The American legal system is comprised of two very different types of cases, civil and criminal. Crimes are generally offenses against the state, and are accordingly prosecuted by the state. Civil cases on the other hand, are typically disputes between individuals regarding the legal duties and responsibilities they owe one another.

Here are some of the key differences between a criminal case and a civil case:

Crimes are considered offenses against the state, or society as a whole. That means that even though one person might murder another person, murder itself is considered an offense to everyone in society. Accordingly, crimes against the state are prosecuted by the state, and the prosecutor (not the victim) files the case in court as a representative of the state. If it were a civil case, then the wronged party would file the case.

Criminal offenses and civil offenses are generally different in terms of their punishment. Criminal cases will have jail time as a potential punishment, whereas civil cases generally only result in monetary damages or orders to do or not do something. Note that a criminal case may involve both jail time and monetary punishments in the form of fines.

The standard of proof is also very different in a criminal case versus a civil case. Crimes must generally be proved "beyond a reasonable doubt", whereas civil cases are proved by lower standards of proof such as "the preponderance of the evidence" (which essentially means that it was more likely than not that something occurred in a certain way). The difference in standards exists because civil liability is considered less blameworthy and because the punishments are less severe.

Criminal cases almost always allow for a trial by jury. Civil cases do allow juries in some instances, but many civil cases will be decided by a judge.

A defendant in a criminal case is entitled to an attorney, and if he or she can't afford one, the state must provide an attorney. A defendant in a civil case is not given an attorney and must pay for one, or else defend him or herself.

The protections afforded to defendants under criminal law are considerable (such as the protection against illegal searches and seizures under the 4th Amendment). Many of these well known protections are not available to a defendant in a civil case.

- See more at: http://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-law-basics/the-differences-between-a-criminal-case-and-a-civil-case.html#sthash.DdL1DXA1.dpuf

Notes -

- To Appeal - to ask a higher court to review the opinion of a lower court

- All lower courts established by Congress

- Trial Courts - First court in a chain, All others are Appellate Courts

Appeal

Appeal

Appeal

Appeal

Appeal

Appeal

Appeal

Appeal

Appeal

Supreme Court as appellate jurisdiction

-Cases that began in lower courts and work up to Supreme Court

Lower State Courts

-Hear civil and criminal cases based on state laws

-Decided by jury of peers

U.S. District Courts

-Hear civil and criminal cases involving Federal laws

-Decided by jury of peers

Supreme Court

Established by Constitution

Cases that go directly to the Supreme Court (original jurisdiction)

-Involving Ambassadors, Consuls, Public Ministers

-Involve a state being sued

-Law passed by Congress

-Maritime and Admiralty cases

-Decided by 9 Supreme Court Justices

Specialized Courts

-Customs Court

-Patent Court

Specialized Courts

-Tax Courts

-U.S. Trade Courts

Lower Military Courts

Military Court of Appeals

U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals

-Handles appeals from Federal District Courts

State Appeals Court

-Task is to review if the law was applied correctly in the Lower State Courts

-Decision must be followed by all trial courts

State Supreme Courts

-Highest appellate court at state level

-Reviews rulings of Appeals Court