

## A Qualitative Study on the Antecedents of Judges' Sense of Time Poverty and Its Consequences for Judicial Decision-Making

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### Abstract

Against the backdrop of the “litigation explosion” era, the practical contradiction between “many cases” and “few people” has become increasingly acute, with the phenomenon of time poverty among judges becoming particularly prominent. This article adopts a “human-centered” perspective to explore the practical factors that induce judges’ sense of time poverty and the underlying mechanisms through which it affects the quality and effectiveness of judicial decision-making. The study employs in-depth interviews, following the principle of purposive sampling, targeting trial and enforcement judges in North China, Central China, and Southeast China (51 individuals), generating over one million words of verbatim transcripts. Based on grounded theory, a dual-path model is constructed concerning the antecedents of time poverty feeling and its consequences for judicial decision-making. The findings indicate: 1) The structural imbalance between job demands and job resources—on the one hand, the surge in job demands caused by complex work content and heavy assessment metrics, and on the other hand, the scarcity of job resources resulting from insufficient staffing and support—jointly foster a widely experienced sense of time poverty among judges. 2) The sense of time poverty, stemming from this job demands-resources imbalance, compels individual judges to adopt coping strategies of “work acceleration” and “working hours extension”, which in turn promotes a “case-closure-oriented” work mode while simultaneously exacerbating the depletion of judges’ internal physical and mental resources, ultimately posing a potential threat to the quality and effectiveness of judicial decision-making.

## Full Text

### Preamble

#### A Qualitative Exploration of the Antecedents of Judges' Work Time Poverty and Its Consequences for Judicial Decision-Making

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### Abstract

Against the backdrop of the “litigation explosion” era, the practical contradiction between “too many cases” and “too few judges” has intensified, making work time poverty particularly salient among Chinese judges. Adopting a person-centered perspective, this study explores the real-world factors that trigger judges’ perception of time poverty and the underlying mechanisms through which it affects the quality and effectiveness of judicial decision-making. Using in-depth interviews and purposeful sampling, we interviewed 51 trial and enforcement judges from North China, Central China, and Southeast China, generating over one million words of verbatim transcripts. Based on grounded theory, we constructed a dual-pathway model of the antecedents of work time poverty and its judicial consequences. The findings indicate that: (1) A structural imbalance between job demands and job resources—specifically, a surge in job demands created by massive caseloads and heavy assessment indicators alongside a scarcity of job resources caused by inadequate staffing and support—collectively generates the pervasive sense of time poverty among judges. (2) This time poverty, rooted in the demands-resources imbalance, compels judges to adopt two coping strategies: “work acceleration tactics” and “working hours extension tactics,” which subsequently promote a “case-closure-oriented” work model while simultaneously depleting judges’ internal physical and mental resources, ultimately posing a potential threat to the quality and effectiveness of judicial decision-making.

**Keywords** judges, time poverty, judicial decision making, grounded theory, qualitative research

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## 1 Introduction

In recent years, China has witnessed a continuous annual increase in court caseloads, giving rise to what has been termed the “litigation explosion” phenomenon (Chen Weidong, 2019; Ren Zhong, 2022). In 2022, courts nationwide received 30.31 million cases, representing a 142% increase compared to a

decade earlier and a staggering 435% increase compared to two decades prior (The Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China, 2003, 2013, 2023). Case studies of grassroots courts reveal that between 2006 and 2016, the average annual caseload per judge in a western Chinese grassroots court quadrupled (reaching 409.4 cases per judge per year by 2016), while monthly overtime hours increased ninefold (Zuo Weimin, 2018). This dramatic surge in caseloads poses an enormous challenge to meeting the people's growing demand for high-quality justice. Simultaneously, since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the goal of judicial system reform has consistently been to "strive to make the people feel fairness and justice in every judicial case." In service of this objective, in June 2014, the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform adopted the *Framework Opinions on Several Issues Concerning the Pilot Reform of the Judicial System*, establishing the judicial quota system aimed at strengthening the specialization and professionalization of judicial personnel and improving trial quality and efficiency (Chen Ruihua, 2018). Specifically, the quota system reform divided the judge corps into quota judges and judge assistants, limiting the number of quota judges and stipulating that only quota judges could independently handle cases. While this measure strengthened judge selection and enhanced professionalization, it inevitably reduced the number of judges qualified to independently adjudicate and enforce cases, thereby exacerbating the "too many cases, too few judges" problem (Chen Ruihua, 2018). For instance, a judge from a non-provincial capital city in central China stated in 2022: "In 2009, our court handled over 600 cases a year; now it's more than 3,000 cases—a fivefold increase. The caseload grows year by year, yet there are even fewer people who can actually handle cases now." <sup>1</sup>

Under these "too many cases, too few judges" conditions, judges' responsibilities and pressures have become increasingly heavy, with the feeling of "not having enough time to meet work demands" spreading continuously. In sociology, the concept of "time poverty" was initially proposed by Vickery (1977) and subsequently developed by researchers to refer to "individuals having less discretionary time than a certain threshold" (Williams et al., 2016). Psychological researchers focus more on the impact of this phenomenon on individual psychology and behavior, defining the perception of time poverty from a subjective feeling perspective as "a diffuse feeling of not having enough time in daily life" (Perlow, 1996). Work time poverty (i.e., the diffuse feeling of not having enough time at work) may have become a hidden danger affecting trial quality and judicial fairness due to the time-related work stress it imposes on individuals.

From a legal studies perspective, although early legal formalism (Neuborne, 1992) held that judicial decision-making is a process of syllogistic logical reasoning based on established rules, unaffected by other real-world factors, Western empirical jurisprudence in the early 20th century began to critique traditional legal formalism through legal realism (Preuß, 2022), arguing that judges are not perfectly rational machines. The ability of judges to make fair, efficient, and

authoritative judicial decisions is closely related to their own emotional feelings and cognitive processes (Wang Yongjie, 2019). Research has found that judges make more lenient decisions when satiated compared to when hungry (Danziger et al., 2011). Additionally, judges' ideology (Zorn & Bowie, 2010), stereotypes (Leiber & Peck, 2015), intuition (Chen Linlin & Zhang Xiaoxiao, 2014), and emotions (Wang Shuang et al., 2016) all influence their decision-making processes.

Decision-making research further demonstrates that time poverty affects numerous psychological processes related to decision-making. For example, under the feeling of time poverty, individuals tend to experience negative emotions such as tension and fatigue (Lehto, 1998) and feel greater work pressure with difficulty concentrating (Kleiner, 2014). When decision tasks must be made under extreme time pressure, individuals exhibit higher levels of need for cognitive closure—meaning they are less willing to thoroughly search for facts and perspectives and prefer to rush to definite answers (De Dreu, 2003); they show more severe confirmation bias, tending to search for evidence consistent with their initial views while ignoring contradictory evidence (Salman et al., 2019); and they demonstrate stronger framing effects, reaching different conclusions when essentially the same information is presented differently (Guo et al., 2017).

Although existing research indirectly supports the potential impact of work time poverty on judicial decision-making quality, further investigation is needed. First, in domestic legal studies on “too many cases, too few judges” and the “litigation explosion,” researchers have discussed potential consequences of work time poverty from various angles, such as surging pressure on judges (Chen Weidong, 2019) and declining communication quality with litigants (Xiong Qihong, 2019), as well as judges leaving the profession in large numbers due to unbearable work pressure, which undermines judicial personnel development (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a). While these studies provide realistic descriptions of different potential consequences, they lack exploration of the deep mechanisms through which work time poverty affects judicial decision-making quality and efficiency, making it difficult to achieve a more nuanced theoretical understanding. Systematic and in-depth research combining practical considerations with empirical paradigms, through both objective description and scientific explanation, is still needed to help policymakers “prescribe the right remedy” and provide effective governance measures targeting the pain points where judges' work time poverty affects judicial work.

