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UNDERSTANDING FEDERAL AND STATE COURTS

Introduction

The judicial system in the United States is unique insofar as it is actually made up of two different court systems: the federal court system and the state court systems. While each court system is responsible for hearing certain types of cases, neither is completely independent of the other, and the systems often interact. Furthermore, solving legal disputes and vindicating legal rights are key goals of both court systems. This lesson is designed to examine the differences, similarities, and interactions between the federal and state court systems to make the public aware of how each system goes about achieving these goals.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, one should be able to:

- Understand that the American judicial system is actually made up of two separate court systems: the federal court system and the state court systems.
- Know the structure of the federal court system and a typical state court system and be able to discuss the similarities and differences between the two.

Jurisdiction of the Federal Courts

The jurisdiction of the federal courts is spelled out in Article III, Section 2, of the United States Constitution. Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction because they can hear only two main types of cases:

1. Diversity of Citizenship

Federal courts can have jurisdiction over a case of a civil nature in which parties are residents of different states and the amount in question exceeds the amount set by federal law (currently \$75,000). The federal courts are often required to apply state law when dealing with these cases since the issues concern matters of state law. The fact that the parties are from different states and that the amount in question is high enough is what manages to get such cases into federal court.

Jurisdiction of the State Courts

The jurisdiction of the state courts extends to basically any type of case that does not fall within the exclusive jurisdiction of the federal courts. State courts are common-law courts. This means that they not only have the authority to apply or interpret the law, but they often have the authority to create law if it does not yet exist by act of the legislature to create an equitable remedy to a specific legal problem. Examples of cases within the jurisdiction of the state courts usually include the following:

1. **Cases involving the state constitution**—Cases involving the interpretation of a state constitution.
2. **State criminal offenses**—Crimes defined and/or punished by the state constitution or applicable state statute. Most crimes are state criminal offenses. They include offenses such as murder, theft, breaking and entering, and destruction of property.
3. **Tort and personal injury law**—Civil wrongs for which a remedy may be obtained, usually in the form of damages; a breach of duty that the law imposes on everyone in the same relation to one another as those involved in a given transaction.