


Lawver – Junior Lab – Off-Site Learning Packet Day 7

Chimel v. California: Case Brief

Cite this lesson 

The Supreme Court's *Chimel v. California* decision defined the scope of permissible searches following a suspect's arrest. In this lesson, you will learn about the facts of the case and the Supreme Court's landmark ruling.

Chimel v. California: The Question Presented to the Supreme Court

As the old saying goes: 'A man's home is his castle.' But what happens if the man in the old saying is arrested in his castle? What's rights does he have? Can the officer who arrests the man search the castle for weapons or other evidence of criminal activity?

In 1969, the Supreme Court of the United States was confronted with the difficult task of placing limitations on searches following arrests in the landmark *Chimel v. California* case.

The **Fourth Amendment** of the Constitution of the United States protects us from unreasonable search and seizure and is especially important in the context of police searches and arrests. This amendment has been interpreted to require warrants for both arrests and searches.

Chimel v. California presented the United States Supreme Court with a compelling Fourth Amendment question:

After the arrest of a suspect in the suspect's home, can the police search the entire house for evidence?

Facts of the Case

California police officers traveled to Chimel's home with a warrant issued for his arrest. When Chimel arrived, the officers served him with the warrant and placed him under arrest. Without first securing a search warrant or permission from Chimel, the officers began to search Chimel's home. The officer's found several items that connected Chimel to a burglary.

At trial, Chimel objected to the introduction of the items found during the search of his home and argued that the officers were not justified under the Fourth Amendment to search his home after his arrest without securing a search warrant. The prosecution argued that the officers were entitled to conduct a 'search incident to arrest' of the entire home. Chimel was ultimately convicted. He appealed his case all the way to the Supreme Court.

The Holding and Analysis of the Supreme Court

In a 7-2 decision, the Supreme Court held that the officers were not entitled to conduct a comprehensive search of Chimel's home following his arrest. In reaching this conclusion, the Court sought to better define the concept of a 'search incident to arrest'-- in other words, what kind of search a police officer can conduct after a suspect's arrest.

The Supreme Court determined that a search incident to arrest is limited to the area within the suspect's immediate control. Under this ruling, an officer is justified in searching the suspect's person for weapons or contraband but can't wander about the suspect's house looking for evidence without a search warrant. This is based on the assumption that the arrest was lawful in the first place.

The rationale behind the *Chimel* holding is based in the Fourth Amendment's requirement that police searches must be reasonable. With a search following an arrest, the officer may reasonably search the suspect for weapons within the suspect's reach in order to ensure his safety and the safety of other officers and bystanders. On the other hand, any weapons or contraband outside of the suspect's reach could not be viewed as a threat because the suspect can't reasonably gain access to the weapon once he has been secured by the arresting officer.

When applied to the facts in Chimel's case, it was clear to the Court that the officers were not permitted to search his house following his arrest. Therefore, the items found during the unlawful search should not have been used at Chimel's trial to convict him of burglary.

Lesson Summary

The Supreme Court's *Chimel v. California* decision held that a police officer can only search an area within a suspect's immediate control after an arrest. Anything outside of that area-- such as, other rooms or areas-- can't be searched without a search warrant. Any evidence seized in violation the suspect's Fourth Amendment rights can't be used against the suspect at trial.

Worksheet: Chimel v. California: Case Brief

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/chimel-v-california-case-brief.html>

1. Which of the following describes the rationale between limiting a post-arrest search to areas within the suspects control?

- Giving the suspect a chance to escape while the officer is distracted.
- The police power of the state.
- Securing the scene for the safety of the officer and any bystanders.
- Providing the officer one last chance to find incriminating evidence.

2. After arresting a suspect, where can an officer search for weapons or contraband?

- Any place where the suspect may have reasonably concealed evidence.
- Within fifty-feet of the suspect but no more.
- The area within the suspect's immediate control.
- In any room of the suspect's home so long as the suspect follows the officer from room to room.

3. The Fourth Amendment offers which of the following protections?

- Protection of the right to free speech.
- Due process of the law.
- Protection from unreasonable searches and seizures.
- Equal protection of the laws.

4. What happens to evidence seized following an unlawful search incident to arrest?

- It can't be used to convict the suspect.
- Only really compelling evidence can be used, even if it was the product of an unlawful search.
- It can be used to convict the suspect in all circumstances.
- It can be used to convict the suspect, but then it must be destroyed.

5. In general, what does a police officer need before he can conduct a lawful search of suspect's home?

- A hunch that he will find contraband in the suspect's home.
- A search warrant.
- An arrest warrant only.
- Belief beyond a reasonable doubt that he will find contraband in the suspect's home.