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1 IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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3 SAMUEL JAMES JOHNSON, :

4 Petitioner :

5 v. : No. 13-7120

6 UNITED STATES. :

7 - x

8 Washington, D.C.

9 Wednesday, November 5, 2014

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11 The above-entitled matter came on for oral  
12 argument before the Supreme Court of the United States  
13 at 11:04 a.m.

14 APPEARANCES:

15 KATHERINE M. MENENDEZ, ESQ., Assistant Federal Defender,  
16 Minneapolis, Minn.; on behalf of Petitioner.

17 JOHN F. BASH, ESQ., Assistant to the Solicitor General,  
18 Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; on behalf of  
19 Respondent.

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1                   P R O C E E D I N G S

2                   (11:04 a.m.)

3                   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:                 We will hear  
4                   argument next in Case 13-7120, Samuel Johnson v. United  
5                   States.

6                   Ms. Menendez.

7                   ORAL ARGUMENT OF KATHERINE M. MENENDEZ

8                   ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER

9                   MS. MENENDEZ:                 Mr. Chief Justice, and may it  
10                  please the Court:

11                  Mere possession of a short-barreled shotgun  
12                  is not a violent felony within the definition of the  
13                  Armed Career Criminal Act's residual clause because it  
14                  is neither similar in the degree of risk nor similar in  
15                  kind to the enumerated offenses set forth in the  
16                  language that immediately precedes that clause. And  
17                  this Court has repeatedly held that those enumerated  
18                  offenses provide important both qualitative and  
19                  quantitative parameters to lower courts in examining  
20                  whether a particular predicate offense counts as a  
21                  violent felony.

22                  Just 6 years ago in Begay, this Court made  
23                  clear that the enumerated offenses must be similar --  
24                  I'm sorry, a question predicate offense must be similar  
25                  in kind to one of the enumerated offenses as well as

1 similar in degree of risk. And when that proper  
2 framework is applied to the question of mere possession  
3 of a short-barreled shotgun, it satisfies neither test.

4 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Should the Court --  
5 should the Court take into account that in the  
6 sentencing guidelines a possession of a short-barreled  
7 shotgun is ranked under career, is under the career  
8 offenses?

9 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, in Guideline  
10 Amendment 674 in 2004, which Your Honor asks about, the  
11 Sentencing Commission included mere possession of an  
12 unregistered short-barreled shotgun or possession of a  
13 short-barreled shotgun as a crime of violence. But it  
14 did not do so after an examination of the empirical data  
15 or an assessment of the pool of data that gives us great  
16 confidence in the Sentencing Commission's decisions.

17 In marked contrast, Your Honor, in 1991,  
18 when the Sentencing Commission adopted Amendment 433  
19 that concluded that being a felon in possession of a  
20 firearm should not count as a crime of violence under  
21 the guidelines, it reached that conclusion after an  
22 extensive examination of empirical data. The difference  
23 between the adoption of those two amendments highlights  
24 the reason that the Sentencing Commission's decision on  
25 this point does not deserve deference in this case.

1           An additional consideration, Your Honor, is  
2       that in making that decision in 2004, the Sentencing  
3       Commission was not anticipating the guidance that this  
4       Court provided in James, Begay, Chambers, and Sykes, and  
5       it doesn't engage in any of the proper analysis. So  
6       whether we look at it as the Sentencing Commission not  
7       serving their traditional role as factfinders and the  
8       keepers of empirical data or whether we acknowledge the  
9       fact that it preceded very important guidance from this  
10      Court, I don't think it controls this Court's decision.

11           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:           Is it --

12           JUSTICE ALITO:                Is it possible --

13           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:           I'm sorry.

14           JUSTICE ALITO:                Is it possible for any  
15       possession offense to qualify as a violent felony?

16           MS. MENENDEZ:               Your Honor, I believe it  
17       would be possible for a very rare possession offense to  
18       qualify as a violent felony if the possession alone  
19       presents a serious potential risk of injury.

20           Respectfully, I believe the flaw with the other side's  
21       position in this case is their entire analysis is based  
22       not on the risk inherent in the mere possession, but on  
23       the risk inherent in committing a further violent crime  
24       with that weapon. And so I believe that any mere  
25       possession of a firearm, including a short-barreled

1 firearm, is not going to satisfy the definition.

2 JUSTICE KAGAN: But if I understand the  
3 government's argument, it's that there's a very strong  
4 correlation between possession in this case and use for  
5 criminal purposes of a kind that clearly would pose a  
6 risk of -- of violent conduct and injury. So are you  
7 saying that we never can take that kind of correlation  
8 into account, that possession crimes just have to be  
9 treated in a box, and we can't think about whether the  
10 possession of something increases the risk of use which  
11 then will pose a serious risk of injury?

12 MS. MENENDEZ: Your -- Your Honor, my  
13 response is twofold. First, although the government has  
14 asserted that correlation, they have not substantiated  
15 it in any way. And there's no data before the Court  
16 that supports the claim that merely possessing a  
17 short-barreled shotgun is somehow connected with  
18 frequent or even regular use.

19 JUSTICE KAGAN: So -- so that seems right,  
20 that it's a question to pose to the government. It's  
21 like, what's in back of this correlation? But is your  
22 argument, then, they haven't made their empirical case  
23 or even if they had lots of statistics, it still  
24 wouldn't be enough?

25 MS. MENENDEZ: And that is correct, Your

1 Honor. I think even if they had made the empirical  
2 case, it wouldn't be enough. And here's why.

3 JUSTICE SCALIA: is there any other  
4 use for a short-barreled shotgun?

5 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, as many as 40,000  
6 Americans have purchased these weapons legally,  
7 registered them lawfully and have found that they serve  
8 some purpose. Whether that purpose is in hunting for a  
9 person of a smaller stature or home defense, the  
10 question before the Court is not whether there is some  
11 reason to have them. Many people believe there is. The  
12 question is whether merely possessing such a weapon is a  
13 violent felony. And with due respect, Your Honor, I  
14 don't think there's any support for the assertion that  
15 these are somehow uniquely more dangerous.

16 JUSTICE SCALIA: People have purchased this  
17 even though it's criminal to possess it?

18 MS. MENENDEZ: It is not, Your Honor. In  
19 fact, it's fully lawful to possess a short-barreled  
20 shotgun in many States as long as it's registered  
21 federally, somebody passes a background check, and pays  
22 a \$200 tax. And the government's own statistics  
23 document, Your Honor, that as many as tens of thousands  
24 of Americans have followed those processes in order to  
25 legally purchase or own one of these weapons. And, in

1 fact, I was surprised in doing the research for this  
2 case that you can get these on line in States where  
3 their possession is legal as long as you comply with the  
4 Federal regulations.

5 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: How many States is it  
6 illegal, do you remember?

7 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I believe there's  
8 10 States that outright ban possession regardless of  
9 compliance with Federal regulations. And then in the  
10 remainder of the States, the question is whether, if its  
11 possession is legal in compliance with either State  
12 registrations or always in compliance with the Federal  
13 registrations.

14 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Just a factual question.  
15 On his plea for this possession, was he charged with  
16 another crime?

17 MS. MENENDEZ: Yes, he was, Your Honor. He  
18 was charged with a -- a marijuana-related crime. And  
19 both of those were pleaded guilty to with Alford pleas,  
20 Your Honor.

