Family Courts in the United States

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This map was produced to stimulate discussions of family case coordination in court systems and was updated from a legislative and rules analysis NCJJ conducted in 1996. The map analysis does not consider the hundreds of one-judge, rural courts that function as family courts. Nor does it consider combination “Juvenile and Domestic Relations Courts” that may resemble family courts in structure and may even function like family courts but are not labeled “Family Court” or “Family Division.”

How many states have established a unified family court? This question is difficult to answer with a single number, matrix or map because “Family Court” can be defined both as a court structure and/or court function, and no two states that have addressed family case coordination in the justice system have adopted the same solution. The proliferation of court reform initiatives labeled “Family Court” in the 1990s (we count activity in over 25 states) has only increased the variance in approaches that bear the same label, “Family Court.”

For example, “Family Court” is simply another name for a domestic relations court in some states (e.g., Texas, California) or a juvenile court in others, or even a specialized domestic violence docket or court in others. The national picture is further complicated by the tendency of jurisdictions to create a Family Court with comprehensive jurisdiction except for one essential element, such as delinquency (e.g., Louisville, Kentucky) or divorce (e.g., New York state) or to establish a state office of family court services to promote ideas often associated with Family Courts, like court-connected family mediation and conciliation services (e.g., California).

The only consistency among efforts referred to as “Family Court” across all the states is the common goal of improving court system performance in the interest of families. For this reason, certain court policy debates are often associated with the idea of a “Family Court.” Some of these debates include:

- What is the definition of a family today and what is a family case?
- Are families better served by one judge hearing all of their court-related matters?
- What are the benefits of specialization versus generalization (e.g., judicial rotation) in a family court system?
- What should court systems provide in the way of social service programs for families (e.g., alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, pro se litigant centers, effective use of volunteers)?
- Is it in the best interest of families to administer family court at the community, county, district, or state level?
- What is the best way to measure court performance in family matters?
- In the area of family jurisdiction, should courts focus on protecting the rights of individual family members or the family unit as a whole?
- What is the proper role of communication technology in court systems and how can it help to coordinate family cases?
- Should judges act as leaders/activists for family issues in their community?

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ISSN 1093-9369
Price: $5

Suggested Citation: