

Introduction

The *Court Statistics Report (CSR)* is published annually by the Judicial Council, Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). The CSR combines 10-year statewide summaries of superior court filings and dispositions with similar workload indicators for the California Supreme Court and Courts of Appeal.

The 2006 *Court Statistics Report* and the Judicial Council's 2006 *Annual Report* are intended to help fulfill the provisions of article VI, section 6 of the California Constitution, which requires the Judicial Council to survey the condition and business of the California courts. The CSR also provides the statistical basis for many of the workload trends identified and interpreted in the annual report—which furnishes an overview of the major activities and projects undertaken by the judicial branch in the previous calendar year to improve court administration, as well as analysis and interpretation of trends in the workload of the courts during the previous fiscal year.

The CSR is published on the California Courts Web site at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/reference/3_stats.htm.

SNAPSHOT OF COURT CASELOAD

The *Court Statistics Report* contains essential information about the branch's yearly caseload—specifically, the numbers and types of cases that are filed and disposed of in the courts. This information is submitted to the California Legislature and used in numerous judicial branch reports. As with any published data, the numbers contained in this report represent a snapshot of the most complete and reliable information available at the time of compilation.

To ensure that the statistics used for making policy decisions are as accurate as possible, courts may amend the data they submit to the AOC as new, more detailed information becomes available. For this reason the data contained in this report may change slightly over time as courts revise their numbers and submit new caseload estimates.

VARIATIONS IN DATA TOTALS

Missing Data

Statewide trends in filings and dispositions may be influenced by numerous factors. For example, changes in the numbers of filings and dispositions may reflect shifts in the needs or behavior of residents of a court's service area, as well as new policy emphases in the work of justice system partners. Statewide totals in the CSR may also be influenced by missing data for certain courts.

Typically, when courts do not report data to the AOC, it is because they have encountered difficulties with the generation of automated reports from their case management systems. Generally, filings data submitted by the courts tend to be more complete than disposition data. (See Appendix A for a list of courts that have not submitted data to the AOC for fiscal year 2004–2005.)

Incomplete Data

A second influence on the totals of filings and disposition statistics in this report is "incomplete data." The reporting of incomplete data typically occurs when courts transmit "partial data totals" for a particular case type due to the limits of their case management systems. It should be noted that incomplete data are more difficult to spot in the tables that follow, but in general they suggest apparent downward shifts in the number of filings and dispositions. Incomplete data for fiscal year 2004–2005 are detailed in Appendix A.

Changes in Reporting Categories

When a court reviews existing or new case classification definitions, it may determine that it needs to reclassify its filings or disposition data into different case categories. While this process reflects a quality control system that is working to improve the accuracy of data submitted to the AOC, it also may suggest a significant shift in the number of filings or dispositions from one case type to another. On that basis, caution is advised in the interpretation of data when workload in related cases appears to have shifted but overall totals remain relatively stable.

Variation in Local Business Practices

One important purpose of the Judicial Branch Statistical Information System (JBSIS) is to standardize the basic definitions of case types and case events across all courts in California. Another component of JBSIS is automated reporting directly from the courts' case management systems to the AOC. Converting to JBSIS case classification and reporting involves:

- Training court staff on the standards for the classification, entry, and reporting of data;
- Providing information to the courts for resolving technical questions associated with data processing and aggregation;
- Developing and adopting new case management system infrastructure in the court; and
- Instituting the use of JBSIS quality control measures.

Although a growing number of courts now transmit their data electronically from the case management system to the AOC, there continue to be differences among superior courts' case processing and other business practices that reflect the histories of individual courts and the unique needs of the communities they serve. These differences may influence the ways in which superior courts report data to the AOC. On that basis, while the filings and disposition data reported by any one court are largely comparable to data from other courts, some local variations in the classification and reporting of cases still occur.

STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

In certain respects, every filing is unique. Civil lawsuits or criminal filings that come before the courts are grouped in case categories, but each case has unique characteristics and must be treated accordingly to ensure that justice is served. Court filings and disposition data represent key measures of court workload, but there are other factors that also must be considered.

For example, the filing of a felony may result in numerous court appearances and actions, whereas the filing of a traffic infraction may not involve any court appearances and may be resolved through the payment of a fine by mail. Yet each of these cases is counted as one filing—and, in the aggregate, they appear equal statistically. Thus, it is critical to distinguish between cases that have differential impacts on the work of the courts. Felonies, personal injury lawsuits, and family and juvenile matters are examples of high-workload cases; infractions and small claims are examples of relatively low-workload cases.