21 Your Honor, I think the question is how much  
22 speculation is permitted. And as Your Honor correctly  
23 points out, it is our position that even if the  
24 government brought forth better data, that still  
25 wouldn't justify allowing mere possession to count as a

1        crime of violence. The reason, I think, is inherent in  
2        this Court's jurisprudence from James, Begay, and the  
3        other cases. We have to begin this with a consideration  
4        of the elements. In fact, in the James case --

5                   JUSTICE ALITO:                  But you said that a  
6        possession offense could qualify. So if someone  
7        possesses a nuclear bomb, that could qualify?

8                   MS. MENENDEZ:                  Your Honor, I think that  
9        might be --

10                  JUSTICE ALITO:                  A biological or chemical  
11        weapon, that could qualify?

12                  MS. MENENDEZ:                  And I think that is the  
13        precise thing that could qualify. And here is why, with  
14        due respect, Your Honor. Possessing a biological or a  
15        chemical agent, by itself, presents a substantial risk,  
16        just alone, even if it's under your bed.

17                  JUSTICE ALITO:                  Well, how do we know that?  
18        You -- you could make the same argument that you've just  
19        made, that we don't know what the -- the risk is that  
20        this will, in the case of a biological weapon, the risk  
21        that it will cause an infection unintentionally. We  
22        don't know that. That statistic is no more available  
23        than the statistic on sawed-off shotguns, is it?

24                  MS. MENENDEZ:                  Your Honor, I suspect that we  
25        would be better able to document the certainty that even

1       doing nothing more than possessing such an item --

2                  JUSTICE ALITO:              How would you do that?

3       You'd look at all the -- you try to -- to identify the  
4       universe of people who have possessed biological weapons  
5       and see how many times somebody has gotten infected  
6       unintentionally?

7                  MS. MENENDEZ:              Your Honor, that -- that  
8       might be appropriate, or perhaps the science alone. But  
9       that demonstrates the difference with this. This is no  
10      more dangerous than any other firearm if it's kept in a  
11      locked gun safe, kept in a closet, kept under a  
12      mattress, under a bed or any of the other myriad places.  
13      We've highlighted for the Court 14 different cases on  
14      page 14 of our reply brief where such a weapon was found  
15      in completely nonviolent circumstances, somewhere in a  
16      home or even in a trunk, in a locked gun safe.

17                 JUSTICE ALITO:              So you would say the same  
18      thing about any weapon.

19                 MS. MENENDEZ:              Any firearm for certain, Your  
20      Honor.

21                 JUSTICE ALITO:              Any firearm? Mortars?

22                 MS. MENENDEZ:              I'm sorry?

23                 JUSTICE ALITO:              Mortars? Artillery pieces?

24                 MS. MENENDEZ:              Your Honor, I think mere  
25      possession does not pose the kind of substantial risk

1 that this statute is talking about. I think that when  
2 we get into the very, I'm sure, hypothetical instance of  
3 the bomb that's inherently dangerous, like a biological  
4 agent, that might be different even untouched, Your  
5 Honor.

6 JUSTICE ALITO: Rockets would not be --  
7 illegal possession of a rocket, that wouldn't be a  
8 violent felony in your submission. Maybe that's right.

9 MS. MENENDEZ: I believe that's correct,  
10 Your Honor.

11 JUSTICE ALITO: That's correct.

12 MS. MENENDEZ: I believe that using a rocket  
13 in a crime of violence or in any other circumstance  
14 would be. And, in fact, Your Honor, I think that in  
15 many of these cases, for instance possession of a  
16 biological agent or a nuclear weapon, the person would  
17 likely be charged with some sort of terrorism offense,  
18 which would, by itself, trigger the Armed Career  
19 Criminal Act if they were free to go on and commit  
20 future crimes, which I -- I somewhat doubt.

21           In this case, though, I think there's  
22       nothing different about mere possession of a  
23       short-barreled shotgun as compared to other firearms  
24       that could be simply possessed. They are simply not  
25       enough.

1           Your Honors, this Court's jurisprudence  
2    clearly requires a categorical assessment of the  
3    question, not an imagining of what further crimes could  
4    ever happen as a result of the offense, but a looking at  
5    what comes from the elements itself. I'd encourage the  
6    Court to remember its decision in James. In James, the  
7    Court first examined the elements of the burglary, the  
8    attempted burglary statute in question, and noted that  
9    mere possession of burglary tools was not enough to  
10   constitute a violation of that attempted burglary  
11   statute. And in part, because an overt act toward  
12   entry, which presented the same sort of risk as the  
13   burglary itself was present, the Court found that that  
14   could present a risk sufficient to trigger the residual  
15   clause.

16                 This is very different.                 This is much more  
17    like mere possession of the burglary tools, which would  
18    not be enough, than it is completing an additional overt  
19    act.

20                 Your Honor, the government uses the Court's  
21    language of ordinary case to invite this Court to engage  
22    in substantial speculation about someone -- what someone  
23    might do with a short-barreled shotgun. And with due  
24    respect, I don't believe that was the purpose of the  
25    ordinary case doctrine whatsoever. In fact, in James,

1       the ordinary case doctrine was borne not to enable  
2       rampant and creative speculation, but to limit rampant  
3       and creative speculation.

4                  JUSTICE BREYER:                   But what you have -- what  
5        were the numbers, if they're there, about how many  
6        people are injured as a result of possession of a  
7        short-barreled shotgun?

8                  MS. MENENDEZ:                   There are no statistics.

9                  JUSTICE BREYER:                   So we have absolutely no  
10      idea?

11                 MS. MENENDEZ:                   We have -- we have no  
12        statistics that demonstrate, Your Honor, a correlation  
13        between mere possession of a short-barreled shotgun  
14        and --

15                 JUSTICE BREYER:                   That's not what I'm  
16        thinking of. I'm thinking of do we have a statistic  
17        that says how many people are injured, forgetting how --  
18        whether it's possession or not possession or anything  
19        else?

20                 MS. MENENDEZ:                   We don't have that, either,  
21        Your Honor. We do have statistics offered both in our  
22        brief and some reference in opposing counsel's brief  
23        about how short-barreled shotguns are at most a de  
24        minimis, de minimis percentage of harm from weapons in  
25        general across the country, but that doesn't answer Your

1 Honor's question. And Your Honor, I think that that is  
2 precisely why the Begay formulation remains very  
3 important in this case.

4 This case, unlike Sykes, which had an ample  
5 amount of data, although I think we could discuss at  
6 length how useful that data is and how much data can be  
7 manipulated, but there was a great deal of data  
8 documenting deaths and injuries. And therefore, this  
9 Court found that the examination of the nature of the  
10 offense and whether it was purposeful, violent or  
11 aggressive was redundant. That's not the case here,  
12 Your Honor, because we don't have the statistical  
13 analysis to make the risk assessment easy.

14 I do think, though, that common sense weighs  
15 heavily in favor of Mr. Johnson. And that is, as Your  
16 Honor indicated in the Doe opinion many years ago on the  
17 First Circuit, that merely possessing something is a  
18 very far cry from using it in a crime. And the  
19 government's entire analysis requires this Court to  
20 assume that these weapons are most commonly possessed  
21 only for the purpose of being used in a crime. That's  
22 simply not supported by the data, and it's not even  
23 supported by the case law provided by the government.

24 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I'm sorry. Do we know  
25 how many possession crimes have been prosecuted,

1 possession for short-barreled shotguns?

