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IN FOCUS

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Standards of Proof in Federal Criminal Law

The Supreme Court has recognized that governmental interference with individual liberty must be supported by sufficient justification for that interference. Generally, as the severity of governmental intrusion lessens, so too does the quantum of proof needed to support that intrusion. In the context of criminal law, for example, an individual may be arrested only upon a finding of "probable cause"; however, the Court has found that an officer may need only possess "reasonable suspicion" to pat down the outer clothing of an individual for a weapon.

This In Focus defines these and other terms that may be applicable in determining whether a restriction on the liberty of a criminal suspect or defendant is lawful. The standard of proof applied may vary on the basis of the scope of the intrusion upon the individual (e.g., a "frisk" or an arrest), as well as the nature of the action or proceeding involving the individual (e.g., investigation, prosecution, sentencing). The In Focus closes with considerations for Congress.

Standards of Proof Generally

The function of a "standard of proof" is to identify the acceptable "degree of confidence" that a decisionmaker (e.g., a judge or law enforcement officer) should have in the "correctness of factual conclusions for a particular type of adjudication" (e.g., a conviction or arrest). The Supreme Court has characterized these standards as embodying different levels of risk that society is willing to accept for an erroneous determination.

Standards of Proof: The Different Standards and Their Hierarchy

100% Certainty

Criminal law does not insist upon the absence of any and all doubt to convict a defendant. The Supreme Court has clarified that a jury need not be convinced of a defendant's guilt to an "absolute" or "mathematical" certainty.

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

To secure a criminal conviction, the Due Process Clause dictates that the government must prove each element of a criminal offense "beyond a reasonable doubt"—the "highest burden" of proof in the nation's criminal justice system.

What Is an "Element" of an Offense?

"Elements" of an offense, in the words of the Supreme Court, "are the constituent parts of a crime's legal definition—the things the prosecution must prove to sustain a conviction." The Court has held that, except for the fact of a prior conviction, "facts that increase the prescribed [minimum or mandatory] range of penalties to which a criminal defendant is exposed" are also "elements of the crime" subject to the reasonable-doubt standard.

For example, to prove that a defendant bribed a witness in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 201(b)(3), the government must prove three elements beyond a reasonable doubt: (1) a person was to be a witness under oath at a specific judicial proceeding; (2) the defendant gave, offered, or promised something of value to the witness; and (3) the defendant did so with intent to influence the testimony of the witness or for the witness to be absent from the proceedings.

More broadly, the Supreme Court has said that

> use of the reasonable-doubt standard is indispensable to command the respect and confidence of the community in applications of the criminal law. It is critical that the moral force of the criminal law not be diluted by a standard of proof that leaves people in doubt whether innocent men are being condemned.

Though exact formulations differ, judges have suggested that "beyond a reasonable doubt" means that the trier of fact must be "firmly convinced" of the defendant's guilt and that the belief in a "real possibility" of the defendant being not guilty should be enough to give the defendant "the benefit of the doubt." Some courts characterize "reasonable doubt" as a doubt that would give one pause or that would lead one to "hesitate."

Clear and Convincing Evidence

This standard is invoked in limited situations in criminal law, such as determining whether a criminal defendant did not comply with a condition of pretrial release. In general, "clear and convincing evidence" speaks to whether it is "highly probable"—not just "slightly" more probable—that a fact is true or not. In numerical terms, showing only a greater than fifty percent probability would not satisfy this standard.

Preponderance of the Evidence

By contrast, a preponderance of the evidence standard asks whether the "existence of a fact is more probable than its nonexistence," or put differently, whether the evidentiary scales are tipped in favor of probability. That is, a preponderance of the evidence requires that the probability of truth only be "any number greater than fifty percent."

While a preponderance of the evidence is used primarily when there is a civil dispute, such as between two private parties, this standard of proof is used in federal criminal law as well. For example, a judge must be convinced of an aggravating or mitigating factor at the sentencing phase—as distinguished from an element of an offense considered at the guilt phase—by a preponderance of the evidence. The Supreme Court has held that the "application of the preponderance standard at sentencing generally satisfies due process." The U.S. Sentencing Commission, an independent federal agency responsible for promulgating the sentencing guidelines that federal judges consult when imposing a sentence, similarly has opined that "use of a preponderance of the evidence standard is appropriate to meet due process requirements" in applying the guidelines.

Probable Cause

Federal criminal law does apply standards of proof that fall below the fifty-percent threshold, such as in the law enforcement context. While these standards are less onerous than preponderance of the evidence, the Supreme Court nonetheless has insisted upon "some minimal level of objective justification to validate" certain law enforcement action under the Fourth Amendment. The text of the Fourth Amendment directs that a warrant authorizing law enforcement to engage in a "search" (i.e., an intrusion upon a person's reasonable expectation of privacy, or a trespass upon a constitutionally protected space) or "seizure" (i.e., meaningful interference with a person's possessory interests in property or self) must be supported by "probable cause." The Supreme Court has explained that probable cause probes whether, from the standpoint of an objective law enforcement officer and in view of the totality of the circumstances, there is a "substantial chance" or "fair probability" of criminal activity.

Example of Probable Cause Standard Being Met

The Supreme Court determined that a police officer who found cocaine in a vehicle had probable cause to arrest all three occupants, because, absent evidence pointing to a particular individual, a reasonable officer could conclude that any of the individuals were in possession of the cocaine, either together or individually.

Reasonable Suspicion

The Supreme Court has recognized that certain law enforcement encounters, specifically a "stop" (e.g., pulling over a vehicle) or "frisk" (e.g., patting down an individual's outer clothing) are relatively minimal intrusions on individual liberty and thus need to be supported by "reasonable suspicion"—a quantum of proof below probable cause. According to the Court, to justify such an intrusion on the basis of "reasonable suspicion," law enforcement must possess "specific and articulable facts which, taken together with rational inferences from those facts, reasonably warrant that intrusion."

A "Hunch"

As to the lowest theoretical rung in the evidentiary hierarchy, the Supreme Court has made clear that an "unparticularized suspicion or 'hunch'" is "simply too slender a reed" to justify a cognizable law enforcement intrusion.

Example of a Hunch Not Satisfying the Reasonable Suspicion Standard

The Supreme Court ruled that a law enforcement officer's perception that two individuals carrying similar bags in an airport were attempting to conceal that they were traveling together because they were separated by others in line and glancing at each other was insufficient to support the officer's stop of the individuals, which resulted in finding cocaine.

Considerations for Congress

The standards of proof described herein generally flow from judicial interpretations of constitutional provisions, principally the right to due process and the right to be secure from unreasonable searches and seizures. These interpretations may be understood to represent a floor of the protections guaranteed by the Constitution. If Congress wished, it could enact more stringent protections for particular criminal offenses or elements. There may be room for congressional action with respect to the federal sentencing guidelines, as Congress must review and approve of any amendments thereto.

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