

Superior Court of California, County of Contra Costa

Courts and their Cases

In the United States, the government is divided into three branches: the Executive (President, Governors, Mayors etc.); the legislative (Congress, state legislatures, city councils; and the judicial (trial, appellate, and Supreme courts.) The court system is responsible for providing for the orderly settlement of disputes between parties in controversy, determining the guilt or innocence of those accused of violating laws, and protecting the rights of individuals.

There are two broad categories of cases:

- **Criminal cases**, in which a government agency seeks to punish someone for doing something the law says, is contrary to the public good. Crimes are divided into:
 - Felonies (e.g. murder),
 - Misdemeanors (e.g. shop-lifting) or
 - Infractions (e.g. parking tickets).

You will see cases named, 'People of the State of California v. (name of the person accused of the crime.)'.

- **Civil cases**, in which private citizens (including corporations and other associations) sue each other. In California, there are different rules of court for:
 - General civil cases
 - Family and juvenile cases
 - Probate cases

You will see cases named things like, 'Smith v. Jones,' or 'ABC Bank v. XYZ Corporation.' Another example of a civil case name is: 'In the Guardianship Matter of [name of child], a minor.'

In California, the vast majority of cases begin in one of the 58 trial courts, which reside in each of the state's 58 counties. In California, the trial courts are called superior courts.

- The superior courts are responsible for receiving evidence and determining the application of the law to the facts which it finds.

- The Superior Court of Contra Costa County has courthouses in 4 towns: Martinez, Pittsburg, Richmond, and Walnut Creek.

Decisions made in the superior courts can be reviewed at two higher levels:

- **State appellate courts** may review the decisions of trial courts to determine whether the trial court made an error of law in deciding the case.
- **The State Supreme Court** may be asked to review the decisions of an appellate court.

There are two other types of court systems in the United States: The Federal Courts and the Tribal Courts.

- The federal court system includes:
 - U.S. Bankruptcy Courts
 - U.S. District Courts
 - U.S. Courts of Appeals
 - U.S. Supreme Court
- The Tribal Courts are part of the Native American Reservation system.

The United States has also signed a wide range of international laws and conventions.