

# CASELOAD HIGHLIGHTS

Volume 12 • Number 1

EXAMINING THE WORK OF STATE COURTS

## Felony Caseloads in the NACM Network

Established in 1993 through a cooperative agreement between the Court Statistics Project (CSP) and the National Association for Court Management (NACM), the NACM Network allows for court-level comparisons of caseloads and resources among its 23 participating state trial courts. In this issue of *Caseload Highlights*, we explore felony caseload trends, the relationship between felony caseload growth and clearance rates, the disposition of felony cases, and evidence that felony trials are becoming less common in the NACM Network courts. Finally, we present an empirical snapshot of seasonal workload patterns in eight courts.

The adjacent table provides an overview of felony caseloads in the NACM Network courts over a ten-year period. In 2003, felony caseloads in the participating courts ranged from a low of just over 1,500 filings in Mohave County to a high of nearly 42,000 filings in Harris County. Between 1993 and 2003, 17 courts saw growth in total felony filings, while 5 courts experienced decreases in

total felony filings. Maricopa County reported the largest increase in total felony filings (131 percent); Kings County (NY) saw the greatest decrease (54 percent). In 2003, clearance rates, which approximate the percentage of felony filings disposed

of within the year, ranged from 81 percent in Maricopa County to 114 percent in Jackson County.

Adjusting total filings for population enables us to see more clearly the effect of population growth on court workloads. Over the same ten-year period, felony

filings per 1,000 population rose in 13 courts and fell in 9 courts. In Mohave, Broward, Chatham, and Harris counties, population-adjusted filings dropped even as total filings climbed, indicating that population growth outpaced increases in felony filings.

Felony Caseloads in the NACM Network Courts, 1993-2003

	Location	Filings 2003	Clearance Rate 2003	Filings Growth 1993 - 2003	Filings per 1,000 Population 1993	Filings per 1,000 Population 2003
Arizona	Mohave County	1,539	99%	12%	12.3	8.9
	Maricopa County	35,063	81	131	6.3	10.4
California	Los Angeles County	34,027	103	-33	5.6	3.5
	Orange County	13,236*	—	50**	3.5	4.5*
	Santa Clara County	11,900	84	33	5.8	7.1
	Ventura County	3,176	103	39	3.3	4.0
Colorado	Denver (city and county)	5,188	99	38	7.6	9.3
District of Columbia	Washington	5,643	106	-35	14.5	10.1
Florida	Broward County	15,643	102	11	10.3	9.1
	Leon County	5,586	106	37	19.7	23.1
	Miami-Dade County	23,459	102	-13	13.3	10.0
	Orange County	14,481	109	41	13.8	15.0
Georgia	Gwinnett County	4,400	97	84	5.6	6.5
	Chatham County	2,668	94	6	11.4	11.3
Missouri	Jackson County	6,163	114	83	5.3	9.4
New Jersey	Essex Vicinage	7,476	113	3	9.3	9.4
New York	Kings County	6,004	99	-54	5.5	2.4
	New York County	9,078	106	—	—	5.8
Texas	Dallas County	27,821	96	-11	15.9	12.2
	Harris County	41,659	98	11	12.6	11.6
Utah	Salt Lake County	6,939	91	20	7.4	7.5
Washington	King County	10,020	88	29	4.9	5.7
Wisconsin	Milwaukee County	7,545	99	35	5.9	8.1

—Data not available. \*Data for 2002. \*\*Data for 1993-2002.

Notes: Texas data include shock probation cases and motions to revoke probation. 1993 populations estimated through linear interpolation based on 1990 and 2000 Census data. 2003 populations estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau.

## Examining the relationship between felony caseload growth and clearance rates

In the 23 NACM Network courts, growth in felony caseloads is associated with lower felony clearance rates. The graph below illustrates the relationship between annual growth in felony filings and annual felony clearance rates. Annual felony filings growth equals a court's annual percentage increase in felony filings. Negative annual filings growth indicates a reduction in filings.

A court's annual clearance rate approximates the percentage of the year's felony filings which are disposed of during that year. The clearance rate is calculated by dividing the court's total number of felony dispositions for the year by the total number of felony filings in the same year, then expressing the result as a percentage. A clearance rate greater than 100 indicates that the court is disposing of more cases than are filed; a court with

a clearance rate lower than 100 is falling behind in its workload.

