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## Article

### Juvenile Delinquency and the Law: Taking Maturity into Account

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#### Introduction

Age-based restrictions are universally recognized in legal jurisprudence as protective measures, justified by the developmental vulnerabilities of minors. Society imposes limitations to protect juveniles from engaging in activities they are not developmentally equipped to understand or handle. In the United States, these protections extend to prohibitions against the purchase of alcohol, tobacco, firearms, and certain other items deemed dangerous to children due to the ongoing development of their prefrontal cortex. In Texas, additional restrictions limit minors' access to gambling establishments and certain medications, all aimed at safeguarding their mental and physical well-being.

Further, there is an ongoing societal debate regarding the appropriateness of children engaging in discussions about topics such as sexuality and other so-called adult matters. These debates

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reflect the broader societal goal of shielding minors from exposure to complex issues they may not yet have the maturity to comprehend fully. Rooted in developmental neuroscience, these age-based restrictions underscore society's commitment to protecting the health and safety of individuals whose decision-making and impulse control remain ongoing. This societal stance of protecting children, grounded in both legal precedent and developmental science, also extends to the criminal justice system, where heightened scrutiny is applied when law enforcement interrogates juvenile suspects.

The critical issue is whether the system sufficiently accounts for the age and maturity of minors during police questioning, particularly when the rights of juveniles under the 14th Amendment's Due Process protections are at stake. Juvenile delinquency, as defined by the Department of Justice, refers to the commission of a criminal act by a person under 18 that would be considered a crime if committed by an adult.<sup>1</sup> Given the special legal status of minors, police interrogations of juveniles must adhere to procedural safeguards designed to protect their rights. In Texas, law enforcement is permitted to question minors without parental consent in non-custodial settings.<sup>2</sup> Under the current Texas law, as long as a child is not detained or subjected to formal arrest procedures, police may question them without the knowledge or consent of their parents.<sup>3</sup> In these situations, children are often not read their Miranda rights, their legal rights to protect them from self-incrimination, as they are merely having a casual conversation with the police.<sup>4</sup>

This legal review will explore the case law surrounding juvenile interrogations, with a particular focus on key decisions that have shaped the current legal framework in Texas. By examining the precedents established by these cases, we will assess

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<sup>1</sup> 18 U.S.C. § 5031.

<sup>2</sup> *When Can Police Interrogate a Minor?, Can Police Interrogate a Minor Without Parental Consent in Texas?*, VARGHESE | SUMMERSETT, <https://versustexas.com/police-interrogate-a-minor/#:~:text=In%20Texas%2C%20police%20officers%20are,question%20the m%20without%20parental%20knowledge>

<sup>3</sup> *When Can Police Interrogate a Minor?*, *supra* note 1.

<sup>4</sup> *When Can Police Interrogate a Minor?*, *supra* note 2.

whether current practices align with the constitutional protections afforded to minors and whether additional reforms may be necessary.

## **Part I: Historical and Jurisprudential Context**

Until the end of the 19th century, children were generally viewed as small adults in society and were thus treated similarly in the justice system. However, the early 20th century marked a shift in societal perceptions, as it became increasingly clear that children, especially in their formative years, were developmentally distinct from adults. In response to these evolving views, the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Control Act was enacted in 1968 to formalize the legal distinction between juveniles and adults.<sup>5</sup> This act focused on preventing crime among juveniles and ensuring their appropriate treatment. The enactment of this law was a significant step toward recognizing that children require different treatment in the justice system due to their psychological and emotional development.

In 1974, the National Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act was passed, establishing several programs designed to protect youths from harsh treatment within the criminal justice system.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the act created the Runaway Youth Program and established the National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (NIJJDP), which became pivotal in advocating for juvenile justice reform and ensuring that juveniles were not unfairly subjected to adult penalties.<sup>7</sup>

However, during the 1980s and 1990s, concerns about rising youth violence, particularly assaults and fatal acts of violence, led to a shift in policy.<sup>8</sup> Changes were made to the National Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, which

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<sup>5</sup> Blair Ames, *The history of the 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS, <https://www.ojp.gov/safe-communities/from-the-vault/1974-juvenile-justice-delinquency-prevention-act-history#1-0> (last updated Sep. 6, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, 42 U.S.C. § § 5601-5603 (1974).

<sup>7</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 5601.

<sup>8</sup> 34 U.S.C. § 101.

allowed states to try juveniles as adults for crimes involving weapons or serious violence.<sup>9</sup> This shift was partly driven by a growing public perception that juveniles engaged in violent crimes should face adult penalties, given the severity of the offenses. In the present day, laws surrounding juvenile delinquency continue to vary by state, with each jurisdiction offering its own procedures and protections for minors in the justice system.

