

Minnesota Judicial State Court Salaries, 2025-27

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Prepared for the Minnesota District Judges Association

ABSTRACT: District court judge salaries in Minnesota have been unchanged since July 2024, following a Compensation Council recommendation that the Legislature did not enact. Measured against the Minneapolis–St. Paul consumer price index, real purchasing power will stand 8.1% below its 2020 peak by the end of FY 2026. This report, prepared for the Minnesota District Judges Association, examines whether current compensation is sufficient to attract and retain qualified candidates for judicial offices and recommends salary adjustments under four analytical standards.

Operational data from the Minnesota Judicial Branch show clearance rates below 100% in several case categories and a sustained decline in judges' self-reported ability to manage caseloads. Eight district court judges retired before age 65 in the last two years, representing nearly 20% of retirements over that period and double the rate of the preceding six years. Bureau of Labor Statistics data place the upper quartile of Twin Cities lawyers 15.6% above the current district judge salary; a survey of 248 Minnesota attorneys found salary to be a threshold barrier to considering judicial applications.

Recommended salaries are presented for FY 2027 and FY 2028 under four standards, ranging from restoring the Council's unacted recommendation to re-establishing the historical premium over private-sector legal compensation. All four standards produce figures within a 4% range of one another.

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Executive summary:

Despite a recommendation of 6% increases in judicial salaries for FY 25 and FY 26 recommended by the Compensation Council in March 2025, judicial pay remained flat over the last biennium. Ali and Banaian (2025) found that increases of 6.9% in FY 25 and 3.4% in FY 26 would make judicial positions more competitive and compensate for lost purchasing power.¹ During this time, economists expect inflation to rise 18% assuming a 3.6% inflation rate for July 2025-June 2026 and 2.3% for July 2026 – June 2027,² meaning that the purchasing power of judicial salaries fell by an additional 6% since July 1, 2025.

There were 8 additional retirements of judges before age 65 in the last two years. A survey of 248 lawyers indicated that one third simply did not consider applying for judicial vacancies. Salary was more important in determining applications among those who considered it within the Twin Cities market. Recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the top 25% of lawyers (by earnings) in the Twin Cities earn at least \$219,710 annually, well above the pay for district judges of \$190,117.

We make two recommendations. As an interim step, the Compensation Council should reiterate its call for 6% increases and then adjust for purchasing power backdated to July 1, 2025. This report includes the calculation and demonstrates that such a change approximately increases salaries for judges and justices consistent with what would have happened had compensation kept pace with inflation since FY 2020 and is equivalent to the salary of lawyers in the Twin Cities market earning at the 75th percentile through both Federal government statistics and private surveys.

Second, to provide for consistency in pay-setting, we recommend a change in statute so that Compensation Council recommendations for judicial pay are treated by the Legislature in the same manner as its recommendations for constitutional offices. A review of independent commissions in the 50 states shows that those where the Legislature must approve a recommendation does not lead to higher pay. We also offer evidence from a recent reform in Kansas that ties pay for its judges to that of federal judges, which has moved that state from the bottom 10 in pay for judges to the middle of the pack.

¹ Fawad Ali and King Banaian, “Minnesota Judicial State Court Salaries.” St. Cloud State University, Center for Policy Research and Community Engagement special study, no. 1, June 2025.
<https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/specstud/1/> last viewed May 28, 2026.

² These are the median CPI forecast of the Wall Street Journal’s Economic Forecasting Survey of April, 2026. See Anthony DeBarros, “About the Wall Street Journal Economic Forecasting Survey,” April 12, 2026.
<https://www.wsj.com/economy/economic-forecasting-survey-archive-11617814998>

Analysis:

Pay for judges came under state control in 2005. Facing budgetary pressures from lower tax collections during the Great Financial Crisis of 2008, pay for judges remained constant between 2008 and 2012, while inflation deteriorated their real earnings by 6.9%. A similar pattern emerged in 2020-22 through the COVID-19 pandemic, where despite a 2.5% increase in 2021, real earnings of district court trial judges fell 9%. (See Figure 1 and Table 1 for data.)

The Compensation Council in 2025, recognizing this loss and its potential impact on the ability to attract top legal talent to apply and accept judgeships, recommended a 6% increase beginning in July 2025 and an additional 6% increase in July 2026. The final legislative conference committee in May 2025 elected to provide no increase to judicial salaries.³ This has placed salaries an additional 5.7% below where they were at the beginning of the biennium if inflation follows these forecasts.

Figure 1 shows essential information about the impact of recent inflation on judicial salaries.⁴ In real terms, trial court judges received their highest pay in 2020, earning \$199,625 in inflation-adjusted dollars (measured in terms of 2025 prices). Nominal salaries that year were \$165,136. Three biennia later, despite nominal salaries rising to \$190,117, inflation will erode those gains to an estimated \$183,457 if current and forecasted inflation evolves as economic forecasts expect. This is an 8.1% loss of purchasing power.

The 2025 the Compensation Council stated that “salaries have made it more difficult for qualified individuals to forego established careers in the public sector and in private practice to make the commitment to serve on a long-term basis in the state courts.” The Council also noted hearing testimony that caseloads had increased and that judges experienced “increasing personal threats and harassment...”⁵

Concerns about caseload are supported by the most recent performance report of the Minnesota Judicial Branch (MJB). In some but not all categories, clearance rates for cases fell short of MJB goals.⁶ “In FY25, 17% of major criminal cases were disposed beyond one year, compared to the goal of 1% or lower.” (p. 7) Eleven of 17 measures in the Quality Court Workplace Survey showed deterioration in judicial job satisfaction, including:

- “I am able to keep up with my workload without feeling overwhelmed.”
- “My working conditions and environment enable me to do my job well.”
- “I feel safe at my workplace.” (p. 53)

³ Tim Walker, “Judiciary, public safety conference committee announces \$3.5 billion budget deal.” *Session Daily*, Minnesota House of Representatives, May 17, 2025. <https://www.house.mn.gov/sessiondaily/Story/18802>

⁴ Because salaries for Supreme Court justices and Court of Appeals judges are set as a percentage increase from those of trial judges, we will focus on the latter for this report in terms of analysis: Anything said about lack of competitive pay for trial judges will apply even more for those in higher courts. We show in Table 7 how we back out salary recommendations for those courts from our analysis.

⁵ Compensation Council Recommendations and Prescribed Salaries, March 31, 2025.

<https://www.lcc.mn.gov/compccouncil/reports/comp-council-final-report-3-31-2025.pdf>, last view May 20, 2026.

