

Just the Facts: U.S. Courts of Appeals

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Just the Facts is a new feature that highlights issues and trends in the Judiciary based on data collected by the Judiciary Data and Analysis Office (JDAO) of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. Comments, questions, and suggestions can be sent to the [data team \(mailto:A0db_JDAO_datateam@ao.uscourts.gov\)](mailto:A0db_JDAO_datateam@ao.uscourts.gov).

Crimes involving drugs fueled a 15 percent increase in criminal appeals last year even as the total volume of appeals continued to steadily decline, according to statistics from the JDAO. The vast majority of appeals are unsuccessful: Fewer than 9 percent of total appeals in 2015 resulted in reversals of lower courts, the figures show. Below are highlights of the data on the federal appellate system along with graphics that help explain the statistics.

- Total filings in the 12 regional U.S. courts of appeals fell 1 percent to 53,266 in calendar year 2015, although criminal appeals filings increased 15 percent (up 1,623 cases) (See [Table 1](#) and [Chart 1](#)). This growth was driven by appeals involving the sale, distribution, or dispensing of drugs other than marijuana, which rose 47 percent to 4,090.
- From January 1, 2011, to December 31, 2015, total appeals court filings decreased nearly 5 percent, declining in every year since 2012. Reductions occurred in each category except bankruptcy appeals (which rose 22 percent) and original proceedings (which rose 12 percent) (See [Table 1](#)).
- In 2015, 76 percent of appeals court filings were appeals of decisions by the district courts, and 13 percent were appeals of decisions by administrative agencies. Eight percent of filings were original proceedings, and 2 percent were appeals of bankruptcy case decisions (See [Table 1](#) and [Chart 2](#)).
- Fewer than 9 percent of total appeals resulted in reversals of lower court decisions in 2015. Appeals of decisions in U.S. civil cases and prisoner petition appeals had the lowest rates of reversals (See [Table 2](#) and [Chart 3](#)).
- In 2015, case terminations by the appeals courts decreased 3 percent (down 1,571 cases) to 52,881 (See [Table 3](#)).
- During the five-year period from 2011 through 2015, case terminations fell almost 8 percent, with increases occurring only in terminations of bankruptcy appeals (up 18 percent) and original proceedings (up 4 percent) (See [Table 3](#)).
- Median disposition times fell 20 percent, from 10.8 months in 2011 to 8.6 months in 2015 (See [Table 3](#)).

- A total of 41,618 appeals court cases remained pending on December 31, 2015, close to the same total as one year earlier and 6 percent below the total five years earlier (See [Chart 4](#)).

Background

Definitions: An appeal is a case seeking to have a higher court review and change a decision of a lower court or administrative agency. In the federal judiciary, most appeals are received by the 12 regional courts of appeals and decided by three-judge panels. These appeals courts also handle some original proceedings, which are cases not considered previously in lower courts.

Case termination refers to cases that were dismissed, settled or closed as a result of a final judgment by a court.

The charts include data from the 12 regional courts of appeals but not from the Federal Circuit, which maintains its own data.

