

Concept Paper

Beneath the Surface of the Mirrored Lake: Why Judicial Well-Being Matters to All of Society

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Abstract

Across societies, judges are entrusted with extraordinary authority to shape legal norms, public policy, and individual rights, with decisions that can influence communities and future generations. This social contract rests on expectations of competence, impartiality, and ethical self-regulation. Popular representations often portray judges as detached, stoic, and immune to typical human emotional reactivity and outside influence. However, judges remain subject to the same biological, psychological, and social realities that affect all humans, including stress physiology, neurocognitive load, emotional strain, and the cumulative effects of allostatic burden. Emerging research suggests that these factors may have important implications for judicial well-being, decision-making, and the effective functioning of justice systems. The recent Nauru Declaration, recognizing that the well-being of judges is essential for a properly functioning judiciary, has led to the 2025 United Nations General Assembly proclamation that the 25th July be recognized as an annual International Day for Judicial Well-being. Drawing on literature identified through scholarly databases, this concept article examines evidence relating to stress, burnout, resilience, and well-being within justice systems, with particular emphasis on judges and judicial well-being. We explore the relevance of lifestyle medicine and whole-person approaches to health in supporting judicial functioning and vitality. Framed through the lens of the judiciary's societal responsibilities and the broader social contract, we contend that judicial well-being is not merely an individual concern, but one with institutional and societal significance. The article argues that well-being within systems of justice matters to society; it examines evidence relating to judicial stress and self-control fatigue, and concludes with solutions-oriented approaches and future directions for promoting judicial well-being and sustainable justice systems.



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1. Introduction

The judge “seems to float along on the Bench with effortless serenity like a swan on the mirrored surface of the lake. But, the judge, like the swan, is paddling madly underneath.”

Baron Edward Pearce (1901–1990) [1].

All over the world, societies place tremendous trust in the judiciary, accepting for the most part that judges have the power to shape human societies [2]. In direct and indirect ways, judges influence public policies and individual rights, while defining social and legal norms in the context of non-fixed cultural and social standards. To cite just a few examples, societies grant judges the power to shape political landscapes, interpret and enforce constitutions, set social norms and standards of human behavior, settle disputes, limit corporate power, determine criminal sentences, protect environments, and set precedents that can last for generations [3]. In the United States (US) alone, judges handle over one million new cases per year, the results of which ripple throughout communities and beyond. Society grants this power and prestige as part of a ‘social contract’ in which professional standards, including ethical codes and competencies, are largely self-regulated without external micromanagement [4,5].

In the popular imagination, judges are viewed as larger-than-life characters, exuding stoicism and dignity, immune from ‘the fray’ and unmoved by any outside influences on measured judgments [6]. Professor Judith Resnik, Yale School of Law, notes that society’s expectations are reflected in the symbology associated with judges, especially Lady Justice: *“Aloof and stoic. . .the scales reflect evenhandedness and absolutism. The sword is a symbol of power, and like the scales, executes decisions without sympathy or compromise. Finally, the blindfold protects Justice from distractions and from information that could bias or corrupt her. Masked, Justice is immune from sights that could evoke sympathy in an ordinary spectator”* [7]. Society’s expectation of dispassion is based on traditional ideals of how judges *ought* to behave [8]. In daily practice, judges are expected to be vigilant for internal biases and engage in purposeful self-restraint, squashing their own off-bench political worldviews, religious ideologies, intuitions, and cultural assumptions [9,10].

Of course, the popular image of judges, rooted in mythology, is far removed from the reality that judges are quite ordinary humans [11]. Judges are not exempt from normal human emotion, the consequences of neurocognitive load, biopsychosocial determinants of neuropsychiatric disorders, constraints of neuroarchitecture, and the allostatic load of stress physiology [12]. The vast and ever-growing body of research under the umbrella terms of lifestyle medicine [13,14] and whole-person health [15,16] is no less applicable to judges than they are to anyone in society.

Drawing from the PubMed, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Google Scholar, and Google Books databases, this concept article scrutinizes evidence surrounding stress and well-being in the legal profession, with a special emphasis on judges and judicial well-being. We used a variety of search terms, including but not limited to those related to burnout, resiliency, self-control fatigue, education, training, stigma, mental health, performance, institutional culture, whole-person health, and the biological aspects of well-being. We examine the extent to which lifestyle and the whole-person approach to health and vitality are of relevance to judicial well-being. We frame the discussions through the competencies associated with the social contract, arguing that judicial well-being is a subject of critical importance not only to the individual, but to institutions and all of society. While much of the research discussed is United States-centric, we underscore at the outset, and in various places below, that the pattern of psychological stress and its mental health toll related to justice work is consistent across cultures and jurisdictions. We begin with an overview of why well-being matters to systems of justice, followed by an assessment of judicial well-being and a discussion of self-control fatigue. We conclude with solutions-oriented approaches and ideas for future directions.

2. Well-Being in Systems of Justice

Before examining the specific topic of judicial well-being, it is important to emphasize that the mental health and well-being of all professionals involved in systems of justice, including law enforcement officials, corrections personnel, court officers, parole and probation officers, and attorneys, is of vital importance to society. Mounting evidence is linking individual mental health and well-being (and institutional support of a culture of well-being) to workplace performance that is fair, just, and non-aggressive [17]; for example, burnout, the risk of which is influenced by organizational culture [18–20], is associated with excessive use of force among police officers [21,22].