⁶ MJB, “Performance Measures Key Results and Measures Annual Report. September 2025.

<https://mncourts.gov/media/migration/ciomedialibrary/documents/FY25-Performance-Measures-Annual-Report.pdf>, last view May 20, 2026.

In Table 2 we present information on retirement trends. Retirements in 2025 rose to 27 judges, including 5 who retired before age 65. Over the last two years, nearly 20% of retiring judges retired before age 65, double the rate of the previous six years. This could be for a variety of reasons, such as better paying opportunities elsewhere, heavier caseloads, concerns about the political environment, or health and family concerns.

A survey of 248 Minnesota attorneys conducted in conjunction with this study found that while salary dissatisfaction was widespread among potential applicants, salary importance as a self-reported factor did not independently predict willingness to apply once other personal and professional considerations were controlled. This result is consistent with salary operating as a threshold condition rather than a marginal incentive: when compensation falls broadly below what qualified attorneys consider acceptable, it constrains the pool without differentiating among those who remain in it. The implication for policy is not that salary is irrelevant, but that salary restoration is necessary to reopen the pool — not sufficient by itself to fill it.⁷⁸

Compared to other states, the Legislature’s decision not to raise judicial salaries in the last biennium lowered its rank modestly, from 19th in 2023 to 21st in 2025. Some states have made noteworthy changes through legislative action since our last report. New Mexico and Texas, both having lagged in relative judicial salaries, passed legislative changes that brought both now above Minnesota.⁹ The state of Kansas took a different route, indexing the pay of its district court judges at 75% of the salary of a U.S. district court judge.¹⁰ Such indexing has the advantage of preventing slippage relative to other states.

Other states, including Washington and Arizona, rely on independent commissions that incorporate federal and private-sector benchmarks into regular adjustments. These systems reduce the need for large, infrequent corrections and help maintain consistent competitiveness in judicial compensation.

All three states leapt above Minnesota and represent a challenge to the state’s current mechanism for determining judicial salaries. Minnesota’s current approach—periodic legislative increases—has maintained competitiveness in nominal terms but has allowed the relative position of judicial pay in state rankings to drift downward when other states adopt more structural reforms. The experience of

⁷ Benedicte Dimuka, “Understanding Barriers to Judicial Applications in Minnesota: A Survey-Based Analysis of Attorney Decision-Making.” Report submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science in Applied Economics, St. Cloud State University, Spring 2026. A copy of this report was made available to MDJA and to the Compensation Council.

⁸ There would be data on applications for judicial vacancies since 2020 included here but as indicated on the cover page, that data has not been received by the date of this draft.

⁹ New Mexico HB 141 (2024) fully restructured the judicial salary table. Its Judicial Compensation Commission 2025 report showed that salaries were set at \$218,318 for district judges, from which law provides premiums for appellate and Supreme Court justices. It recommended a 4% increase for 2026. See <https://nmcourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/JCC-Report-2025-FINAL.pdf>, last viewed May 21, 2026. Texas raised pay for district judges from \$140,000 to \$175,000 in 2025. Bayliss Wagner, “Texas judges receive long-awaited pay raise in last-minute legislative deal.” *Austin American-Statesman*, July 28, 2025, <https://www.statesman.com/story/news/2025/06/02/texas-judges-receive-long-awaited-pay-raise-in-last-minute-legislative-deal/83998849007/>, last viewed June 4, 2026.

¹⁰ See Kansas Senate Bil 229 (2023) https://www.kslegislature.gov/b2023_24/documents/view-leg/?apn=b2023_24/year1/ready_for_publication/sb_229/sb229_enrolled.pdf, at New Sec. 3.

Kansas and other states suggests that adopting a more systematic approach to judicial compensation would reduce this risk going forward.

Labor market data support these anecdotes. Over the 2020–25 period, salaries of lawyers in the private sector have risen faster than district judge salaries. According to May 2025 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) shown in Table 4, the top 25% of lawyers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington MN metropolitan statistical area earn more than \$219,710 annually, well above the pay for district judges of \$190,117.

Other metro areas pay less for lawyers, in part because the competition for lawyers in those communities is less as well. Yet all but Mankato show the upper quartile above \$150,000 in salary and the top 10% receive more than a Minnesota trial judge. The data show 93% of all lawyers in Minnesota live in a metro area, and 82% of all Minnesota lawyers live in the Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington MSA.¹¹ For those outside of the Twin Cities, mobility matters; a decision to apply for a vacant seat includes not only pay but also cost-of-living differences, family attachment to a community, etc.

Of the 287 district judgeships in Minnesota, 86 (30%) are by statute held in Hennepin and Ramsey counties (the 4th and 2nd districts.) The other five counties of the Minneapolis-St. Paul MSA – Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Scott, and Washington – are parts of the 1st and 10th Judicial Districts. Allocating their judgeships by population would add 64 more judges living within the MSA.¹² Thus, while more than 80% of lawyers live in the Twin Cities, 48% of judges are required constitutionally to live in greater Minnesota.¹³

As shown in Table 5, general counsel in the Minneapolis market earn a median of \$258,405 — 36% above district judge pay — and in-house counsel with ten or more years of experience earn \$199,288, a 5% premium over the judicial salary. Law firm attorneys at the same experience level earn \$181,900, modestly below the judicial salary, though the competitive pressure from in-house and public-sector positions remains substantial. As shown in Table 6, the average salary of county attorneys across the six metro-area counties is \$212,558, 12% above district judge pay, and the highest-paid assistant county attorney in the average county earns just 1% below the district judge salary.

Experienced judges make better decisions. Moreover, a fully staffed bench of judges reduces workload and decreases time for decision-making. Minnesota has invested in reducing the backlog of cases since 2021, and while the total caseload has fallen, the clearance rate for those cases has fallen below 100%. Perceptions of judges have deteriorated on workload as well. The share of judges who agreed or

¹¹ This number is imprecise since three of the six metro areas, including Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, incorporate border counties across state lines. We did not attempt to correct using county-level data. The Minnesota Judicial Branch counts 26,313 active lawyers in Minnesota. Minnesota Judicial Branch, Performance Measures, Key Results and Measures, Annual Report 2023, Sept. 2023, p. 44.

¹² The number 64 is an approximation using MSA population for the three metro counties in the 1st District as a share of the total population and multiplying that by the number of judgeships allocated by statute and doing the same for the two metro counties in the 10th. The chief judge assigns district judges to counties.