Chart 1

U.S. Courts of Appeals--Percentage of Cases Filed, by Type ≡

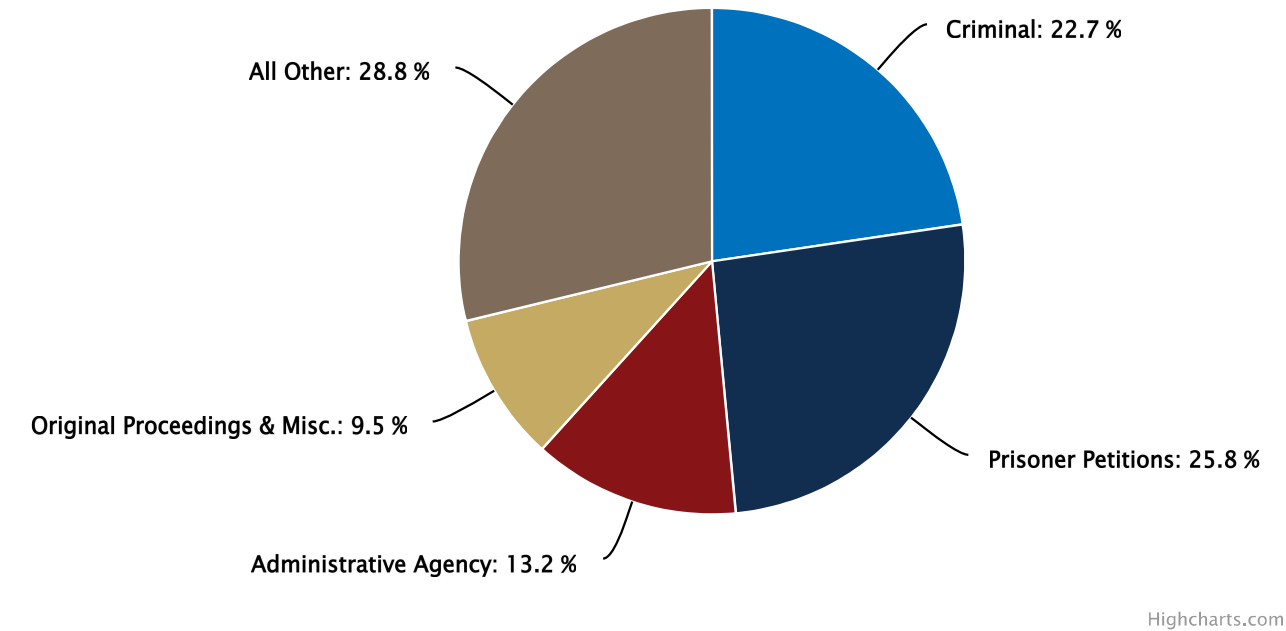


TABLE 1
FILINGS IN THE U.S. COURTS OF APPEALS
SOURCES OF APPEALS
CALENDAR YEARS 2011-2015

Source	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
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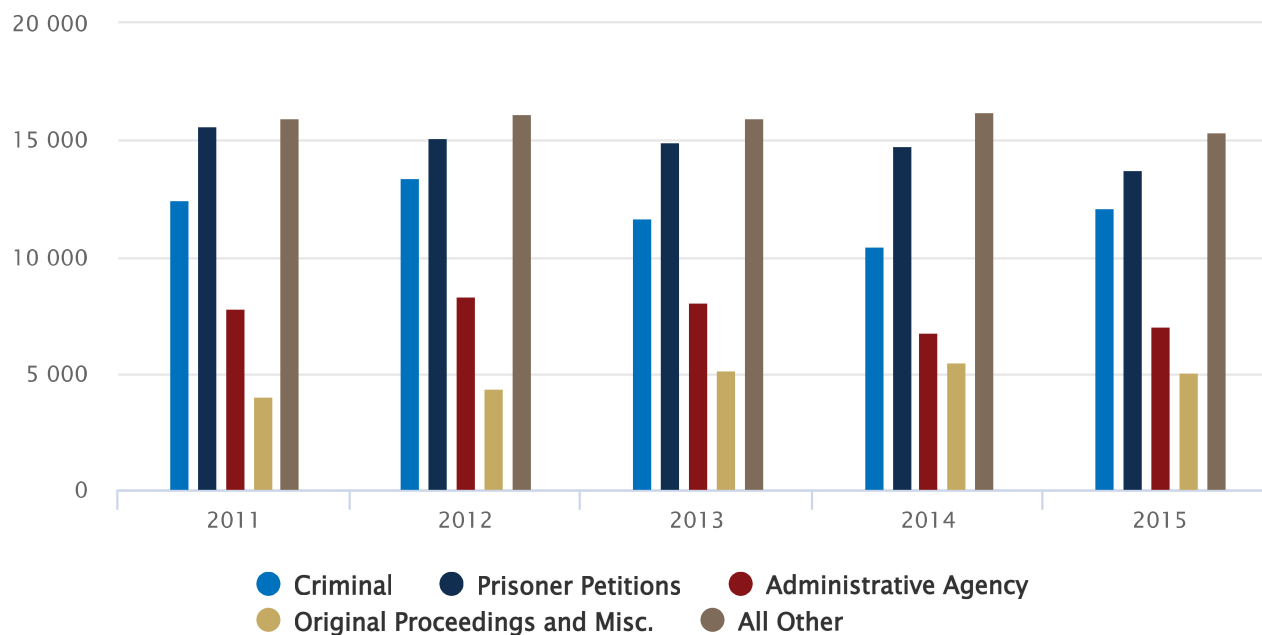
TOTAL	55,817	57,335	55,822	53,799	53,266
U.S. District Courts					
Criminal	12,453	13,419	11,697	10,476	12,099
Civil – Total	30,899	30,374	30,078	30,153	28,252
Civil – Prisoner Petitions	15,605	15,111	14,958	14,788	13,723
Civil – U.S.	2,757	2,665	2,622	2,694	2,678
Civil – Private	12,537	12,598	12,498	12,671	11,851
Other Appeals					
Bankruptcy	677	893	823	835	826
Administrative Agency	7,786	8,285	8,038	6,810	7,023
Original Proceedings	4,002	3,787	4,433	4,951	4,495
Miscellaneous Applications	N/A ¹	577	753	574	571
NOTE: This tables excludes data for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. SOURCE: Table B-1, Statistical Tables for the Federal Judiciary. Dec. 31, 2011-2015 ¹ Miscellaneous applications were not collected until 2012					

