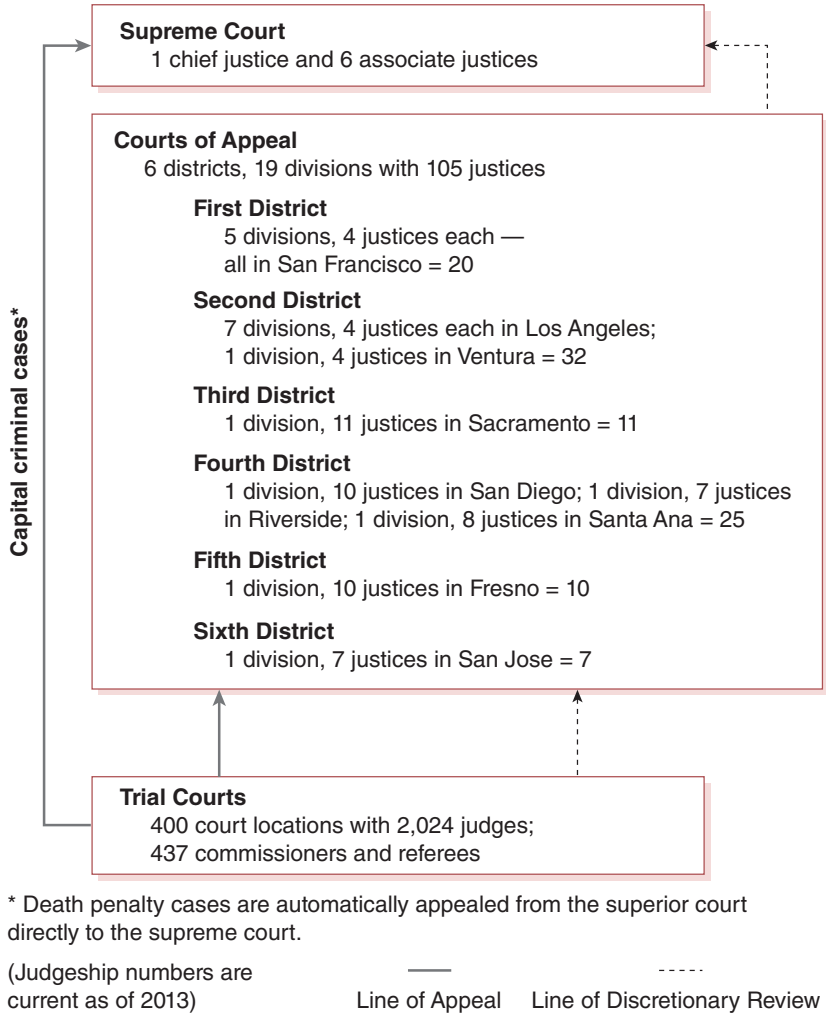
Figure 1.4 California State Court System



Two types of courts

California has two types of courts: 58 trial courts, one in each county, and appellate courts. Trial courts are the superior courts; appellate courts are the six districts of the Courts of Appeal and the California Supreme Court. In the trial courts, a judge and sometimes a jury hear witnesses' testimony and other evidence and decide cases by applying the relevant law to the relevant facts. In the appellate courts, people who are not satisfied with a trial court decision appeal cases to judges. The California courts serve nearly 34 million people.

Trial courts. In June 1998, California voters approved Proposition 220, a constitutional amendment that permitted the judges in each county to merge their superior and municipal courts into a "unified," or single, superior court. As of February 2001, all of California's 58 counties have voted to unify their trial courts.

Superior courts now have trial jurisdiction over all criminal cases including felonies, misdemeanors, and traffic matters. They also have jurisdiction over all civil cases, including family law, probate, juvenile, and general civil matters. Nearly 8.8 million cases were filed in the trial courts at some 400 court locations throughout the state during 1998–1999. Appeals in limited civil cases (where $25,000 or less is at issue) and misdemeanors are heard by the appellate division of the superior court. When a small claims case is appealed, a superior court judge decides the case.

Appellate courts

Supreme Court: The state's highest court, the supreme court, may grant review of cases decided by the courts of appeal. Certain other cases, such as death penalty appeals and disciplinary cases involving judges and attorneys, are appealed directly to this court. At least four of the seven justices must agree on decisions of the court. The court's decisions are binding on all other state courts.

Courts of Appeals: Panels of three justices hear appeals from superior courts, except in death penalty cases, which are appealed automatically to the supreme court. The courts of appeal determine whether a trial court committed legal error in handling the cases that are presented on appeal.

Source: Superior Court of California, County of Glenn (2009). *Structure of California Court System,* http://www.glenncourt.ca.gov/general_info/teachers/structure.html. Updated by the author.