¹³ Article VI, Section 4 of the Minnesota Constitution provides: "Each judge of the district court in any district shall be a resident of that district at the time of his selection and during his continuance in office." The application to become a judge further requires "An applicant must be a resident of the judicial district for which the applicant submits an application at the time the application is submitted, and, if appointed, for the duration of the term."

strongly agreed with the statement “I am able to keep up with my workload without feeling overwhelmed” fell from 54% in 2021 to 43% in 2024.¹⁴

As noted in our previous study, a March 2023 survey by the Minnesota District Judges Association (MDJA) found 61% of Minnesota district judges had moved up their planned date of retirement or resignation.¹⁵ Seven of every eight judges reported an increase in workload since 2020, with 34% of those judges reporting an increase of over 5 hours per week.¹⁶ Larger workloads were the most common reason cited for a change in retirement plans (23%), but almost an equal number (22%) cited “stagnation in judicial pay” as a factor.¹⁷ Six said “stagnation of judicial pay” was a reason that contributed to their decision.¹⁸

As shown in Table 6, six Minnesota county attorneys -- from Anoka, Dakota, Hennepin, Olmsted, Scott, and Stearns -- earned 12% more than Minnesota trial judges. Here too, salary was highly correlated with the logarithm of county population ($R^2 = 0.78$.) In February 2023, Anoka County announced the hiring of former district judge Bethany Fountain Lindberg, age 59, as chief deputy county attorney, a position for which she resigned from the bench.¹⁹

Table 7 and Figure 2 summarize applicant data for Minnesota district court vacancies from 2019 through 2025, drawn from records maintained by the Minnesota Judicial Selection Commission. The unit of measurement is applicants per seat: for vacancy announcements involving multiple departing judges, the total number of applicants is divided by the number of seats posted, and annual averages are computed as total applicants divided by total seats rather than applicants per announcement. This approach avoids overstating pool depth in years with unusually large multi-seat announcements.²⁰

The data reveal two patterns with direct implications for recruitment. First, applicant pools in Greater Minnesota districts (Third, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) have consistently run well below those in metro districts (First, Second, Fourth, and Tenth), averaging between 6.4 and 8.3 per seat compared to a metro range of 10.2 to 17.8 over the same period. Second, the metro applicant rate has declined sharply since 2019 — from 17.8 per seat to approximately 11.0 in 2025, a reduction of 38 percent — while the Greater Minnesota rate has remained flat and low. The overall district-wide figure fell from 12.4 per seat in 2019 to 9.0 in 2024, its lowest point in the study period.²¹ Notably, the metro decline coincides with the period in which judicial salaries stagnated relative to private-sector

¹⁴ Minnesota Judicial Branch, Performance Measures, Key Results and Measures, Annual Report 2025., p. 53. Comparison to 2021 drawn from the 2021 report. Last viewed May 28, 2026.

¹⁵ Minnesota District Judges Association Judicial Compensation Survey, March 2023, 16. Hereinafter referred to as MDJA Survey.

¹⁶ MDJA Survey, 11.

¹⁷ MDJA Survey, 17. Respondents could choose more than one factor.

¹⁸ MDJA Survey, 20-21.

¹⁹ Peter Bodley, “Fountain Lindberg Appointed Chief Deputy County Attorney.” *Hometown Source*, Feb. 10, 2023. https://www.hometownsource.com/abc_newspapers/community/andover/fountain-lindberg-appointed-chief-deputy-county-attorney/article_b8c0d434-a327-11ed-84a4-f31535182355.html

²⁰ There were 29 seats vacated within 2024. The year held several multi-seat announcements, including a four-seat opening in District 10.

²¹ We received data through June 30, 2026, but omitted the partial year. The data so far do not contradict this pattern.

benchmarks, consistent with the survey finding that salary operates as a threshold condition for applicants in metropolitan legal markets.

As noted in the 2021 Compensation Council recommendations, “The Compensation Council emphasizes the importance for salaries of the judiciary to be able to attract candidates from the private sector, as well as from the public sector.”²² The 2023 MDJA Survey showed 24% of surveyed judges were exploring other jobs outside of the judicial branch, and that 43% had been recruited outside of the judicial branch within the last three years of the survey. Eighty-five percent of the jobs offered by recruiters paid more than they earned as a judicial officer.²³

Recommendations:

Over the last two biennia, judicial salaries have fallen further behind as recommendations by the Compensation Council have not been enacted by the legislature.²⁴

Fiscal year	Compensation Council Recommended	Legislature enacted
2023-24	9%	8%
2024-25	6%	4%
2025-26	6%	0%
2026-27	6%	0%

The Council noted, “the judiciary should reflect a broad range of experience and perspectives, and ... a small pool of candidates drawn largely from only part of the legal community could be a serious concern for the future of the state’s judiciary.”²⁵ As wages in the private sector continue to expand and inflation continues to run ahead of pay increases, the prospects of a shrinking pool of applicants and an increased rate of retirement raise an issue that policymakers should consider.

We thus provide two types of recommendations. First, in keeping with the long tradition of salary reports to the MDJA, we offer guidance on salaries for the biennium beginning July 1, 2027, through June 30, 2029. These are based on restoration of lost purchasing power and maintaining a realistic and historically affirmed premium for district judges from the private sector. Second, as the state has experience now with the Compensation Council, the legislature can look to other states’ reforms in judicial pay to consider alternatives to the current process of setting salaries.

Salaries that match previous standards in real and relative terms

In considering salaries for future years, we are required to forecast future inflation if our goal is to make up for the loss of purchasing power: it makes little sense to catch up with inflation on a single date in the past and then allow it to erode value over a future two-year period. A plausible range of forecasts, based on current long-run forecasts and central bank credibility, would lie between 2.3% and 2.9% per year.

²² Compensation Council Recommendations, March 29, 2021, at page 5.
<https://www.lrl.mn.gov/docs/2021/mandated/210584.pdf>, last view May 28, 2026.

²³ MDJA Survey, 32-34.

²⁴ As recounted in Compensation Council Recommendations and Prescribed Salaries. Letter to Speaker Lisa Demuth Senate President Bobby Joe Champion, March 31, 2025, p. 5.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

The Wall Street Journal has surveyed 75 economists quarterly regarding a variety of economic indicators, including CPI. As of April 2026, the median forecast was for an annual rate of 2.3% between June 2027 and December 2028. Persistent supply shocks from the Persian Gulf conflict would likely move to the higher end of the range. Forecasters will update these projections between now and when the Council makes its recommendations. We therefore use the midpoint of that range, 2.6% per year, as our inflation expectation for the period between July 2026 and June 2028.