Second, regarding research perspective, existing policy and research explorations addressing judges' work time poverty have primarily centered on litigation procedure improvement. For example, at the legislative level, revisions to the *Civil Procedure Law* have focused on diverting complex and simple cases and diversifying dispute resolution (Ren Zhong, 2022) to address judges' time shortages in adjudicating cases. At the research level, studies have also concentrated on improving case diversion and distribution procedures (Ren Zhong, 2022; Zuo Weimin, 2018). However, empirical research shows that the actual efficiency

gains from various procedural reforms have been mixed (Zuo Weimin, 2022), and judges still feel significant work burdens (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a). A small number of studies have adopted a micro perspective to measure judges' time use, depicting judges' individual workload saturation or oversaturation from a person-centered approach (Wang Lan & Qiu Sufang, 2019; Zuo Weimin, 2017), but these studies have primarily been from legal, management, and sociological perspectives. Adding a psychological perspective to such person-centered research can provide an internal decision-maker perspective to understand the antecedents and consequences of judges' work time poverty, thereby injecting endogenous motivation for improving judicial decision-making quality and efficiency.

Third, existing research on how time poverty affects emotions, cognitive processes, and decision-making biases (e.g., De Dreu, 2003; Guo et al., 2017; Salman et al., 2019) has mostly focused on general social decisions rather than judicial decisions. Judicial decision-making tasks are often more complex and unique, requiring judges to make rulings within specific ideological, legal, and organizational system contexts. Moreover, most existing research is not based on China's institutional background, making it difficult to provide targeted guidance for China's judicial practice. Empirical research materials from China's judicial practice are still needed to more directly and deeply explore how work time poverty affects judges' decisions.

In summary, this study will first clarify the factors causing judges' work time poverty, then explore its impact on judicial work by revealing the individual coping pathways triggered by work time poverty and their corresponding work and personal consequences, thereby investigating its influence on judicial decision-making quality and efficiency.

## 2.1 Sampling Method

This study conducted field research from April 2021 to August 2022 in North China, Central China, Southeast China, and other regions. Following purposeful sampling principles, interviewees were selected based on having recent independent trial or enforcement case experience<sup>2</sup> (covering four key judicial stages: criminal trial, civil trial, criminal enforcement, and civil enforcement). Following the principle of information saturation (Fu Anguo et al., 2020), interviews were terminated when content reached stability, saturation, and depth. Ultimately, 51 interviewees were selected (26 males, 25 females) with an average age of 39.89 years ( $SD = 9.08$ ), ranging from 26 to 59 years old; 33 had one child, 11 had two children, and 7 had no children; 33 were from grassroots People's Courts, 17 from intermediate People's Courts, and 1 from a high People's Court; 10 were criminal trial judges, 19 were civil trial judges, and 22 were enforcement judges<sup>3</sup>. Average judicial tenure was 6.96 years ( $SD = 6.04$ ), ranging from 1 to 36 years. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology at Beijing Normal University (Approval No.: BNU202207150084).

## 2.2 Data Collection

Before formal interviews, three judges were selected for pilot interviews. These pilot interviews focused on “work time poverty,” inviting judges to freely report, based on their genuine experiences and feelings, situations where they felt time-pressed at work and related antecedents and consequences. The pilot interviews were less structured, primarily helping researchers understand the extent of work time poverty among judges, confirm appropriate expressions for relevant concepts, and provide a foundation for designing the formal interview protocol.

The formal study employed semi-structured interviews conducted by a primary interviewer and an assistant interviewer around the theme of “work time poverty.” Interview locations were selected based on participant convenience, safety, and ensuring an uninterrupted process. Specific interview times were determined by participants according to their schedules, with each interview lasting approximately 1 to 3 hours. The formal interview protocol consisted of three parts: First, establishing rapport with participants, informing them about informed consent and basic ethical rules, and asking for permission to record the interview<sup>4</sup>; second, understanding participants’ general work conditions and inviting judges to discuss their current experiences of time poverty at work and possible causes, with typical questions being “Do you feel you don’t have enough time at work?” and “What do you think causes this feeling of not having enough time at work?” ; third, inquiring about judges’ coping strategies for their work time poverty and its consequences, with a typical question being “How does this feeling of not having enough time at work affect you?”

## 2.3 Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data were imported into QSR Nvivo 19.0 (N19) qualitative analysis software. Based on grounded theory, researchers cyclically conducted open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, constantly comparing and reflecting, conducting comparative analysis, and using inductive methods to construct theory (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper] for the data analysis process; Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper] for coding nodes; Appendix 1 for detailed coding and theory construction process; Tables 1 and 2 for selective coding results; and Appendix 2 for original data examples of each node).

### 2.4.1 Reliability Testing

Unlike quantitative research, reliability in qualitative research is difficult to evaluate through quantitative indicators (Chen Xiangming, 2000). This study employed three main measures to enhance the reliability of data analysis: First, multi-source data collection. During data collection, samples with diverse demographic characteristics were included (e.g., age, gender, tenure, judicial position, marital and child-rearing status) to ensure richness of interview data. Second, repeated coding. Different researchers conducted coding, analysis, and recoding from their respective perspectives to strengthen validation of analysis results.

Third, reflection and discussion. Coders and experts in time poverty research held regular discussions to reflect on and revise results based on team members' perspectives.

### 2.4.2 Validity Testing

The study employed participant validation and non-participant validation to avoid over-interpretation and subjective bias by coders. A total of ten validators provided feedback on the analysis results, primarily checking whether coders over-interpreted or biased material understanding. Participant validators included two interviewers from the interview phase (one psychology professor and one graduate student) and five judges who participated in in-depth interviews (all quota judges, three from grassroots courts and two from intermediate courts). Non-participant validators included three researchers not involved in interviews (one law teacher, one law postdoc, and one psychology PhD student).

Researchers compiled validators' feedback and addressed it in three aspects: (1) whether the data analysis and integration process was reliable; (2) whether the constructed category structure was reliable; (3) whether researchers exhibited subjective bias in theory formation. Findings were retained if supported by evidence; modifications were made if evidence was insufficient. If validators' understanding deviated from coding results, researchers provided explanations to reach consensus.

## 3.1 Antecedents of Judges' Work Time Poverty

Based on the research question, this study defined the core concept of judges' work time poverty as "judges' long-term feeling of not having enough time at work." Factors influencing judges' work time poverty primarily consist of three components: complex work content, heavy assessment pressure, and insufficient staffing.

### 3.1.1 Complex Work Content

Judges' complex work content is mainly reflected in two aspects: heavy core work tasks (case handling) and numerous other affairs.

#### 3.1.1.1 Excessive Core Responsibility Load

Excessive core responsibility load can be summarized in three factors: numerous cases, unsmooth digital office operations, and repeated responses to closed cases.

**(1) Numerous Cases.** Heavy case burden is a universal feeling among judges. Compared to before the quota system reform, judges now face even greater caseloads, resulting in larger overall workloads. With limited working hours, judges' feeling of not having enough time to complete work intensifies. Beyond the problem of many new annual cases, judges face an even more severe challenge:

as their tenure increases, their workload grows in a “snowball” fashion. For example, in enforcement, a common case-closure method is “termination of current execution” (终本), which temporarily ends the current enforcement but is not a permanent solution. When conditions for resuming enforcement are met later, these temporarily “terminated” cases must be reopened. This requires judges to handle both accumulated past cases and current cases simultaneously. Additionally, parties in cases that have been terminated but don’t yet meet resumption conditions continue to repeatedly contact the original judge, forcing judges to invest time and energy communicating with parties of non-current cases, greatly increasing their work burden.

