

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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ABSTRACT. 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. This descriptive-correlational study investigated occupational stress, psychological distress, and coping strategies among 357 first-level judges in the Philippines. The study employed three standardized instruments: the Occupational Stress Scale, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), and the Filipino Coping Strategies Scale (FCSS). This study revealed that first-level judges in the Philippines experience high levels of occupational stress and psychological distress. However, they also utilize a range of coping strategies to manage these challenges. The study found no significant relationship between occupational stress, psychological distress, and coping strategies and the demographic profile of the first-level judges. This suggests that these challenges are inherent to the judicial role itself rather

than influenced by individual differences. The study concludes that interventions and support systems tailored to the specific demands of the profession are needed to address these challenges. The findings served as the basis for the Wellness Program for the first-level court judges in the Philippines.

1.0. Introduction

Judges worldwide face significant stress stemming from demanding workloads, consequential decisions, and emotionally charged environments (Lee et al., 2018). This stress, prevalent across ASEAN nations and China (Kong, 2021), can lead to burnout (Lee & Asher, 2018), jeopardizing judicial performance and eroding public trust in the judiciary, which relies on ethical conduct, efficient performance, and strong governance (Sadik, 2021). Addressing this pervasive issue requires a multi-pronged approach, combining individual coping mechanisms like exercise and social support with systemic changes such as reducing workloads and improving mental health resources within court systems (Lebovits, 2017). Furthermore, regional solutions in ASEAN, including enhanced mental health programs and knowledge sharing of stress management techniques, are crucial for promoting judicial wellbeing and safeguarding the integrity of legal systems (Lee & Asher, 2018; Sriprakash & Mohamed Rafique, 2018).

In the Philippines, Filipino judges face

unique occupational stress due to factors like strict deadlines, work-life balance struggles, and complex court proceedings. This pressure can lead to psychological strain, especially for female judges (Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022). While individual coping mechanisms are common, there is a growing recognition of the need for systemic solutions. The Philippine Supreme Court is leading the charge with a multi-pronged approach, including health insurance, free mental health checkups, and dedicated Mental Health Units within courts nationwide (as part of their Strategic Plan for Judicial Innovations). This initiative reflects a growing awareness of mental wellbeing's importance for a resilient and effective judiciary (Rosal, 2021).

First-level judges in the Western Visayas, Philippines, face a multitude of stressors (Rosal, 2021). Heavy caseloads and strict deadlines to resolve them create constant pressure. Balancing work and family life can be particularly challenging, and the emotional intensity of courtroom situations adds another layer of strain, potentially leading to psychological burnout (Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022). Coping mechanisms often involve individual strategies like exercise and social support. However, recent studies suggest a growing awareness of the need for systemic changes

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within the court system. These changes could include reducing workload and improving access to mental health resources, promoting a more comprehensive approach to supporting the wellbeing of Western Visayas' first-level judges.

Existing research on judicial stress has limitations. The focus is on developed nations (Lee & Asher, 2018), neglecting the experiences of judges in developing countries, stress and coping mechanisms of first-level women court judges in the Philippines (Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022). It emphasizes individual coping mechanisms (Rosal, 2021;) while overlooking potential systemic solutions (Lebovits, 2017). Cross-sectional designs limit understanding of stress evolution. Underrepresentation of judges, particularly females or minorities, hinders comprehension of diverse experiences (Rosal, 2021; Lee & Asher, 2018).

Hence, this study investigated the occupational stress and psychological distress of first-level judges in the Philippines during 2023-2024 and their use of coping strategies. It examined the relationship between these factors and demographics, such as age, sex, civil status, length of service, and caseload. The study sought to determine if these demographics significantly influenced the judges' occupational stress, psychological distress, and coping mechanisms.

