

U.S. Department of Justice  
Bureau of Justice Statistics



## Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

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ACQUISITIONS

# State Felony Courts and Felony Laws

According to a recent census of the Nation's 3,235 State felony courts, 1.5 million felony cases were filed in 1985; an equal number of felony cases were disposed. About one million felony cases--69% of all dispositions--resulted in conviction.

#### Other findings include:

- The 75 largest counties (those with populations of about 600,000 persons or more) accounted for about half of the reported crime and 43% of all arrests in the United States, but only about 28% of all felony court filings and convictions. These counties averaged about 5,500 felony case filings each.
- The smallest counties (the 2,650 counties with populations of less than 100,000 persons) accounted for 16% of reported crime, but 23% of all arrests and about 38% of all felony court filings and convictions.
- About half the counties had fewer than 100 felony case filings and fewer than 70 convictions each.
- Arrests in the South were more likely to result in prosecution and conviction in a felony court than arrests in other regions. For every 1,000 arrests in the South, there were 143 felony court convictions; in the West, the number of felony court convictions per 1,000 arrests was 58; in the Northeast, 60; and in the Midwest, 78.

#### Introduction

A gap currently exists in national statistics on crime and justice. Statistics on crime rates and arrests are routinely available through various

This bulletin, a summary of the major findings of the 1985 census of State felony courts, continues BJS' efforts to develop data on the Nation's courts. While at present we have extensive data on crime and arrests, on the one hand, and on correctional facilities and inmates, on the other, our knowledge of what actually happens between arrest and imprisonment is limited. It has been a major effort of BJS to remedy this deficiency.

Two previous BJS reports, Felony Sentencing in 18 Local Jurisdictions (June 1985) and Sentencing Outcomes in 28 Felony

sources, such as the National Crime Survey, sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), and the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports. Statistics on the number of persons sent to prison, also published by BJS, are available in the National Prisoner Statistics. No national statistics exist, however, that show what happens between arrest and imprisonment.

Recently, BJS began an effort to develop statistics on the Nation's courts. In 1986 BJS obtained data on all 3,235 felony courts in the 50 States and the District of Columbia. The U.S. Census Bureau collected the data, primarily through a mail questionnaire which BJS helped design with assistance from the National Center for State Courts. The data consist mostly of information about the volume of cases State felony courts disposed in 1985.

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Courts, 1985 (July 1987), have begun to provide data on felony courts and sentencing patterns. This report, and a detailed national survey of 100 State felony courts that is currently being conducted, will further enhance our knowledge of a vital part of the criminal justice system.

The Bureau gratefully acknowledges the participation and cooperation of the felony courts of the 50 States and the District of Columbia, without whom this bulletin and future reports on the Nation's courts would not be possible.

Steven R. Schlesinger  
Director

The information from that questionnaire has been used to select a representative sample of 100 counties to participate in a more extensive national survey of felony courts. Results of that sample survey, due to be completed in 1988, will provide detailed information about the sentences that convicted felons receive.

This report details the results of the 1985 mail questionnaire. It also presents information on the felony laws of the 50 States and the District of Columbia derived from a separate survey of State criminal codes conducted for BJS by Abt Associates, Inc.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See Logan, Wayne A., Lindsey S. Steliwagen, and Patrick A. Langan, Felony Laws of the 50 States and the District of Columbia, 1986, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ-105066, 1987.

## State felony courts

In the United States there are 3,128 counties and county equivalents (parishes, boroughs, independent cities, and the District of Columbia). Nearly all of them have State-level courts that conduct trials for all types of felony cases. Sixteen States call these courts circuit courts; 15 States call them district courts; 13 States and the District of Columbia call them superior courts; 2 States use other names; and 4 States use a combination of names (table 1).

