

## Syllabus

NOTE: Where it is feasible, a syllabus (headnote) will be released, as is being done in connection with this case, at the time the opinion is issued. The syllabus constitutes no part of the opinion of the Court but has been prepared by the Reporter of Decisions for the convenience of the reader. See *United States v. Detroit Timber & Lumber Co.*, 200 U. S. 321, 337.

**SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES**

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**BROWN, GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA, ET AL. *v.*  
PLATA ET AL.**

APPEAL FROM THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURTS FOR  
THE EASTERN AND NORTHERN DISTRICTS OF CALIFORNIA

No. 09–1233. Argued November 30, 2010—Decided May 23, 2011

California’s prisons are designed to house a population just under 80,000, but at the time of the decision under review the population was almost double that. The resulting conditions are the subject of two federal class actions. In *Coleman v. Brown*, filed in 1990, the District Court found that prisoners with serious mental illness do not receive minimal, adequate care. A Special Master appointed to oversee remedial efforts reported 12 years later that the state of mental health care in California’s prisons was deteriorating due to increased overcrowding. In *Plata v. Brown*, filed in 2001, the State conceded that deficiencies in prison medical care violated prisoners’ Eighth Amendment rights and stipulated to a remedial injunction. But when the State had not complied with the injunction by 2005, the court appointed a Receiver to oversee remedial efforts. Three years later, the Receiver described continuing deficiencies caused by overcrowding. Believing that a remedy for unconstitutional medical and mental health care could not be achieved without reducing overcrowding, the *Coleman* and *Plata* plaintiffs moved their respective District Courts to convene a three-judge court empowered by the Prison Litigation Reform Act of 1995 (PLRA) to order reductions in the prison population. The judges in both actions granted the request, and the cases were consolidated before a single three-judge court. After hearing testimony and making extensive findings of fact, the court ordered California to reduce its prison population to 137.5% of design capacity within two years. Finding that the prison population would have to be reduced if capacity could not be increased through new construction, the court ordered the State to formulate a compliance plan and submit it for court approval.

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*Held:*

1. The court-mandated population limit is necessary to remedy the violation of prisoners' constitutional rights and is authorized by the PLRA. Pp. 12–41.

(a) If a prison deprives prisoners of basic sustenance, including adequate medical care, the courts have a responsibility to remedy the resulting Eighth Amendment violation. See *Hutto v. Finney*, 437 U. S. 678, 687, n. 9. They must consider a range of options, including the appointment of special masters or receivers, the possibility of consent decrees, and orders limiting a prison's population. Under the PLRA, only a three-judge court may limit a prison population. 18 U. S. C. §3626(a)(3). Before convening such a court, a district court must have entered an order for less intrusive relief that failed to remedy the constitutional violation and must have given the defendant a reasonable time to comply with its prior orders. §3626(a)(3)(A). Once convened, the three-judge court must find by clear and convincing evidence that "crowding is the primary cause of the violation" and "no other relief will remedy [the] violation," §3626(a)(3)(E); and that the relief is "narrowly drawn, extends no further than necessary. . . , and is the least intrusive means necessary to correct the violation," §3626(a)(1)(A). The court must give "substantial weight to any adverse impact on public safety or the operation of a criminal justice system caused by the relief." *Ibid.* Its legal determinations are reviewed *de novo*, but its factual findings are reviewed for clear error. Pp. 12–15.

(b) The *Coleman* and *Plata* courts acted reasonably in convening a three-judge court. Pp. 15–19.

(1) The merits of the decision to convene are properly before this Court, which has exercised its 28 U. S. C. §1253 jurisdiction to determine the authority of a court below, including whether a three-judge court was properly constituted. *Gonzalez v. Automatic Employees Credit Union*, 419 U. S. 90, 95, n. 12. Pp. 15–16.

