



LEGAL RESEARCH GUIDE SERIES
BASIC RESEARCH GUIDE # 1

FEDERAL STATUTORY RESEARCH



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FEDERAL STATUTORY RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

There are two types of federal laws:

- **Private laws** benefit a particular person or a group of individuals.
- **Public laws** are of general application. This research guide focuses on how to research federal public laws.

To determine if a source listed in this guide is available through LexisNexis or Westlaw:

LexisNexis: Select the “**Find a Source**” tab; type the source name or identifiers in the search box.

Examples: United States Code or GENFED;USCODE

Westlaw: If you are using Westlaw.com, type the name of the source in the “**Search for a database**” box. If you are using WestlawNext, type the name of the source in the WestlawNext search box and select the resource from the drop down list.

Examples: United States Code Annotated or USCA

For additional information, please see the following LibGuide available from the Law Library’s web site: *Finding Federal Statutory Law Resources at Burns Law Library* (<http://law.gwu.libguides.com/statutorylaw>).

I. THE PUBLICATION OF FEDERAL STATUTES

A. Slip Laws

Public laws or statutes are first published officially in the form of a pamphlet called a "slip law," and are then assigned a designated public law number. The public law number is the unique identification number for each law. Public laws are numbered sequentially starting with each new Congress and are cited the following way: **Pub. L. No. 101-123**

- **Pub. L. No.** = *Bluebook* abbreviation for "public law number"
- **101** = the Congress
- **123** = sequential number assigned to the law

Since 1974, citations to the *United States Code* have been included in the margins of the law indicating where the statute will be codified in the *Code*. Since 1975, a brief legislative history has also been included on the last page of each public law.

B. *United States Statutes at Large*

Slip laws are compiled into bound volumes known as session laws. “Session laws” refer to the publication, in chronological sequence, of laws enacted during a legislative session. The official bound volumes containing session laws of the U.S. Congress are called the *U.S. Statutes at Large*. An example of a citation to the *Statutes at Large* is: **80 Stat. 931**

- **80** = volume number of the *Statutes at Large*
- **Stat.** = *Bluebook* abbreviation for *Statutes at Large*
- **931** = page on which the text of the law begins

• World Wide Web

FDsys (PDF, 1951-2002; 2003-2007)

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys> > *Browse Collections* > *United States Statutes at Large*

American Memory, Library of Congress (PDF, 1789-1875)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwsl.html>

• Commercial Databases

HeinOnline (*U.S. Statutes at Large*) (PDF, 1789-)

<http://www.law.gwu.edu/Library/Research> > *Database Subscriptions*.

Westlaw (*US-STATLRG*) (PDF, 1789-1972)

• **Print:** LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1) (1789-)

C. *United States Code (U.S.C.)*

The most useful form of a federal law is not its session law format, but its codified format. A “code” organizes laws by subject. A code also incorporates later amendments into the text of the original law. Repealed laws are deleted and minor technical adjustments are made to the text. The result is the most current version of the law. Codes often appear in **official** and **unofficial** editions.

The **official** code of federal laws is the *United States Code (U.S.C.)* [**Print:** LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1)]. In the *U.S.C.*, the laws are grouped into 51 “titles,” with each title representing a particular subject area. For example, Title 12 of the *U.S.C.* contains the current text of banking laws. In the codified version of a law, section numbers of the session law version are renumbered. Thus, the

section numbers of the session law will differ from the section numbers of the codified version. An example of a citation to the *U.S.C.* is: **5 U.S.C. § 555 (2006)**

- **5** = title of the *U.S.C.*
- **U.S.C.** = *Bluebook* abbreviation for the *United States Code*
- **555** = section number
- **2006** = year of the edition of the *U.S.C.*

The *U.S.C.* is completely revised every six years and is updated between these revisions with annual cumulative supplements.

Unofficial versions of the *U.S.C.* contain the same text of the law as it appears in the official code. However, they are more current than the official version and contain useful annotations that cite to regulations, cases, and secondary materials.

- **World Wide Web**

FDsys (PDF, 1994 ed.-)

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys> > *Federal Register*

Cornell Law School's Legal Information Institute (LII), United States Code

<http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode>

Individual titles of the *U.S.C.* can be searched and currency information is provided for each title.

- **Commercial Databases**

HeinOnline (*United States Code*) (PDF, 1925 ed.-)

<http://www.law.gwu.edu/Library/Research> > *Database Subscriptions*

LexisNexis (*GENFED;USCODE*) (current)

ProQuest Congressional (current)

<http://www.law.gwu.edu/Library/Research> > *Database Subscriptions*

Search *Legislative History, Bills, & Laws* by keyword.

