

No. 09-60

---

---

IN THE  
*Supreme Court of the United States*

---

---

JOSE ANGEL CARACHURI-ROSENDO,

*Petitioner,*

—v.—

ERIC H. HOLDER, JR., U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL,

*Respondent.*

---

---

ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES  
COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT

---

---

**BRIEF FOR THE CENTER ON THE  
ADMINISTRATION OF CRIMINAL LAW AS  
*AMICUS CURIAE* IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER**

---

---

*Of Counsel:*

ANTHONY S. BARKOW  
DAVID B. EDWARDS  
CENTER ON THE ADMINISTRATION  
OF CRIMINAL LAW  
110 West Third Street, Suite 214  
New York, New York 10012  
(212) 998-6612

CATHERINE M. AMIRFAR  
*Counsel of Record*  
HELEN V. CANTWELL  
MARGARET D. SPILLANE  
JILL VAN BERG  
YOUNG K. LEE  
DEBEVOISE & PLIMPTON LLP  
919 Third Avenue  
New York, New York 10022  
(212) 909-6000

*Counsel for Amicus Curiae*

---

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TABLE OF AUTHORITIES .....	iii
INTEREST OF <i>AMICUS CURIAE</i> .....	1
SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT.....	2
ARGUMENT .....	5
I. This Court Should Reverse the Fifth Circuit’s Decision Because It Improperly Interferes with the Basic Exercise of Prosecutorial Discretion with Respect to Charging Decisions.....	5
A. The Prosecutor’s Exercise of Discretion Is a Critical Tool Used To Achieve Important Policy Goals and Should Not Be Undermined. ....	6
B. The Fifth Circuit Failed to Account for the Important Role of Prosecutorial Discretion in the Statutory Scheme. ....	16
II. This Court Should Reverse the Fifth Circuit’s Decision Because It Fundamentally Undermines State Interests in the Proper and Equitable Administration of Criminal Justice and Results in Disparate Treatment of Criminal Defendants Facing Convictions in State Versus Federal Courts. ....	20

III. This Court Should Reverse the Fifth Circuit's Decision Because the Scheme Set Forth Can Lead to a Violation of a Defendant's Right to Trial by Jury Under the Sixth Amendment.....	25
CONCLUSION.....	28

## TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

	Page
<b>FEDERAL CASES</b>	
<i>Alsol v. Mukasey</i> , 548 F.3d 207 (2d Cir. 2008).....	2, 20
<i>Berhe v. Gonzales</i> , 464 F.3d 74 (1st Cir. 2006).....	2
<i>Blackledge v. Allison</i> , 431 U.S. 63 (1977) .....	14
<i>Blanton v. City of North Las Vegas, Nevada</i> , 489 U.S. 538 (1989) .....	26
<i>Bordenkircher v. Hayes</i> , 434 U.S. 357 (1978) .....	5
<i>Carachuri-Rosendo v. Holder</i> , 570 F.3d 263 (5th Cir. 2009) .....	2, 17, 18
<i>Colten v. Kentucky</i> , 407 U.S. 104 (1972) .....	8
<i>Duncan v. Louisiana</i> , 391 U.S. 145 (1968) .....	26
<i>Engle v. Isaac</i> , 456 U.S. 107 (1982) .....	21
<i>Ewing v. California</i> , 538 U.S. 11 (2003) .....	12

<i>Fernandez v. Mukasey</i> , 544 F.3d 862 (7th Cir. 2008) .....	2, 18
<i>Heckler v. Chaney</i> , 470 U.S. 821 (1985) .....	6
<i>In re Carachuri-Rosendo</i> , 24 I. & N. Dec. 382 (BIA 2007) .....	2, 7, 19
<i>Lockyer v. Andrade</i> , 538 U.S. 63 (2003) .....	12
<i>Lopez v. Gonzales</i> , 549 U.S. 47 (2006) .....	15
<i>Petite v. United States</i> , 361 U.S. 529 (1960) .....	21
<i>Rashid v. Mukasey</i> , 531 F.3d 438 (6th Cir. 2008) .....	2
<i>Rinaldi v. United States</i> , 434 U.S. 22 (1977) .....	21
<i>Steele v. Blackman</i> , 236 F.3d 130 (3d Cir. 2001).....	2
<i>United States v. Booker</i> , 543 U.S. 220 (2005) .....	10
<i>United States v. Dodson</i> , 288 F.3d 153 (5th Cir. 2002) .....	17
<i>United States v. LaBonte</i> , 520 U.S. 751 (1997) .....	5

<i>Wayte v. United States</i> , 470 U.S. 598 (1985) .....	3, 6
<i>Younger v. Harris</i> , 401 U.S. 37 (1971) .....	20, 21

### **FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS**

U.S. CONSTITUTION amendment VI .....	26
--------------------------------------	----

### **FEDERAL STATUTES AND REGULATIONS**

18 U.S.C. § 3553 .....	10
21 U.S.C. § 844 .....	<i>passim</i>
21 U.S.C. § 851 .....	<i>passim</i>
Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, Pub. L. No. 91-513, 84 Stat. 1236 (1970) .....	17
U.S.S.G. § 4A1.3 .....	10
U.S.S.G. § 5K2.0 .....	10

### **STATE STATUTES**

CALIFORNIA PENAL CODE § 667 .....	12
COLORADO REVISED STATUTES § 16-7-301 .....	9, 10

COLORADO REVISED STATUTES § 18-18-406.....	26
NEW YORK CRIMINAL PROCEDURE LAW § 340.40.....	26, 27
NEW YORK PENAL LAW § 70.15.....	27
NEW YORK PENAL LAW § 221.10.....	27
TEXAS PENAL CODE § 12.43.....	22
REVISED CODE OF WASHINGTON § 9A.20.030 .....	10