2 MS. MENENDEZ: I don't have that statistic,  
3 I apologize, Your Honor. I can say that, having been an  
4 assistant Federal defender for quite a long time, we  
5 don't see these very commonly, but we do see people  
6 prosecuted for possessing a short-barreled shotgun  
7 that's not federally registered. It's not an incredibly  
8 frequent crime.

9 However, this has greater implications,  
10 obviously, Your Honor, because approximately 600 people  
11 every year suffer the greater penalties of the Armed  
12 Career Criminal Act as a result of enhancements such as  
13 this.

14 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That's what I mean.  
15 It's about 600 a year?

16 MS. MENENDEZ: 600 ACCA cases each year,  
17 more or less, Your Honor.

18 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: More or less. So we're  
19 talking about 35,000 people or 40,000 who own the  
20 shotguns legally.

21 MS. MENENDEZ: Oh, I apologize, Your Honor.  
22 I -- I provided Your Honor an incorrect statistic. I'm  
23 talking about people whose current conviction is for  
24 felon in possession, triggering the Armed Career  
25 Criminal Act.

1 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I see what you mean.

2 MS. MENENDEZ: I apologize. I -- I do not  
3 know how many people nationwide are prosecuted for  
4 violation of one of the several States that outright  
5 bans these or for violating some other portion. I do  
6 know that they're not very common in the State of  
7 Minnesota, which is where our statute arises.

8 Your Honors, it's also important to keep in  
9 mind that in Minnesota as well as almost every place  
10 else that this is criminalized or criminalized if not  
11 properly registered, that constructive possession of the  
12 weapon alone is enough to make somebody guilty. This  
13 doesn't have to be on or near their person. It  
14 certainly need not be used in a crime or possessed with  
15 the intent to use it in a future crime. And, in fact,  
16 some of the cases that we've proffered to the Court  
17 involve possessing this in nothing more than a locked  
18 gun case. That is simply not the sort of active,  
19 purposeful, violent and aggressive or risky conduct that  
20 the Armed Career Criminal Act's residual clause is  
21 designed to apply to.

22 JUSTICE KAGAN: When you say "constructive  
23 possession," what does that mean?

24 MS. MENENDEZ: That means where you don't  
25 have an item directly on your person, Your Honor, but

1 you have the intent, at least in the Eighth Circuit,  
2 it's the intent to exercise dominion and control and the  
3 power to do so. So, for instance, I have constructive  
4 possession of the items in my briefcase, even though I  
5 don't have them with me and I have constructive  
6 possession of items in my home, even though that's back  
7 in Minnesota. And so that demonstrates, Your Honor, the  
8 broad application of mere possession crimes and how far  
9 removed they can be from the parade of horribles, with  
10 due respect, that the government suggests these are  
11 inherently intrinsically tied to.

12 Your Honor, I'd also invite the Court to  
13 examine closely the cases cited by opposing counsel in  
14 their brief, because while they do cite 16 cases in  
15 their brief in which mere -- I'm sorry, in which  
16 short-barreled shotguns were used in violent crimes,  
17 it's important for the Court to note that in only two of  
18 those cases was there actually a conviction for a  
19 weapons offense or mere possession of a weapon. So in  
20 only two of those cases was the prior offense actually  
21 before the Court today even being considered.

22 In the other 14, and indeed also in those  
23 two, the person was convicted of the far more serious  
24 crime of violence than the weapon was used during,  
25 ranging from assault to capital murder. And as Justice

1      Gruender, in his dissent in the Vincent case in the  
2      Eighth Circuit made very clear, in such a case, that  
3      much more serious offense would readily trigger  
4      application of the Armed Career Criminal Act and we  
5      wouldn't need to resort to the overinclusive  
6      interpretation proffered by the Government.

7                  JUSTICE ALITO:                What are -- what do you  
8      think is the basis for a State legislature's prohibiting  
9      the possession of a short-barreled shotgun or a  
10     short-barreled shotgun that is not properly registered?

11                MS. MENENDEZ:                Your Honor, I can't say what  
12     all the State legislatures' bases were, although I would  
13     note that Michigan just last year changed its mind and  
14     made these lawful. But I think that many State  
15     legislatures, and indeed Congress in 1934 when it  
16     decided to regulate these weapons, were persuaded by at  
17     least the reputation of this gun, that it was associated  
18     with gangster activity in the Prohibition era.

19                With due respect, although I am not at all  
20     disagreeing that States are within their rights to ban  
21     possession of this weapon, that reputation is somewhat  
22     dated, and in fact today, you can get far more lethal  
23     and far more intimidating weapons without even  
24     triggering the application.

25                JUSTICE ALITO:                Well, do you think that

1 those State legislatures came to the conclusion that  
2 there was a strong correlation between the possession of  
3 a short-barreled shotgun and the use of that weapon in  
4 committing crimes?

5 MS. MENENDEZ: I think they may have come to  
6 that conclusion. I'm unaware of them doing so based on  
7 data, Your Honor, including the Minnesota Act. I am  
8 unaware of even the National Firearms Act, when it was  
9 adopted in 1934, relying on actual statistics about the  
10 danger presented by this weapon --

11 JUSTICE ALITO: Do you think Congress --

12 MS. MENENDEZ:: -- as opposed to --

13 JUSTICE ALITO: -- had statistics before it  
14 when it listed the specifically enumerated offenses in  
15 the Armed Career Criminal Act? Is this the sort of  
16 thing with respect to which it is reasonable to expect  
17 that there will be empirical evidence, or is this the  
18 sort of thing, the sort of decision that legislatures  
19 make based in -- on an impressionistic way and taking  
20 into account common sense?

21 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I don't know  
22 whether Congress, when it passed the residual clause,  
23 assumed that we would come to such statistical analysis  
24 of the --

25 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, when they said

1       burglary is a violent offense, do you think they had  
2       statistics about the percentage of all burglar -- of all  
3       burglaries that occur within the United States that  
4       result in violence?

5                  MS. MENENDEZ:                   I don't believe so, Your  
6       Honor. I think burglary motivated the Armed Career  
7       Criminal Act in the first place. Burglary and robbery  
8       seem to be the two -- the two predicate offenses that  
9       most specifically the court -- I mean, I'm sorry,  
10      Congress intended to include as triggering prior  
11      offenses. Why? I think it's because they had the  
12      belief that an armed burglar would be more dangerous  
13      than an unarmed burglar and wanted to capture people who  
14      were repeat and persistent property offenders who would  
15      then later possess a gun.

16                 JUSTICE ALITO:                   Well, if that is a  
17      reasonable conclusion for the national legislature to  
18      reach in enacting the Armed Career Criminal Act, why is  
19      it not equally defensible for a State legislature to  
20      make the same decision with respect to the illegal  
21      possession of a sawed-off shotgun?

22                 MS. MENENDEZ:                   It's absolutely appropriate  
23      for them to make that decision. That should not control  
24      this Court's decision about whether merely possessing  
25      that unlawful weapon is a violent felony. That decision

1 has to be governed by the residual clause language, and  
2 it doesn't satisfy --

3 JUSTICE ALITO: Do you think that that  
4 judgment on the part of legislature is entitled to any  
5 respect from this Court?

6 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, certainly it  
7 matters that some legislatures have chosen to ban it,  
8 but I think it matters even more that most legislatures  
9 and the United States Congress do not outlaw this  
10 weapon. They permit it to be possessed when lawfully  
11 registered. And even in 19 --

12 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, that's what I'm  
13 talking about, the cases where it is possessed  
14 illegally, either because it is flatly banned or that it  
15 is possessed by somebody who will not register it for  
16 whatever reason, very possibly because that person  
17 doesn't want it known that he or she possesses the  
18 weapon.

