

TEXAS COURTS AND APPELLATE PROCESS

Trial-Level Limited Jurisdiction Courts

Municipal Courts:

Most small cities in Texas, as well as all larger ones, have municipal courts. These trials courts hear traffic, municipal code violations and small claims, usually no more than \$10,000. Texas has municipal courts in 913 cities. Appeals from city and JP courts go to county or district courts.

Justice of the Peace Courts:

“JP courts” exist in all Texas counties, one in each precinct. These courts decide misdemeanor crimes, traffic violations and small claims. They are often in shopping centers or small offices in each county precinct. Texas has 821 justice courts.

Trial-Level General Jurisdiction Courts And County Courts

District Courts, County Courts at Law and Constitutional County Courts:

Each county has a district court, the trial courts of general jurisdiction in Texas. District courts hear divorce, felony crimes, disputes over land ownership and civil cases without limit on the total damages claimed. In 84 counties that have county at law, these courts generally have more limited jurisdiction than district courts-misdemeanor crimes and lawsuits over smaller amounts (usually up to \$100,000). Appeals from both district and county courts generally go directly by the Court of Criminal Appeals. Texas has 449 district courts and 245 county courts at law, including 18 probate courts. Each county has a “constitutional” county court that can decide uncontested probates, lawsuits involving up to \$10,000, juvenile crimes and misdemeanors.

Intermediate Appellate Courts

Courts of Appeals:

Texas’ mid-level appellate courts decide cases from county courts at law and district courts in 14 districts. These appellate courts hear criminal and civil cases. Texas has 80 justices for the courts of appeals, each elected by voters in the counties in their districts. These courts range from three justices in Eastland, El Paso, Texarkana, Tyler and Waco to 12 in Dallas. These intermediate courts hear appeals in three-judge panels. Two appeals courts in Houston share the same six-county courts with duplicate districts.

Very limited direct appeals

The ‘High’ Courts

Supreme Court and Court of Criminal Appeals:

Texas is one of only two states with coordinate “supreme” courts: the Supreme Court of Texas, for civil and juvenile-delinquency cases, and the Court of Criminal Appeals, the last-resort court for criminal matters. Each court has nine members elected statewide. Both are discretionary courts, generally taking only cases with legal rulings decided differently by courts of appeals, cases with statewide implications and unsettled constitutional issues. The Court of Criminal Appeals decides all death-penalty appeals. Only cases with federal constitutional questions or federal law issues can be approved from either court to the U.S. Supreme Court.