Throughout systems of criminal justice, investments in mental health, occupational resiliency, and institutional cultures of wellness are increasingly viewed as upstream drivers of the competency and integrity that otherwise underpins public trust and the entire legitimacy of justice professions [23]. For example, in the United States, the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (2017) underscores the importance of assessments that query whether or not law enforcement agencies have implemented mental health and wellness programming, and to what extent the implementation of such programming actually has a beneficial influence on organizations and personnel [24]. This is an important consideration because uptake by personnel is weakened by perceptions that organizations are providing only superficial, front-facing signals of care—described as ‘window dressing’—rather than a deep structural approach to reducing stigma and providing a compassionate approach to well-being [25]. Indeed, less than 3% of the 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States have early warning and intervention programs for officers in crisis [26].

It is also important to underscore that the lines between mental health and physical conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, hypertension, and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs), are not distinct. Lifestyle behaviors that are associated with protection against NCDs (e.g., healthy dietary patterns and exercise) are often avoided by justice professionals under stress. For example, many law enforcement professionals and their supervisors adopt unhealthy dietary patterns that are, in turn, associated with stress, burnout, and biological markers of NCDs [27–30]. These objective markers include elevations in blood lipids and immune chemicals that point to chronic, low-grade inflammation, and a higher risk of multiple NCDs.

Some 25% of police officers in the US may be dependent on alcohol, and in the justice professional subculture, alcohol is often perceived to be a socially acceptable way to reduce stress [31]. In a large sample of licensed and active US lawyers ($n = 12,825$), over 20% screened positive for hazardous, harmful, and potentially alcohol-dependent drinking; the same survey found high rates of depression, anxiety, and stress among practicing attorneys [32]. As with law enforcement officers, occupational stress and burnout among lawyers working in justice systems, especially those characterized by severe pressures and high-volume caseloads, can cascade into substance use and diminished attention to self-care and behavioral health [33,34]. Rates of suicidal ideation are over twice as high among lawyers compared to adults in the general US population [35], and as with law enforcement officers, occupational stress can “get under the skin” and increase the risk of NCDs [36].

3. Judicial Well-Being

Historically, judges have received less research attention than other high-stakes professions (e.g., medical doctors) and those working in systems of justice (e.g., law enforcement). The normative aspects of judicial isolation in society have likely contributed to the perception, and perhaps reality, that judges are inaccessible as research subjects [37]. This is not to say that judges have not been studied in terms of political ideology, sentencing,

precedent-setting decisions, or other legal outcomes [38]; however, until recently, judges have largely escaped scrutiny in the research frames of health psychology, occupational stress, personality features, and biopsychosocial aspects of behavior.

Discussions of judicial stress and its consequences, and issues such as substance use, were found at the margins of academic discourse, mostly confined to generalized discussions in law journals [39–42]. Historically, judges experiencing distress, burnout, and/or substance use were “*brushed under the rug, kept quiet in the [professional] community*” [43]. Worse still, the culture of stoicism was associated with intra-professional bullying directed at individuals considered ‘weak’ (Figure 1) [44]. Where they did occur, discussions of judicial stress were mostly based on anecdote, observations, and opinion; it was not until 2008 that validated psychometric instruments and evidence-based approaches were employed, with calls to scientifically understand the prevalence and extent of judicial stress [45]. By this time, other members of the justice system continuum, such as law enforcement, had already been subjected to years of detailed study in the realms of stress, trauma, burnout, health, and performance [46–49].



Figure 1. Historically referred to as ‘unmentionable,’ the subjects of judicial stress, burnout, and well-being are increasingly viewed as central to competency and social trust (artwork by author S.L.P.).

Recent years have witnessed a significant increase in research focused on the well-being of judges, especially in the context of occupational demands, the unique nature of judicial work, and the ways in which off-bench life can influence, and be influenced by, such stressors. The role of a judge often entails sustained exposure to conflict, distressing material (e.g., photographic and video evidence of trauma, harms, and victimization), high-stakes decision-making, significant workloads, public scrutiny, and professional isolation [50,51]. Concerns about courtroom safety are not trivial [52]; perceptions of threat in this environment have been shown to track closely with rising stress levels among judges [53]. Workload demands are compounded by competency requirements that mandate continuous knowledge expansion in evolving areas such as technology and science [54–56]. Role conflict (e.g., competing organizational requirements such as managerial efficiency and methodical case considerations and slow deliberation) and hierarchical ambiguities (e.g.,

who supervises judicial performance?) contribute to stress [57]. Judges without training and skills in managerial competencies can easily lag behind in performance [58].