2.0. Framework of the Study

This study theorizes that judges experience occupational stress and psychological distress due to a complex interplay of individual factors, like age, sex, and civil status, and work-related factors, such as length of service and number of dockets (caseloads). These factors may or may not influence how judges perceive and cope with the demands of their role, contributing to their overall wellbeing. This framework seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of the unique stressors influencing judges and inform interventions to support their mental health. This framework draws theoretical support from two key perspectives: the transactional model of stress and stressor-appraisal theory.

The Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) emphasizes the dynamic interplay of individual and work-related factors in determining stress responses. Individual factors, such as age, sex, and civil status, can influence how judges appraise and cope with stressful situations. Judges constantly appraise situations, such as heavy caseloads and difficult decisions, as either threats or challenges based on their individual characteristics and experiences. They then evaluate their coping resources, which are influenced by workplace support and culture. This model highlights the importance of individual appraisal processes and access to adequate

resources in determining how judges cope, using problem-focused strategies (e.g., seeking advice, time management) and emotion-focused strategies (e.g., mindfulness, social support). The study's findings, such as the tendency towards similar coping mechanisms, suggest a potential influence of judicial culture on these processes. This understanding can inform targeted interventions to reduce stress and improve wellbeing within the judiciary.

On the other hand, Stressor-Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) posits that stressors do not automatically lead to stress. Instead, an individual's cognitive appraisal of a situation (i.e., how threatening or challenging they perceive it to be) determines the stress response. The theory offers strong support for this study's assumption. It posits that judges do not experience stress from objective stressors (like several dockets/caseloads) but rather from their subjective appraisal of those stressors. This explains why individual factors, such as age, sex, and civil status, are crucial in understanding how judges perceive and cope with the demands of their role. For instance, a younger judge might appraise a high-profile case as a challenging opportunity, while an older judge might appraise it as a threat to their work-life balance. This subjective appraisal determines their emotional and behavioral responses, influencing their overall wellbeing. Therefore, the Stressor-Appraisal Theory underscores the importance of considering both individual and work-related factors when developing interventions to support the mental health of judges, as it highlights the need to address not only the objective stressors but also the judges' subjective interpretations and coping mechanisms.

Hence, this theoretical framework recognizes that judges' occupational stress and psychological distress are not uniform experiences but rather arise from a complex interplay of individual differences (age, sex, and civil status) and the inherent demands of the judicial role (length of service and number of dockets). By acknowledging this interplay, the framework aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to judges' wellbeing and influencing their coping mechanisms. This understanding is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support systems that effectively address the unique stressors judges face and promote their mental health.

3.0. Methodology

This descriptive-correlational study investigated occupational stress, psychological distress, and coping strategies among 357 first-level judges in the Philippines determined using stratified random sampling. The study employed three standardized instruments: the Occupational Stress Scale (House

et al., 1979), the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) by Kessler et al. (2003), and the Filipino Coping Strategies Scale (FCSS) by Rilveria (2018). These tools comprehensively assessed the judges' experiences with stress and distress and their culturally relevant coping mechanisms.

To ensure ethical and efficient data collection, the study obtained permission and informed consent from participants. Questionnaires were administered via email or during conferences on non-hearing days, minimizing disruption to court proceedings. A licensed psychometrician and psychologist supervised the administration and subsequent data analysis, which included descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests (Spearman rank correlation and rank biserial) due to the non-normal distribution of the variables.

In addition, the study adhered to ethical protocols by prioritizing informed consent, confidentiality (RA 10173), and participant wellbeing. Judges were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and were assured their right to withdraw at any time. Data was anonymized and securely stored. The researcher, a judge and PhD candidate in Psychology, maintained transparency throughout the process and fostered collaboration with the judges, recognizing their valuable insights in addressing judicial stress within the Philippine court system.

4.0. Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of the First-Level Judges

The majority of the first-level judges are younger ($f=199$, 55.7%), females ($f=232$, 65%), and married ($f=294$, 82.4%). In addition, 52% of the judges had shorter lengths of service ($f=185$), and 58% had

fewer dockets ($f=207$). The demographic profile of first-level judges in the Philippines, characterized by being younger, predominantly female, and married, with less experience and smaller dockets, presents unique vulnerabilities and opportunities related to occupational stress.