Each point on the graph below represents the felony filings growth and clearance rates in one court during a single year. The line is the best linear approximation of the relationship between annual felony filings growth and

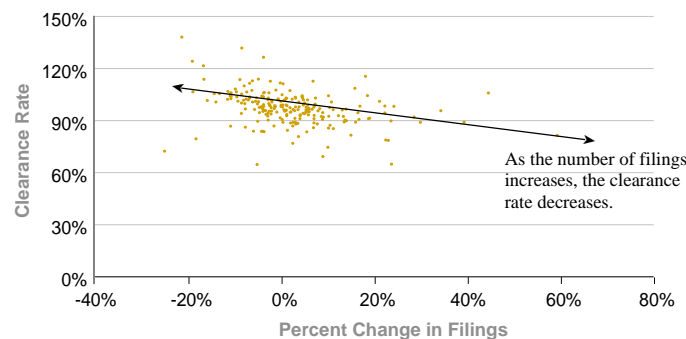
annual felony clearance rates in the NACM Network from 1994 through 2003. The line's downward slope indicates that as a court's annual rate of filings growth increases, its clearance rate tends to decrease.

The relationship between filings growth and clearance rates is also apparent in the comparison of

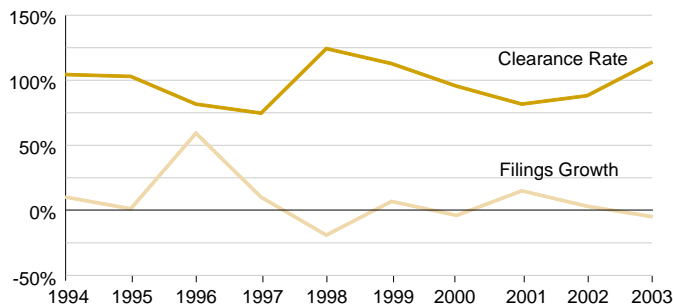
both trends over time in a single court. Annual filings growth and clearance rate trends tend to mirror each other. In Jackson County, for example, the clearance rate tends to fall in years with higher growth rates, and vice versa.

### Annual Felony Filings Growth and Clearance Rates, 1994–2003

#### All NACM Network Courts



#### Jackson County, MO



## Courts experience seasonal patterns in workload and clearance rates

Every court employee probably has an intuitive sense of the seasonal ebb and flow of court workload. Monthly caseload data submitted by eight of the NACM Network courts provide a clear empirical picture of these seasonal fluctuations in filings, dispositions, and clearance rates.

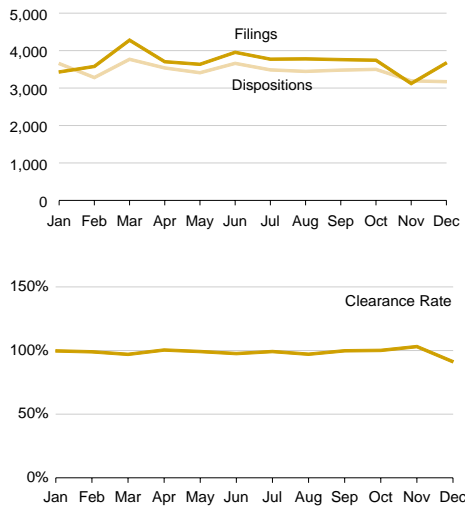
Eight courts provided caseload data on a monthly basis from 1993 through 2003. Median filings, median dispositions, and median clearance rate were calculated for each court in each month. For example, a court's median January clearance rate is the median of the court's January

clearance rates in all years between 1993 and 2003. Monthly medians taken over the study's 11-year span provide an approximation of each court's workload over the course of a typical year, minimizing the influence of outlying values resulting from unusual events.