#### **OTHER AUTHORITIES**

ABA STANDARDS FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE: PROSECUTION FUNCTION AND DEFENSE FUNCTION (3d ed. 1993).....	9, 16
Bureau of Justice Statistics, Federal Justice Statistics Resource Center, <a href="http://fjsrc.urban.org">http://fjsrc.urban.org</a> .....	24
Bureau of Justice Statistics, <i>State Court Sentencing of Convicted Felons, 2004</i> , <a href="http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/html/scscf04/tables/scs04101tab.cfm">http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/html/ scscf04/tables/scs04101tab.cfm</a> .....	24
CALIFORNIA DISTRICT ATTORNEYS ASS'N, PROSECUTORS' PERSPECTIVE ON CALIFORNIA'S THREE STRIKES LAW: A 10-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE (2004) .....	13

- SANFORD H. KADISH ET AL.,  
 CRIMINAL LAW AND ITS PROCESSES  
 (8th ed. 2007) ..... 8, 11
- Tracey Kyckelhahn & Thomas H. Cohen,  
 Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Felony  
 Defendants in Large Urban Counties,  
 2004*, BUREAU JUST. STAT. BULL. (U.S.  
 Dep't of Justice, Office of Justice  
 Programs, Wash. D.C.), Apr. 2008..... 14
- Gerard E. Lynch,  
*Our Administrative System of Criminal  
 Justice*, 66 FORDHAM L. REV. 2117 (1998) ..... 8
- Report of House Committee on Interstate and  
 Foreign Commerce, H.R. Rep. No. 91-  
 1444, 91st Cong., 2d Sess., *reprinted in*  
 1970 U.S.C.C.A.N. 4566 ..... 17
- Daniel C. Richman & William J. Stuntz,  
*Al Capone's Revenge: An Essay on the  
 Political Economy of Pretextual  
 Prosecution*, 105 COLUM. L. REV. 583  
 (2005) ..... 14
- Brittany Schoepp,  
*Panel Hears Deportation Fears of  
 Hispanics*, WIS. STATE J., Feb. 26, 2008 ..... 15
- William J. Stuntz,  
*Bordenkircher v. Hayes: Plea  
 Bargaining and the Decline of the Rule  
 of Law*, in CRIMINAL PROCEDURE STORIES  
 351 (Carol S. Steiker ed., 2006) ..... 13



William J. Stuntz,  
*Self-Defeating Crimes*, 86 VA. L. REV.  
1871 (2000)..... 8

U.S. Attorney’s Manual (1997) .....*passim*

**INTEREST OF *AMICUS CURIAE***

*Amicus curiae* the Center on the Administration of Criminal Law (“the Center”) respectfully submits this brief in support of Petitioner Jose Angel Carachuri-Rosendo.<sup>1</sup> The Center, based at New York University School of Law, is dedicated to defining and promoting good government practices in the criminal justice system through academic research, litigation, and participation in the formulation of public policy, and particularly focuses on prosecutorial power and discretion. In general, the Center’s litigation practice concentrates on cases in which exercises of prosecutorial discretion raise significant substantive legal issues. A primary guiding principle in selecting cases to litigate is to identify cases in which prosecutors exercised discretion to engage in overaggressive or unwarranted interpretations of the Constitution, statutes, regulations, or policies in a way that diverges from standard practices, raises fundamental questions of defendants’ rights, or is a misuse of government resources in light of law enforcement priorities. The Center also defends exercises of prosecutorial discretion where the discretionary decisions comport with applicable law

---

<sup>1</sup> The parties have consented to the filing of this brief, and letters of consent have been lodged with the Clerk of the Court, in accordance with Supreme Court Rule 37.2(a). Pursuant to Rule 37.6, no counsel for any party has authored this brief in whole or in part, and no person or entity, other than the Center or its counsel, made a monetary contribution intended to fund the preparation or submission of this brief.

and standard practices and are consistent with law enforcement priorities.

The Center's appearance as *amicus curiae* here is prompted by its concern that allowing immigration courts to supplant prosecutorial discretion exercised in a measured and consistent manner will undermine the fair and efficient administration of the criminal justice system. Thus, this case is an important one to the Center's mission.

### SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

Allowing immigration courts to deem an individual an aggravated felon for purposes of the immigration laws when that individual was neither charged nor convicted as a recidivist in the underlying state criminal proceeding impedes the proper administration of the criminal justice system by undermining the considered discretion of state prosecutors. The decision of the Fifth Circuit, like the prevailing rule in the Seventh Circuit but unlike that in the First, Second, Third, and Sixth Circuits and the Board of Immigration Appeals, permits immigration courts to treat a second or subsequent possession misdemeanor offense as a recidivist felony despite a state prosecutor's choice to decline such a charge.<sup>2</sup> In so holding, the Fifth Circuit's

---

<sup>2</sup> Compare *Alsol v. Mukasey*, 548 F.3d 207 (2d Cir. 2008), *Rashid v. Mukasey*, 531 F.3d 438 (6th Cir. 2008), *Berhe v. Gonzales*, 464 F.3d 74 (1st Cir. 2006), *Steele v. Blackman*, 236 F.3d 130 (3d Cir. 2001), and *In re Carachuri-Rosendo*, 24 I. & N. Dec. 382 (BIA 2007), with *Carachuri-Rosendo v. Holder*, 570 F.3d 263 (5th Cir. 2009) and *Fernandez v. Mukasey*, 544 F.3d 862 (7th Cir. 2008).

decision contravenes the considered charging decisions of state prosecutors acting consistently with the broad discretion afforded them under the law. *Amicus* urges this Court to reverse the decision below for three principal reasons.

