

**STORAGE NAME:** h0887.jud

**DATE:** March 3, 2000

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
AS REVISED BY THE COMMITTEE ON  
JUDICIARY  
ANALYSIS**

**BILL #:** HB 887

**RELATING TO:** Similar Fact Evidence

**SPONSOR(S):** Committee on Crime & Punishment and Representative Ball

**TIED BILL(S):** None

**ORIGINATING COMMITTEE(S)/COMMITTEE(S) OF REFERENCE:**

- (1) CRIME AND PUNISHMENT YEAS 7 NAYS 0
  - (2) JUDICIARY
  - (3)
  - (4)
  - (5)
- 

**I. SUMMARY:**

Section 90.404(2)(a), Florida Statutes, governs the admissibility of collateral crime evidence in criminal trials. Section 90.404(2)(a), F.S., permits admission of similar fact evidence of other crimes, wrongs, or acts when relevant to prove a material fact in issue, such as proof of motive, opportunity, intent, preparation, plan, knowledge, identity, or absence of mistake or accident, but it is inadmissible when the evidence is relevant solely to prove bad character or propensity.

HB 887 adds a provision to s. 90.404(2), F.S., to admit collateral crime evidence of the defendant's other acts of "child molestation" in cases where the defendant is charged with an act of "child molestation." The bill also clarifies that evidence of the defendant's other acts of child molestation is admissible as long as, in the court's discretion, it does not become a feature of the trial.

HB 887 also deletes the reference to "similar fact" evidence in s. 90.404(2)(a), F.S. In addition, the bill allows notice of the state's intention to use evidence of other crimes to be given to the defendant or the defendant's counsel to satisfy the statutory notification requirement.

II. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS:

A. DOES THE BILL SUPPORT THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES:

- |                                   |                              |                             |   |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. <u>Less Government</u>         | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. <u>Lower Taxes</u>             | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. <u>Individual Freedom</u>      | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. <u>Personal Responsibility</u> | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. <u>Family Empowerment</u>      | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

B. PRESENT SITUATION:

**Prosecution of Cases of Child Sexual Abuse**

Cases of child sexual abuse can be difficult for prosecutors to prove if the crime consists of lewd fondling, digital penetration, or the child being forced to perform sex acts upon the assailant and there is no physical evidence left by the commission of the crime. Frequently, these crimes take place when the child is alone with the assailant. In such cases, the child's testimony is the only evidence of the crime, and the child's credibility becomes the pivotal factor in the case.

In cases such as these, evidence that the defendant has also sexually abused children at other times can be a tool to assist juries in weighing the credibility of child victims. The knowledge that a defendant has sexually assaulted other children can be the deciding factor in the mind of a juror on whether to believe or disbelieve the testimony of a child victim.

**Similar Fact/Collateral Crime Evidence**

Section 90.404(2)(a), Florida Statutes, currently provides:

(2) OTHER CRIMES, WRONGS, OR ACTS.--

(a) Similar fact evidence of other crimes, wrongs, or acts is admissible when relevant to prove a material fact in issue, such as proof of motive, opportunity, intent, preparation, plan, knowledge, identity, or absence of mistake or accident, but it is inadmissible when the evidence is relevant **solely** to prove bad character or propensity. (Emphasis added)

Under this provision, evidence of other crimes or actions (also called "collateral crime" or "similar fact" evidence) is admissible when it is relevant to a matter that is at issue in a trial. Such evidence cannot be admitted, however, if it is **only** relevant to show the defendant's propensity to commit such crimes or other wrongful acts. In other words, if the evidence shows a defendant's propensity to commit such crimes, **and** it is relevant to prove things such as the defendant's motive, plan, intention, or opportunity to commit the crime, the evidence is admissible under this section. See Williams v. State, 110 So. 2d 654 (Fla. 1959).

Section 90.404(2)(a), Florida Statutes, is the codification of the rule regarding the admissibility of collateral crime evidence announced in Williams. In Williams, the Florida Supreme Court upheld the admission of the similar fact evidence and expressed the rule both in terms of when such evidence is admissible, and when it is not:

Our view of the proper rule simply is that relevant evidence will not be excluded merely because it relates to similar facts which point to the commission of a separate crime. The test of admissibility is relevancy. The test of inadmissibility is a lack of relevancy.

*Id.* at 659-660.

The court further stated:

As we did in Talley v. State, we emphasize that the question of relevancy of this type of evidence should be cautiously scrutinized before it is determined to be admissible. **Nonetheless, relevancy is the test.** If found to be relevant for any purpose save that of showing bad character or propensity, then it should be admitted. (Emphasis added).

*Id.* at 662.

