



# CASELOAD HIGHLIGHTS

Volume 2 • Number 2

EXAMINING THE WORK OF THE STATE COURTS

## Findings From the National Trial Court Network

Over the past year the National Center for State Courts' Court Statistics Project (CSP) and the National Association for Court Management (NACM) have been cooperating to build the "NACM" Trial Court Network. The purpose of this project is to create a uniform and practical method for permitting the nation's larger state trial courts to compare their work to other courts of similar size and structure.

Beyond traditional caseload measures such as filings, dispositions, and pending caseload trends, the Network will develop the potential of participating courts to generate comparable data on caseflow and workload. Such court performance measures, never before available in a comparable context, will help the trial court community (1) assess and respond to a range of national policy initiatives directed at the state courts, (2) obtain and allocate resources by making valid, cross-court comparisons possible, (3) improve communication and information exchange between courts, and (4) create a source of public information on the business of the courts.

As the Network gets

underway, the initial focus is on felony caseloads in some of the nation's larger urban courts. There are currently 26 courts participating in the Network, with these localities reporting populations from 225,000 to 9.3 million. In total, the Network sites comprise roughly 15 percent of the nation's population.

The top table examines the number of felony filings for courts providing data from 1993 to 1995. The range in filings is broad: Ventura and Salt Lake City report roughly 2,000 filings and Los Angeles reports roughly 50,000 filings per year. Growth in felony filings from 1993 to 1995 varied considerably across sites, with an increase of 47 percent in Lawrenceville compared to a decrease of 36 percent in San Francisco.

The bottom table shows the total number of judges in each site, the estimated number of FTE judges handling felony cases, and population-adjusted filing levels. On average, the Network sites assign about 40 percent of their judgeships to felony cases. Felony filings per 1,000 population range from a low of 2.6 to a high of 16.3.

### Felony Filings, 1993-1995

City	% Growth 1993-1995	Felony Filings		
		1993	1994	1995
Lawrenceville, GA	47%	1,861	2,175	2,732
Denver, CO	45	3,762	4,184	5,436
Milwaukee, WI	25	5,577	6,612	6,988
Ventura, CA	25	1,669	2,386	2,081
Orlando, FL	18	10,242	11,386	12,072
Ft. Lauderdale, FL	17	14,056	15,055	16,400
Salt Lake City, UT	15	1,847	1,813	2,131
Tallahassee, FL	13	4,073	4,312	4,617
Albuquerque, NM	13	6,215	6,430	7,026
Phoenix, AZ	12	15,173	16,244	16,912
Kansas City, MO	11	3,361	3,703	3,747
Santa Ana, CA	5	8,826	8,653	9,277
Seattle, WA	5	7,766	7,825	8,129
Newark, NJ	3	7,267	7,593	7,508
Los Angeles, CA	-1	50,476	47,944	50,197
Wilmington, DE	-1	4,079	3,702	4,046
Savannah, GA	-3	2,519	2,418	2,449
Houston, TX	-3	37,680	36,686	36,458
San Jose, CA	-7	8,925	8,627	8,315
Washington, DC	-13	8,661	8,730	7,508
Dallas, TX	-17	31,283	28,382	25,978
Brooklyn, NY	-20	12,928	11,452	10,326
San Francisco, CA	-36	6,453	5,052	4,129

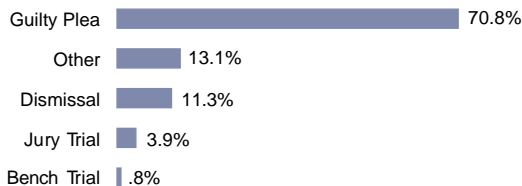
### Judgeship Allocation and Felony Filings per 1,000 Population, 1995

City	Total Judges	Estimated Felony Judges*	Felony Filings per 1,000 population
Los Angeles, CA	238	103	5.4
Brooklyn, NY	81	50	4.5
Santa Ana, CA	69	20	3.6
Phoenix, AZ	68	19	7.6
Ft. Lauderdale, FL	65	14	11.8
Washington, DC	59	17	12.8
Dallas, TX	57	15	14.4
Newark, NJ	53	22	9.6
Seattle, WA	49	22	5
Milwaukee, WI	46	10	7.3
San Jose, CA	44	22	5.2
Kansas City, MO	27	6	5.9
San Francisco, CA	29	8	5.5
Orlando, FL	25	9	16.3
Houston, TX	22	22	12.3
Albuquerque, NM	21	7	14.1
Tallahassee, FL	20	8	15.6
Denver, CO	20	7	11.6
Ventura, CA	16	6	2.9
Salt Lake City, UT	14	14	2.6
Wilmington, DE	13	8	8.8
Savannah, GA	6	6	10.8
Lawrenceville, GA	6	2	6.1

\* Refer to the table on back page for further information on judicial assignment.