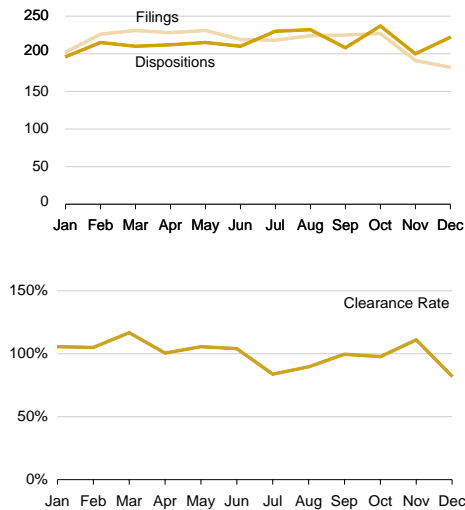
In each of the courts reporting monthly data, a definite seasonal workload pattern emerges. Several courts experience similar trends during the fall and winter months. In Los Angeles, Chatham, Salt Lake, and King (WA) counties, clearance rates tend to rise in November,

### Median Felony Filings, Dispositions, and Clearance Rates by Month

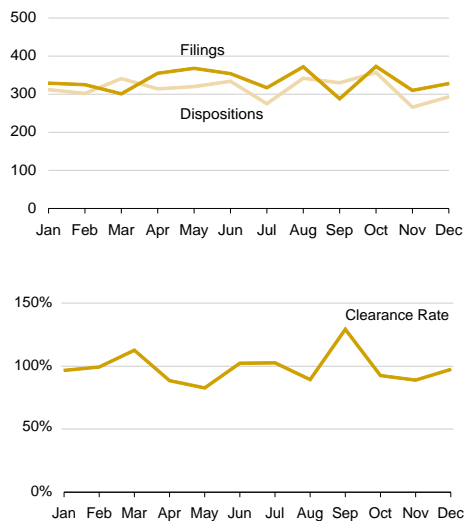
#### Los Angeles County, CA



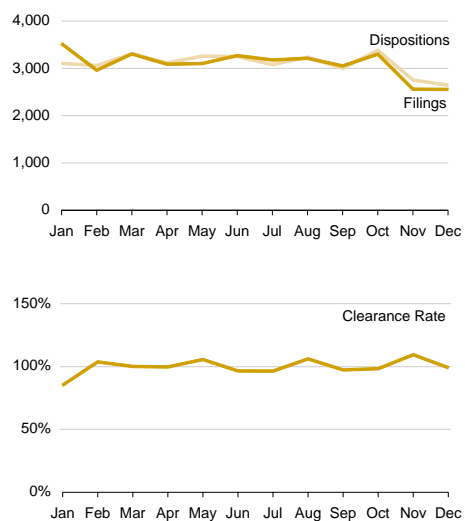
#### Chatham County, GA



#### Gwinnett County, GA



#### Harris County, TX



plummet in December, and recover in January. The high November clearance rates appear to result mainly from decreases in filings during that month. In December, filings return nearly to their October levels while dispositions fall, resulting in low

December clearance rates.

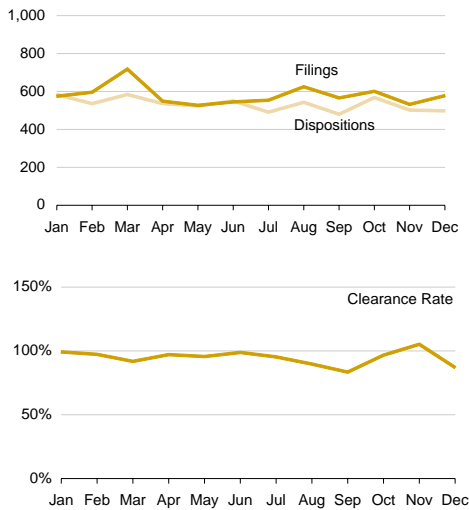
In the two New York courts, median clearance rates track closely with median dispositions throughout the year. In both Kings County and New York County, high clearance rates during the spring and fall are offset

by low clearance rates during the summer months.

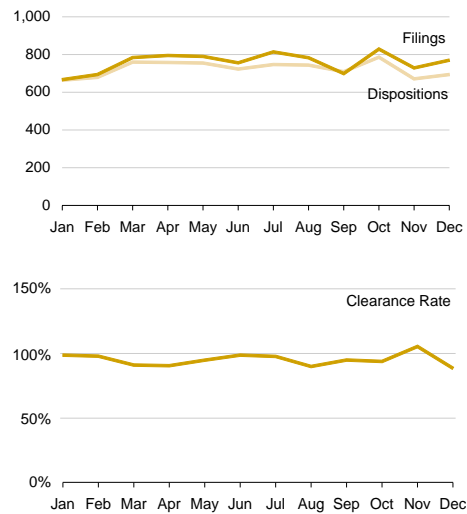
Clearance rates appear to be the most stable throughout the year in those courts where monthly dispositions closely track monthly filings. A court wishing to avoid seasonal backlogs

may therefore find it useful to examine its own monthly trends in both filings and dispositions before adjusting resources to compensate.