*First*, the Fifth Circuit's disregard for the exercise of prosecutorial discretion ignores this Court's recognition that "the decision to prosecute is particularly ill-suited to judicial review," because "[s]uch factors as the strength of the case, the prosecution's general deterrence value, the Government's enforcement priorities, and the case's relationship to the Government's overall enforcement plan are not readily susceptible to the kind of analysis the courts are competent to undertake." *Wayte v. United States*, 470 U.S. 598, 607 (1985). Because prosecutorial discretion plays a crucial role in the interplay between prosecutors, courts, and legislatures to ensure fair and equitable application of the criminal laws, interfering with such discretion prevents the appropriate actors in the criminal justice system from ensuring that charges and sentences are tailored to the circumstances of the particular individual. Indeed, state and federal legislatures often design punishment schemes to account for the exercise of prosecutorial discretion, recognizing that such exercise will mitigate what otherwise could be unduly harsh punishments. The government's characterization of section 851's requirements as merely "procedural" inappropriately denigrates the critical role that prosecutorial discretion plays in determining appropriate punishments for misdemeanor recidivists under federal law. Further,

encroaching upon prosecutorial discretion creates uncertainty about the consequences of convictions, undermining prosecutors' ability to secure plea dispositions. Countermanding prosecutorial discretion also compromises prosecutors' ability to secure the cooperation of offenders necessary for the disposal of cases, thereby impeding the proper punishment of the most culpable offenders.

*Second*, this Court should reverse the decision below to address not only the basic disrespect afforded the states' administration of their criminal justice systems inherent in the Fifth Circuit rule, but also the unwarranted disparity created between defendants convicted in state versus federal courts. When a federal immigration court interferes with the administration of state criminal justice systems in this fashion, it upsets the appropriate balance between state and federal interests. Because states play a primary role in defining and enforcing their criminal laws, and state prosecutors bring the vast majority of criminal prosecutions in the United States, encroaching upon state prosecutors' charging decisions while potentially leaving similar decisions of federal prosecutors undisturbed not only demonstrates disrespect for state actors, but has far-reaching implications for the criminal justice system. Indeed, in practice, federal prosecutors virtually always exercise their discretion to decline to bring a recidivist drug charge under 21 U.S.C. §§ 844 & 851—in 2007, only three reported felony convictions included a record of a filed section 851 information. Allowing an immigration court to disregard completely a state prosecutor's decision similarly to decline a recidivist charge would create a vast and

very real disparity in the treatment of state and federal offenders.

*Finally*, this Court should reverse the decision below because the scheme set forth by the Fifth Circuit creates the risk that a defendant's Sixth Amendment right to a jury trial may be violated, depending upon where removal proceedings are initiated.

Given the importance of these issues to the fairness and equity of the criminal justice system and the uncertainty that the Fifth Circuit's decision engenders for that system, *amicus* urges this Court to reverse the decision below.

## ARGUMENT

### **I. This Court Should Reverse the Fifth Circuit's Decision Because It Improperly Interferes with the Basic Exercise of Prosecutorial Discretion with Respect to Charging Decisions.**

As this Court has recognized, prosecutorial discretion "is an integral feature of the criminal justice system," *United States v. LaBonte*, 520 U.S. 751, 762 (1997), and "[i]n our system, so long as the prosecutor has probable cause to believe that the accused committed an offense defined by statute, the decision whether or not to prosecute, and what charge to file or bring before a grand jury, generally rests entirely in his discretion," *Bordenkircher v. Hayes*, 434 U.S. 357, 364 (1978). "This broad discretion rests largely on the recognition that the decision to prosecute is particularly ill-suited to

judicial review,” because “[s]uch factors as the strength of the case, the prosecution’s general deterrence value, the Government’s enforcement priorities, and the case’s relationship to the Government’s overall enforcement plan are not readily susceptible to the kind of analysis the courts are competent to undertake.” *Wayte v. United States*, 470 U.S. 598, 607 (1985); *see also Heckler v. Chaney*, 470 U.S. 821, 832 (1985) (“[T]he decision of a prosecutor in the Executive Branch not to indict ... [is] a decision which has long been regarded as the special province of the Executive Branch ....”).

The Fifth Circuit’s decision fundamentally contravenes this integral feature of the criminal justice system by allowing immigration courts to supplant, after the fact and without the requisite experience or perspective, the considered charging decisions of prosecutors acting within the proper discretion afforded them under the law. If left standing, the decision not only would undermine the vital role prosecutorial discretion plays in ensuring the fair and efficient administration of the criminal justice system, but also would result in a system that ignores the explicit role that discretion plays in the specific statutory scheme at issue.

**A. The Prosecutor’s Exercise of Discretion Is a Critical Tool Used To Achieve Important Policy Goals and Should Not Be Undermined.**

The decision of the Court of Appeals would allow immigration judges—who lack the requisite perspective and knowledge of the facts and

circumstances that inform the decisions of prosecutors, plea allocation judges, and sentencing judges—to interpose their judgment in contravention of the considered collective judgment of the myriad players in the criminal justice system. As the Board of Immigration Appeals (“BIA”) itself cautioned in Petitioner’s proceedings, “the hypothetical approach would authorize Immigration Judges to collect a series of disjunctive facts about the respondent’s criminal history, bundle them together for the first time in removal proceedings, and then declare the resulting package to be ‘an offense’ that could have been prosecuted as a Federal felony.” *In re Carachuri-Rosendo*, 24 I. & N. Dec. 382, 393 (BIA 2007). Such interference disturbs the efficient and fair administration of the criminal justice system: *first*, by contravening prosecutors’ proper role in ensuring the equitable enforcement of the criminal laws through the exercise of their charging discretion, which is particularly important in the context of recidivism cases; *second*, by creating uncertainty about the consequences of convictions and thus undermining prosecutors’ critical ability to secure plea dispositions; and *finally*, by compromising prosecutors’ ability to secure cooperation of witnesses to ensure the proper punishment of the most culpable offenders.