Like other high-stakes and public-interactive professions, such as law enforcement and healthcare (e.g., nurses, physicians in an emergency room or dealing with trauma) [59], judicial work involves significant amounts of ‘emotional labor’ [60], with its emphasis on the word labor, this term describes efforts associated with “the act of displaying appropriate emotions” [61], especially in ways that conform to the traditional ‘display rules’ of an organization or institution [62]. In the aforementioned professions, including judgeships, the traditional display rules are not explicitly handed down; rather, they are implied and often based on mythical ideas that judges and other criminal justice professionals should be without emotion [63,64]. In reality, the management and regulation of emotions in the workplace can be labor-intensive and cognitively taxing, as is the effort to “suppress” emotions in accordance with idealized occupational roles [65]. In addition to managing their own emotions, the judge is often burdened with simultaneously managing the emotions of others (e.g., jurors, witnesses, and others in the courtroom work group). If the organizational culture impedes voluntary emotional disclosures in an appropriate setting (e.g., off-bench among peers), and contributes to the idea that the justice professional should be without emotion, a sense of shame and stigma can compound the aforementioned sources of stress [66]. Active suppression of emotions and sustained resistance to normal human feelings have been associated with higher risks of burnout in emotionally intensive professions [67,68]. Moreover, the consistent suppression of emotions in the workplace spills over into external patterns, compromising peer and family relationships [69]. In a vicious cycle, exhaustion and psychological stress leaves less energy for regulating one’s emotions during work, which, in turn, increases the odds that emotional labor will contribute to further stress [70,71].

Across cultures and jurisdictions, emerging evidence points to a consistent pattern of psychological stress and a mental health toll within the judiciary [72]. Studies from the United States and Australia indicate that many judges experience subthreshold post-traumatic stress, commonly assessed through measures of secondary traumatic stress, alongside symptoms of anxiety and depression [73,74]; alcohol use among judges has also been reported at higher rates than in the general population, with 30% of Australian judges consuming alcohol at levels that could be considered “problematic” [75]. Based on responses to the validated Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (STSS), approximately 30% of Australian judges would benefit from clinical assessment of post-traumatic stress symptoms [76]. In Portugal, a study of judges ($n = 413$) found that, relative to the general population, judges reported poorer overall health, lower sleep quality, and greater perceived stress. Burnout was also more pronounced, particularly in terms of emotional exhaustion [77]. Parallel findings from Northern Ireland, based on a sample of 71 salaried judges, revealed widespread workload-related strain, with symptoms including sleep disturbances (70%), headaches (55%), irritability (43%), and burnout (27%) [78]. In the Netherlands, a study of Dutch judges ($n = 257$) found that increases in job demands (including the encroachment of those demands into home/private life, limiting opportunities for rest and recovery) were associated with a higher risk of burnout [79]. Research from China [80], India [81], Sri Lanka [82], Pakistan [83], Peru [84], and the Philippines also reflect these patterns of psychological stress among judges [85], including disturbance of the work–family life balance [86]. Collectively, the international findings also underscore that despite variations in caseload volume, there appear to be cross-cultural commonalities in judicial work that contribute to heightened risks of occupational stress [87–90]. Since caseload in judicial systems is heterogeneous across geographies [91], the consistency of cross-cultural judicial stress cannot be pinned on workload alone.

As discussed in Section 6, high-profile organizations, including the United Nations, the Consultative Council of European Judges, the Council of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Chief Justices, and the Canadian Judicial Council, have responded to the emergent research. These organizations underscore that judicial stress, left unattended, is harmful to the individual, the community, and ultimately, societal trust in the institution. We now turn our attention to some of the potential consequences of judicial distress and deficits in health and well-being.

4. Consequences of Judicial Distress

The consequences of unmanaged mental distress and burnout are damaging to the mental and physical health of the individual judge, and their job performance and decision quality [92]. Thus, the consequences extend to the parties involved in particular cases (which can have exponential effects), institutional integrity, and ultimately, societal trust. At the extreme, judges living and dealing with acute stress and chronic neuropsychiatric disorders, or acute intoxication, can find themselves as defendants facing criminal charges [93–95]. Sometimes the substance use disorder is only revealed after a judge leaves the bench, such as the recent guardianship case involving a retired US judge; the family seeking guardianship argued that their father had been intoxicated multiple times while presiding over cases [96]. This has forced a review of thousands of cases where the judge presided.

While such extremes are relatively rare, it has been argued that judicial stress often manifests in on-bench behaviors that are otherwise cloaked under the term “lack of judicial temperament” [39]. The available evidence would suggest that biological and behavioral responses to stress are intertwined with environmental and lifestyle factors, individual dispositions, and current metabolic health [97,98]. To date, there has been very little objective evidence that directly links judicial stress to decision quality (especially fairness and the idea that all defendants should be treated equally) in the routine aspects of work.

Hints that even relatively minor stress can impact judicial fairness are found in an odd place—sports results of a judge’s alma mater; examining 16 years’ worth cases, researchers found that an upset loss by the judge’s alma mater college football team (especially a home game where the team was expected to win) was associated with a significant increase in punitive sentencing subsequent to the loss [99]. Interestingly, this fits with the broader psychology literature indicating that an upset loss is much more likely to lead to emotional distress among sports fans [100]. In the judge’s college football results study, Black defendants bore the burden of the increased sentencing following a team loss. This suggests that even minor distress could magnify implicit bias, another uncomfortable finding among US judges. Remarkably, individual US judges rate themselves as being more effective than their colleagues at avoiding racial prejudice (suggesting overconfidence), even though research on implicit bias suggests otherwise [101]. Self-control fatigue, a subject we turn to next, provides a mechanistic link between stress and adverse judicial performance.

5. Self-Control Fatigue

Across high-stakes professions, the demands of sustained cognitive focus, decision-making, emotion and behavior regulation, resisting distractions, and attempts at multitasking can set the stage for self-control fatigue [102]. Also known as ego depletion or depleted willpower, self-control fatigue occurs when energy resources are diminished due to intense and enduring cognitive demands [103]. Self-control fatigue has been documented and replicated in multiple research settings, with the results demonstrating that the drain on energy leads to diminished self-control and impairments in effective decision-making, rational intelligent thinking, planning, and initiative [104].