Collectively, these circuit, district, and superior courts form the Nation's State felony courts.<sup>2</sup> Felony courts are distributed throughout the 3,128 jurisdictions as follows:

Number of felony courts in county	Number of counties	Percent of counties
None	19	1%
One	3,008	96
More than one	101	3
Total	3,128	100%

The vast majority of counties has one court responsible for deciding cases arising out of alleged violations of State felony laws.<sup>3</sup> Only 19 jurisdictions have no felony court. They consist of 15 independent cities in Virginia, 3 counties in South Dakota and Wisconsin that are largely Indian reservations, and 1 county in Rhode Island. Felonies committed in these 19 jurisdictions are tried in nearby counties.

### Felony case processing, 1985

A felony court case begins with the formal submission to a court of a document charging one or more persons with a crime. Such submissions are called case filings, and the number of case filings is one measure of the workload of the court.

Courts vary in how they define a case. In two-thirds of all courts each defendant equals one case. In the rest, each charge or each indictment equals one case, regardless of the number of defendants. Consequently, the number of cases reported is not the same as the number of persons who appeared in felony courts or who were convicted.

<sup>2</sup>Federal courts were not included in the census.

<sup>3</sup>The term court, as it is used here, should not be confused with courthouses or courtrooms. As used here, a court refers to a court system, such as a circuit court system.

Table 1. What States call their felony courts

State	Name given to felony court			
	Circuit Court	District Court	Superior Court	Other
Alabama	X			
Alaska			X	
Arizona			X	
Arkansas	X			
California			X	
Colorado		X		
Connecticut			X	
Delaware			X	
Dist. of Columbia			X	
Florida	X			
Georgia			X	
Hawaii	X			
Idaho		X		
Illinois	X			
Indiana	X		X	
Iowa		X		
Kansas		X		
Kentucky	X			
Louisiana		X		
Maine			X	
Maryland	X			
Massachusetts		X	X	X
Michigan	X			
Minnesota		X		
Mississippi	X			
Missouri	X			
Montana		X		
Nebraska		X		
Nevada		X		
New Hampshire			X	
New Jersey			X	
New Mexico		X		
New York				X
North Carolina			X	
North Dakota		X		
Ohio				X
Oklahoma		X		
Oregon	X			
Pennsylvania				X
Rhode Island			X	
South Carolina	X			
South Dakota	X			
Tennessee	X			
Texas		X		X
Utah		X		
Vermont		X		
Virginia	X			
Washington			X	
West Virginia	X			
Wisconsin	X			
Wyoming		X		

Source: Clifford, M.L., and R.T. Roper 1984  
State Trial Court Jurisdiction Guide for  
Statistical Reporting (Williamsburg, Va.:  
National Center for State Courts, undated),  
table 10 and (for Mississippi) table 1.

About 1.5 million felony cases were filed in the Nation's 3,235 felony courts in 1985, an average of nearly 500 per county. Eighteen counties had more than 10,000 felony filings each. Half of all counties in the Nation, however, had fewer than 100 filings each, and no felony cases were filed in 32 sparsely populated counties. The 75 most populated counties averaged about 5,500 filings.

Felony courts dispose of cases through conviction, acquittal, dismissal, or some other means. In 1985 about 1.5 million felony cases were disposed by the Nation's felony courts, an average of nearly 500 per county. Twenty counties disposed over 10,000 cases each. Half of all counties had less than 100 dispositions each, and no felony cases were disposed in 31 counties. The 75 largest counties averaged about 5,300 felony court dispositions.

Nationwide, 69% of felony cases were disposed through conviction. Felony court convictions numbered one million in 1985, and the average per county was a little over 300. Four counties had over 10,000 convictions each. Half of all counties had less than 70 convictions, and 41 counties had no felony court convictions. The 75 largest counties averaged about 3,900 convictions.

Not all of these convictions were for felonies. Nearly 80% of the courts reported that felonies reduced to misdemeanors were included in their statistics on felony court dispositions.

