

NO. 12-15-00106-CR

IN THE COURT OF APPEALS

TWELFTH COURT OF APPEALS DISTRICT

TYLER, TEXAS

***WAVON LASHELTER OWENS,
APPELLANT***

§ ***APPEAL FROM THE 3RD***

V.

§ ***JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT***

***THE STATE OF TEXAS,
APPELLEE***

§ ***ANDERSON COUNTY, TEXAS***

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Wavon Lashelter Owens appeals his conviction of sexual assault of a child, for which he was sentenced to imprisonment for twenty-five years. In one issue, Appellant argues that his sentence amounted to cruel and unusual punishment and that the evidence is factually insufficient to support his punishment. We affirm.

BACKGROUND

Appellant was charged by indictment with sexual assault of a child and pleaded “guilty.” The indictment further alleged that Appellant previously was convicted of aggravated kidnapping. The matter proceeded to a bench trial on punishment, at which Appellant pleaded “true” to the enhancement allegation. Ultimately, the trial court found Appellant to be “guilty” as charged, found the enhancement allegation to be “true,” and sentenced Appellant to imprisonment for twenty-five years. This appeal followed.

CRUEL AND UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT

In his sole issue, Appellant argues that the twenty-five year sentence imposed by the trial court amounts to cruel and unusual punishment.¹ However, Appellant made no timely objection

¹ As part of his sole issue, Appellant cites *Zuniga v. State*, 144 S.W.3d 477 (Tex. Crim. App. 2004), and

to the trial court raising the issue of cruel and unusual punishment and has, therefore, failed to preserve any such error. See *Rhoades v. State*, 934 S.W.2d 113, 120 (Tex. Crim. App. 1996) (waiver with regard to rights under the Texas Constitution); *Curry v. State*, 910 S.W.2d 490, 497 (Tex. Crim. App. 1995) (waiver with regard to rights under the United States Constitution); see also TEX. R. APP. P. 33.1; *Mays v. State*, 285 S.W.3d 884, 889 (Tex. Crim. App. 2009). (“Preservation of error is a systemic requirement that a first-level appellate court should ordinarily review on its own motion[;] . . . it [is] incumbent upon the [c]ourt itself to take up error preservation as a threshold issue.”). But even despite Appellant’s failure to preserve error, we conclude that the sentence about which he complains does not constitute cruel and unusual punishment.

The Eighth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States provides that “[e]xcessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.” U.S. CONST. AMEND. VIII. This provision was made applicable to the states by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Meadoux v. State*, 325 S.W.3d 189, 193 (Tex. Crim. App. 2010) (citing *Robinson v. California*, 370 U.S. 660, 666–67, 82 S. Ct. 1417, 1420–21, 8 L. Ed. 2d 758 (1962)).

The legislature is vested with the power to define crimes and prescribe penalties. See *Davis v. State*, 905 S.W.2d 655, 664 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1995, pet. ref’d); see also *Simmons v. State*, 944 S.W.2d 11, 15 (Tex. App.—Tyler 1996, pet. ref’d). Courts have repeatedly held that punishment which falls within the limits prescribed by a valid statute is not excessive, cruel, or unusual. See *Harris v. State*, 656 S.W.2d 481, 486 (Tex. Crim. App. 1983); *Jordan v. State*, 495 S.W.2d 949, 952 (Tex. Crim. App. 1973); *Davis*, 905 S.W.2d at 664. In the case at hand, Appellant was convicted of sexual assault of a child, the punishment range for which, considering enhancements is five to ninety-nine years, or life. See TEX. PENAL CODE ANN. §§ 12.32(a), 12.42(b), 22.011(a)(2), (f) (West 2011 & Supp. 2015). Thus, the sentence imposed

suggests that the evidence in the case strongly supports that Appellant should have been sentenced to community supervision. However, a review of the evidence for factual sufficiency is inappropriate with respect to the assessment of punishment. See *Bradfield v. State*, 42 S.W.3d 350, 351 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 2001, pet. ref’d); see also *Smith v. State*, No. 12-03-00206-CR, 2003 WL 23015082, at *1 (Tex. App.—Tyler Dec. 23, 2003, no pet.) (mem. op., not designated for publication). Therefore, we limit the scope of our review of Appellant’s sole issue to the topic of disproportionate sentencing.

by the trial court falls within the range set forth by the legislature. Therefore, the punishment is not prohibited as cruel, unusual, or excessive per se.

