

Tip Sheet for Searching Court Records

Below are a series of tips that should be kept in mind as you perform your record searching at the courts.

1. Learn the Index & Record Systems

Most civil courts index records by both plaintiffs and defendants, but some only index by the defendant name. A plaintiff search is useful, for example, to determine if someone is especially litigious.

2. Understand the Search Requirements

There is a strong tendency for courts to overstate their search requirements. For civil cases, the usual reasonable requirement is a defendant (or plaintiff) name – full name if it is a common name – and the time frame to search – e.g., 1993-2002. For criminal cases, the court may require more identification, such as date of birth (DOB), to ascertain the correct individual.

3. Be Aware of Restricted Records

Courts have types of case records, such as juvenile and adoptions, which are not released without a court order. Records may also be sealed from view or expunged. The presiding judge often makes a determination of whether a particular record type is available to the public. Some criminal court records include the arresting officer's report. In some locations this information is regarded as public record, while in other locations the police report may be sealed.

4. Watch for Multiple Courts at Same Location

When the general jurisdiction and limited jurisdiction courts are in the same building and use the same support staff, chances are the record databases are combined as well. But that does not necessarily mean you will receive a search of both databases and pay for one search unless you ask for it. Do not assume.

5. Watch for Overlapping Jurisdictions

In some states, the general jurisdiction court and the limited jurisdiction court have overlapping dollar amounts for civil cases. That means a case could be filed in either court. Check both courts; never assume.

6. A Certain Truth

Just because records are maintained in a certain way in your state or county, do not assume that any other county or state does things the same way. Case document images are not generally available online because courts are still experimenting and developing electronic filing and imaging. Generally, copies of case documents are only on-site.

As your public record searching takes you from county-to-county or from state-to-state, always keep this truth in the back of your mind.