

Federal Courts

The federal and state court systems exist primarily to serve three functions: to settle civil disputes between parties, to enable governments to prosecute alleged crimes, and to protect individual rights.

Whether a particular case should be filed in the federal or state court system depends on the jurisdiction of the different courts to hear the case. Some civil and criminal matters can be filed only in state court, some only in federal court, and some in either.

The United States Constitution specifies the authority of the federal courts. Federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over certain types of cases, such as cases involving federal laws, controversies between states, and cases involving foreign governments. In certain other areas federal courts share jurisdiction with state courts. For example, both federal and state courts may decide cases involving parties who live in different states. State courts have exclusive jurisdiction over the vast majority of cases. In both federal and state trial courts the parties have a right to trial by jury in serious criminal cases and most civil cases.

The United States Constitution also establishes the United States Supreme Court and gives Congress the authority to establish the lower federal courts. Congress has established two levels of federal courts below the Supreme Court: the United States Circuit Courts of Appeals and the United States District Courts. There are 94 United States District Courts located throughout the country, with at least one district court in each state. There are 12 United States Circuit Courts of Appeals located in different regions of the country. Panels of three judges hear appeals from the district courts. A party to a case may appeal a final judgment to the court of appeals. At the top of the federal court system is the United States Supreme Court located in Washington, D.C. Unlike the courts of appeals, the Supreme Court has wide authority to decide what cases to accept for review. The Supreme Court's decisions are binding on lower courts in interpreting the U.S. Constitution and federal law.

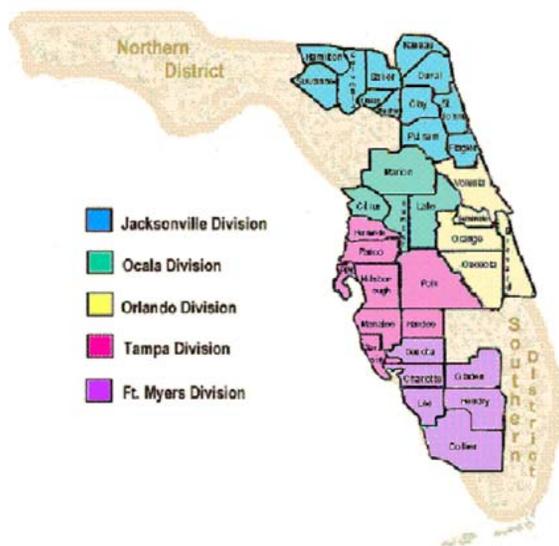
The Middle District of Florida: Facts and Figures

Three of the six largest metropolitan areas in the state, Tampa, Jacksonville and Orlando, are within the district. There are five divisions of the Middle District: Jacksonville, Ocala, Orlando, Tampa and Fort Myers.

Like other federal district courts, the Middle District is a trial level court. Judges, and in some cases, juries, decide cases. Parties dissatisfied with the result may seek review. Appeals from federal district courts in Florida, Georgia, and Alabama are heard by the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals.

Geographically the Middle District of Florida stretches nearly 400 miles from the Georgia border on the northeast to south of Naples on Florida's southwest coast.

With nearly 10 million people or over half of the State's population, the Middle District is one of the busiest federal district courts in the United States. By 2015, the United States Census Bureau projects that Florida will become the third largest state in the country. The rapid population growth in the Middle District has placed great demands on the federal judiciary and court staff.



The Middle District of Florida: The First Decade

"U.S. federal judges occupy the social and political space between individuals and the Constitution. They locate the boundaries between the power of society and government and the rights guaranteed under the Constitution of the United States." Alan Bliss, historian

Courts, like other institutions, people, and places, have a history. For more than a century, Floridians were served by two U.S. District Courts: the Northern District and the Southern District. Recognizing Florida's unprecedented growth, Congress established the Middle District of Florida on July 30, 1962 to serve thirty-three counties that had formerly been in the Southern District. The new district stretched from the Georgia border at Fernandina almost to the Everglades. Three Southern District judges moved to the Middle District: Bryan Simpson, Joseph Lieb, and William McRae. In 1962, George Young was appointed district judge for all three district courts and was permanently assigned to the Middle District in 1966 where he now serves as a senior judge in the Orlando Division. In 1966 two additional district judges joined the court: Charles Ray Scott and Benjamin Krentzman. Divisions were established in Jacksonville, Tampa, and Orlando during the first decade. Divisions in Ocala and Ft. Myers followed.

The Middle District came into existence during a tumultuous decade. Issues that had been unresolved since the Civil War came to the fore early in the Middle District's life, most famously civil rights issues involving African-Americans. It fell to the district's federal judges to navigate constitutional questions that bore the weight of a complex history and deep emotions. During the same period, Americans experienced a presidential assassination and the war in Vietnam. All of these events were reflected in the caseload during the first decade of the Middle District.

In 2012, the Middle District will celebrate its 50th year.