

Minnesota District Court Judge Compensation

Evidence and Salary Standards for the Compensation Council

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Current Position

Minnesota district court judges have received no salary increase since July 2024. The Compensation Council recommended a 6% increase effective July 2025 and an additional 6% effective July 2026; the Legislature enacted neither. District court pay remains at \$190,117. Measured against the Minneapolis–St. Paul CPI, purchasing power will be 8.1% below its 2020 peak by the end of FY 2026.

Caseload and Working Conditions

In FY 2025, 17% of major criminal cases were disposed beyond one year, against a goal of 1% or lower. Clearance rates have fallen below 100% in several categories. Eleven of 17 measures in the Quality Court Workplace Survey showed deterioration. The share of judges who reported keeping up with their workload without feeling overwhelmed fell from 54% in 2021 to 43% in 2024 — the lowest-rated item in the survey.

Retention Signals

Eight district court judges retired before age 65 in the last two years, each forgoing higher retirement benefits. This represents nearly 20% of all retirements during that period — double the rate of the preceding six years. A 2023 MDJA survey found that 24% of sitting judges were actively exploring employment outside the judicial branch, and 85% of positions offered to them by recruiters paid more than their judicial salary.

Labor Market Comparisons

Bureau of Labor Statistics data for May 2025 show the upper quartile of lawyers in the Minneapolis–St. Paul–Bloomington MSA earns at least \$219,710 annually — 15.6% above the district judge salary. Robert Half data place in-house counsel with ten or more years of experience at \$199,288, a 5% premium over the judicial salary, and general counsel at a median of \$258,405, a 36% premium. County attorneys in six metro-area counties average \$212,558, 12% above district judge pay. Minnesota ranked 21st in cost-of-living-adjusted judicial salaries in 2025, down from 19th in 2023.

A survey of 248 Minnesota attorneys conducted for this study found that one-third did not consider applying for judicial openings. Salary appears to function as a threshold condition: when compensation falls broadly below what qualified attorneys consider acceptable, it constrains the eligible pool without differentiating among those who remain in it. Data on applications per judicial vacancy were requested from the Governor's office and had not been received at time of preparation.

Recommended Salary Schedule, FY 2027–2029

The following schedule presents four standards for restoring compensation across the full salary hierarchy. District court judge figures are **shown in bold** in each panel. The 7/1/26 reference salaries reflect what would have been paid had the standard been applied to the current rate of \$190,117 as of that date; they are not sums actually paid. The range across all four standards is less than 4%. The 7/1/27 and 7/1/28 figures apply a forward maintenance adjustment of 2.6% per year — the midpoint of current forecaster projections for CPI inflation through June 2028.

| Standard 1 — Restore Compensation Council 6%+6% Recommendation | | | |
|---|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Position | 7/1/26¹ | 7/1/27 | 7/1/28 |
| District Court Judge | \$213,645 | \$219,169 | \$224,868 |
| District Court Chief Judge | \$224,326 | \$230,126 | \$236,110 |
| Court of Appeals Judge | \$227,592 | \$233,477 | \$239,548 |
| Court of Appeals Chief Judge | \$238,967 | \$245,145 | \$251,520 |
| SC Associate Justice | \$241,534 | \$247,779 | \$254,222 |
| SC Chief Justice | \$265,688 | \$272,558 | \$279,645 |

| Standard 2 — Restore FY24 Real Purchasing Power | | | |
|--|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Position | 7/1/26¹ | 7/1/27 | 7/1/28 |
| District Court Judge | \$208,905 | \$214,337 | \$219,909 |
| District Court Chief Judge | \$219,349 | \$225,053 | \$230,903 |
| Court of Appeals Judge | \$222,542 | \$228,329 | \$234,265 |
| Court of Appeals Chief Judge | \$233,665 | \$239,741 | \$245,973 |
| SC Associate Justice | \$236,176 | \$242,317 | \$248,616 |
| SC Chief Justice | \$259,794 | \$266,549 | \$273,478 |

