

American court system: design and functions



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In the United States, in keeping with our bicameral system of government, we have a dual court system consisting of State and Federal courts. While each system is self-contained it is possible, though infrequent, for questions of State law to finish at the United States Supreme Court.

The systems and functions of the state and federal courts roughly mirror each other. The state courts system serves both trial and appellate functions and in turn, the federal court system serves these purposes at the federal level.

The Federal Courts may be divided into Article III courts, and non-Article III courts. Article III courts were established by/under Article III of the United States Constitution. The Court of International Trade, District Courts (94 in 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico), Courts of Appeals (12 geographic-based and another for the Federal Circuit), and the U. S. Supreme Court are all Article III courts. Non-Article III courts include Bankruptcy Courts, Tax Court, decisions by U. S. Magistrate Judges and Administrative Law judges (ALS) in various federal agencies.

United States District Courts are trial courts of original jurisdiction for federal cases with mandatory appellate jurisdiction over rulings by non-Article III courts. They adjudicate all federal crimes as well as some civil law cases. All federal felony cases are the responsibility of U. S. Magistrate judges.

State Courts vary considerably from state to state. In a broad sense, they all follow the pattern, in ascending order, of state minor trial courts, state major trial courts, state intermediate appellate courts, state high courts of last

resort (also known as state supreme courts), and the United States Supreme Court.

State minor trial courts include Municipal courts, Justice of the Peace courts and Magisterial District Courts. These courts serve as original jurisdiction courts for misdemeanor cases, both civil and criminal traffic violations and small civil claims.

State major trial courts, which may also be known as Superior Courts, Courts of common pleas and District courts, are trial courts of general jurisdiction. They are often arranged by county or groups of counties, to hear felonies and some civil cases. They sometimes have jurisdiction over minor trial courts.

State Intermediate Appellate Courts are used in forty out of fifty states. They have mandatory jurisdiction over rulings by the state's major trial courts. It is rare for criminal appellants to win on appeal here.

State high courts of last resort have both mandatory and discretionary jurisdiction over decisions by lower state courts. This court is a major policy maker for the state due to its position as the final decider on matters of state law.

The United States Supreme Court (the High Court of Last Resort in the United States) is arguably the most powerful court in the world. It has absolute control over the cases it hears via its discretionary appellate jurisdiction over decisions made by the U. S. Courts of Appeals. It has jurisdiction over the highest state courts when a question of federal law, to include federal

constitutional law, is at issue. Typically, less than a third of the cases heard by the country's highest court are criminal cases.

There are eight courts in the state of Alabama and three Federal districts. Alabama Court of the Judiciary oversees judicial officers and is assembled to hear complaints of the Judicial Inquiry Commission. Alabama Probate Courts deal with matters of probate and the governance of estates. Municipal courts in Alabama handle violations of city ordinances. District courts may be either criminal or civil. District civil courts handle small claims suits. District criminal courts handle state law violations, felonies, and misdemeanors. They can also accept a guilty plea in felony cases. Alabama Circuit Courts are state trial courts of general jurisdiction and have jurisdiction to hear civil and criminal cases. The Alabama Court of Criminal appeals presides over appeals in criminal cases. Civil appeals are the domain of the Alabama Court of Civil appeals. At the top of the hierarchy is the Alabama Supreme Court, the state's court of last resort. District courts in Alabama are in the 11th Circuit. They trial courts of original jurisdiction over federal cases.

A criminal case that goes to trial may end up using trial, appellant and supreme courts. This basic structure and sequence is the same in both state and federal courts. Trial courts of general jurisdiction hear felonies and non-small claims civil cases. They may also have appellate jurisdiction over a state's minor trial courts. A case may end at this level if the defendant is convicted and does not appeal, or if he is found innocent. Appellate courts have jurisdiction over decisions made by the major trial courts. Appellate courts do not rule on guilt or innocence but rather on whether the trial was conducted properly. It is rare for a defendant to win at the appellate level. If <https://assignbuster.com/american-court-system-design-and-functions/>

the decision of the appellate court is challenged the case will proceed to the State Supreme court, also known as the State court of last resort. Typically, the State Supreme Court hears only a few criminal cases annually. In order to move ahead to the United States Supreme Court, a case must include a question of federal law or federal constitutional law.

All states do not have the same court design. Part of the purpose of a dual court system is to allow states the freedom to govern themselves and to be separate and independent of the federal government. This being the case, each state has developed its own court system and terminologies that serve the people of that state. While the overall structures of the court of one state may be similar to another/others, the fact that each state has its own unique laws guarantees variations in their court systems.