



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

**AN OVERVIEW OF CASELOAD STUDIES AND CASE FILINGS IN TENNESSEE:
2025 UPDATE**



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Introduction

This publication considers the past and future of weighted caseload studies in Tennessee. An analysis of criminal and civil case filing trends from 2016 through 2023 is also included.

What is a weighted caseload study?

Weighted caseload studies account for the amount of time and resources needed to process the different types of cases in a caseload. Since not all cases require the same amount of time to process, a weighted caseload study adds more weight to cases that take more time and resources. In a court setting, a weighted caseload study adjusts (or “weighs”) different types of cases based on the amount of time and resources demanded. Cases that demand more time have a higher weight and those that demand less time have a lower weight. The weights for each type of case are then multiplied by the number of cases to produce an estimate of resources needed.

For example, the weighted caseload study for the state’s trial court judges takes the caseload in each judicial district and weights the different case types according to how much time judges spend working on particular types of cases. The weights for each type of case are then multiplied by the number of case filings to produce an estimate of judicial resources needed in each district. This estimated need is the demand side of the weighted caseload calculation.

What is a case filing?

A case filing is a written document that has been properly submitted to the court. A case filing is a written document properly submitted to the court, marking the start of a legal case. In civil cases, a case filing typically involves a complaint or petition filed by a plaintiff against a defendant. In criminal cases, a case filing occurs when charges are filed by the State against an individual.

A criminal case is defined as a single charge or set of charges arising out of a single incident concerning a single defendant in a court proceeding. A civil case is defined as all motions, petitions, claims, counterclaims, or proceedings between the parties resulting from the initial filing until the case is disposed.

The supply side of the calculation (the judicial resources available) is based on the time judges have available to work on cases. The calculation of time available for case-related work in each district begins with eight hours per day/210 days per year, or 1,680 hours multiplied by the number of full-time state trial court judges in that district. The average amount of time spent by judges on travel, non-case-related activities, and non-trial duties are subtracted from the 1,680 hours, leaving only the time spent working on cases.

Each judicial district’s demand is then subtracted from its supply, and the resulting number is subtracted from the number of judges in the district to produce an estimate of judicial need and whether there is a surplus or deficit of judges in each judicial district.

Weighted caseload study for judges

From 1999 to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Comptroller’s Office published an annual judicial weighed caseload study for state trial court judges. Tennessee’s trial courts include chancery, criminal, circuit, and probate courts. The current weights were last updated in 2013 and grow increasingly outdated with each passing year. In 2024, the Comptroller’s Office and the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) contracted with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to update the weights at a cost of \$175,534.

NCSC’s contract includes the following tasks:

- constitute a Workload Assessment Advisory Committee (WAAC) to provide guidance and oversight during the life of the project;
- develop a set of preliminary case weights that are representative of the way that cases are currently being processed;

- conduct an adequacy of time survey with judicial officers to determine whether there is, and is not, sufficient time to complete all their job duties;
- review the initial time study data findings, assess the quantitative and qualitative results from a time sufficiency perspective, and identify any specific questions to pose to focus group participants;
- conduct focus groups;
- review all data sources and recommend a set of final workload standards at the final meeting of the WAAC; and
- produce a final report which will include a description of the methodology, qualitative and quantitative data results, and judicial needs model for the Tennessee Trial Courts.

NCSC began its work on November 1, 2024, and estimates completion by December 31, 2025. After NCSC completes its work, the Comptroller's Office plans to publish an updated judicial weighted caseload study using the new weights in early 2026.

Weighted caseload study for district attorneys and public defenders

A weighted caseload study update for district attorneys (DAs) and public defenders (PDs) was last published by the Comptroller's Office for the 2006 fiscal year. One of the reasons for not conducting an update since then has been a lack of reliable court data from General Sessions Courts, as described in memos issued by the Comptroller's Office. In 2013, the General Assembly appropriated funding to update the case weights for DAs and PDs, but problems with the data prevented this from occurring.

Another complicating factor is that nine counties, including Shelby, Davidson, Knox, and Hamilton, do not currently provide criminal case data from General Sessions courts to the AOC in the preferred way for standardized reporting.^A The AOC is working with courts in these counties so that they begin providing data in the preferred way for standardized reporting. Criminal case data is needed to conduct a weighted caseload study for DAs and PDs.

Another reason for not conducting an update for PDs and DAs is that the case weights are out-of-date, having last been updated in 1999. Thus, there are two issues related to updating the weighted caseload study for DAs and PDs: (1) some counties do not currently provide criminal case data from General Sessions courts to the AOC in the preferred way for standardized reporting, and (2) outdated case weights.