We incorporate that into a calculation that sets salaries for district court judges based on what would have restored salaries to a set of previous real and relative salaries – real as applied to CPI, and relative as compared to the salaries of private sector lawyers as of July 1, 2026, and then allowing for future inflation between then and each proposed increase. Kula and West (2020) found that upon appointment, a new district judge received a 13% salary increase relative to their prior private-sector earnings.²⁶ Using current Robert Half data for Minneapolis lawyers with ten or more years of experience — the experience range from which judicial appointees are most commonly drawn — the judge's salary today stands essentially at parity with the private sector average of \$190,594. Restoring a 13% premium over this benchmark would imply a target salary of \$216,749, consistent with Standard 4 in Table 7. We apply the following four standards in the table below.

Potential Standard	If used for 7/1/26	To maintain purchasing power, on 7/1/27	To maintain purchasing power, on 7/1/28
Restore 6%/6% recommendation of the Compensation Council in March 2025	\$213,645	\$219,169	\$224,868
Restore purchasing power to FY24 levels.	\$208,905	\$214,337	\$219,909
Restore purchasing power to FY20 levels.	\$214,381	\$219,955	\$225,674
Restore 13% gap for new district judges to the salaries of Twin Cities lawyers with more than 10 years of experience.	\$216,749	\$222,385	\$228,167
Values are for district (trial) court judges. See Table 7a-c for a full schedule of salaries for judges at higher levels. See Tables 4- 5 for private sector salary data. “Maintaining purchasing power” computed as an inflation rate of 2.6% per year, see text.			

²⁶ Elizabeth Kula and Kristine L. West, “Minnesota Judicial State Court Salaries,” St. Catherine University, St. Paul, MN, draft of July 6, 2020, prepared for MDJA., p. 3.

The first standard applies the Compensation Council's 2025 recommendation to the current level of \$190,117, which would have raised salaries faster than the rate of inflation. This was broadly in line with both the Ali and Banaian (2025) analysis and the request of the entire MJB. Both were attempting to move pay closer to a standard of providing a meaningful but not large increase in salary to lawyers who were coming from the private sector with significant experience from the market that holds most of the lawyers.

These numbers will appear large, and a step increase of that size – the restoration of parity relative to private sector lawyers with 10 or more years of experience would require a recommendation of 17% for the fiscal year starting on July 1, 2027 – presents fiscal challenges. While we recognize this fact, we are guided by the principle that our role is to state what it would take to reach these standards, and that raises below these levels would not meet them. The rise for the second year of the biennium would be only for the prospective inflation of July 1, 2028, to June 30, 2029, of 2.6%. Were the Council to choose one of these strategies, it may be preferable to reach the 2028-29 level with a smaller increase in the first year, waiting a year to reach the recommended level in the second year of the biennium.

All four of those strategies lead to significant salary increases, and the gap between the highest and lowest of them is less than 4%. A recommendation from the Compensation Council to the Minnesota Legislature has typically been expressed as a percentage from previous levels; it may make more sense to provide the actual salaries we show in Table 7.

As can be seen from Table 3, an increase of this size is likely to move Minnesota into the top 10 of salaries even after adjustments made to reflect 2026 COLA-adjusted ranks, consistent with states like Nebraska and Utah. However, these periodic large adjustments without some level of public pay reform will eventually lead to backsliding as other states reform their public sectors. Such a change should be considered a transitional, one-time adjustment while implementing more structural reform.

A structured benchmarking approach to judicial salaries

Minnesota's current approach to judicial salaries relies on periodic legislative action embedded in the biennial omnibus judiciary appropriations bill. As Table 1 and Figure 1 demonstrate, this approach has not maintained compensation in real terms. The Compensation Council has submitted recommendations in each of the last four biennia; the Legislature enacted them in full only once (FY 2023–24), partially in a second (FY 2024–25), and enacted no increase at all in the last two fiscal years. The result is a salary that has lost more than 8% of its real purchasing power since its peak in 2020.

The root of this problem is structural. Under Minnesota Statutes §15A.082, Subd. 3(a), the Council's recommendations for judicial salaries take effect only "if an appropriation of money to pay the recommended salaries is enacted." Legislative inaction — the path of least resistance — means the recommendation lapses. This arrangement places the burden on those seeking to maintain judicial competitiveness to secure affirmative action within an omnibus process where judicial salaries compete against public defenders, civil legal services, court technology, and dozens of other priorities. That competition has not gone well for judges in the last two biennia.

This default stands in notable contrast to how the same statute treats constitutional officer salaries. Under Subd. 3(b), the Council *prescribes* — not merely recommends — salaries for the Governor, Attorney General, Auditor, Secretary of State, and Lieutenant Governor. Those salaries take effect on July 1 unless the Legislature acts to override them. An appropriation of sufficient funds to operate the relevant office at the prescribed level constitutes acceptance; no separate legislation naming a salary figure is required. The Legislature has accepted this prescriptive model for constitutional officers in every biennium since the Council was established. Judicial salaries are the anomaly.

The reform this report supports is a targeted amendment to §15A.082 Subd. 3(a) that extends to judicial salaries the same default already governing constitutional officer salaries: the Council's recommendation would take effect unless the Legislature affirmatively modifies or rejects it. This change would not eliminate legislative authority. The Legislature could still block or reduce any recommendation by passing a bill to that effect. What it would eliminate is the ability of inaction alone — the failure to pass an omnibus judiciary bill that includes the recommended salary increase — to serve as the mechanism for ignoring a compensation recommendation. The burden of action would shift from those seeking to maintain judicial competitiveness to those seeking to constrain it.

It would be an overstatement to claim that this change will move Minnesota substantially up the interstate salary rankings. States with advisory commissions requiring legislative affirmation average rank 28 among the 51 jurisdictions in Table 3; states with binding-unless-overridden commissions average rank 24. The difference is not large relative to the variance within each category — advisory states range from 6th to 51st — and the two top-ranked states, Illinois and Tennessee, have no commission at all. Commission type does not reliably predict salary rank in cross-sectional data. What cross-sectional data cannot show, however, is whether structural reform prevents the drift that has moved Minnesota from 19th in 2023 to 21st in 2025. That is a longitudinal question, and the best available evidence comes from Kansas.

