

In the  
United States Court of Appeals  
For the Seventh Circuit

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No. 22-1587

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

*Plaintiff-Appellee,*

*v.*

JAMES F. WILLIAMS,

*Defendant-Appellant.*

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Appeal from the United States District Court for the  
Southern District of Illinois.

No. 4:98-cr-40093 — **Staci M. Yandle**, *Judge*.

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ARGUED DECEMBER 5, 2022 — DECIDED MARCH 2, 2023

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Before BRENNAN, SCUDDER, and ST. EVE, *Circuit Judges*.

SCUDDER, *Circuit Judge*. James Williams is serving a life sentence for various drug-related crimes committed while he was a leader for the Gangster Disciples in Carbondale, Illinois. Decades after his conviction, Williams asked a district court to reduce his sentence. The court denied his motion because Williams maintained his involvement with the Gangster Disciples while in prison. We affirm.

## I

In 1998 a federal grand jury indicted Williams, then a leader of the Gangster Disciples, on federal narcotics charges under 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and 846. A trial ended with a jury convicting Williams on all counts. The district court sentenced Williams to concurrent sentences of 240 months on two counts and a life sentence on a third count, owing in no small part to evidence showing that Williams directed a murder to further the gang's drug dealing activities. See U.S.S.G. § 2A1.1.

More than twenty years later Williams invoked the First Step Act of 2018 and sought to reduce his sentence to time served. See Pub. L. No. 115-391, 132 Stat. 5194. The statute gives district courts discretion to reduce the sentences of inmates who demonstrate that their original sentence reflected, among other things, the statutory penalties for crack cocaine offenses in place before the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010. See First Step Act § 404. Williams pointed not only to the revised penalty scheme but also to his advanced age, poor health, and record of good behavior in prison as justifications for relief.

Williams's motion met firm opposition from the government. The government's central concern was that Williams remained affiliated with the Gangster Disciples within federal prison and thus posed an ongoing risk to the public. Because Williams disputed that contention, the district court held a hearing to address whether, despite being incarcerated, he remained affiliated with the gang.

Prior to the hearing, the government proffered evidence to support its position. That evidence included photos of Williams posing within prison with other Gangster Disciples. The

government also produced investigative reports showing that Williams's affiliation extended beyond maintaining relationships with gang members and included helping distribute drugs for the gang within the prison. At the hearing, Williams disputed the extent of his involvement with the Gangster Disciples and the reliability of the government's evidence. But he admitted through his counsel that he continued his association with the Gangster Disciples.

That admission proved fatal to Williams's request for a reduced sentence. The district court explained that Williams's ongoing affiliation with the Gangster Disciples was by itself "sufficient" to deny relief—regardless of the precise extent of his involvement. But the district court went further and found that Williams was still participating in drug dealing with and for the gang. Right to it, the district court found that Williams "continues to demonstrate a lack of respect for the law," was "undeterred from criminal activity," and "continues to pose a significant danger to the community."

Williams now appeals.

## II

The First Step Act allows district courts to provide sentencing relief to certain defendants who were convicted of cocaine-related offenses. See First Step Act § 404. We have explained that the statute creates a two-step process. First the court must determine whether the defendant is eligible for relief under the statute. If so, "then the court faces the [second] question of whether it *should* reduce the sentence." *United States v. Hudson*, 967 F.3d 605, 610 (7th Cir. 2020). In making that assessment, the district court enjoys the same broad discretion traditionally afforded to initial sentencing

determinations. See *Concepcion v. United States*, 142 S. Ct. 2389, 2404 (2022). The district court may consider “any information relevant to the sentencing factors enumerated in 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a).” *United States v. Newbern*, 51 F.4th 230, 232 (7th Cir. 2022). We will reverse only if the district court abused that broad discretion. See *United States v. Fowowe*, 1 F.4th 522, 526 (7th Cir. 2021).

In this case our analysis is straightforward. Everyone agrees that Williams meets the First Step Act’s eligibility criteria for a reduced sentence, so the only issue is whether the district court properly exercised its discretion in denying the request.

As we see it, the district court properly grounded its reasoning in the sentencing factors in § 3553(a). The record is clear that even in prison, Williams remained affiliated with the Gangster Disciples. The government proffered significant evidence to support the allegation, and Williams himself admitted to the ongoing involvement. That admission weighed heavily in the district court’s final analysis. And for good reason: Williams’s affiliation with and leadership within the Gangster Disciples was central to the underlying offense conduct in his original case. See 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)(i) (providing that a sentencing court may consider “the nature and circumstances of the offense and the history and characteristics of the defendant”).

Williams’s ongoing involvement with the Gangster Disciples directly related to other sentencing factors as well. It showed that his sentence had not deterred him and that he posed an ongoing risk to the public. See *id.* (explaining that the sentence imposed should “afford adequate deterrence” and “protect the public from further crimes of the

defendant”). The district court acted well within the bounds of its broad discretion in denying relief based on Williams’s gang affiliation, and we can affirm on these grounds alone.

For his part, Williams urges a different outcome by contesting the reliability of the government’s evidence that he was distributing drugs within the prison. See *United States v. Perez*, 956 F.3d 970, 976–77 (7th Cir. 2020) (explaining that due process requires the sentencing court to consider only evidence with “sufficient indicia of reliability” (quoting *United States v. Taylor*, 72 F.3d 533, 543 (7th Cir. 1995))). But as we have explained in a related context, the court only needed “one good reason” to deny relief. *United States v. Rucker*, 27 F.4th 560, 563 (7th Cir. 2022) (affirming the denial of a compassionate-release motion).

The district court had that reason here. It made abundantly clear during the hearing and in its written order that Williams’s ongoing affiliation with the Gangster Disciples was alone enough to deny his motion for a shortened sentence. The district court’s further finding that Williams was distributing drugs for the Gangster Disciples was an independent yet unnecessary basis for denying his motion. We therefore do not need to delve into the particulars of that finding.

Seeing no error, we AFFIRM.