

Occupational Stress, Psychological Distress, and Coping Strategies of First-Level Judges in the Philippines: Examining the Influence of Demographics and Caseloads

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Introduction: Judges worldwide face intense pressure from heavy workloads, emotionally charged cases, and limited resources, leading to burnout and decreased public trust in the justice system. While individual coping is important, systemic change is crucial.

Methodology: This study employed a descriptive-correlational design and utilized standardized self-administered questionnaires to assess occupational stress, psychological distress, and coping strategies among 357 first-level judges in the Philippines, selected through stratified random sampling. The instruments used were the Occupational Stress Scale (House et al., 1979), the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) (Kessler et al., 2003), and the Filipino Coping Strategies Scale (Rilveria, 2018). Data collection was conducted via email and during conferences on non-hearing days, ensuring minimal disruption to court duties. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality (RA 10173), and participant wellbeing were strictly observed. A licensed psychometrician and psychologist supervised the process. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests (Spearman rank correlation and rank biserial) due to non-normal variable distribution.

Results: The study found no significant relationship between occupational stress, psychological distress, and coping strategies and the demographic profile of the first-level judges.

Conclusion: The study reveals that occupational and psychological distress among first-level judges in the Philippines is not significantly affected by demographics or workload. Instead, these stressors are inherent to the judicial profession, highlighting the need for systemic support strategies that focus on promoting mental health, stress management, and a supportive judicial culture to build resilience across the judiciary.

Practical Value: The practical value of this study lies in its identification of occupational and psychological distress as inherent aspects of the judicial role among first-level judges in the Philippines. By showing that these stressors are not significantly influenced by demographic factors or caseloads, the study highlights the need for systemic, profession-specific interventions. This underscores the potential for judicial institutions to implement tailored mental health programs, promote supportive work environments, and influence policy reforms that enhance overall judicial wellbeing and resilience.

Direction for Future Research: Future research should explore various avenues to better understand and address stress in the judiciary. These include qualitative studies on individual experiences, longitudinal studies on stress and coping over time, comparative studies across court levels and legal systems, and intervention research on programs like mindfulness training and peer support. It should also examine judicial culture, specific stressors such as trauma exposure, gender differences in stress responses, and the impact of technology on workloads. This approach will support the development of evidence-based strategies for a healthy and resilient judiciary.

Keywords: occupational stress, psychological distress, coping strategies, first level judges, Philippines

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