

§ 15A-1340.16. Aggravated and mitigated sentences.

(a) Generally, Burden of Proof. – The court shall consider evidence of aggravating or mitigating factors present in the offense that make an aggravated or mitigated sentence appropriate, but the decision to depart from the presumptive range is in the discretion of the court. The State bears the burden of proving beyond a reasonable doubt that an aggravating factor exists, and the offender bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that a mitigating factor exists.

(a1) Jury to Determine Aggravating Factors; Jury Procedure if Trial Bifurcated. – The defendant may admit to the existence of an aggravating factor, and the factor so admitted shall be treated as though it were found by a jury pursuant to the procedures in this subsection. Admissions of the existence of an aggravating factor must be consistent with the provisions of G.S. 15A-1022.1. If the defendant does not so admit, only a jury may determine if an aggravating factor is present in an offense. The jury impaneled for the trial of the felony may, in the same trial, also determine if one or more aggravating factors is present, unless the court determines that the interests of justice require that a separate sentencing proceeding be used to make that determination. If the court determines that a separate proceeding is required, the proceeding shall be conducted by the trial judge before the trial jury as soon as practicable after the guilty verdict is returned. If at any time prior to rendering a decision to the court regarding whether one or more aggravating factors exist, any juror dies, becomes incapacitated or disqualified, or is discharged for any reason, an alternate juror shall become a part of the jury and serve in all respects as those selected on the regular trial panel. An alternate juror shall become a part of the jury in the order in which the juror was selected. If an alternate juror replaces a juror after deliberations have begun, the court must instruct the jury to begin its deliberations anew. In no event shall more than 12 jurors participate in the jury's deliberations. If the trial jury is unable to reconvene for a hearing on the issue of whether one or more aggravating factors exist after having determined the guilt of the accused, the trial judge shall impanel a new jury to determine the issue. A jury selected to determine whether one or more aggravating factors exist shall be selected in the same manner as juries are selected for the trial of criminal cases.

(a2) Procedure if Defendant Admits Aggravating Factor Only. – If the defendant admits that an aggravating factor exists, but pleads not guilty to the underlying felony, a jury shall be impaneled to dispose of the felony charge. In that case, evidence that relates solely to the establishment of an aggravating factor shall not be admitted in the felony trial.

(a3) Procedure if Defendant Pleads Guilty to the Felony Only. – If the defendant pleads guilty to the felony, but contests the existence of one or more aggravating factors, a jury shall be impaneled to determine if the aggravating factor or factors exist.

(a4) Pleading of Aggravating Factors. – Aggravating factors set forth in subsection (d) of this section need not be included in an indictment or other charging instrument. Any aggravating factor alleged under subdivision (d)(20) of this section shall be included in an indictment or other charging instrument, as specified in G.S. 15A-924.

(a5) Procedure to Determine Prior Record Level Points Not Involving Prior Convictions. – If the State seeks to establish the existence of a prior record level point under G.S. 15A-1340.14(b)(7), the jury shall determine whether the point should be assessed using the procedures specified in subsections (a1) through (a3) of this section. The State need not allege in an indictment or other pleading that it intends to establish the point.

(a6) Notice of Intent to Use Aggravating Factors or Prior Record Level Points. – The State must provide a defendant with written notice of its intent to prove the existence of one or more aggravating factors under subsection (d) of this section or a prior record level point under G.S. 15A-1340.14(b)(7) at least 30 days before trial or the entry of a guilty or no contest plea. A defendant may waive the right to receive such notice. The notice shall list all the aggravating factors the State seeks to establish.

(a7) Procedure When Jury Trial Waived. – If a defendant waives the right to a jury trial under G.S. 15A-1201, the trial judge shall make all findings that are conferred upon the jury under the provisions of this section.

(b) When Aggravated or Mitigated Sentence Allowed. – If the jury, or with respect to an aggravating factor under G.S. 15A-1340.16(d)(12a) or (18a), the court, finds that aggravating factors exist or the court finds that mitigating factors exist, the court may depart from the presumptive range of sentences specified in G.S. 15A-1340.17(c)(2). If aggravating factors are present and the court determines they are sufficient to outweigh any mitigating factors that are present, it may impose a sentence that is permitted by the aggravated range described in G.S. 15A-1340.17(c)(4). If the court finds that mitigating factors are present and are sufficient to outweigh any aggravating factors that are present, it may impose a sentence that is permitted by the mitigated range described in G.S. 15A-1340.17(c)(3).