**Z22:** “We have a procedure called termination of current execution. It doesn’t mean the case is no longer your responsibility. Even though the system shows it as closed, the parties will keep contacting you…This means that out of 1,000 cases, maybe only 200 are fully enforced and completed. The remaining 80% are incomplete. These 80% may be handled through termination of current execution…Although the case is no longer in your system and you’ve closed it using this method, the parties repeatedly come to you.”

**(2) Unsmooth Digital Office Operations.** Unsmooth digital office operations stem from the complexity of digital office platform design and the challenges judges face in learning and adapting to new platforms and workflows. Many courts are attempting paperless office operations, implementing digital case filing, mediation, trial, hearings, closure, and archiving throughout the entire process (Gao Xiang, 2020). Although the original intention of digital office operations was to improve court efficiency and promote transparency in case adjudication and enforcement (Wang Fuhua, 2016), in practice, some digital platforms are complex to operate, have confusing interfaces, and unclear processes, causing many judges to encounter difficulties that reduce work efficiency. Judges must undertake additional paperless technical work beyond original case adjudication and enforcement, which invisibly increases workload, disrupts work flow, and exacerbates work time poverty.

**M11:** “Now all case files must be uploaded to the network, and materials for parties are also sent through the computer, so there are many computer operations—constantly…oh, this deadline is here, quickly click it, that deadline is here (click again)…This workload is quite large, with these operations every day.”

**(3) Repeated Responses to Closed Cases.** Under the judicial accountability system (“let the adjudicator decide, let the adjudicator be responsible”), petition work aims to strengthen the connection between courts and the people to protect civil interests and build public trust. According to regulations, when parties petition or file complaints, judges must organize case materials and submit them to relevant departments within specified time limits, providing corresponding explanations. However, in practice, many parties repeatedly petition or complain about legally correct effective judgments due to biased understanding of case facts, misunderstanding of legal provisions, or emotional factors.

Judges can only continuously provide “repetitive” explanations and clarifications, which undoubtedly interferes with already busy case-handling schedules and further exacerbates work time poverty.

**Z17:** “They (parties dissatisfied with judgments) repeatedly petition to multiple departments. After reflecting their situation to the court or district political-legal affairs committee, they go to the intermediate court, municipal petition office, municipal political-legal affairs committee, and even threaten to petition in Beijing. So multi-department repetitive petitions mean that each department requires us to write situation reports, making us exhausted—it’s the same facts over and over.”

### 3.1.1.2 Other Affairs Disrupting Work Rhythm

In addition to adjudicating and enforcing cases and resolving disputes, judges must devote substantial time and energy to other work affairs, including but not limited to writing trial reports, attending meetings, handling administrative affairs, political study, professional study, team affairs, and publicity work. These tasks are not only numerous and time-consuming but also often sudden, interspersed throughout actual case handling, frequently disrupting judges’ work rhythm, increasing work time fragmentation, reducing work time quality, and squeezing actual case-handling time. This prevents judges from completing work on schedule, in full, and as planned during work hours, intensifying their feeling of not having enough time.

**M8:** “Affairs-related matters take up a lot of time, a lot of time—there are so many affairs. Plus there are regular meetings and studies, and since most judges are Party members, there’s political study, which is essential. Organizational life must be attended. So these take up a lot of time.”

## 3.1.2 Heavy Assessment Pressure

Judges face heavy assessment pressure, including both absolute speed assessment pressure based on case adjudication/enforcement speed and relative speed ranking pressure.

### 3.1.2.1 Absolute Speed Assessment Pressure

Absolute speed assessment pressure based on case adjudication/enforcement speed refers to pressure caused by higher courts’ evaluation systems that emphasize case quantity and trial/enforcement efficiency—indicators highly related to time—with many indicators set as strict absolute standards. For example, assessment indicators in the trial stage often use case closure numbers and closure-receipt ratios as main measures (Hua Xiaopeng, 2020), assuming that high case numbers and ratios demonstrate lower courts’ and judges’ ability and attitude in resolving conflicts. However, absolute indicators lack tolerance for time-consuming complex cases: even when judges apply for extensions for diffi-

cult cases according to regulations, it still affects absolute assessment indicator completion. This makes excessively compressing time for complex cases a reluctant but necessary choice for judges. Additionally, lower courts encourage judges to complete more cases in less time to meet assessment indicators, with some courts even ignoring the reality that complex cases take far longer than simple cases, setting “one-size-fits-all” standards for all judges. This intensifies the feeling of not having enough time for judges handling complex cases.

**Z13:** “Actually, we hate restoring a case. Do you know why? A case clearly has assets that we can dispose of, but the six-month deadline you give is too short. Generally, disposing of a house takes at least three or four months at minimum for first and second auctions, not including vacating the property or other work. If the auction takes two months, that’s six months gone.”

### 3.1.2.2 Relative Speed Ranking Pressure

Relative speed ranking pressure based on case adjudication/enforcement speed is caused by assessment ranking mechanisms conducted by higher courts over lower courts. This mechanism means there is no absolute standard for court performance; what matters is ranking compared to other courts. Therefore, even if a court’s assessment indicators meet qualified standards, it may still be criticized by higher courts if its ranking is relatively low (Zhang Xi, 2019). To avoid bottom rankings or pursue better positions, lower courts likely require judges to handle cases as quickly as possible, increasing case numbers and work burdens. Some courts even conduct real-time daily dynamic rankings of judges’ case closure numbers, eroding judges’ internal motivation to pursue case quality, disrupting their rhythm of independent decision-making based on case characteristics, and intensifying work time poverty.

**Z21:** “There are so many assessments from above, ranking us every day. Actually, courts shouldn’t need ranking because cases have natural cycles. If you insist on rankings, everyone has to busy themselves coping with them.”

Meanwhile, as court leaders, to avoid the potential threat of overall bottom rankings, they often increase requirements for judges’ case closure quantity and speed, and may pay special attention to and urge judges with lower closure numbers to close cases quickly. This undoubtedly interferes with judges’ case-handling rhythm and intensifies frontline judges’ work time poverty.

### 3.1.3 Insufficient Staffing

Insufficient staffing includes both limited quota judge numbers and inadequate team personnel configuration.

#### 3.1.3.1 Limited Quota Judge Numbers

The limited number of quota judges qualified for adjudication and enforcement increases judges’ work time poverty. As the quota system reform gradually

advances and the judge corps becomes more elite, the number of judges qualified to handle cases decreases, making the “too many cases, too few judges” problem increasingly prominent. Judges’ adjudication and enforcement tasks become increasingly heavy, and work time poverty consequently increases.

**Z12:** “When I entered the court, total cases were just over 3,000 a year; now there are more than 10,000 (a threefold increase). Personnel hasn’t tripled. When I entered, I remember our court establishment was 101, later changed to 103, now it’s 100. I think there are actually fewer people.”

### 3.1.3.2 Inadequate Team Personnel Configuration

Lack of adequate personnel support in judge teams also poses a severe challenge. Inadequate team personnel configuration refers to judge teams lacking stable, sufficient, and professionally competent support. Ideally, a judge team should include at least “one judge, one assistant, one clerk” —one quota judge, one judge assistant, and one clerk—where the quota judge handles core case adjudication/enforcement work, the judge assistant handles complex auxiliary work, and the clerk handles affairs-related work (Ma Yuanjie, 2016). Due to vacancies in judge teams, situations often arise where one judge assistant or clerk must support two or more quota judges (Chen Ruihua, 2018). This not only results in heavy workloads for judge assistants and clerks, likely preventing them from completing assigned work on time and with quality, but also drags down the entire judge team’s progress. Judges must invest time and energy handling work that should be completed by clerks and assistants, preventing them from focusing on core case adjudication/enforcement work and thereby intensifying work time poverty.

