

Miranda v. Arizona / Summary of Decision

In a 5-4 opinion, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Miranda. The majority opinion, written by Chief Justice Earl Warren, concluded that defendants arrested under state law must be informed of their constitutional rights against self-incrimination and to representation by an attorney before being interrogated when in police custody. Justices Clark, Harlan, Stewart, and White dissented.

In their majority opinion, the justices explained that the Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination is fundamental to the U.S. system of justice and is “one of our Nation’s most cherished principles.” This guarantee requires that only statements freely made by a defendant may be used in court. The justices described some of the techniques used by police officers in interrogations. They observed that “the modern practice of in-custody interrogation is psychologically rather than physically oriented,” and cited the advantage police officers hold in custodial interrogations (interrogations that take place while the subject is in police custody). Because of these advantages, they concluded that “the very fact of custodial interrogation exacts a heavy toll on individual liberty, and trades on the weakness of individuals.”

The Court ruled that in order to reconcile the necessary practice of custodial interrogations with the guarantees of the Fifth Amendment, police must ensure that defendants are aware of their rights before they are interrogated in custody. Because the right against self-incrimination is so important to the American system of justice, a case-by-case determination made by police officers of whether each defendant understands their rights is not sufficient. Before interrogating defendants in police custody, they must be warned 1) that they have the right to remain silent 2) that anything they say may be used against them in court, 3) that they have the right to an attorney, either retained by them or appointed by the court, and 4) that they may waive these rights, but they retain the right to ask for an attorney any time during the interrogation, at which point the interrogation can only continue in the presence of a lawyer.

The Supreme Court reasoned that because the right against self-incrimination is so fundamental, and because it is so simple to inform defendants of their rights, any statements made by defendants during a custodial interrogation in which the defendant has not been read their Miranda rights are inadmissible in both state and federal courts.

Justice Harlan wrote the main dissent. He argued that the newly created rules did not protect against police brutality, coercion, or other abuses of authority during custodial interrogations because officers willing to use such illegal tactics and deny their use in court were “equally able and destined to lie as skillfully about warnings and waivers.” Instead, he predicted that the new requirements would impair and substantially frustrate police officers in the use of techniques that had long been considered appropriate and even necessary, thus reducing the number of confessions police would be able to obtain. He concluded that the harmful effects of crime on society were “too great to call the new rules anything but a hazardous experimentation.”