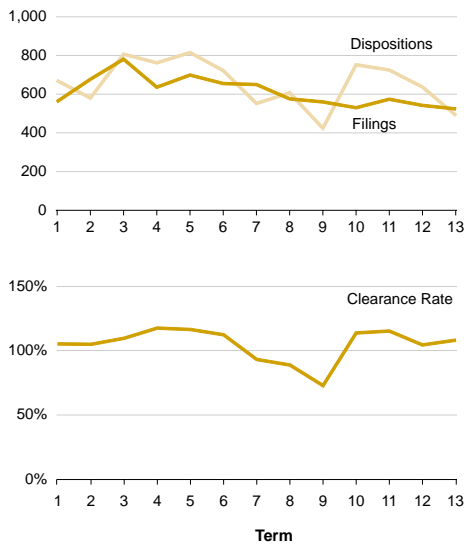
### Salt Lake County, UT



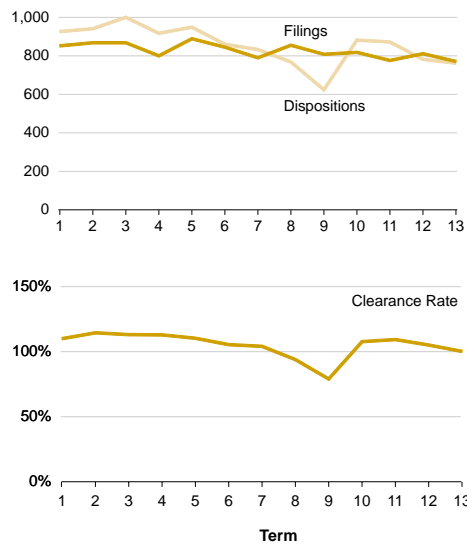
### King County, WA



### Kings County, NY



### New York County, NY



## Most felony defendants plead guilty

The NACM Network case-load study tracks felony dispositions in several categories: pleas of guilty and nolo contendere, jury trials, bench trials, dismissals and entries of nolle prosequi, and other dispositions. The two adjacent tables show the breakdown of felony dispositions in the 17 courts reporting complete data for 2003.

In every court, the vast majority of felony dispositions came in the form of guilty pleas. Dismissal was the second most common method of disposing of felony cases in most courts. In Los Angeles County, the rate of jury trials was similar to dismissals. In Miami-Dade County and the District of Columbia, “other” dispositions were the second largest category of dispositions.

In each of the Texas courts, about one-fifth of felony cases were placed on deferred adjudication. Under deferred adjudication, judgment is postponed while the defendant participates in community supervision.

### Felony Dispositions in 15 Courts, 2003

	Dismiss/Nolle Pros.	Trial		Other	Guilty Plea/Nolo Contendere
		Jury	Bench		
Los Angeles Co., CA	6%	6%	0%	0%	88%
Chatham Co., GA	6	2	0	5	86
Maricopa Co., AZ	12	2	0	0	86
Leon Co., FL	10	3	0	2	85
King Co., WA	13	4	1	0	82
New York Co., NY	11	5	1	2	81
Kings Co., NY	10	6	0	3	81
Mohave Co., AZ	16	4	0	0	80
Miami-Dade Co., FL	8	2	0	10	80
Broward Co., FL	10	4	0	7	79
Orange Co., FL	18	3	0	5	74
Jackson Co., MO	23	1	0	5	72
Essex Vicinage, NJ	25	2	1	4	68
Ventura Co., CA	19	2	0	17	63
Washington, D.C.	16	8	0	23	53

### Felony Dispositions in Two Texas Courts, 2003

	Deferred Adj.	Dismiss/Nolle Pros.	Trial		Other	Guilty Plea/Nolo Contendere
			Jury	Bench		
Harris Co., TX	17%	10%	1%	0%	18%	53%
Dallas Co., TX	21	6	2	1	24	46

Notes: “Other” dispositions may include deferred prosecution, absconded defendants, consolidated cases, felony charges reduced to misdemeanors, etc. In Texas, they include shock probation cases and motions to revoke probation. Totals may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