**Z21:** “Now they’ve hired some temporary workers, but they haven’t studied law and got in through various connections, so I currently have no clerk. Why no clerk? Because you can’t direct temporary workers—they’re not in this field —so many aspects get pressed onto the judge.”

## 3.2.1 Work Consequences

### 3.2.1.1 Case-Closure-Oriented Values and Strategies

Values guide individual behavior and choices (Braithwaite & Scott, 1990). Interview data show that improving efficiency, maintaining fairness, and resolving conflicts are work values commonly recognized by judges. However, when time becomes a scarce resource, the contradiction between high case closure quantity requirements under limited time and insufficient time available for case handling becomes the most prominent conflict in judges’ work. Simultaneously, under the guidance of strict and competitive assessment indicators, strong work time poverty drives judges to prioritize improving case closure efficiency as the current “number one task.” The judge group has gradually developed case-closure-oriented values, including:

**(1) Greater Emphasis on Quantity Assurance.** When facing cases, judges prioritize “closing cases quickly” among work objectives, potentially valuing closure quantity more than other important goals like ensuring case quality or coordinating conflict resolution.

**Z14:** “(Under time poverty) I have to digest these cases, turn them into closable cases. Every day you don’ t think about how to handle a case well, but how to close it.”

**(2) Relatively Weakened Fairness Maintenance.** Under long-term work time poverty pressure, ensuring case fairness may become a secondary choice in judges’ value systems, implicitly subordinated to efficiency pursuit.

**X7:** “We should theoretically prioritize fairness over efficiency. (But) now it’ s reversed.”

**(3) Relatively Weakened Conflict Resolution.** Genuine conflict resolution often requires judges to conduct extensive work and invest substantial time. Under the influence of work time poverty, the importance of conflict resolution is gradually weakened in judges’ value rankings, inevitably subordinated to efficiency pursuit.

**Z4:** “Because assessments affect your final closure methods, affecting genuine conflict resolution. I might have to choose between resolving conflicts or protecting assessment scores.”

Consistent with these values are the case-closure-oriented coping strategies judges develop when facing time poverty dilemmas. The most direct motivation for adopting these strategies is achieving the goal of “closing more cases” under current time poverty conditions. These strategies include:

**(1) Striving for Successful Pre-trial Mediation.** Pre-trial mediation occurs before court sessions. If successful, it eliminates subsequent filing, review, trial, and judgment issuance procedures. Judges adopt strategies to encourage parties to reach mediation and avoid trial procedures due to feeling time-pressed, reducing subsequent workload and saving work time. Pre-trial mediation was originally established to save judicial resources, optimize allocation of limited judicial resources, and promote conflict resolution between parties. However, if judges participate in pre-trial mediation with “quick success” motivations like reducing workload or alleviating time pressure, there may be risks of unfairness.

**M16:** “Now if you mediate (pre-trial), you can skip a lot of work. Holding court, checking accounts, writing judgments might take three or four days. If you mediate, you just list things clearly one, two, three, four, five, and it’ s done. The mediation statement comes easily.”

**(2) Reducing In-trial Mediation.** When pre-trial mediation fails, the case proceeds to litigation. Although pre-trial mediation efforts may not lead to agreement, judges can still conduct further mediation during litigation based on case circumstances (in-trial mediation). However, this often requires organizing

multiple lengthy mediation sessions to resolve conflicts successfully. Driven by work time poverty, some judges adopt strategies to reduce in-trial mediation, shortening mediation time during litigation and proceeding directly to judgment after minimal mediation. This may cause parties who could have reached settlement with continued mediation efforts to lose reconciliation opportunities, hindering genuine conflict resolution.

**M17:** “If assessment indicators require you to achieve certain closure rates within specific timeframes, some cases that could have been mediated successfully won’t be mediated but judged directly.”

**(3) Weakening Quality of Some Cases.** Judges’ work time poverty makes them feel unable to handle every case meticulously. Guided by case-closure-oriented values, some judges adopt strategies to weaken quality in some cases (e.g., low-visibility cases) to achieve closure goals. That is, instead of processing every case carefully, they selectively handle some cases thoroughly while lowering quality standards for others. This not only jeopardizes quality for “sacrificed” cases but also threatens judicial fairness and justice.

**Z3:** “(Individual caseload) has far exceeded bearable limits…Honestly, to a large extent, it’s hard to guarantee every case can be thoroughly handled or that judges can responsibly and meticulously craft each case. It’s hard to reach that level.”

**(4) Lowering Operational Standardization.** During case handling, some judges simplify procedural operations and lower standardization levels of certain procedures to improve efficiency and save time.

**Z18:** “Because there are too many cases, I just follow procedures. The judge who trained me did it this way, so I do it this way. But if you ask why, they can’t explain. There’s no time to think about why—just do it. Veteran training novice generally won’t make big mistakes, but it’s not very standardized.”

**(5) Hasty Case Closure.** A typical feeling of work time poverty is the constant rush of “being chased by cases (M9)” and “being driven to run (M7),” leaving insufficient time for thinking and processing. Under this “rushed off their feet” pressure, trial judges sometimes must render judgments hastily without sufficient legal reasoning. Some enforcement judges adopt a “terminate first” temporary closure strategy to avoid affecting assessment indicator evaluations and court ranking. That is, by communicating and negotiating with parties, they temporarily close enforcement cases that are time-consuming and unlikely to be completed within the current assessment period using “termination of current execution”; after the current assessment period ends, parties can apply to resume enforcement. This “terminate first” strategy differs from normal termination—not because cases temporarily lack enforcement conditions, but as a “stopgap measure” forced by work time poverty.

**M1:** “You may not actually be confident about making this judgment directly, but when the deadline arrives, you must judge.”

### 3.2.1.2 Poor Work State

Interview data show that work time poverty negatively affects judges' work state, mainly manifested in three aspects:

**(1) Diminished Work Vitality.** Work vitality refers to the energy and psychological resilience individuals possess at work, their willingness to exert effort, and their persistence in facing difficulties (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Under work time poverty influence, judges exhibit diminished work vitality, reflected in decreased energy levels, reduced willingness to work hard, and increased desire to retreat when facing work difficulties.

**M12:** “With many cases, you have to work faster to close them quickly. But greater motivation? No. Many cases mean greater difficulty, and everyone has difficulty-avoidance tendencies—that’ s normal…Who wants to handle this? Goodness, a case file this thick is annoying to look at. Going through it takes so much time…Which judge truly wants to handle this? Not willing, I think. I’ m not willing.”

**(2) Impeded Focus State.** Focus at work is characterized by complete concentration (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Case adjudication requires judges to concentrate attention on current cases, maintain high focus, and invest corresponding cognitive resources. However, in work time poverty dilemmas, judges face situations where cases and work affairs come in droves. Frequent task switching and interference from non-case-related affairs make it difficult for judges to “settle down (X3)” into current case processing. Moreover, anxiety triggered by work time poverty makes it difficult for judges to enter efficient and focused states.

**X3:** “(Does time shortage affect your case review?) Yes. For relatively complex cases, you might work continuously for a week or a month on just one case. But other simple cases might suddenly require a hearing this week. When other cases interrupt, it’ s hard to get back into that case.”

**(3) Decreased Patience.** Besides handling cases, resolving conflicts and explaining laws to parties are important daily tasks for judges. These tasks often lack clear assessment standards but require judges to invest substantial patience. Under the feeling of time poverty with cases piling up and never enough time to process them systematically, judges exhibit decreased patience when facing such work.

**Z22:** “I have less and less patience. I tell you (the party) to get to the point. Only tell me what’ s useful for my work; I don’ t want to hear useless things. It’ s a waste of time.”