# Felony Dispositions, Clearance Rates, and Pending Caseloads

## Felony Case Dispositions Across 17 NACM Network Sites, 1995



## Felony Trials, 1995

City	Trial Rate	Number of Jury Trials	Jury Trial Rate
Washington, DC	9.5 %	690	9.1 %
Seattle, WA	8.1	455	5.6
Ventura, CA	6.9	105	4.7
Newark, NJ	6.7	506	6.3
Brooklyn, NY	6.0	614	5.5
Los Angeles, CA	5.9	2,537	5.4
Dallas, TX	5.1	675	2.5
Santa Ana, CA	4.8	396	4.3
Phoenix, AZ*	4.5	532	4.5
Tallahassee, FL	4.4	174	4.1
San Jose, CA	4.0	197	2.5
Kansas City, MO	3.8	134	3.5
Salt Lake City, UT	3.1	64	3.1
San Francisco, CA	2.8	117	2.8
Wilmington, DE	2.8	99	2.6
Houston, TX	2.7	825	2.2
Orlando, FL	1.9	215	1.8
Albuquerque, NM	1.9	60	1.0

\* Data from Phoenix includes bench trials.

## Convictions and Guilty Pleas in Felony Cases, 1995

City	Rates			Cases		
	Total Convictions	Guilty Pleas	Trial Convictions	Total Convictions	Guilty Pleas	Trial Convictions
San Jose, CA	97%	94%	91%	7,777	7,482	295
Santa Ana, CA	94	90	94	8,631	8,216	415
Ventura, CA	93	87	84	2,056	1,927	129
Los Angeles, CA	92	87	82	43,624	41,343	2,281
San Francisco, CA	90	88	90	3,745	3,639	106
Seattle, WA	87	80	87	7,043	6,473	570
Tallahassee, FL	87	84	66	3,662	3,539	123
Kansas City, MO	82	79	77	3,178	3,066	112
Salt Lake City, UT	81	79	63	1,681	1,641	40
Wilmington, DE	80	78	91	3,021	2,925	96
Orlando, FL	80	79	68	9,347	9,199	148
Newark, NJ	78	74	63	6,290	5,952	338

Judges who handle criminal matters in the Network sites typically process hundreds of felony cases annually. The most common method of disposition remains the guilty plea. Guilty plea rates are high across all sites, regardless of whether filings are rising or falling.

Caseload pressure is only one possible reason for the high frequency of guilty pleas. Another interpretation is that guilty pleas are advantageous to both parties, since the state averts the time-consuming and often costly trial process and the defendant avoids the uncertainty of a trial outcome. Bench and jury trials account for less than 5 percent of dispositions, with most sites varying little from this average. Jury trials make up the largest share of trials in 17 of 18 sites.

On average, about 11 percent of felony cases end through dismissal of the charges or a nolle prosequi. In addition, many jurisdictions

are using and experimenting with deferred judgments and other types of criminal case diversion. These “other” types of dispositions account for 13 percent of the total.

Conviction and acquittal rates are of considerable interest to court officials as well as the general public. The bottom table compares the number and rate of convictions across the 12 sites capable of providing data. The great majority of convictions occur as a result of guilty pleas. Regardless of whether a conviction is obtained by trial or guilty plea, the overall rates of acquittal are quite low.

The ability of trial courts to clear felony filings and thus reduce their pending caseloads is always a top concern for court administrators. Underlying this concern is the need to adhere to tight time standards while ensuring that the constitutional rights of the defendant are being met.

The table on the following page shows filing, disposition, and pending case totals for 1995. Trial courts reduce their pending felony caseload if dispositions exceed filings. The three-year clearance rate, the sum of all dispositions divided by the sum of all filings, indicates a court’s success in clearing cases while allowing for yearly fluctuations. Overall, 20 of 23 sites cleared at least 95 percent of their caseload over the past three years.

