



State Courts Play a Key Role in American Life

From divorce to traffic tickets, overwhelming dockets impact millions of people every year

Overview

State courts in the U.S. decide cases that touch the lives of millions of Americans every year. These influential government entities directly affect the safety, well-being, and financial stability of people across the country through matters ranging from speeding tickets and similar minor, administrative issues to potentially life-altering cases, such as child custody and criminal trials.

In addition to the substantial implications for the people appearing in court, the massive numbers of cases and wide array of issues can also overwhelm court systems, causing problems for staff and exacerbating the effects on communities. Courts throughout the country have grappled with case backlogs since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many struggled to resolve cases expeditiously even before the health emergency.¹

Policymakers, community members, and other stakeholders who have the power to help ensure that courts operate effectively and administer justice equitably need reliable data about how courts work and which types of cases consume their resources and time. This information can help foster greater awareness and trust within their local communities; illuminate how well courts are serving the public; and inform legislative decision-making about how to direct resources and even whether some matters would be better handled outside of the courtroom through either court-operated initiatives, such as diversion programs, or referrals to community-based service organizations.²

To gain insight into the size and composition of U.S. state court dockets, The Pew Charitable Trusts examined the number and types of cases they manage. The researchers analyzed Court Statistics Project caseload data for 2022—the most recent available—which is sourced directly from state courts and includes municipal and local courts.³ Pew's team then created national estimates based on that data and found that state courts in the U.S. handle approximately 66 million cases each year—more than twice the annual number of arrests (8 million) and traffic stops (20 million), combined.⁴

The research team separated the matters heard by courts into four categories:

- Traffic, which includes both noncriminal violations, such as speeding tickets, and criminal charges, including driving on a suspended license.
- Community and business, which covers civil cases involving money or property.
- Public safety, which includes felony and misdemeanor criminal matters.
- Family, including divorce, child custody, and similar matters.

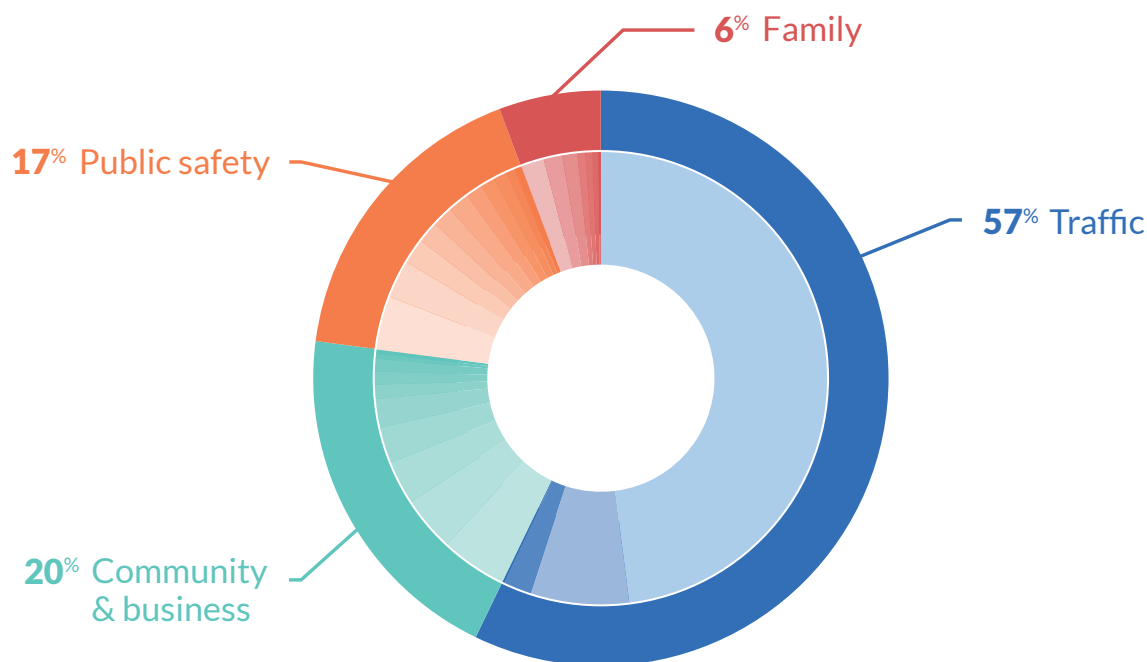
This effort revealed that, in contrast to the image of courts in popular media, most cases filed in state and local courts, while often of vital importance to the people affected, do not involve serious or violent crime. (For details on Pew's analysis, see the Appendix.) More than half (57%) of cases in 2022 were traffic related, mostly noncriminal violations. (See Figure 1.) About a fifth of cases (20%) pertained to community and business matters, such as landlord-tenant disputes and business-to-person debt lawsuits.⁵ An even smaller portion was related to public safety (17%), and family matters were the smallest share of cases (6%).⁶