### 3.2.1.3 Declined Case Quality

The quality of judges' case handling is a crucial component of work effectiveness, a cornerstone for ensuring justice and rule of law, and a primary concern for

people facing the judicial system. Work time poverty affects case quality mainly in:

**(1) Reduced Case Familiarity.** Before rendering judgments or enforcement plans, judges must fully understand case details. However, work time poverty reduces judges' familiarity with their cases. On one hand, it forces judges to skim case files hurriedly without detailed review. On the other hand, it makes judges anxious, irritable, and less patient, reducing their willingness to communicate with parties in detail, sometimes leading to insufficient communication and inadequate case understanding.

**Z7:** "Judgments are long, dozens of pages. Criminal cases especially are 50-60 pages. Reading 50-60 pages is impossible. Stacked on the desk, you can't see the upper body. I only read a little. I don't have time to read so much. How can I familiarize myself with the case? It's impossible."

**(2) Reduced Case Handling Meticulousness.** During case adjudication/enforcement, work time poverty makes judges process cases hastily, making it difficult to consider cases thoroughly. They can only try to ensure general direction is correct, substantially reducing handling meticulousness.

**M16:** "Complex cases require meticulous trial because they contain many conflicts that need careful examination. But time doesn't allow it. You can't be meticulous, just general. Frankly, as long as the direction isn't wrong, the existing evidence is generally checked. Sometimes what should be repeatedly checked isn't; sometimes it's just dropped. I might prune branches, quickly trim them bare, and only handle the branches, not the leaves."

**(3) Lowered Conviction Standards for Rulings.** In fact-finding, judges must form inner conviction through free evaluation of evidence (Song Yinghui & Tang Weijian, 2006); in law application, they must conduct sufficient subsumption processes<sup>5</sup> to match facts with law. Only when judges reach certain self-conviction levels in fact-finding and law application can they make judgments with confidence that they are lawful. Work time poverty forces judges to continuously accelerate ruling speed. In haste, judges must render decisions before reaching conviction levels previously achieved with adequate time, lowering their conviction standards.

**X3:** "Time shortage affects case handling, possibly causing problems with ruling correctness. Because indeed, some cases, especially simple ones, are handled by assistants. We just go through procedures; substantive trial is done by assistants. But for us, without detailed case review, we're uncertain whether the case has problems."

### 3.2.2 Personal Consequences

Work time poverty affects judges at the personal level mainly in four aspects: extended working hours, stalled career growth, damaged physical and mental health, and hindered family happiness.

### 3.2.2.1 Extended Working Hours

Work time poverty drives judges to sacrifice personal time to extend working hours, including: (1) Active overtime on workdays or holidays. Nearly 40% (37%) of judges reported needing extra overtime on workdays or holidays because they cannot complete work during regular hours. (2) Reduced annual leave. Although judges are entitled to annual leave by regulation, their allocated caseload doesn't decrease when they take leave. Therefore, after leave, judges face even larger workloads and more severe time poverty. Consequently, most judges choose to reduce or even skip leave to extend work hours, attempting to alleviate or avoid more severe work time poverty.

**Z18:** “Do you think I can rest? If I take annual leave but cases keep being assigned to me, it doesn't feel like leave at all. It's the same as not taking leave.”

### 3.2.2.2 Stalled Career Growth

Professional competence refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities crucial for individual career development and career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020). Judges' work requires continuous learning and understanding of newly enacted laws and amendments, making mastery of professional knowledge and skills vital for competence and career development. However, work time poverty reduces judges' investment in improving professional knowledge and skills, manifested in: (1) Reduced learning orientation, i.e., decreased willingness to study professional knowledge and analyze difficult or novel cases.

**M15:** “I feel truly excellent judges, at least in their field, can delve deeply and continuously research...willing to find relevant books and papers to thoroughly understand problems...But now many judges seem to lack this, just wanting to simply close cases to meet requirements.”

(2) Reduced professional study, i.e., shortened time for professional knowledge learning.

**X5:** “You can't even keep up with daily work, can't finish writing judgments –where's the time for self-study? There's simply no time for self-study.”

### 3.2.2.3 Damaged Physical and Mental Health

Work time poverty damages judges' physical and mental health in three aspects: insufficient health maintenance and recovery, increased psychological pressure, and deteriorated physical condition.

**(1) Insufficient Health Maintenance and Recovery.** Physical health is a basic human need. However, feeling they lack time to complete work, judges not only cherish work time but also often handle unfinished work during off-hours, unable to invest enough time and energy in maintaining or restoring health. Specifically, work time poverty and resulting extended work hours cause judges

to: first, reduce seeking professional healthcare support (**M10**: “I haven’ t seen a doctor. My classmates say you should consult someone, but I don’ t have time…” ); second, reduce recovery activities—self-regulation activities to restore physical and mental health after work stress (Bennett et al., 2018)—such as reducing participation in micro-breaks (Nie et al., 2021) and off-job recovery activities (Oerlemans et al., 2014). Moreover, feeling they lack time for recovery activities limits judges’ options, leading them to choose shorter activities while avoiding more effective but time-consuming ones.

**M8**: “Sometimes I run on weekends to relieve stress, what else can I do? No time. Think about it, most time is spent working overtime, so you can only self-regulate. If it gets too bad, drink a cup of coffee to relieve it—no good solutions.”

**(2) Increased Psychological Pressure.** Interview results show that judges who chronically feel time-pressed and unable to meet work demands experience overwhelming fatigue with sharply increased recovery needs. When recovery needs cannot be met, even after brief rest, judges still feel “not recovered and buffered (M7).” Meanwhile, under high pressure and mental exhaustion, judges worry day and night about massive unfinished work, often experiencing negative emotions like anger, irritability, and anxiety. For example, **M16**: “The closure task’ s deadline…about a week and ten days left for assessment. My face turned wax-yellow, anxious, couldn’ t sleep.”

**(3) Deteriorated Physical Condition.** Judges often must cope with work demands by “overdrafting energy.” Over time, coupled with increased psychological pressure, many judges’ bodies are in a state of depletion, creating a sub-healthy state of “not exactly good, not exactly bad, but many minor ailments (M4).” More seriously, some experience nervous tension and difficulty sleeping (**M16, Z15, Z18**), severe hair loss and graying (**M1, M2**); some report increased disease risk, yet time-poor judges mostly have no time to take sick leave, further aggravating conditions. For example, **M1**: “Recently a colleague found a lung nodule but had no time to go to the hospital—really no time, because once court sessions are scheduled, you can’ t take leave.”

#### 3.2.2.4 Hindered Family Happiness

Work time poverty not only affects judges’ physical and mental condition but also impacts their family life, including: (1) Reduced family companionship time. Work time poverty drives judges to frequently work overtime or reduce leave to handle unfinished work, resulting in insufficient time resources for family. For example, **X1**: “Reduced personal rest time leads to less time with family.” (2) Reduced family companionship quality. Work time poverty increases judges’ stress levels, hinders recovery processes, and causes judges to carry unrelieved stress into family life, reducing companionship quality. **M17**: “Mood becomes impatient, easily angry. At home with husband and children…when work isn’ t going well, mood at home isn’ t good either.”

In summary, through repeated comparison of categories and concepts emerging from the grounded theory process, this study proposes a dual-pathway model of work time poverty antecedents and judicial consequences. Specifically, judges' work time poverty originates from the combined effect of “daunting job demands” and “scarce job resources”; work time poverty further leads to negative work and personal consequences through two pathways— “work acceleration tactics” and “working hours extension tactics” —thereby threatening judicial decision-making quality and effectiveness (see Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]).

#### **4.1 Antecedents of Judges' Work Time Poverty: Structural Imbalance Between Job Demands and Resources**

Based on the dual-pathway model, this study reaches Conclusion 1: On one hand, massive work content and heavy assessment pressure jointly cause a surge in job demands; on the other hand, insufficient staffing and support cause scarce job resources. The structural imbalance between these job demands and resources collectively generates judges' time poverty.

