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NOTE

ROSALES V. STATE: TIME FOR A CHANGE, WITNESS IMPEACHMENT BY USE OF A PRIOR CONVICTION UNDER MARYLAND LAW

JOHN KARPINSKI*

As a general principle, evidence doctrine bars the use of character evidence to prove that a person acted in accordance with a particular trait on a specific occasion.1 The federal courts and most states, including Maryland, make an exception to this general pronouncement, allowing a witness to be impeached with evidence of prior criminal convictions.2 This exception is among the most controversial evidence rules.3 In Rosales v. State,4 the Court of Appeals held that a conviction under the Violent Crime in Aid of Racketeering Activity statute5 (“VICAR”) is a proper conviction for witness impeachment under Maryland Rule 5-609.6 In doing so, the Court of Appeals

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1. See MD. R. 5-404(a) (establishing that “evidence of a person’s character or character trait is not admissible to prove that the person acted in accordance with the character or trait on a particular occasion”); FED. R. EVID. 404(a)(1) (establishing that “[e]vidence of a person’s character or character trait is not admissible to prove that on a particular occasion the person acted in accordance with the character or trait”).

2. FED. R. EVID. 609; Md. R. 5-609.


6. Rosales, 463 Md. at 556–57, 206 A.3d at 918.

The Rule states in relevant part,

(a) Generally. For the purpose of attacking the credibility of a witness, evidence that the witness has been convicted of a crime shall be admitted if elicited from the witness or established by public record during examination of the witness, but only if (1) the crime was an infamous crime or other crime relevant to the witness’s credibility and (2) the court determines that the probative value of admitting this evidence outweighs the danger of unfair prejudice to the witness or the objecting party.

101
further blurred the line of admissible convictions under Maryland Rule 5-609. The current Rule sets forth a confusing framework for trial judges to decipher which crimes qualify for impeachment. As such, the Rule is ripe for replacement. While no alternative would be flawless, implementing Federal Rule of Evidence 609, or alternatively Alabama Rule of Evidence 609 or Indiana Rule of Evidence 609, would cure many of the defects in Maryland Rule 5-609.

Part I of this Note will discuss the underlying facts in Rosales and the Maryland Court of Special Appeals’ unreported decision. Part II will examine the legal history of witness impeachment by use of a prior conviction in Maryland as well as the intricate features of Maryland Rule 5-609. Part III will review the Court of Appeals’ unanimous decision in Rosales. Part IV of this Note will argue that the Court of Appeals improperly expanded rule 5-609 by interpreting VICAR convictions as relevant to a witness’s credibility. Part IV will further advocate that due to the Rule’s inaccessible framework, as demonstrated in Rosales, Maryland Rule 5-609 should be replaced in favor of a more workable rule, such as Federal Rule of Evidence 609, Alabama Rule of Evidence 609, or Indiana Rule of Evidence 609.

I. THE CASE

In September 2012, Wilfredo Rosales was arrested in connection with an assault in Langley Park in Prince George’s County, Maryland. The victim of the assault, Hector Hernandez-Melendez, alleged that seven MS-13 gang members approached him at the park and asked him to identify himself. After refusing to identify himself or lift up his shirt to reveal identifying tattoos, the assailants threw Mr. Hernandez-Melendez to the ground and stabbed him. Mr. Hernandez-Melendez was only able to identify Mr. Rosales out of the seven assailants. Mr. Hernandez-Melendez knew Mr. Rosales did not commit the assault; however, he alleged Mr. Rosales

(b) Time Limit. Evidence of a conviction is not admissible under this Rule if a period of more than [fifteen] years has elapsed since the date of the conviction, except as to a conviction for perjury for which no time limit applies.

MD. R. 5-609(a)–(b).

7. Rosales, 463 Md. at 558, 206 A.3d at 919.
8. Id.
9. Id.
10. Id. Mr. Hernandez-Melendez had a prior relationship with Mr. Rosales. Id. In 2006, Mr. Hernandez-Melendez “walk[ed] through” Mr. Rosales. Id. (alteration in original). “Walking through” is the procedure to gain membership in MS-13. Id. at 558 n.1, 206 A.3d at 919 n.1. Mr. Hernandez-Melendez “walk[ed] through” Mr. Rosales for roughly four months before the two lost contact. Id. They did not regain contact until the incident in September of 2012. Id. at 558–59, 206 A.3d at 919.
orchestrated the attack. Further, Mr. Hernandez-Melendez alleged Mr. Rosales took “$150 from his wallet” after the attack was complete.

Mr. Hernandez-Melendez alleged members of the MS-13 gang ordered the attack as retaliation for his testimony in a 2009 District of Columbia criminal case against other members of the gang. Between 2005 and 2006, the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department identified Mr. Hernandez-Melendez as a full-fledged MS-13 gang member. Likewise, Mr. Rosales was a validated MS-13 gang member. Mr. Hernandez-Melendez believed that a “green light,” or death order, was put out on him for his prior cooperation with law enforcement.

In May of 2013, a jury trial against Mr. Rosales commenced in the Circuit Court for Prince George’s County. The State brought nine charges against Mr. Rosales arising from the assault of Mr. Hernandez-Melendez. As part of its case, the State called Mr. Hernandez-Melendez as a victim-witness. Prior to the cross-examination of Mr. Hernandez-Melendez, the State moved in limine to preclude the defense from asking about Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s 2011 federal convictions for “conspiracy to commit assault with a dangerous weapon in aid of racketeering and threatening to commit a crime of violence in aid of racketeering.”

The State argued that the convictions should be excluded for impeachment purposes because they did not meet the criteria under Maryland Rule 5-609. Rule 5-609 states, in relevant part:

For the purpose of attacking the credibility of a witness, evidence that the witness has been convicted of a crime shall be admitted if elicited from the witness or established by public record during

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11. Id. at 558, 206 A.3d at 919. When questioned by detectives at Washington Hospital Center, Mr. Hernandez-Melendez informed detectives that he could not identify the person who stabbed him but that he recognized Mr. Rosales when he removed the money from his wallet. Id.
12. Id.
15. Id. Detective Medina had stopped Mr. Rosales dozens of times based on his connection with other documented MS-13 gang members. Id. Further, “based on investigations, pictures, and interviews,” Mr. Rosales had been classified as a validated gang member. Id.
16. Id. (“The number one rule violation leading to a green light is ‘associating with rivals or associating with law enforcement.’”).
17. Rosales, 463 Md. at 559, 206 A.3d at 920. The case was docketed Case No. CT121814X. Id. at 552, 206 A.3d at 916.
18. Id. at 559, 206 A.3d at 920.
19. Id.
20. Id.
21. Id.
examination of the witness, but only if (1) the crime was an infamous crime or other crime relevant to the witness’s credibility . . . .

At trial, the defense argued Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s convictions were relevant to his credibility, and further, “were different from other crimes of violence.” The trial court disagreed with the defense and granted the State’s motion to exclude. Mr. Rosales was convicted of “retaliation against a witness” and “participation in a criminal gang.”

Mr. Rosales appealed the judgment to the Court of Special Appeals. The main question to be answered on appeal was whether, “the trial court err[ed] in excluding the victim-witness’ prior convictions for crimes of violence in aid of racketeering activity?” A three-judge panel, comprised of Judges Graeff, Leahy, and Beachley, unanimously held that the circuit court did not err by excluding Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s prior convictions.

Relying on precedent, the court ruled that whether a conviction for conspiracy qualifies under rule 5-609 “depends on the objective of the conspiracy.”

The Court of Special Appeals examined the substantive crimes underlying the VICAR convictions to decide whether Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s convictions qualified under the Rule. The court determined that the substantive acts underlying Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s convictions “involve[d] acts of violence.” Maryland precedent is clear that violent crimes, “generally have little, if any, bearing on honesty and veracity.” Because crimes of violence are not eligible under Maryland Rule 5-609, the Court of Special Appeals held Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s convictions were

23. Rosales, 463 Md. at 559, 206 A.3d at 920.
24. Id.
25. Id. at 560, 206 A.3d at 920. Mr. Rosales received a twelve-year sentence, with all but six years suspended on the retaliation charge and ten years with all but five suspended on the participation in a criminal gang charge. Id. Mr. Rosales was acquitted of “first and second degree assault, armed robbery, robbery, theft, and carrying a weapon.” Rosales v. State, No. 2659, 2017 WL 6312861, at *3 (Md. Ct. Spec. App. Dec. 11, 2017), aff’d in part, rev’d in part, 463 Md. 552, 206 A.3d 916 (2019).
27. Id.
28. Id. at *13.
29. Id. at *7 (noting that a conviction for cocaine distribution was an impeachable offense under Maryland Rule 5-609 (citing In re Gary T., 222 Md. App. 374, 386, 112 A.3d 1108, 1115 (2015))).
30. Id. at *6.
31. Id. The crimes underlying Mr. Rosales’s convictions were “assault with a dangerous weapon in aid of racketeering activity and threatening to commit a crime of violence in aid of racketeering activity.” Id. at *3.
32. Id. at *6 (citing Prout v. State, 311 Md. 348, 364, 535 A.2d 445, 453 (1988) (finding that prostitution and solicitation are not proper crimes for impeachment)).
not proper for impeachment. Subsequently, the Court of Appeals granted Mr. Rosales’ petition for writ of certiorari to decide: (1) Whether a prior federal conviction “for committing a violent crime in aid of racketeering” was admissible for witness impeachment, and (2) whether the trial court’s failure to allow the defendant to use the witness’s prior convictions for the purposes of impeachment constituted harmless error.

