

Immigration judges are burning out faster than prison wardens and hospital doctors



Everyone in immigration court needs relief. (Reuters/David McNew)

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Across the United States, tens of thousands of immigrants are facing years of waiting for their day in court. With court staff in short supply and enforcement on the rise, there are close to half a million cases pending nationwide, according to the latest data from [Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse](#) (TRAC). But there are **only 250** immigration judges in the US, and this year, 100 judges are up for retirement.

Since 2007, the immigration court backlog jumped by nearly 160% while the number of immigration judges rose by **just 15%**. There are efforts to boost the ranks: in May, spokesman for the Executive Office for Immigration Review Louis Ruffino [told the Los Angeles Times](#) that the US government is working to hire 68 new judges.

But the government hasn't been able to employ staff quickly enough, putting a major strain on the existing system.

Because of huge caseloads, scarce resources, and constant horror stories heard in court, immigration judges already have traumatic stress and burnout rates higher than prison wardens and busy hospital doctors, found one [2009 study](#).

“Hearing asylum cases, especially the ones in which the witnesses testify credibly, has affected my view of the world,” [a survey respondent from the study said](#), citing tales of homicide, rape, and organized crime heard in court. “I have lost most of my faith in humankind, and I fear deeply for the future,”

Other complaints include insufficient support staff, office space, and technology. “I have been in government service for decades, including combat duty, and I have never detested a working environment more than I do in this capacity,” another respondent said. The average wait time has risen almost 40% in the last five years. |

Dana Leigh Marks, a San Francisco immigration judge and president of the National Association of Immigration Judges, told Quartz the courts are “desperately understaffed.” Plus, on-the-job stress takes a toll, meaning many judges retire as soon as they can. “If working conditions were what they should be, these individuals would work longer and that would be a benefit to everyone,” said Marks, noting she spoke on behalf of the NAIJ and not the Justice Department.

Because of the backlog, judges take on thousands of cases. The Immigration Policy Center [estimates](#) that while other kinds of judges in the United States usually deal with annual caseloads around 500, judges now handle more than 1,400 cases a year, with some judges taking 3,000 or more. Marks thinks caseloads may be even higher, since they are unevenly distributed.

More cases mean more delays in court. Nationally, the average wait time has risen almost 40% in the last five years, according to TRAC [records](#). Colorado has the longest mean wait: close to 850 days. Another reason for delays include “[rocket dockets](#)”: fast-tracked cases of unaccompanied minors who came across the U.S.-Mexico border in [record numbers](#) last year. While the courts prioritize these cases as well as those in detention and recent border crossers, everyone else goes to the back of the line, said Jeff Joseph, a Colorado-based immigration attorney.

Across the country, non-priority cases have been bumped as far as November 2019. In scheduling hearings, no distinction is made between immigrants with legitimate claims and criminals, he said. “That’s just not wise enforcement. Frankly, it’s dangerous,” Joseph said.

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