Regarding job demands, judges mired in complex work content must simultaneously face the judicial system' s heavy assessment pressure. The combination greatly increases perceived job demands, constituting the main reason for experiencing work time poverty. Case adjudication/enforcement is judges' core responsibility. Today, case numbers within core responsibilities increase exponentially, while social publicity services and other additional responsibilities keep increasing, continuously adding to judges' tasks. Meanwhile, assessment and ranking systems continuously demand judges complete more tasks in less time (e.g., Zu Peng & Wang Yanhua, 2023). Under dual pressure, daunting job demands have created a systemic time dilemma for judges. In fact, quantity- or efficiency-oriented job demands may not suit all work, such as creative workers targeting innovation and uniqueness, doctors focusing on patient life and health, and researchers requiring deep thinking. Similarly, judicial work emphasizing fairness and justice should not place excessive weight on quantity and efficiency assessments. Instead, rigorous job analysis from human resource management should be applied to classify and study different case types, determine the “reasonable daily workload” advocated by scientific management pioneer Taylor (1967), and develop more scientific and profession-appropriate assessment mechanisms.

Regarding job resources, insufficient staffing further weakens judges' job resources, intensifying time poverty. Under heavy job demands, the number of judges qualified for independent adjudication is decreasing. Limited quota judge numbers and inadequate team personnel configuration—this systemic shortage of job resources in the judicial system forces judges to undertake excessive work tasks while also handling additional work that should be completed by support staff, intensifying work time poverty. This not only negatively affects judges' work but also poses potential threats to overall judicial system efficiency. Therefore, ensuring adequate job resources for judges, such as ensuring courts have

sufficient quota judges and corresponding team members, is a key factor in maintaining normal judicial system operation and ensuring judicial work quality.

This study, based on in-depth interviews with frontline judges, outlines the daily struggles of judges in time poverty dilemmas. Time poverty means the feeling of having too much to do without enough time to do it. While seemingly a personal experience of judges with high professional honor, it 实质上 reflects organizational structural imbalance' s coercion of practitioners. Therefore, future solutions to judges' time poverty must comprehensively consider these factors, taking corresponding measures to improve judges' work environment and resource support to achieve balance between job demands and resource supply.

## 4.2 Mechanism of Work Time Poverty' s Impact on Judicial Decision-Making Quality: Individual Coping Efforts in Structural Time Dilemmas

Based on the dual-pathway model, this study reaches Conclusion 2: Faced with systemic structural job demands-resources imbalance, individuals find it difficult to break its shackles through personal power to reduce job demands or obtain necessary resources. At this point, individuals trapped in time poverty have only two possible coping pathways: accelerating work speed within clearly insufficient work time relative to massive workloads, or extending their own work time beyond regular working hours. The former can be called “work acceleration tactics,” the latter “working hours extension tactics.” However, accompanying continuously accelerated work speed is inevitable quality decline, while blindly extending work time beyond regular hours inevitably causes excessive depletion of individual physical and mental resources. The combined effect ultimately damages work quality and effectiveness.

Regarding the “work acceleration tactics pathway,” the impact on judicial quality and effectiveness mainly manifests in two aspects: First, under the drive of continuously accelerating work speed, judges' work values undergo negative transformation. From values emphasizing fairness protection, justice maintenance, and conflict resolution, they gradually shift to values prioritizing increased case closure quantity. Since values guide behavior (Yang Yiyin, 1998), under these values, judges lean more toward case-closure-oriented work models, posing potential threats to judicial fairness. Second, in the process of continuously accelerating work speed, judges are “rushed off their feet,” making it difficult to immerse themselves in work, resulting in relatively negative work states. However, employees with good work states are often passionate and perform better (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), while 低迷 work states are not conducive to ensuring judicial work quality and effectiveness. This aligns with existing literature on negative work states' adverse effects on work performance (e.g., Hopstaken et al., 2015).

Regarding the “working hours extension tactics pathway,” the impact on judicial quality and effectiveness mainly manifests in several aspects: First, contin-

uously sacrificing personal time for work time exacerbates judges' adverse stress responses. However, good work performance requires practitioners to invest personal physical and mental resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Damaged physical and mental resources inevitably lead to declined work states, thereby reducing judicial decision-making quality. Based on China's conventional five-day workweek with eight-hour days, judges' regular weekly work hours should be 40 hours, but a survey shows nearly half (46%) of China's quota judges work over 45 hours weekly (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a). A recent meta-analysis shows an inverted U-shaped relationship between work hours and task performance (more pronounced among Chinese practitioners), with negative effects beginning when weekly work hours exceed the critical point of 44.43 hours (Song Haojie et al., 2022). This means blindly extending judges' work hours may not truly benefit judicial work and could be "more loss than gain." This conclusion is supported by existing research on general organizational employees, such as studies showing weekend work-related activities hinder recovery experiences (e.g., Zhang et al., 2023), morning recovery levels positively predict daily work engagement (Sonnentag et al., 2012), and "overwork" negatively affects performance (Bouckennooghe et al., 2022).

Second, continuously extended work hours are not conducive to judges' career growth. Judges' work time is increasingly occupied by current complex cases and affairs, with worries about "how to close cases (Z14)" displacing desires to "do well." This leaves judges no time for in-depth case discussion, let alone allocating more time to self-improvement-oriented learning and development activities, causing career growth to slow or stagnate. Research shows individuals with low construal levels focusing on "how to do things" rather than "why" have poorer learning effect predictions and are more likely to give up learning (Halamish et al., 2013). Moreover, extended work hours not only damage judges' physical and mental health and stall career growth but also inevitably cause work-family conflict, which ultimately negatively affects workplace performance. In existing literature, work-family conflict's negative spillover effect on work performance has received widespread support (e.g., Liao et al., 2019).

### 4.3 Research Significance and Future Directions

Today, time poverty is increasingly prominent in judges' judicial work. Globally, "judicial capacity crises" caused by judges' inability to handle massive job demands within limited work time are common (Cheng Jinhua, 2022b). For example, in 2018, Japanese judges averaged 937 filed cases; in 2019, Chinese quota judges averaged 210, and U.S. federal appellate judges averaged 290 (Cheng Jinhua, 2022b). At first glance, Chinese judges' per capita caseload is not the highest, but empirical research shows that due to handling complex non-case work affairs and insufficient judge assistant staffing, their workload and work time poverty are no less severe than other countries facing caseload challenges—82% of Chinese quota judges and 73% of judge assistants in 2020 reported their work state as "unbearable" or "heavy burden" (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a). In contrast,

UK longitudinal surveys from 2014 to 2022 showed that while self-reported “excessive caseload” and “excessive non-caseload” increased, they never exceeded 50% and 40% respectively (Thomas, 2023). This suggests that single caseload indicators may be insufficient to accurately measure and compare judges’ work dilemmas across countries, and that available job resources must also be considered.

Regarding job resources, in some high-caseload countries, a complete range and large number of court auxiliary personnel significantly alleviate caseload pressure. For example, U.S. judicial support staff includes law clerks, secretaries, chief clerks, court administrators, legal record assistants, filing clerks, court reporters, probation officers, and other categories, totaling up to 10 times the number of presiding judges (Training Program in USA for Directors of the Political Departments of Chinese High People’s Courts, 2012). In contrast, this study’s interviews found many Chinese courts cannot even meet the most basic “one judge, one assistant, one clerk” team configuration, demonstrating an obvious lack of support systems. In short, different countries’ national conditions and judicial systems vary greatly, making it difficult to find unified objective measures for judges’ work time poverty. Under these circumstances, this study starts from the structural job demands-resources imbalance that triggers judges’ work time poverty, attempting to transcend cultural and institutional background limitations and contribute Chinese perspectives to understanding the global “judicial capacity crisis.”