Additionally, Pew's study highlighted key questions that legislators should be asking of court leadership to ensure that lawmakers have a clear picture of the challenges courts face and the types of supports and reforms they need to ensure that everyone who engages with the courts receives equal treatment under the law.

Figure 1

State and Local Courts Handle a Wide Variety of Matters, From Family Disputes to Traffic Tickets

Case types as a share of court filings, 2022



Source: Pew analysis of Court Statistics Project, CSP Stat, 2022

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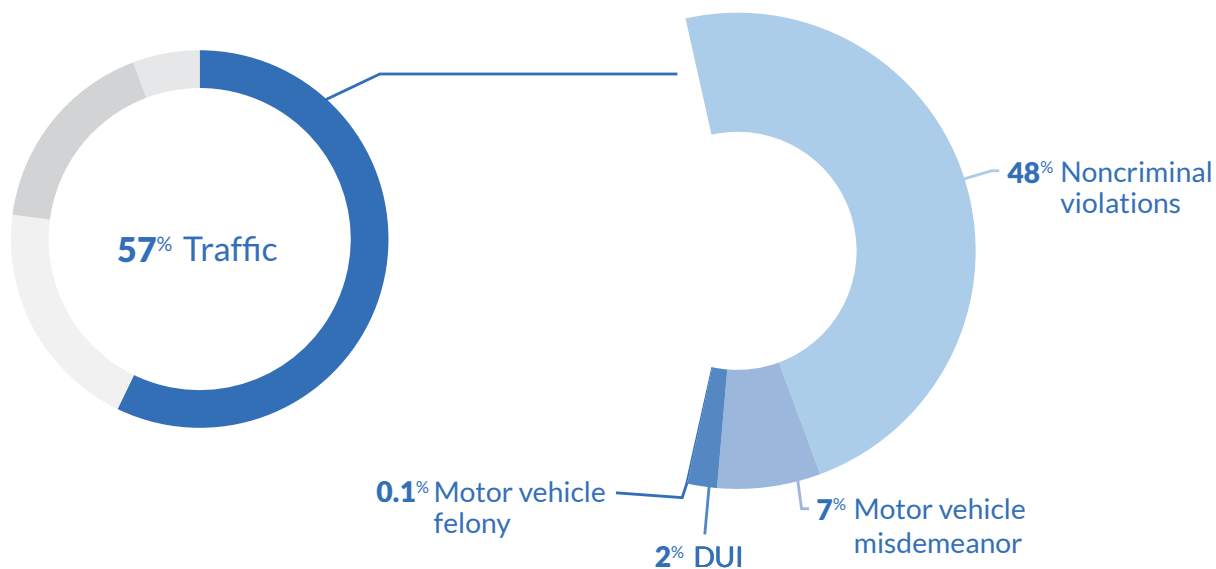
Traffic cases dominate court filings