*First*, the exercise of prosecutorial discretion is a key mechanism within the criminal justice system by which punishment is calibrated to fit the characteristics of the specific offense and offender. This Court has recognized that legislatures face “practical difficulties in drawing criminal statutes both general enough to take into account a variety of



human conduct and sufficiently specific to provide fair warning that certain kinds of conduct are prohibited.” *Colten v. Kentucky*, 407 U.S. 104, 110 (1972). As a result, many criminal offenses are enumerated in “statutes that are ill-defined, overbroad, or insufficiently concerned with culpability,” while other offenses are found within “[s]tatutes prohibiting appallingly destructive conduct [that] are jumbled together with others prohibiting relatively minor violations of social mores.” Gerard E. Lynch, *Our Administrative System of Criminal Justice*, 66 FORDHAM L. REV. 2117, 2137 (1998). Given this reality, prosecutorial discretion, particularly in favor of leniency, “is widely seen as necessary, and frequently as a good thing: It permits mercy, and it avoids flooding the system with low-level crimes.” William J. Stuntz, *Self-Defeating Crimes*, 86 VA. L. REV. 1871, 1892 (2000). Indeed, because “[c]riminal statutes now commonly permit (or purport to require) draconian punishments that no one expects to be imposed in the typical case,” “leniency’ has ... become not merely common but a systemic imperative.” SANFORD H. KADISH ET AL., CRIMINAL LAW AND ITS PROCESSES 1006 (8th ed. 2007).

For example, the U.S. Attorney’s Manual requires prosecutors to charge “the most serious offense that is consistent with the nature of the defendant’s conduct, and that is likely to result in a sustainable conviction,” with the significant caveat that “the attorney for the government consider, *inter alia*, such factors as the Sentencing Guideline range yielded by the charge, [and] whether the penalty yielded ... is proportional to the seriousness of the

defendant's conduct ...." U.S. Attorney's Manual, PRINCIPLES OF FEDERAL PROSECUTION § 9-27.300 (1997), *available at* [http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/eousa/foia\\_reading\\_room/usam/title9/27mcrm.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/eousa/foia_reading_room/usam/title9/27mcrm.htm) (hereinafter "U.S. Attorney's Manual"). The American Bar Association ("ABA") similarly has observed that

[d]ifferences in the circumstances under which a crime took place, the motives behind or pressures upon the defendant, mitigating factors in the situation, the defendant's age, prior record, general background, and role in the offense, and a host of other particular factors require that the prosecutor view the whole range of possible charges as a set of tools from which to carefully select the proper instrument to bring the charges warranted by the evidence.

ABA STANDARDS FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE: PROSECUTION FUNCTION AND DEFENSE FUNCTION § 3-3.9(b) cmt. (3d ed. 1993) (hereinafter "ABA STANDARDS").

Many state statutory schemes expressly contemplate the use of prosecutorial discretion related to charging decisions. For example, under Colorado law, prosecutors are provided broad discretion either to pursue appropriate dispositions through plea agreements, including to "seek or not to oppose the dismissal of an offense charged if the defendant enters a plea of guilty or *nolo contendere* ... to another offense reasonably related to the defendant's conduct," COLO. REV. STAT. § 16-7-

301(2)(b), or to “consent to deferred prosecution,” *id.* § 16-7-301(2)(d). *See also* WASH. REV. CODE § 9A.20.030(1) (directing prosecutors to investigate and recommend to the court when “the alternative of restitution ... is appropriate and feasible”).

Such exercise of prosecutorial discretion *ex ante* complements the courts’ authority to adjust sentences as appropriate and is an essential element of the dialogue between courts and prosecutors as to what constitutes appropriate punishment. The U.S. Sentencing Commission has recognized the sometimes imprecise alignment between the statutory definition of an offense and the actual conduct of an offender, and thus has provided mechanisms throughout the Sentencing Guidelines that allow sentencing courts to calibrate sentences to each individual. *See, e.g.*, U.S.S.G. § 4A1.3(b) (authorizing downward departures where “information indicates that the defendant’s criminal history category substantially over-represents the seriousness of the defendant’s criminal history”); *id.* § 5K2.0(a)(3) (departure from guideline range warranted if circumstances present are “substantially in excess of, or substantially below, that which ordinarily is involved in that kind of offense”). Now that the Federal Sentencing Guidelines are no longer mandatory, *United States v. Booker*, 543 U.S. 220, 245 (2005), federal courts have even greater discretion to individualize sentences such that they reflect, *inter alia*, “the nature and circumstances of the offense and the history and characteristics of the defendant,” 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)(1).

The exercise of a prosecutor’s discretion, including to charge a lesser offense (or to decline to charge at all), is particularly important in recidivism cases, as these laws tend to have graver sentencing implications than anyone—including legislatures—expects, should prosecutors attempt to enforce them in all cases covered by their terms. KADISH, *supra*, at 1006. For example, depending on the circumstances of the case, a recidivist determination can increase the statutory maximum sentence for simple possession from one year up to as many as five years. See 21 U.S.C. § 844. Indeed, the U.S. Attorney’s Manual specifically provides that the decision to seek a recidivism enhancement pursuant to section 851 should be treated with the same diligence and attention to the particular facts of a case as the pursuit of any other charge under the U.S. Code. See U.S. Attorney’s Manual § 9-27.300 cmt. (“Every prosecutor should regard the filing of an information under 21 U.S.C. § 851 ... as equivalent to the filing of charges.”). Moreover, without a federal prosecutor’s express decision to do so, a U.S. District Judge is without power to adjudicate a defendant as a felon under this statutory scheme. A prosecutor’s decision not to seek a recidivist charge should be no more ignored by an immigration court than any other decision made by a prosecutor to charge one particular offense or another.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the disparities in immigration courts’ treatment of state and federal convictions, see *infra* Part II.

