

BROWN V. PLATA CASE SUMMARY (2011)

FACTS

Brown v. Plata involves a class action lawsuit alleging a violation of prisoners' rights due to a lack of medical and mental health care. California's prisons are designed to house a population of approximately 80,000 inmates, but at the time the class action reached the Supreme Court, the prison population was roughly double that. The plaintiffs filed suit claiming that the California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation's medical services are inadequate due to severe prison overcrowding in violation of the Eighth Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment.

QUESTION FOR THE SUPREME COURT

Should the Supreme Court require the release of inmates to reduce prison overcrowding in California?

OPINION A: NO

- Releasing inmates on this scale would pose a serious safety risk to the people of California
- As a consequence of their prior actions and crimes, prisoners may be deprived of certain rights
- Courts should not overstep their constitutional authority- the decision whether to reduce the prison population should be up to the state authorities
- It is unlikely that the prisoners receiving inadequate care will be the ones released from prison early
- A court may not order a prisoner's release unless it determines that the prisoner is suffering from a violation of his constitution rights and that his release, and no other relief, will remedy the violation
- Summary: ordering California to release nearly 50,000 prisoners extends further than necessary to correct the constitutional right of a select group of plaintiffs who have been denied medical care

STUDENT QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with Opinion A? Why or why not?
2. What are the strengths of Opinion A? Weaknesses?
3. Formulate your argument to present to the jury
 - a. It should be about 2 minutes long
 - b. Argue the strengths of the opinion
 - c. Develop counter arguments to the weaknesses

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QUESTION FOR THE SUPREME COURT

Should the Supreme Court require the release of inmates to reduce prison overcrowding in California?

OPINION B: YES

- A prison that deprives prisoners of basic needs is incompatible with the concept of human dignity
- Overcrowding has consumed the limited resources of prison staff, imposed huge demands on medical facilities, and created unsanitary and unsafe conditions that make appropriate care impossible to achieve
- California is in the midst of an extreme financial crisis and will be unable to fix the problem on its own
- A prison's failure to provide adequate care for inmates may cause physical torture or death, promote violence, spread disease, and/or make it difficult for prison officials to control the prison population
- Extreme prison overcrowding has caused suicide rates in California's prison to rise to 80% higher than the average for inmates nationwide
- Summary: state officials should be required to reduce the prison population in order to meet prisoners' basic needs

STUDENT QUESTIONS

4. Do you agree with Opinion B? Why or why not?
5. What are the strengths of Opinion B? Weaknesses?
6. Formulate your argument to present to the jury
 - a. It should be about 2 minutes long
 - b. Argue the strengths of the opinion
 - c. Develop counter arguments to the weaknesses