(2) Section 3626(a)(3)(A)(i)'s previous order requirement was satisfied in *Coleman* by the Special Master's 1995 appointment and in *Plata* by the 2002 approval of a consent decree and stipulated injunction. Both orders were intended to remedy constitutional violations and were given ample time to succeed—12 years in *Coleman*, and 5 years in *Plata*. Contrary to the State's claim, §3626(a)(3)(A)(ii)'s reasonable time requirement did not require the District Courts to give more time for subsequent remedial efforts to succeed. Such a reading would in effect require courts to impose a moratorium on new remedial orders before issuing a population limit, which would delay an eventual remedy, prolong the courts' involvement, and serve neither the State nor the prisoners. The *Coleman*

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and *Plata* courts had a solid basis to doubt that additional efforts to build new facilities and hire new staff would achieve a remedy, given the ongoing deficiencies recently reported by both the Special Master and the Receiver. Pp. 16–19.

(c) The three-judge court did not err in finding that “crowding [was] the primary cause of the violation,” §3626(a)(3)(E)(i). Pp. 19–29.

(1) The trial record documents the severe impact of burgeoning demand on the provision of care. The evidence showed that there were high vacancy rates for medical and mental health staff, *e.g.*, 20% for surgeons and 54.1% for psychiatrists; that these numbers understated the severity of the crisis because the State has not budgeted sufficient staff to meet demand; and that even if vacant positions could be filled, there would be insufficient space for the additional staff. Such a shortfall contributes to significant delays in treating mentally ill prisoners, who are housed in administrative segregation for extended periods while awaiting transfer to scarce mental health treatment beds. There are also backlogs of up to 700 prisoners waiting to see a doctor for physical care. Crowding creates unsafe and unsanitary conditions that hamper effective delivery of medical and mental health care. It also promotes unrest and violence and can cause prisoners with latent mental illnesses to worsen and develop overt symptoms. Increased violence requires increased reliance on lockdowns to keep order, and lockdowns further impede the effective delivery of care. Overcrowding’s effects are particularly acute in prison reception centers, which process 140,000 new or returning prisoners annually, and which house some prisoners for their entire incarceration period. Numerous experts testified that crowding is the primary cause of the constitutional violations. Pp. 19–24.

(2) Contrary to the State’s claim, the three-judge court properly admitted, cited, and considered evidence of current prison conditions as relevant to the issues before it. Expert witnesses based their conclusions on recent observations of prison conditions; the court admitted recent reports on prison conditions by the Receiver and Special Master; and both parties presented testimony related to current conditions. The court’s orders cutting off discovery a few months before trial and excluding evidence not pertinent to the issue whether a population limit is appropriate under the PLRA were within the court’s sound discretion. Orderly trial management may require discovery deadlines and a clean distinction between litigation of the merits and the remedy. The State points to no significant evidence that it was unable to present and that would have changed the outcome here. Pp. 24–26.

(3) It was permissible for the three-judge court to conclude that

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overcrowding was the “primary,” but not the only, cause of the violations, and that reducing crowding would not entirely cure the violations. This understanding of the primary cause requirement is consistent with the PLRA. Had Congress intended to require that crowding be the only cause, the PLRA would have said so. Pp. 26–29.

(d) The evidence supports the three-judge court’s finding that “no other relief [would] remedy the violation,” §3626(a)(3)(E)(ii). The State’s claim that out-of-state transfers provide a less restrictive alternative to a population limit must fail because requiring transfers is a population limit under the PLRA. Even if they could be regarded as a less restrictive alternative, the three-judge court found no evidence of plans for transfers in numbers sufficient to relieve overcrowding. The court also found no realistic possibility that California could build itself out of this crisis, particularly given the State’s ongoing fiscal problems. Further, it rejected additional hiring as a realistic alternative, since the prison system was chronically understaffed and would have insufficient space were adequate personnel retained. The court also did not err when it concluded that, absent a population reduction, the Receiver’s and Special Master’s continued efforts would not achieve a remedy. Their reports are persuasive evidence that, with no reduction, any remedy might prove unattainable and would at the very least require vast expenditures by the State. The State asserts that these measures would succeed if combined, but a long history of failed remedial orders, together with substantial evidence of overcrowding’s deleterious effects on the provision of care, compels a different conclusion here. Pp. 29–33.