II. LEGAL BACKGROUND

The issue of witness impeachment by use of a prior conviction dates back to the English Common Law. Under the common law, “one who had been convicted of treason, any felony, a misdemeanor involving dishonesty, or crimes relating to the obstruction of justice, was considered incompetent to testify at any trial.” In 1898, for the first time, English law granted criminal defendants the right to testify on their own behalf. Interestingly enough, this law specifically forbid prosecutors from inquiring into the defendant’s prior convictions. Since then, courts around the United States have grappled with how to properly restrict witness impeachment by use of a prior conviction. Section II.A discusses the historical development of Maryland Rule 5-609. Section II.B examines the purpose of the Rule. Section II.C explores the “eligible universe” of crimes suitable for

33. Id. at *8.
34. Rosales v. State, 463 Md. 552, 556, 206 A.3d 916, 917 (2019). Following the grant of certiorari, the Court of Appeals sua sponte raised the additional question of whether there was jurisdiction to hear petitioner’s untimely appeal. See id. at 565 n.4, 206 A.3d at 923 n.4 (thanking the Standing Committee on Rules of Practice and Procedure for bringing the inconsistency to the court’s attention); see also Oral Argument at 15:50, Rosales v. State, 463 Md. 552, 206 A.3d 916 (2019) (No. 6), https://www.courts.state.md.us/sites/default/files/import/coappeals/media/2018/coa20180907caseno6.mp4.
36. Id. (citing CHARLES TILFORD MCCORMICK, MCCORMICK ON EVIDENCE § 42, at 142 (John William Strong ed., 4th ed. 1992)).
37. Criminal Evidence Act 1898, 61 & 62 Vict. c. 36, § 1(f) (Eng.).
38. Id. The Act lists three exceptions to this general bar. The Act states, in relevant part, (f) A person charged and called as a witness in pursuance of this Act shall not be asked . . . any question tending to show that he has committed or been convicted of or been charged with any offence other than that wherewith he is then charged, or is of bad character, unless—
   (i) the proof that he has committed or been convicted of such other offence is admissible evidence to show that he is guilty of the offence wherewith he is then charged; or
   (ii) he has personally or by his advocate asked questions of the witnesses for the prosecution with a view to establish his own good character, or has given evidence of his good character, or the nature or conduct of the defense is such as to involve imputations on the character of the prosecutor or the witnesses for the prosecution; or
   (iii) he has given evidence against any other person charged with the same offence.
   Id.
39. See infra Section IV.B.2.
impeachment. Finally, Section II.D ponders the facial approach of Maryland Rule 5-609. Section II.E surveys the balancing test employed by Maryland Rule 5-609.

A. The Historical Development of Maryland Rule 5-609

The Maryland legislature first addressed the disqualification of felons from testifying in 1864 when the General Assembly enacted Chapter 109. Chapter 109 eliminated the total bar to testifying for those convicted of infamous crimes but made those convictions eligible for witness impeachment. This statute has remained largely the same for over 150 years and was most recently codified as Annotated Code of Maryland, Courts and Judicial Procedure, section 10-905. Section 10-905 states, in relevant part, “Evidence is admissible to prove . . . [the witness’s] conviction of an infamous crime.”

On January 2, 1975, Congress passed the Federal Rules of Evidence. The Federal Rules of Evidence include rule 609, which allows for the impeachment of a witness by use of a qualifying prior conviction. Using Federal Rule 609 as a model, on November 1, 1991, the Court of Appeals adopted rule 1-502 to govern witness impeachment by use of a prior conviction in Maryland. On July 1, 1994, in an effort to consolidate and

40. 1864 Md. Laws 136; see also State v. Westpoint, 404 Md. 455, 474, 947 A.2d 519, 530–31 (2008) (finding that when the legislature passed “Chapter 109 in 1864 it intended to remove this common law disqualification”).
42. Prout, 311 Md. at 558–59, 535 A.2d at 450.
43. MD. CODE ANN., CTS. & JUD. PROC. § 10-905(a) (LexisNexis 2013).
44. Id.
46. FED. R. EVID. 609.
clarify the State’s rules on evidence, Title 5 of the Maryland Rules of Practice and Procedure became the governing rules of evidence for Maryland state courts.  As part of this new collection of laws, Maryland Rule 5-609 replaced rule 1-502.

B. The Purpose of Maryland Rule 5-609

The Maryland Rules of Evidence were designed with the goals of determining the truth and ensuring proceedings are conducted in a just manner.  Witness impeachment by use of a prior conviction is designed to help the factfinder gauge the credibility of the witness.  However, Maryland Rule 5-609 was designed to limit the factfinder’s prejudice to the witness by narrowing the circumstances in which a past conviction could be used for impeachment.  Essentially, rule 5-609 serves as a safeguard against a factfinder disregarding the witness’s testimony because of the witness’s past criminal acts, or because they think the witness is generally a bad person.

C. The Eligible Universe of Crimes: A Complicated Universe to Navigate

In order to admit a prior conviction for impeachment under rule 5-609, a court must first determine if the conviction falls within the “eligible universe.”  Rule 5-609 delineates two categories of convictions that are eligible for impeachment.  Convictions are eligible for impeachment only if the crime is (1) “an infamous crime” or (2) an “other crime relevant to the witness’s credibility.”


49. Westpoint, 404 Md. at 478, 947 A.2d at 533.  Rules 5-609 and 1-502 are nearly identical in their language and function.  There are four minor differences between rules 1-502 and 5-609.  The first difference is rule 5-609(a) included the phrase “during examination” while rule 1-502(a) read “on cross-examination.”  Lynn McLain, Maryland Rules of Evidence 153 (1994).  The second difference is that section (a) was divided into clauses (1) and (2) to show “that section (a)’s balancing test applies to both categories of prior convictions.”  Id.  The third difference is the final sentence of rule 1-502(a)’s Committee note is omitted because it is “inconsistent with Rule 5-607.”  Id.  The final difference is the addition of the second sentence “to the Committee note following section(a)”  Id.


52. Id. at 703, 436 A.2d at 907.

53. Westpoint, 404 Md. at 478, 947 A.2d at 533.

54. Md. R. 5-609(a); Cure v. State, 421 Md. 300, 324, 26 A.3d 899, 913 (2011).

55. Md. R. 5-609(a) (noting that “infamous crime[s]” and “other crime[s] relevant to the witness’s credibility” are proper for impeachment).
witness’s credibility.” Infamous crimes include treason, common law felonies, and other relevant offenses generally classified as *crimen falsi*. Since the enactment of Maryland Rule 1-502 and subsequently Maryland Rule 5-609, Maryland courts have struggled to define what qualifies as an “other crime relevant to the witness’s credibility.” Crimes that fall into this category have to show, “the perpetrator ‘lives a life of secrecy’ and engages in ‘dissembling in the course of [the crime], being prepared to say whatever is required by the demands of the moment, whether the truth or a lie.’” In other words, to qualify under the “other crime relevant to a witness’s credibility” category, the conviction must question whether the witness’s testimony should be believed. Absent this tendency to show untruthfulness, the conviction should not be admitted.

Maryland courts have not been able to consistently delineate which crimes are relevant to a witness’s credibility under Maryland Rule 5-609. In practice, the construction of rule 5-609 requires the Court of Appeals to grant certiorari to a case which presents a previously unexplored conviction for impeachment. This construction has left trial courts, and the intermediate appellate court, vulnerable to reversible error subject to the Court of Appeals decision regarding the novel conviction.

