

The state and federal Constitutions guarantee a defendant facing criminal charges the right to a speedy trial, thereby protecting the accused from an unduly lengthy period in which criminal charges are pending. (See U.S. Const., 6th Amend.; Cal. Const., art. I, § 15.) A principal statute implementing the right to speedy trial in California is Penal Code section 1382, which requires dismissal of the charges if the defendant is not “brought to trial” within the period prescribed by the statute, unless “good cause” is shown for the delay. Ordinarily, chronic court congestion does not constitute good cause in the absence of exceptional circumstances.

Defendant was charged with selling or transporting a controlled substance, a felony. (Health & Saf. Code, § 11379, subd. (a).) His case, along with criminal prosecutions in four other cases, had reached the last day for trial permitted by section 1382, but the “calendar court” (the court responsible for assigning cases for trial) at the central courthouse in the City of Riverside was unable to identify a courtroom anywhere in the county that was available to commence a criminal trial. At 4:15 p.m., however, a courtroom became available at a branch courthouse in Indio, some 76 miles away, but defendant and defense counsel would not be able to travel there before the close of business because of the distance between the two courthouses.

The Supreme Court must consider whether, under the circumstances, defendant could be “brought to trial” in the Indio courtroom within the terms of section 1382, and whether the time required to travel between the courthouses in the City of Riverside and Indio constitutes “good cause” or an exceptional circumstance justifying delay of the trial.