Mainstream legal research on judges’ work time poverty mostly adopts macro perspectives, conceptualizing the problem as “too many cases, too few judges” and exploring coping strategies (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a; Xiong Qihong, 2019). First, regarding “too many cases,” existing policy and research focus on pre-litigation mediation (Zuo Weimin, 2020) and diversified dispute resolution mechanisms (Dong Chuchao & Shu Yaozhi, 2023) as litigation source governance strategies, attempting to resolve disputes at the source before they enter litigation. Second, regarding “too few judges,” research also points to the importance of increasing quota judge numbers (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a) and ensuring trial auxiliary staffing (Xiong Qihong, 2019), though noting that increasing staff faces practical limitations or limited effects (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a). Third, between “too many cases” and “too few judges,” policy mainly focuses on improving judicial efficiency through procedural optimization, with research exploring this as well. As a procedural coping pathway, separating complex and simple cases has become an essential efficiency requirement, receiving legislative and court management attention. However, research finds its contribution to case processing efficiency has reached a bottleneck (Zuo Weimin, 2022); management efficiency improvements may degenerate into “whipping the fast ox” in practice (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a); and compressed trial limits and competitive comparisons, as manifestations of “efficiency anxiety,” damage professional honor and case quality (Hua Xiaopeng, 2020).

Beyond this “procedure-centered” macro perspective, a few studies adopt a

“person-centered” micro perspective, using judges’ time use as an analytical entry point to assess work time allocation (Zuo Weimin, 2017) and workload saturation (Wang Lan & Qiu Sufang, 2019), focusing on quantitative analysis of judges’ time use to reveal time use dilemmas. This study adds a psychological perspective, using work time poverty as a core variable to expand and deepen exploration of its antecedents and consequences. On one hand, in exploring antecedents, this study clarifies how job demands-resources structural imbalance affects judges’ individual psychology, intersecting with and validating existing analyses of “too many cases, too few judges” and judges’ time use status. Importantly, as psychological research on time poverty shows, time poverty feelings are affected not only by insufficient time quantity for tasks but also by time quality (Sun Xiaomin et al., 2024). The job demands-resources imbalance judges face causes not only insufficient time quantity but also erosion of time quality through continuous influx and interruption of various complex affairs, jointly creating strong time poverty feelings. This study constructs a psychological mechanism model of how work time poverty affects judicial decision-making processes and quality for the judge group trapped in time poverty, highlighting the necessity and urgency of alleviating judges’ work time poverty.

Through a psychological lens, this study argues that the deep cause of negative impacts on judicial decision-making quality is not merely the appearance of “too many cases, too few judges,” but the inevitable consequences of judges’ forced choices to “accelerate work speed” and “extend work time” under job demands-resources imbalance. Time is a crucial prerequisite for judges to complete work with both quality and quantity, and a basic resource for generating fairness and justice. In-depth research should be conducted on judges’ work time allocation and needs (Cheng Jinhua, 2022a), with realistic job analysis, and targeted solutions for the three major antecedents of work time poverty. For “complex work content,” enhance work specialization, avoid fragmentation, reduce administrative affairs assigned to frontline judges, and appropriately purchase social services to decompose judges’ affairs work. For “heavy assessment pressure,” clarify that assessment serves case fairness and justice and judges’ capacity improvement, not pursuing “good-looking assessment data on the surface (M17)” (Zu Peng & Wang Yanhua, 2023). Limit the proportion of time-limited assessment indicators and emphasize case quality assessment. For “insufficient staffing,” on one hand, face the “few people” reality under “many cases” conditions, weigh pros and cons, try to overcome staffing resistance to avoid negative consequences of work time poverty, realistically assess work needs of each court, appropriately increase quota judge ratios, and expand judge decision-support staff; on the other hand, unblock promotion channels to protect judges’ professional honor, thereby attracting more talent to the judge assistant ranks. Only by placing judges in a subject position and providing important resource guarantees can their work effectiveness and decision quality be improved, thereby alleviating the “too many cases, too few judges” contradiction.

Given topic complexity and intricate real-world causal relationships, although this study strived for sample diversity and theoretical/informational saturation,

constructively building a dual-pathway model based on existing materials, future research can continue to deepen and mutually validate with this study. On one hand, while striving to provide detailed, rich, and ecologically valid materials for how judicial work is affected by work time poverty, this study had to sacrifice to some extent precision validation of mechanisms in the model. Future research can clarify the weight of each mechanism in the process of time poverty affecting judicial decision-making work, identify the most influential mechanisms, and explore targeted intervention schemes to provide more precise strategies. On the other hand, given judicial decision-making quality's important impact on building a fair and just rule-of-law society and meeting people's judicial needs, future research can adopt more combined qualitative and quantitative methods to explore psychological mechanisms affecting judicial decision-making, enriching the profound connotation of "people-centered" judicial construction from a psychological perspective.

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## Appendix 1: Coding Process

### 1 Open Coding

Open coding involves researchers coding with an open attitude according to how data present themselves. In this study, two researchers carefully deliberated on work time poverty-related information word by word, focusing on antecedents and consequences of “work time poverty feeling,” discovering and extracting meaningful units from the data to form initial nodes (trying to preserve information from original materials when naming nodes). During coding, the two researchers continuously analyzed and discussed until reaching consensus. This round of analysis was conducted with a completely open attitude, without reference to any theoretical framework, striving for clear, complete, and fitting coding of original materials.

### 2 Axial Coding

Axial coding mainly involves discovering and summarizing relationships between concepts (Chen Xiangming, 2000). Based on open coding results, nodes were categorized according to meaning and content, sorting out relationships between nodes from perspectives of causality, similarity, difference, and process, and forming organically connected categories from various parts of the data (Chen Xiangming, 2000). After establishing category relationships, further combined coding was conducted combining interview context and sociocultural background.

### 3 Selective Coding

Selective coding summarizes core categories with overarching significance from all constructed categories at a more abstract level, concentrating existing nodes around core categories (Fu Anguo et al., 2020). By continuously querying original data, researchers discussed and comparatively analyzed to construct core categories of work time poverty antecedents and consequences (antecedents see Table 1, consequences see Table 2, coding nodes see Figure 2, original data examples of each node see Appendix 2).

#### 4 Theory Construction

This study used inductive analysis to construct theory, specifically through the following four steps (Chen Xiangming, 2000; Fu Anguo et al., 2020):

**Step 1:** Based on coding results at all levels, preliminary description, analysis, and synthesis of data were conducted to develop a preliminary theoretical framework of judges' work time poverty antecedents and consequences.

**Step 2:** The preliminary coding framework was systematically and repeatedly compared with original materials. Specifically, original materials were repeatedly checked to compare whether substantive relationships existed between various levels of coding in work time poverty antecedents and consequences, with discovered relationships further sorted and analyzed. For example, after comparison and sorting, relationships were found between consequence nodes "greater emphasis on quantity assurance" and "lowered operational standardization." Through continuous comparative sorting, the theoretical framework was verified and revised.

**Step 3:** Another researcher in the time poverty field (not a coding participant) reviewed the generated theoretical framework, reviewing whether node generation was appropriate, whether node classification standards and naming were suitable, whether category relationships had problems, etc. Researchers continuously discussed and analyzed to determine whether and how modifications were needed.

**Step 4:** The above three steps were repeated continuously to establish a final theoretical system with internal connections.

#### Appendix 2: Original Data Examples of Open Coding Results

The table below organizes original data examples of open coding results. Appendix Table 1 shows original data examples of work time poverty antecedents, Appendix Table 2 shows original data examples of work time poverty work consequences, and Appendix Table 3 shows original data examples of work time poverty personal consequences.