Since self-regulation and the aspects of executive functioning draw on the same energy resources, depletion caused by one demand (e.g., decision fatigue) could spill over and influence the others (e.g., emotion regulation) [104]. The consequences of self-control fatigue are not limited to fatigue or memory. Studies have shown that self-control fatigue alters moral reasoning [105], while increasing prejudice and biases against certain groups [106–108], aggressive tendencies (including spiteful punishment and displaced aggression directed at innocent parties) [109,110], incivility, emotional reactivity, and a default toward the worldviews, attitudes, and opinions that might otherwise be held in check [111–113].

It is easy to visualize an overworked judge operating in a late morning session (without adequate rest and nutritional breaks) suffering from self-control fatigue and its cognitive consequences. There is some evidence suggesting that self-control fatigue influences judicial outcomes. For example, an examination of 10 months' worth of sequential parole decisions made by 10 experienced judges (covering 1112 judicial rulings) found that judges demonstrated greater leniency in the period following a mid-morning break and immediately after the lunch break [114]. Even though the researchers did not examine hunger ratings, blood glucose levels, or what the judges ate (if anything), the findings of this parole study (henceforth referred to as "the parole study" below) received considerable media attention, often presented as evidence of a "hungry judge" effect [115].

Similarly, a study of a US traffic court showed that judges are less likely to dismiss charges (at arraignment) as the court sessions proceed, with the at-arraignment dismissal rate dropping from approximately 30% at the start of the session to under 18% at the conclusion [116]. This latter study is important because it is a more direct attempt to replicate the parole study; even though the authors of the parole study defended their work against methodological challenges [117], multiple authors have used hypotheticals [118] or simply opinions [119] rather than judicial replication studies to conclude that the hungry judge effect does not exist. In a recent reanalysis of the parole study data, one that addressed the primary concerns of critics, researchers replicated the main finding that the further a judge is away from their last break, the more likely they are to deny a parole request [120].

For now, we cannot conclude that the hungry judge effect is 'real' or a myth. However, there is a significant body of research demonstrating that states of hunger, glycemic dysregulation, and/or hypoglycemia can negatively influence cognitive function and emotions such as irritability, aggression, and anger [121,122]. There is also evidence indicating that even mild dehydration can impair cognitive function and mood state [123–127], so it could be a hungry and *thirsty* judge effect. Moreover, sleep deprivation, another aspect of lifestyle medicine, has been linked to judges doling out longer sentences [128]. Thus, the hungry, thirsty, and *sleepy* judge might be the most likely to violate the social contract.

In any case, studies from the high-stakes field of medicine (e.g., radiology) demonstrate that professional errors are more likely to occur as the workday moves from morning to lunch, and again from post-lunch to the end of the workday [129–131], with at least one study demonstrating that hunger is a factor [132]. Organizational physicians also appear more punitive (denying sick leave and duty exemptions) as the day moves on [133]. Of course, these observations of time-locked decreases in performance and increases in punitive outcomes support the so-called hungry judge effect. Yet, the findings signal a need for integrative and transdisciplinary research. As mentioned earlier, there are many commonalities between high-stakes fields such as medicine and law enforcement. Cognitively demanding fields such as radiology share an enhanced occupational risk factor with judges—burnout [134].

One critical observation of the aforementioned parole study is worth mentioning. After the primary data collection period, the researchers queried attorneys and judges

about the apparent increase in parole denials; there was an absence of awareness that potential parolees were at risk of denial as the sessions moved forward [114]. Among other things, this suggests that a potentially tired, hungry, thirsty, or sleepy judge is *unaware* of the self-control fatigue phenomenon.

Based on existing self-control research, it is very likely that individual personality features [135], biological vulnerabilities [136,137], and lifestyle factors [138–140] will intersect with fatigue resistance, frustration, and irritability in prolonged cognitive tasks. These factors are compounded by the current levels of occupational stress experienced by a judge as they work their way through a dynamic morning, afternoon, or night court session. Recall, a sizeable portion of judges, over one-third in the US, report that occupational stress is already manifesting as lack of sleep and concentration, and fatigue, on a regular basis [141].

Of course, not all judicial misconduct is a product of psychological distress and/or influenced by a neuropsychiatric disorder. As Massachusetts Appeals Court Chief Justice John M. Greaney noted in a 1987 article on judicial stress, some judges lack “*judicial temperament from the outset, and should never have been appointed to the bench*” [39]. Undoubtedly, there are ‘bad judges’ wherein the term is associated with corruption, use of the position for personal gain, abuse of others via a personal social dominance orientation, and other unethical behavior patterns that are largely unrelated to occupational stress [142]. Judicial misconduct is a wide and complex subject, one that includes discussions of pre-employment suitability, appropriate judicial oversight, and disciplinary measures that maintain social trust [143]. At the same time, there is a need for research that can help identify the intersectionality of personal vulnerabilities, well-being, and outcomes related to judicial integrity. Our focus here is on the ways in which the workplace conditions and cumulative stress of a career on the bench have the potential to draw out behaviors that may never have occurred otherwise. We turn now toward solutions-oriented approaches and future research directions.

