interpretation.

23 MR. DREEBEN: So I don't really think that
24 that interpretation is correct, because if you look at
25 the exemplar crimes --

1 JUSTICE SCALIA: I don't know what you're
2 talking about.

3 MR. DREEBEN: I think it's --

4 JUSTICE BREYER: All right. What I'm
5 talking about specifically --

6 JUSTICE SCALIA: What interpretation?

7 JUSTICE BREYER: -- is you read the words,
8 "Otherwise involves conduct that presents a serious
9 potential risk of physical injury to another." You look
10 at the four examples. You say in each of the four
11 examples there was a jury determination that it fell
12 within one of the four, and we should read those words,
13 too, as requiring a jury to make a determination that
14 there's a serious potential risk. And the way you do
15 that is that you insist that an element of the crime has
16 the words, or the equivalent, of "serious potential
17 risk."

18 Now, that's roughly what the suggestion was
19 on the other side. I just didn't want you to sit down
20 and -- at any point you'd like without -- without
21 addressing that possibility.

22 MR. DREEBEN: Well, I -- I can address it
23 quickly, Justice Breyer, because I don't think that it
24 is a construction of the statute that really works. The
25 exemplar crimes like --

1 JUSTICE SCALIA: Excuse me. She didn't
2 propose it as a construction of the statute. She said
3 very clearly that this Court could not adopt that, but
4 that Congress could. She was asked, you know, how
5 Congress could fix this. That was her proposal about
6 how Congress could fix it --

7 MR. DREEBEN: Justice Scalia, I --

8 JUSTICE BREYER: I'm asking you as a saving
9 construction.

10 MR. DREEBEN: I just wanted to -- I think we
11 agree with Petitioner on this one, that the exemplar
12 crimes, burglary, extortion, arson, and so forth, don't
13 involve as an element characteristically serious
14 potential risk of physical injury to another. It arises
15 because of the elements of the crime. And the residual
16 clause, which was originally where ACCA came from as a
17 freestanding clause, and then the exemplars were added
18 back in before it was passed --

19 JUSTICE BREYER: I see.

20 MR. DREEBEN: -- illustrates --

21 JUSTICE BREYER: Go back to Justice Kagan.

22 MR. DREEBEN: Yes. So that -- that I think
23 is not really a viable solution to it, but I do think
24 that the viable solution in this area is that for many
25 crimes, they -- they don't pose the empirical conundrums

1 that can be hypothesized. And when they do and the
2 government is not able to satisfy the Court or the Court
3 isn't through its own research able to become satisfied
4 that it is a fix on the ordinary case, that it can say
5 with some degree of confidence that the risk is
6 comparable to the exemplar crimes, the crime falls out.

7 And so you have in the ACCA world many
8 crimes that no one ever contests are covered; mail
9 fraud, gambling. And then you have crimes that we have
10 listed that are not seriously contested. We listed 17
11 of them. They contested 3. I think two of the contests
12 really have to be satisfied but with --

13 JUSTICE KAGAN: But I think even --

14 MR. DREEBEN: -- are different -- please.

15 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice Kagan.

16 JUSTICE KAGAN: I -- I think even in the
17 ones that you think are easy, they're only easy in the
18 abstract.

19 The vehicular flight one was a good example
20 of that. In the abstract, everybody just has a sense
21 that it's really dangerous if people flee from a police
22 officer in a car. But then it turns out there are all
23 kinds of degrees and we have zero idea what the charging
24 is. And I think that that's not -- that was not a fluke
25 of that case. That's kind of every case, is that we

1 don't have a sense of how all the statutes connect to
2 each other and what statutes are used for the dangerous
3 ones and what statutes are used for more minor variants
4 of the same offenses, and that that's kind of an endemic
5 problem in this. Is that not right?

6 MR. DREEBEN: Justice Kagan, I think what
7 the Court is asking itself when it attempts to apply
8 ACCA is not a question at that fine-grained level of
9 empirical precision. Congress understood, for example,
10 that in most burglaries, probably nobody is hurt. Many
11 extortions, nobody realizes the threat. And yet, it
12 regarded the kind of person who is willing to undertake
13 a crime that could lead to that kind of confrontation as
14 properly subject to an enhanced sentence when they have
15 not just one, but two other convictions, and then they
16 go out and use a gun. This --

17 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, but then you're
18 talking about a very different inquiry, it seems to me.
19 Then you're talking about just a gut check. Do -- do,
20 like, people that -- is this the kind of conduct that a
21 bad person engages in?