### Felony cases disposed in misdemeanor courts

In most States two separate courts conduct criminal trials: A felony court conducts trials for all types of felonies; a misdemeanor court conducts trials for misdemeanors. Usually in those States that have separate misdemeanor and felony courts, a person arrested for a felony first appears in the misdemeanor court before answering to felony charges in the felony court. The misdemeanor court holds arraignment hearings, bail/bond hearings, and preliminary hearings to determine if probable cause exists to proceed on a felony charge. During the course of such initial proceedings, the misdemeanor court may sometimes accept guilty pleas by defendants to a felony charge and sentence these defendants if the charge is for a less serious class of felony.

The felony court in 326 counties (representing 10% of all counties) reported that the misdemeanor court accepts guilty pleas to felony charges; the felony court in 300 of these 326 counties further reported that the misdemeanor court also sentences all felons whose guilty pleas they accept.

## Regional variations in felony case processing

The amount of crime and the number of arrests in a particular jurisdiction largely determine how many felony court cases there will be. The volume of crime and arrests, however, is not the only factor involved. Regional variations may account for some of the differences among jurisdictions in felony case processing.

The South, for example, accounted for 34% of all reported crime and 38% of all arrests in the United States (table 2). However, it accounted for proportionately larger percentages of felony court filings (59%), total dispositions (59%), and total felony court convictions (57%). Thus, a person arrested for a crime in the South was more likely to be prosecuted and convicted in a felony court than a person arrested for a crime in any other region. For every 1,000 arrests in the South, there were 143 convictions in felony court (table 3). In the Northeast, by contrast, the number of felony court convictions per 1,000 arrests was 60; in the Midwest, 78; and in the West, 58.<sup>4</sup>

## Felony case processing and county population size

The size of a county also appears to affect whether an arrest results in a felony court trial. In medium-sized counties (those with populations of between 100,000 and about 600,000 persons), the number of arrests was directly proportional to felony case activity (table 4). Medium-sized counties, which account for 34% of the U.S. population, had nearly identical percentages of all crimes reported to police (36%), all police arrests (34%), all felony court filings (34%), all felony court dispositions (35%), and all felony court convictions (34%).

<sup>4</sup>The South is less urbanized than other regions of the country: 25% of the population in the South resides in a large county, compared to 49% in the Northeast, 30% in the Midwest, and 55% in the West. This does not explain, however, why there are proportionately more felony cases in the South compared to the rest of the country. Controlling for county population size, there are still about twice as many felony case filings for every 1,000 arrests than in the other three regions.

Table 2. Population, crime reported to police, arrests, and felony court cases, by region of the United States, 1985

	Percent for each region				
	Total	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Population	100%	21%	25%	34%	20%
Police data					
Reported crime	100%	20%	21%	34%	26%
Arrests	100	21	18	38	24
Felony court data					
Filings	100%	13%	14%	59%	13%
Total dispositions	100	13	15	59	13
Convictions	100	13	15	57	15

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding.  
Source: Police data are from a computerized dataset of the FBI's Crime in the United States, 1984 (1985). Reported crimes are murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft. Arrests are for all crimes.

Table 3. Number of felony court filings, dispositions, and convictions per 1,000 arrests, by region of the United States, 1985

	Number per 1,000 arrests for each region			
	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Felony court data				
Filings	89	110	215	78
Total dispositions	87	113	213	75
Convictions	60	78	143	58

Source: See table 2.

Table 4. Population, crime reported to police, arrests, and felony court cases, by county size, 1985

	Percent by county size			
	Total	Small counties <sup>a</sup>	Medium counties <sup>b</sup>	Large counties <sup>c</sup>
Population	100%	29%	34%	37%
Police data				
Reported crime	100%	16%	36%	48%
Arrests	100	23	34	43
Felony court data				
Filings	100%	38%	34%	28%
Total dispositions	100	38	35	27
Convictions	100	36	34	30

<sup>a</sup>2,650 counties with a population of less than 100,000 each.  
<sup>b</sup>362 counties with a population of 100,000-579,000 each.  
<sup>c</sup>75 counties with a population of at least 580,000 each.  
Source: See table 2.