Westlaw (*USCA*) (current)

- **Print**

United States Code (U.S.C.): LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1) (1940 ed.-)

Official version of United States Code, published every six years, updated by annual supplements.

United States Code Annotated (U.S.C.A.): RESERVE (1ST FL) and LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1) (current)

The *U.S.C.A.* is updated with annual supplements called “pocket parts” and periodic supplemental pamphlets. The *U.S.C.A.* provides extensive annotations following the code sections citing to court cases, federal regulations, law review articles, and legislative history documents. The *U.S.C.A.* also includes cross references to related Code sections and detailed historical notes explaining subsequent amendments to the law.

United States Code Service (U.S.C.S.): LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1)
(current)

Like the *U.S.C.A.*, the *U.S.C.S.* is updated annually with pocket parts as well as with periodic supplemental pamphlets. Extensive annotations provide citations to court decisions, federal regulations, statutory history, federal agency decisions and law review articles.

II. HOW TO RESEARCH FEDERAL STATUTES

A. Locating the Public Law Number of a Federal Law

Having the public law number of a new federal law will enable you to more easily locate a copy of the text of the law. It is possible to obtain the public law number in a variety of ways:

- **World Wide Web**

FDsys (PDF, 104th Cong., 1995/1996-)

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys> > *Public and Private Laws*

Users may also search for public laws from the Advanced Search page by keyword.

THOMAS, Library of Congress (93rd Cong., 1973-)

<http://thomas.loc.gov>

THOMAS is searchable by keyword or bill number.

- **Commercial Databases**

LexisNexis (*LEGIS;BLTRCK*)

Contains summaries and status information (including public law numbers) for current legislation.

ProQuest Congressional (1988-)

<http://www.law.gwu.edu/Library/Research> > *Database Subscriptions*

In *ProQuest Congressional*, select “Legislative Histories, Bills & Laws” to locate public law numbers by keyword or bill number.

Westlaw (*US-BLLTRK*)

Contains summaries and status information (including public law numbers) for current legislation.

- **Print**

Shepard's Acts and Cases by Popular Names, Federal and State: INDEXES (1ST FL), KF90 .S538

If you only have the popular name of a public law, check *Shepard's Acts and Cases by Popular Names*. *Shepard's* provides the public law number, the *Statutes at Large* citation, and the *United States Code* citation.

U.S.C.A. Popular Name Table: RESERVE (1ST FL) and *LEGAL REFERENCE* (LL1)

Revised annually, the *Popular Name Table* provides the *U.S.C.A.* citation, public law number, and *Statutes at Large* citation.

Congressional Index: RESERVE (1ST FL) (current Congress); *LEGAL REFERENCE* (LL1) (83rd Cong. 1953-), KF49.C6

The service comprises two volumes—one for Senate legislation; the other covering the House. The Senate volume contains a detailed subject index to legislation being considered by both houses of the current Congress. A “Status of Bills” section in each volume lists all action taken on a particular bill and provides the public law number, if the legislation was signed into law. The *Index* is updated weekly.

B. Finding the Text of a Public Law

Once you have the public law number, you can obtain a copy of a **recent** law from a variety of sources:

- **World Wide Web**

FDsys (PDF, 104th Cong., 1995/1996-)

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys> > *Public and Private Laws*

THOMAS, Library of Congress (101st Congress, 1989- ; PDF, 103rd Congress, 1994-)

<http://thomas.loc.gov>

- **Commercial Databases**

CQ.com

<http://www.library.gwu.edu> > *Articles & Databases* > *Political Science*

CQ.com is accessible from Gelman Library's website following the path above. CQ.com provides the text of current bills, along with

Congressional Record information, bill analyses, floor votes, and biographies of the bill sponsors. Searchable by keyword and bill number.

HeinOnline (*U.S. Statutes at Large*) (PDF, 1789-200)
<http://www.law.gwu.edu/Library/Research> > *Database Subscriptions*

LexisNexis (*GENFED;PUBLAW*) (100th Cong., 1988-)

ProQuest Congressional (1988-)
<http://www.law.gwu.edu/Library/Research> > *Database Subscriptions*
Laws can be retrieved using keyword or citation (i.e., Pub. L. No. 101-549, 100 Stat. 25).

