

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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CITY OF INDIANAPOLIS ET AL. *v.* EDMOND ET AL.

CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR
THE SEVENTH CIRCUIT

No. 99–1030. Argued October 3, 2000— Decided November 28, 2000

Petitioner city operates vehicle checkpoints on its roads in an effort to interdict unlawful drugs. Respondents, who were each stopped at such a checkpoint, filed suit, claiming that the roadblocks violated the Fourth Amendment. The District Court denied respondents a preliminary injunction, but the Seventh Circuit reversed, holding that the checkpoints contravened the Fourth Amendment.

Held: Because the checkpoint program’s primary purpose is indistinguishable from the general interest in crime control, the checkpoints violate the Fourth Amendment. Pp. 3–15.

(a) The rule that a search or seizure is unreasonable under the Fourth Amendment absent individualized suspicion of wrongdoing has limited exceptions. For example, this Court has upheld brief, suspicionless seizures at a fixed checkpoint designed to intercept illegal aliens, *United States v. Martinez-Fuerte*, 428 U. S. 543, and at a sobriety checkpoint aimed at removing drunk drivers from the road, *Michigan Dept. of State Police v. Sitz*, 496 U. S. 444. The Court has also suggested that a similar roadblock to verify drivers’ licenses and registrations would be permissible to serve a highway safety interest. *Delaware v. Prouse*, 440 U. S. 648, 663. However, the Court has never approved a checkpoint program whose primary purpose was to detect evidence of ordinary criminal wrongdoing. Pp. 3–7.

(b) The latter purpose is what principally distinguishes the checkpoints at issue from those the Court has previously approved, which were designed to serve purposes closely related to the problems of policing the border or the necessity of ensuring roadway safety. Petitioners state that the *Sitz* and *Martinez-Fuerte* checkpoints had the same ultimate purpose of arresting those suspected of committing crimes. Securing the border and apprehending drunken drivers are

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law enforcement activities, and authorities employ arrests and criminal prosecutions to pursue these goals. But if this case were to rest at such a high level of generality, there would be little check on the authorities' ability to construct roadblocks for almost any conceivable law enforcement purpose. The checkpoint program is also not justified by the severe and intractable nature of the drug problem. The gravity of the threat alone cannot be dispositive of questions concerning what means law enforcement may employ to pursue a given purpose. Rather, in determining whether individualized suspicion is required, the Court must consider the nature of the interests threatened and their connection to the particular law enforcement practices at issue. Nor can the checkpoints' purpose be rationalized in terms of a highway safety concern similar to that in *Sitz*, or merely likened to the antismuggling purpose in *Martinez-Fuerte*. Neither *Whren v. United States*, 517 U. S. 806, nor *Bond v. United States*, 529 U. S. 334, precludes an inquiry into the checkpoint program's purposes. And if the program could be justified by its lawful secondary purposes of keeping impaired motorists off the road and verifying licenses and registrations, authorities would be able to establish checkpoints for virtually any purpose so long as they also included a license or sobriety check. That is why the Court must determine the primary purpose of the checkpoint program. This holding does not alter the constitutional status of the checkpoints approved in *Sitz* and *Martinez-Fuerte*, or the type of checkpoint suggested in *Prouse*. It also does not affect the validity of border searches or searches in airports and government buildings, where the need for such measures to ensure public safety can be particularly acute. Nor does it impair police officers' ability to act appropriately upon information that they properly learn during a checkpoint stop justified by a lawful primary purpose. Finally, the purpose inquiry is to be conducted only at the programmatic level and is not an invitation to probe the minds of individual officers acting at the scene. Pp. 7–15.

183 F. 3d 659, affirmed.

O'CONNOR, J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which STEVENS, KENNEDY, SOUTER, GINSBURG, and BREYER, JJ., joined. REHNQUIST, C. J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which THOMAS, J., joined, and in which SCALIA, J., joined as to Part I. THOMAS, J., filed a dissenting opinion.