As another example, the implications of California's recidivist sentencing scheme are so grave that the statute affirmatively provides prosecutors with broad discretion in determining which prior convictions will trigger increased sentences under the law. Under California's "three strikes" law, if a defendant has one prior "serious" or "violent" felony conviction, he must be sentenced to "twice the term otherwise provided as punishment for the current felony conviction." CAL. PENAL CODE § 667(e)(1). Two or more such priors require a sentence of an indeterminate term of life imprisonment, with a minimum term of at least twenty-five years before eligibility for parole. *Id.* § 667(e)(2)(A). This third felony need not be "serious" or "violent"—"any felony can constitute the third strike ...." *Lockyer v. Andrade*, 538 U.S. 63, 67 (2003). However, the "three strikes" statutory scheme expressly provides for the exercise of prosecutorial discretion as a check against harsh results: "[t]he prosecuting attorney may move to dismiss or strike a prior felony conviction allegation in the furtherance of justice ... or if there is insufficient evidence to prove the prior conviction." CAL. PENAL CODE § 667(f)(2). Further, for certain offenses "known as 'wobblers,'" prosecutors may "exercise their discretion to charge a 'wobbler' as either a felony or a misdemeanor." *Ewing v. California*, 538 U.S. 11, 16-17 (2003).

In practice, the exercise of prosecutorial discretion has been the primary means of mitigating the impact of this sentencing regime. According to the California District Attorneys Association, "[d]ata from California's most populous counties reveal that

prosecutorial discretion to request the court to dismiss felony strikes is used in 21-40% of all Three Strikes cases.” CAL. DIST. ATTORNEYS ASS’N, PROSECUTORS’ PERSPECTIVE ON CALIFORNIA’S THREE STRIKES LAW: A 10-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE 11 (2004), *available at* [http://www.threestrikes.org/cdaa/ThreeStrikes\\_0.pdf](http://www.threestrikes.org/cdaa/ThreeStrikes_0.pdf); *see also id.* at i (“As District Attorney for San Mateo County since 1983, I ... signed the ballot argument in opposition to the Three Strikes initiative. In reality, the actual implementation of the law has been appropriate.... The fact that both the court and the prosecutor can cause priors to be stricken establishes a balance in the law that was missing when Three Strikes was first enacted.”).

Lawmakers rely upon such discretion by prosecutors when enacting harsh laws, guided by the knowledge that, because most cases end in guilty pleas, prosecutors in reality use such laws as bargaining tools and exercise their discretion not to charge defendants to the fullest extent possible. *See* William J. Stuntz, *Bordenkircher v. Hayes: Plea Bargaining and the Decline of the Rule of Law*, in *CRIMINAL PROCEDURE STORIES* 351, 377-78 (Carol S. Steiker ed., 2006) (making this argument with respect to Congress and state legislatures).

The government’s suggestion that the mechanics of section 851 are merely “procedural” ignores the critical role that prosecutorial discretion plays in all charging determinations. (Br. in Opp’n 12.) Indeed, it is a fundamental principle that conduct that “is punishable” under the law is not equivalent to a criminal conviction. Following the government’s theory to its logical conclusion would

grant immigration judges the authority to deem any number of misdemeanor possession convictions—including federal dispositions—as felonies, simply because the underlying conduct *could have been* punished as such, thus undermining the discretion of both state and federal prosecutors.

*Second*, when a court interferes with prosecutors’ discretion in the direction of mercy while deferring to their discretion in favor of harshness, as the Fifth Circuit’s decision would allow, it creates uncertainty about the consequences of convictions and thus undermines prosecutors’ ability to secure dispositions via plea agreement. This Court has observed that “[w]hatever might be the situation in an ideal world, the fact is that the guilty plea and the often concomitant plea bargain are important components of this country’s criminal justice system.” *Blackledge v. Allison*, 431 U.S. 63, 71 (1977). Because the vast majority of cases are resolved by pleas—97% of convictions in the nation’s 75 most populous counties<sup>4</sup>—this reduction in defendants’ willingness to plea bargain will hinder prosecutors’ ability to manage and efficiently dispose of their cases, further exacerbating the “[e]xtreme docket pressure [that] characterizes DAs’ offices, particularly in the large cities where crime rates tend to be highest.” Daniel C. Richman & William J.

---

<sup>4</sup> Tracey Kyckelhahn & Thomas H. Cohen, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Felony Defendants in Large Urban Counties, 2004*, BUREAU JUST. STAT. BULL. (U.S. Dep’t of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Wash. D.C.), Apr. 2008, at 3, available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/fdluc04.pdf>.

Stuntz, *Al Capone's Revenge: An Essay on the Political Economy of Pretextual Prosecution*, 105 COLUM. L. REV. 583, 601 (2005); *see also* U.S. Attorney's Manual § 9-27.420 cmt. 11 ("A plea disposition in one case may facilitate the prompt disposition of other cases, including cases in which prosecution might otherwise be declined.").

