



Administrative Office of the Courts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 23, 2026

Supreme Court affirms conviction of Albuquerque man for a murder when he was 17-years-old

SANTA FE – The state Supreme Court today upheld the first-degree murder conviction of Ruben Benavidez for fatally shooting his mother’s boyfriend in 2022 in Albuquerque.

In a unanimous opinion written by Justice Julie J. Vargas, the Court rejected Benavidez’s arguments there was insufficient evidence that he had the necessary criminal intent for willful and deliberate murder. Benavidez contended that he did not deliberately kill Cedric Guzman but instead he was provoked.

The Court set aside one of Benavidez’s two convictions for evidence tampering as a violation of constitutional protections against double jeopardy — multiple punishments for the same crime. The evidence showed that Benavidez hid two pieces of evidence – the murder weapon and a hoodie – “on only one conceptually distinct occasion,” the justices stated.

Benavidez was 17-years-old at the time of the crime. He and a younger sister lived at their mother’s home but had not seen her for a week. They called their father to pick them up and help find her. They located the mother’s car at the victim’s apartment. The father went to the door and asked whether the children’s mother was there. Guzman shut the door without responding.

Benavidez walked past his father and kicked the door twice. Guzman opened the door and stepped outside toward the teenager. Guzman and Benavidez exchanged words. Guzman spat at Benavidez, who fired two shots from a handgun inside the pocket of his hoodie. Guzman stumbled back into the apartment. Bullets struck his arm and abdomen. He later died. Benavidez and his father walked away. A security camera recorded the shooting.

The father dropped Benavidez and his sister at their older sister’s apartment, where Benavidez hid his handgun in a ceiling vent and put his hoodie under a couch in a trash bag. When police found the evidence, the hoodie’s right pocket had a bullet hole and two shell casings matching the handgun.

Benavidez’s “provocative actions, words, and demeanor towards Victim” provided part of the evidence for the jury to find he deliberately intended to kill Guzman, the Court stated.

“Defendant arranged to be taken to Victim’s apartment on the morning of the killing, and after confirming Victim’s presence in that apartment, approached Victim in a highly confrontational

manner. He violently kicked on the front door of the apartment, checked the gun in his pocket, and then goaded Victim by trading insults and telling Victim to ‘do something.’ The jury could reasonably infer a deliberate intent to kill from Defendant’s engagement with and immediate aggression towards Victim,” the Court wrote.

The justices rejected arguments by Benavidez that the trial court erred in instructions to the jury about provocation and that there was prosecutorial misconduct in certain statements during closing arguments of the trial.

Benavidez was sentenced to 30 years in prison with eight years suspended. The trial court was not required to sentence Benavidez to life imprisonment because he was 17-years-old at the time of the killing — what the law considers a serious youthful offender.

In his appeal, Benavidez challenged a five-year period of parole imposed as part of his sentence. He contended it should have been two years because he was not sentenced to life imprisonment. State law requires five years of parole for a sentence of life imprisonment but a lesser parole term for noncapital felony convictions.

The Court concluded the five-year parole period for Benavidez was legal. The case represented the first time the Supreme Court addressed the question of what parole term applied to a serious youthful offender convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to less than life imprisonment.

In analyzing the law, the justices noted that the Legislature “designated first-degree murder a capital felony, not a first-degree felony,” for which a two-year parole term would apply.

“The district court’s mitigation of Defendant’s sentence does not transform the legislative classification of his capital crime,” the Court stated.

The justices concluded that “the Legislature intended that a serious youthful offender convicted of first-degree murder serve a five-year period of parole, regardless of any mitigation in the offender’s prison sentence.”

###

To read the decision in *State v. Benavidez*, No. S-1-SC-40452, please visit the New Mexico Compilation Commission's website using the following link:

<https://nmonesource.com/nmos/nmsc/en/item/537870/index.do>