Prior to 2023, Kansas set judicial salaries through periodic legislative action — the same model Minnesota uses today. Three consecutive 5% legislative increases from FY 2022 through FY 2024 were not sufficient to close the gap with other states; Kansas entered 2025 ranked near the bottom of cost-of-living-adjusted comparisons. Senate Bill 229, enacted in May 2023, indexed district court judge salaries at 75% of the federal district judge salary, effective January 1, 2025. Table 8 shows the result. The nominal salary jumped 24.6% in a single year, from \$148,912 to \$185,550, and Kansas rose 22 places in the COLA-adjusted rankings. Measured at Minnesota price levels, a Kansas district judge now earns \$206,604, compared to Minnesota's \$190,117 — an 8.7% gap that did not exist two years ago, and one that grows each January as federal judicial salaries adjust automatically. Kansas chose external indexing as its structural mechanism; Minnesota need not adopt the same approach. The relevant lesson is that the mechanism matters: a salary-setting system that adjusts by default produces better sustained outcomes than one that erodes by default.

Several states have pursued more complete structural independence. Washington state's Citizens' Commission on Salaries for Elected Officials sets salaries that take effect unless rejected by voters, currently ranking 12th. Arkansas's Independent Citizens Commission, established by constitutional amendment in 2014, sets judicial and other public salaries that cannot be overridden — currently ranking 3rd. These models produce demonstrably better outcomes. Minnesota might aspire to them

over time, but the Legislature's constitutional appropriations authority makes a fully independent or voter-protected mechanism unlikely without a constitutional amendment. That is not a realistic near-term path.

Not all commission systems are the same, and it would be a mistake to conflate them. An advisory commission that submits recommendations requiring legislative appropriation — the model Minnesota uses today for judges — functions very differently from a binding commission whose recommendations take effect by default, or from a statutory formula that adjusts automatically. The proposed amendment to §15A.082 would not transform the Compensation Council into a fully independent body. It would make the Council's recommendations meaningful in the same way they are meaningful for constitutional officers: by requiring the Legislature to make a deliberate choice to deviate from them, rather than permitting silence to function as rejection.

The Compensation Council was established in 1983 as a first step away from purely legislative determination of judicial compensation. Amending Subd. 3(a) to extend prescriptive authority from constitutional officers to judges would represent a second step: modest in scope, consistent with the institutional logic the Legislature has already accepted and targeted precisely at the procedural failure this report has documented. It would not guarantee that Minnesota returns to the top quartile of the interstate rankings. It would guarantee that the Council's work receives a genuine legislative response — either adoption or deliberate override — rather than the procedural indifference of an omnibus conference committee under budget pressure. That is a durable improvement to a system that is, as this report has shown, currently failing to perform its basic function.

Table 1: Minnesota Judicial Salaries: Nominal and Real, 2002–2026 (estimated)

Year	SC Chief Justice Nominal	SC Chief Justice Real (2025\$)	SC Assoc. Justice Nominal	SC Assoc. Justice Real (2025\$)	Trial Court Chief Judge Nominal	Trial Court Chief Judge Real (2025\$)	Trial Court Judge Nominal	Trial Court Judge Real (2025\$)
2002	\$138,487	\$236,179	\$125,897	\$214,708	\$116,926	\$199,409	\$111,359	\$189,914
2003	\$142,641	\$238,491	\$129,674	\$216,811	\$120,434	\$201,362	\$114,700	\$191,775
2004	\$146,920	\$240,021	\$133,564	\$218,201	\$124,047	\$202,654	\$118,141	\$193,005
2005	\$149,124	\$236,567	\$135,567	\$215,061	\$125,908	\$199,738	\$119,913	\$190,228
2006	\$151,361	\$236,569	\$137,601	\$215,063	\$127,797	\$199,740	\$121,712	\$190,229
2007	\$155,902	\$236,908	\$141,729	\$215,371	\$131,631	\$200,026	\$125,363	\$190,501
2008	\$160,579	\$235,051	\$145,981	\$213,682	\$135,580	\$198,458	\$129,124	\$189,008
2009	\$160,579	\$236,518	\$145,981	\$215,016	\$135,580	\$199,696	\$129,124	\$190,187
2010	\$160,579	\$232,280	\$145,981	\$211,164	\$135,580	\$196,119	\$129,124	\$186,780
2011	\$160,579	\$223,736	\$145,981	\$203,396	\$135,580	\$188,904	\$129,124	\$179,909
2012	\$160,579	\$218,768	\$145,981	\$198,880	\$135,580	\$184,710	\$129,124	\$175,915
2013	\$167,002	\$222,384	\$151,820	\$202,167	\$141,003	\$187,763	\$134,289	\$178,822
2014	\$172,012	\$225,724	\$156,375	\$205,204	\$145,233	\$190,583	\$138,318	\$181,509
2015	\$178,892	\$236,472	\$162,630	\$214,976	\$151,042	\$199,658	\$143,851	\$190,152

2016	\$186,048	\$243,000	\$169,135	\$220,909	\$157,084	\$205,169	\$149,605	\$195,401
2017	\$190,699	\$243,376	\$173,363	\$221,251	\$161,011	\$205,487	\$153,345	\$195,704
2018	\$195,466	\$244,477	\$177,697	\$222,252	\$165,036	\$206,417	\$157,179	\$196,590
2019	\$200,353	\$244,703	\$182,139	\$222,458	\$169,162	\$206,608	\$161,108	\$196,771
2020	\$205,361	\$248,251	\$186,692	\$225,683	\$173,391	\$209,604	\$165,136	\$199,625
2021	\$210,496	\$242,423	\$191,359	\$220,383	\$177,726	\$204,682	\$169,264	\$194,937
2022	\$210,496	\$225,730	\$191,359	\$205,208	\$177,726	\$190,589	\$169,264	\$181,514
2023	\$227,336	\$238,292	\$206,668	\$216,628	\$191,944	\$201,194	\$182,805	\$191,615
2024	\$236,429	\$241,912	\$214,935	\$219,920	\$199,622	\$204,252	\$190,117	\$194,526
2025	\$236,429	\$236,429	\$214,935	\$214,935	\$199,622	\$199,622	\$190,117	\$190,117
2026 (est)	\$236,429	\$228,147	\$214,935	\$207,406	\$199,622	\$192,630	\$190,117	\$183,457

Note: Real salaries are adjusted to 2025 dollars using the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U annual average for the Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI metropolitan region (306.806). Shaded row (2025) is newly added. The 2025 nominal salaries reflect the 4% increase enacted effective July 2024 (same nominal values as mid-2024). The March 2025 Compensation Council recommended an additional 6% increase effective July 2025; if enacted, Trial Court Judge salary would rise to \$201,524, Associate Justice to \$227,831, and Court of Appeals Judge to \$214,680. 2026 estimates based on Wall Street Journal Survey of Economic Forecasts estimate of 3.63% 12-month CPI inflation, based on forecast of April 2026.