(e) The prospective relief ordered here was narrowly drawn, extended no further than necessary to correct the violation, and was the least intrusive means necessary to correct the violation. Pp. 33–41.

(1) The population limit does not fail narrow tailoring simply because prisoners beyond the plaintiff class will have to be released through parole or sentencing reform in order to meet the required reduction. While narrow tailoring requires a “‘fit’ between the [remedy’s] ends and the means chosen to accomplish those ends,” *Board of Trustees of State Univ. of N. Y. v. Fox*, 492 U. S. 469, 480, a narrow and otherwise proper remedy for a constitutional violation is not invalid simply because it will have collateral effects. Nor does the PLRA require that result. The order gives the State flexibility to determine who should be released, and the State could move the three-judge court to modify its terms. The order also is not overbroad because it encompasses the entire prison system, rather than separately assessing each institution’s need for a population limit. The *Coleman* court found a systemwide violation, and the State stipulated to systemwide relief in *Plata*. Assuming no constitutional violation

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results, some facilities may retain populations in excess of the 137.5% limit provided others fall sufficiently below it so the system as a whole remains in compliance with the order. This will afford the State flexibility to accommodate differences between institutions. The order may shape or control the State's authority in the realm of prison administration, but it leaves much to the State's discretion. The order's limited scope is necessary to remedy a constitutional violation. The State may move the three-judge court to modify its order, but it has proposed no realistic alternative remedy at this time. Pp. 33–36.

(2) The three-judge court gave “substantial weight” to any potential adverse impact on public safety from its order. The PLRA's “substantial weight” requirement does not require the court to certify that its order has no possible adverse impact on the public. Here, statistical evidence showed that prison populations had been lowered without adversely affecting public safety in some California counties, several States, and Canada. The court found that various available methods of reducing overcrowding—good time credits and diverting low-risk offenders to community programs—would have little or no impact on public safety, and its order took account of such concerns by giving the State substantial flexibility to select among the means of reducing overcrowding. The State complains that the court approved the State's population reduction plan without considering whether its specific measures would substantially threaten public safety. But the court left state officials the choice of how best to comply and was not required to second-guess their exercise of discretion. Developments during the pendency of this appeal, when the State has begun to reduce the prison population, support the conclusion that a reduction can be accomplished without an undue negative effect on public safety. Pp. 37–41.

2. The three-judge court's order, subject to the State's right to seek its modification in appropriate circumstances, must be affirmed. Pp. 41–48.

(a) To comply with the PLRA, a court must set a population limit at the highest level consistent with an efficacious remedy, and it must order the population reduction to be achieved in the shortest period of time reasonably consistent with public safety. Pp. 41–42.

(b) The three-judge court's conclusion that the prison population should be capped at 137.5% of design capacity was not clearly erroneous. The court concluded that the evidence supported a limit between the 130% limit supported by expert testimony and the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the 145% limit recommended by the State Corrections Independent Review Panel. The PLRA's narrow tailoring requirement is satisfied so long as such equitable, remedial judg-

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ments are made with the objective of releasing the fewest possible prisoners consistent with an efficacious remedy. Pp. 42–44.

(c) The three-judge court did not err in providing a 2-year deadline for relief, especially in light of the State’s failure to contest the issue at trial. The State has not asked this Court to extend the deadline, but the three-judge court has the authority, and responsibility, to amend its order as warranted by the exercise of sound discretion. Proper respect for the State and for its governmental processes require that court to exercise its jurisdiction to accord the State considerable latitude to find mechanisms and make plans that will promptly and effectively correct the violations consistent with public safety. The court may, *e.g.*, grant a motion to extend the deadline if the State meets appropriate preconditions designed to ensure that the plan will be implemented without undue delay. Such observations reflect the fact that the existing order, like all ongoing equitable relief, must remain open to appropriate modification, and are not intended to cast doubt on the validity of the order’s basic premise. Pp. 44–48.

Affirmed.

KENNEDY, J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which GINSBURG, BREYER, SOTOMAYOR, and KAGAN, JJ., joined. SCALIA, J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which THOMAS, J., joined. ALITO, J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which ROBERTS, C. J., joined.