

New Jersey Court Statistics: Making Every Picture Tell a Story

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Charts make court data easier to read and digest, but creating data graphics to present data across courts or jurisdictions of various sizes can be particularly challenging. Significant differences in county sizes make it difficult to fairly and accurately compare all courts in a single picture. New Jersey has grappled with this issue in our statistics reporting, since the state's largest county is almost twenty times larger than its smallest. The following exhibits display recent New Jersey statistics and contain easy-to-construct charts that demonstrate how a data presentation can be improved to provide a picture of court activity that accounts for size.

Judges and administrators rely on New Jersey's rich set of trial court data to manage more than one million cases per year. The organizational context of this discussion of statistics can be briefly summarized as follows: New Jersey's state courts are located in its 21 counties. The 21 general jurisdiction courts are supplemented by 534 limited jurisdiction municipal courts. The Administrative Office of the Courts, working under the direction of the New Jersey Supreme Court, is responsible for the administration of the judicial branch throughout the state. New Jersey's combination of strong centralized policy-making and regional governance through its 15 vicinages has proven to be an effective framework for its judiciary.

The foundation of the statistical system is the collection of monthly aggregate reports of filings, dispositions, and pending cases for every county and every case type. Details about filings (new, reopened, reactivated, etc.), disposition types (trials, settlements, dismissals, etc.) and pending (by age of case) are very similar to the categories recommended in the *State Court Guide to Statistical Reporting*. Two specific approaches to understanding court data must be mentioned here. First, in addition to New Jersey expressing clearance as a percentage (clearance percentage) it also reports clearance in terms of numbers of cases (clearance). Second, New Jersey has established time standards by case type, and any case that is not disposed within that time period is classified as "backlog." New Jersey's courts have built a statewide dataset that contains over twenty-five years of monthly snapshots of activity.

In 2006, New Jersey's filings grew by 4 percent, the state achieved a net positive clearance of 2,175 cases, and the backlog decreased by a little less than 1 percent to 22,765 cases. Exhibit 1 displays three side-by-side vertical bar charts for filings, clearance, and backlog by county. The filings chart shows the number of cases for two years. Since the chart includes counties with large differences in filing volume (Essex had almost 150,000 cases and Hunterdon had less than 10,000 cases), the y-axis scale required to fit all courts on one chart makes the differences between 2005 and 2006 almost impossible to see, especially for the small counties. The

clearance chart is easy to read, but the backlog chart has the same problems as the filings chart: it is difficult to see the differences between 2005 and 2006.

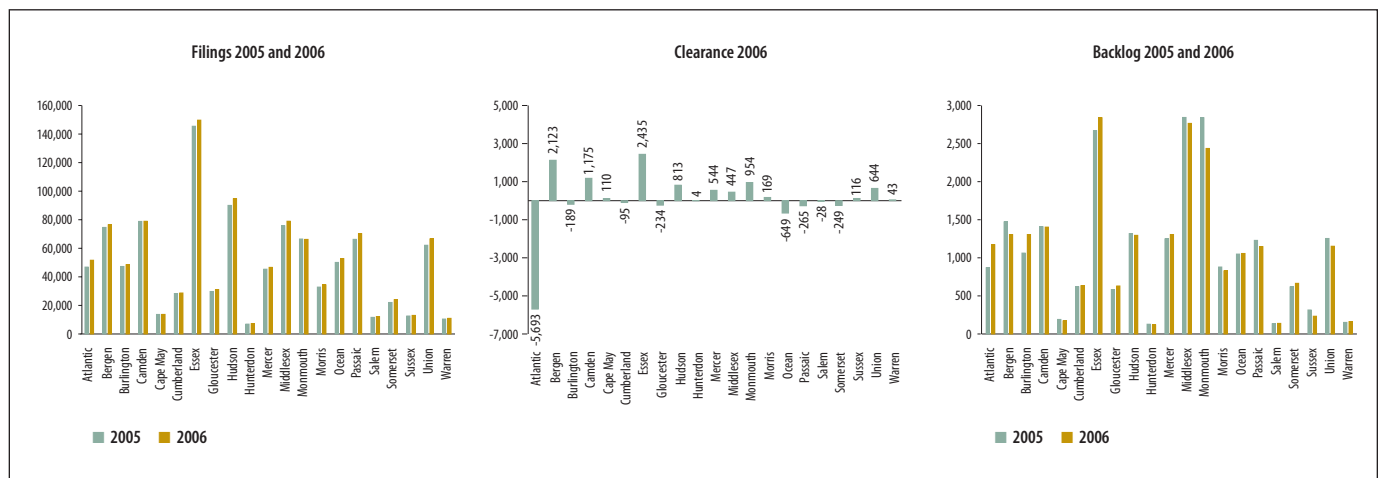
The overall picture in Exhibit 1 is accurate but does not clearly convey the story to the reader. Even though we are interested in the 2006 activity, the filings and backlog charts tell us more about the sizes of the counties than about what is happening within them.

Exhibit 2 (on the following page) improves the presentation by using filings and backlog growth and groups the information by county size, based on filings volume. The new picture provides an expanded view that quickly tells more compelling stories: 1) every medium county grew by at least 1 percent; 2) none of the small counties grew by more than 5 percent; 3) most of the large and small counties cleared their cases while most of the medium counties accumulated cases; 4) most of the large counties reduced backlog in 2006, while most medium counties had backlog growth; 5) Atlantic had the largest filing growth, accumulated the most cases, and had

the largest backlog growth (further investigation revealed this was due to mass tort activity); and, 6) Sussex had modest filings growth, the largest clearance of any small county, and the largest backlog reduction in the state.

Just as charts can be tailored for county size, statistical reports can be tailored for different audiences. New Jersey has many audiences, including trial court administrators, judges, managers, analysts, the Judicial Council, and the Administrative Council. Trial court administrators use a report that focuses on individual counties, with comparisons of performance across time. The Judicial Council (chief justice, assignment judges, presiding judge conference chairs, administrative director, and deputy director) uses a report that focuses on case types, with comparisons of performance across counties. The Administrative Council (trial court administrators and AOC directors) uses a report that focuses on backlog reduction, with comparisons of backlog statistics across time and across counties. Analyses that accompany New Jersey's monthly reports include sets of newly created charts each month. Since the reports are

Exhibit 1



designed for specific audiences, the charts are carefully tailored for the audiences. The wide variety of charts that are presented each month with the regular reports allows judges and managers to continue to take fresh looks at the data.

Controlling for county size with the format below is one approach that we use to improve the way we tell important statistical stories to our readers and thus improve court management.

Exhibit 2