Traffic matters made up 57% of state and local court filings in 2022—or about 38 million cases. The vast majority of those were noncriminal matters, such as speeding and parking tickets.⁷

Figure 2

More Than Half of State and Local Court Cases Are Traffic Related and Mostly Noncriminal

Types of traffic matters as a share of court filings, 2022



Source: Pew analysis of Court Statistics Project, CSP Stat, 2022

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Although some traffic cases can be handled easily online, others require an in-person court appearance, which can force people to miss work, school, and other obligations. And when people cannot afford to pay an issued ticket or fail to show up to court, what starts as a simple traffic matter can escalate into a cycle of costly court interactions, possibly leading to additional fines and fees, a bench warrant for arrest, license suspension, or even jail time. In North Carolina, for example, one study found that most missed court appearances were for traffic misdemeanors, such as driving with expired registration.⁸ State law requires the Department of Motor Vehicles to revoke the driver's license of anyone who misses a court appearance for these offenses, which led to more than 800,000 driver's license suspensions for missing court in 2018 alone. These suspensions can hamper people's ability to get to work, earn a living, and care for their families, and continuing to drive despite a suspension can lead to arrest and jail time.⁹

For courts, the sheer volume of minor traffic matters that they hear—even though many only take a minute or two of a judge's time—has the potential to consume valuable court resources. Processing large numbers of low-level, administrative matters may mean judges, clerks, and other court personnel have less capacity for cases that have more serious implications for community safety.

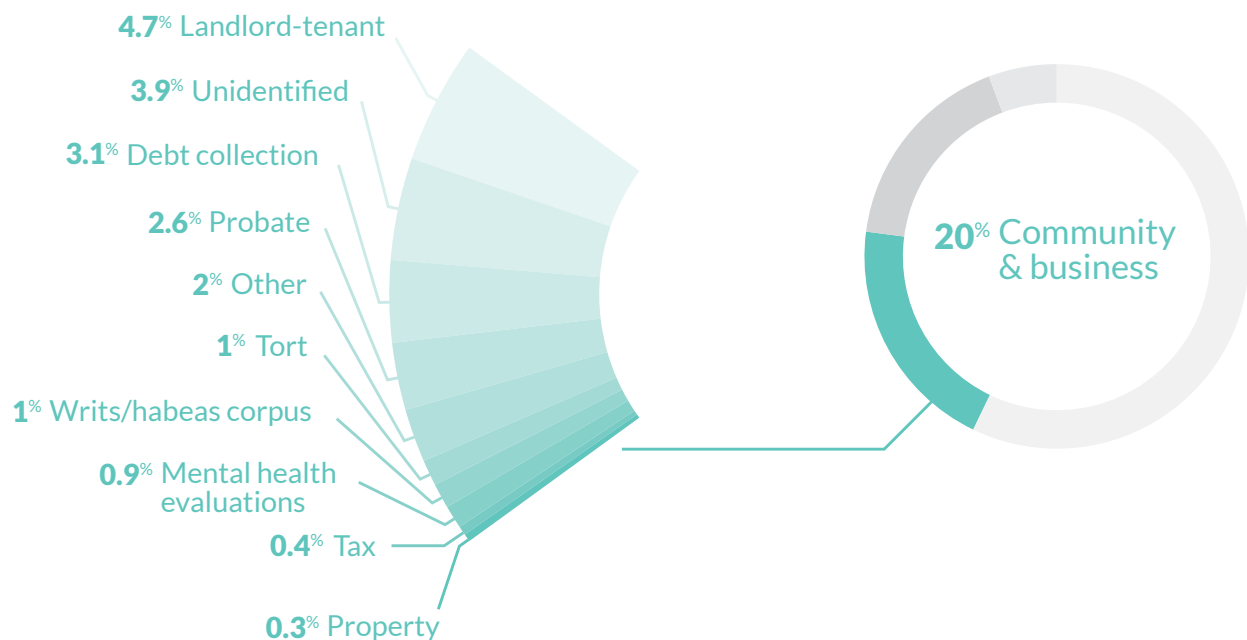
One-fifth of state court cases are related to communities and businesses