19 MS. MENENDEZ: Certainly, Your Honor. Or  
20 because they're unaware of the registration requirement,  
21 which in almost every State will nonetheless make it a  
22 criminal conduct, or because they're unaware of the  
23 characteristics of the weapon that require it to be  
24 registered, which in some States doesn't protect one  
25 from the conviction.

1           Your Honor, I think it's important, if we're  
2 using the opinion of legislatures and Congress to help  
3 us determine whether this is a violent felony, it's  
4 important to recognize that it is widely legal.

5           But you are right that the question before  
6 the Court is the unlawful possession and whether  
7 unlawful possession of a firearm is a violent felony.

8           JUSTICE BREYER:                 What should we do if we  
9 think that the reason that the legislature has made  
10 possession unlawful is because the legislature believes  
11 that possession will lead to a risk of physical injury?

12          MS. MENENDEZ:                 Your Honor, I don't think  
13 that answers the question. I think the question has to  
14 be grounded in the residual clause, and the residual  
15 clause requires not just the possibility of future  
16 injury, but that the offense itself, when examined  
17 categorically and based on its element, creates a  
18 substantial --

19          JUSTICE BREYER:                 Well, it says -- it says if  
20 I use those words, I could repeat the same question and  
21 say the reason that the legislature makes it unlawful to  
22 possess a sawed-off shotgun is because the legislature  
23 believes that the possession, that's the crime, presents  
24 a serious potential risk of physical injury to another.  
25 That's why they made it unlawful. What other reason

1 could there have been? And therefore, their judgment is  
2 the same words that the statute uses, but for the word  
3 otherwise.

4 MS. MENENDEZ: Your Honor, I -- I -- I don't  
5 think there's any suggestion that either the Minnesota  
6 legislature or the other minority legislatures that have  
7 reached that conclusion did so based on an understanding --

8 JUSTICE BREYER: What other reason would  
9 they have had for making possession unlawful?

10 MS. MENENDEZ: Because I think there's a  
11 strong belief that firearms in general are unlawful,  
12 that certain types of fire are -- are dangerous, that  
13 certain types of firearms are more dangerous than  
14 others, and that's appropriate. We aren't saying these  
15 should be legal. We aren't saying these are --

16 JUSTICE BREYER: No, I'm just saying what  
17 other reason could they have had for making this a  
18 crime, the possession --

19 MS. MENENDEZ: Perhaps --

20 JUSTICE BREYER: -- unless they thought that  
21 possession presents a serious potential risk of physical  
22 injury to another? I'm not suggesting an answer. I  
23 want to know what your answer is.

24 MS. MENENDEZ: Perhaps they were, in fact,  
25 adopting a different standard which is: We, as the

1 Minnesota legislature, hypothetically, are going to ban  
2 this weapon because we believe that it is somewhat more  
3 dangerous than other weapons, and we would prefer it is  
4 not possessed. I don't think we can assume that they  
5 went this far, and this is the question the Court has to  
6 answer.

7           Also, Your Honor, the Michigan legislature,  
8 for instance, obviously disagreed when they recently  
9 changed their law to no longer prohibit mere possession  
10 of a short-barreled shotgun.

11           I do think it is a recognition, Your Honor,  
12 that legislatures think these are dangerous weapons, and  
13 they are dangerous weapons, but that does not make their  
14 mere possession violative of the residual clause of the  
15 Armed Career Criminal Act. I think it's very important  
16 in every case that we tie the examination not to a  
17 possible thing that could be done with the gun in the  
18 future, but to the actual risk presented by mere  
19 possession. In the same way that in the James case the  
20 Court was motivated by the fact that something more than  
21 mere possession of burglary tools was required, here  
22 something more than mere possession of the weapon should  
23 be required.

24           We would be having a much different  
25 conversation if we were talking about a different part

1       of Section 924 of Title 18, 924(c), which penalizes  
2       using a weapon, even a short-barreled shotgun, during a  
3       crime of violence. That could certainly be a violent  
4       felony. But the mere possession --

5                                  JUSTICE GINSBURG:              You pointed out in your  
6       brief that explosives -- one of the enumerated crimes is  
7       use of explosives, but is no -- anywhere a crime of  
8       possession.

9                                  MS. MENENDEZ:                 That's correct, Your Honor,  
10      and I'm glad you reminded me because that was an  
11      important point for me to make, is that when we look at  
12      these enumerated offenses as providing guidance for the  
13      residual clause, it is very important that Congress  
14      adopted use of explosives rather than possession. And  
15      in fact, in the legislative history, in 1986, they gave  
16      examples of the sorts of things they believed would be  
17      included by that provision, and it was not mere  
18      possession of explosives.

19                                  JUSTICE ALITO:               Has any legislature  
20      prohibited the possession of explosives?

21                                  MS. MENENDEZ:               I am sure that some have,  
22      using certain language.

23                                  JUSTICE ALITO:               They just flatly prohibited,  
24      within our State, you cannot possess any explosives.  
25      Has any legislature done that?

1 MS. MENENDEZ: I'm not aware of that, Your  
2 Honor. I apologize, I don't know. I'm sure --

3 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, do you think it's a  
4 possibility that there are States in which explosives  
5 cannot be used for demolition purposes?

6 MS. MENENDEZ: No, I don't think that's  
7 likely, Your Honor. But nonetheless, Your Honor, when  
8 Congress was adopting this language, they chose to put  
9 "use of" prior to the term "explosives." If they wanted  
10 it to be more inclusive, they could have certainly made  
11 it more inclusive. They did not. In fact, the examples  
12 given were the use of explosives to destroy energy  
13 facilities or transportation facilities.

14 I see that I -- will reserve the rest of my  
15 time for rebuttal, if I might. Thank you, Your Honors.

16 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.

17 Mr. Bash.

18 ORAL ARGUMENT BY JOHN F. BASH

19 ON BEHALF OF UNITED STATES

20 MR. BASH: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it  
21 please the Court:

22 The ordinary case of possession of a  
23 sawed-off shotgun is possession in connection with  
24 serious criminal activity. That is the judgment that  
25 Congress, State legislatures, this Court in Miller and

1 Heller, and lower courts have reached for 8 decades.

2 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: If that's the case, how  
3 many charges do you have that are for mere possession,  
4 not involved with an underlying crime?

5 MR. BASH: Most of these charges are brought  
6 at the State level, so I don't have sort of the  
7 comprehensive statistics. But what I will point out is  
8 that Petitioner has now had two briefs to come forward  
9 with examples of law-abiding citizens just kind of  
10 caught up in this sawed-off shotgun regime.

11 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: She raises 14 cases in  
12 her reply brief.

13 MR. BASH: If you look at all of those  
14 cases, Your Honor, the vast majority of them, both cited  
15 in the opening brief and in the reply brief, involved  
16 people involved in other very serious criminal activity,  
17 meth dealing, sexual abuse, assaults. So those cases  
18 only verify what I think has been this Court's judgment  
19 in Heller and Miller, Congress's judgment, the judgment  
20 of State legislatures for a long time, that these are  
21 exclusively used for unlawful purposes.

22 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So why haven't they been  
23 outlawed federally and why is it only a minority of  
24 States that have outlawed their -- just their  
25 possession, not their registration?