Recent studies (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020; Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022) highlight their susceptibility to stressors like heavy workloads and emotional strain, potentially exacerbated by a steeper learning curve, gender bias, and work-life balance challenges (Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022; Joy et al., 2017). However, while potentially lacking extensive experience, these judges may bring fresh perspectives and benefit from a less overwhelming workload (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020; Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022).

Extent of Occupational Stress of First-level Judges

General Occupational Stress. First-level judges in the Philippines report high levels of occupational stress ($M=2.83$, $SD=0.79$), consistent with existing literature (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020; Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022) that identifies heavy workloads, time pressures, and the emotional burden of judicial work as significant contributors. These stressors, compounded by challenges in work-life balance (Malagsic et al., 2021) and interactions with unprepared counsel (Joy et al., 2017), can lead to detrimental effects such as burnout, negative health outcomes, and impaired decision-making (Miller et al., 2018; Schrever et al., 2024). While factors like job autonomy and positive workplace relationships can contribute to wellbeing (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020), the high-stress levels underscore the need for interventions to address these challenges and potentially improve job satisfaction and prevent burnout among judges, especially considering the potential influence of gender (Miller et al., 2018) and recent judicial reforms (Pereira et al., 2022) on stress experiences.

Domains of Occupational Stress. First-level judges in the Philippines experience high-stress levels across various domains. Role conflict ($M=2.97$, $SD=0.67$) and workload ($M=2.96$, $SD=0.71$) are particularly prominent, reflecting the challenges of managing evolving responsibilities, heavy caseloads, and time pressures (Guimaraes et al., 2017; Pereira et al., 2022; Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020). These stressors can lead to frustration and burnout, potentially impacting decision-making quality and overall wellbeing (Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022). Interventions focused on clarifying roles, improving communication, and providing stress management support are crucial to mitigate these negative effects and foster a more supportive and efficient judicial environment (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020).

Table 1
Profile of First-Level Judges

Variable	f	%
Age		
Younger	199	55.7
Older	158	44.3
Civil Status		
Single	63	17.6
Married	294	82.4
Sex		
Male	125	35.0
Female	232	65.0
Length of Service		
Shorter	185	51.8
Longer	172	48.2
Number of Dockets		
Less	207	58.0
More	150	42.0
Total	357	100.0

Responsibility pressure also contributes significantly to stress levels ($M=2.88$, $SD=0.69$), highlighting the burden judges face due to the weight of their decisions and the potential consequences of errors (Schrever et al., 2024). This pressure can lead to feelings of inadequacy and negatively impact wellbeing and decision-making abilities (Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022; Schrever et al., 2022). Therefore, support systems, adequate training, and access to mental health resources are essential to help judges manage this pressure effectively (Rossouw & Rothmann, 2020; Schrever et al., 2024).

impact their wellbeing and decision-making abilities (Rosales et al., 2022). This underscores a broader trend of self-neglect observed in helping professions, emphasizing the need for increased awareness and robust support systems to prioritize mental health through preventative measures, self-care strategies, and organizational support, ultimately safeguarding both individual wellbeing and the integrity of vital institutions like the judiciary (Alhur et al., 2022).

Demographics and psychological distress. This study reveals a concerning trend of psychological distress among first-level judges in the Philippines,