Nonetheless, Appellant urges the court to perform the three part test originally set forth in *Solem v. Helm*, 463 U.S. 277, 103 S. Ct. 3001, 77 L. Ed. 2d 637 (1983). Under this test, the proportionality of a sentence is evaluated by considering (1) the gravity of the offense and the harshness of the penalty, (2) the sentences imposed on other criminals in the same jurisdiction, and (3) the sentences imposed for commission of the same crime in other jurisdictions. *Solem*, 463 U.S. at 292, 103 S. Ct. at 3011. The application of the *Solem* test has been modified by Texas courts and the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in light of the Supreme Court's decision in *Harmelin v. Michigan*, 501 U.S. 957, 111 S. Ct. 2680, 115 L. Ed. 2d 836 (1991) to require a threshold determination that the sentence is grossly disproportionate to the crime before addressing the remaining elements. *See, e.g., McGruder v. Puckett*, 954 F.2d 313, 316 (5th Cir. 1992), *cert. denied*, 506 U.S. 849, 113 S. Ct. 146, 121 L. Ed. 2d 98 (1992); *see also Jackson v. State*, 989 S.W.2d 842, 845–46 (Tex. App.–Texarkana 1999, no pet.).

We first must determine whether Appellant's sentence is grossly disproportionate. In so doing, we are guided by the holding in *Rummel v. Estell*, 445 U.S. 263, 100 S. Ct. 1133, 63 L. Ed. 2d 382 (1980). In *Rummel*, the Supreme Court addressed the proportionality claim of an appellant who had received a mandatory life sentence under a prior version of the Texas habitual offender statute for a conviction of obtaining \$120.75 by false pretenses. *See id.*, 445 U.S. at 266, 100 S. Ct. at 1135. A life sentence was imposed because the appellant also had two prior felony convictions—one for fraudulent use of a credit card to obtain \$80.00 worth of goods or services and the other for passing a forged check in the amount of \$28.36. *Id.*, 445 U.S. at 266, 100 S. Ct. at 1134–35. After recognizing the legislative prerogative to classify offenses as felonies and, further, considering the purpose of the habitual offender statute, the court determined that the appellant's mandatory life sentence did not constitute cruel and unusual punishment. *Id.*, 445 U.S. at 285, 100 S. Ct. at 1145.

In the case at hand, the offense committed by Appellant—sexual assault of a child—is far more serious than the combination of offenses committed by the appellant in *Rummel*, while Appellant's twenty-five year sentence is far less severe than the life sentence upheld by the Supreme Court in *Rummel*. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that if the sentence in *Rummel* was not unconstitutionally disproportionate, then neither is the sentence assessed against

Appellant in the case at hand. Therefore, since we do not find the threshold test to be satisfied, we need not apply the remaining elements of the *Solem* test. Appellant's sole issue is overruled.

DISPOSITION

Having overruled Appellant's sole issue, we *affirm* the trial court's judgment.

BRIAN HOYLE
Justice

Opinion delivered March 9, 2016.

Panel consisted of Worthen, C.J., Hoyle, J., and Neeley, J.

(DO NOT PUBLISH)



COURT OF APPEALS

TWELFTH COURT OF APPEALS DISTRICT OF TEXAS

JUDGMENT

MARCH 9, 2016

NO. 12-15-00106-CR

WAVON LASHELTER OWENS,
Appellant
V.
THE STATE OF TEXAS,
Appellee

Appeal from the 3rd District Court
of Anderson County, Texas (Tr.Ct.No. 31595)

THIS CAUSE came to be heard on the appellate record and briefs filed herein, and the same being considered, it is the opinion of this court that there was no error in the judgment.

It is therefore ORDERED, ADJUDGED and DECREED that the judgment of the court below **be in all things affirmed**, and that this decision be certified to the court below for observance.

Brian Hoyle, Justice.
Panel consisted of Worthen, C.J., Hoyle, J., and Neeley, J.