Similarity of detail or uniqueness are not required for the admission of similar fact evidence of other crimes, wrongs or acts.<sup>1</sup> Professor Charles Ehrhardt points out: "Thus it can be misleading to refer to this evidence as 'similar fact' evidence because similarity of the facts involved in the collateral act or crime does not insure relevance for admissibility. Similarly, evidence of collateral crimes may be relevant and admissible even if it is not similar."<sup>2</sup>

Heuring v. State, 513 So. 2d 122 (Fla. 1987), Rawls v. State, 649 So. 2d 1350 (Fla. 1994), and Saffor v. State, 660 So. 2d 668 (Fla. 1995), are the lead Florida cases on the admission of collateral crime evidence in child sexual abuse cases. The three cases noted above have generated two standards for admitting collateral crime evidence in cases of child sexual abuse. A "strict similarity" standard which applies to cases of child sexual abuse when there **is no** familial relationship between the defendant and the victim. And a "relaxed similarity" standard for cases when there **is** a familial relationship between the defendant and the victim. See Saffor v. State, 660 So. 2d 668 (Fla. 1995). The basis for the different standards for cases occurring inside versus outside the familial relationship is unclear.

In Saffor v. State, 625 So. 2d 31 (Fla. 1st DCA, 1993), the defendant was convicted of sexual battery of his girlfriend's ten-year-old son. Saffor was living in the same home as the victim at the time of the offense, and had fathered two other children with the victim's mother. Saffor, 625 So. 2d at 32. Saffor and the victim were sleeping in the same bed when Saffor pulled down the victim's pants and sodomized him. *Id.* Similar fact evidence was introduced regarding a prior conviction of attempted lewd assault on Saffor's twelve-year-old niece that occurred four years earlier. *Id.* The incident took place when she spent the night at "her aunt's house" (presumably Saffor's home too). *Id.* Saffor entered her room while she was sleeping, put his hand down her pajamas and started rubbing her vagina. *Id.* Saffor withdrew his hand when she told him to leave. *Id.* at 32-33. The First District Court of Appeal found that the evidence was sufficiently similar, and upheld the admission of the evidence.

The Florida Supreme Court, in Saffor v. State, 660 So.2d 668, 672 (Fla. 1995), vacated Saffor's conviction on the ground that the crime charged and the collateral crime "bore little resemblance to each other." The court found that the similarities were not sufficient to admit

---

<sup>1</sup> See Williams v. State, 621 So.2d 413, 414 (Fla. 1993)(stating that evidence of other crimes can be admissible "even if not similar, if it is probative of a material fact in issue."); Bryan v. State, 533 So. 2d 744, 746 (Fla. 1988), cert. denied, 490 U.S. 1028 (1989)(stating that the Williams rule "does not bar the introduction of evidence of other crimes which are factually dissimilar to the charged crime if the evidence of other crimes is relevant.").

<sup>2</sup> C. Ehrhardt, Florida Evidence, Section 404.09, at 174 (1999 Edition).

the evidence even under the "relaxed" standard. Saffor, 660 So. 2d at 672. In both instances, however, the child victims were in a familial relationship with the defendant, both incidents took place while the victims were in bed sleeping, one victim was ten years old and the other twelve, and Saffor was attracted only to each child's lower bodily orifices. Id. at 669. In making their ruling the Florida Supreme Court attached great weight to facts such as that one victim was male and the other female, that the victims were not exactly the same age, that the offenses occurred at different locations and "different times of the day," and that they took place at "different time frames." Saffor, 660 So. 2d at 672.

The First District Court of Appeal made the following comment regarding the current standard:

The standard that has been crafted is unfortunately extremely unwieldy to apply. Our trial judges are being called upon on a case by case basis to determine whether certain alleged sex acts performed by an adult upon one child are sufficiently similar to other sex acts allegedly performed upon another child to meet the standard of admissibility. Hardly an enviable task.

Rowland v. State, 680 So.2d 502, 504 (Fla. 1st DCA 1996).

### C. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

HB 887 adds a provision to section 90.404(2), Florida Statutes, to admit collateral crime evidence of the defendant's other acts of "child molestation" in cases where the defendant is charged with an act of "child molestation."

The term "child molestation" is defined as conduct proscribed by sections 794.011 and 800.04 when the act is committed against a victim 16 years of age or younger. The conduct proscribed under these sections is the following:

1. Sexual Battery under section 794.011,
2. Lewd or Lascivious Battery under section 800.04(4),
3. Lewd or Lascivious Molestation under section 800.04(5),
4. Lewd or Lascivious Conduct under section 800.04(6), or
5. Lewd or Lascivious Exhibition under section 800.04(7).