In small counties (populations of less than 100,000) and in large counties (populations of about 600,000 or more), however, crime and arrests were not proportional to felony case filings and dispositions. Criminal justice systems in small counties handled a proportionately greater number of felonies in their court systems than did large counties. Small counties had 23% of all arrests, but about 38% of all felony court filings, dispositions, and convictions. By contrast, large counties had 43% of all arrests and only about 28% of all filings, dispositions, and convictions.

One possible explanation for this is that the frequency and seriousness of the crimes that occur in large, highly urbanized counties cause criminal justice officials there to be more selective about the types of crimes and criminals to which they devote their limited resources. For example, about half of all murders and rapes and nearly three-fourths of all robberies take place in the large urban counties; small counties account for only 18% of all murders, 15% of all rapes, and only 4% of all robberies.

## State felony laws

Based on a survey undertaken for BJS of the statutory laws in effect in 1986, the term felony is not uniform in either its usage or definition in the United States today. Three jurisdictions (Maine, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia) do not use the term to

classify their criminal offenses, and nine others offer no explicit definition of the term, even though they use it as a criminal designation (table 5).

In the 39 States that use and define the term felony, common elements do exist in their felony definitions. With few exceptions, criminal codes define

felonies by reference to place of imprisonment or duration of imprisonment. A common felony definition is one that identifies the place of imprisonment but not the duration, as in Idaho, where a felony is "a crime which is punishable by death or by imprisonment in the State prison." Nearly as

Table 5. Felony definitions of the States and the District of Columbia

**Alabama.** Felony. An offense for which a sentence to a term of imprisonment in excess of 1 year is authorized by this title.

**Alaska.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**Arizona.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**Arkansas.** An offense is a felony if: it is so designated by this Code; or it is so designated by a statute not a part of this Code.

**California.** A felony is a crime which is punishable with death or by imprisonment in the State prison.

**Colorado.** The term felony, wherever it may occur in this constitution, or the laws of the State, shall be construed to mean any criminal offense punishable by death or imprisonment in the penitentiary, and none other.

**Connecticut.** An offense for which a person may be sentenced to a term of imprisonment in excess of 1 year is a felony.

**Delaware.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**District of Columbia.** (Statutory law does not use the term felony.)

**Florida.** The term "felony" shall mean any criminal offense that is punishable under laws of this State, or that would be punishable if committed in this State, by death or imprisonment in a State penitentiary.

**Georgia.** "Felony" means a crime punishable by death, by imprisonment for life, or by imprisonment for more than 12 months.

**Hawaii.** A crime is a felony if it is so designated in this Code or if persons convicted thereof may be sentenced to imprisonment for a term in excess of 1 year.

**Idaho.** A felony is a crime which is punishable with death or by imprisonment in the State prison.

**Illinois.** "Felony" means an offense for which a sentence to death or to a term of imprisonment in a penitentiary for 1 year or more is provided.

**Indiana.** "Felony conviction" means a conviction, in any jurisdiction at any time, with respect to which the convicted person might have been imprisoned for more than 1 year; but it does not include a conviction with respect to which the person has been pardoned, or a conviction of a Class A misdemeanor or under Section 7(b) of this chapter.

**Iowa.** A public offense is a felony of a particular class when the statute defining the crime declares it to be a felony.

**Kansas.** A felony is a crime punishable by death or by imprisonment in any State penal institution.

**Kentucky.** Offenses punishable by death or confinement in the penitentiary, whether or not a fine or other penalty may also be assessed, are felonies.

**Louisiana.** "Felony" is any crime for which an offender may be sentenced to death or imprisonment at hard labor.

**Maine.** (Statutory law does not use the term felony.)

**Maryland.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**Massachusetts.** A crime punishable by death or imprisonment in the State prison is a felony.