6. Solution-Oriented Approaches

The emergence of scientific evidence surrounding judicial well-being (or lack thereof) has provided a nudge for the United Nations to support the 2024 Nauru Declaration on Judicial Well-being (Figure 2) [88], and the first-ever United Nations International Day for Judicial Well-being in March 2025. As scholar Carly Schrever notes, the subject of judicial well-being has rapidly moved from a closeted ‘unmentionable’ to a global conversation [87]. These events have taken the conversation toward policy and practice changes aimed at promoting health and vitality in the judiciary.

In addition to the Nauru Declaration, other judicial bodies have signaled strong support for the idea that well-being among judges is coupled to public trust in the judiciary. For example, in 2026, the Consultative Council of European Judges formally acknowledged “judicial well-being as an essential element of independence, impartiality, quality of justice, and respect for the rule of law” [144]. In 2026, nine ASEAN judiciaries participated in a unified training event themed “Judicial Wellbeing to Strengthen Judicial Integrity” [145]. Encouragingly, higher numbers of judges appear responsive to large-scale surveys on the subject of judicial stress. For example, in 2026, the Canadian Judicial Council announced a 66% response rate to its nationwide health and wellness survey of judges (the results are expected shortly) [146]. Earlier nationwide surveys of US judges have been large, but response rates relative to the total number of US judges remains vague [73].

1. **Judicial Well-being is essential and must be recognized and supported.**
Judicial well-being is essential to judges' health, the quality of justice, court experience, and public confidence in judicial systems. It should be treated as a core institutional priority.
2. **Judicial stress is not a weakness and must not be stigmatized.**
Judicial work is inherently demanding, and stress is a normal human response. Stigma surrounding stress can discourage help-seeking and worsen isolation, highlighting the need for supportive judicial cultures.
3. **Judicial well-being is a responsibility of individual judges and judicial institutions.**
Judicial well-being is a shared responsibility. Judges must actively support their own well-being, while courts and judicial leaders must foster healthy and sustainable working conditions.
4. **Judicial well-being is supported by an ethical and inclusive judicial culture.**
Collegiality, inclusion, and respectful workplace cultures support judicial well-being. Judicial environments must not tolerate discrimination, harassment, bullying, or corruption.
5. **Promoting judicial well-being requires a combination of awareness-raising, prevention, and management activities.**
Effective judicial well-being strategies require ongoing awareness, prevention of avoidable stressors, and support for managing the inherent demands of judicial work through evidence-informed approaches.
6. **Judicial well-being initiatives must suit the unique circumstances and requirements of national jurisdictions.**
Judicial stress and well-being are shaped by local social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. Initiatives must therefore be responsive to the needs of individual jurisdictions.
7. **Judicial well-being is enhanced by human rights.**
Judges are entitled to fundamental human rights while also maintaining judicial integrity, impartiality, and independence. Balancing these principles supports both judicial well-being and public trust.

Figure 2. Seven principles of the Nauru Declaration on judicial well-being.

Some of the most obvious measures are those that have been suggested (but rarely implemented) since the early days of judicial well-being discourse, including judicial assistance programs with access to high-quality counseling, peer support, and well-being networks that prioritize confidentiality. Proper implementation requires tackling the stigma that otherwise acts as a barrier to help-seeking. Research in law enforcement shows that those most in need—officers with PTSD—are more likely to endorse negative stereotypes about mental illness and stigmatize help-seeking [147]. Recommendations to reduce judicial caseloads include expanded hiring of judges and incorporating 'chamber days' away from the case calendar, allowing for a catch-up on other work; inclusion of sabbatical time for veteran judges has also been recommended. Adequate breaks within sessions can allow for cognitive restoration, hydration, and nourishment.

Training is an essential component of judicial competency. However, as famously noted by the investigative journalism outlet ProPublica, some US judges have less mandated training than barbers [148]. While most jurisdictions require orientation and training for new judges, mandated continuing education (CE) is non-uniform, with less than half of all US states requiring 15 or more hours per year [149]. The US National Association of State Judicial Educators notes that training should accomplish eight primary goals: (1) acquisition of knowledge and skills that support fair, correct, and efficient fulfillment of responsibilities; (2) support the highest standards of personal and official conduct; (3) assist

judges as leaders in service to their communities; (4) eliminate bias, prejudice in promoting integrity of the courts (5) promote effective court practices and procedures; (6) improve the administration of justice; (7) ensure access to the justice system; and (8) enhance public trust and confidence in the judicial branch [150]. From our perspective, the subject of judicial well-being and its consequences is intertwined with all of these goals.

In the field of medicine, mandated CE is required in 47 of the 50 US states [151]; under the auspices of “Risk Management,” the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine specifically allows for CE hours that are directed at wellness and lowering burnout risk [152]. For example, the CE-approved Medical Professionals Empowerment Program (MedPeP) focuses on self-care, mindfulness, managing energy levels, conflict resolution, peer support, managing unrealistic expectations, and other subjects that could easily apply to judicial well-being [153]. SMART (Stress Management and Resiliency Training), which is offered at Harvard Medical School, is also CE-approved, focusing on understanding stress physiology in relation to mind–body health, cognitive skills, contemplative practices, social support, healthy diet, exercise, and restorative sleep [154]. The intent is to promote personal wellness and resiliency in the professional, yet through a lens of improved competency and practice outcomes. While a patchwork of judicial well-being training is available, the attachment to annual CE requirements (wherein an outside body has evaluated and approved the content) is a model that should be adopted within judicial training.