1           MR. BASH:           Because I think what the National  
2       Firearm Act reflects, and this was reflected in Attorney  
3       General Cummings' arguments in favor of the law when it  
4       was under consideration, is that if you're willing to  
5       disclose your fingerprints and photograph to the Federal  
6       Government and undergo a background check -- that's only  
7       by regulation, but undergo a background check, it  
8       dissipates the chance that you're going to be involved  
9       in crimes.

10           Gang members, terrorists, and bank robbers  
11       do not go around disclosing their fingerprints and  
12       photograph to the government. So there are some  
13       atypical gun collections who build collection of, I  
14       think, rare firearms, and those are the sorts of  
15       applications the ATF sees.

16           But I just want to emphasize the point  
17       about, sort of, how many of these things are lawfully  
18       registered. We made a good faith attempt at an estimate  
19       in our brief, and it's 140,000 lawfully registered ever.  
20       It appears that the vast majority of those are to law  
21       enforcement agencies or to the manufacturers themselves.

22           Just by way of comparison, the Congressional  
23       Research Service put out a gun control analysis in 2012  
24       that estimated that there are currently 82 million  
25       shotguns of all varieties, either in private hands or

1 available for purchase by private citizens. So the  
2 number of -- whether it's 40,000, 50,000 ever, is a  
3 vanishingly small number of sawed-off shotguns that have  
4 been lawfully registered. I think --

5 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Wasn't there something in  
6 one of these briefs that a manufacturer in States where  
7 these weapons are lawful has advertised them as ideal  
8 for use in self-defense?

9 MR. BASH: There is something like that in  
10 one of the briefs. I don't think a manufacturer's, sort  
11 of, market strategy should govern the analysis. It  
12 certainly shouldn't refute this Court's judgment,  
13 Congress's judgment, the judgment of State legislatures  
14 for decades, that these weapons have no lawful uses.  
15 And I am not aware of, for example, a spike in  
16 applications for registrations for sawed-off shotguns to  
17 the ATF, which you might expect to see if these weapons  
18 were suddenly being in common use for self-defense.

19 I just wanted to address a point that I  
20 think Justice Kagan raised with my friend, which was,  
21 are we, sort of, solely relying on a correlative  
22 relationship between the enumerated offense and the  
23 potential for violence. I think it's a great deal more  
24 than a correlative relationship. I think it's actually  
25 precisely the same relationship between the crime and

1       the potential for violence present for burglary,  
2       attempted burglary, extortion, which is to say this:  
3       The enumerated crime enables the potential for violence  
4       in a but-for causal sense, but the offender has to take  
5       an additional act of volition to bring the violence to  
6       fruition.

7               So, for example, with a burglary or an  
8       attempted burglary, a burglar could say, if I'm  
9       confronted by a homeowner or police officer, I am going  
10      to flee. I am not going to attack anybody or I am going  
11      to give up. The burglary enables that confrontation to  
12      occur, but the offender has to take an additional act of  
13      volition to actually bring violence to fruition.

14             JUSTICE KAGAN:           I would think the analogy to  
15       that is the person who uses the sawed-off shotgun in a  
16       crime, but decides: I'm not going to shoot it. And  
17       then you say: It doesn't really matter if you're not  
18       going to shoot it; you just used it in a criminal  
19       activity, that's enough for us.

20             But this is a good deal more attenuated than  
21       that because this person could, for whatever reason,  
22       maybe because he wants to commit a crime in the future  
23       or maybe he's one of the odd collectors or people who  
24       think that this is good for self-defense, this person  
25       could have kept it in a locked closet, in a safe deposit

1      box, and never have brought it out and never have any  
2      potential for use in a crime. I mean, it would be one  
3      thing to say use in a crime causes enough risk of  
4      serious injury, but this is a step further.

5                    MR. BASH:            I agree that a necessary premise  
6      of our argument is that the ordinary case of possession  
7      is possession in connection with crimes. So if you  
8      don't buy that, we're in trouble. But you should buy  
9      that. It's what this Court said in Heller when it said  
10     short-barreled shotguns are not typically used by law  
11     abiding citizens for lawful purposes.

12                  JUSTICE KAGAN:        But they are two separate  
13     offenses, right, possession of this gun and use of this  
14     gun. And you're converting the one into the other for  
15     purposes of ACCA.

16                  MR. BASH:            And that makes total sense, and  
17     let me explain why. If it wasn't like that, clause 2 of  
18     the definition of violent felony -- it's at 11a of our  
19     statutory appendix -- would do no work. The whole point  
20     of that clause is to capture situations that were  
21     pregnant with the possibility of violence but where the  
22     apprehender was offended before the violence occurred.  
23     If an offender used a firearm against somebody, he would  
24     be squarely within clause 1, which is the use of force  
25     or the threatened or attempted use of force against

1       somebody.

2                  The whole point of clause 2 is when you  
3        catch someone who put themselves in the position to do  
4        violence but the violence didn't materialize on that  
5        occasion, they still fall within clause 2, and that  
6        makes sense because that sort of behavior is reflective  
7        of the armed career criminal. I mean, this is the  
8        weapon of choice historically, along with machine guns,  
9        of the armed career criminal. So it would be kind of  
10      odd if the illegal possession of this weapon didn't  
11      satisfy -- didn't count as a predicate under the Armed  
12      Career Criminal Act.

13                  JUSTICE KAGAN:                   Do you think the same would  
14      be true of a felon in possession?

15                  MR. BASH:                       No, and I think that's an  
16      important difference. I think the felon in possession  
17      statute reflects a slightly different judgment. It's  
18      the judgment that someone who has committed a felony,  
19      whether it's a violent felony or, you know, bank fraud  
20      or something, has revealed themselves to be an  
21      irresponsible person who can't be trusted with a  
22      firearm. I think in that sense, it's more prophylactic  
23      in nature, but you certainly don't have --

24                  JUSTICE KAGAN:                   I would think that in the  
25      felon -- a felon in possession law, I mean, honestly,

1 I'm sure the numbers dwarf the sawed-off shotguns, and  
2 the whole point of that is, yes, they're people who have  
3 shown themselves to be irresponsible, who have shown  
4 themselves perhaps to use weapons irresponsibly, and  
5 they're going to do it again, and there's a pretty  
6 strong correlation of a kind of recidivism that makes  
7 Congress pass that law.

8 MR. BASH: I think that's an accurate  
9 description of felon in possession, but there are,  
10 nevertheless, felons who legitimately want a handgun,  
11 which has been in common use for decades, for  
12 self-defense or for target practice or whatever.

13 The judgment that this Court has rendered  
14 and that Congress has rendered is that these weapons do  
15 not have other purposes in the ordinary case, and I  
16 think that distinguishes really a sawed-off shotgun  
17 offense almost from any other --

18 JUSTICE BREYER: Where did Congress say  
19 that? Where? Where? I mean, a felon in possession has  
20 a gun, and you say he might keep it upstairs in his  
21 closet, in the back of a car, in his hand, many places  
22 he might possess it, and he might never use it for a  
23 crime. Recognizing that, you say that doesn't fall  
24 within the statute. Just substitute the words  
25 "sawed-off shotgun." In the closet, back of a car,

1       glass case, maybe in his hand, maybe in somebody else's  
2       hand. Maybe he just says to somebody: I have a  
3       sawed-off shotgun up there; give me your money.

4                 All right?                     All those things are possible  
5       with either. And so since they're possible with either,  
6       on what basis do we write an opinion that says that you  
7       win with the sawed-off shotgun, but you lose with almost  
8       every other kind of gun. What's our theory? What lines  
9       would there be in that opinion?