Chart 2

U.S. Courts of Appeals--Cases Filed, by Type



Calendar Years 2011–2015



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TABLE 2
U.S. COURTS OF APPEALS
PERCENTAGE REVERSED
CALENDAR YEARS 2011-2015

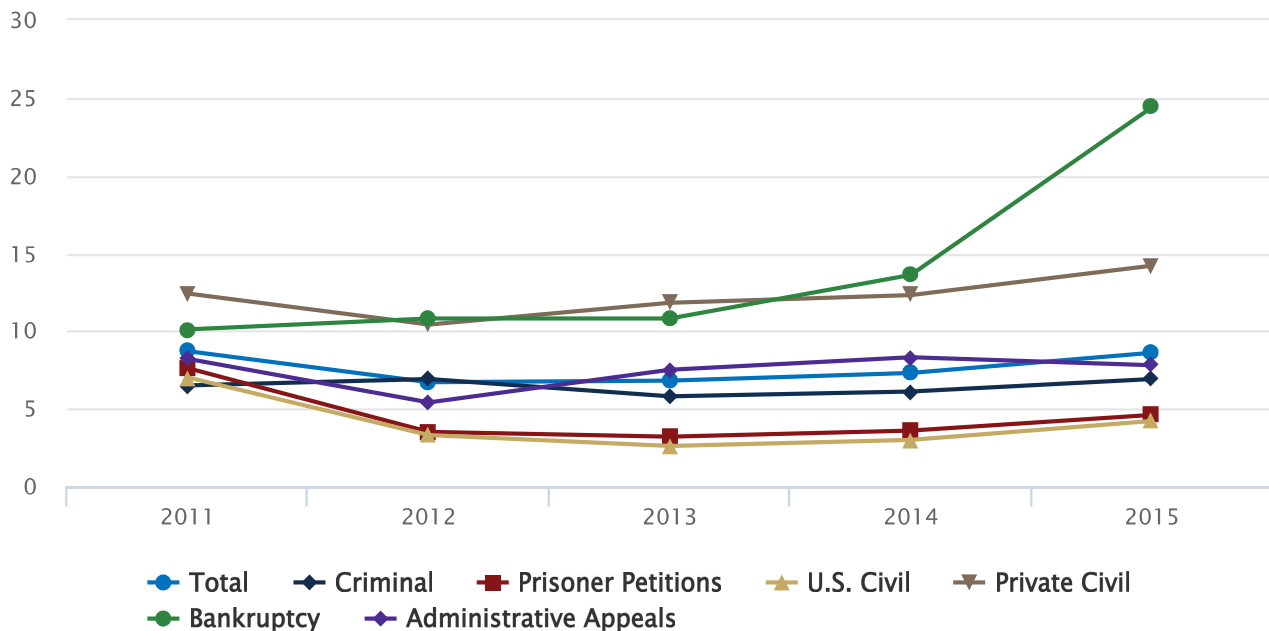
	Total	Criminal	Prisoner Petitions	U.S. Civil	Private Civil	Bankruptcy	Administrative Appeals
2011	8.7	6.5	7.6	7.0	12.4	10.1	8.2
2012	6.7	6.9	3.5	3.3	10.4	10.8	5.4
2013	6.8	5.8	3.2	2.6	11.8	10.8	7.5
2014	7.3	6.1	3.6	3.0	12.3	13.6	8.3
2015	8.6	6.9	4.6	4.2	14.2	24.4	7.8