Training should include discussions about self-control fatigue and its consequences, as described above. Emergent evidence indicates that self-control training can have both acute and long-term benefits, alleviating fatigue, improving emotional regulation, and minimizing burnout risk [155]. Moreover, training can also enhance awareness of the emotional states of the self (and others) and the capacity to regulate or use emotions to positively affect role performance [156].

Increasing the availability of well-being programs, especially those that follow the evidence-based principles of lifestyle medicine and whole-person health, will be an important part of solutions-oriented policies. Not all counseling or psychotherapy programs have the capacity or expertise to address underlying biosocial vulnerabilities (e.g., poor glycemic control compounded by lifestyle factors). The ever-expanding body of research connecting dietary habits and specific nutrients to mental health, cognition, behavior, and stress resiliency [157,158] certainly applies to judges. For example, dietary patterns rich in fruits, vegetables, fiber, and omega-3 fatty acids have been consistently associated with mental well-being, while dietary patterns (or even acute meals) high in simple sugars and ultra-processed foods have been linked to lowered mood, anxiety, irritability, antisocial behavior, and aggression [159–162]. Emerging evidence indicates that multi-domain lifestyle interventions—combining healthy dietary practices, physical activity, mindfulness, and behavioral support—can improve outcomes in both physical and mental health [163–165].

Ultimately, these solutions-oriented approaches will remain limited unless accompanied by a culture of well-being at the institutional level, and across the justice spectrums. It should be alarming that some judges are resistant to evidence-based phenomena such as secondary traumatic stress. In the words of one judge in a qualitative US study: *“Most if not all who claim such a thing [that judicial stress exists] are government scammers or extraordinarily weak minded”* [166]. As mentioned earlier, law enforcement has enjoyed much more research attention in the spheres of stress, burnout, performance and associated workplace cultures. The learnings indicate that isolated action will not suffice—well-being must form part of the professional culture, from the earliest days of police academy training, through top-down leadership directives and regularly scheduled in-service training [167,168]. In this way, police officer well-being is not only presented as a matter of personal health; it is considered part of optimal job functioning, ethics and competency. This cultural approach enhances

the perception of organizational support and organizational justice (i.e., that the institution and its leadership care about well-being and fairness) [169].

In law enforcement, the police academy has been, historically, the cultural epicenter for the seeding of stoicism, emotional detachment, stigma on help-seeking, and a warrior mentality [170,171]. Hence, cultural reform toward well-being has focused on early training in the academy. The same is true for judges. There is a need to move the conversation to the wellspring of a judge's professional journey—law school. Indeed, there are increasing calls for well-being to be a core component of law degree learning objectives, one that is *"pervasive throughout the law school curriculum"* [172]. This presents an opportunity to improve the well-being of students during the rigors of law school and beyond, while also emphasizing that the subject matter is central to matters of ethics, competency, and societal trust.

7. Unanswered Questions, Future Directions

The available research provides little doubt that judicial stress is a common occupation-related phenomenon that occurs across geographies and cultures. The manifestations of judicial stress include fatigue and a variety of cognitive and behavioral changes, many of which have the potential to impact on-bench performance. The research described above, especially when viewed in the context of the large societal influence of judicial performance, leads to many urgent questions for researchers and policymakers. While it has been acknowledged that the daily work environment, duties, responsibilities, and training of judges differ from other professionals working within systems of justice (e.g., lawyers and law enforcement officers), progress in the field of judicial well-being can draw from the robust body of evidence directed at occupational stress among other justice professionals. At the same time, the field requires novel approaches to the unique occupational roles and societal position of judges.

We suggest that attention be given to the following areas:

1. Further examine the extent to which judges engage in the social desirability bias, answering self-reports in ways that present a positive image. For example, US judges report their mental health as very good, yet the same study found that over 25% of judges reported missing 10 or more days of work per year due to stress [92]. It would be valuable to use validated mental health screeners (especially those that can capture depression, anxiety, and subclinical variants) rather than simply ask judges how they rate their mental health. It would also be helpful to use validated social desirability scales and reverse-scored items to enhance validity.
2. Further examine the lifestyle factors associated with stress and its management. While judges self-report using healthy dietary practices, physical activity, mindfulness, social connection, and hobbies, as stress-mitigating techniques [73], there is a need to close the gap between self-report and actual practice. Remarkably, despite all of the media attention and debate surrounding the so-called hungry judge and its consequences, we have no evidence base on the actual dietary practices of judges at home and work, in recreation and under stress. Momentary ecological assessments and related mobile apps can minimize recall bias and help identify actual dietary practices (e.g., skipping meals or consuming unhealthy snacks), hunger ratings, and associations with current stressors and mental state [173–175]. Use validated measures such as the Yale Food Addiction Scale 2.0 (which has been applied to law enforcement populations) [176]. Scrutinize social media use (including validated social media addiction scales) as a potential contributor to stress and/or interference with sleep [177].
3. Incorporate biological assessments into judicial stress research. Mobile technology and smart watches are now capable of capturing biophysiological markers in less

invasive ways. While certain designs could use traditional markers found in saliva, blood, and/or urine, other options are available. For example, the hungry judge theory could be tested by using non-invasive continuous glucose monitoring (CGM) paired with various outcomes, including those that suggest a more punitive response. Recent evidence combining CGM with momentary ecological assessments finds that fluctuations in glucose shape how stress is perceived in daily life, even in metabolically and mentally healthy adults [178]. Explore emergent connections between the gut microbiome, diet, lifestyle, and biological markers related to cognition, behavior, and well-being [179–182].