Overall, about 20% of state and local court cases, roughly 13 million, each year are business or community matters (see Figure 3), with most of those involving Americans struggling to afford basic needs.¹⁰ These included landlord-tenant matters (4.7% of all cases), such as evictions, and debt cases (at least 3.1%), usually a business suing an individual to collect a credit card or medical debt.¹¹ Other cases dealt with probate, such as wills (2.6%), and questions of mental health (less than 1%).¹²

Figure 3

Debt and Landlord-Tenant Cases Are the Main Community and Business Matters Heard by Courts

Types of community and business cases as a share of court filings, 2022



Source: Pew analysis of Court Statistics Project, CSP Stat, 2022

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For a small but meaningful share of community and business cases (3.9%), the specific matter was unidentified in the data, which partly obscured the key issues that bring individuals or businesses to court. Other research has shown, however, that most community and business claims involve businesses suing individuals, often for \$5,200 or less.¹³ Although these could be seen as small-dollar cases, court involvement can mean additional costs for the individual being sued, such as interest and attorney's fees, which can compound or even exceed the original amount of the claim.¹⁴

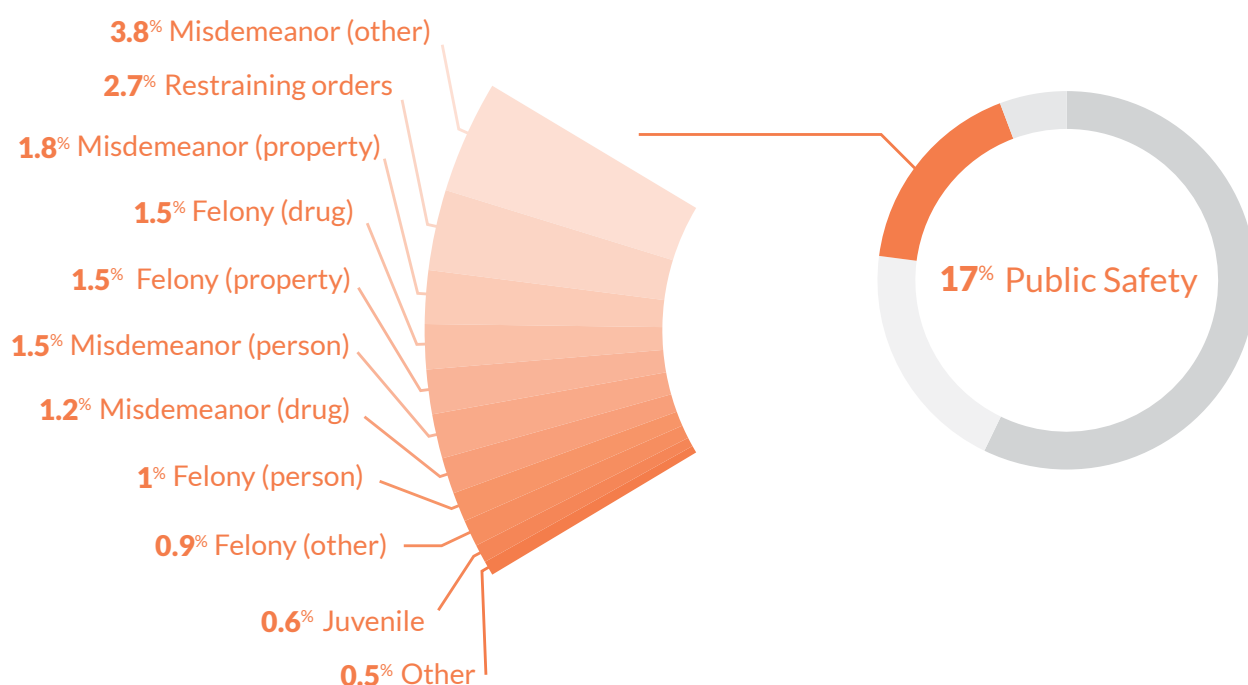
Public safety makes up less than a quarter of court business

