**Brief Summary**

**The Structure of the U.S. Court System**

The U.S. courts are divided into federal and state systems.  Each system is further divided by hierarchical, geographic, and subject matter jurisdictions, giving each particular court unique responsibilities. Criminal trial courts hear the facts pertaining to guilt or innocence, while appellate and supreme courts address questions of law and fairness.

**The Courtroom Workgroup**

The court system includes many players who interact daily and, in the process of doing so, form relationships that help the court function smoothly. Judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys each fulfill a specific role in the criminal justice system.  While prosecutors act for the state and defense attorneys act for their clients, judges must rule on matters of law. Numerous other professionals, and even members of the public, form part of the courtroom workgroup.

**The Criminal Pretrial Process**

After entry into the system, citizens unfamiliar with the court process face a confusing labyrinth of appearances and hearings. Through the pretrial processes, defendants face a wide possibility of outcomes, such as release, bail, plea agreements, and/or the potential of a formal criminal trial.   The journey begins with the initial appearance and continues with the grand jury and/or preliminary hearing processes to determine if probable cause exists.  The next step is arraignment, at which time the defendant formally enters a plea.  Some defendants may choose to enter into a plea bargain; for those who proceed to trial, legal processes such as discovery and pretrial motions are initiated.  The steps in the pretrial process are designed not only to keep the power of the state or government in check, but also to keep defendants apprised of their rights and responsibilities.

**Criminal Trial Processes**

The Sixth Amendment guarantees the right to a trial, but, surprisingly to some, there are exceptions to this right. Guided by a presumption of innocence, the state must prove a defendant’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.  There is an order of presentation common to most trials, leading toward the ultimate goal of reaching a verdict. If a defendant is convicted, the judge must determine a sentence.  Judges often draw upon presentencing investigation (PSI) reports in doing so. Defendants have a right to an appeal on issues of law or fairness, as opposed to issues of fact.  When a higher court agrees to hear and rule on an appeal, the power of judicial review can have significant influence on criminal justice policies and procedures.

**Legal Reasoning**

Impartiality is crucial to the justice system.  It falls to judges to make legal rulings, and there are a variety of perspectives and values that they can draw upon in doing so.  These perspectives and values are reflected in legal philosophies that underlie judicial decisions requiring the interpretation and application of the law. The public expects judges to be able to explain how they used law and facts to arrive at a decision; but sometimes other factors, such as social and moral factors, also influence decisions.