Some firm categories of eligible convictions have been established. Crimes of violence, “which may result from a short temper, a combative nature, extreme provocation, or other causes generally have little or no direct bearing on honesty or veracity” and thus, are not eligible for witness

56. Id.
57. Common law felonies include “murder, manslaughter, robbery, rape, burglary, larceny, arson, sodomy and mayhem.” Robinson v. State, 4 Md. App. 515, 523 n.3, 243 A.2d 879, 884 n.3 (1968)(citing Hochheimer’s Criminal Law § 6 (1st ed.)).
59. MD. R. 5-609(a); see also State v. Westpoint, 404 Md. 455, 476, 947 A.2d 519, 531 (2008) (recognizing “it is difficult to draw distinct lines on what crimes may be used to impeach”).
62. Westpoint, 404 Md. at 476, 947 A.2d at 531.
63. State v. Giddens, 335 Md. 205, 216 n.8, 642 A.2d 870, 875 n.8 (1994).
64. See King v. State, 407 Md. 682, 706–08, 967 A.2d 790, 804–05 (2009) (reversing the Court of Special Appeals affirmance of the trial court’s exclusion of a previous possession with intent to distribute marijuana conviction); Westpoint, 404 Md. at 495, 947 A.2d at 543 (affirming the Court of Special Appeals reversal of the trial court’s admission of a third-degree sexual offense under rule 5-609); Giddens, 335 Md. at 222, 642 A.2d at 878 (reversing the Court of Special Appeals ruling that distribution of cocaine was not an impeachable offense under rule 5-609); State v. Duckett, 306 Md. 503, 512, 510 A.2d 253, 258 (1986) (affirming the Court of Special Appeals reversal of the trial court’s admission of a previous assault and battery conviction).
impeachment. Generally, Maryland courts have found that simple possession of a controlled substance does not bear on a witness’s credibility. In contrast, a conviction for possession with intent to distribute has been held to be relevant to a witness’s veracity because the crime inherently involves deceit. Likewise, convictions for crimes involving theft and robbery have been held admissible for impeachment purposes under rule 5-609.

D. No Conviction Left Behind: The Facial Approach of Maryland Rule 5-609

When determining whether a conviction is eligible under Maryland Rule 5-609, Maryland judges look at the elements required for conviction, and not the underlying facts of the case. This approach resembles a facial analysis. Trial courts are not to “conduct a mini-trial” by looking at the individual circumstances of a witness’s prior conviction. In order for a prior conviction to be admitted for impeachment, the elements of the conviction must “describe[] with sufficient specificity the conduct reflecting on the defendant’s credibility.” If the conviction does not, by its elements, clearly state conduct bearing on a witness’s credibility, then it should be excluded. Secrecy alone is not sufficient to make a prior conviction eligible for impeachment.

The Reporter’s Notes for rule 1-502 state that the subcommittee unequivocally felt that trial courts should not examine the underlying facts of a conviction. The subcommittee found that, “[t]he marginal gain in probative value on the question of credibility in a particular case [is] likely to...


66. See Morales v. State, 325 Md. 330, 330, 600 A.2d 851, 851 (1992) (holding possession of cocaine was not an impeachable offense); see also Lowery v. State, 292 Md. 2, 2, 437 A.2d 193, 193 (1981) (finding that possession of barbiturates was not proper for impeachment under rule 5-609).

67. See Giddens, 335 Md. at 205, 642 A.2d at 870 (finding possession of cocaine with intent to distribute to be a proper crime for impeachment); see also King, 407 Md. at 706–07, 967 A.3d at 804 (holding possession with intent to distribute marijuana to be an impeachable offense).

68. See Jackson v. State, 340 Md. 705, 668 A.2d 8 (1995) (holding that theft was an impeachable offense). But see Morales, 325 Md. at 339, 600 A.2d at 855 (holding that assault and battery was not a proper conviction for impeachment).

69. Giddens, 335 Md. at 222, 642 A.2d at 878; see also Westpoint, 404 Md. at 480, 947 A.2d at 534.


71. See id. at 714–15 (holding that indecent exposure was not a proper crime for impeachment under rule 5-609); see also State v. Duckett, 306 Md. 503, 509, 510 A.2d 253, 256 (1986) (holding that assault and battery were not sufficiently specific to qualify under rule 5-609).

72. Westpoint, 404 Md. at 486, 947 A.2d at 537.

73. Giddens, 335 Md. at 222, 642 A.2d at 878.
be substantially outweighed by the expenditure of judicial resources necessary to examine the facts underlying prior convictions in every case.” 74

Under rule 5-609, a witness can only be questioned about the name and date of the conviction as well as the sentence imposed. 75 Due to the restrictive nature of the facial approach, Maryland courts have struggled to identify if a crime’s elements specifically identify conduct that bears on the witness’s credibility, and thus, is admissible under rule 5-609.

The facial approach dilemma is highlighted in Giddens v. State. 76 In Giddens, a divided Court of Special Appeals 77 held that distribution of cocaine does not, by its elements, state conduct bearing on the witness’s credibility. 78 The court reasoned that the crime could be committed in a multitude of ways ranging from “selling a ton of cocaine to sub-dealers throughout a community as well as by giving a friend a marijuana cigarette.” 79 The Court of Special Appeals ruled that even though the behavior is certainly criminal, it is not inherently dishonest. 80 The concurrence was troubled by the fact that under a facial approach, convictions for the distribution of narcotics would never be admissible because courts cannot evaluate the manner in which the crime was committed. 81

The Court of Appeals 82 reversed, and held that distribution of cocaine is inherently dishonest, despite the range of potential circumstances of conviction. 83 The Court of Appeals stated, “in theory, some activity that falls within the definition of drug distribution would not be probative of an individual’s lack of veracity, [however] the vast majority of convictions for cocaine distribution are relevant to credibility.” 84 Thus, the Court of Appeals concluded that cocaine distribution was not so “ill-defined” as to warrant exclusion. 85

74. Id. (alteration in original) (quoting RULES ORDER, 1-502 cmt. (1992)).
75. Giddens, 335 Md. at 222, 642 A.2d at 878.
78. Id. at 592, 631 A.2d at 504.
79. Id. at 591, 631 A.2d at 503.
80. Id.
81. Id. at 593, 631 A.2d at 504 (Motz, J., concurring).
82. This opinion generated a five-judge majority opinion and a two-judge dissenting opinion. Giddens, 335 Md. at 205, 642 A.2d at 870. The dissent endorsed the majority opinion of the Court of Special Appeals. Id. at 223, 642 A.2d at 878.
83. Id. at 222, 642 A.2d at 878.
84. Id. at 218, 642 A.2d at 876.
85. Id.
E. Insult to Injury: The Required Balancing Test Under Maryland Rule 5-609

One of the distinct features of rule 5-609 is that every conviction is subject to a balancing test to determine if “the probative value of admitting [the] evidence outweighs the danger of unfair prejudice to the witness or the objecting party.” Due to this balancing test, rule 5-609 does not have any “per se” admissible convictions. The Maryland Senate Rules Committee notes on rule 1-502 indicate “the Committee’s preference for a broadly-applied balancing test” and recognize that “the then-existing law of impeachment [was] ‘dangerously inflexible in its mandate.’” The balancing test is a matter of judicial discretion. The Court of Appeals has not given any firm rules or strict guidelines for trial courts to follow when conducting the balancing test. Instead, the court has expressed its support of trial judges retaining wide discretion in making witness impeachment decisions.

The Court of Appeals has designated certain factors it believes will be valuable to trial courts tasked with conducting the balancing test. These factors include: “(1) the impeachment value of the prior crime; (2) the point in time of the conviction and the defendant’s subsequent history; (3) the similarity between the past crime and the charged crime; (4) the importance of the defendant’s testimony; and (5) the centrality of the defendant’s credibility.” Maryland courts, in applying these factors, need not do so “mechanically or exclusively.”

III. THE COURT’S REASONING

Writing for a unanimous court, Judge Getty of the Court of Appeals affirmed in part and reversed in part the Court of Special Appeals decision. The Court of Appeals held: (a) Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s “convictions for

86. MD. R. 5-609(a)(2).
87. Id.
90. Id. at 364, 535 A.2d at 452.
91. Id. (finding that a narrow test “would be contrary to our suggestion that the trial judge exercise a sound discretion in each case where the issue arises”).
93. Id. (citing United States v. Mahone, 537 F.2d 922, 929 (7th Cir. 1976)). Importantly, under rule 5-609, the same or similar crimes are not automatically excluded. Id. at 711, 668 A.2d at 11. Further, the risk of prejudice is reduced when a non-defendant witness is to be impeached. King v. State, 407 Md. 682, 704, 967 A.2d 790, 803 (2009).
94. Jackson, 340 Md. at 717, 668 A.2d at 14.
95. The Court of Appeals is comprised of seven judges who all participate in every case before the court. MD. COURT OF APPEALS, https://www.courts.state.md.us/coappeals (last visited Mar. 18, 2020).
conspiracy to commit assault with a dangerous weapon in aid of racketeering and threatening to commit a crime of violence in aid of racketeering” in violation of Title 18, section 1959 of the United States Code were admissible under Maryland Rule 5-609 for witness impeachment, and (b) the circuit court committed harmless error in ruling Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s convictions were not impeachable. As a result, the Court of Appeals reversed the trial court’s exclusion of the conviction, but found that Mr. Rosales was not entitled to a new trial.


The court ruled that based on the elements required, a VICAR conviction was a proper impeachable offense under Maryland Rule 5-609(a)(1). The court reasoned that convictions under section 1959 require “extraordinary dishonesty” which require “great pains to conceal.” Specifically, the court found that in order to be convicted under section 1959, an individual must commit the underlying crime with the intention of benefitting either the criminal organization or the perpetrator’s standing in the organization. In the court’s view, a VICAR conviction inherently suggests that a witness would be willing to lie under oath, just as they were willing to deceive society to benefit or increase standing in the criminal organization.