Uncertainty about the immigration consequences of convictions has had a significant impact upon the criminal justice system. It is already the case that "federal consequences of state crimes will vary according to state severity classifications when Congress describes an aggravated felony in generic terms, without express reference to the definition of a crime in a federal statute," *Lopez v. Gonzales*, 549 U.S. 47, 58 (2006), thus creating uncertainty as to how a conviction under a particular state's law will be treated for purposes of immigration law. Allowing the Fifth Circuit's decision to stand will affect prosecutors' ability to secure agreements by significantly increasing the possibility that even a plea to a minor offense will have untold immigration consequences. *See, e.g.*, Brittany Schoepp, *Panel Hears Deportation Fears of Hispanics*, WIS. STATE J., Feb. 26, 2008, at D1 (defense attorney stating that "many of his clients, who would normally accept plea bargains for minor crimes, are now too afraid that even a short jail sentence will mean deportation, so they take their case to trial").

*Finally*, the uncertainty created by the Fifth Circuit's decision in undermining prosecutorial discretion also adversely affects prosecutors' ability



to bring a lesser charge to secure cooperation agreements. As the ABA has noted, “[p]rosecutors frequently and properly choose to pursue a lenient course with one participant in a criminal activity in order to bring other, more serious, offenders to justice.” ABA STANDARDS § 3-3.9(b) cmt. In cases that rely heavily upon evidence provided by confidential informants, a prosecutor’s ability to induce a plea to a lesser charge avoids a public trial in which the informant’s identity would be revealed, thus reducing the “likelihood that the informant’s usefulness in other investigations will be seriously diminished or destroyed.” U.S. Attorney’s Manual § 9-27.420 cmt. 7. Obtaining cooperation through a plea in one case also can free up prosecutorial resources that may be better used to dispose of other cases.

In sum, the exercise of discretion in making charging decisions reflects an assessment of the facts, circumstances, and available resources by the prosecutor, the actor in the criminal justice system with the highest competence to exercise that discretion in a full and considered manner. Reversing the Fifth Circuit’s decision would ensure that the crucial role that such discretion plays in the fair and efficient administration of criminal justice is respected by the lower courts.

**B. The Fifth Circuit Failed to Account for the Important Role of Prosecutorial Discretion in the Statutory Scheme.**

Given the necessary role that prosecutorial discretion plays in bringing a recidivist felony charge

under 21 U.S.C. §§ 844 & 851, the failure of the Fifth Circuit to meaningfully acknowledge such a role in its analysis is a fatal flaw.

Congress specifically enacted 21 U.S.C. § 851 as part of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, Pub. L. No. 91-513, 84 Stat. 1236 (1970), in order to give prosecutors discretion not to seek recidivist treatment. “Whereas the prior version of the statute made enhancements for prior offenses mandatory, the new statutory scheme gave prosecutors discretion whether to seek enhancements based on prior convictions.” *United States v. Dodson*, 288 F.3d 153, 159 (5th Cir. 2002); *see also* Report of House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, H.R. Rep. No. 91-1444, 91st Cong., 2d Sess., *as reprinted in* 1970 U.S.C.C.A.N. 4566, 4576 (“[S]evere penalties, which do not take into account individual circumstances, and which treat casual violators as severely as they treat hardened criminals, tend to make convictions somewhat more difficult to obtain.... [M]aking the penalty structure in the law more flexible can actually serve to have a more deterrent effect than existing penalties....”).

Nevertheless, in the decision below, the Fifth Circuit did not consider the import of the statutory scheme set forth in section 851, nor did it even mention the requirements a prosecutor must satisfy to charge a recidivist felony under section 844. *See Carachuri-Rosendo v. Holder*, 570 F.3d 263 (5th Cir. 2009). The Court of Appeals simply deemed “correct” the immigration judge’s holding that “[b]ecause Carachuri’s second state conviction could

have been punished as a felony under the CSA, had he been prosecuted in federal court, he committed a ‘drug trafficking crime,’ making him ineligible for cancellation of removal.” *Id.* at 264-65. Missing from this analysis is the critical fact that such conviction could be punished as a felony *only if* a prosecutor had chosen to prosecute it as such pursuant to the requirements of section 851.

Similarly, while the Seventh Circuit noted that compliance with section 851’s requirements was mandatory to charge a recidivist felony under section 844, *Fernandez v. Mukasey*, 544 F.3d 862, 866 (7th Cir. 2008), it nevertheless also ignored the import of that provision in its analysis. Absent from its discussion was the fact that petitioners would have been considered recidivists under federal law *only if* they had been charged as repeat offenders under 21 U.S.C. § 851. *Id.* at 877 (Rovner, J., dissenting); *see also id.* (“And that is a big ‘if.’ After all, they were not charged as repeat offenders in state court. This is the ‘one too many levels of hypothetical’ with which we were concerned in [a previous case].”).

It is telling that, unlike these courts, the executive agency charged with the execution of this nation’s immigration laws and the agency with the greatest expertise in the enforcement of such laws gave due weight to the legislative scheme. In Petitioner’s proceedings before the BIA, the Department of Homeland Security (“DHS”) changed its position with respect to this issue, “conced[ing] that a conviction arising in a State that has drug-specific recidivism laws cannot be deemed a State-law counterpart to ‘recidivist possession’ unless the

State actually used those laws to prosecute [Petitioner].” *In re Carachuri-Rosendo*, 24 I. & N. Dec. at 390-91. The BIA observed that

it seems that the DHS is troubled by the fact that a purely hypothetical approach, carried to its logical conclusion, could result in a Federal *misdemeanor* conviction under 21 U.S.C. § 844(a) being treated as a hypothetical Federal *felony* on the ground that the defendant had prior convictions that *could have been used* as the basis for a recidivist enhancement.