10          MR. BASH:                     Here's the line. When you have a  
11       firearm that has historically been exclusively  
12       associated with violence, unlike a handgun, but just  
13       like a sawed-off shotgun --

14          JUSTICE BREYER:                 My goodness, stop right  
15       there for a second, because what we heard was there are  
16       40,000 or more people in 10 States and others that don't  
17       even make it unlawful. So how can we say it's more  
18       associated with crime than, what, a handgun or a  
19       regular -- or a torpedo? I don't know.

20          MR. BASH:                     I think we would contend that  
21       unlawful possession of a torpedo --

22                 (Laughter.)

23          JUSTICE BREYER:                 I realized you were going  
24       to say that, and all I put that in was to express my own  
25       lack of knowledge of which is which, and therefore I

1 can't just speak ex cathedra and say this. I would have  
2 to have some proof.

3 MR. BASH: I understand the uncertainty in a  
4 case without empirical data. It was the same  
5 uncertainty that the Court had in James, where it said  
6 we don't have empirical data to make the judgment. And  
7 in both James and Sykes, the Court said at the end of  
8 the day in some of these ACCA cases we need to rely on  
9 our common sense judgment. But here I think what I hope  
10 would be the Court's common sense judgment --

11 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, I don't -- I mean,  
12 I've seen a lot of movies. James Cagney used to, but I  
13 can't use that.

14 MR. BASH: Well, let me just say -- let me  
15 just say where I -- where I think you can ground the  
16 common sense judgment. We've set forward in the brief  
17 Federal statutes, State statutes, the legislative  
18 history, Senate and House reports saying these weapons  
19 are exclusively associated with lawbreaking and crime.  
20 There is a history of that. That's why they've been  
21 regulated. And I think, to go to a colloquy that my  
22 colleague was having with one of the members of the  
23 bench, the judgment of State legislatures and the  
24 Federal Congress is not something sort of to be cast  
25 away as the product of superstition. State legislators,

1      Congresspeople, talk with their constituents, they speak  
2      with law enforcement agencies. They exercise reasonable  
3      judgment based on the facts on the ground when they  
4      enact laws like this.

5            And I don't think it can be really disputed,  
6      as Justice Alito was alluding to earlier, that those  
7      legislatures have made a judgment that these weapons are  
8      exclusively associated with crime. And I think that's a  
9      much better factual record --

10         JUSTICE BREYER:            We couldn't say the same  
11      thing with a Saturday night special?

12         MR. BASH:                  I don't know. I'm not familiar  
13      with the term.

14         JUSTICE BREYER:            They used to be. A  
15      Saturday night special is a kind of pistol that was  
16      really used very, very heavily with robberies and  
17      crimes. They were viewed -- that was one of the first  
18      things that people tried to get banned after  
19      assassinations and so forth.

20         MR. BASH:                  I'm not saying that our argument  
21      couldn't apply to any other weapons. I imagine we'd  
22      have a similar case on unlawful possession of machine  
23      guns, for example.

24         JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:        How many --

25         JUSTICE BREYER:            No, no. This isn't a

1 machine gun. It's a pistol, a handgun.

2 MR. BASH: We'd have to do the work. I  
3 don't mean to cut off --

4 JUSTICE BREYER: No.

5 MR. BASH: We'd have to do the work. Here I  
6 think we have done the work. We have a legislative and  
7 judicial consensus over decades that these are  
8 exclusively used in crimes.

9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But we -- but we  
10 know that's not true. We know there are 40,000  
11 registered that by -- and, you know, and you yourself I  
12 think said or -- that if you're willing to give your  
13 photograph and fingerprint or whatever to the Federal  
14 Government, you're probably not going to use it  
15 illegally. So we know it's not true that these are  
16 exclusively used in criminal activity.

17 MR. BASH: Well, I think there's two points  
18 in that. One was the point I was alluding to earlier,  
19 which is not only that Congress thinks sort of this  
20 process ameliorates the -- the normal effect of  
21 possession of a sawed-off shotgun and that these are  
22 actually registered in extraordinarily small numbers  
23 relative to total gun population.

24 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, what number  
25 would be enough? I mean if we had 100,000

1 registrations, does that mean that it's no longer  
2 conduct that presents a serious potential risk?

3 MR. BASH: I'm not sure. I want to give you  
4 two answers to that question. I mean, the first is  
5 that, as this Court said in James, the relevant data  
6 point is convictions. So there's no convictions for  
7 lawful possession of a sawed-off shotgun. The relevant  
8 data point is how many convictions for unlawful  
9 possession are associated with otherwise nonviolent  
10 activity, and Petitioner hasn't really pointed to any  
11 cases of sort of law-abiding citizens using them for  
12 other reasons.

13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, then -- then  
14 is possession, possession of explosives, an offense  
15 under this enhancement provision?

16 MR. BASH: I think we'd run the same  
17 analysis, and we talk about this at pages 47 to 48 of  
18 our brief, which is to say explosives regulated by the  
19 NFA, which are defined to be explosives designed as  
20 weapons, yes, it's pretty much the same analysis we'd  
21 run through which --

22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Even though the  
23 statute -- even though the statute says use of  
24 explosives is covered?

25 MR. BASH: And I don't think --

1                   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:                   You'd say, well,  
2                   under the catch-all phrase, mere possession is covered.

3                   MR. BASH:                           No. And there's no redundancy,  
4                   because -- maybe we explained this unclearly. What we  
5                   tried to explain is that the use of explosives would  
6                   encompass a felony conviction for the use of any  
7                   explosives. So there are felony convictions for the use  
8                   of TNT or dynamite, explosives that are not inherently  
9                   dangerous in character, but could be used unlawfully.

10                  The possession offense under the reasoning  
11                  that we've set forth in the brief would apply to  
12                  weaponized explosives, those regulated under the NFA  
13                  because they're designed as -- as weapons, napalm and  
14                  things like that, not to the unlawful possession of TNT,  
15                  even though the unlawful use of TNT would fall under the  
16                  use of explosives statute provided as a felony. So I  
17                  don't think there's any redundancy created there.

18                  And I guess just to wrap up this colloquy, I  
19                  think it's possible to imagine an alternative universe  
20                  where sawed-off shotguns developed as self-defense  
21                  weapons in ordinary use. In that case, the ordinary  
22                  case analysis would look very different. You would say,  
23                  well, maybe there are some people who unlawfully acquire  
24                  these, just like some people unlawfully acquire handguns  
25                  for self-defense. But this Court has never recognized this,

1       this Court said very clearly in Heller in  
2       distinguishing Miller, that these are not in lawful use  
3       by law-abiding citizens.

4                  That's not the way the real world looks.              In  
5       the real world these are unlawfully possessed for use in  
6       crime.  And once you accept that proposition, the final  
7       step of our analysis is that when these items are  
8       brought to crimes, it seriously increases the chance  
9       that someone is going to be killed or wounded.  We've  
10      set forth the characteristics of the weapon and the sort  
11      of damage they do.  I won't repeat that.  But I don't  
12      even really hear Petitioner to dispute that in the  
13      ordinary case, when the -- in what we call the ordinary  
14      case, when these are brought to crimes, they massively  
15      increase the chance --

16                  CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:                           Well, that's a  
17      second step, unlike the others.  When you're engaged in  
18      a burglary, the -- the risk is there.  When it's mere  
19      possession, the risk isn't there.  You have to take an  
20      additional step of taking it and using it in a crime.