## Selected Felony Caseload Measures

City	Three-year Clearance Rate, 1993-95*	Filings 1995	Dispositions 1995	Year-End Pending 1995
San Francisco, CA	113%	4,129	4,153	883
Brooklyn, NY	109	10,326	11,192	2,698
Ventura, CA	107	2,081	2,237	407
Newark, NJ	105	7,508	8,083	1,813
Milwaukee, WI	104	6,988	7,126	3,892
Washington, DC	102	7,508	7,569	3,095
Lawrenceville, GA	102	2,732	2,907	1,217
Houston, TX	101	30,450	37,395	23,660
Dallas, TX	101	25,978	27,370	14,558
Savannah, GA	101	2,449	2,411	696
Santa Ana, CA	99	9,277	9,149	892
Kansas City, MO	99	3,747	3,857	1,957
Orlando, FL	98	12,072	11,687	4,823
Wilmington, DE	98	4,046	3,757	1,392
Salt Lake City, UT	97	2,131	2,037	649
Seattle, WA	97	8,129	8,075	5,609
Ft. Lauderdale, FL	97	16,400	15,522	5,469
San Jose, CA	97	8,315	7,988	2,234
Tallahassee, FL	96	4,617	4,209	1,906
Phoenix, AZ	95	16,912	15,791	13,176
Los Angeles, CA	94	50,197	47,310	8,393
Denver, CO	90	5,436	4,842	4,709
Albuquerque, NM	89	7,026	5,860	6,414

\* The clearance rate is calculated by dividing dispositions by filings then multiplying by 100.

The impact of clearance rates on pending caseloads is clearly seen in the accompanying charts of monthly data on filing, dispositions, and pending caseloads for four sample courts. This monthly trend data (January 1993 to April 1996) shows how the stock of pending cases rises and falls as a result of what are often only slight differences between monthly filings and dispositions. Brooklyn, Los Angeles, and Savannah report only active pending cases, while Salt Lake City also includes inactive pending cases in its count.

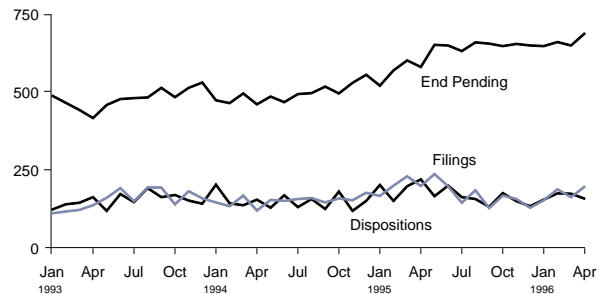
◆ An increase in the pending caseload occurs when the number of cases disposed falls short

of the number filed. Even though monthly filings appear to exceed dispositions by a relatively small margin, as in both Savannah and Salt Lake (April 1993 to April 1995), the cumulative impact of these differences is a sustained increase in pending cases.

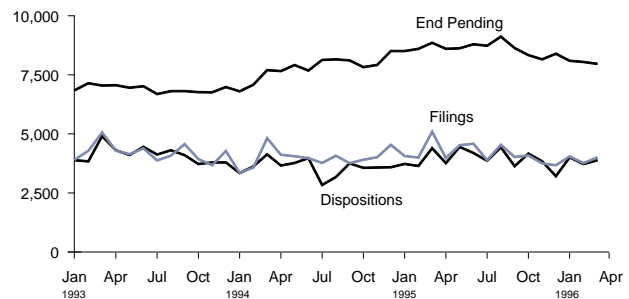
◆ The growth rate of felony filings is a key factor in understanding changes in pending caseloads. For example, an increase of 15 percent in felony filings between 1993 and 1995 underlies the growth of pending cases in Salt Lake City, while Brooklyn's case management efforts benefited from a drop of 20 percent in felony filings over the same period.