**Michigan.** The term "felony" when used in this act, shall be construed to mean an offense for which the offender, on conviction may be punished by death, or by imprisonment in State prison.

**Minnesota.** "Felony" means a crime for which a sentence of imprisonment for more than 1 year may be imposed.

**Mississippi.** The term "felony," when used in any statute, shall mean any violation of law punished with death or confinement in the penitentiary.

**Missouri.** A crime is a "felony" if it is so designated or if persons convicted thereof may be sentenced to death or imprisonment for a term which is in excess of 1 year.

**Montana.** "Felony" means an offense in which the sentence imposed upon conviction is death or imprisonment in the State prison for any term exceeding 1 year.

**Nebraska.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**Nevada.** Every crime which may be punished by death or by imprisonment in the State prison is a felony.

**New Hampshire.** A felony is murder or a crime so designated by statute within or outside this Code or a crime defined by statute outside of this Code where the maximum penalty provided is imprisonment in excess of 1 year; provided, however, that a crime defined by statute outside of this Code is a felony when committed by a corporation or an unincorporated association if the maximum fine therein provided is more than \$200.

**New Jersey.** (Statutory law does not use the term felony.)

**New Mexico.** A crime is a felony if it is so designated by law or if upon conviction thereof a sentence of death or of imprisonment for a term of 1 year or more is authorized.

**New York.** "Felony" means an offense for which a sentence to a term of imprisonment in excess of 1 year may be imposed.

**North Carolina.** A felony is a crime which: was a felony at common law; is or may be punishable by death; is or may be punishable by imprisonment in the State's prison; or is denominated as a felony by statute.

**North Dakota.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**Ohio.** Regardless of the penalty which may be imposed, any offense specifically classified as a felony is a felony, and any offense specifically classified as a misdemeanor is a misdemeanor. Any offense not specifically classified is a felony if imprisonment for more than 1 year may be imposed as a penalty.

**Oklahoma.** A felony is a crime which is, or may be, punishable with death, or by imprisonment in the State penitentiary.

**Oregon.** Except as provided in ORS 161.585 and 161.705, a crime is a felony if it is so designated in any statute of this State or if a person convicted under a statute of this State may be sentenced to a maximum term of imprisonment of more than 1 year.

**Pennsylvania.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**Rhode Island.** Unless otherwise provided, any criminal offense which at any given time may be punished by imprisonment for a term of more than 1 year, or by a fine of more than \$1,000 is hereby declared to be a felony.

**South Carolina.** The crimes referred to in the following sections. . . (specific statutory sections cited) and all other criminal offenses punishable under the laws of this state which were felonies under the common law are hereby classified as and declared to be felonies (parens added).

**South Dakota.** A felony is a crime which is or may be punishable by imprisonment in the State penitentiary.

**Tennessee.** All violations of law punished by imprisonment in the penitentiary or by the infliction of the death penalty are, and shall be denominated, felonies.

**Texas.** "Felony" means an offense so designated by law or punishable by death or confinement in a penitentiary.

**Utah.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**Vermont.** Any other provision of law notwithstanding any offense whose maximum term of imprisonment is more than 2 years, for life or which may be punished by death is a felony.

**Virginia.** Such offenses as are punishable with death or confinement in the penitentiary are felonies.

**Washington.** (Statutory law does not define the term felony.)

**West Virginia.** Such offenses as are punishable by confinement in the penitentiary are felonies.

**Wisconsin.** A crime punishable by imprisonment in the Wisconsin State prisons is a felony.

**Wyoming.** Crimes which may be punished by death or by imprisonment for more than 1 year are felonies.

Source: Annotated code of each State, 1986.

common is a definition that specifies the duration of imprisonment but not the place, as in Georgia, where a felony is "a crime punishable by death, by imprisonment for life, or by imprisonment for more than 12 months."