The Court of Appeals rejected the lower court’s opinion that VICAR convictions are ordinary crimes of violence. Rather, in VICAR trials, “[t]he government must prove elements concerning both the enterprise and the defendant beyond a reasonable doubt to successfully” convict. The court reasoned that the intent to cover up racketeering, and not the underlying

96. Rosales v. State, 463 Md. 552, 552, 206 A.3d 916, 916 (2019). The court also decided whether appellate time-filing violations were jurisdictional in nature. Id. at 552, 206 A.3d at 919. In deciding this issue, the court ruled that appellate time-filing violations trigger claims-processing rules and, thus, are not jurisdictional in nature. Id. at 568, 206 A.3d at 925. The court’s decision tracked the recent United States Supreme Court decision Hamer v. Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago, 138 S. Ct. 13 (2017). In Hamer, the Court ruled Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 4(a)(5)(C)’s limitation on appellate time filing had no statutory basis and, thus, is a mandatory claim-processing rule. Id. at 16–17. For a further discussion of the appellate time-filing dilemma, see, Mathew H. Frederick et. al., United States Supreme Court Update, 30 APP. ADVOC. 259, 259 (2017).

97. Rosales, 463 Md. at 557, 206 A.3d at 918–19.

98. For a discussion of the elements, see infra Section IV.A.1.

99. Rosales, 463 Md. at 579, 206 A.3d at 931–32.

100. Id. at 574, 206 A.3d at 928 (quoting State v. Giddens, 335 Md. 205, 217, 642 A.2d 870, 876 (1994)).

101. Id. at 577, 206 A.3d at 930.

102. Id. at 572, 206 A.3d at 927.

103. Id. at 578, 206 A.3d at 931 (explaining “the requisite mens rea is unlike that of typical acts of violence”).

104. Id. at 577, 206 A.3d at 930.
violent offenses, are what “[make] VICAR convictions inherently deceitful.”

Much of the conduct required for a VICAR conviction “requires secrecy and tears at the fabric of society.”

The court concluded that a VICAR conviction, by its elements, clearly identified prior conduct that tended to show the perpetrator was unworthy of belief.

To support its reasoning, the court noted “the great majority of enumerated offenses [under section 1959] meet [the] criteria” under Maryland Rule 5-609(a)(1). Thus, because the elements of the crime suggest the perpetrator must be “prepared to say whatever is required by the demands of the moment” and because “the great majority” of enumerated crimes would qualify, the Court of Appeals ruled Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s prior convictions fell within the “eligible universe” for impeachment under Maryland Rule 5-609.

**B. The Circuit Court’s Omission of Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s Convictions Constituted Harmless Error**

The court ruled that not allowing the defense counsel to impeach Mr. Hernandez-Melendez under Maryland Rule 5-609 was harmless error. At trial, Mr. Hernandez-Melendez testified that he engaged in criminal activity as an MS-13 gang member. Further, Mr. Hernandez-Melendez testified that he had been incarcerated for approximately four years. Throughout the trial, the defense counsel also referred to Mr. Hernandez-Melendez as “a convicted felon” and “a gangster.” The court reasoned that through these references, the jury had the opportunity to make a determination as to Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s credibility. Allowing impeachment of Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s convictions, “would add little value to the jury’s consideration of the witness’ credibility.” As a result, the court concluded the testimony presented

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105. *Id.* at 579, 206 A.3d at 931.
108. *Id.* at 579, 206 A.3d at 932; see also Pamela Bucy Pierson, *RICO Trends: From Gangsters to Class Actions*, 65 S.C.L. REV. 213, 221 (2013) (finding that gang and drug distribution operations make up a significant portion of prosecuted racketeering activity).
110. *Id.* at 583, 206 A.3d at 934.
111. *Id.* at 582, 206 A.3d at 933.
112. *Id.* Mr. Hernandez-Melendez “also stated that he was on probation both at the time of the attack and during his current testimony.” *Id.*
113. *Id.*
114. *Id.*
115. *Id.*
was sufficient for the jury to evaluate Mr. Hernandez-Melendez’s credibility.116

IV. ANALYSIS

In *Rosales v. State*, the Court of Appeals held that a prior conviction for committing a violent crime in aid of racketeering117 was a crime relevant to credibility under Maryland Rule 5-609.118 The court erred by concluding that the elements required for a VICAR conviction require deceit. *Rosales* demonstrates the need to reform Maryland Rule 5-609 to provide trial judges with a workable standard for determining whether a prior conviction is proper for witness impeachment.119 This Part proceeds in two sections. Section IV.A discusses witness impeachment for a prior VICAR conviction.120 Section IV.B addresses the need to rethink Maryland Rule 5-609.121

A. Witness Impeachment by Prior VICAR Conviction

In *Rosales*, the court ruled that a VICAR conviction, by its elements, describes the conduct impacting a witness’s credibility with sufficient specificity.122 This Section lays out how the court over-extended Maryland Rule 5-609 by applying it to VICAR convictions, and further, how Maryland precedent regarding witness impeachment is flawed. Specifically, Section IV.A.1 discusses the underlying VICAR statute and its broad reach.123 Section IV.A.2 discusses how the *Rosales* court erred by relying on the logic of *State v. Giddens*.124


Title 18, section 1959 of the United States Code criminalizes violent crimes committed in aid of racketeering activity. Unlike robbery, treason, or theft, a defendant can be convicted of a VICAR offense under a multitude of circumstances.125 The wide array of potential crimes eligible for conviction under section 1959 renders it ill-suited to be considered as an “other crime relevant to credibility” under Maryland Rule 5-609. A VICAR conviction requires that the government show:

116. *Id.* at 583, 206 A.3d at 934. *But see* Devincenz v. State, 460 Md. 518, 562, 191 A.3d 373, 399 (2018) (ruling the exclusion of the victim’s stepbrother’s “testimony was not harmless” error because the “errors affected the jury’s ability to assess [the victim’s] credibility”).
118. *Rosales*, 463 Md. at 583, 206 A.3d at 934; *see also supra* Section III.A.
119. *See infra* Section IV.A.2.
120. *See infra* Section IV.A.
121. *See infra* Section IV.B.
122. *Rosales*, 463 Md. at 583, 206 A.3d at 934.
123. *See infra* Section IV.A.1.
124. 335 Md. 205, 642 A.2d 870 (1994); *see infra* Section IV.A.2.
(1) that the [o]rganization was a RICO enterprise, (2) that the enterprise was engaged in racketeering activity as defined in RICO, (3) that the defendant in question had a position in the enterprise, (4) that the defendant committed the alleged crime of violence, and (5) that [their] general purpose in so doing was to maintain or increase [their] position in the enterprise.126

Section 1959 specifically enumerates a variety of violent crimes; such as, murder, assault with a dangerous weapon, and kidnapping as predicate underlying felonies necessary for conviction.127

The broad range of circumstances possible for a section 1959 conviction renders it inappropriate for impeachment under Maryland Rule 5-609. In order to accomplish its intended purposes, section 1959 should be interpreted liberally.128 To satisfy this liberal end, courts have ruled that the criminal enterprise need only have “a de minimis interstate commerce connection.”129

Courts have consistently rejected facial challenges alleging that section 1959 exceeds Congress’s Commerce Clause authority.130 Instead, courts have found this connection to interstate commerce in a vast array of circumstances.131 Further, courts have generally rejected a test requiring the


127. 18 U.S.C. § 1959(a). The statute also includes maiming, and “threaten[ing] to commit a crime of violence against any individual in violation of the laws of any State or the United States, or attempt[ing] or conspir[ing] to do so” as predicate felonies. Id.


129. United States v. Mills, 378 F. Supp. 3d 563, 571–73 (E.D. Mich. 2019) (quoting United States v. Riddle, 249 F.3d 529, 538 (6th Cir. 2001)); see, e.g., id. (noting that “[i]nsofar as it concerns VICAR in particular, a court must decide ‘whether Congress could rationally have concluded that intrastate acts of violence . . . committed for the purpose of maintaining or increasing one’s status in an interstate racketeering enterprise, would substantially affect the interstate activities of that enterprise’” (quoting United States v. Umana, 750 F.3d 320, 336 (4th Cir. 2014))); United States v. Gray, 137 F.3d 765, 773 (4th Cir. 1998) (finding that although the evidence presented to prove an “interstate commerce connection [was] not copious,” it was sufficient).