4. Greater inclusion of judges in research involving professionals across the legal spectrum. As mentioned above, decades of research have shown that police officers, correctional personnel, and attorneys face mental health challenges and high burnout rates. While each profession maintains distinct occupational roles and unique stressors, inclusion of judges can parse differences and similarities, while sending a signal that understanding health-to-competency connections across professions is essential to the public trust that underpins systems of justice [23]. While mindfulness practices may have far-reaching benefits in curbing judicial stress [183], only high-quality research involving judges can determine the real-world value of various mindfulness programs [184].
5. Examine the aforementioned trauma exposure and vicarious trauma more closely and pair with specific health- and performance-related outcomes. At present, it is understood that judges are exposed to traumatic materials in the broad sense, and that vicarious trauma is a risk. However, not all judges are exposed to traumatic imagery and witness/victim descriptives; there is a need to bring specificity into exposure and outcomes. For example, research shows that military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are 61% more likely to be justice-involved, and 59% more likely to be arrested for a violent act (vs. veterans without PTSD) [185]. Combat and its associated exposures significantly increase the risk of PTSD compared to non-deployed personnel. Validated screeners for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [186] can be used as researchers examine the subject of trauma exposure and vicarious trauma in judges.
6. Employ longitudinal designs that capture stress and its biopsychosocial consequences over time. For example, research in law enforcement samples indicates that occupational stress increases over time (12 years of study), self-reported health is worse, and the likelihood of glucose dysregulation and non-communicable disease risk increases [187].
7. Evaluate gender differences in judicial stress. Research in law enforcement samples indicates that there are important differences; female officers encounter higher levels of harassment, discrimination, bias, underestimation of physical abilities, and hostile work environments [188]; females are far more likely (37% higher) to consider lack of support from ranking officers as a significant source of stress [189]. Previous findings that female judges are more punitive than their male counterparts [190,191] have not been viewed through the lens of judicial stress, nor has the larger frame of inter-judge disparities in sentencing [192]. Better understandings of gender differences can help tailor training toward specific needs, rather than universal programming assumptions.
8. Link efforts to improve scientific literacy among judges to personal health and well-being. For example, educational modules on neuroscience [193] and the social determinants of health [194] are mostly oriented toward overcoming a judge's reliance on personal beliefs [195], moving toward a science-based understanding of biological and social determinants of behavior, with emphasis on culpability, capacity, mitigation,

risk, and/or rehabilitation. Although these modules are of immense value to society, there is little discussion of how social determinants shape the health and well-being of the judge (e.g., through ultra-processed food dietary patterns), or how biobehavioral sciences apply to the judge's own behavior and well-being. For example, a recent summary of a neuroscience education program spanning 18 years, involving more than 700 judges participating in dozens of online and in-person trainings, makes no mention of stress, well-being, or how such science intersects with the broader aspects of a judge's personal cognition and behavior on and off the bench. This is reflected in the quotes by attendees, emphasizing an externality wherein the content is perceived to be about the lives of others: *"As judges, we need to understand how people perceive their world and their experiences in it and how that is related back in their thoughts, words, and behavior"* [196]. The emphasis on "their" speaks to the aforementioned cultural mythology that judges are separated from "the people"—this requires its own scientific scrutiny.

9. Scrutinize policies and well-being programs to determine efficacy. A multitude of coping strategies and programs have been suggested for addressing judicial stress [92], yet high-quality evidence for interventions remains sparse. For example, while much has been written on coping with emotional labor in judicial work, intervention studies with pre- and post-training outcomes, such as those conducted in other professions [197], are needed. Although reductions in caseload might improve judicial performance, direct causal links to judicial stress and well-being have not been made [198]. Lessons from law enforcement stress and burnout suggest that "window dressing" is not enough [25]. Attendees of training sessions often give socially desirable responses to surveys, which are then used to overstate the efficacy of an intervention or add to the assumptions that any programming is of value. There is a need to scientifically pair judicial policies, practices, and programming used to mitigate judicial stress with pertinent health, well-being, and performance outcomes. This will also require examining barriers to evidence-based policy and practice implementation and uptake.
10. Examine subject matter that has received significant attention in law enforcement stress and burnout research, and little to no attention in the context of judicial stress. For example, volumes of research have examined the intersection of personality features and stress, performance, and burnout in law enforcement. We know comparatively little about the personality features of judges, especially chief judges who might set an organizational tone that contributes to a culture of well-being (or the opposite, judicial stress). While there are anecdotes about bullying in the judiciary, there is evidence in law enforcement populations [199,200]. We know that moral injury (psychological trauma stemming from actions or the inability to intervene in situations conflicting with one's moral compass) significantly contributes to law enforcement stress [201,202]. Research using validated moral injury scales and decisional fatigue scales shows that moral injury compounds self-control fatigue in lawyers [203].
11. Consider the normative behavioral responsibility framework in which many judges operate [204]. For example, almost all global criminal justice systems sit upon the fulcrum of folk psychology. That is, courts generally assume that the actions of almost all justice-involved persons are based on adequate willpower and completely *"unencumbered by character, temperament, and circumstance"* [205]. Put simply, criminal court judges are immersed in an institution oriented almost exclusively to prescientific notions of personal responsibility, wherein moral blame is directed at the individual, and biopsychosocial factors are largely irrelevant [206]. This workaday immersion in prescientific folk psychology [207] likely anchors the unscientific viewpoints expressed

by select judges, such as the aforementioned claim that judicial stress is either non-existent or an issue for the “weak minded.”

