



SNAPSHOT

AN OVERVIEW OF CASELOAD STUDIES AND CASE FILINGS IN TENNESSEE

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State law requires the Comptroller of the Treasury to maintain and update a weighted caseload study for the state trial court judges, district attorneys (DAs), and public defenders (PDs).

Weighted caseload studies account for the amount of time and resources needed to process the different types of cases in a caseload. A weighted caseload study adds more weight to cases that take more time and resources. The weights for each type of case are then multiplied by the number of cases to produce an estimate of resources needed.

The Comptroller's Office has not updated the weighted caseload study for state trial court judges for the last three fiscal years (2020, 2021, and 2022) because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting changes to court operations, and outdated case weights. In lieu of updating the judicial weighted caseload study during this period, the Comptroller's Office has conducted related research projects.

The weighted caseload study for district attorneys and public defenders has not been updated since 2006, as described in memos by the Comptroller's Office.

This new report from the Comptroller's Office considers the past and future of weighted caseload studies in Tennessee. An analysis of trends in case filings between 2016 and 2022 is also included.

State Trial Court Judges

The current weights for state trial court judges were last updated in 2013 and grow increasingly outdated with each passing year. The National Center for State Courts, with which Tennessee has contracted in the past to update the weights, recommends updating the weights every five to seven years. In addition, the current weights were set prior to 2020 and reflect the court operations and conditions of a decade ago. The current weights are also based on data from before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding cost, when the weights used in the judicial weighted caseload study were last updated in 2013, the cost was \$135,000 in one-time funding. The cost for a new study to create up-to-date weights is likely to be higher.

District Attorneys and Public Defenders

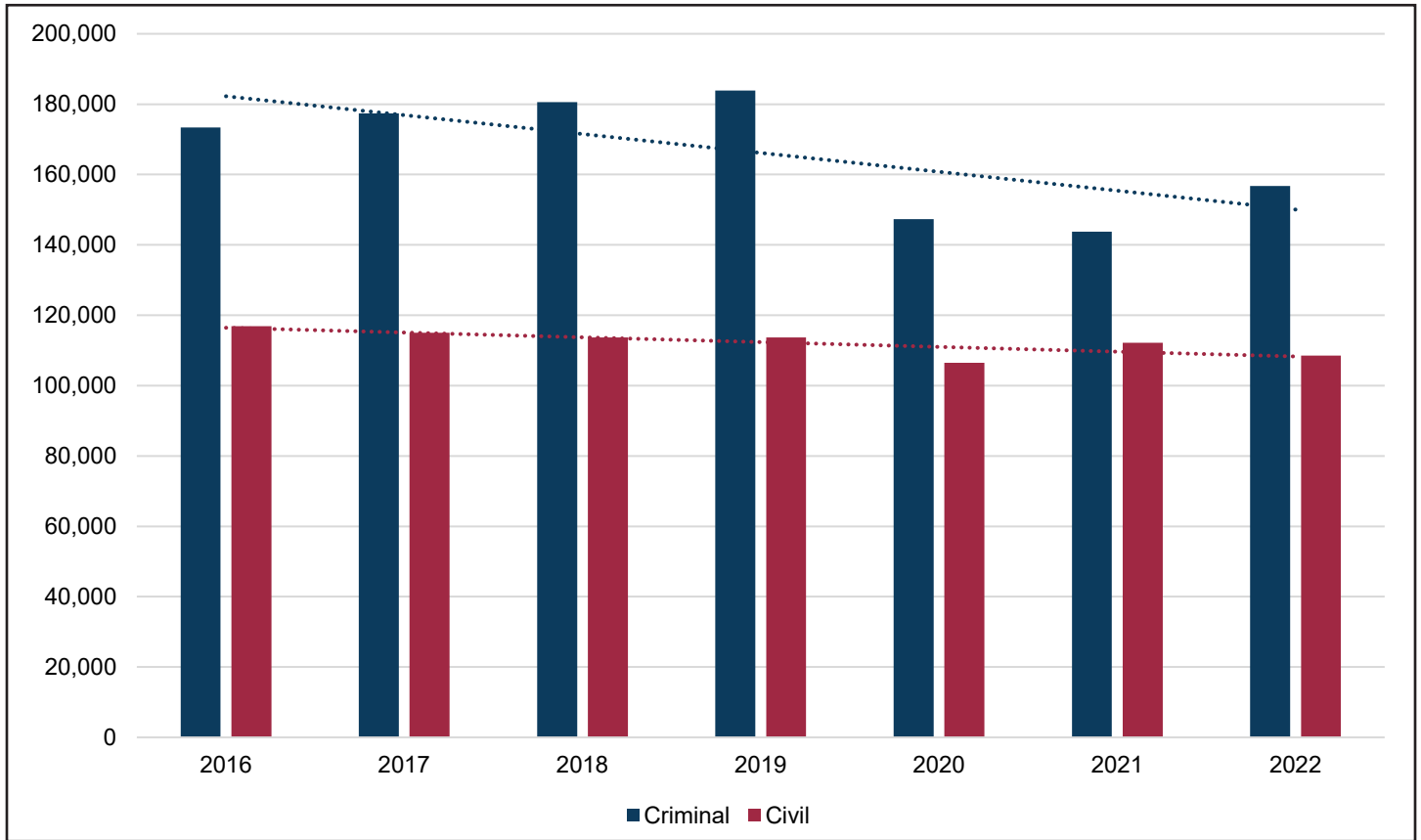
The current weights for district attorneys (DAs) and public defenders (PDs) were last updated in 1999 – and the last weighted caseload update for DAs and PDs published by the Comptroller's Office was for fiscal year 2006.

One of the reasons for not conducting an update for DAs and PDs since then has been a lack of reliable court data from General Sessions Courts. Another complicating factor is that some judicial districts have not yet implemented the preferred software needed to upload data from their General Sessions courts into the General Sessions Data Repository (GSDR). The GSDR was created in 2021 to compile all of the data from General Sessions Courts in a single database.

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, however, because of problems with data from the General Sessions Courts. The cost of conducting a new study to create up-to-date weights for DAs and PDs is likely to be higher than a decade ago.

The report also analyzes case filing trends from 2016 to 2022. The period chosen for this trend analysis includes years prior to the pandemic, allowing policymakers to assess changes in the number of case filings before and after 2020.

Criminal and civil filings in Tennessee courts | 2016-2022



Source: OREA analysis of AOC data.

As shown above, criminal and civil case filings fell to their lowest levels in 2020 or afterward. Criminal case filings saw a greater decrease than civil filings. Both types of filings remain below the average level for the years just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Civil filings have nearly returned to pre-COVID average filing levels, but criminal filings have not. County-level data can be found in the full report.

To read the full report, visit the Comptroller's OREA website at tncot.cc/orea.