Since the 20th century, numerous Supreme Court cases have shaped juvenile delinquency laws in the United States. These cases have addressed a wide range of issues related to juvenile justice, including the constitutionality of the death penalty for minors (*Furman v. Georgia*, 1972)<sup>10</sup> and the constitutionality of life sentences without the possibility of parole for juveniles (*Miller v. Alabama*, 2012).<sup>11</sup> Some landmark cases that directly impacted juvenile due process rights are *Haley v. Ohio* (1948), *Gallegos v. Colorado* (1962), and *In re Gault* (1967).<sup>12</sup> These cases examine juveniles' rights to due process and rights against self-incrimination.

The most recent case in Texas addressing juvenile rights in police interrogations is *Ochoa v. State* (2024).<sup>13</sup> This case approaches the idea of juvenile rights and police interrogation methods, forcing practitioners to pay special attention to procedures that disproportionately affect young, inexperienced suspects. This case was presented to the Texas Court of Appeals, where they were tasked with evaluating whether methods used by

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<sup>9</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 5601.

<sup>10</sup> See generally *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 U.S. 238, 309 (1972) (Court ruled that petitioner's death penalty sentence was in violation of the 8th and 14th Amendments).

<sup>11</sup> See generally *Miller v. Alabama*, 567 U.S. 460 (2012) (SCOTUS held that mandatory life without parole for those under age of 18 violates the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment).

<sup>12</sup> See generally *Haley v. Ohio*, 332 U.S. 596 (1948) (SCOTUS ruled that murder confession from a 15 year old without counsel during interrogation violated Due Process Clause); See generally *Gallegos v. Colorado*, 370 U.S. 49 (1962) (SCOTUS reversed murder conviction of a 14 year old who signed a confession after being held for 5 days without seeing a lawyer or parent); See generally *In re Gault*, 387 U.S. 1 (1967) (Court held that juveniles are entitled to 14th amendment's due process requirements after 15 year old Gerald Gault was taken into custody without parental knowledge).

<sup>13</sup> See generally *Ochoa v. State*, 675 S.W.3d 793 (Tex. Crim. App. 2024) (Court ruled that the Ranger Holland's interrogation tactics rendered Ochoa's confession inadmissible under Texas Family Code).

law enforcement, combined with misleading information provided by a magistrate, violated Ochoa's due process rights under the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>14</sup>

## **Part II: A Case Study of *Ochoa v. State***

In 2021, 14-year-old Emmanuel Ochoa was convicted of aggravated assault of a child under 6, injury to a child, and kidnapping. His conviction stemmed from a coerced confession obtained during a police interrogation. At the time of the interrogation, Ochoa was not accompanied by a parent or guardian and did not have legal representation.<sup>15</sup>

This situation raised critical questions about whether Ochoa understood his rights during the interrogation, whether he was aware of the full scope of his confession, and whether his statements were the result of coercion due to the nature of the questioning. During a nearly three-hour interview, Texas Ranger James Holland interrogated Ochoa.<sup>16</sup> At one point, Ranger Holland told Ochoa, "There's no reason on this deal that you shouldn't be adjudicated as a juvenile."<sup>17</sup> In the absence of a guardian, Ochoa eventually confessed to the crimes with two affirmative words that led to a sentence of 120 years in prison. The confession came the same night as the alleged crime, under circumstances that raised serious concerns about the voluntariness of his statements.

The Texas Court of Appeals found that Ochoa's confession was involuntary due to the coercive nature of the interrogation.<sup>18</sup> Ochoa argued that he was in custody before being read his rights, which would be a critical procedural error.<sup>19</sup> The court also noted that the circumstances of the interrogation, including psychological manipulation, repeated promises of leniency, and the suggestion of help if Ochoa admitted guilt, played a significant role in coercing the minor.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 811.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 806.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 812.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 811.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 808.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 803.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 808.

In addition to these psychological tactics, the court cited the confined physical space of the interview room. Ochoa was unable to leave the room “without moving or climbing over a chair,” a factor that contributed to the impression that he was unable to escape the interrogation.<sup>21</sup> Ranger Holland’s assertion of guilt and the officer’s implied threat of further harm if Ochoa did not confess further contributed to the confession’s invalidity.

The claim of involuntariness was made under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Texas law. The court, however, encountered limitations when referencing alternative precedents. Initially, the court turned to *Garcia v. State*, which found a confession to be involuntary when law enforcement made a positive promise in exchange for a confession.<sup>22</sup> But the challenge to Ochoa’s confession was not immediately clear-cut when compared to the framework of involuntariness from *Garcia v. State*.