Table 2
Extent of Occupational Stress of First-level Judges

Variable	Responsibility pressure			Role conflict			Job vs non-job conflict			Workload items			Occupational Stress		
	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int
Age															
Younger	2.86	0.69	Hi	2.99	0.67	Hi	2.48	1.42	Ave	3.01	0.69	Hi	2.84	0.80	Hi
Older	2.91	0.69	Hi	2.94	0.68	Hi	2.53	1.34	Ave	2.90	0.74	Hi	2.82	0.78	Hi
Sex															
Male	2.92	0.67	Hi	3.05	0.66	Hi	2.55	1.34	Ave	2.97	0.65	Hi	2.87	0.77	Hi
Female	2.87	0.70	Hi	2.93	0.68	Hi	2.48	1.41	Ave	2.96	0.74	Hi	2.81	0.80	Hi
Civil Status															
Single	2.91	0.64	Hi	3.01	0.66	Hi	2.63	1.36	Ave	3.07	0.63	Hi	2.90	0.74	Hi
Married	2.88	0.70	Hi	2.96	0.68	Hi	2.48	1.39	Ave	2.94	0.73	Hi	2.82	0.80	Hi
Length of Service															
Shorter	2.91	0.72	Hi	2.99	0.67	Hi	2.53	1.41	Ave	3.01	0.67	Hi	2.86	0.80	Hi
Longer	2.86	0.66	Hi	2.95	0.68	Hi	2.48	1.35	Ave	2.92	0.75	Hi	2.80	0.78	Hi
Number of Dockets															
Less	2.85	0.66	Hi	2.96	0.68	Hi	2.43	1.44	Ave	2.91	0.73	Hi	2.79	0.80	Hi
More	2.93	0.73	Hi	2.98	0.67	Hi	2.61	1.30	Ave	3.04	0.67	Hi	2.89	0.77	Hi
Whole	2.88	0.69	Hi	2.97	0.67	Hi	2.51	1.38	Ave	2.96	0.71	Hi	2.83	0.79	Hi

Note: High (Hi) stress=2.67 - 4.00; Average (Ave) stress=1.34 - 2.66; Low stress=0.00 - 1.33

While the average stress level related to job versus non-job conflict appears moderate ($M=2.51$, $SD=1.38$), it is crucial to recognize that this may mask individual struggles with work-life balance. The potential for negative outcomes like burnout and intention to leave the profession (Xu & Cao, 2019) underscores the importance of addressing this conflict, particularly for newer judges (Siodlak et al., 2021). Initiatives promoting work-life balance, access to mental health resources, and a supportive workplace culture that acknowledges these challenges are essential to support judges' wellbeing and retain talent within the judiciary (Ellis et al., 2023).

Level of Psychological Distress of First-Level Judges

General psychological distress. This study reveals a high level of psychological distress among first-level judges in the Philippines ($M=30.25$, $SD=12.08$), suggesting elevated levels of nervousness, agitation, fatigue, and depression. While the K10 used in this study is a screening tool and not a diagnostic instrument, these findings align with existing literature highlighting the prevalence of mental health concerns among professionals in high-stress occupations like the judiciary (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020; Sovold et al., 2021). Judges face numerous stressors, including heavy workloads, emotionally demanding cases, and potential safety concerns, which can negatively

with younger, married judges with smaller caseloads exhibiting high levels of distress ($M=29.88$, $SD=12.05$), while older judges with heavier workloads and longer tenures report even higher levels. This suggests that different career stages present unique mental health challenges, with younger judges potentially grappling with

establishing themselves and work-life balance and senior judges experiencing heightened nervousness, fatigue, and depression. These findings corroborate existing research on mental health challenges within high-stress occupations like the judiciary (Santre, 2024; Smith et al., 2021; Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020), emphasizing the need for comprehensive support systems, including counseling, stress management resources, and early intervention strategies (Cole-Mossman et al., 2018). Ultimately, cultivating a workplace culture that prioritizes

Table 3
Level of Psychological Distress of First-Level Judges

Variable	M	SD	Interpretation
Age			
Younger	29.88	12.05	High level
Older	30.72	12.14	Very high level
Sex			
Male	30.47	11.75	Very high level
Female	30.14	12.28	Very high level
Civil Status			
Single	31.87	11.75	Very high level
Married	29.91	12.14	High level
Length of Service			
Shorter	30.17	11.87	Very high level
Longer	30.35	12.34	Very high level
Number of Dockets			
Less	29.01	12.03	High level
More	31.97	11.98	Very high level
Whole	30.25	12.08	Very high level

Scale of interpretation: 30-50- Very high level of psychological distress; 22-29- high level of psychological distress; 16-21- moderate level of psychological distress; 10-15- low level of psychological distress

mental health is crucial for individual wellbeing and upholding the integrity of the judicial process (Alhur et al., 2022).

