

Pathways to the Supreme Court of the United States

Cases Come from Federal and State Courts

Federal Court System

13 Number of Federal Courts of Appeals.
The final deciders in all but ~ 100 appeals taken by the U.S. Supreme Court

U.S. Courts of Appeals

When parties think the trial court made an error in their case, they, usually, can ask a U.S. Court of Appeals to examine the proceedings, the law(s) used, and the decision.

Typically, three judges on the bench review what happened during the trial. They analyze the trial court record to see if there was unfairness in the process and/or errors in what law was selected and how it was applied.

At an appeal, there is:

No jury.

No witnesses.

No new evidence.

94 Number of Federal Trial Courts

U.S. District Courts

A judge presides over a trial to make sure the process is fair, and to decide what law(s) to apply. When there is no jury, the judge listens to the witnesses, weighs the evidence, applies the law, and makes the final decision.

In a jury trial, the judge does not make the final decision. Jurors analyze the evidence -- the testimony and the exhibits. They decide the facts based on what evidence is credible and relevant. The judge decides what law(s) to apply. The jury makes the final decision.

What is Evidence?
+Witness testimony
+Exhibits



Start Here

State Court System

52 Number of State Courts of Last Resort

State Courts of Last Resort

State Courts of Last Resort have different titles in different states. In some states they are called the State Supreme Court. However, all review cases appealed from intermediate courts of appeals and trial courts. Some of their decisions can be appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States.

46 Number of Intermediate Courts of Appeals

Intermediate Courts of Appeals

Many states have an intermediate court that handles most of the appeals from the trial courts. These courts usually work in three-judge panels. Decisions can be appealed to the highest court in the state -- the court of last resort.

~16,000 Number of Trial Courts

State Trial Courts

State trial courts handle the vast majority of legal cases in the nation. They hear criminal, civil, domestic relations, juvenile, and traffic matters. Problem-solving courts deal with issues such as drugs and mental health.

This is a teaching tool to simplify key points for students. Find more information at: uscourts.gov Education Resources