Evidence admitted under the bill's newly created section could be considered "for its bearing on any matter to which it is relevant."<sup>3</sup>

Currently, all forms of relevant evidence are also scrutinized under section 90.403 which precludes the admission of relevant evidence "if its probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice" (also known as a "403 balancing test"). An argument could be made that evidence of the defendant's other acts of child molestation is, by its very nature, too unfairly prejudicial to be admitted and should, therefore, be excluded under section 90.403. As applied by the courts, however, the "403 balancing test" requires the exclusion of "similar fact" evidence when it becomes a "feature of the trial."<sup>4</sup> HB 887 clarifies that evidence of the defendant's other acts of child molestation is admissible as long as, in the court's discretion, it does not become a feature of the trial. Simply arguing that the evidence is "too prejudicial" will not be a basis to exclude such evidence.

---

<sup>3</sup> The language allowing evidence to be considered "for its bearing on any matter to which it is relevant" is from Federal Rule 414 regarding "Evidence of Similar Crimes in Child Molestation Cases."

<sup>4</sup> See Fernandez v. State, 730 So. 2d 277, 282 (Fla. 1999); Bush v. State, 690 So. 2d 670, 673 (Fla. 1st DCA 1997); Travers v. State, 578 So. 2d 793, 797-798 (1st DCA), rev. den., 584 So. 2d 1000 (Fla. 1991), State v. Richardson, 621 So. 2d 752, 755 (Fla. 5th DCA 1993).

The bill also deletes the reference to "similar fact" evidence in section 90.404(2)(a). In addition, the bill allows notice of the state's intention to use evidence of other crimes to be given to the defendant or the defendant's counsel to satisfy the statutory notification requirement.

The bill provides an effective date of July 1, 2000.

III. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT:

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

N/A

2. Expenditures:

N/A

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

N/A

2. Expenditures:

N/A

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

N/A

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.

IV. CONSEQUENCES OF ARTICLE VII, SECTION 18 OF THE FLORIDA CONSTITUTION:

A. APPLICABILITY OF THE MANDATES PROVISION:

This bill is exempt from the requirements of Article VII, Section 18 of the Florida Constitution because it is a criminal law.

B. REDUCTION OF REVENUE RAISING AUTHORITY:

This bill does not reduce the authority that municipalities or counties have to raise revenues in the aggregate.

C. REDUCTION OF STATE TAX SHARED WITH COUNTIES AND MUNICIPALITIES:

This bill does not reduce the percentage of a state tax shared with counties or municipalities.

V. COMMENTS:

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

This bill expands the admissibility of evidence of collateral crimes in cases of child sexual abuse to consideration "on any matter to which it is relevant." This expansion tracks the federal rule with the exception that the federal standard has not restated its "403 balancing test" with regard to these cases. This bill states that collateral crime evidence will be admitted if relevant and if it does not become a feature of the trial.

Opponents of such an expansion could argue that the admissibility of similar fact evidence in this manner would violate the "fundamental fairness" component of the due process clause of the constitution. The argument is essentially that the admission of such evidence would permit a jury to convict the defendant as punishment for his other bad acts, rather than for his charged crime. Such arguments, however, have generally been rejected in federal court (where there is a presumption in favor of admission) in challenges made to the federal rules.<sup>5</sup> In addition, similar arguments have been raised in opposition to a comparable California provision, and have been defeated.<sup>6</sup> In the federal cases and in the California cases, the courts found that a defendant's due process rights were protected because the trial court was still required to determine whether the probative value of the evidence outweighed any unfair prejudice.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, this bill prevents collateral crimes evidence from becoming a feature of the trial so a defendant's right to a fair trial would be protected.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

N/A

C. OTHER COMMENTS:

N/A

---

<sup>5</sup> See U.S. v. Enjady, 134 F.3d 1427, 1431-1433 (10th Cir. 1996)(holding that a presumption in favor of admission of evidence of prior sexual assaults does not violate due process); U.S. v. LeCompte, 131 F.3d 767, 770 (8th Cir. 1997)(reversing a trial court order excluding collateral crime evidence and noting that Federal Rule 414 is intended to overrule cases holding that collateral crime evidence in child sex cases is unfairly prejudicial).

<sup>6</sup> People v. Fitch, 63 Cal.Rptr.2d 753, 760 (3rd DCA 1997)(holding that analogous California evidence code provision does not violate due process).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Enjady; LeCompte; United States v. Castillo, 140 F.3d 874, 883 (10th Cir. 1998)(noting that courts are still required to perform a 403 balancing test and holding that "Rule 414 on its face does not violate the constitutional guarantee of due process.").

**STORAGE NAME:** h0887.jud

**DATE:** March 3, 2000

**PAGE 7**

VI. AMENDMENTS OR COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES:

N/A

VII. SIGNATURES:

COMMITTEE ON CRIME AND PUNISHMENT:

Prepared by:

Staff Director:

David M. De La Paz

David M. De La Paz

AS REVISED BY THE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY:

Prepared by:

Staff Director:

L. Michael Billmeier, J.D.

P.K. Jameson, J.D.