22 MR. DREEBEN: No. I don't think that it's
23 quite that amorphous. There is a much more specific
24 inquiry into the risk, and the way the courts have
25 conducted it I think is really -- you know, in this

1 Court's decision in Sykes was an exemplar, but there are
2 many, many, many other cases where the lower courts look
3 at the conduct, they examine the conduct, is this a sex
4 crime that involves a minor and an adult? What is
5 likely to ensue?

6 And I think that it's kind of critical to
7 keep a perspective here that the idea of substantial
8 risk is shot through criminal law. The very
9 definition --

10 JUSTICE KENNEDY: That -- that brings me to
11 the statutes in your appendix. It did -- it does seem
12 to me that those statutes do require a case-by-case
13 determination by the finder of fact that there was a
14 danger in the particular case.

15 MR. DREEBEN: So there --

16 JUSTICE KENNEDY: And so -- and so that --
17 that's different from --

18 MR. DREEBEN: Yes.

19 JUSTICE KENNEDY: -- from a categorical
20 approach.

21 MR. DREEBEN: Yes. And, Justice Kennedy --

22 JUSTICE KENNEDY: And most of those
23 statutes, it seemed to me, would survive if -- if this
24 Court ruled against you here.

25 MR. DREEBEN: It depends on the rationale,

1 Justice Kennedy, because if the rationale were the
2 concept of substantial risk is itself too amorphous to
3 be grasped at all and to be applied in any kind of a
4 consistent manner, I think that would raise serious
5 questions.

6 JUSTICE SCALIA: We would never say that.
7 We would never say that.

8 MR. DREEBEN: But I think as a logical
9 matter, that's essentially what Petitioner is saying,
10 that it's not possible to really get a fix on what those
11 words mean.

12 JUSTICE SCALIA: No. He's saying -- she's
13 saying that you can't tell what the typical crime is,
14 and when you can't tell what the typical crime is, you
15 can't tell what -- what -- what the risk is.

16 MR. DREEBEN: And my answer to that is --

17 JUSTICE SCALIA: Just as you can't do it for
18 extortion.

19 MR. DREEBEN: If you can't tell what the
20 typical crime is, the government loses. Once you can
21 tell what the --

22 JUSTICE SCALIA: That's not really an
23 answer. That sounds wonderful. The government loses
24 because of the -- the -- the rule that the tie goes to
25 the defendant. That sounds wonderful, but the fact is

1 one court will say, yes, the government loses. Another
2 court, given the vagueness of it, will say the
3 government wins.

4 MR. DREEBEN: Yes. I -- I don't think
5 that's --

6 JUSTICE SCALIA: Are we going to have to
7 review every one of these until the law is clear?

8 MR. DREEBEN: No. I think the Court does
9 what it typically does, which is to review cases and
10 establish general principles, and the lower courts make
11 an effort to harmonize their rulings in light of them.

12 It's not unique that this statute has
13 generated a lot of litigation. Section 924(c), for
14 example, this Court has had three different cases
15 interpreting the meaning of the word "use" and one
16 interpreting the word "carry." I mean, that's a higher
17 ratio of cases to words than this statute, but I think
18 what it says is that when there's a lot at stake, when
19 many years of prison time are at stake, people litigate
20 hard.

21 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Is the test the same here
22 for vagueness as when we're determining the validity of
23 a statute that specifies a crime?

24 MR. DREEBEN: So I don't think that's so
25 clear, Justice Kennedy. This Court in Chapman indicated

1 that there's a lesser degree of -- of clarity required
2 for vagueness doctrine in the sentencing context.

3 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Why should that be when
4 it's a mandatory -- this is mandatory, and has
5 five years, no possibility -- and this case is such a
6 good illustration because the judge said, If it were up
7 to me, this person should get half or most -- what did
8 he say -- two-thirds, that would more than suffice, but
9 I'm locked into this by ACCA.

10 Shouldn't we demand from Congress, if it
11 wants to have that kind of enhancement, a really clear
12 statement?

13 MR. DREEBEN: Let me say two things about
14 that, Justice Ginsburg. One is that this statute
15 involves recidivism. There -- the -- there was never
16 any question that Petitioner should have had about what
17 conduct was prohibited and not prohibited. He knew or
18 should have known that he could not possess a gun.

19 And the second thing is because this statute
20 is applied as a matter of law by courts with de novo
21 appellate review, it achieves a degree of clarity
22 through the litigation process that, I think, is going
23 to be sufficient to meet whatever heightened standard
24 the Court might impose on it.

25 But I do want to come back --

1 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Before you do,
2 just -- because I disagree with the statement you made.

3 You said if there's -- because there are so
4 many years involved, people will litigate hard. I think
5 because there are so many years involved, people won't
6 litigate at all. I mean, if -- if they're facing
7 when -- if they go to trial such a large enhancement, I
8 think they're going to be compelled -- it gives so much
9 more power to the prosecutor in the plea negotiations
10 which is, of course, where almost all of the cases are
11 disposed of.