Following are summaries of filings and dispositions for the Supreme Court, Courts of Appeal, and superior courts.

Supreme Court

- The court issued 125 written opinions in 2004–2005.
- Filings for the California Supreme Court totaled 8,990, and dispositions totaled 8,535, in 2004–2005.
- Automatic appeals arising out of judgments of death totaled 18 cases, and dispositions of automatic appeals numbered 29, in fiscal year 2004–2005.
- Habeas corpus filings arising out of related automatic appeals totaled 40, and dispositions of such matters totaled 36, in fiscal year 2004–2005.
- Petitions seeking review following Court of Appeal decisions in appeals and writs totaled 5,410 in fiscal year 2004–2005, while dispositions of such petitions totaled 5,135 in the same year.
- Original petitions for habeas corpus relief in noncapital cases filed in the Supreme Court totaled 3,066 in fiscal year 2004–2005, while dispositions of this type totaled 2,849 during the same period.
- The Supreme Court ordered 16 Court of Appeal opinions depublished in 2004–2005.

Courts of Appeal

- Filings for the Courts of Appeal totaled 23,754 in fiscal year 2004–2005. This figure is composed of 15,080 notices of appeal and 8,674 original proceedings.
- Filings of notices of appeal included 6,312 criminal cases, 6,142 civil cases, and 2,626 juvenile cases. Filings of original proceedings included 5,339 criminal matters, 2,517 civil matters, and 818 juvenile matters.¹
- Dispositions in the Courts of Appeal totaled 24,358 in fiscal year 2004–2005. Of these dispositions, 15,856 were appeals and 8,502 were original proceedings.
- Dispositions of appeals by written opinion totaled 10,975, and appeals disposed without written opinion totaled 4,881, in fiscal year 2004–2005. Dispositions of original proceedings by written opinion totaled 772, and appeals disposed without written opinion totaled 7,730, in fiscal year 2004–2005.
- Of the cases disposed by written opinion in fiscal year 2004–2005, 9,151 were affirmed, 1,198 were reversed, and 262 were dismissed.
- Statewide, 8 percent of Court of Appeal majority opinions were published in 2004–2005.

Superior Courts

- Superior court case filings across all case categories totaled 8,972,056, and dispositions totaled 7,582,573, in fiscal year 2004–2005.

Within these aggregate numbers, the following totals in major case categories were recorded.

- Civil filings totaled 1,423,097, and civil dispositions totaled 1,294,900, in fiscal year 2004–2005.

¹Note that, while family law filings are reported as a separate category in the superior courts, these cases are grouped under the general heading of civil law in the appellate courts.

- Criminal filings totaled 7,385,219, and criminal dispositions totaled 6,148,544, in fiscal year 2004–2005.
- Juvenile filings totaled 134,726, and juvenile dispositions totaled 112,493, in fiscal year 2004–2005. Family filings totaled 473,205, and family dispositions totaled 392,665, in fiscal year 2004–2005.
- Appeal filings in the superior courts totaled 4,649, and appeal dispositions in these courts totaled 4,281, in fiscal year 2004–2005.
- Civil unlimited cases reached disposition at the following pace in fiscal year 2004–2005: 64 percent were disposed within 12 months, 84 percent within 18 months, and 92 percent within 24 months. Civil limited cases reached disposition at a somewhat faster pace, with 83 percent disposed within 12 months, 91 percent within 18 months, and 94 percent within 24 months.
- Criminal cases reached disposition at the following pace in fiscal year 2004–2005: 57 percent were disposed in less than 30 days, 67 percent were disposed in less than 45 days, 81 percent were disposed in less than 90 days, and 91 percent were disposed in less than 12 months.
- A total of 9,952 jury trials were conducted across the state during fiscal year 2004–2005. This represents about 4.8 trials per judicial position equivalent.

THE CALIFORNIA COURT SYSTEM

The vast majority of cases in the California courts begin in one of the 58 superior, or trial, courts—which reside in each of the state’s 58 counties. With facilities in more than 450 locations, these courts hear both civil and criminal cases, as well as family, probate, and juvenile cases. The equivalent of more than 2,000 judicial positions address the full range of cases heard each year by the superior courts, as reflected in the sheer number of case filings and dispositions reported here. The trial courts report summaries of their case filing counts to the AOC. Those counts are reported here in aggregate form.

The next level of judicial authority within the state’s judicial branch resides with the Courts of Appeal. Most of the cases that come before the Courts of Appeal involve the review of a superior court decision that is being contested by a party to the case. The Legislature has divided the state geographically into six appellate districts, each containing a Court of Appeal. Currently, 105 appellate justices preside in nine locations in the state to hear matters brought for review. Totals of Court of Appeal case filings are forwarded to the AOC; these are summarized in the tables that follow.