In a few States the definition specifies both place and duration, as in Illinois, where a felony is "an offense for which a sentence to death or to a term of imprisonment in a penitentiary for one year or more is provided." States that define felonies by reference to place and/or duration of imprisonment account for 36 of the 39 States that use and define the term felony in their criminal codes.

#### *Felony classifications*

Rather than specifying a different penalty for each individual felony statute (which, in some States, would mean more than 100 different penalties), most State legislatures designate a class to which each felony belongs and enact a different penalty for each felony class. Because the number of felony classes is small (usually around five), legislatures are able to review and revise penalties for large numbers of felonies at one time.

Felonies of comparable seriousness are put into the same class. Felony classes differ from one another by the length of the prison sentence that conviction can bring. Of the 48 States that use the term felony in their criminal codes, 31 classify felonies for sentencing purposes.

#### *Minimum and maximum felony sentences*

Convicted felons can be sent to a State prison or county jail, placed on probation, fined, or given a combination of these sentences. Previous studies have shown that most convicted felons do not go to prison; most receive either a jail sentence or a term of probation.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, because felonies are widely defined as crimes for which a person may receive a prison sentence, all convicted felons at least risk the possibility of imprisonment for their crimes.

The minimum prison sentence a convicted felon faces varies from State to State (table 6). The most common minimum prison sentence is 1 year (19 States); next most common is more than 1 year (17 States).

Table 6. Minimum and maximum felony sentences, by jurisdiction

Jurisdiction	Minimum	Maximum
Alabama	Greater than 1 year	Death
Alaska	Greater than 1 year	99 years
Arizona	Minimum of 1 1/2 years	Death
Arkansas	No minimum exists	Death
California	Greater than 1 year	Death
Colorado	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Connecticut	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Delaware	No minimum exists	Death
District of Columbia <sup>a</sup>	Greater than 1 year	Life
Florida	Greater than 1 year	Death
Georgia	Greater than 1 year	Death
Hawaii	Greater than 1 year	Life
Idaho	No minimum exists	Death
Illinois	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Indiana	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Iowa <sup>b</sup>	Greater than 1 year	Life
Kansas	Minimum of 1 year	Life
Kentucky	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Louisiana	Minimum of 1 year, hard labor	Death
Maine <sup>a</sup>	No minimum exists	Life
Maryland	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Massachusetts	Greater than 2 1/2 years	Life
Michigan <sup>b</sup>	Greater than 1 year	Life
Minnesota	Greater than 1 year	Life
Mississippi	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Missouri	Greater than 1 year	Death
Montana	Greater than 1 year	Death
Nebraska	No minimum exists	Death
Nevada	Minimum of 1 year	Death
New Hampshire	Greater than 1 year	Death
New Jersey <sup>a</sup>	Minimum of 3 years	Death
New Mexico	Minimum of 1 year	Death
New York <sup>c</sup>	Minimum of 1 year	Life
North Carolina	Minimum of 1 year	Death
North Dakota	Greater than 1 year	Life
Ohio	Minimum of 6 months	Death
Oklahoma	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Oregon	Greater than 1 year	Death
Pennsylvania	Minimum of 3 1/2 years <sup>d</sup>	Death
Rhode Island	Minimum of 1 year	Life
South Carolina	Minimum of 3 months	Death
South Dakota	No minimum exists	Death
Tennessee	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Texas	Minimum of 2 years	Death
Utah	Greater than 1 year	Death
Vermont	No minimum exists	Death
Virginia	Minimum of 1 year	Death
Washington	No minimum exists	Death
West Virginia	Minimum of 1 year	Life
Wisconsin	Minimum of 1 year	Life
Wyoming	Greater than 1 year	Death

Note: Minimums reported here refer to statutorily defined minimum sentences for those receiving a prison term. Any potential effect of aggravating or mitigating circumstances in sentences imposed is not reflected in this table. Other types of sentences—jail, fines, probation—may also be given.

