



Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance

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NEWS

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Municipal Courts Resolved over Half of Wisconsin Court Cases WISTAX Studies Court Operations, Caseloads and Finances

MADISON—Of the almost one million cases resolved by Wisconsin’s courts in 2004, 55% were disposed of by municipal courts and 44% by circuit courts. The remainder were Court of Appeals or Supreme Court cases, according to a new study by the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (WISTAX), a non-profit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to public-policy research and citizen education. The cases were not weighted; each counted as one regardless of the personnel, time and procedures involved.

Although municipal courts had the higher caseload, since most of their work involves traffic violations, circuit courts spent more. For each \$1 spent by municipal courts, circuit courts spent \$14. Expenditures by the 231 municipal courts, which are locally funded, were \$14.2 million, while spending by the 69 circuit courts totalled \$198.2 million.

WISTAX reported that counties funded 60% of circuit court costs, while the state provided 40% in 2004. The state portion includes compensation and travel expenses of circuit court judges and court reporters, and certain reported court costs. “Some think this arrangement is odd,” WISTAX President Todd A. Berry noted. “They argue that the state makes the laws for circuit courts to administer, yet pays for less than half the costs it creates.”

In looking at circuit court judges, WISTAX found that the number of circuit court judges in 2004 varied from one in 30 circuits to 47 in Milwaukee. Unweighted cases per judge also varied—from 520 in Iron county to 3,894 in Juneau. Milwaukee county, with the most judges, ranked 44th with 1,638 cases per judge. Each county is a separate circuit, except for Buffalo-Pepin, Forest-Florence and Menominee-Shawano, which have combined circuits.

(Editors Note: See table on reverse side for a listing of judges per circuit.)

In 2004, expenditure for all courts totalled \$245.1 million, of which the state spent \$111.3 million and local governments \$133.8 million. The study, “Wisconsin’s Courts: Operations and Finances,” also shows that state-local expenditures for the court system increased 16.4% from \$210.5 million in 1998-99 to \$245.1 million in 2003-04. The increase at the state level (16.6%) was similar to that at the local level (16.3%).

WISTAX notes that each level of Wisconsin’s court system is distinct. Some of the differences are:

- The Wisconsin Supreme Court provides administrative services to the entire court system and serves as the court of last resort (final authority). Cases may be appealed to the Supreme Court, which, unlike any other court, decides which to accept. Since 2000, the number of new and carried over Supreme Court cases has averaged 1,514 annually.
- The state is divided into four Court of Appeals districts. They cover Milwaukee county (District I), 12 southeastern counties (II), 35 northern counties (III) and 24 southwestern counties (IV).

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The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, founded in 1932, is the state’s oldest and most respected private government-research organization. Through its research, publications, civic lectures and school talks, WISTAX aims to improve Wisconsin government through citizen education. Nonprofit, nonpartisan and independently funded, WISTAX is not affiliated with any group—national, state or local—and receives no government support.

Any circuit court decision can be appealed to the Court of Appeals. Since 2000, the number of appellate cases has remained fairly constant, averaging almost 5,500 annually.

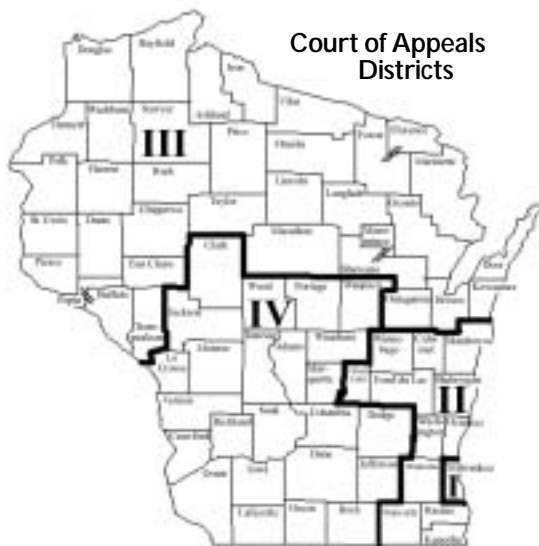
(Editors Note: See below for a map of the Court of Appeals districts.)

- Circuit courts—the only Wisconsin courts that can conduct jury trials—disposed of 94% of their cases without going to trial. Criminal (36%) and civil (27%) cases constituted the largest portions of the cases resolved. The remaining were forfeiture (21%), probate (10%) or juvenile (6%) matters.
- A municipal court, which has jurisdiction over municipal ordinance violations, may be created by any number of towns, villages or cities. In 2004, the largest was the Lake Country Municipal Court, whose 15 members include the city and town of Oconomowoc. Of the 72 counties, 25 contained no municipal court, while 15 had one each. The most in one county was Dane’s 29. Milwaukee (three judges) and Madison (one judge) have the only full-time municipal judges. In 2004, municipal courts reported disposing of almost 550,000 cases.

In fiscal 2005, the circuit courts, Court of Appeals and Supreme Court had an estimated 2,400 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees, including judges (seven Supreme Court justices, 16 appellate judges and 241 circuit court judges). With 511 state-paid employees and 1,622 locally funded positions, circuit courts accounted for 88% of the FTE-employee total.

WISTAX also reported that, as of October 2004, the annual salary of a Wisconsin justice (\$123,876) ranked 25th nationally, while those for appellate court (\$116,865) and circuit court (\$110,250) judges ranked 24th and 27th, respectively.

For a free copy of *The Wisconsin Taxpayer* titled “Wisconsin’s Courts: Operations and Finances”: write WISTAX, 401 North Lawn Ave., Madison, WI 53704-5033; e-mail wistax@wistax.org; visit www.wistax.org; or phone 608.241.9789. □



Circuit Court Judges per Circuit - 2005

No. per Circuit	Circuit (county)
47	Milwaukee
17	Dane
12	Waukesha
10	Racine
8	Brown
7	Kenosha, Outagamie and Rock
6	Winnebago
5	Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, La Crosse, Marathon and Sheboygan
4	Jefferson, Walworth and Washington
3	Columbia, Dodge, Manitowoc, Ozaukee, Portage, St. Croix, Sauk, Waupaca and Wood
2	Barron, Chippewa, Door, Douglas, Dunn, Grant, Lincoln, Marinette, Menominee-Shawano, Monroe, Oconto, Oneida and Polk
1	All others (30 circuits, 32 counties)

(Editors Note: An electronic version of this release is available at www.wistax.org.)