## Filings, Dispositions, and Pending Caseloads, 1993-1996

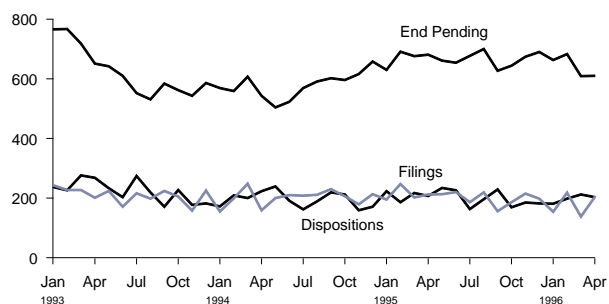
Salt Lake City, UT



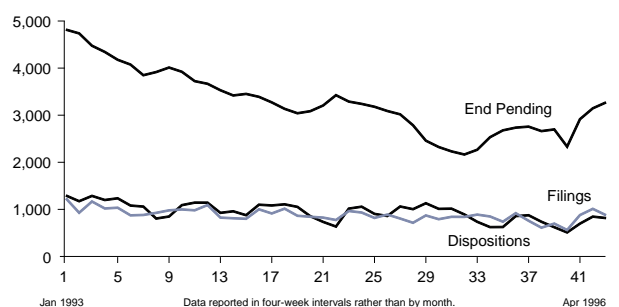
Los Angeles, CA



Savannah, GA



Brooklyn, NY



◆ Because the size of the pending caseload reflects the cumulative difference between filings and dispositions over time, a reduction in pending caseloads requires effective, long-term caseload

management. For example, ongoing case management efforts in Los Angeles have led to a significant decline in pending cases over the past year.

## NACM Network Court Profiles and Definitions

City	How are cases counted? (# defendants - # charges)	How are cases initiated?	How are pending cases defined?	Does court purge cases?	What type of case calendar system?	Are there separate criminal and civil judges?
Albuquerque, NM	1 defen. - 1 incident	grand jury indictment	active/inactive	no	combination	yes
Brooklyn, NY	1 defen. - varies	grand jury indictment/SCI	active	no	combination	yes
Dallas, TX	1 defen. - 1 charge	grand jury indictment	active/inactive	yes	individual	yes
Denver, CO	1 defen. - 1 incident	other	active	yes	individual	yes
Ft. Lauderdale, FL	1 defen. - 1 incident	prelim. hearing results	active/inactive	yes	individual	yes
Houston, TX	1 defen. - 1 charge	other	active	no	individual	yes
Kansas City, MO	1 defen. - varies	grand jury indictment	active/inactive	no	combination	yes
Lawrenceville, GA	1+ defen. - 1 incident	grand jury indictment	active	no	individual	no
Los Angeles, CA	1 defen. - varies	grand jury indictment	active	no	combination	yes
Milwaukee, WI	1+ defen. - varies	other	active/inactive	no	individual	yes
Newark, NJ	1+ defen. - 1 charge	other	active	no	individual	yes
Orlando, FL	1 defen. - 1 incident	grand jury indictment	active/inactive	yes	individual	yes
Phoenix, AZ	1 defen. - varies	other	active/inactive	no	individual	yes
Salt Lake City, UT	1 defen. - 1 charge	prelim. hearing results	active/inactive	no	individual	no
San Francisco, CA	1 defen. - 1 incident	other	active	no	master	yes
San Jose, CA	1+ defen. - 1 incident	other	active/inactive	no	master	other
Santa Ana, CA	1+ defen. - 1 incident	grand jury indictment	active/inactive	no	combination	yes
Savannah, GA	1 defen. - 1 incident	grand jury indictment	active	no	individual	no
Seattle, WA	1 defen. - 1 incident	prelim. hearing results	active/inactive	yes	master	yes
Tallahassee, FL	1 defen. - varies	other	active	yes	individual	other
Ventura, CA	1 defen. - 1 incident	other	active	no	individual	yes
Washington, DC	1 defen. - 1 incident	grand jury indictment	active	no	combination	yes
Wilmington, DE	1 defen. - 1 incident	grand jury indictment	active	no	combination	yes

## The Court Statistics Project (CSP)

In existence since 1975, the CSP is administered by the National Center for State Courts, with generous support by the State Justice Institute and the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The CSP receives general policy direction from the Conference of State Court Administrators through its Court Statistics Committee. Those wishing a more comprehensive review and analysis of the business of state trial and appellate courts are invited to read the CSP's latest publication, *Examining the Work of State Courts, 1994*.



## CASELOAD HIGHLIGHTS

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