

Outline of the State and Federal Court Systems



Franz Jantzen, Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States

Supreme Court of the United States

The Supreme Court of the United States hears appeals of decisions by the United States Courts of Appeals and decisions made by the supreme courts of the states to the extent those decisions concern federal law. In most cases, the justices of the Supreme Court of the United States have the discretion to decide whether or not they will hear an appeal in a particular case.

State Supreme Courts

Each state has a supreme court, or equivalent, that hears appeals of decisions made by an intermediate court of appeals or trial court. Most states, but not all, have an intermediate court of appeals, as described below. On issues of state law, the decision of a state supreme court is the final word. If a decision made by a state supreme court involves a question of federal law, the Supreme Court of the United States may review the decision of the state supreme court.

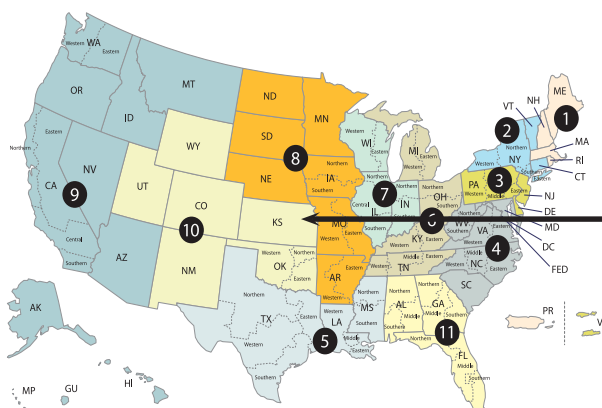
State Courts of Appeals

Most states have an intermediate court of appeals, which hears appeals of decisions by the state's trial courts. Usually, in a state with an intermediate court of appeals, a case will not be heard by the state's supreme court until the case first is decided by the intermediate court of appeals.

Federal Courts of Appeals

United States Courts of Appeals

Eleven federal circuit courts of appeals are designated numerically. A twelfth circuit court, the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, covers cases arising in the District of Columbia. The jurisdiction of these twelve federal circuit courts of appeals is defined by geography. These circuit courts hear appeals of cases resolved by the federal district courts within the boundaries of their circuit and appeals from certain federal administrative agencies. In contrast, the jurisdiction of the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, located in Washington D.C., is defined by the specialized subject matter of the cases heard by that court (e.g., cases on patent, trademark, and copyright, government contracts, and international trade).



United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit

The United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit hears appeals of cases resolved by the federal district courts within the six states that comprise the Tenth Circuit: Wyoming, Utah, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas, and Colorado. The Byron White United States Courthouse in Denver, Colorado, is the headquarters of the Tenth Circuit.

State Trial Courts

Each state has a system of trial courts that hear criminal cases arising under state law, civil cases arising under state law, and some civil cases arising under federal law.

Federal Trial Courts

United States District Courts

The United States district courts hear criminal cases arising under federal law, civil cases arising under federal law, and some civil cases arising under state law. The United States is divided into 94 federal judicial districts. In each district, there is a United States District Court, which is the federal trial court for that district. Many federal judicial districts are defined by a state's boundaries. Some states are divided into multiple judicial districts. No federal judicial district covers more than one state.

United States Bankruptcy Courts

Each federal judicial district includes a United States Bankruptcy Court, which operates under the supervision of the United States District Court for that district.