Extent of Use of Coping Strategies of First-Level Judges

First-level judges in the Philippines utilize coping strategies at a moderate level (M=2.77, SD=0.48), indicating a need for increased support and interventions to improve their stress management skills and prevent burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and impaired decision-making (Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022; Olivar et al., 2024). While judges employ coping mechanisms to manage stressors like heavy workloads and work-life balance challenges (Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022), the moderate level of use suggests room for improvement, potentially through greater awareness of effective strategies such as talking with colleagues, physical exercise, and mindfulness (Olivar et al., 2024; Cahill et al., 2021), while considering cultural and professional nuances (Labrague et al., 2018). Targeted support systems, including stress management workshops, mindfulness training, and counseling programs (Costa & Pinto, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2018), can help judges develop more effective coping mechanisms, ultimately prioritizing their mental health and wellbeing to ensure professional effectiveness and uphold the integrity of the judicial process.

High-use coping strategies. First-level judges in the Philippines demonstrate a proactive and multifaceted approach to stress management, frequently utilizing cognitive reappraisal (M=3.06, SD=0.69), problem-solving (M=3.14, SD=0.66), religiosity (M=3.09, SD=0.70), and relaxation/recreation (M=3.11, SD=0.66) as coping mechanisms (Bondarchuk et al., 2023). This active engagement in diverse strategies, including reframing situations positively, actively addressing challenges, utilizing religious beliefs, and engaging in leisure activities, aligns with research highlighting the importance of combining approaches like education, self-reliance, and treatment for effective stress management (Anderson et al., 2022). This proactive coping style likely contributes to their ability to maintain high levels of wellbeing, potentially linked to job autonomy and positive workplace relationships (Rossouw & Rothmann, 2020).

Moderate-use coping strategies. First-level judges in the Philippines utilize a range of coping strategies to manage stress, including emotional release (M=2.34, SD=0.58), overactivity (M=2.82, SD=0.74), social support (M=2.72, SD=0.59), and tolerance (M=2.78, SD=0.87), highlighting the complexity of stress management within their profession. While they actively seek social support and engage in emotional release, the moderate use of these strategies, particularly for male judges who

may benefit significantly from social support (Miller et al., 2018), suggests strengthening support networks and fostering more active engagement strategies. Furthermore, the reliance on overactivity and tolerance, potentially a form of avoidance, may be linked to reduced perceived control and lower wellbeing (Dijkstra & Homan, 2016), emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to enhance engagement-focused coping mechanisms and promote strategies that foster a greater sense of control and wellbeing among judges (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020).

Low-use coping strategies. First-level judges in the Philippines rarely, if ever, utilize substance use as a coping mechanism (M=1.88, SD=0.76), demonstrating responsible behavior and prioritizing healthier alternatives despite