(c) Written Findings; When Required. – The court shall make findings of the aggravating and mitigating factors present in the offense only if, in its discretion, it departs from the presumptive range of sentences specified in G.S. 15A-1340.17(c)(2). If the jury finds factors in aggravation, the court shall ensure that those findings are entered in the court's determination of sentencing factors form or any comparable document used to record the findings of sentencing factors. Findings shall be in writing. The requirement to make findings in order to depart from the presumptive range applies regardless of whether the sentence of imprisonment is activated or suspended.

(d) Aggravating Factors. – The following are aggravating factors:

- (1) The defendant induced others to participate in the commission of the offense or occupied a position of leadership or dominance of other participants.
- (2) The defendant joined with more than one other person in committing the offense and was not charged with committing a conspiracy.
- (2a) The offense was committed for the benefit of, or at the direction of, any criminal gang as defined by G.S. 14-50.16A(1), with the specific intent to promote, further, or assist in any criminal conduct by gang members, and the defendant was not charged with committing a conspiracy.
- (3) The offense was committed for the purpose of avoiding or preventing a lawful arrest or effecting an escape from custody.
- (4) The defendant was hired or paid to commit the offense.
- (5) The offense was committed to disrupt or hinder the lawful exercise of any governmental function or the enforcement of laws.
- (6) The offense was committed against or proximately caused serious injury to a present or former law enforcement officer, employee of the Department of Public Safety or the Department of Adult Correction, jailer, fireman, emergency medical technician, ambulance attendant, social worker, justice or judge, clerk or assistant or deputy clerk of court, magistrate, prosecutor, juror, or witness against the defendant, while engaged in the performance of that person's official duties or because of the exercise of that person's official duties.
- (6a) The offense was committed against or proximately caused serious harm as defined in G.S. 14-163.1 or death to a law enforcement agency animal, an assistance animal, or a search and rescue animal as defined in G.S. 14-163.1, while engaged in the performance of the animal's official duties.
- (7) The offense was especially heinous, atrocious, or cruel.
- (8) The defendant knowingly created a great risk of death to more than one person by means of a weapon or device which would normally be hazardous to the lives of more than one person.

- (9) The defendant held public elected or appointed office or public employment at the time of the offense and the offense directly related to the conduct of the office or employment.
- (9a) The defendant is a firefighter or rescue squad worker, and the offense is directly related to service as a firefighter or rescue squad worker.
- (10) The defendant was armed with or used a deadly weapon at the time of the crime.
- (10a) The defendant committed the offense on the property of a hospital as defined in G.S. 131E-76.
- (10b) The defendant committed the offense on the property of a medical practice which is defined as a professional corporation organized under or subject to Chapter 55B of the General Statutes and registered with the North Carolina Medical Board.
- (11) The victim was very young, or very old, or mentally or physically infirm, or handicapped.
- (12) The defendant committed the offense while on pretrial release on another charge.
- (12a) The defendant has, during the 10-year period prior to the commission of the offense for which the defendant is being sentenced, been found by a court of this State to be in willful violation of the conditions of probation imposed pursuant to a suspended sentence or been found by the Post-Release Supervision and Parole Commission to be in willful violation of a condition of parole or post-release supervision imposed pursuant to release from incarceration.
- (13) The defendant involved a person under the age of 16 in the commission of the crime.
- (13a) The defendant committed an offense and knew or reasonably should have known that a person under the age of 18 who was not involved in the commission of the offense was in a position to see or hear the offense.
- (14) The offense involved an attempted or actual taking of property of great monetary value or damage causing great monetary loss, or the offense involved an unusually large quantity of contraband.
- (15) The defendant took advantage of a position of trust or confidence, including a domestic relationship, to commit the offense.
- (16) The offense involved the sale or delivery of a controlled substance to a minor.
- (16a) The offense is the manufacture of methamphetamine and was committed where a person under the age of 18 lives, was present, or was otherwise endangered by exposure to the drug, its ingredients, its by-products, or its waste.
- (16b) The offense is the manufacture of methamphetamine and was committed in a dwelling that is one of four or more contiguous dwellings.
- (17) The offense for which the defendant stands convicted was committed against a victim because of the victim's race, color, religion, nationality, or country of origin.
- (18) The defendant does not support the defendant's family.
- (18a) The defendant has previously been adjudicated delinquent for an offense that would be a Class A, B1, B2, C, D, or E felony if committed by an adult.
- (19) The serious injury inflicted upon the victim is permanent and debilitating.