Regarding cost, the General Assembly appropriated \$400,000 a decade ago to update the weights for state trial court judges, district attorneys, and public defenders. The weights were not updated for DAs and PDs because of problems with data from the General Sessions Courts. (The weights for state trial court judges were updated in 2013 for a one-time cost of \$135,000.) The cost to update the weights for DAs and PDs is likely to be higher than a decade ago.

While both criminal and civil filings have declined since 2016, criminal filings have experienced more fluctuation

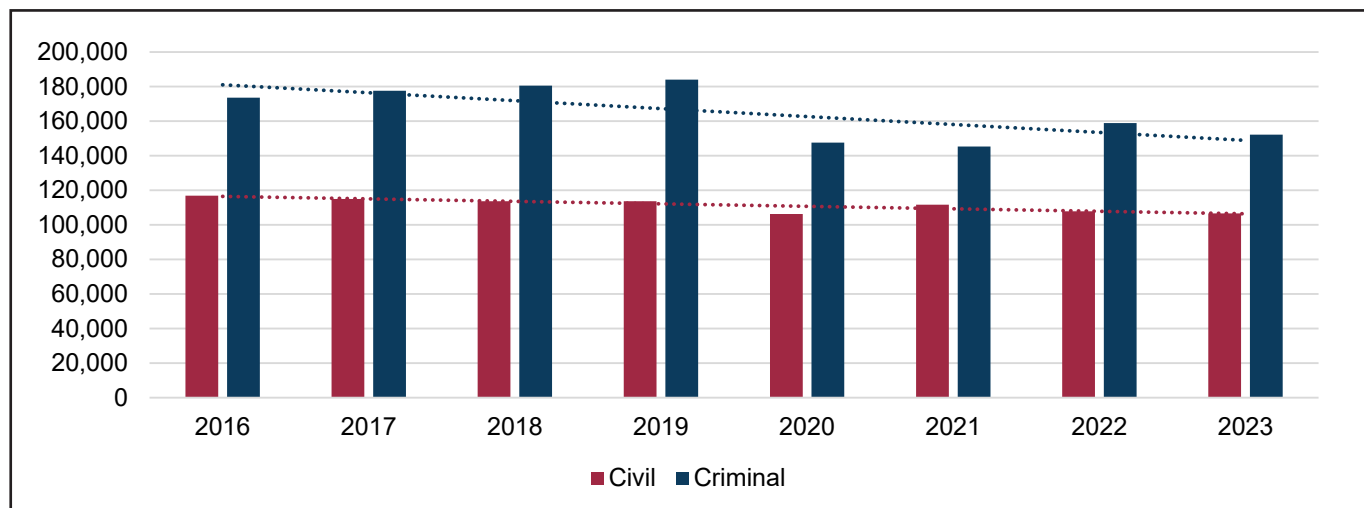
Exhibit 1 shows the criminal and civil case filings in Tennessee Courts from 2016 through 2023. In every year, criminal case filings surpassed civil filings. Statewide criminal and civil case filings both experienced a shift

^A The other five counties are Carter, Anderson, Monroe, Marion, and Henderson.

from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic levels. Both criminal and civil filings declined to their lowest levels in 2020 or thereafter, with 106,233 civil filings in 2020, and 145,306 criminal filings in 2021. After an increase in filings for civil and criminal courts in 2021 and 2022, respectively, statewide case filings for both courts have since declined.

From 2016 to 2023, criminal filings experienced a larger decline than civil filings. During this time, criminal filings declined by 12.34 percent compared to an 8.79 percent decline in civil filings.

Exhibit 1: Criminal and civil filings in Tennessee Courts by calendar year | 2016 through 2023