Table 4A
Extent of Use of Coping Strategies of First-Level Judges

Variable	Cognitive Reappraisal			Problem-solving			Religiosity			Relaxation/Recreation			Substance Use		
	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int
Age															
Younger	3.07	0.69	Hi	3.14	0.66	Hi	3.10	0.72	Hi	3.12	0.67	Hi	1.83	0.74	Low
Older	3.05	0.68	Hi	3.14	0.66	Hi	3.09	0.68	Hi	3.11	0.65	Hi	1.94	0.79	Low
Sex															
Male	3.02	0.72	Hi	3.15	0.68	Hi	3.06	0.74	Hi	3.07	0.70	Hi	1.97	0.80	Low
Female	3.08	0.67	Hi	3.13	0.65	Hi	3.11	0.69	Hi	3.14	0.64	Hi	1.83	0.74	Low
Civil Status															
Single	3.07	0.71	Hi	3.12	0.69	Hi	3.17	0.70	Hi	3.07	0.71	Hi	1.97	0.80	Low
Married	3.06	0.68	Hi	3.14	0.66	Hi	3.07	0.71	Hi	3.06	0.68	Hi	1.83	0.74	Low
Length of Service															
Shorter	3.09	0.69	Hi	3.17	0.67	Hi	3.12	0.72	Hi	3.14	0.68	Hi	1.82	0.74	Low
Longer	3.02	0.68	Hi	3.10	0.65	Hi	3.07	0.69	Hi	3.09	0.64	Hi	1.94	0.79	Low
Number of Dockets															
Less	3.08	0.73	Hi	3.15	0.71	Hi	3.10	0.73	Hi	3.13	0.68	Hi	0.77	Low	0.77
More	3.03	0.63	Hi	3.12	0.59	Hi	3.08	0.66	Hi	3.09	0.63	Hi	0.76	Low	0.76
Whole	3.06	0.69	Hi	3.14	0.66	Hi	3.09	0.70	Hi	3.11	0.66	Hi	0.76	Low	0.76

Note: Hi=3.00-4.00-high use; Mo=2.00-2.99-moderate use; Lo=1.00-1.99-low use

Table 4B
Extent of Use of Coping Strategies of First-Level Judges

Variable	Emotional Release			Overactivity			Social Support			Tolerance			Coping		
	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int
Age															
Younger	2.32	0.59	Mo	2.79	0.68	Mo	2.68	0.62	Mo	2.80	0.88	Mo	2.75	0.48	Mo
Older	2.37	0.58	Mo	2.86	0.81	Mo	2.76	0.55	Mo	2.76	0.85	Mo	2.78	0.49	Mo
Sex															
Male	2.30	0.59	Mo	2.77	0.62	Mo	2.68	0.61	Mo	2.80	0.86	Mo	2.75	0.47	Mo
Female	2.36	0.58	Mo	2.84	0.79	Mo	2.73	0.58	Mo	2.78	0.87	Mo	2.77	0.49	Mo
Civil Status															
Single	2.38	0.64	Mo	2.86	0.61	Mo	2.72	0.61	Mo	2.96	0.90	Mo	2.80	0.49	Mo
Married	2.33	0.57	Mo	2.81	0.76	Mo	2.72	0.59	Mo	2.75	0.86	Mo	2.76	0.48	Mo
Length of Service															
Shorter	2.29	0.62	Mo	2.79	0.71	Mo	2.70	0.62	Mo	2.78	0.90	Mo	2.76	0.48	Mo
Longer	2.40	0.54	Mo	2.85	0.77	Mo	2.74	0.55	Mo	2.79	0.83	Mo	2.77	0.49	Mo
Number of Dockets															
Less	2.32	0.53	Mo	2.82	0.58	Mo	2.72	0.60	Mo	2.86	0.89	Mo	2.76	0.47	Mo
More	2.37	0.65	Mo	2.82	0.91	Mo	2.71	0.57	Mo	2.68	0.83	Mo	2.77	0.49	Mo
Whole	2.34	0.58	Mo	2.82	0.74	Mo	2.72	0.59	Mo	2.78	0.87	Mo	2.77	0.48	Mo

Note: Hi=3.00-4.00-high use; Mo=2.00-2.99-moderate use; Lo=1.00-1.99-low use

facing considerable stress (Kiepek & Ausman, 2023; Kiepek & Beagan, 2018). This positive finding, particularly in light of the prevalence of problematic drinking and mental health concerns within the legal profession (Krill et al., 2016), highlights the importance of cultivating a supportive judicial environment that promotes peer support networks, encourages help-seeking behaviors, and provides access to resources for those facing substance use or mental health challenges (Brady et al., 2022), recognizing that avoidant coping mechanisms, even in the absence of substance use, can be detrimental to wellbeing (Arble et al., 2018).

