

## **Exploring the Role and Structure of U.S. Courts**

Eric K. Corpus

Old Dominion University

CRJS 222 (35246): The Criminal Justice System

Hayley Jackey

August 4, 2023

## **Exploring the Role and Structure of U.S. Courts**

The unique structure of the United States' court system, the only one worldwide comprising two parallel court systems at the national and state levels, is integral to its justice system (Porto, 2017, p. 29). These court systems are responsible for enforcing and interpreting the law, resolving disputes, and punishing those who violate it. The hierarchy and specialization inherent in this structure provide an effective platform to administer justice, ranging from minor civil disagreements to critical constitutional issues. Moreover, this architecture supports a checks and balances system via appeals. This paper investigates court hierarchies, various court types within the system, and the function, roles, and interaction of the system's critical components. Exploring this structure will shed light on the functions of the larger U.S. justice system.

The U.S. court system draws its structure from the federalism principle, which distributes power between the federal government and the states, a core tenet of the United States Constitution. The concept of federalism has led to the existence of separate court systems at the federal and state levels. Another key term to comprehend is jurisdiction, as discussed by Shaunnagh Dorsett and Shaun McVeigh describe as a court's authority to hear and rule on certain types of legal cases (Dorsett & McVeigh, 2012). Jurisdiction extends to personal, subject matter, and territorial realms. Personal jurisdiction relates to a court's power over the involved parties, while subject matter jurisdiction pertains to the court's power to hear the case type before it. Territorial jurisdiction is about the geographical area where a court holds authority.

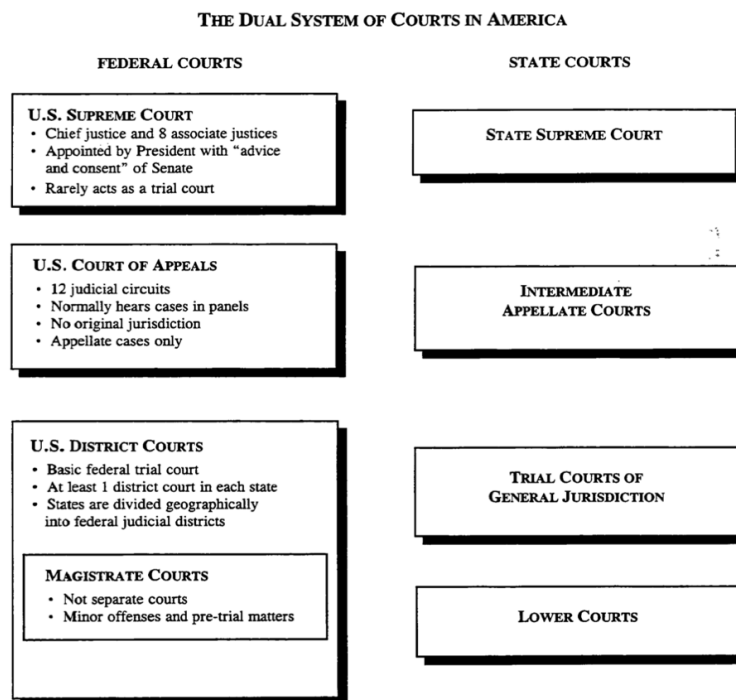
The court system operates in a structured hierarchical manner, progressing based on jurisdictional power and authority. This tiered structure ensures the effective functioning of the legal system by facilitating the appeals process and allowing for legal specialization. The appeal process, a key aspect of the court hierarchy, serves as a check and balance for lower court

decisions, reducing the risk of erroneous rulings through multiple layers of examination. The role of specialization is to ensure that specific cases are heard in the most suited courts, improving efficiency by leveraging unique court expertise (Kornhauser, 1995).