<sup>a</sup>These jurisdictions do not use the term felony to classify offenses, but a working definition has been constructed here for the purposes of cross-jurisdictional analysis.

<sup>b</sup>These States contain classifications referred to as "aggravated" or "serious" misdemeanors, with penalties that exceed felony minimums. They resemble felonies in procedural

terms, essentially constituting misdemeanor status in name only.

<sup>c</sup>Although the New York State Penal Code authorizes the death penalty for first degree murder, the capital statute was ruled unconstitutional by the State Supreme Court in 1984. The statute has never been repealed by the New York State legislature.

<sup>d</sup>The minimum term derives from the Pennsylvania judicial code which stipulates that the minimum be half the maximum sentence for third degree felonies.

Source: Annotated code of each State, 1986, and State officials.

<sup>5</sup>See Cuniff, Mark A., *Sentencing Outcomes in 28 Felony Courts, 1985*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ-105743, July 1987.

<u>Minimum prison sentence</u>	<u>States</u>
No minimum	8
3 months	1
6 months	1
1 year	19
More than 1 year	17
1 1/2 years	1
2 years	1
More than 2 1/2 years	1
3 years	1
3 1/2 years	1

In most States the maximum sentence a convicted felon can receive is death. Currently, the felony laws of 37 States authorize capital punishment for the most serious crimes. In the remaining 13 States and the District of Columbia, the maximum felony sentence is life imprisonment (defined as 99 years in Alaska).

#### Methodology

For each State felony court in the United States, the 1985 Census of Felony Courts succeeded in obtaining a response to at least one item in the census questionnaire. Nevertheless, certain items referred to in this report did not receive a 100% response rate. Specifically, 3% of all counties did not report the number of felony filings; 5% did not report the number of dispositions; and 26% did not report the number of convictions.

Statistics presented in this report are based on analyses that aggregated courts to form county-level units. In cases where data were missing for at least one felony court in a county, a series of regression analyses of county-level data were run sequentially and formed the basis for imputing values. Specifically, the relationship between county population and number of filings was the basis for imputing filings; the relationship between number of filings and number of dispositions was the basis for imputing dispositions; and the relationship between dispositions and convictions was the basis for imputing convictions.

Regression analyses for the 75 largest counties were run separately from those for the remaining counties. None of the 75 largest counties was missing filings or total dispositions. For the 75 largest counties the correlation between convictions and total dispositions was .96. For the remaining counties the correlation between population and filings was .46; between filings and total dispositions, .96; and between dispositions and convictions, .96. The preceding correlations are based on analyses which excluded counties with missing data.

Based on analyses of county-level data, which included imputed values, correlations with the number of felony filings were: .75 with population; .70 with total arrests; .69 with arrests for FBI Part I crimes; .67 with arrests for violent crime; and .74 with crimes known to the police.

Analysis of the relationship between FBI data and court data involved merging the two datasets. The outcome was a dataset consisting of 3,087 counties representing over 99% of the U.S. population.

Additional methodological details are presented in the codebook (in preparation) for the computerized dataset containing results of the 1985 census of State felony courts. The dataset and codebook (designated ICPSR #8667) are available by writing or calling the Criminal Justice Data Archive, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106, (313) 763-5010. (The dataset and codebook for the 1984 UCR data used in this report, designated ICPSR #8714, are also available at this address.)

For methodological details on the 1986 national survey of State felony laws, see Logan, Wayne A., Lindsey S. Stellwagen, and Patrick A. Langan, Felony Laws of the 50 States and the District of Columbia, 1986, NCJ-105066 (Washington: 1987). The publication is available from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (\$14.70 domestic, \$17.40 Canada, \$27.00 other foreign) and can be obtained by writing or calling NCJRS, Box 6000, Rockville, Md. 20850, (301) 251-5500. The toll-free number is 800-732-3277.

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The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the criminal and juvenile justice activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office of Victims of Crime.



## Bureau of Justice Statistics reports

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