Contrary to depictions on popular TV shows, the bulk of state court cases do not involve serious violent crime. (See Figure 4.) Most of the 11 million public safety cases filed in 2022 were charged as misdemeanors, such as shoplifting or drug offenses. And among all incoming cases, only 2.6% were alleged as either a misdemeanor or a felony committed against a person (e.g., assaults, robbery, sex offenses, and homicide). Protection order requests accounted for 2.7% of cases in state and local courts, and juvenile charges made up less than 1%.

Figure 4

Public Safety Matters Account for 1 in 6 Cases in State Courts—and Most Are Misdemeanors

Types of public safety cases as a share of court filings, 2022



Source: Pew analysis of Court Statistics Project, CSP Stat, 2022

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Although public safety cases represent only a small share of filings, they can have serious implications for the safety of communities and the rights of individuals. Criminal cases carry the potential of financial penalties and imprisonment, even before trial. When a case comes to court, the judge must determine next steps, including pretrial incarceration, bail, and possible electronic monitoring of the person charged. And because nationwide, 70% of the jail population on any given day is made up of people who have not yet been tried for the crimes for which they are being held, these court decisions affect not only individual freedoms, but also law enforcement and jail officials' ability to direct resources toward managing public safety and individuals who have been convicted of a crime rather than on those still facing trial.¹⁵

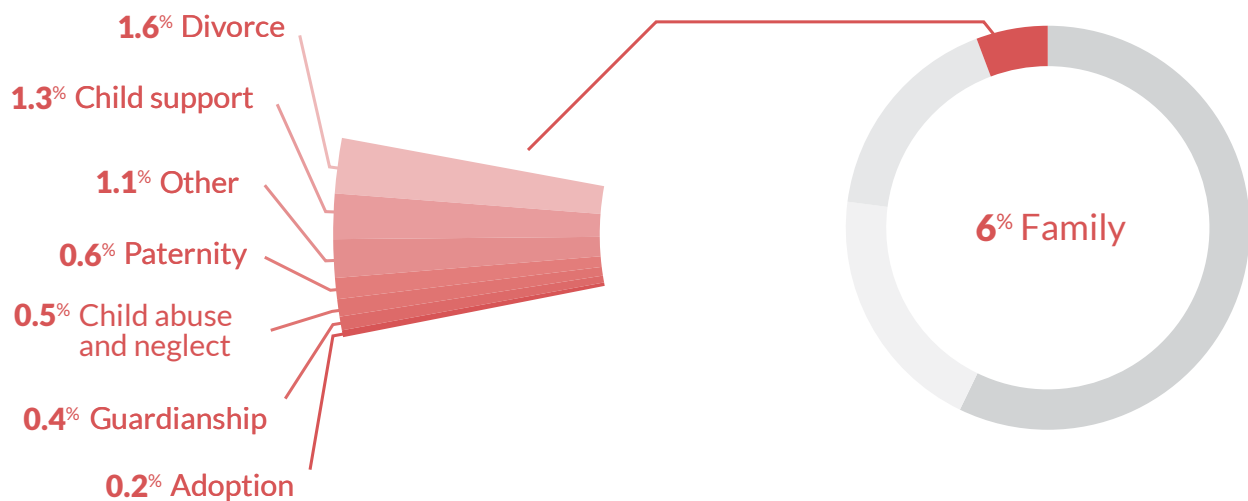
Though a Small Part of Court Dockets, Family Matters Have Serious Implications for Communities