The Supreme Court sits at the apex of authority in the state’s judicial system, and as such it may review decisions of the Courts of Appeal in order to settle important questions of law and ensure that the law is applied uniformly. The Supreme Court has considerable discretion in deciding which decisions to review, but it must review any case in which a trial court has imposed the death penalty. The Supreme Court sends the AOC its annual case filing figures, which are reported here in summary form.

CSR TERMINOLOGY AND COUNTING RULES FOR FILINGS

Technical definitions of most CSR terms can be found in the appendixes. Some core definitions are presented here in more detail.

Supreme Court and Courts of Appeal

APPEAL. An appeal is a proceeding undertaken to have a decision reconsidered by bringing it from a lower to a higher court of authority. A **notice of appeal** is a written notification that is filed with a superior court and is intended to initiate the appeal of a judgment to a higher court. A **fully briefed appeal** is one in which all briefs have been filed with the court. **Dismissal** of an appeal involves the termination of a case for reasons other than its merit. An appeal that is awaiting a final decision is said to be **pending**. A notice of appeal is counted as a **new filing**.

AUTOMATIC APPEAL. An automatic appeal is the appeal of a judgment of guilt in a case involving the death penalty. This type of appeal is unique because it moves directly from a trial court to the Supreme Court without first being reviewed by one of the Courts of Appeal. Like other types of appeals, an automatic appeal is counted as a new filing.

CASE REVERSAL. A reversal is the overturning of a lower court's decision by an appellate court. For purposes of tracking workload, case reversals are not counted separately from dispositions because a reversal is simply descriptive of the outcome of the appeal.

ORIGINAL PROCEEDING. An original proceeding is an action filed and heard for the first time in an appellate court. This action is not an appeal; rather, it is ordinarily a petition for a writ. Examples of original proceedings include a writ of mandamus, which instructs a lower court to perform mandatory duties correctly; a writ of prohibition or an order that forbids certain actions; and a writ of habeas corpus, which may be issued to bring a party before the court. An original proceeding is counted as a single new filing.

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS. A petition for the issuance of a writ of habeas corpus is typically filed to contest the legality of a party's imprisonment. A single habeas corpus petition may be filed simultaneously in any superior court and any appellate court. This writ is counted as a new filing.

RECORD OF APPEAL. A record of appeal is the compilation of documents and transcripts associated with a given trial court case that is under review by an appellate court. The record is a component of a new appellate case and as such is not counted separately from the initial appeal.

WRITTEN OPINION. A written opinion is a statement explaining an appellate court's final judgment in a case. The written opinion includes a statement of the legal facts in the case, relevant points of law, and the rationale for the decision. Written opinions may or may not accompany final judgments and are not counted separately from case filings in tracking workload.

Superior Courts

DISPOSITION. In a general sense, a disposition may be described as a final settlement or determination in a case. A disposition may occur either before or after a civil or criminal case has been scheduled for trial. A final judgment, a dismissal of a case, and the sentencing of a criminal defendant are all examples of dispositions. In certain case types, a disposition may merely signal the beginning of the court's authority over a case. For example, after the petition to appoint a conservator is disposed of in conservatorship cases, the court assumes control over that case. Rules for counting and reporting dispositions mirror those for filings, although a case filed in one year may be disposed by the court in a subsequent year.

FILING. In the most general sense, a filing is the initiation of a legal action with the court through a carefully prescribed legal procedure. The rules for counting filings are consistent with national standards for statistical reporting. These rules differ according to case type:

- Each filing in a **civil case** pertains to the complaint or petition that has been submitted to the court for action. A given civil complaint may name one or more individuals or groups as its object. However, regardless of the number of parties named in a case, each civil case is reported as one filing or one disposition.
- Each filing in a **criminal case** is associated with a single defendant against whom criminal charges have been filed. Multiple criminal charges may occur in a criminal case in which different charges have been brought against the same defendant. However, only the single most severe charge against a criminal defendant in a given case is counted as a new criminal filing. When multiple defendants are charged with a crime, multiple filings are reported.
- Each filing in a **juvenile case** pertains to a minor who is the subject of a petition made to the court for adjudication. A minor may have an initial filing that brought him or her to the attention of the court, and subsequent filings if new petitions or charges are filed over time. This practice continues until termination of the dependency or delinquency by the court or when the minor has reached the legal definition of adulthood. In a single case involving multiple minors, each minor is counted as a separate filing.