Sources: Minnesota Compensation Council Reports 2021–2025; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U, Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington CBSA (FRED series CUUSA211SA0), annual averages, WSJ, author's calculations.

Table 2: Age Distribution of New Retirees from the Minnesota District Court, 2018–2025

Year	50-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75-79
2018	0	3	14	10	0
2019	1	2	17	7	0
2020	0	1	12	3	0
2021	0	0	11	5	0
2022	0	4	15	7	0
2023	0	1	11	5	0
2024	0	3	7	4	0
2025	0	5	16	5	1

Source: Minnesota State Retirement System Judges Retirement Fund Actuarial Valuation Reports, 2018–2025.

Table 3: Complete cost of living adjusted (COLA) trial court judge salary rankings, 2025

2025 COLA adjusted rank	State	2025 COLA district trial court judge salary	% (real) change for MN to reach rank	Difference in rank from 2023 to 2025
1	Illinois	\$258,510	38.37%	0
2	Tennessee	\$237,379	27.06%	0
3	Arkansas	\$233,883	25.19%	+2
4	Pennsylvania	\$230,700	23.49%	-1
5	South Carolina	\$224,446	20.14%	-1
6	New Mexico	\$223,503	19.63%	+21
7	Virginia	\$215,242	15.21%	-1
8	Georgia	\$214,706	14.92%	-1
9	Utah	\$211,062	12.97%	-1
10	Nebraska	\$209,321	12.04%	-1
11	New York	\$206,702	10.64%	+2
12	Washington	\$206,357	10.46%	-2
13	Michigan	\$203,803	9.09%	-2
14	Delaware	\$202,529	8.41%	+1
15	Missouri	\$199,640	6.86%	-1
16	Texas	\$199,021	6.53%	+18
17	Florida	\$197,735	5.84%	-5
18	Arizona	\$194,629	4.18%	+3
19	Indiana	\$191,847	2.69%	-3
20	Kansas	\$188,686	1.00%	+22
21	Minnesota	\$186,824	0.00%	-2
22	South Dakota	\$184,798	-1.08%	0
23	Colorado	\$183,203	-1.94%	+2
24	Louisiana	\$181,284	-2.97%	-7
25	California	\$181,063	-3.08%	-5

26	Oklahoma	\$179,830	-3.74%	+4
27	Wisconsin	\$179,243	-4.06%	+1
28	Alabama	\$178,232	-4.60%	+4
29	Mississippi	\$178,050	-4.70%	-11
30	Ohio	\$177,689	-4.89%	-7
31	North Carolina	\$177,180	-5.16%	-5
32	Rhode Island	\$175,772	-5.92%	-8
33	New Jersey	\$174,903	-6.38%	-4
34	Kentucky	\$174,550	-6.57%	-3
35	Iowa	\$174,388	-6.66%	-2
36	Idaho	\$172,926	-7.44%	+7
37	Oregon	\$172,780	-7.52%	+9
38	North Dakota	\$172,472	-7.68%	+2
39	Maryland	\$170,021	-8.99%	-2
40	Alaska	\$168,926	-9.58%	+4
41	Vermont	\$168,860	-9.62%	+4
42	Connecticut	\$163,303	-12.59%	-6
43	Hawaii	\$162,832	-12.84%	+5
44	Wyoming	\$162,724	-12.90%	-3
45	Massachusetts	\$157,081	-15.92%	-10
46	District of Columbia	\$155,960	-16.52%	-7
47	New Hampshire	\$155,313	-16.87%	-9
48	West Virginia	\$145,941	-21.88%	-1
49	Montana	\$143,893	-22.98%	0
50	Nevada	\$143,468	-23.21%	0
51	Maine	\$142,396	-23.78%	0

Source: National Center for State Courts, "Survey of Judicial Salaries," Vol. 51, No. 1, February 2026 (data as of January 1, 2026) and Vol. 49, No. 1, 2024. COLA corrects for differences in cost of living in different states, see www.coli.org for details.

Note: The last column shows the extent to which the rank of each state has increased or decreased since 2023. A negative value represents an improved rank (lower number). A positive value represents a worsened rank. Minnesota moved from 19th in 2023 to 21st in 2025, so this column contains a +2 to represent its worsening position compared to other states.

Table 4. Lawyer Salaries 2025 (Standard Occupation Code 23-1011)

Location	Number	Annual Low (10%)	Annual Lower Quartile (25%)	Annual Median (50%)	Annual Upper Quartile (75%)	Annual High (90%)
Duluth, MN-WI	260	\$65,470	\$95,000	\$129,120	\$173,010	\$246,800
Fargo, ND-MN	410	\$70,180	\$95,250	\$111,090	\$157,790	\$202,750
Mankato, MN	140	\$65,560	\$90,580	\$130,020	\$157,890	\$204,340
Minneapolis-St. Paul- Bloomington, MN-WI	10,160	\$85,810	\$116,860	\$159,620	\$219,710	\$352,210
Rochester, MN	210	\$79,790	\$100,050	\$118,860	\$169,020	\$314,240
St. Cloud, MN	300	\$68,400	\$89,770	\$118,860	\$161,660	\$212,090
MEMO: STATE	12,380	\$79,820	\$107,220	\$155,140	\$216,440	\$341,170

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/>. May 2025 data.

Table 5: Minnesota District Trial Court Judge salaries relative to median salaries of Minneapolis private sector lawyers with various years of experience, 2025

	Median 2025 Salary	% Increase Over District Court Judge Salary
General Counsel	\$258,405	36%
In-House Counsel (10+ years of experience)	\$199,288	5%
Law Firm Attorney (10+ years of experience)	\$181,900	-4%
Law Firm Attorney (4–9 years of experience)	\$149,800	-21%
In-House Corporate Attorney (4–9 years of experience)	\$159,163	-16%
District Court Judge	\$190,117	—

Source: National Robert Half Legal 2026 Salary Guide.

Note: The data are adjusted for Minneapolis and do not account for bonuses, incentives, benefits, or retirement packages. Salary figures represent the midpoint of the Robert Half low-to-high range for each role. The 2026 guide uses "Lawyer/Attorney" in place of the prior "Law Firm" category. District Court judge salary reflects the current rate of \$190,117 unchanged since July 2024.