21                  MR. BASH:                                   And I think burglary has the  
22      exact same connection.  Burglar -- maybe it's easier to  
23      see it with extortion, but the same analysis would apply  
24      to burglary.  When you -- extortion, as defined most  
25      narrowly, as Justice Scalia would have defined it in

1 James to be a threat of violence to person or property,  
2 that itself does not create the possibility of violence.  
3 It's only if the extortionist is willing to follow  
4 through on the threat to take an additional step, just  
5 like the additional step of using a firearm, that the  
6 violence materializes.

7 So the sort of connection between the  
8 underlying offense and violence that Congress had in  
9 mind did contemplate an additional step by the offender  
10 himself.

11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, or the  
12 homeowner could happen to have a short-barreled shotgun  
13 and shoot the burglar.

14 MR. BASH: But remember --

15 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Then the violence  
16 doesn't depend on any additional act by the burglar.

17 MR. BASH: It does, Mr. Chief Justice,  
18 because the statute says violence to another. So if  
19 the -- if the homeowner clocks the burglar, that's not  
20 the violence the statute contemplates. And I suppose  
21 you could imagine fanciful scenarios where the police  
22 officer accidentally shoots the homeowner, but surely  
23 that's not the sort of ordinary case violence that this  
24 statute had in mind.

25 So I think --

1           CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:                   So the parallel  
2        you're drawing is that burglary itself doesn't present a  
3        risk of violence until the burglar pulls a gun?

4           MR. BASH:                                  Or -- or attacks the homeowner.

5        Like I said, I think it's most clear in extortion. I  
6        mean, even -- the Court suggested in James that  
7        extortion could be even much broader to include  
8        blackmail and sort of prototypical extortion. But even  
9        if we just accept Justice Scalia's view of extortion,  
10      which is that it's a threat to person or property, there  
11      must be some number of extortionists that say: Well,  
12      I'm going to make the threat, but I'm actually not going  
13      to follow through on the threat. And the violence --

14           JUSTICE GINSBURG:                        What about the -- what  
15      about the analogy to -- explosives, you say that there  
16      could be lawful possession because explosives, it's use  
17      that's given as an enumerated crime.

18           MR. BASH:                                  And what we would say is, by  
19      parity of reasoning to what we've set forth in the brief  
20      with respect to firearms, weaponized explosives, that is  
21      to say explosives that only have a use as a weapon,  
22      could fall under the residual clause.

23           JUSTICE BREYER:                          Is there -- the proposition  
24      then that I must accept I think for you to prevail is  
25      possession of that which is normally used or has a very

1 serious risk of being used in a way that risks physical  
2 injury to another falls within the statute. And instead  
3 of drawing a line between possession and some other use  
4 of the thing, we say sometimes possession is in itself  
5 within the statute, sometimes it's not. If you possess  
6 those things that have as a predominant use  
7 participation in a matter that's likely to cause  
8 physical injury to another, that's within the statute.  
9 If that's the proposition, is there any case where  
10 simple possession of anything has been interpreted as  
11 falling within this language? I don't know the answer  
12 to that.

13 MR. BASH: You mean circuit or Supreme Court  
14 cases?

15 JUSTICE BREYER: Any, any case.

16 MR. BASH: Well, we won this. We've won  
17 this issue in --

18 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, I know -- you've won  
19 this issue in --

20 MR. BASH: In circuit courts. I think the  
21 Eighth Circuit and the First Circuit.

22 JUSTICE BREYER: But it's this issue.

23 There's not some other area I could look at?

24 MR. BASH: I think there's a case out of the  
25 Fourth Circuit with possession of weapon in prisons.

1      Obviously the setting can change the analysis to some  
2      degree. But I believe there's a Fourth Circuit. Maybe  
3      my co -- my opponent will have a better recollection of  
4      that.

5                  JUSTICE BREYER:                    There's a Fourth Circuit  
6      case and then this line right here. Okay.

7                  MR. BASH:                         I -- I don't mean to suggest that  
8      there's no other cases. I would not be surprised if  
9      there were possession of machine gun and short-barreled  
10     rifle and silencer; in other words, the very firearms  
11     covered by the NFA. Also, I think short-barreled  
12     shotguns are, just to underscore the point, more often  
13     used in crimes, and so you're going to see a  
14     proliferation of cases there.

15                 JUSTICE GINSBURG:                 Why not burglar tools?  
16     Isn't it -- burglar tools are outside, right?  
17     Possession of burglar tools will not get you under ACCA.

18                 MR. BASH:                         This Court reserved that question  
19     in James in a footnote, because I think some States  
20     purportedly had defined attempted burglary to be  
21     something like possession or to include something like  
22     possession of burglar tools. I think we'd have a much  
23     harder case there because there's a longer chain of  
24     attenuation.

25                 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 Pardon --

1 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But there's no other use.

2 There's no other use for burglar tools than in burglary.

3 MR. BASH: I think that's true. I think  
4 we'd have to build through the practical case, one, that  
5 burglar tools -- the mere possession of burglar tools is  
6 sort of inevitably associated with committing burglary.  
7 It may be that there's a lot of people who acquire them,  
8 think about committing burglary, but don't make the sort  
9 of attempt that James contemplated will result in a  
10 confrontation, and then it's more attenuated because  
11 you're linking up this burglary -- burglary tools with  
12 committing burglary and then burglary with the  
13 confrontation.

14 I think it's a much tighter nexus here. I  
15 think if you ask an ordinary congressperson whether they  
16 think there's a tighter connection between possession of  
17 a sawed-off shotgun and acts of violence rather than,  
18 you know, possession of a crowbar and acts of violence,  
19 I think most people would say, yes, that's sort of the  
20 common sense answer that most legislators would give.

21 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I'm a little still  
22 confused about the felony possession, okay? You say  
23 that's not a crime of violence. I -- I don't know how  
24 to differentiate that from this because most felons, in  
25 possession of a gun, I'm sure the statistics would show,

1      are committing crimes. So if the question is the risk  
2      of injury to others, it would be a felon possessing a  
3      handgun of any kind and not a common citizen. Because,  
4      yes, common citizens more often than not, we hope, use  
5      guns that they possess for lawful purposes; but felons,  
6      I would think, just as a matter of logic, what Justice  
7      Alito was asking, that felons more often than not use  
8      guns in illegal activities.

9                    MR. BASH:                I -- I don't know. And for  
10     one -- for one thing, we have a -- the judgment of the  
11     sentencing commission here that we're in full accord  
12     with that possession of a sawed-off shotgun is  
13     fundamentally different than felony possession.

14                  And they see --

15                  JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:        Well, I understand that.  
16     I just want you to give me some sort of analytical  
17     approach on when to judge that -- when to judge that  
18     risk, or how to differentiate that risk --

19                  MR. BASH:                I think the analytical --

20                  JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:        -- so that everything,  
21     no -- every possession crime doesn't become a crime of  
22     violence.

23                  MR. BASH:                I understand the concern. And I  
24     think the analytical line to draw is that weapons that  
25     by their nature are exclusively associated, or in the

1 ordinary case, associated with violent crimes count  
2 under ACCA. I don't think that the felon in possession  
3 statute reflects quite the judgment that every felon  
4 that possesses a firearm is going to commit acts of  
5 violence with it. I think it reflects the sort of  
6 prophylactic concern that these folks have proven  
7 themselves irresponsible lawbreakers -- even if they  
8 committed a nonviolence felony and they've, you know,  
9 lost their ability to responsibly care for firearms and  
10 to handle firearms. I do think it's a different  
11 judgment than the judgment of why people can't  
12 unlawfully possess mortars and artillery pieces and  
13 torpedoes and -- and sawed-off rifles and shotguns and  
14 machine guns. I think it's a different judgment.