Westlaw (*US-PL*) (current Cong.) ; (*US-PL-OLD*) (93rd Cong., 1973-)

• **Print**

U.S. Code Congressional and Administrative (USCCAN): LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1) (1951-)

USCCAN is an unofficial version of the *U.S. Statutes at Large*. *USCCAN* has two parts--volumes containing the text of the public laws, and volumes containing legislative history information and documents. Laws in *USCCAN* are published chronologically. Monthly pamphlets contain federal statutes, arranged by public law number, which have been enacted within the previous two months. *USCCAN* also contains cumulative subject indexes and popular name tables.

United States Code Annotated (U.S.C.A.) Statutory Supplement: RESERVE (1ST FL) and LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1)

The statutory supplement reprints the texts of current public laws and contains selected legislative history documents. Laws are arranged by public law number.

United States Code Service (U.S.C.S.) Advance: LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1)

This monthly service reprints the texts of current public laws, but contains no legislative history documents. Laws are arranged by public law number and subject indexing is cumulative.

C. Locating the Most Up-to-Date Version of a Statute

The most up-to-date text of a statute is its **codified text**. The codified text of a law is found in the official *United States Code (U.S.C.)*, the unofficial *United States Code Annotated (U.S.C.A.)*, or the unofficial *United States Code Service (U.S.C.S.)*. All three versions contain subject indexes, popular name indexes, and tables which list public laws section-by-section and provide their location in the Code. Unofficial codes such as the *U.S.C.A.* and the *U.S.C.S.* are generally more current than the official code due to publication delays.

- **World Wide Web**

FDsys (PDF, 1994 ed.-)

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys> > *United States Code*

Cornell Law School's Legal Information Institute (LII), United States Code: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode>

Individual titles of the *U.S.C.* can be searched and currency information is provided for each title.

- **Commercial Databases**

LexisNexis (*GENFED*; *USCODE*) (current)

ProQuest Congressional

<http://www.law.gwu.edu/Library/Research> > *Database Subscriptions*

To find the codified text of a law by keyword(s), select "Legislative Histories, Bills & Laws," then "United States Code." To find the codified text of a law by citation (i.e., 42 U.S.C. § 7412), click on "Legislative Histories, Bills & Laws," then "Get a Document" tab.

Westlaw (*USCA*) (current)

- **Print**

U.S.C.: LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1) (1940 ed.-)

U.S.C.A.: RESERVE (1ST FL) and LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1) (current)

U.S.C.S.: LEGAL REFERENCE (LL1) (current edition)

Shepard's Acts and Cases by Popular Names, Federal and State: INDEXES (1ST FL), KF90 .S538

Lists by popular name, where laws are located in the *U.S.C.*

D. Updating Federal Statutes

Publishers use bound or soft cover supplements and “pocket parts” (a supplemental pamphlet which is placed in a pocket in the back of the bound volume) to update codes. Researchers should check these supplements to verify that a particular code section is valid and that no subsequent laws (i.e., amendments) or judicial decisions which have affected the validity of the statute:

- **Commercial Databases**

LexisNexis (Federal statutes may be Shepardized on LexisNexis)

Westlaw (Federal statutes may be KeyCited on Westlaw)

1. ***United States Code: Bound Cumulative Supplements***

The *U.S.C.* is completely revised every six years and is updated by annual bound cumulative supplements. The *U.S.C.* is published very slowly, making the updating of a statute difficult. To locate the current text of a law using the *U.S.C.*, check the appropriate volume of the most recent edition for the title and section number, then use the latest *U.S.C.* supplement, if any, to check for changes to the same title and section.

2. ***United States Code Annotated and United States Code Service: Pocket Parts, Pamphlet, and Supplements***

It is in the updating process that the **unofficial, annotated codes** such as *U.S.C.A.* and *U.S.C.S.* are invaluable. These annotated codes are updated annually by “pocket parts” in the back of each volume. In addition, pamphlet supplements, issued six times a year for *U.S.C.A.* and three times for *U.S.C.S.*, update the main code volume and pocket part. The codes contain annotations to case law (i.e., “notes of decisions”), regulations, and law review articles. After finding the law in the code section in the main volume of *U.S.C.A.* and *U.S.C.S.*, turn to the back “pocket part” under the same section number to see if there are any later amendments. The supplemental pamphlets should be used to update the section beyond the closing date of the pocket part. These pamphlets, called “Statutory Supplements,” have tables arranged by title and code section that note recent public laws in the pamphlet that amend the section.