131. See United States v. Nascimento, 491 F.3d 25, 45 (1st Cir. 2007) (finding that the purchase and subsequent transportation of firearms over state lines was sufficient to establish a de minimis connection to interstate commerce); Crenshaw, 359 F.3d at 992 (finding that the “Rolling 60s Crips” were an organization engaged in interstate commerce by virtue of their smuggling and distribution of up to ten kilograms of cocaine per month from Louisiana and California to Minnesota); Riddle, 249 F.3d at 537 (finding that even though the enterprise was not engaged in interstate commerce, it
underlying crime of violence be directly connected to interstate commerce to qualify as a VICAR crime.\textsuperscript{132}

The connection between the violent crime and the racketeering enterprise does not need to be strong to convict an individual under section 1959. Section 1959(a) explains that the violent crime must be committed for something of “pecuniary value” or to increase status within the organization “engaged in racketeering activity”.\textsuperscript{133} This is known as the “purpose” requirement of the VICAR statute.\textsuperscript{134} The notable feature of the “purpose” requirement is that the organizational component does not have to be the primary motive of the defendant.\textsuperscript{135} In \textit{United States v. Gardner},\textsuperscript{136} the court found that the prosecution had satisfied the purpose requirement by proving nothing more than a defendant’s membership in an organization engaged in racketeering activity.\textsuperscript{137} Further, in \textit{United States v. Zelaya},\textsuperscript{138} the court found a defendant had satisfied the purpose requirement when he committed a murder with knowledge that the victim was in a rival gang and subsequently bragged about the murder to elevate his position in MS-13.\textsuperscript{139} Finally, in \textit{United States v. Tse},\textsuperscript{140} the court found, “[i]f [a defendant] possessed the requisite intent when he entered into the conspiracy then all foreseeable crimes committed by the conspiracy can be attributed to that intent.”\textsuperscript{141} Moreover, a crime of violence committed for personal reasons can still fall within the reach of section 1959.\textsuperscript{142} Further, to be convicted under section

\textsuperscript{132} Riddle, 249 F.3d at 538; Mills, 378 F. Supp. 3d at 571. \textit{But see} United States v. Garcia, 68 F. Supp. 2d 802, 810–12 (E.D. Mich. 1999) (ruling that the violent crime itself, and not simply the connected enterprise, need to be involved in interstate commerce to qualify under section 1959).


\textsuperscript{135} Zelaya, 908 F.3d at 927; Gardner, 417 F. Supp. 2d at 713 (finding “[i]f [defendant] joined a conspiracy within the framework of the ‘Mitchell Organization’ to murder a particular person, he did so not only for personal gain, but for the gain of the ‘Mitchell Organization’”). The \textit{Gardner} court also noted that “[t]he case law makes it plain that the judicial gloss placed on the ‘purpose’ element of the VICAR conspiracy offense sweeps within its compass a broader range of intentionality and purposefulness than that borne by a plain reading of the statute.” \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{136} 417 F. Supp. 2d 703 (D. Md. 2006).

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Id.} at 713 (noting that “[i]f [defendant] joined a conspiracy within the framework of the ‘Mitchell Organization’ to murder a particular person, he did so not only for personal gain, but for the gain of the ‘Mitchell Organization’”). The \textit{Gardner} court also noted that “[t]he case law makes it plain that the judicial gloss placed on the ‘purpose’ element of the VICAR conspiracy offense sweeps within its compass a broader range of intentionality and purposefulness than that borne by a plain reading of the statute.” \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{138} 908 F.3d 920 (4th Cir. 2018).

\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Id.} at 927 (finding that although the crime was primarily committed because the victims threatened the defendant’s friend, the crime was committed for a gang purpose because the victims were members of a rival gang).

\textsuperscript{140} 135 F.3d 200 (1st Cir. 1998).

\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Id.} at 207.

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{See} U.S. DEP’T OF JUSTICE, \textit{supra} note 130, at 100; \textit{see also} United States v. Kamaele, 748 F.3d 984, 1008–09 (10th Cir. 2014) (finding that the purpose element was satisfied when the evidence established a variety of personal purposes, but also allowed for a reasonable inference that
1959, the government does not even have to prove that the defendant was a member of the racketeering enterprise.\footnote{143} Some federal circuits have explicitly found that “[i]t would make little sense” to strictly interpret the purpose requirement “to provide a safe-harbor from VICAR for gang members who can offer a plausible alternative motivation for their acts.”\footnote{144}

The wide net of permitted circumstances for conviction and range of permissible inferences make VICAR convictions unsuitable for impeachment under Maryland Rule 5-609.\footnote{145} The first step in determining whether a conviction is within the reach of rule 5-609 is to determine whether the conviction falls within “the eligible universe.”\footnote{146} A conviction falls within the “eligible universe” when its elements clearly state the conduct bearing on the witness’s credibility.\footnote{147} When looking at the wide array of enumerated predicate offenses under section 1959, it becomes clear that VICAR convictions “cause[] the factfinder to speculate as to what conduct is impacting on the defendant’s credibility.”\footnote{148} By the Court of Appeals’s own admission, “\textit{some racketeering activity . . . may not qualify} as an infamous crime or be otherwise relevant to a witness’ credibility.”\footnote{149} Maryland precedent makes clear that if the conduct bearing on a witness’s credibility is not clear from the elements of the offense, then the conviction must be excluded under rule 5-609.\footnote{150} The wide range of predicate felonies, combined with the liberal interpretations of the commerce connection and purpose element makes it so factfinders cannot determine, by the elements of section 1959 alone, the conduct bearing on the witness’s credibility.

\textbf{2. The Rosales Court’s Reliance on State v. Giddens is Flawed}

In \textit{Rosales}, the Court of Appeals improperly relied on \textit{State v. Giddens}\footnote{151} in deciding that VICAR convictions are proper for impeachment

\footnotesize{
the assault was carried out with the purpose of promoting the organization or advancing the defendant’s position in the organization).

\footnote{143} United States v. Concepcion, 983 F.2d 369, 384 (2d Cir. 1992) (finding that independent contractors who receive something of “pecuniary value” can be prosecuted under section 1959).

\footnote{144} United States v. Banks, 506 F.3d 736, 761–64 (9th Cir. 2007) (adopting the view of five sister circuits which “have concluded that VICAR’s purpose element is satisfied even if the maintenance or enhancement of [their] position in the criminal enterprise was not the defendant’s sole or principal purpose”).

\footnote{145} See United States v. Bergrin, 650 F.3d 257, 267 (3d. Cir. 2011) (finding that racketeering statutes cast a “wide net”); \textit{see also} Concepcion, 983 F.2d at 381 (finding that VICAR statutes, like RICO statutes, should be construed liberally).


\footnote{147} Ricketts v. State, 291 Md. 701, 713, 436 A.3d 906, 913 (1981); \textit{see also} supra Section II.C.

\footnote{148} \textit{See Ricketts}, 291 Md. at 713, 436 A.3d at 913 (holding that indecent exposure is not a proper crime for impeachment under rule 5-609 because indecent exposure is so ill-defined that it could be committed in an infinite amount of ways).


\footnote{150} \textit{See supra} Section II.D.

\footnote{151} 335 Md. 205, 642 A.2d 870 (1994).}
under Maryland Rule 5-609. The Rosales court noted that Giddens, “is the seminal Maryland case” on witness impeachment by prior conviction.152 In Giddens, the court considered whether a conviction for distribution of cocaine may be used to impeach a witness’s credibility.153 The Giddens court held that distribution of cocaine was an impeachable offense because “an individual convicted of cocaine distribution would be willing to lie under oath.”154 The court in Giddens reasoned “[a] narcotics trafficker lives a life of secrecy and dissembling in the course of that activity, being prepared to say whatever is required by the demands of the moment, whether the truth or a lie.”155

The court’s analysis in Giddens ignores the facial approach required under Maryland Rule 5-609.156 The court in Giddens noted, “the vast majority of convictions for cocaine distribution are relevant to credibility.”157 While the “vast majority of convictions” might qualify, cocaine distribution does not, “by its elements, . . . clearly identify the prior conduct of the witness that tends to show that he is unworthy of belief.”158 The court further noted, “[w]e share the belief that a person will rarely be convicted of cocaine distribution if that person merely gives a small quantity to a friend at a party.”159 While this might rarely happen, the fact that it is possible indicates that cocaine distribution does not by its elements specifically state the conduct that will bear on credibility.