Source: Table B-5, Statistical Tables for the Federal Judiciary, Dec. 31, 2011-2015

Chart 3

A U.S. Courts of Appeals--Percentage of cases Reversed, by Type

Calendar Years 2011–2015



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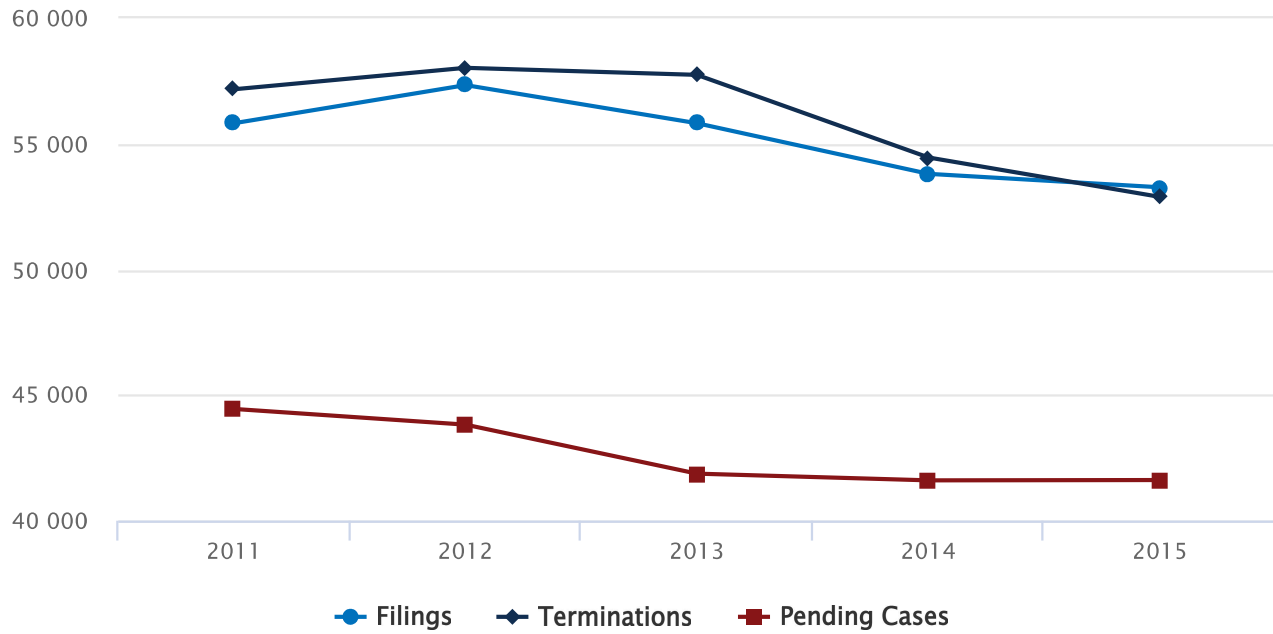
TABLE 3
U.S. COURTS OF APPEALS
TERMINATIONS, BY SOURCES OF APPEALS AND MEDIAN DISPOSITION TIMES
CALENDAR YEARS 2011-2015

Source	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
TOTAL	57,173	58,030	57,741	54,452	52,881
U.S. District Courts					
Criminal	13,316	13,528	12,388	11,131	11,532
Civil--Total	31,430	31,145	30,769	29,547	28,191
Civil -- Prisoner Petitions	16,526	15,831	15,642	14,852	13,886
Civil -- U.S.	2,785	2,712	2,606	2,416	2,619
Civil -- Private	12,119	12,602	12,521	12,279	11,686
Other Appeals					
Bankruptcy	702	709	808	834	828
Administrative Agency	7,640	8,431	8,780	7,243	7,399
Original Proceedings	4,085	3,648	4,475	5,006	4,262
Miscellaneous Applications	N/A	569	521	691	669
Median Disposition Times (mos)	10.8	9.6	8.9	8.4	8.6
Source: Table B-1, <i>Statistical Tables for the Federal Judiciary</i>. Dec. 31, 2011-2015 NOTE: This table excludes data for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit					

Chart 4

U.S. Courts of Appeals--filings, Terminations, and Pending Cases

Calendar Years 2011–2015



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