12 MR. DREEBEN: And not so much here for two
13 reasons, Mr. Chief Justice. One is that section 922(g)
14 prohibits possession of a weapon by a firearm. And I'm
15 not going to say that there are no contested cases, but
16 it's not the hardest crime to prove. If you're found in
17 a car with a gun and the suppression motion fails, trial
18 is not going to get you lot.

19 The second thing is it's not totally up to
20 the prosecutor. The presentence report will indicate
21 the defendant's criminal history, and the judge is
22 obligated to apply ACCA whether or not the government
23 asks for it to be applied if, in fact, it is legally
24 applicable. So I don't think that this context presents
25 quite the same plea bargaining pressure that Your Honor

1 had in mind. But --

2 JUSTICE GINSBURG: How is the government
3 going to know about the prior crimes unless the
4 government -- and how is the judge supposed to know
5 about the prior crimes unless the prosecutor tells the
6 court?

7 MR. DREEBEN: The -- may I answer, Mr. Chief
8 Justice?

9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Sure.

10 MR. DREEBEN: The -- the presentence report
11 which is required to be prepared by the probation
12 officer does a criminal history check, gathers that
13 information, synthesizes it, makes recommendations to
14 the sentencing court.

15 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.

16 MR. DREEBEN: Thank you.

17 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Ms. Menendez, you
18 have three minutes remaining.

19 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF KATHERINE M. MENENDEZ

20 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER

21 MS. MENENDEZ: Thank you, Your Honor, Mr.
22 Chief Justice. Just briefly, Your Honor.

23 First, I think lenity is an illusory
24 solution in this case. After the government suggested
25 lenity is the answer, we looked through every opinion we

1 could find from the courts of appeals and the district
2 court. We did not find a single case nationwide where a
3 court has applied lenity to find that a marginal case
4 should not count under the residual clause. So if
5 lenity is going to pose the solution that the government
6 suggests, it needs substantial invigoration by this
7 Court to be the -- the answer in the gray areas.

8 The second thought is that this suggestion
9 that the Court can decide what the ordinary case is from
10 reported decisions is actually also skewed in favor of
11 the government. Consider a -- consider a standard
12 offense where somebody commits a much less egregious
13 case; resisting arrest where all they do is refused to
14 be handcuffed versus resisting arrest where they kick
15 and punch and fight the officer. This case is likely to
16 get a higher sentence and more likely to lead to appeals
17 and challenges and a reported decision. This case is
18 perhaps more likely to be resolved with a suspended
19 sentence and never to appear in the reported case law at
20 all.

21 So if all we're doing is turning to the
22 reported case law to try to determine what the ordinary
23 case is, that's going to give an artificially skewed
24 sense of the aggressive nature of those cases.

25 Finally, Your Honors, while it's true that

1 this Court has grappled with things like 924(c)
2 repeatedly, 924(c) provides an example of what's
3 supposed to happen, which is when this Court points out
4 a flaw in a statute, which they have -- Your Honors have
5 now done four different times, Congress answered.
6 Change 924(c) to try to address the Court's decision and
7 address the Court's concerns from Bailey. And then that
8 answer has led to additional questions.

9 That give and take, that discourse is
10 missing in this case, where it's been clear for a long
11 time that this statute needs help, and there's been
12 inaction on the part of Congress. Your Honors, I think
13 that the idea that the tie should go to the defendant is
14 important, but it's just not happening, because of the
15 subjective gut check that Your Honor has mentioned.

16 Judges substitute a feeling, boy, a sexual
17 offense involving a minor sounds bad, and it sounds
18 violent, so therefore, it must count. But I'd invite
19 Your Honors to look at the footnote in our brief where
20 we highlight that there's actually several cases that
21 find that where the offense is -- or is unlawful because
22 of the age of the victim, it doesn't count as a violent
23 offense. So that gut check has to mean -- has to be
24 more quantified, it has to be limited, it has to have
25 specific guidance.

1 The last point I'd like to make, Your
2 Honors, is that whether this Court decides in favor of
3 Mr. Johnson on the merits or an application of the Rule
4 of Lenity, whether this Court decides that this statute
5 is unconstitutionally vague as applied to possessory
6 offenses, or as applied to mere possession of a
7 short-barrel shotgun, or whether this Court takes the
8 step that I think it's time for, and declares this
9 clause unconstitutionally vague, in every instance, I
10 think the appropriate result is for Mr. Johnson to win
11 and be resentenced.

12 Thank you.

13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
14 The case is submitted.

15 (Whereupon, at 11:04 a.m., the case in the
16 above-entitled matter was submitted.)

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