Giddens generated a dissenting opinion160 that endorsed the Court of Special Appeals majority opinion.161 The intermediate appellate court noted that Maryland’s distribution and possession with intent to distribute statute,162 “lists over 200 substances that it defines as controlled dangerous ones and adds to that list as well salts, isomers, derivatives, and compounds of or containing those substances.”163 The court pointed out that one can be convicted under this statute for handing a small quantity of narcotics to a friend, as well as by operating a large narcotics distribution network.164 Thus,

152. Rosales, 463 Md. at 573, 206 A.3d at 928.
153. Giddens, 355 Md. at 212–13, 642 A.2d at 873.
154. Id. at 217, 642 A.2d at 876.
155. Id. (quoting United States v. Ortiz 553 F.2d 782, 784 (2d Cir. 1977), cert. denied, 434 U.S. 897 (1977)).
156. See supra section II.D.
157. Giddens, 355 Md. at 218, 642 A.2d at 876.
158. Giddens, 355 Md. at 218, 642 A.2d at 876; State v. Westpoint, 404 Md. 455, 480–81, 947 A.2d 519, 534 (2008) (ruling that a prior conviction for third-degree sexual offense is not admissible under Maryland Rule 5-609).
159. Giddens, 355 Md. at 218, 642 A.2d at 877.
160. Id. at 223, 642 A.2d at 878–79 (Eldridge, J., dissenting).
162. MD. ANN. CODE art. 27, § 286(a) (1987) (recodified at MD. CODE ANN., CRIM. LAW § 5-602 (LexisNexis 2017)).
164. Id. at 590–91, 631 A.2d at 503.
“[t]he behavior is criminal, to be sure, but it is not necessarily dishonest.”165 The Court of Special Appeals concluded by noting that this large net rendered the statute inappropriate for impeachment.166 This opinion is consistent with the facial approach required when interpreting crimes under rule 5-609.167

In Rosales, the court found that Giddens provided a close factual match.168 As such, the court determined that a crime of violence that is done for the purpose of aiding a criminal enterprise engaged in racketeering qualifies as an “other crime relevant to the witness’s credibility” under Maryland Rule 5-609(a).169 Quoting Giddens, the court noted that “one who aids a racketeering enterprise will be living ‘a life of secrecy and dissembling,’ ‘being prepared to say whatever is required by the demands of the moment,’ and ‘posing [a] grave danger to the fabric of society.’”170 The court noted that many of the predicate racketeering offenses, by their elements, would qualify under rule 5-609; however, the court conceded that there are some racketeering offenses that may not qualify.171 The court makes a critical distinction here. While most predicate offenses qualify, the court conceded that there are some predicate offenses that do not qualify as an infamous crime or other crime relevant to a witness’s credibility. The court did not endeavor to say which predicate crimes would and would not qualify under Maryland Rule 5-609. This begs the question, if someone can be convicted of VICAR with a predicate offense that would not otherwise qualify, can it be said that a VICAR conviction, by its elements, specifically states the conduct that bears on the witness’s credibility? If the answer is no, then the crime should never be admissible under Maryland Rule 5-609.

While the Court of Special Appeals erred in Rosales by evaluating the substantive acts underlying the VICAR conviction, the court correctly concluded that by its elements, the VICAR statute does not sufficiently explain the conduct that would call into question the truthfulness of the witness.172 The Court of Special Appeals in Rosales held that while many of the predicate offenses under the VICAR statute are admissible, other predicate offenses are pure crimes of violence, and are thus, not admissible.173 The Court of Special Appeals found that, “the actual conduct

165. Id. at 591, 632 A.2d at 503.
166. Id.
167. See supra Section II.D.
169. Id. at 557, 206 A.3d at 918.
170. Id. at 578, 206 A.3d at 931 (quoting State v. Giddens, 335 Md. 205, 217, 642 A.2d 870 (1994) (alterations in original)).
171. Id. at 579, 206 A.3d 916, 932 (finding that “some racketeering activity . . . may not qualify as an infamous crime or be otherwise relevant to a witness’ credibility”).
173. Id. at *8. Specifically, the Court of Special Appeals found that predicate crimes that are fraud or narcotics trafficking related would qualify but pure crimes of violence such as, murder or kidnapping would be excluded. Id.
involved is a crime of violence, which is not impeachable, and the purpose of committing the crime is not to deceive, but to advance in an enterprise that might, or might not, be engaged in deceitful acts.”

The Court of Appeals in *Rosales* erred by making the same mistake as the majority in *Giddens*. By venturing away from the strict facial approach prescribed by previous case law, the court greatly expands the reach of Maryland Rule 5-609. Allowing convictions that do not bear on veracity could have a devastating effect on the justice system. If admitted, erroneous convictions could significantly sway a jury’s impression of a witness and, further, could result in flawed convictions or acquittals. VICAR, like drug distribution, can be accomplished in a variety of ways with an infinite amount of potential circumstances ranging from pure acts of violence to more calculated and malevolent acts in furtherance of an illegal enterprise. As such, the elements required for a VICAR conviction do not clearly highlight the conduct that weighs on the witness’s propensity to tell the truth and thus, must be excluded under Maryland Rule 5-609.

**B. Time for Change: Maryland Rule 5-609 and Its Unworkable Formula**

Since 1994, Maryland Rule 5-609’s undiscernible construction has continuously frustrated trial judges. While Judge Paul Grimm of the United States District Court for the District of Maryland has written that Maryland “Rule 5-609 is a perfect example of how the three general concepts of evidence law—relevance, economy, and fairness—are applied.” Other commenters have been frustrated by the lack of guidance given by the Court of Appeals. For the last twenty-five years, trial judges and lawyers have

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174. *Id.*

175. By expanding the reach of the crimes allowed for impeachment under the Rule, the court narrows the indicia of untruthfulness by “causing the fact finder to speculate as to what conduct is impacting on the witness’s credibility.” *State v. Giddens*, 335 Md. 205, 218–19, 642 A.2d 870, 876 (1994) (citing *State v. Ricketts*, 291 Md. 701, 713–14, 436 A.2d 906, 913 (1981)).


177. *Id.* at 2001–04.

178. United States v. Jones, 873 F.3d 482, 490 (5th Cir. 2017) (noting that “[t]he term ‘racketeering activity’ encompasses a wide range of state and federal offenses, including murder, robbery, extortion, and drug-dealing”).

179. See supra Section III.A.


faced uncertainty about which crimes should be admitted under Maryland Rule 5-609. 182

Maryland Rule 5-609 has set up “a piecemeal list of crimes relevant to credibility”183 because crimes can only be added if the Court of Appeals grants certiorari, and subsequently decides that the crime is “infamous” or is otherwise relevant to a witness’s credibility.184 Rule 5-609’s weakness arises when a previously unexplored crime is proffered to challenge a witness’s credibility.185 Specifically, the weakness arises because the Court of Appeals has not given trial judges any strict guidelines to follow, thus, trial judges and the intermediate appellate court are making in-the-dark determinations and subsequently having to wait for the Court of Appeals to grant certiorari and decide if the crime is relevant to a witness’s credibility.186

One year after Maryland Rule 5-609 passed, Commenter James Protin wrote, “[t]he Maryland Rule did not . . . follow the example set by the Federal Rule which more clearly delineates the crimes subject to the rule. “This oversight is the single major weakness of Maryland Rule 5-609.”187 Twenty-five years of litigation have proven this prophecy correct, and the time for reform has come. Federal Rule of Evidence 609, Alabama Rule of Evidence 609 and Indiana Rule of Evidence 609 all provide workable replacements to Maryland Rule 5-609. Section IV.B.1 examines Maryland Rule 5-609’s federal counterpart—Federal Rule of Evidence 609. Section IV.B.2 examines state evidence rules that could serve as replacements to Maryland Rule 5-609.

1. Federal Rule 609: A Clearer Standard

The purpose of Federal Rule of Evidence 609 is to encourage witnesses to testify, while still giving the jury an accurate picture of the witness’s

182. Protin, supra note 181, at 1137 (reporting that at a public meeting on Maryland Rule 5-609, “Chief Judge Murphy noted that failure to define clearly which crimes are relevant to a person’s credibility ‘leaves the trial judges . . . hanging out there not knowing . . . what . . . is eligible.’” (alterations in original)); Goldberg, supra note 181, at 860 (commenting that “the lack of guidance left defendants open to needless and costly appeals that may unnecessarily clog the courts with litigation aimed at ascertaining a standard”).

183. Protin, supra note 181, at 1137.

184. See State v. Giddens, 335 Md. 205, 216 n.8, 642 A.2d 870, 875 n.8 (1994) (confirming that the Court of Appeals anticipated having to grant certiorari in a wide range of cases to decide if the underlying convictions are eligible for impeachment under rule 5-609); see also Goldberg, supra note 181.

185. See Giddens, 335 Md. 205, 642 A.2d 870 (reversing the Court of Special Appeals and holding that the previously unexplored crime of possession with intent to distribute narcotics was a crime relevant to a witness’s credibility); see also Ricketts v. State, 291 Md. 701, 436 A.2d 906 (1981) (reversing the Court of Special Appeals’ admission of the previously unexplored crime of indecent exposure).

186. Protin, supra note 181, at 1137.

187. Id. at 1133.
background. The final rule was “a compromise between the need to admit prior conviction evidence to impeach a witness and the accused’s right to a fair trial.” Maryland Rule 5-609 differs from Federal Rule of Evidence 609 in that it does not delineate any per se admissible categories of convictions, and further, on its face, seems to have more restrictive language as to which crimes are admissible. There are some significant differences between Maryland Rule 5-609 and Federal Rule 609. Notably, the Federal Rule mandates admission, meaning no balancing test is required, of crimes that involve false statements. Additionally, the Federal Rule allows admission of felony convictions, provided they survive a balancing test. Comparatively, Maryland Rule 5-609 has a cloudy “eligible universe” and requires a balancing test for all crimes.