Typically, the court hierarchy consists of lower courts (also known as trial courts or courts of first instance), appellate courts, and supreme or highest courts. Lower courts handle a wide range of case subject matters at a more local level, while appellate courts review lower court decisions. Supreme or highest courts, situated at the top of the court hierarchy, handle constitutionally significant cases, and their decisions are generally final and unappealable. For instance, in the U.S. court system, District Courts serve as trial courts, Circuit Courts function as appellate courts, and the Supreme Court is the highest court (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

The Dual Court System



Note. Graphic representation of the Federal Courts and State Court structure. Adapted from "Federal and State Jurisdiction," by H. Wallace, 2000, in National Victim Assistance Academy (p. 2.1-13). Retrieved from <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/federal-and-state-jurisdiction-national-victim-assistance-academy-p>

Specialized courts such as criminal, civil, family, and probate courts exist within the court system, each serving specific functions and areas of focus. These courts are critical to ensuring that the legal system can address the diverse legal disputes and issues arising in society. Criminal courts deal primarily with cases where entities or individuals are accused of crimes, with the government or state prosecuting the alleged offender. Conversely, civil courts resolve disputes between private parties, including individuals, organizations, or companies, covering personal injury cases, contractual disputes, property issues, or defamation claims (Miller, 2019).

Family courts focus on family-related matters like divorce proceedings, child custody and visitation rights, child and spousal support, and adoption cases. Probate courts mainly address issues related to the estate of deceased individuals, including the validation of wills, and overseeing asset distribution. The distinct roles of these courts in handling specific case types underline their contributions to the court system's overall efficiency and effectiveness. Each court operates within the established system and jurisdictional boundaries, illustrating the complex and multifaceted nature of societal legal issues and the importance of a structured and specialized court system for effective resolution.

It is essential for society to have courts upholding the rule of law and delivering justice. They maintain law and order, protect individual rights, and ensure adherence to constitutional principles. Through their law interpretation and application, courts resolve disputes and establish legal precedents guiding future decisions, thereby maintaining predictability and consistency within the legal system. This function is especially crucial in safeguarding individual and collective rights and ensuring no person or institution oversteps the law. Particularly, supreme, or

constitutional courts provide checks on the legislative and executive branches' powers by interpreting the constitution, thereby preserving democratic principles and the power balance.

Each court within the system carries out specific responsibilities that collectively ensure the justice system's effective functioning. Lower courts, being the first point of contact, hear numerous cases and make initial determinations. Appellate courts ensure the lower courts' decisions adhere to legal principles and procedures, providing an opportunity to correct any potential errors. Highest courts handle matters of significant public interest, interpret constitutional questions, and provide legal guidance to lower courts. The responsibilities shouldered by these courts can shape societal norms, influence policy, and impact people's lives, making their role vital in maintaining the integrity, functionality, and fairness of the broader court system.

In examining the structure of the court system, we are met with a sophisticated and complex organization that serves as the cornerstone of our justice system. This court system, regardless of size or level, possesses a specific role, either in overseeing the process of legal recourse or addressing the diverse legal needs arising within our society. As public dynamics shift, causing new and unique legal challenges, it is essential for our courts to demonstrate the capacity for adaptation and evolution. It remains vital that these courts faithfully maintain their integrity, functionality, and fairness. The scope of a court's influence extends beyond dispute resolution; it significantly shapes societal norms, steers policy direction, and wields significant impact on individual lives. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the court system provides not only an insight into how justice is dispensed but also reveals its profound and prevalent role in the fabric of our society.

## References

- Dorsett, S., & McVeigh, S. (2012). *Jurisdiction*. Taylor & Francis Group.  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/odu/reader.action?docID=1016126>
- Kornhauser, L. A. (1995). Adjudication by a resource-constrained team: hierarchy and precedent in a judicial system. *Southern California Law Review*, 1607–1609. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/scal68&i=1623>
- Miller, M. C. (2019). Judicial politics in the United States. In *Routledge eBooks* (1st ed.). Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429493607>
- Porto, B. L. (2017). May It Please the Court: Judicial Processes and Politics in America. In *CRC Press eBooks* (3rd ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315170633>
- Wallace, H. (2000). *Federal and State Jurisdiction (From National Victim Assistance Academy, P 2.1.1 - 2.1.15, 2000, Anne Seymour, Morna Murray, eds. et al., -- See NCJ 184052) | Office of Justice Programs*. Office of Justice Programs (U.S. Department of Justice). <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/federal-and-state-jurisdiction-national-victim-assistance-academy-p>