Relationship between demographics and occupational stress of first-level judges

The analysis revealed no significant relationship between occupational stress and demographics among first-level judges. Specifically, no correlations were found with age [$p(355)=-0.041$, $p=0.443$], sex [$p(355)=-0.024$, $p=0.653$], civil status [$p(355)=-0.040$, $p=0.448$], length of service [$p(355)=-0.040$, $p=0.452$], or number of dockets [$p(355)=0.010$, $p=0.855$]. This absence of a correlation with factors like age, sex, civil status, length of services, and caseload suggests a crucial insight: occupational stress appears to be inherent to the judicial role itself rather than influenced by individual differences. Judges worldwide experience significant occupational stress due to heavy workloads, the gravity of their decisions, and the emotional toll of their work, leading to burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and potentially impacting their decision-making abilities (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020; Joy et al., 2017). This persistent stress, regardless of personal or professional background, necessitates systemic support mechanisms within the judiciary, including fostering a culture of wellbeing, promoting peer support and mentoring, and providing access to resources for stress management and emotional resilience (Schrever et al., 2024; Gabayoyo & Madrigal, 2022). These interventions are crucial not only for protecting the wellbeing of judges but also for ensuring they can effectively administer justice and maintain public trust in the judiciary.

Relationship between demographics and psychological distress of first-level judges

There was no significant relationship between psychological distress and the following profiles: age [$p(355)=0.035$, $p=0.510$], sex [$p(355)=0.002$, $p=0.967$], civil status [$p(355)=-0.072$, $p=0.175$], length of service [$p(355)=0.033$, $p=0.531$], and number of dockets [$p(355)=0.094$, $p=0.078$]. The absence of a significant relationship between psychological distress and demographic or professional factors among first-level judges highlights the pervasive nature of this distress, likely inherent to the judicial role itself (Kong et al., 2021). The inherent stressors of the job, such as navigating complex legal issues, managing difficult litigants, and facing exposure to traumatic situations (O’Sullivan et al., 2022), contribute to this distress, impacting judges relatively equally regardless of their backgrounds (Schrever et al., 2022; Kong et al., 2021). This widespread distress has significant implications, potentially affecting judges’ wellbeing, decision-making capacity, and the overall functioning of the judicial system (O’Sullivan et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach, including developing specific assessment tools, providing ongoing training and support for effective coping strategies (Joy et al., 2017), and implementing organizational strategies to mitigate the impact of secondary trauma exposure (Schrever et al., 2024).

Table 5
Relationship between Demographics and Occupational Stress of First-Level Judges

Variable	ρ	df	p
Age	-0.041	355	0.443
Sex	-0.024	355	0.653
Civil Status	-0.040	355	0.448
Length of Service	-0.040	355	0.452
Number of Dockets	0.010	355	0.855

Note: correlation is significant when $p \leq 0.05$

Table 6
Relationship between Demographics and Psychological Distress of the Judges

Variable	ρ	df	p
Age	-0.041	355	0.443
Sex	-0.024	355	0.653
Civil Status	-0.040	355	0.448
Length of Service	-0.040	355	0.452
Number of Dockets	0.010	355	0.855

Note: correlation is significant when $p \leq 0.05$

Relationship between demographics and coping strategies of first-level judges

There was no significant relationship between coping and the following profiles: age [$p(355)=0.032$, $p=0.548$], sex [$p(355)=0.035$, $p=0.510$], civil status [$p(355)=-0.039$, $p=0.468$], length of service [$p(355)=0.022$, $p=0.674$], and number of dockets [$p(355)=-0.031$, $p=0.562$]. Regardless of individual

characteristics, judges tend to employ similar coping mechanisms to manage the inherent stress of their roles, potentially indicating the effectiveness or ingrained nature of certain strategies within the judicial culture (Schrever et al., 2024). While some judges maintain high wellbeing due to factors like job autonomy and strong professional relationships (Rothmann & Rossouw, 2020), many struggle with the emotional burden and pressure to maintain impartiality, highlighting the need to mitigate inherent stressors and promote a workplace culture that fosters healthy coping mechanisms (Bondarchuk et al., 2023). This includes ensuring access to diverse support resources and encouraging a culture that prioritizes wellbeing, with future research exploring the effectiveness of specific coping strategies and any variations across judicial levels to refine support systems (Costa & Pinto, 2017; Schrever et al., 2024).

