

Miranda v. Arizona / Background ●●●

Ernesto Miranda was a poor man living in Phoenix, Arizona. In 1963, Miranda was arrested after a victim identified him in a police lineup as her assailant. Miranda was charged with rape and kidnapping and interrogated for two hours while in police custody. The police officers who questioned him did not inform him of his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination or of his Sixth Amendment right to the assistance of an attorney.

As a result of the interrogation, Miranda confessed in writing to the crimes he was charged with. His written statement also included an acknowledgement that he was aware of his right against self-incrimination. During his trial, the prosecution used his confession to obtain a conviction, and he was sentenced to 20–30 years in prison on each count.

Miranda's defense attorney appealed to the Arizona Supreme Court. His attorney argued that his confession should be excluded as evidence in his trial because he had not been informed of his rights, nor had an attorney been present during his interrogation. The police officers involved admitted they did not give Miranda any explanation of his rights. They argued, however, that because Miranda was convicted of a crime in the past, he must have been aware of his rights. The Arizona Supreme Court denied his appeal and upheld his conviction.

The case came down to this fundamental question: What is the role of the police in protecting the rights of the accused as guaranteed by the Fifth and Sixth Amendments to the Constitution? The Fifth Amendment states that no person “shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself.” The Sixth Amendment states that, “In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right . . . to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.” The Supreme Court of the United States made previous attempts to deal with these issues. In *Brown v. Mississippi* (1936), the Court ruled that the Fifth Amendment protected individuals from being forced to confess. In *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963), the Court decided that persons accused of felonies have a fundamental right to an attorney, even if they cannot afford one. In *Escobedo v. Illinois* (1964), after Miranda's arrest but before the Court heard his case, the Court ruled that when an accused person is denied the right to consult with their attorney, that person's Sixth Amendment right to counsel is violated. But do the police have an obligation to ensure that the accused person is aware of these rights? If so, at what point in the criminal justice process must the defendant learn of these rights?

In 1965, the Supreme Court of the United States agreed to hear Miranda's case. At the same time, the Court agreed to hear three similar cases: *Vignera v. New York*, *Westover v. United States*, and *California v. Stewart*. The Court combined the four cases. Since Miranda was listed first among the four cases considered by the Court, the decision came to be known by his name. The decision in *Miranda v. Arizona* was handed down in 1966.

Questions to Consider

1. What rights of the accused does the Fifth Amendment protect?
2. What rights of the accused does the Sixth Amendment protect?
3. If Ernesto Miranda had been made aware of these rights, how might his behavior have been different when the police questioned him?
4. Individual rights must be balanced against the values of society at large. In *Miranda*, what societal values must be balanced against a person's right to be protected from self-incrimination and the right to counsel?
5. Some people argue that it is an individual's responsibility to know what their rights are under the Constitution, and not the government's responsibility to inform them. Do you think the government should have to inform individuals who are arrested of their rights? Why or why not?