Upon a more comprehensive review, the court referenced landmark cases like *Haley v. Ohio* and *Gallegos v. Colorado*, both of which addressed the susceptibility of minors to coercive interrogation tactics.<sup>23</sup> The court determined that the combined effect of Ranger Holland’s conduct, along with Judge Johnson’s misinformation regarding Ochoa’s rights, deprived Ochoa of his free will, resulting in an involuntary confession.<sup>24</sup> The court referred to the precedent set in *J.D.B. v. North Carolina* (2011) that emphasizes the diminished capacity of a child to understand legal procedures and consequences compared to an adult defendant, noting that Ochoa’s age and maturity made him particularly vulnerable to coercion.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, the court ruled that the confession violated Ochoa’s due process rights and was inadmissible, setting a

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<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 806.

<sup>22</sup> *See generally* *Garcia v. State*, S.W.2d 370 (Tx. Crim. App. 1994) (appellant was convicted of capital murder and resulting confession did not meet Texas Code of Criminal Procedure requirements).

<sup>23</sup> *See generally* *Haley v. Ohio*, 332 U.S. 596 (1948) (SCOTUS ruled that murder confession from a 15-year-old without counsel during interrogation violated Due Process Clause); *See generally* *Gallegos v. Colorado*, 370 U.S. 49 (1962) (SCOTUS reversed murder conviction of a 14-year-old who signed a confession after being held for 5 days without seeing a lawyer or parent).

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 808.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* At 806.

significant precedent for how juvenile interrogations must be handled in Texas.

### **Part III: Juvenile Interrogations, Developmental Science, and Social Justice**

Beyond constitutional implications, coercive interrogation practices involving juveniles undermine broader principles of social justice. Developmental psychology demonstrates juveniles' limited ability to appreciate the full extent of the long-term consequences of their actions, including legal decisions and waivers of rights. The Supreme Court, in *J.D.B. v. North Carolina* (2011), recognized that children must be viewed as distinct from adults when evaluating their perception of custody and interrogation contexts, acknowledging the inherent power imbalance between juveniles and law enforcement officers.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, empirical research demonstrates that juveniles disproportionately provide false confessions when subjected to coercive interrogation techniques. Minors exhibit heightened suggestibility, compliance, and vulnerability to authoritative pressure, driven by developmental immaturity, fear, and a lack of understanding regarding their legal rights and the gravity of potential consequences. Although we do not imply that the case concerning Emmanuel Ochoa was one of wrongful conviction, such missteps in the trial are sometimes referred to as “miscarriages of justice.”<sup>27</sup>

Social justice demands procedural fairness that considers juveniles' developmental status. The ruling in *Ochoa v. State* aligns with principles established by the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child of 1989, specifically Articles 37 and 40, mandating protection against coercion and ensuring fair treatment within juvenile justice systems.<sup>28</sup> The statute is not ratified by the United States, but the UNCRC

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<sup>26</sup> *J.D.B. v. North Carolina*, 564 U.S. 261, 275 (2011).

<sup>27</sup> Steven A. Drizin & Richard A. Leo, *The Problem of False Confessions in the Post-DNA World*, 82 N.C. L. Rev. 891, 901 (2004) (studies of wrongful convictions).

<sup>28</sup> G.A. Res. 44/25, Convention on the Rights of the Child, at 10-11 (Nov. 20, 1989).

provides internationally recognized standards advocating for special protections reflective of juveniles' developmental vulnerabilities.

Regardless of whether a statement is true or false, it is fundamentally unjust to coerce a confession from anyone, particularly minors who lack the maturity and understanding to fully comprehend the implications of their statements. This idea connects back to the societal norms established in the introduction, where minors are restricted in various aspects of life to safeguard their well-being and account for their developmental limitations. The resulting statements significantly compromise the integrity of the criminal adjudication process and elevate the risk of wrongful convictions, which also disproportionately impact socioeconomically disadvantaged and marginalized youth populations.

Age-based restrictions reflect the recognition that juveniles, by virtue of their limited maturity, should be treated differently in society. The same reasoning should apply in the criminal justice system. When it comes to procedural treatment, juveniles must be afforded the same consideration for their age and mental capacity. In the case of *Ochoa v. State*, the methods used to extract a confession from Ochoa violated these principles and infringed upon his rights.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the extensive legal and social foundation regarding the delinquency of minor suspects, juveniles should not be held to the same standards of maturity as adults within the criminal justice system. They must be provided with proper legal safeguards, including access to attorneys, clear explanations of the charges against them, and a full understanding of their rights, such as the right to remain silent, which must be communicated through Miranda warnings. Treating juveniles with the due consideration they deserve ensures that the justice system upholds the constitutional protections afforded to all individuals, regardless of age.