Table 7
Relationship between Demographics and Coping Strategies of First-Level Judges

Variable	ρ	df	p
Age	0.032	355	0.548
Sex	0.035	355	0.510
Civil Status	-0.039	355	0.468
Length of Service	0.022	355	0.674
Number of Dockets	-0.031	355	0.562

Note: correlation is significant when $p \leq 0.05$

Overall, this study of first-level judges largely validates the transactional model of stress and stressor-appraisal theory by demonstrating that occupational stress and psychological distress are not significantly related to demographic factors like age, sex, and length of service. This suggests that the inherent pressures of the judicial role, rather than individual differences, are the primary determinants of stress levels. The demanding nature of judicial work, with its high-stakes decision-making and heavy caseloads, likely presents a consistent stressor that judges similarly appraise despite their varied backgrounds. However, focusing on first-level judges limits the generalizability of these findings, as judges in higher courts may exhibit different stress patterns. Further research incorporating a wider range of judicial roles and qualitative data on individual appraisals and coping strategies is needed to provide a more nuanced understanding of stress in the judiciary.

5.0. Conclusion

This study of first-level judges in the Philippines demonstrates that occupational stress and psychological distress are not significantly influenced by demographic factors or caseloads, suggesting these challenges are inherent to the judicial role. This underscores the need for systemic interventions and support systems tailored to the specific demands of

the profession, such as fostering a work environment that promotes mental health and wellbeing, providing resources to manage stress, and cultivating a culture of support within the judiciary. By focusing on the inherent stressors of the judicial role, interventions can be more effectively designed to promote a healthy and resilient judiciary, regardless of individual differences among judges.

6.0. Limitations of the Findings

While this study of Filipino first-level judges provides valuable insights into their stressors, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The focus on a specific judicial population limits the generalizability of findings to higher courts or other legal systems, where different stress patterns may emerge. Additionally, relying on self-reported measures and a cross-sectional design may introduce bias and limit causal inferences. Future research should encompass a wider range of judicial roles, incorporate qualitative data on individual experiences, and employ longitudinal designs with objective measures to provide a more comprehensive understanding of stress in the

judiciary.

7.0. Practical Value of the Paper

To enhance the wellbeing of Filipino judges, a comprehensive approach is necessary. This includes interventions that provide stress management techniques, mental health resources, and system-wide support to address the inherent stressors of their roles, such as heavy workloads and emotional burdens. These interventions should be tailored to different career stages, with early intervention for younger judges and continued support for older judges. Simultaneously, policy changes are crucial to promote manageable workloads through caseload limits and efficient procedures and to encourage work-life balance with reasonable working hours and support for family responsibilities. Fostering a healthy workplace culture free from harassment and discrimination and strong protections for judicial independence is also essential. Finally, dedicated resources for mental health services and professional development will further contribute to their overall wellbeing.

8.0. Directions for Future Research

Future research should explore several avenues to further understand and address stress in the judiciary. Qualitative studies can provide deeper

insights into individual experiences of stress, while longitudinal studies can track how stress and coping mechanisms evolve over a judge's career. Comparative studies across different court levels and legal systems can reveal variations and best practices. Crucially, intervention research should focus on developing and evaluating programs like mindfulness training and peer support networks to mitigate stress. Additionally, examining the role of judicial culture, specific stressors like exposure to trauma, potential gender differences in stress responses, and the impact of technology on judges' workloads are vital areas of inquiry. This multifaceted research approach will help develop evidence-based strategies to support a healthy and resilient judiciary.

8.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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