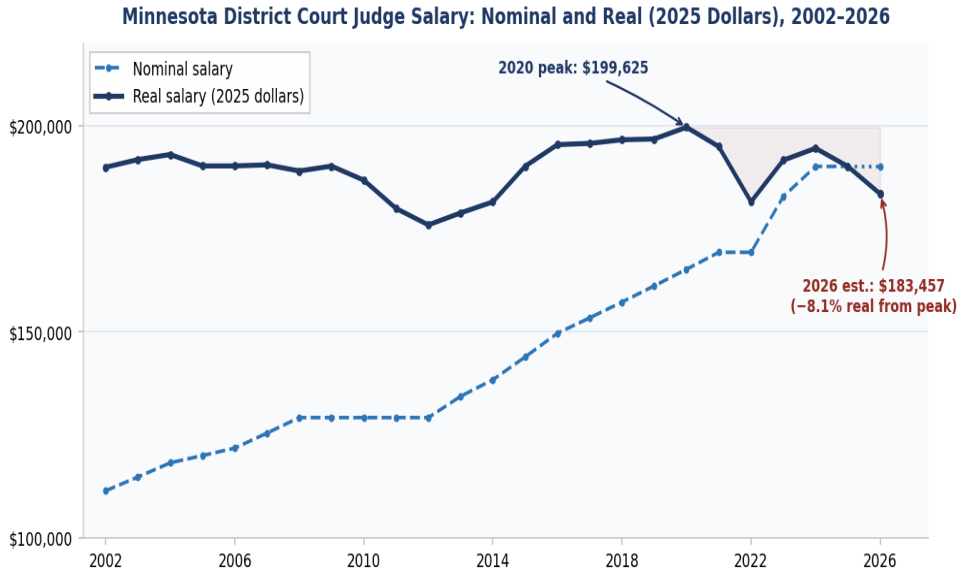
| Standard 3 — Restore FY20 Real Purchasing Power | | | |
|--|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Position | 7/1/26¹ | 7/1/27 | 7/1/28 |
| District Court Judge | \$214,381 | \$219,955 | \$225,674 |
| District Court Chief Judge | \$225,099 | \$230,952 | \$236,957 |
| Court of Appeals Judge | \$228,376 | \$234,314 | \$240,406 |
| Court of Appeals Chief Judge | \$239,790 | \$246,024 | \$252,421 |
| SC Associate Justice | \$242,366 | \$248,668 | \$255,134 |
| SC Chief Justice | \$266,604 | \$273,535 | \$280,648 |

| Standard 4 — Restore 13% New-Judge Premium over Twin Cities Private Sector | | | |
|---|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Position | 7/1/26¹ | 7/1/27 | 7/1/28 |
| District Court Judge | \$216,749 | \$222,385 | \$228,167 |
| District Court Chief Judge | \$227,585 | \$233,503 | \$239,574 |
| Court of Appeals Judge | \$230,899 | \$236,902 | \$243,062 |
| Court of Appeals Chief Judge | \$242,438 | \$248,742 | \$255,210 |
| SC Associate Justice | \$245,044 | \$251,415 | \$257,952 |
| SC Chief Justice | \$269,548 | \$276,557 | \$283,748 |

¹ 7/1/26 figures are reference salaries under each standard, not amounts actually paid. The hierarchy for higher courts is back-calculated from the district court figure using the Compensation Council's March 2025 prescribed ratios. The 2.6% annual maintenance adjustment reflects the WSJ median CPI forecast (April 2026) for the Minneapolis–St. Paul–Bloomington CBSA. Sources: Compensation Council Reports 2021–2025; BLS CPI-U; authors' calculations.

Historical Context: Purchasing Power Erosion, 2002–2026

Real district court judge salaries reached a peak in 2020 and have declined since, even as nominal salaries stagnated after July 2024. The pattern echoes the 2008–2012 period, when real pay fell 12% over four years before recovering — suggesting the current erosion is not an anomaly but a structural feature of salary-setting by periodic legislative action.



Source: Minnesota Compensation Council Reports 2021–2025; BLS CPI-U, Minneapolis–St. Paul–Bloomington CBSA (FRED series CUUSA2115A0); WSJ Economic Forecasting Survey, April 2026; authors' calculations. Dotted lines indicate estimated values.