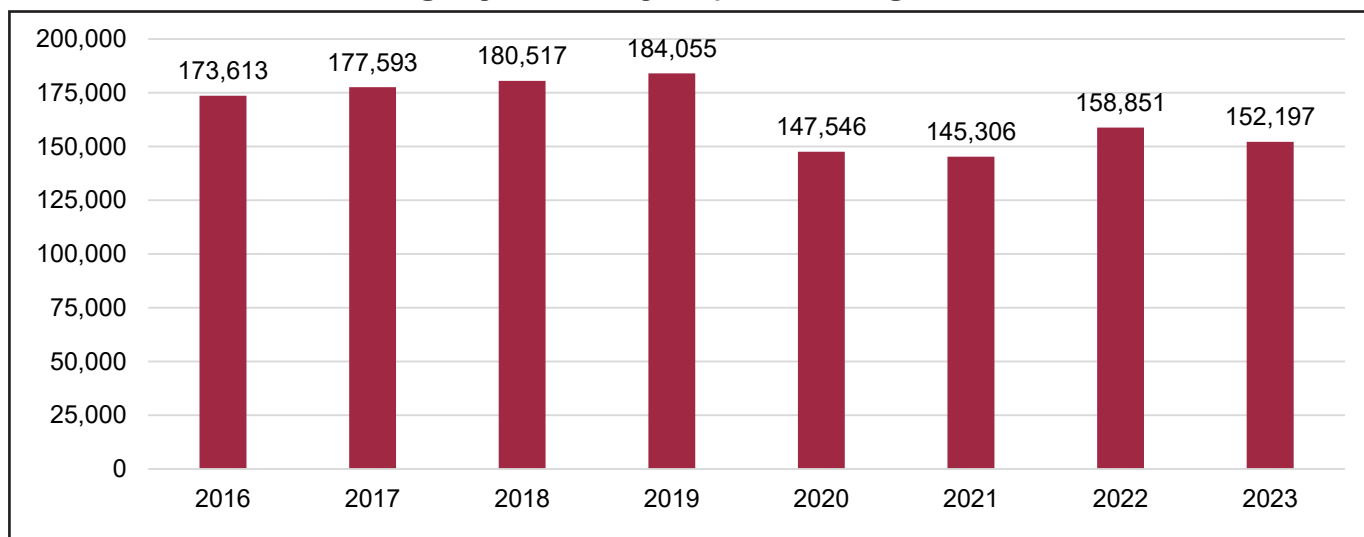


Source: OREA analysis of AOC data.

Criminal case filings have decreased by 15.6 percent since 2020

From 2016 to 2019, Tennessee's criminal courts saw an average of 178,945 cases filed annually. From 2020 to 2023, the number of criminal case filings decreased to an average of 150,975 annually, reflecting a decrease of about 15.6 percent compared to the previous four-year average. In the most recent two years with available data, statewide criminal case filings decreased from 158,851 in 2022 to 152,197 in 2023, representing a decrease of 6,654 cases, or approximately 4.19 percent.

Exhibit 2: Total criminal filings by calendar year | 2016 through 2023

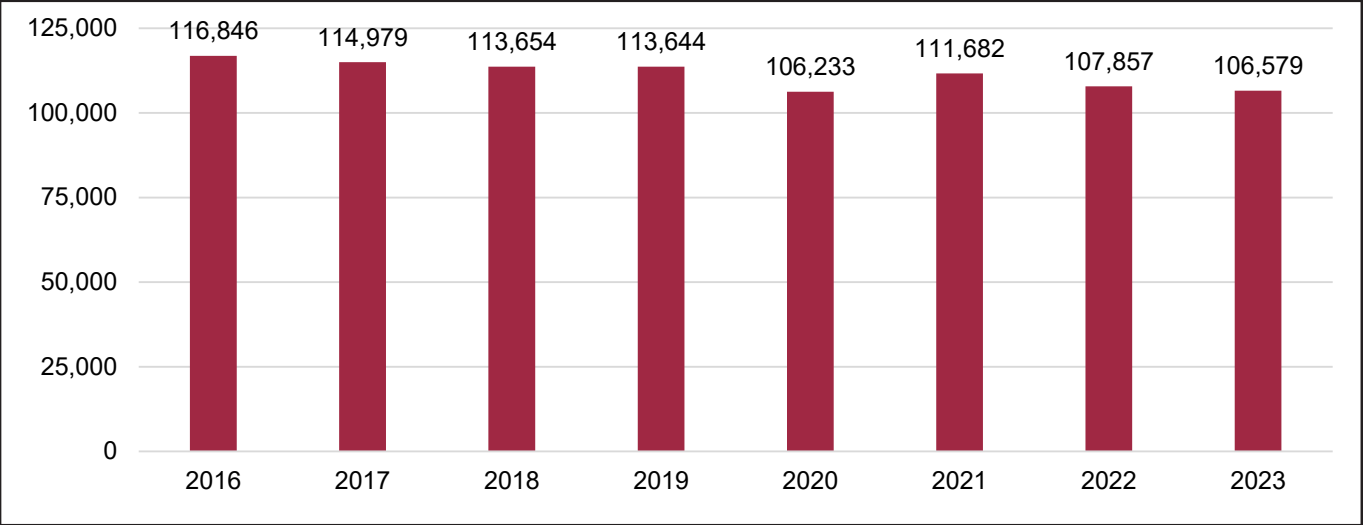


Source: OREA analysis of AOC data.

Civil case filings have decreased by 6.2 percent since 2020

From 2016 to 2019, the average number of cases filed per year in Tennessee civil courts was 114,781. From 2020 to 2023, the number of criminal case filings decreased to an average of 108,088, reflecting a decrease of about 5.83 percent compared to the previous four years. In the two most recent years with available data, civil case filings decreased from 107,857 in 2022 to 106,579 in 2023, reflecting a decrease of 1,278 cases, or approximately 1.18 percent.

Exhibit 3: Total civil filings by calendar year | 2016 through 2023



Source: OREA analysis of AOC data.

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