Table 6: Minnesota District Court Judge Salaries relative to metropolitan area lead county attorneys and senior assistant county attorneys, 2024

	County Attorney	Highest Paid Assistant County Attorney		
	2024 Salary	% vs. District Court Judge	2024 Salary	% vs. District Court Judge
Hennepin County	\$224,820	+18%	\$179,315	-6%
Ramsey County	\$197,284	+4%	\$183,309	-4%
Stearns County	\$206,939	+9%	\$196,497	+3%
Dakota County	\$219,813	+16%	\$208,619	+10%
Carver County	\$213,757	+12%	\$175,698	-8%
Scott County	\$212,737	+12%	\$190,906	+0%
Six County Average	\$212,558	+12%	\$189,057	-1%
District Court Judge	\$190,117	—	—	—

Sources: Minnesota County Attorneys Association 2024 County Attorney Salaries & 2024 Assistant County Attorney Salaries, as cited in Minnesota Compensation Council, March 2025.

Note: The table has been expanded from four to six metro-area counties to reflect additional data reported in the 2025 Compensation Council proceedings. Where the MCAA survey provided a salary range, the high end of the range is shown. Salaries do not account for bonuses, benefits, or retirement packages. A positive % indicates the position earns more than a District Court Judge; a negative % indicates it earns less.

Table 7: Applicants per Judicial Seat, Minnesota District Courts, 2019-2025

	Metro Districts (1, 2, 4, 10)		Greater Minnesota Districts (3, 5-9)		All Districts	
Year	Seats	Applicants per seat	Seats	Applicants per seat	Seats	Applicants per seat
2019	9	17.8	8	6.4	17	12.4
2020	12	17.8	6	8.3	18	14.6
2021	14	13.7	6	8.2	20	12.0
2022	12	14.0	9	8.1	21	11.5
2023	10	10.2	3	8.3	13	9.8
2024	16	10.8	13	6.8	29	9.0
2025	10	11.0	9	7.0	19	9.1

Seats reflect total judicial positions posted, counting each departing judge as one seat. Applicants per seat is a weighted average: total applicants divided by total seats in the region and year. Data for 2026 are partial and excluded. Source: Minnesota Judicial Selection Commission data and authors' tabulations.

Table 8: Salary hierarchy for Minnesota judges under all four standards

Standard 1 – Restore Compensation Council 6%+6% Recommendation			
Position	7/1/26 as reference	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
Ct. of Appeals Judge	\$227,592	\$233,477	\$239,548
Ct. 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	7/1/26 as reference	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
Ct. of Appeals Judge	\$222,542	\$228,329	\$234,265
Ct. 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	7/1/26 as reference	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
Ct. of Appeals Judge	\$228,376	\$234,314	\$240,406
Ct. 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 Private Sector Gap

Position	7/1/26 as reference	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
Ct. of Appeals Judge	\$230,899	\$236,902	\$243,062
Ct. 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

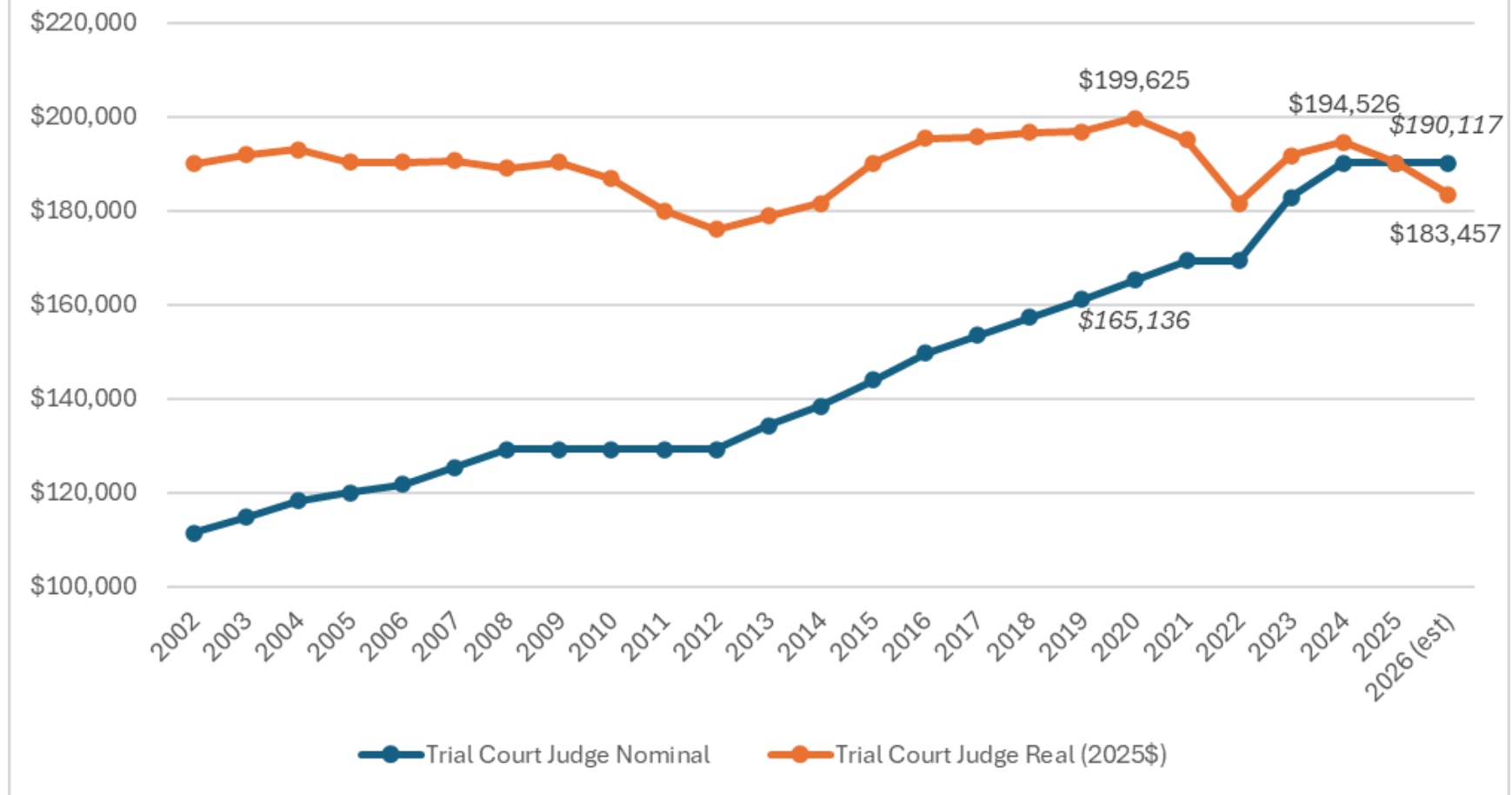
Note: The 7/1/26 figures are not what is actually paid but are to demonstrate what the salaries would have been the salaries those years had the standard been met. The hierarchy is backcalculated from the Compensation Council's recommended figure from March 2025, as shown in the first standard. The 7/1/27 and 7/1/28 figures apply a 2.6% annual inflation maintenance adjustment to each position's 7/1/26 hypothesized salary, so the same percentage is embedded across the entire hierarchy.