Additionally, the Federal Rule establishes different balancing tests depending on the date of conviction, and the type of witness testifying. On the contrary, rule 5-609 provides only one balancing test and mandates that it be applied regardless of the type of witness testifying or type of conviction. Finally, the Federal Rule establishes a ten-year window for prior convictions to be eligible for impeachment, while rule 5-609 establishes a fifteen-year timeframe.

189. Robert D. Dodson, What Went Wrong with Federal Rule of Evidence 609: A Look at How Jurors Really Misuse Prior Conviction Evidence, 48 Drake L. Rev. 1, 10 (1999). However, “those favoring greater admission of prior conviction evidence got the better end of the compromise.” Id.
190. Protin, supra note 181, at 1131.
192. Id. A felony is defined as, “[a] serious crime usu. punishable by imprisonment for more than one year or by death.” Felony, Black’s Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019).
193. Jackson v. State, 340 Md. 705, 712, 668 A.2d 8, 12 (1995); see supra Sections II.C; II.E.
194. If the conviction is more than 10 years old,
Evidence of the conviction is admissible only if:

1. its probative value, supported by specific facts and circumstances, substantially outweighs its prejudicial effect; and

2. the proponent gives an adverse party reasonable written notice of the intent to use it so that the party has a fair opportunity to contest its use.

FED. R. EVID. 609(b)(1)–(2). The federal rule provides that “in a criminal case in which the witness is [the] defendant, . . . the probative value of the evidence [must] outweigh[] its prejudicial effect to that defendant.” FED R. EVID. 609(a)(1)(B). This is a higher threshold than if the witness is not the accused. FED R. EVID. 609(a)(1)(A).
195. McLain, supra note 49, at 154–55 (emphasis added); see also Goldberg, supra note 181, at 844–45 (noting that the application of the balancing test to all convictions “significantly changed trial practice in Maryland’s state courts”).
196. Compare FED. R. EVID. 609(b) (creating a ten-year admissibility timeframe for prior convictions) with MD. R. 5-609(b) (establishing a fifteen-year admissibility timeframe for prior convictions). Some Maryland judges have suggested that the more recent the conviction, the more probative it is to the witness’s credibility. Jackson v. State, 340 Md. 705, 717, 668 A.2d 8, 14 (1995). Thus, by extending the timeframe by five years, Maryland courts are increasing the number
Although Maryland Rule 5-609 appears on its face to be more restrictive than Federal Rule 609, depending on the underlying conviction, it can act more leniently. Under the Federal Rule, pure crimes of violence are admissible, whereas Maryland courts have specifically excluded these convictions. However, the Federal Rule excludes more crimes that involve dishonesty or false statements than Maryland Rule 5-609. For example, rule 609 rejects possession with intent to distribute as a crime bearing on a witness’s credibility. Further, rule 609 excludes crimes such as, theft and shoplifting from its per se admissible “dishonest act or false statement” prong, all of which would likely be permitted under rule 5-609. However, it is possible that these crimes could be admitted if they meet the qualifications of rule 609(a)(1)’s felony requirements.

The major advantage of Federal Rule 609 is the definitive language establishing different categories of per se impeachable crimes. Under the Federal Rule, crimes that require “dishonesty or false statement,” or are felonies punishable by more than one year are per se admissible, meaning of convictions eligible and increasing the possibility that a crime that does not bear on a witness’s credibility will be admitted. See United States v. Lewis, 626 F.2d 940, 946 (D.C. Cir. 1980) (ruling that possession with intent to distribute does not involve the type of dishonesty that Congress intended to exclude).

See United States v. Johnson, 388 F.3d 96 (3d Cir. 2004) (finding that theft is not a per se admissible offense under Federal Rule of Evidence 609(a)(2)).

they require no balancing test. Although federal courts still have to decide (1) whether the crime involves dishonesty or false statement and (2) if the crime does not, and the witness is a defendant, whether the probative value outweighs its prejudicial effect to the defendant, the majority of crimes do not require any balancing to be performed.

The ambiguity in Maryland’s Rule is two-fold. The first ambiguous step in the analysis is to determine whether the raised conviction is either an “infamous crime” or “other crime relevant to a witness’s credibility.” By drafting the Rule to say “other crime relevant to a witness’s credibility,” instead of a more definite class of crimes, such as felonies, Maryland trial judges have to make informed guesses as to whether the conviction qualifies under this category. Federal courts also allow trial judges to look to the facts of the conviction when determining whether or not a crime can be used for impeachment, eliminating the facial approach mandated in Maryland.

The second ambiguity is in rule 5-609(a)(2)’s requirement that all convictions be weighed to determine whether “the probative value of admitting the evidence outweighs the danger of unfair prejudice.” This balancing creates ambiguity because the Court of Appeals has not issued any hard-and-fast rules for trial judges to apply when conducting the balancing test. The Federal Rule only requires balancing for the narrow class of crimes where a defendant witness is being impeached for a felony that was punishable by more than one year. Through a clearer construction and nearly fifty years of federal litigation, Federal Rule of Evidence 609 provides a sound alternative to Maryland Rule 5-609 due to its per se admissible categories of eligible convictions that can be easily interpreted by trial judges.

2. A Clearer Future: State Evidence Law Solutions to Maryland Rule 5-609

Many states have crafted witness impeachment by use of a prior conviction rules that could serve as a workable alternative to Maryland Rule 5-609. Most states have adopted rules that resemble Federal Rule of

206. Lipscomb, 702 F.2d at 1056–57 (finding that the phrase “shall be admitted” gives a linguistic inference that all felonies should be admitted).
208. Md. R. 5-609(a)(1).
209. Id.
210. See Lipscomb, 702 F.2d at 1067 (suggesting that “specific facts will . . . prove relevant to the rule 609(a)(1) balancing”).
211. Md. R. 5-609(a)(2).
212. Goldberg, supra note 181, at 860.
213. FED R. EVID. 609(a)(1)(B).
214. See Dodson, supra note 189, at 22 n.201.
Evidence 609. California and Missouri depart from rule 609 and allow any conviction to be used to impeach a witness. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Montana does not allow any conviction to be used for the purposes of witness impeachment. This Section will propose two state evidence rule alternatives to replace Maryland Rule 5-609. Section IV.2.A will discuss Alabama Rule of Evidence 609 and its benefits, while Section IV.2.B. will explore Indiana Rule of Evidence 609 and its benefits.

a. Alabama Rule of Evidence 609

Alabama Rule of Evidence 609 provides trial judges with a workable framework to determine which convictions should be admitted. This Rule establishes the nature of the offense and the type of witness (accused vs. non-accused) as determinative factors in deciding the admissibility of a prior conviction. The Rule employs a more stringent balancing test for admission of an accused witness’s prior conviction and a less stringent test for admission of a non-accused witness’s prior conviction. This is a significant distinction that Maryland Rule 5-609 does not make.

215. See id. at 14; D.C. CODE § 14-305 (2001); NEB. REV. STAT. § 27-609 (West 1975); OKLA. STAT. ANN. tit. 12 § 27-2609 (West 2004); ARK. R. EVID. 609; MICH. R. EVID. 609; N.M. R. EVID. 11-609; S.C. R. EVID. 609; VT. R. EVID. 609; WASH. R. EVID. 609; WYO. R. EVID. 609.

216. See CAL. EVID. CODE § 788 (West 1967); MO. ANN. STAT. § 491.050 (West 2011).”

217. MONT. R. EVID. 609. Montana courts, however, “have not allowed witnesses to bolster their credibility by making false statements about past convictions.” Dodson, supra note 189, at 21.

218. The Rule states in relevant part:

(a) General rule. For the purpose of attacking the credibility of a witness,

(1)(A) evidence that a witness other than an accused has been convicted of a crime shall be admitted, subject to Rule 403, if the crime was punishable by death or imprisonment in excess of one year under the law under which the witness was convicted, and

(1)(B) evidence that an accused has been convicted of such a crime shall be admitted if the court determines that the probative value of admitting this evidence outweighs its prejudicial effect to the accused; and

(2) evidence that any witness has been convicted of a crime shall be admitted if it involved dishonesty or false statement, regardless of the punishment.

ALA. R. EVID. 609.


220. Under the Alabama Rule, the evidence is per se admissible if it was punishable by more than one year of imprisonment for a non-accused witness; however, if the witness is the accused then, the court must determine if “the probative value of admitting [the] evidence outweighs its prejudicial effect to the accused.” ALA. R. EVID. 609(a)(1)(B).

