

Guide to the Judicial Workload Study

The judicial Workload Study applies a nationally recognized weighted caseload assessment methodology to assess judicial workload across Wisconsin's 69 circuit courts. The model estimates the amount of judicial time required to process cases and translates that work into an estimate of resource need.

The methodology is based on three components: the number of cases filed in each category, the average amount of time required to process each type of case, and the amount of time a judicial official has available each year for case-related work. These elements are combined to estimate total workload and to calculate the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) judicial officials required to manage that workload.

The study's output is an estimate of judicial workload expressed in FTE need, not a direct determination of the number of judgeships required. Nor does it account for factors other than judicial officer resources which impact court workload.

The approach reflects that cases differ considerably in complexity and in the amount of judicial attention they require. By accounting for these differences, the weighted caseload model delivers a more accurate and consistent measure of workload than approaches based solely on population or raw filing counts.

What the study shows

The study provides a statewide, data-driven assessment of judicial workload and identifies several consistent trends across Wisconsin's courts. Judicial workload is shaped not only by the number of cases filed, but also by the complexity of those cases and the conditions under which they are processed.

While filings have declined in some areas, the time required to resolve cases has increased across most case types. This reflects changes in court practice, including increased motion activity, expanded use of digital evidence, and a growing number of self-represented litigants.

The study also reflects the impact of broader system conditions. Attorney shortages, staffing limitations, and resource constraints in other areas of the justice system affect the pace of case processing and often require additional judicial involvement. These factors contribute to workload even where filing levels remain stable or decline.

Based on the weighted caseload model and recent filing data, the study estimates that approximately 379.6 full-time equivalent (FTE) judicial officials are required statewide to manage current workload demands. In this context, "judicial official" includes both circuit court judges and court commissioners. Wisconsin currently has 261 circuit court judges and approximately 87 FTE court commissioners, for a combined total of about 348 FTE judicial officials. Under the model, this results in an estimated additional workload equivalent to approximately 31 FTE judicial officials.

This estimated gap does not directly translate into the need for additional circuit court branches.

Wisconsin's court system relies on a combination of judges and court commissioners, and resource decisions are made based on a broader evaluation of statewide workload, district-level balancing, and available resources.

What the study does not show

The Judicial Workload Study is a tool for measuring workload. It is not designed to evaluate performance, efficiency, or factors outside of the judiciary that impact judicial workload.

The study does not:

- Evaluate the performance of individual judges, courts, or counties
- Measure current case backlog directly
- Assess compliance with case processing time standards
- Capture all local or operational factors affecting court functioning
- Determine how courts are currently managing workload within existing resources
- Recommend the optimal judge-to-court commissioner ratio
- Directly determine where circuit court branches should be added

The model provides an objective and consistent framework, but it must be applied with an understanding of its limits and in conjunction with other information about court operations and broader system resource needs.

Caseload and workload

A central concept in the study is the distinction between caseload and workload. Caseload refers to the number of cases filed, while workload reflects the amount of judicial time required to process those cases. These measures are not interchangeable.

Some case types involve high volumes but require relatively little judicial time, while others involve fewer filings but demand substantial judicial attention. The weighted caseload model takes into account these differences by assigning time values to each case type, allowing for a more accurate assessment of judicial need.

Workload results and rankings¹

The study shows workload estimates at both the statewide and county level, including total workload, estimated FTE need, and workload per judicial official. These measures provide a uniform basis for comparing workload across counties.

¹ Rankings are based on the most recent available data at the time of publication. Updated figures, including filings and court commissioner data, will be incorporated in June, which may result in changes to county rankings.

The counties with the highest workload per judicial official under the study model are:

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|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Trempealeau (1.55) | 6. Burnett (1.31) | 11. Washington (1.26) |
| 2. Menominee/Shawano (1.48) | 7. Sauk (1.30) | 12. Chippewa (1.25) |
| 3. Brown (1.47) | 8. Kenosha (1.28) | 13. Marathon (1.21) |
| 4. Monroe (1.31) | 9. La Crosse (1.27) | 14. Columbia (1.21) |
| 5. Wood (1.31) | 10. Fond du Lac (1.27) | 15. Buffalo/Pepin (1.21) |

These figures represent the relationship between workload and available judicial resources under the model. Values above 1.0 indicate that the workload exceeds the standardized amount of judicial time available.

These results should be interpreted with caution. They reflect relative workload pressure, not court performance. They are influenced by case mix, staffing levels, and local practices, and they do not account for all operational factors or resource needs outside of the judiciary.

Importantly, these results are evaluated within the context of judicial administrative districts, where courts may share or offset workload across county lines.

How the study is used

The Judicial Workload Study acts as a starting point for evaluating judicial resource needs in Wisconsin. The weighted caseload model provides an objective basis for analysis, ensuring that resource discussions are grounded in measured workload rather than population alone or individual requests.

The study is not used in isolation. In practice, the results are evaluated in conjunction with additional considerations, including workload distribution across judicial administrative districts, the availability and use of court commissioners, and the ability of neighboring courts to share or offset workload. Local operational conditions, staffing, and resource constraints are also considered, as are fiscal considerations at the state and county level and broader policy priorities.

For these reasons, a calculated FTE need does not automatically suggest that the appropriate solution is the addition of circuit court branches, and a lower calculated need does not automatically suggest a reduction in judicial official resources. Final recommendations reflect a statewide assessment of need, available resources, and system capacity.

Next steps

Following the release of the study, the results will be reviewed by the Committee of Chief Judges. The committee will evaluate the findings in the context of statewide workload distribution, available

resources, and operational considerations. Based on that review, the committee will develop recommendations regarding judicial resource needs in consultation with partners at the county level.

Those recommendations will inform the development of a request for additional resources submitted to the Governor and Legislature for consideration during the 2027-28 legislative session.

As part of this process, counties considered for an additional circuit court branch must demonstrate their ability to support the position. This includes adopting a county resolution confirming that adequate courtroom space is available and committing to fund the staff and resources necessary to support the branch.

Key takeaways

- The study delivers a data-driven assessment of judicial workload, not a measure of court performance.
- Workload is increasing in complexity, and judicial workload demands are increasing even where filings have declined.
- The weighted caseload model delivers a more accurate measure of need than raw filings or population.
- Results must be interpreted within the context of statewide resource allocation and system capacity.
- The study measures workload using standardized assumptions and should be interpreted within that framework.
- The study is a planning tool intended to inform, but not dictate, policy decisions in the context of local practices, resource needs outside the judiciary, and fiscal and practical constraints at the state and county level.