Only about 6% of the cases that come before state and local courts are family matters. (See Figure 5.) The court's role in cases of divorce, child support, paternity, adoption, child abuse and neglect, and guardianship of children and adults directly affects the safety and security of children and families. In these matters—with families often facing acute time and emotional pressures—courts can either expeditiously settle these issues and enable families to move forward or they can delay resolution because of complex and costly procedures, prolonging and even exacerbating families' stress and costs.¹⁶

Figure 5

Divorce, Child Support, and Other Family Matters Are the Least Common Cases in State Courts

Types of family cases as a share of court filings, 2022



Source: Pew analysis of Court Statistics Project, CSP Stat, 2022

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Although these cases are the least common, they can be difficult and time-consuming for courts and families. Divorce (1.6%) and child support (1.3%) are the most common family case types, and if families' circumstances change, these cases can be reopened months or even years after a case is first brought to court, placing significant additional demands on court staff. Further, family cases frequently uncover other issues that courts must address, such as domestic violence, substance use disorders, or child abuse and neglect. These cases are complex and demanding for the court and have ongoing effects on people's well-being and stability.¹⁷

5 Questions State Legislators Should Be Asking About Courts

These national findings are critical to understanding the challenges facing state and local courts. However, each state needs to have a similar picture of their own courts' case mix and challenges. Although court administrators and judges decide how matters before the court should be handled, legislators make the laws that determine the range of matters that show up before the court. They also play a key role in shaping the funding available to courts to address those matters. Policymakers and others who want to learn more about how their courts function can start by looking at available data from their states and asking these key questions:

- 1. How are courts spending their time and resources?** Dockets will look different for each state, and understanding the composition of cases in a given state will shed light on the issues driving demand for staff time and other resources.
- 2. Who is affected by court operations?** Behind every case number on a docket is an individual, business, or family. Identifying the demographics of people using the court system is the first step to ensuring equal treatment under the law.
- 3. How much do court operations cost?** Understanding court operating expenses and unmet needs can help legislators make informed decisions during the budget process.
- 4. Is useful court data available?** Data about courts enables policymakers, community members, and other stakeholders to understand court operations and impacts. Court data should be informative as well as easy to access and digest.
- 5. What outcomes are courts achieving?** Although success can be difficult to define, courts and policymakers should strive to outline specific objectives and measure progress toward them.

Conclusion

Court systems and the myriad matters they handle are complex. High volumes of low-level administration matters may pull resources, including staff time, away from critical issues, such as determining the guilt or innocence of a person charged with a serious crime, deciding whether an individual's paycheck may be garnished to repay a debt, or choosing which family member should care for a child.

Understanding the volume and make up of state court cases is the first step for policymakers and court leaders in evaluating how resources are being used, reconsidering the role of courts in less serious case types, and making evidence-based changes to court operations. Given the size and scale of court operations, this is not an easy feat, but effective policies could help courts focus on the cases that would most benefit from their involvement, increasing system efficiencies while maximizing the positive—and minimizing the negative—impacts on communities.

Appendix: About the data

Pew researchers examined caseload data from the Court Statistics Project (CSP), a partnership between the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) and the Conference of State Court Administrators that sources data directly from state courts.

Because state courts vary in their organizational frameworks and case definitions, CSP has created a standardized reporting system to ensure comparable metrics and a holistic national snapshot. CSP staff review submitted data and work with in-state specialists to resolve questions and concerns. Data is not published if it is incomplete, incomparable, or not reported by the state.

CSP reports case counts for each state by the level of jurisdiction. In single-tiered states, only one jurisdiction is reported. In two-tiered states, case counts are reported separately for limited jurisdiction and general jurisdiction courts. CSP also consolidates related issues as a single case, reported as the most significant matter. For example, if a criminal case contains multiple charges, the most serious offense would be reported as a single case.

The data is publicly available through the CSP portal. More information about CSP's data collection, evaluation, and reporting can be found on its [website](#).¹⁸

Creating national estimates

Pew researchers used incoming case data from 2022 for all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; and Puerto Rico. The data included 105 types of cases for each jurisdiction. No jurisdiction had complete data, and six states did not report any publishable data in 2022 (Kansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Virginia, Washington). Researchers selected for analysis a subset of commonly reported case categories that had higher case counts. The research team also combined some related categories. See Table A.1 for the analyzed case types.