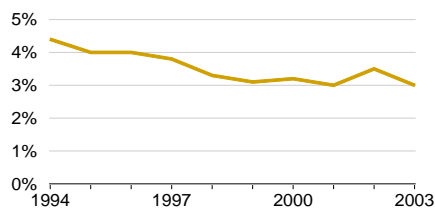
## Felony trial rates are declining

In recent years, the phenomenon of “vanishing trials” has received much attention in the court community. As the figures below demonstrate, felony cases in the NACM Network courts appear to be following this trend. In the

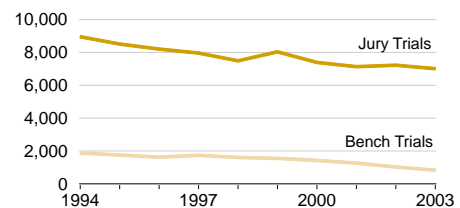
17 NACM Network courts reporting data on jury and bench trials, both the total number of trials and the percentage of cases disposed of through bench or jury trials fell between 1994 and 2003. The median trial rate in these 17

courts dropped from 4.4 percent in 1994 to just over 3 percent in 2003. Over the same time period, the total number of jury trials and bench trials in this group of courts declined by about 22 percent and 56 percent, respectively.

### Median Felony Trial Rates in 17 Courts



### Total Felony Trials in 17 Courts



## About the NACM Network

Each of the 23 NACM Network courts is a trial court with exclusive jurisdiction over felony cases filed within its geographic boundaries. Each court's jurisdiction encompasses one county (the Superior Court of the District of Columbia has jurisdiction over the entire District of Columbia). The data collected refer to felony cases bound over for trial following preliminary hearings, and therefore do not represent the total number of felony indictments within each jurisdiction. The definition of a case varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction—for ex-

ample, some courts count all charges arising against a defendant out of one incident as a single case, whereas other courts count each charge as a separate case—so not all data may be directly comparable among all courts.

Since 1993, each participating court has reported annual counts of felony filings and dispositions, as well as the number of felony cases pending at the beginning and end of each year. Most courts have also reported data on felony case outcomes. Eight courts have reported similar data on a monthly or term basis.

### NACM Network Courts

Court Name	City	County Population, 2003
Superior Court of AZ, Maricopa Co.	Phoenix	3,388,768
Superior Court of AZ, Mohave Co.	Kingman	172,248
Superior Court of CA, Co. of Los Angeles	Los Angeles	9,860,382
Superior Court of CA, Co. of Orange	Santa Ana	2,960,149
Superior Court of CA, Co. of Santa Clara	San Jose	1,675,915
Superior Court of CA, Co. of Ventura	Ventura	790,560
Denver (CO) District Court*	Denver	556,039
Superior Court of the District of Columbia	Washington	556,039
Circ. Court of the 17 <sup>th</sup> Jud. Circ. of FL in and for Broward Co.	Ft. Lauderdale	1,728,916
Circ. Court of the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Jud. Circ. of FL in and for Leon Co.	Tallahassee	242,099
Circ. Court of the 11 <sup>th</sup> Jud. Circ. of FL in and for Miami-Dade Co.	Miami	2,336,140
Circ. Court of the 9 <sup>th</sup> Jud. Circ. of FL in and for Orange Co.	Orlando	964,073
Superior Court of Chatham Co., State of GA	Savannah	236,144
Superior Court of Gwinnett Co., State of GA	Lawrenceville	673,774
16 <sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Court of Jackson Co., MO	Kansas City	659,387
Superior Court of NJ, Essex Vicinage	Newark	797,439
NY State Supreme Court, Criminal Term, Kings Co.	Brooklyn	2,483,164
NY State Supreme Court, Criminal Term, New York Co.	New York	1,557,014
Dallas Co. (TX) Criminal District Courts Division	Dallas	2,281,750
Harris Co. (TX) Criminal District Courts	Houston	3,593,007
3 <sup>rd</sup> District Court, Salt Lake Co. (UT)	Salt Lake City	924,760
King Co. (WA) Superior Court	Seattle	1,764,750
Milwaukee Co. (WI) Circuit Court, Criminal Division	Milwaukee	932,143

\*Denver is both a city and a county.  
Note: Populations estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau.



## CASELOAD HIGHLIGHTS

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