



How Often Federal Civil Forfeiture Cases End in a Default Judgment

Original analysis of 30,648 records from the Federal Judicial Center, FY2006–FY2025 (federal fiscal years). Published October 18, 2026. <https://settlementinsight.com/research/civil-forfeiture-default-judgments>

Of 4,572 civil forfeiture and penalty cases filed by the United States and closed in federal district courts in fiscal years 2021 through 2025, 1,882 ended in a default judgment, or 41.2%. Only 15 ended in a trial verdict. In drug-related seizure cases alone the default share was 42.5%, and in cases where the first-listed defendant is property it was 43.9%.

41%

Federal forfeiture cases ending in default, FY2021–25

15

Trial verdicts among them, FY2021–25

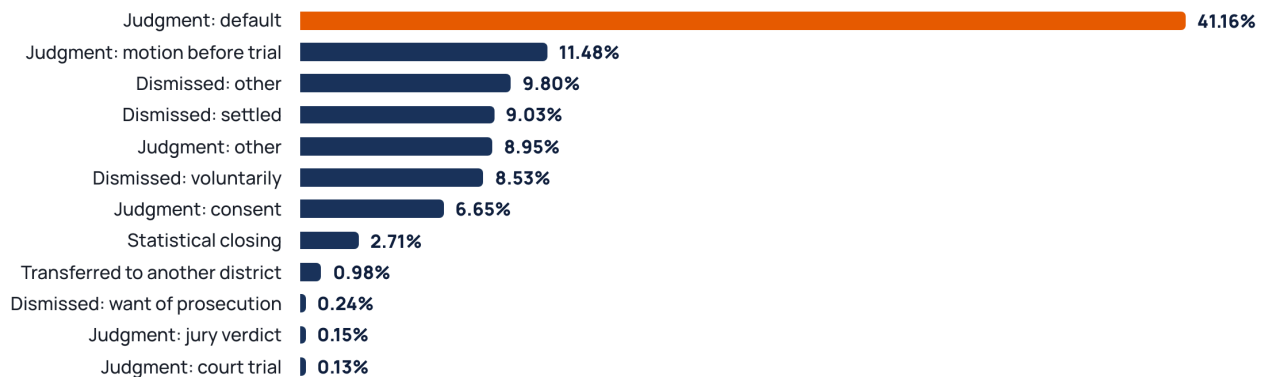
44%

Default share, property-named defendant, FY2021–25



How U.S. civil forfeiture and penalty cases ended, FY2021–FY2025

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Source: Settlement Insight analysis of data from the Federal Judicial Center
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What the Federal Court Records Show

- Default is the most common outcome.** Default judgments accounted for 1,882 of 4,572 closed cases (41.2%), far ahead of judgments on a motion before trial (11.5%) and dismissals coded as settled (9.0%).
- Trials are almost absent.** Only 15 of the 4,572 cases ended in a jury verdict, directed verdict or bench trial, a share of 0.33%.

3. **The default share has risen.** In fiscal 2006, 28.4% of closed cases ended in default; in fiscal 2025 it was 41.3%. The highest share in the series came in fiscal 2024 at 45.5%.
4. **Fewer cases are closed each year.** Courts closed an average of 2,129 of these cases a year in fiscal 2006–2010 and 914 a year in fiscal 2021–2025.
5. **Districts differ widely.** Among the 44 district courts with at least 40 closed cases, the default share ranged from 91.1% in the Western District of North Carolina to 1.5% in the Western District of Pennsylvania, a spread that may partly reflect how courts code uncontested cases.

How we measured

The data come from the Federal Judicial Center’s Integrated Database (IDB) of federal civil cases, in the data file dated August 26, 2026, which covers cases through June 30, 2026, as held in the Settlement Insight database on October 10, 2026 and analyzed on October 18, 2026. The IDB is built from the case data that district courts report to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. Disposition, jurisdiction and nature-of-suit codes follow the FJC civil codebook.

We included cases under the two nature-of-suit codes the judiciary groups as forfeiture and penalty suits, 625 (drug related seizure of property) and 690 (other forfeiture and penalty suits), with the U.S. government as plaintiff. Suits in which the government is the defendant, such as owners suing to get property back, are left out. Years are federal fiscal years (October through September) of the date a case was closed, fiscal 2006 through fiscal 2025; fiscal 2026 is incomplete and left out.

The unit is a case closing, as in the judiciary’s Table C-4. Default judgment means disposition code 4; trial verdicts are codes 7, 8 and 9 (jury verdict, directed verdict, court trial). The analysis covers 30,648 closings in fiscal 2006–2025, 4,572 of them in fiscal 2021–2025.

To check the data, we recounted published totals. For fiscal 2025 we count 250 drug-related seizure filings with the U.S. as plaintiff against 251 in Table C-2 (0.4% difference), 476 other forfeiture and penalty filings against 480 (0.8%), and 838 closings of forfeiture and penalty cases with the U.S. as plaintiff or defendant against 838 in Table C-4 (0.0% difference).

Checked against published figures

- FY2025 civil filings with the U.S. as plaintiff, nature of suit 625 (Drug-Related Seizure of Property): published 251, our count 250 (0.40% apart). [Table C-2: U.S. District Courts, Civil Cases Commenced, by Basis of Jurisdiction and Nature of Suit, 12 months ending September 30, 2025 \(Judicial Business 2025\)](#).
- FY2025 civil filings with the U.S. as plaintiff, nature of suit 690 (Other Forfeiture and Penalty Suits): published 480, our count 476 (0.83% apart). [Table C-2: U.S. District Courts, Civil Cases Commenced, by Basis of Jurisdiction and Nature of Suit, 12 months ending September 30, 2025 \(Judicial Business 2025\)](#).
- FY2025 terminations of U.S. civil forfeiture and penalty cases (natures of suit 625 and 690, U.S. plaintiff or defendant): published 838, our count 838 (exact match). [Table C-4: U.S. District Courts, Civil Cases Terminated, by Nature of Suit and Action Taken, 12 months ending September 30, 2025 \(Judicial Business 2025\)](#).

Limitations

- A default judgment is recorded under one code, but courts do not all use it the same way. Some enter uncontested forfeitures as judgments on a motion or as other judgments, so the default share is a lower bound for uncontested cases and district comparisons partly reflect recording practice. The records do not say whether any claimant appeared, how much property was involved or whether property was returned.
- Court cases are only part of federal forfeiture. Administrative forfeitures, which happen at the seizing agency when no claim is filed, and criminal forfeitures do not appear in these civil records.
- The other forfeiture and penalty code also includes civil penalty suits against people and companies. Our property-caption check reads only the first-listed defendant in a truncated name field and is an approximation.
- A reopened case that closes again counts again: 92 docket numbers account for 187 of the closings in fiscal 2021–2025. Courts can also report cases late, so counts for fiscal 2025 may still change slightly in later FJC releases.

Data files

- [Default judgments in federal civil forfeiture and penalty cases by district court, FY2021–FY2025](#) (CSV, 94 rows)
- [Federal civil forfeiture and penalty cases filed by the U.S.: default judgments by fiscal year, FY2006–FY2025](#) (CSV, 20 rows)
- [How federal civil forfeiture and penalty cases filed by the U.S. ended, FY2021–FY2025](#) (CSV, 18 rows)

How to cite

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