12. Place judicial well-being research into the larger frame of mental health. In recent years there has been increased recognition that psychologists and other mental healthcare providers are at high risk for occupational stress and burnout, leading researchers to question whether the “*emotionally exhausted are treating the mentally unwell?*” [208]. In the context of judicial stress, it is worth pondering whether the emotionally exhausted are judging the mentally unwell. In the US and elsewhere, criminal legal systems (and by extension, under-resourced carceral systems) are often used as de facto mental health institutions [209,210]. Emergent research involving judges suggests that there is a need for policies to address enduring institutional stigma about mental illness, and judicial training on the science vs. myths on violence and mental illness [211]. It is very possible that the over-punishment of people with mental illness is a product of a lack of knowledge of the subject matter [212,213].

8. Conclusions

Judicial well-being is a subject with far-reaching implications for societies. Based on the research discussed above, several conclusions can be drawn. First, judicial well-being is inseparable from the quality and integrity of justice. Judges operate at the intersection of human conflict, trauma, morality, and social order, often under conditions of intense cognitive and emotional demand. While societies rightly expect fairness, integrity, and sound judgment from the judiciary, these expectations must be matched by institutional cultures and systems that acknowledge the realities of human vulnerability, stress physiology, and occupational burden. The growing recognition of judicial stress and well-being reflects a broader shift in understanding that the health of institutions cannot be separated from the health of the people within them. Ignoring these realities does not protect the judiciary; rather, it risks undermining the very qualities upon which public trust depends.

Second, the available evidence indicates that occupational stress within the judiciary is neither rare nor confined to any single jurisdiction. Across cultures, judges report substantial levels of stress, burnout, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbance, trauma-related symptoms, and disruption of work–family balance. Although the evidence base remains uneven, its consistency across countries suggests that important features of judicial work—including sustained cognitive load, emotional labor, exposure to distressing material, professional isolation, public scrutiny, and high-stakes decision-making—create recognizable and potentially preventable risks to health and well-being.

Third, judicial stress may have consequences that extend beyond the individual judge. The increasing body of evidence linking chronic stress, burnout, trauma exposure, self-control fatigue, sleep disruption, inadequate opportunities for recovery, and unhealthy lifestyle factors to impaired health and decision-making makes clear that judicial well-being is both a personal and societal concern. These factors may influence emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, susceptibility to implicit bias, consistency of decision-making, and the capacity to sustain measured judgment under pressure. Although direct causal evidence relating judicial well-being to case outcomes remains limited, the potential implications for litigants, institutional integrity, and public confidence warrant serious attention.

Fourth, responsibility for judicial well-being must be shared between individual judges and the institutions in which they work. Importantly, the conversation around judicial well-being is not about lowering standards or diminishing accountability. On the contrary, it is about creating the conditions that allow judges to sustain the clarity, balance, ethical judgment, and humanity required of their role over time. Individual lifestyle practices that support physical and mental health are important, but they cannot compensate for

excessive workload, stigma, isolation, inadequate training, or institutional cultures that equate distress with weakness. Effective responses therefore require confidential assistance and peer-support programs, appropriate opportunities for rest and recovery, evidence-informed education, and visible leadership committed to creating a culture of well-being.

Three main paths for the future emerge from these conclusions. First, research must move beyond cross-sectional self-report surveys toward longitudinal, interdisciplinary studies that integrate validated psychological, behavioral, biological, lifestyle, and performance-related measures. Second, judicial well-being programs and institutional reforms must be evaluated rigorously to determine which approaches improve health, reduce occupational strain, and support judicial functioning rather than relying on participation rates or satisfaction surveys alone. Third, well-being should be embedded throughout judicial education and professional culture—from law school and early judicial training to continuing education and senior leadership—while remaining responsive to the distinctive cultural and institutional conditions of different jurisdictions.

Much of the research on judicial well-being remains at the assessment stage, with little large-scale intervention evidence or longitudinal evaluation of changes in policy and practice. The discourse is also frequently siloed from the more developed literature concerning other justice professionals and occupations characterized by emotional labor and sustained cognitive demand. Given the seriousness of the subject, its transdisciplinary dimensions, and its implications for society, substantial coordinated investment is needed to understand both the barriers to and facilitators of judicial well-being. As momentum builds internationally, there is now an opportunity to foster more open dialog, evidence-informed policy, and cultures of support within judicial systems. In doing so, societies strengthen not only the resilience of judges themselves, but also the fairness, integrity, and legitimacy of justice systems upon which democratic life depends. Given the seriousness of the subject, with its many transdisciplinary connections and societal implications, there is a need for massive ‘Moonshot’ level investments in understanding the barriers to, and facilitators of, judicial well-being.

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