- (19a) The offense is a violation of G.S. 14-43.11 (human trafficking), G.S. 14-43.12 (involuntary servitude), or G.S. 14-43.13 (sexual servitude) and involved multiple victims.
- (19b) The offense is a violation of G.S. 14-43.11 (human trafficking), G.S. 14-43.12 (involuntary servitude), or G.S. 14-43.13 (sexual servitude), and the victim suffered serious injury as a result of the offense.
- (20) Any other aggravating factor reasonably related to the purposes of sentencing.

Evidence necessary to prove an element of the offense shall not be used to prove any factor in aggravation, and the same item of evidence shall not be used to prove more than one factor in aggravation. Evidence necessary to establish that an enhanced sentence is required under G.S. 15A-1340.16A may not be used to prove any factor in aggravation.

The judge shall not consider as an aggravating factor the fact that the defendant exercised the right to a jury trial.

Notwithstanding the provisions of subsection (a1) of this section, the determination that an aggravating factor under G.S. 15A-1340.16(d)(18a) is present in a case shall be made by the court, and not by the jury. That determination shall be made in the sentencing hearing.

(e) Mitigating Factors. – The following are mitigating factors:

- (1) The defendant committed the offense under duress, coercion, threat, or compulsion that was insufficient to constitute a defense but significantly reduced the defendant's culpability.
- (2) The defendant was a passive participant or played a minor role in the commission of the offense.
- (3) The defendant was suffering from a mental or physical condition that was insufficient to constitute a defense but significantly reduced the defendant's culpability for the offense.
- (4) The defendant's age, immaturity, or limited mental capacity at the time of commission of the offense significantly reduced the defendant's culpability for the offense.
- (5) The defendant has made substantial or full restitution to the victim.
- (6) The victim was more than 16 years of age and was a voluntary participant in the defendant's conduct or consented to it.
- (7) The defendant aided in the apprehension of another felon or testified truthfully on behalf of the prosecution in another prosecution of a felony.
- (8) The defendant acted under strong provocation, or the relationship between the defendant and the victim was otherwise extenuating.
- (9) The defendant could not reasonably foresee that the defendant's conduct would cause or threaten serious bodily harm or fear, or the defendant exercised caution to avoid such consequences.
- (10) The defendant reasonably believed that the defendant's conduct was legal.
- (11) Prior to arrest or at an early stage of the criminal process, the defendant voluntarily acknowledged wrongdoing in connection with the offense to a law enforcement officer.
- (12) The defendant has been a person of good character or has had a good reputation in the community in which the defendant lives.
- (13) The defendant is a minor and has reliable supervision available.
- (14) The defendant has been honorably discharged from the Armed Forces of the United States.
- (15) The defendant has accepted responsibility for the defendant's criminal conduct.

- (16) The defendant has entered and is currently involved in or has successfully completed either (i) a drug treatment program, (ii) an alcohol treatment program, or (iii) a mental, behavioral, or medical health-related treatment program, subsequent to arrest and prior to trial.
- (17) The defendant supports the defendant's family.
- (18) The defendant has a support system in the community.
- (19) The defendant has a positive employment history or is gainfully employed.
- (20) The defendant has a good treatment prognosis, and a workable treatment plan is available.
- (21) Any other mitigating factor reasonably related to the purposes of sentences.

(f) Notice to State Treasurer of Finding. – If the court determines that an aggravating factor under subdivision (9) of subsection (d) of this section has been proven, the court shall notify the State Treasurer of the fact of the conviction as well as the finding of the aggravating factor. The indictment charging the defendant with the underlying offense must include notice that the State seeks to prove the defendant acted in accordance with subdivision (9) of subsection (d) of this section and that the State will seek to prove that as an aggravating factor. (1993, c. 538, s. 1; 1994, Ex. Sess., c. 7, s. 6; c. 22, s. 22; c. 24, s. 14(b); 1995, c. 509, s. 13; 1997-443, ss. 19.25(w), 19.25(ee); 2003-378, s. 6; 2004-178, s. 2; 2004-186, s. 8.1; 2005-101, s. 1; 2005-145, s. 1; 2005-434, s. 4; 2007-80, s. 2; 2008-129, ss. 1, 2; 2009-460, s. 2; 2011-145, s. 19.1(h); 2011-183, s. 18; 2012-193, s. 9, 10; 2013-284, s. 2(b); 2013-368, s. 14; 2015-62, s. 4(a); 2015-264, s. 6; 2015-289, s. 3; 2017-186, s. 2(hhh); 2017-194, s. 17; 2021-94, s. 3; 2021-180, s. 19C.9(tt); 2022-6, s. 8.2(f); 2022-47, s. 17(a); 2022-58, s. 18(a); 2022-74, s. 19A.1(d); 2023-129, s. 8.3(a).)