BEYOND A REASONABLE DOUBT:
The Federal Court System & the Sixth Amendment

Federal Court System

- 9 judges per case
- Hears 60-70 cases per year

1 Supreme Court

The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States. The Supreme Court is made up of 1 Chief Justice and 8 Associate Justices. To appeal a case to the Supreme Court, four justices must vote to grant a *writ of certiorari*. Fewer than 80 are granted annually. Supreme Court decisions are final and cannot be appealed.

- 3 judges per case
- Hears 40 thousand cases per year

13 U.S. Courts of Appeals

U.S. Courts of Appeals serve as the federal appellate courts between the U.S. District Courts and the Supreme Court of the United States; they can only hear cases from the district courts in their circuit. Panels of three judges hear cases in the Courts of Appeals. If either party is still unsatisfied with the ruling, they may appeal to the Supreme Court.

- 1 judge per case
- 1 million cases a year

94 U.S. District Courts

U.S. District Courts accept around one million cases annually. Article III Judges in these courts handle higher-level cases like murder, while Magistrate Judges, who are appointed by Article III judges, issue warrants and manage pretrial matters. District Courts have original jurisdiction, meaning that they hear the case first and issue the verdict. Parties can appeal District Court decisions to the Court of Appeals in their corresponding circuit.

The Sixth Amendment

"In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence."

-The United States Constitution

Let's Break it Down:

What rights does the Sixth Amendment ensure?

- Speedy Trial
- Public Trial
- Impartial Jury from the area where the crime was committed
- Know the charges against you
- Ability to confront witnesses
- Call witnesses on behalf of the defendant
- Advice of counsel (an attorney) for a defense

All of the above applies to *criminal* proceedings

Why is the Sixth Amendment Important?

The Sixth Amendment was written in 1789 by James Madison as part of the Bill of Rights. Shortly after the Constitution was ratified in 1788, the Founding Fathers realized citizens needed protection from potential tyranny caused by a lack of government restraint. Without the rights provided by the Sixth Amendment, citizens could be held in jail indefinitely and then thrown in prison without knowing what they were accused of, or who their accuser was. They would have no jury to determine guilt, no right to call defense witnesses, and no lawyer.

The Sixth Amendment Selectively Incorporated

The legal process used by the Supreme Court to apply the protections of the Bill of Rights to state governments through the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Gideon v. Wainwright (1963)

Right to Counsel in Felony Cases

In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court held that the Fourteenth Amendment creates a right for criminal defendants who cannot afford their own lawyers to have the state appoint counsel on their behalf.

We think...that those guarantees of the Bill of Rights which are fundamental safeguards of liberty immune from federal abridgment are equally protected against state invasion by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

-Justice Hugo Black

Pointer v. Texas (1965)

Right to Confront Witnesses

In a unanimous decision written by Justice Hugo Black, the Supreme Court held that the Sixth Amendment's right to confrontation and cross-examination is a fundamental right that applies to state proceedings via the Fourteenth Amendment.

"The fact that this right appears in the Sixth Amendment of our Bill of Rights reflects the belief of the Framers of those liberties and safeguards that confrontation was a fundamental right essential to a fair trial in a criminal prosecution."

-Justice Hugo Black

Klopfer v. North Carolina (1967)

Right to a Speedy Trial

In a 9-0 decision, the Supreme Court found that North Carolina violated a defendant's Sixth Amendment right to a speedy trial when it indefinitely postponed prosecuting the case.

"The history of the right to a speedy trial and its reception in this country clearly establish that it is one of the most basic rights preserved by our Constitution."

-Chief Justice Earl Warren

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