Missing data included instances where the court did not have jurisdiction over that case type or the data was unknown, incomplete, or otherwise incomparable. Researchers used [jurisdiction information](#) from the NCSC to distinguish missing data from instances when the court did not have jurisdiction.¹⁹

Researchers imputed missing data based on the reported data for each case type. They then coded each case type as a percentage of cases within its respective category (i.e., traffic, domestic relations, criminal, civil, and juvenile) and calculated an average for reported case types. Missing data was imputed as the average of the total cases for each category.

The research team then extrapolated national figures based on the resident populations of the states included in the analysis. Across case types, missing data was imputed based on reported data from at least 15 states and as many as 39 states.

Researchers also tested different approaches for addressing missing values, including multiple imputation and a modified version of complete case analysis. Because no states reported all the desired variables, complete cases within each category of traffic, criminal, civil, juvenile, and domestic relations cases were analyzed.

All approaches had similar results. The share of all cases for traffic varied by 3%, community and business by 1%, public safety cases by 2%, and family by less than 1%. Most individual case types were consistent across approaches, as well. The case types with the largest difference across approaches were landlord-tenant and motor vehicle misdemeanors (not DUI), which varied between 3% and 7% across approaches, and misdemeanor (other) which ranged between 4% and 8%. The multiple imputation analysis also resulted in a higher estimate of total cases nationally, at 72 million.

Table A.1

Pew-Analyzed and Court Statistics Project Case Types

Case type	CSP category	CSP case type
Traffic		
Non-criminal violations	Traffic	Total traffic
Traffic misdemeanor (not DUI)	Criminal	Total motor vehicle misdemeanors less motor vehicle misdemeanor DWI (criminal)
Traffic felony (not DUI)	Criminal	Total motor vehicle felonies less motor vehicle felonies DWI (criminal)
Driving while intoxicated (DUI)	Criminal	Misdemeanor DWI plus felony DWI
Public safety		
Restraining orders	Domestic relations & civil	Protection orders in civil and domestic relations courts
Juvenile	Juvenile	Juvenile delinquency
Felony (person)	Criminal	Felony person
Felony (drug)	Criminal	Felony drug
Felony (property)	Criminal	Felony property
Felony (other)	Criminal	All felonies less person, drug, property, and motor vehicle felonies
Misdemeanor (person)	Criminal	Misdemeanor person
Misdemeanor (drug)	Criminal	Misdemeanor drug
Misdemeanor (property)	Criminal	Misdemeanor property
Misdemeanor (other)	Criminal	All misdemeanors less person, drug, property, motor vehicle misdemeanors
Unknown crimes	Criminal	Remaining criminal cases, includes appeals

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Case type	CSP category	CSP case type
Community & business		
Unidentified	Civil	Small claims
Debt collection	Civil	Seller-plaintiff
Landlord-tenant	Civil	Landlord-tenant
Tort	Civil	Tort
Probate	Civil	All probate/estate less guardianship
Guardianship	Civil	Total guardianship
Mental health evaluations	Civil	Mental health
Real property	Civil	Total real property
Writs/habeas corpus	Civil	Writs plus habeas corpus
Tax	Civil	Tax
Other community & business	Civil	Remaining civil cases, includes appeals
Family		
Divorce	Domestic relations	Dissolution/divorce
Child support	Domestic relations	Child support
Paternity	Domestic relations	Paternity
Adoption	Domestic relations	Adoption
Child abuse or neglect	Juvenile	Juvenile dependency
Other family	Domestic relations & juvenile	Remaining domestic relations and juvenile cases

Source: Pew analysis of Court Statistics Project, *CSP Stat*, 2022

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External reviewers

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Endnotes

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