*Id.* at 391 (emphases in original). It further noted that “it would ... be anomalous to treat a second State conviction for simple possession as the hypothetical equivalent of a Federal ‘recidivist possession’ conviction when the State affirmatively elected not to proceed under its own available recidivism laws.” *Id.*

The Second Circuit embraced the BIA’s reasoning in its decision addressing the treatment of multiple state possession offenses, and specifically noted how the alternate approach advanced by the Fifth and Seventh Circuits would encroach upon the administration of the criminal justice system. Deeming state possession convictions federal felonies, “even when the State explicitly elected not to pursue a recidivist conviction,” “would intrude on prosecutorial discretion to make charging decisions, specifically undermining the State’s ability to negotiate plea agreements with defendants who would admit guilt to drug possession with the

understanding that their criminal records would reflect misdemeanor and not felony convictions.” *Alsol v. Mukasey*, 548 F.3d 207, 217 (2d Cir. 2008).

In light of the clear policy imperatives of both the Congress that enacted section 851 and the federal agency charged with executing its mandate, this Court should reverse the decision of the Fifth Circuit in favor of the approach set forth by the BIA and the First, Second, Third and Sixth Circuits.

**II. This Court Should Reverse the Fifth Circuit’s Decision Because It Fundamentally Undermines State Interests in the Proper and Equitable Administration of Criminal Justice and Results in Disparate Treatment of Criminal Defendants Facing Convictions in State Versus Federal Courts.**

The decision of the Fifth Circuit interferes with the administration of state criminal justice systems and upsets the appropriate balance between state and federal interests in our constitutional system of dual sovereigns. This Court has counseled federal courts to defer to appropriate exercises of state power as a matter of “proper respect for state functions, [as] a recognition of the fact that the entire country is made up of a Union of separate state governments.” *Younger v. Harris*, 401 U.S. 37, 44 (1971). Such deference is motivated by the “belief that the National Government will fare best if the States and their institutions are left free to perform their separate functions in their separate ways.” *Id.* The resulting balance between state and federal interests “is a system ... in which the National

Government, anxious though it may be to vindicate ... federal rights and federal interests, always endeavors to do so in ways that will not unduly interfere with the legitimate activities of the States.” *Id.* Such deference is particularly important with respect to states’ exercise of their competence in the field of criminal justice, since “[s]tates possess primary authority for defining and enforcing the criminal law.” *Engle v. Isaac*, 456 U.S. 107, 128 (1982).

The Department of Justice has a strong policy of deferring to state determinations regarding the seriousness and method of prosecuting crimes. The Department “refus[es] to bring a federal prosecution following a state prosecution except when necessary to advance compelling interests of federal law enforcement.” *Rinaldi v. United States*, 434 U.S. 22, 28 (1977); *see also* U.S. Attorney’s Manual § 9-2.031 (“preclud[ing] the initiation or continuation of a federal prosecution, following a prior state ... prosecution based on substantially the same act(s) or transaction(s),” unless various substantive and procedural prerequisites are met).<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Attorney’s Manual accordingly prohibits federal prosecution following a state trial unless there remain “substantial federal interest[s]” “demonstrably unvindicated” by the state proceedings. *See* U.S. Attorney’s Manual § 9-2.031. That requirement cannot be met here.

---

<sup>5</sup> This federal policy is called the “Petite policy,” based on *Petite v. United States*, 361 U.S. 529 (1960).

Rather, Petitioner's circumstance presents a stark example of the severe consequences of inadequate respect for and deference to state determinations. Carachuri-Rosendo was a lawful permanent resident who has since been removed from the country and separated from his fiancée and four children, all of whom are U.S. citizens, based on a misdemeanor conviction for possession of a single tablet of Xanax, an anti-anxiety drug, without a prescription. This simple possession conviction was deemed a recidivist felony by the immigration court because of a prior misdemeanor conviction for possession of zero to two ounces of marijuana, despite the state prosecutor's decision not to charge Petitioner as a recidivist.<sup>6</sup>

When a federal court countermands a state prosecutor's considered decision in this fashion, it causes disparate treatment among state and federal defendants based solely on which government brought the prosecution. Had a federal prosecutor made the same charging decision with respect to Petitioner's second offense, her decision and Petitioner's immigration status presumably would have remained undisturbed.<sup>7</sup> Without addressing

---

<sup>6</sup> While Petitioner's prior possession offense could not be used as the basis for a recidivist charge under Texas law, *see* TEX. PENAL CODE § 12.43, he also had a prior conviction for misdemeanor assault that could have served as the basis for a recidivist charge. The prosecutor nevertheless declined to seek a recidivism enhancement on that basis. (*See* Pet. Br. at 5.)

<sup>7</sup> The Fifth Circuit's decision does not address the circumstance where the underlying prosecution is federal, but applying its rationale to that context only emphasizes

the point, the Fifth Circuit nonetheless held that despite the considered decision of the state prosecutor not to pursue a felony charge, a federal immigration court may second-guess that exercise of discretion and penalize Petitioner as if he had been charged and convicted as a recidivist.

Given that nearly all criminal prosecutions proceed in state rather than federal court, the Court of Appeals' approach risks a pervasive problem. As noted above, the U.S. Attorney's Manual contemplates treating the decision to file an information under section 851 for a recidivist enhancement as equivalent to the decision to file a charge and notes that there are legitimate policy reasons why a prosecutor might decline to charge a defendant as a recidivist. U.S. Attorney's Manual § 9-27.300 cmt. "Such a reason might include, for example, that the United States Attorney's office is particularly overburdened, the case would be time-consuming to try, and proceeding to trial would significantly reduce the total number of cases disposed of by the office." *Id.* Clearly, prosecutors may also exercise their discretion to forgo a recidivist enhancement, as particularly relevant here, because a review of the individual facts and circumstances—including the seriousness of both past and present conduct—may reveal that such an enhancement is not warranted. *Cf. id* § 9-27.230

---

its incoherence: an individual convicted of a federal misdemeanor would be deemed convicted of a federal felony even though he was neither prosecuted for, nor convicted of, a federal felony in the underlying proceeding. (*See* Pet. Br. at 22.)



cmt. (listing factors to be considered in determining whether prosecution should be declined, including, *inter alia*, “the nature and seriousness of the offense involved,” “the degree of the person’s culpability in connection with the offenses,” “the nature of the person’s prior criminal involvement,” and “the sentence, or other consequence, that is likely to be imposed if prosecution is successful, and whether such a sentence or other consequence would justify the time and effort of prosecution”).