Table 9. Comparison of Minnesota Versus Kansas District Judge Salaries

Year	Kansas Nominal	As share of federal pay	Minnesota Nominal	KS vs MN	KS salary growth rate
2021	\$128,636	58.9%	\$169,264	-24.0%	—
2022	\$135,068	60.5%	\$169,264	-20.2%	+5.0%
2023	\$141,821	61.0%	\$182,805	-22.4%	+5.0%
2024	\$148,912	61.2%	\$190,117	-21.7%	+5.0%
2025*	\$185,550	75.0%	\$190,117	-2.4%	+24.6%
2026	\$187,425	75.0%	\$190,117	-1.4%	+1.0%

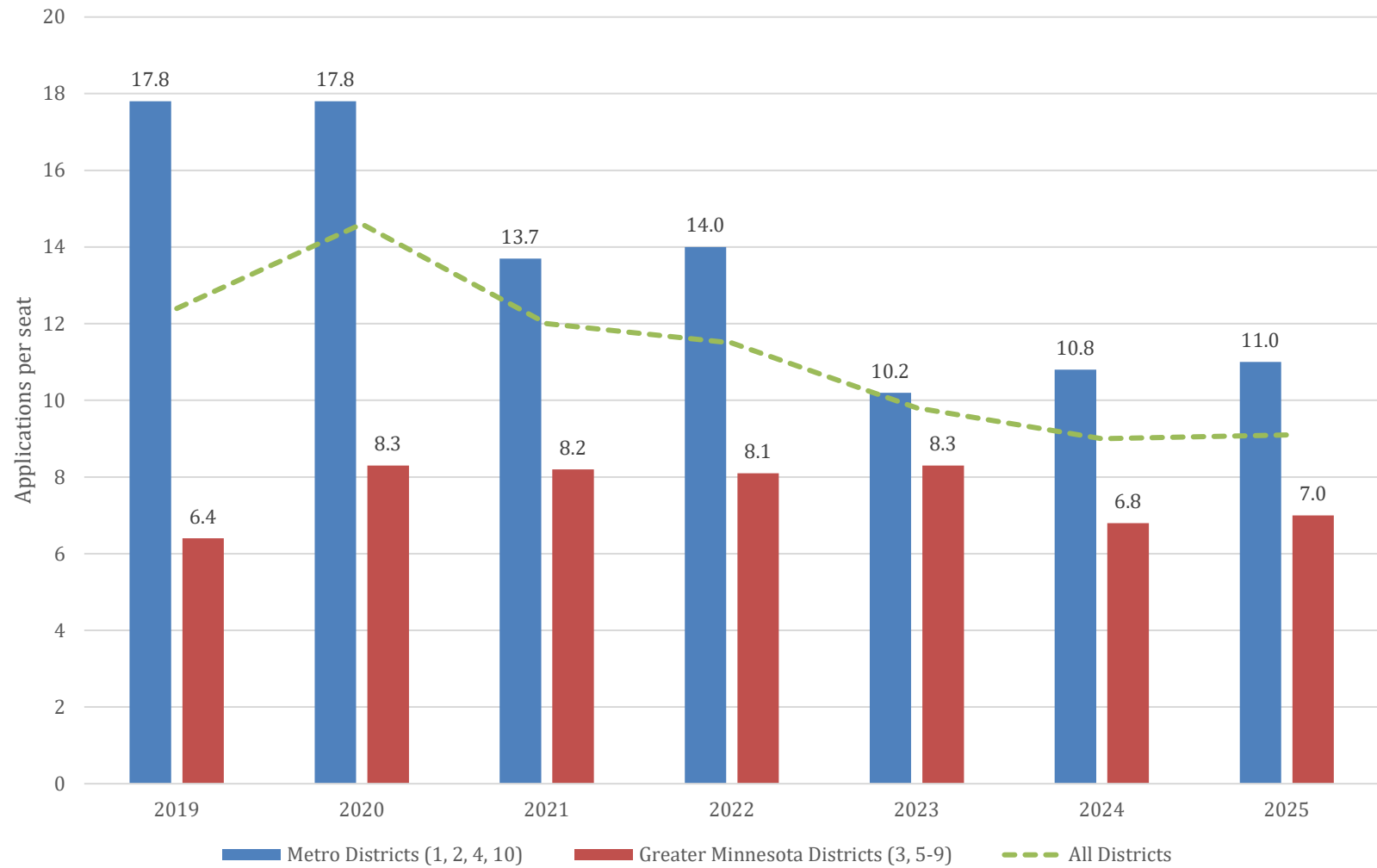
* – enactment of SB 229. Source: National Center for State Courts, <https://www.ncsc.org/resources-courts/state-state-tracking-judicial-salaries>, last viewed June 4, 2026.

Figure 1. Nominal and real salaries, MN Trial Court Judges, 2002-26 (est.)



Sources: See Table 1.

Figure 2. Applicants per judicial seat, Minnesota District Courts, 2019-2025



A note about the authors:

King Banaian is a professor in the Department of Economics and directs the Center for Policy Research and Community Engagement at St. Cloud State University. He has co-authored the St. Cloud Quarterly Business Report since 2004. A former university administrator and state representative from St. Cloud, he holds the Ph.D. in economics from the Claremont Graduate School. He has authored 2 books and over 50 articles discussing monetary policy and political economy. He serves as president of the St. Cloud Economic Development Authority, vice chair of the Minnesota Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board and a member of the St. Cloud Regional Airport Authority.

Benedicte Dimuka is a graduate student in the Applied Economics and Data Analytics program at St. Cloud State University with a Graduate Certificate in Data Analytics. She recently graduated in Spring 2026. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from the Minnesota State University, Mankato, where she received the International Maverick Scholarship. Benedicte collaborated with Dr. King Banaian on a judicial compensation research project that was recognized as a great success. She was selected as a Policy Research Intern at the Center for Policy Research & Community Engagement, where she conducts quantitative policy analysis for policymakers and community stakeholders.