15 The Court -- Petitioner has really not  
16 refuted the historical understanding that these are  
17 uniquely and purely associated with crime. And I think  
18 a few thousand registrations since 1934, lawfully, does  
19 not refute the common sense conclusion that the unlawful  
20 possession of a sawed-off shotgun is associated with  
21 crime.

22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: That -- you're -- is  
23 that the 40,000 you're talking about?

24 MR. BASH: I'm sorry --

25 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: When you say a few

1 thousand, is that the same statistic as --

2 MR. BASH: Yes. And I'll just say it's

3 140,000; we think it's a great deal lower than that.

4 That's the total number of registrations since 1934. As  
5 we say in the brief, we can't have perfect certainty,  
6 but it appears that the majority are registered with law  
7 enforcement or manufacturers.

8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I might have used a  
9 different word than a few thousand.

10 MR. BASH: Forgive me, a few ten thousand  
11 or --

12 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Yes, that would --  
13 (Laughter.)

14 MR. BASH: A few dozen thousand.

15 JUSTICE ALITO: In the Armed Career Criminal  
16 Act in general, and the residual clause in particular,  
17 has caused no end of problems for this Court. Are you  
18 aware of any efforts made by the Justice Department to  
19 propose legislation revising either the -- either the  
20 Act in general or the residual clause?

21 MR. BASH: I am not aware of those efforts.  
22 That doesn't mean they don't exist, but I, standing  
23 here, am not aware of the efforts. But I --

24 JUSTICE BREYER: What would you think, which  
25 I once suggested and certainly didn't have the nerve to

1 follow through, that it's more likely that the  
2 Department of Justice, with the aid of the sentencing  
3 commission, could get the relevant statistics than it is  
4 that a defendant could. So if no statistics appear, we  
5 should draw a presumption against the department.

6 MR. BASH: Well, this Court has held  
7 otherwise in James.

8 JUSTICE BREYER: Yes, yes. I realize that.

9 MR. BASH: So, I mean, I think that's a  
10 statutory stare decisis holding that -- that governs --

11 JUSTICE BREYER: But could you do something,  
12 that is to say, even without legislation? Is it  
13 possible that the department, through its statistical  
14 gathering resources, and it has some, working with the  
15 sentencing commission, could help us more on the -- on  
16 the underlying statistical data that would give us a  
17 clue as to what was dangerous and what was not?

18 MR. BASH: I think -- I think that's  
19 conceivable. I'm not familiar with all the sort of  
20 statistical resources of the Department of Justice. But  
21 I just want to emphasize, this is the clear case. This  
22 is the case where Congress and State legislatures and  
23 this Court in Heller and Miller have said for decades.  
24 So I don't think there's a fair argument that criminals  
25 are not on notice that possession of an unlawful shotgun

1 can carry very serious consequences. Maybe in a closer  
2 case down the road you say, well, the department could  
3 have come up with statistics, and that would be -- you  
4 know, we're going to rule against the department for  
5 that reason. But, I mean, we have a quote from Judge  
6 Boudin in the brief in the Shaw case, where, you know,  
7 anyone that watches television or reads the newspaper  
8 knows that these are especially associated with crimes.  
9 So I don't think it came as a surprise to Mr. Johnson  
10 that when he commits two robberies and one illegal  
11 possession of a sawed-off shotgun, eventually that's  
12 going to catch up with him.

13 If the Court has no further questions.

14 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.  
15 Ms. Menendez, you have four minutes  
16 remaining.

17 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF KATHERINE M. MENENDEZ

18 ON BEHALF OF PETITIONER

19 MS. MENENDEZ: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice.  
20 Just briefly. You're -- with respect to  
21 Justice Breyer's question, there are a couple of related  
22 contexts where there are some appellate decisions. The  
23 Eighth Circuit in Archer, which is cited in our brief,  
24 has held that possession of a concealed weapon is not a  
25 violent felony under the Armed Career Criminal Act.

1           In addition, in the Fourth -- I'm sorry, the  
2       Ninth Circuit in a case called Fish, which I am not sure  
3       whether we've cited it in our brief, but it's a 2004  
4       decision, held that possession of a pipe bomb was not a  
5       crime of violence under the sentencing guideline  
6       provision, not the Armed Career Criminal Act.

7           And I do agree with my opposing counsel that  
8       there's been one decision that went the way we disagree  
9       with in the Fourth Circuit about possession of a weapon  
10      in prison, which I think is a very different  
11      circumstance.

12          Your Honors, I do think that it's important  
13      to look at James, comparing attempted burglary as to  
14      burglary. I think it gives us a great deal of guidance.  
15      In James, the Court found that there wasn't any textual  
16      justification for treating those differently. Here we  
17      have a very clear textual justification in terms of use  
18      of explosives, which gives us a strong signal that mere  
19      possession wasn't contemplated. The government invites  
20      this Court to do pretty convoluted reasoning, adopting  
21      an unstated definition from a totally unrelated statute  
22      in Title 26. And assuming that Congress meant when it  
23      said use of explosives, that all things listed in the  
24      National Firearms Act would be included by mere  
25      possession, I don't think we can make that leap.

1           Your Honors, it's also not true that there  
2       is a unanimous belief that these are inherently  
3       unjustifiable weapons. In fact, I think that the fact  
4       is most legislatures allow these to be possessed in some  
5       context or another, and Michigan has just indicated that  
6       perhaps the old historical reputation of this weapon is  
7       no longer deserved. But this Court doesn't have to like  
8       the short-barreled shotgun or decide that it's even an  
9       appropriate weapon for punish -- or for possession in  
10      order to agree that we can't assume from its possession  
11      alone that someone has only nefarious purpose.

12           In addition, Your Honors, the relevant  
13      analysis has to begin with the offense. And the  
14      government tries over and over again to say, well, it's  
15      obvious that these would only be possessed for nefarious  
16      reason, but they cannot substantiate that. They  
17      disagree with the 14 cases I encourage the Court to look  
18      at from page 14 of our reply brief, that those are mere  
19      possession cases. By characterizing the people who  
20      possessed those weapons, they were found during the  
21      course of investigations of other crimes, but that  
22      doesn't mean a single one of those possession acts was  
23      actually possession during a crime. And this Court  
24      certainly can't assume that merely because a criminal or  
25      a bad person had possessed the weapon, that they

1 possessed it for nefarious purposes.

2           Finally, Your Honors, I would really  
3 encourage the Court to consider the -- the rule of  
4 lenity and its application in this case. The government  
5 has not brought statistics nor clear, decisive, textual  
6 argument that mandate the application of one of the most  
7 onerous sentencing provisions that we see in Federal  
8 courts every day. This statute is applied to 600 people  
9 a year. It lacks all clarity. And while this Court  
10 need not get into whether it is unconstitutionally vague  
11 and the baby should go out with the bath water, the  
12 Court can certainly decide that Congress did not speak  
13 clearly on this question, and that it should not be  
14 applied to Mr. Johnson.

15           Unless there are any further questions, I  
16 appreciate the opportunity to present argument.

17           CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:                 Thank you, counsel.

18           The case is submitted.

19           (Whereupon, at 11:59 a.m., the case in the  
20 above-entitled matter was submitted.)

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