In practice, federal prosecutors readily exercise their discretion to decline a recidivist charge. According to figures compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1,376 defendants were charged under 21 U.S.C. § 844 in 2007. In that same year, only three reported felony convictions included a record of an information filed pursuant to 21 U.S.C. § 851.<sup>8</sup> See Bureau of Justice Statistics, Federal Justice Statistics Resource Center, <http://fjsrc.urban.org/>. By contrast, based on the most recent data available, over 160,000 defendants were convicted of drug possession felonies in state courts in 2004. See Bureau of Justice Statistics, *State Court Sentencing of Convicted Felons, 2004*, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/html/scscf04/tab1>

---

<sup>8</sup> While some of these 1,376 defendants may not have been eligible for a recidivist charge because they were already charged as felons under a different provision of section 844 based on the substance they possessed, the fact remains that there were nevertheless very few instances in which a section 851 information was filed.

es/scs04101tab.cfm.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while a miniscule portion of federal defendants in drug cases have actually been convicted of recidivist felonies, many thousands of state defendants convicted of drug possession misdemeanors could be treated as recidivist felons under federal law under the Fifth Circuit's approach. If federal prosecutors deciding whether to charge a defendant as a recidivist may properly consider whether they are overburdened, whether resources merit prosecution, or whether the circumstances of the case warrant an enhancement, certainly state prosecutors—with their far more crushing caseloads—are entitled to take those same factors into account and to receive the same deference as to their judgment.

**III. This Court Should Reverse the Fifth Circuit's Decision Because the Scheme Set Forth Can Lead to a Violation of a Defendant's Right to Trial by Jury Under the Sixth Amendment.**

Should the Fifth Circuit's decision stand, defendants convicted of a misdemeanor offense to which a jury trial right does not attach could nevertheless have that conviction treated as an aggravated felony—an offense to which the right *does* attach. To treat a defendant as a convicted felon while depriving her of a trial by jury for that offense violates her rights under the Sixth Amendment.

---

<sup>9</sup> Only data on felony (not misdemeanor) offenses are available on the Bureau of Justice Statistics website.

Under the Sixth Amendment, “a defendant is entitled to a jury trial whenever the offense for which he is charged carries a maximum authorized prison term of greater than six months.” *Blanton v. City of N. Las Vegas, Nev.*, 489 U.S. 538, 542 (1989); *see also* U.S. CONST. amend. VI. There is, however, “a category of petty crimes or offenses which is not subject to the Sixth Amendment jury trial provision ...” *Duncan v. Louisiana*, 391 U.S. 145, 159 (1968). While this Court has declined to categorically classify offenses carrying a maximum term of six months or less as “petty” offenses, it has held that it is “appropriate to presume for purposes of the Sixth Amendment that society views such an offense as ‘petty.’” *Blanton*, 489 U.S. at 543. In light of this presumption, “[a] defendant is entitled to a jury trial in such circumstances only if he can demonstrate that any additional statutory penalties, viewed in conjunction with the maximum authorized period of incarceration, are so severe that they clearly reflect a legislative determination that the offense in question is a ‘serious’ one.” *Id.*

Some jurisdictions have limited the jury trial right to extend only to charges for offenses with an authorized term of greater than six months. *See, e.g.*, N.Y. CRIM. PROC. LAW § 340.40(2). Other jurisdictions have authorized maximum penalties for several drug possession offenses of less than six months. *See, e.g.*, COLO. REV. STAT. § 18-18-406(3) (possession and open display or consumption of not more than one ounce of marijuana is punishable at maximum by a fine and fifteen days in county jail). Thus, in jurisdictions with limitations upon the jury trial right, there are drug possession offenses to

which that right does not attach, but which, for a defendant convicted multiple times, could under the Court of Appeals' approach be treated as aggravated felonies. For example, under New York law, criminal possession of marijuana in the fifth degree is a Class B misdemeanor, N.Y. PENAL LAW § 221.10, punishable by a term of imprisonment that "shall not exceed three months," N.Y. PENAL LAW § 70.15(2). A defendant in New York City charged with a misdemeanor with an authorized term of less than six months is eligible only for a bench trial. *See* N.Y. CRIM. PROC. LAW § 340.40(2). Thus, a defendant twice convicted in New York City of possession of marijuana in violation of section 221.10 who is facing removal proceedings in the Fifth Circuit could be treated as a felon, despite being unable to secure a trial by jury for the second offense in violation of her Sixth Amendment right to trial by jury.

This Court should reverse the decision below to ensure that defendants facing removal proceedings are not deprived of their right to a trial by jury in violation of the Sixth Amendment.

**CONCLUSION**

For the foregoing reasons, this Court should reverse the decision of the Fifth Circuit.

Respectfully submitted,

CATHERINE M. AMIRFAR  
*Counsel of Record*  
HELEN V. CANTWELL  
MARGARET D. SPILLANE  
JILL VAN BERG  
YOUNG K. LEE  
DEBEVOISE & PLIMPTON LLP  
919 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10022  
(212) 909-6000

*Of Counsel:*  
ANTHONY S. BARKOW  
DAVID B. EDWARDS  
CENTER ON THE ADMINISTRATION  
OF CRIMINAL LAW  
110 West Third Street  
Suite 214  
New York, NY 10012  
(212) 998-6612

February 4, 2010