221. Compare ALA. R. EVID. 609(a)(1)(A) (announcing that “evidence that a witness other than an accused has been convicted of a crime shall be admitted, subject to Rule 403 . . .”), and ALA. R. EVID. 609(a)(1)(B) (announcing that “evidence that an accused has been convicted of such a crime shall be admitted if the court determines that the probative value of admitting this evidence outweighs its prejudicial effect to the accused”), with Md. R. 5-609(a)(2) (mandating that “the court determines that the probative value of admitting this evidence outweighs the danger of unfair prejudice to the witness”).
Further, the Rule mandates admission of convictions that “involve[] dishonesty or false statement, regardless of the punishment.”\(^\text{222}\) Alabama courts interpret “dishonesty” broadly.\(^\text{223}\) So long as the crimes “involve ‘dishonesty (meaning breach of honesty or trust, as lying, deceiving, cheating, stealing or defrauding) and bear[] directly on the capacity of a witness . . . to testify truthfully at trial’” the crimes are admissible.\(^\text{224}\) Importantly, if a balancing test is required, Alabama trial judges are permitted to inquire into the facts of a witness’s prior conviction to determine if the conviction would bear on a witness’s veracity.\(^\text{225}\) By delineating felonies and specifically defining what is meant by “dishonesty or false statement,” Alabama courts have given trial judges an adequate framework to determine which convictions are eligible.\(^\text{226}\)

The Alabama approach allows for a broader range of impeachable convictions while still focusing on the elements of dishonesty and untruthfulness. Alabama’s test is a substantive departure from the *crimen falsi* approach defined under the Federal Rule.\(^\text{227}\) By expanding the scope of per se admissible crimes, and limiting the number of crimes that require a balancing test, Alabama has eliminated much of the current ambiguity surrounding Maryland Rule 5-609.\(^\text{228}\) Specifically, by adopting Alabama’s Rule, Maryland would eliminate discretion from trial court judges and give litigants a clearer picture of which convictions are impeachable, while still protecting an accused-witness.

\(^{222}\) ALA. R. EVID. 609(a)(2).

\(^{223}\) Ex Parte Byner, 270 So. 3d 1162, 1166 (Ala. 2018) (citing C. GAMBLE & R. GOODWIN, McELROY’S ALABAMA EVIDENCE § 145.01(7)(c–d), at 871–72 (6th ed. 2009)).

\(^{224}\) Id. The court notes that examples of this category of crime include “burglary, robbery and larceny.” Id.

\(^{225}\) See, e.g., Snyder v. State, 893 So. 2d 488, 541 (Ala. Crim. App. 2003) (finding that “[t]he record shows that the trial court and both attorneys had copies of the case action summary sheets relating to the prior conviction and appeared to be aware of the specifics concerning the conviction”); Maxwell v. State, 387 So. 2d 328, 332 (Ala. Crim. App. 1980) (agreeing that shoplifting may be a crime relevant to credibility depending on the circumstances of the conviction).


\(^{227}\) Ex Parte Byner, 270 So. 3d at 1168–69. In deviating from the Federal Rule, the Alabama Supreme Court determined that while its rules of evidence are modeled on the federal rules, Alabama can choose to “not follow[] the federal majority view on this issue where to do so would change the state’s substantive law.” Huffman, 706 So. 2d at 813. *Crimen falsi* is a much narrower test that requires that the “very nature [of the crimes] permit the impeachment of a witness.” Ex Parte Byner, 270 So. 3d at 1167. Under Alabama’s approach, a crime “involves dishonesty or false statement” as long as the crime “bears directly on the capacity of a witness convicted of that offense to testify truthfully at trial.” Huffman, 706 So. 2d at 813–14.

\(^{228}\) See Ex Parte Byner, 270 So. 3d at 1164, 1170 (finding that robbery is per se admissible under Alabama Rule of Evidence 609 as well as “embezzlement, perjury, subordination of perjury, false statement, criminal fraud, false pretense, forgery, worthless check violations, failure to file tax returns, counterfeiting and bribery” (citing C. GAMBLE, McELROY’S ALABAMA RULE OF EVIDENCE §145.01(9), at 675–76 (5th ed 1996)));

\(^{229}\) see also Huffman, 706 So. 2d at 814 (noting that theft is a per se admissible crime).
b. Indiana Rule of Evidence 609

Indiana Rule of Evidence 609\(^{229}\) also provides a workable alternative to Maryland Rule 5-609. This Rule deviates from Federal Rule 609 by mandating admission of qualifying convictions.\(^{230}\) This deviation was no accident. Indiana specifically intended to eliminate the balancing portion of the Federal Rule.\(^{231}\) By mandating admission of convictions that fall within the scope of the Rule, Indiana has eliminated all discretion from trial judges, thus creating certainty as to which crimes will and will not be admitted.\(^{232}\) Indiana has taken this novel approach “to prevent the jury from inferring that the witness must be a liar merely because [they] ha[ve] done bad things.”\(^{233}\) Further, to guarantee that only crimes that bear on a witness’s credibility are admitted, Indiana courts allow for trial judges to examine the underlying facts of conviction when evaluating crimes that involve “dishonesty or false statement.”\(^{234}\) The Indiana case law, or lack thereof, suggests that Indiana Rule 609(a)’s hard-and-fast requirements have been successful; however, interestingly, rule 609(b)’s provision which requires trial courts to balance

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\(^{229}\) This Rule states in relevant part:

(a) General Rule. For the purpose of attacking the credibility of a witness, evidence that the witness has been convicted of a crime or an attempt of a crime must be admitted but only if the crime committed or attempted is (1) murder, treason, rape, robbery, kidnapping, burglary, arson, or criminal confinement; or (2) a crime involving dishonesty or false statement, including perjury.

(b) Limit on Using the Evidence After 10 Years. This subdivision (b) applies if more than ten (10) years have passed since the witness’s conviction or release from confinement for it, whichever is later. Evidence of the conviction is admissible only if:

1. its probative value, supported by specific facts and circumstances, substantially outweighs its prejudicial effect; and

2. the proponent gives an adverse party reasonable written notice of the intent to use it so that the party has a fair opportunity to contest its use.

\(^{230}\) See Britt v. State, 937 N.E.2d 914, 916 (Ind. 2010) (finding that the language of Indiana Rule of Evidence 609 is mandatory).

\(^{231}\) See Jenkins v. State, 677 N.E.2d 624, 627 (Ind. Ct. App. 1997) (finding that “Indiana has specifically rejected this part of the federal rule with the intention of preserving prior Indiana law in this area”); see also Ashton v. Anderson, 279 N.E.2d 210, 213 (Ind. 1972) (finding that it is clear that any person convicted “for the crimes of treason, murder, rape, arson, burglary, robbery, kidnapping, forgery and willful and corrupt perjury” are eligible to be impeached via their record of convictions).

\(^{232}\) Anderson, 279 N.E.2d at 216 (finding that “we see little wisdom in permitting the exclusion of such evidence to rest in the sound discretion of the trial court. Simply stated, either the particular criminal conviction reflects on the witness’ credibility for truth and veracity, or it does not”); Jenkins, 677 N.E.2d at 626–27.


\(^{234}\) See Fletcher v. State, 340 N.E.2d 771, 774–75 (Ind. 1976) (finding that for convictions like theft, attorneys should make the facts of conviction known to trial judges in pre-trial motions in limine).
convictions outside of the ten-year timeframe has attracted more litigation.235 By eliminating Maryland Rule 5-609’s mandatory balancing test and designating specific crimes as per se admissible, Indiana Rule 609 paints a clear picture as to which prior convictions are eligible for impeachment, which in turn, enables trial judges to make consistent rulings, and further results in litigants having a clear idea as to which convictions will be subject to impeachment.

V. CONCLUSION

In Rosales v. State, the Court of Appeals improperly held that VICAR convictions qualified as “other crime[s] relevant to the witness’s credibility” under Maryland Rule 5-609.236 In admitting VICAR convictions, the court severely blurred the line as to the impeachability of past convictions under the Rule.237 The Rosales decision highlights why the framework of Maryland Rule 5-609 is unworkable for trial judges and the intermediate appellate court.238 To cure this defect, the legislature should consider adopting a new rule that would provide trial judges with a more workable framework for determining which convictions can and cannot be used for impeachment.239 While no rule is necessarily perfect, Federal Rule of Evidence 609, as well as Alabama and Indiana Rules of Evidence 609, would provide trial judges with a sturdier platform to analyze admissible prior convictions for witness impeachment.240

235. See Whiteside v. State, 853 N.E.2d 1021, 1029–30 (Ind. Ct. App. 2006) (finding that the trial court erred in admitting defendant’s prior auto theft conviction because the state did not comply with Indiana Rule of Evidence 609(b)’s notice requirement); Scalissi v. State, 759 N.E.2d 618, 625 (Ind. 2001) (finding “that the trial court abused its discretion when it admitted stale convictions without an analysis of the facts and circumstances surrounding the convictions”); Dowdy v. State, 672 N.E.2d 948, 952 (Ind. 1996) (finding that the probative value of defendant’s previous conviction did overcome Indiana Rule of Evidence 609(b)’s presumption of inadmissibility).

236. See supra Part III.

237. See supra Section IV.A.2.

238. See supra Section IV.A.2.

239. See supra Section IV.B.

240. See supra Section IV.B.