##### Appendix Table 1: Original Data Examples of Work Time Poverty Antecedents

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M1]	Now enforcement judges have the most pressure, especially at grassroots courts. Our superiors may somewhat understand but not fully. Some regulations require closing thousands of cases. With 365 days a year and about 200+ workdays, you don't even want to flip through each case. One quota judge has over a thousand enforcement cases annually, generally four to five hundred, two to three hundred.	Numerous cases
[X7]	I remember in 2015, we only handled 38-39 cases, very few. But after appointment, nearly 100+ cases annually, actually quite a lot, but considered few compared to Changsha. But we definitely increased by over 100%, more than doubled.	Numerous cases
[M11]	As an assistant, he handles other auxiliary work, basically on the computer daily for digital office work, needing to confirm many items on the computer, actually quite a large workload.	Digital office operations
[M11]	Now all case files must be represented on the network, and parties' materials also go through the computer, so many computer operations—constantly clicking when deadlines arrive. This workload is large, with these operations every day.	Digital office operations

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M18]	When there' s no evidence, our discipline inspection requires us to write situation reports explaining everything, not just one sentence saying it' s all untrue. You must address each point, explain the whole case again, occupying massive work time, writing constantly.	Repeated responses to closed cases
[M10]	Once we tell them problems or conclusions that don' t meet their expectations, they start petitioning and complaining, endlessly entangling in the matter, creating considerable pressure for judges. Because sometimes, frankly, even if they' re completely unreasonable, when it comes, I must report it. I must set aside my urgent work to explain and clarify, write reports on whether I have problems. This occupies my work time; other parties must wait in line while I handle this first. And this may escalate— they won' t let it go, continuing to entangle endlessly.	Repeated responses to closed cases
[M19]	But now courts, like schools, must conduct research and produce papers, cases, and publicity. Because there' s a requirement to let the public know what you' re doing. So we have WeChat public accounts and must write publicity articles, taking time to write, busy with these tasks daily.	Other affairs disrupting rhythm

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M2]	Now caseload is huge, plus non-trial affairs like various inspections, file transfers, various studies, non-business studies. But as a political-legal unit, Party theoretical knowledge, including current education rectification studies, are indeed necessary but contradict workload.	Other affairs disrupting rhythm
[M18]	Because we now have trial limits. We have time pressure not only from statutory trial limits but also indicators requiring closure within 1/2 of statutory limits, making it “higher, faster, stronger.”	Absolute speed assessment pressure
[M10]	The key is trial limit pressure. It restricts how many days you have to close cases. And it’ s not one case—many cases intertwine simultaneously, requiring you to divide energy. Actually, I think this is a non-technical issue.	Absolute speed assessment pressure
[X7]	Our current president has high performance requirements. Each court ranks among provincial courts. Bottom rankings require self-criticism, yellow card warnings, even removal from office. So pressure cascades down. For example, our intermediate court’ s indicators must be completed (e.g., closure rates). Failure reduces points. Many assessment indicators create great pressure.	Relative speed ranking pressure

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[Z3]	They will spur you on—you can't be last continuously. Occasional last place may bring warnings. Continued poor performance may bring severe consequences like removal of top leadership, transmitting pressure to us.	Relative speed ranking pressure
[M11]	I think the original quota system hoped cases and people would match, that is, determining how many cases a judge can bear before setting quotas. But now I think it's inconsistent with the original design. Cases haven't decreased, each judge's tasks have increased, and there are fewer people. For example, originally 50 judges, now 30 after quota reform, but cases have increased, so each judge's pressure is greater.	Limited quota judge numbers
[X1]	Receiving 20-30 cases weekly, but our chamber only has three judges, so each may get 6-7 cases weekly, lasting a long time.	Limited quota judge numbers
[X5]	Handling so many cases annually without enough judge assistants, and some clerks aren't competent, you worry a lot and spend more time.	Inadequate team personnel configuration
[Z22]	We have 5 quota judges handling cases, with 4 assistants below, oh no, 3 assistants (one on sick leave), so 8 people handling cases but only 3 assistants working. Imagine our pressure—if my field tasks can't move, the case can't progress.	Inadequate team personnel configuration

**Appendix Table 2: Original Data Examples of Work Time Poverty Work Consequences**

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[Z14]	(Under time poverty) I have to digest these cases, turn them into closable cases. Every day you don' t think about how to handle a case well, but how to close it.	Case-closure-oriented values
[M15]	I just want to simply close cases to meet requirements.	Case-closure-oriented values
[X7]	It' s like administrative management—efficiency first, barely considering fairness. We should theoretically prioritize fairness over efficiency. Now it' s reversed.	Weakened fairness maintenance
[Z22]	We must close about 140-180 cases monthly. You have no time to handle cases because you receive and close them quickly, otherwise your indicators won' t rise. They look at case numbers. What can you achieve in a month or two? Cases from me are like full moon wine—after the celebration, they go to sleep. Really, I think this is not conducive to overall enforcement effectiveness improvement.	Weakened conflict resolution
[Z4]	Because assessments affect your final closure methods, affecting genuine conflict resolution. I might have to choose between resolving conflicts or protecting assessment scores.	Weakened conflict resolution

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[Z11]	You must spend time communicating with trial judges to understand cases. This is really useful for handling and resolving conflicts. When you can't keep up, you handle simply according to laws and regulations. But afterward, they (parties) will really come to you.	Reduced in-trial mediation
[M16]	Now if you mediate (pre-trial), you can skip a lot of work. Holding court, checking accounts, writing judgments might take three or four days. If you mediate, you just list things clearly and it's done. The mediation statement comes easily.	Striving for successful pre-trial mediation
[M13]	Now (pre-trial) mediation is troublesome but avoids assessment, court sessions, evidence collection. (Interviewer: That takes more time.) Right, spending two or three hours (on pre-trial mediation) now may save two or three days or longer later, preventing long-term unclosed cases.	Striving for successful pre-trial mediation
[M17]	If assessment indicators require achieving certain closure rates within timeframes, some cases that could be mediated won't be mediated but judged directly.	Reduced in-trial mediation
[M16]	Back then (when caseload was smaller, max 100 cases annually), we did a lot of mediation work, asking very detailed questions.	Reduced in-trial mediation

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[Z3]	(Individual caseload) has far exceeded bearable limits. Honestly, it' s hard to guarantee every case can be thoroughly handled or that judges can responsibly and meticulously craft each case.	Weakened quality of some cases
[Z14]	How can you (judge) have time to refine every case with parties? No time. If you do, you can' t complete assessments.	Weakened quality of some cases
[Z18]	Because there are too many cases, I just follow procedures. The judge who trained me did it this way, so I do it this way. But if you ask why, they can' t explain. There' s no time to think about why. Veteran training novice generally won' t make big mistakes, but it' s not very standardized.	Lowered operational standardization
[M1]	You may not be confident about making this judgment directly, but when the deadline arrives, you must judge.	Hasty case closure
[Z11]	Sometimes when cases are many, you might think: let' s handle it this way first, and if they raise issues, we' ll resolve them later.	Hasty case closure

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M12]	With many cases, you have to work faster to close them quickly. But greater motivation? No. Many cases mean greater difficulty, and everyone has difficulty-avoidance tendencies. Who wants to handle this? A case file this thick is annoying. Going through it takes so much time. Which judge truly wants to handle this? Not willing.	Diminished work vitality
[Z2]	Over a thousand cases a year with 365 days, about 200+ workdays. You don't even want to flip through each case. One quota judge has over a thousand enforcement cases.	Diminished work vitality
[X3]	(Does time shortage affect your case review?) Yes. For complex cases, you might work continuously for a week or month on one case. But other simple cases might suddenly require a hearing. When interrupted, it's hard to get back into it.	Impeded focus state
[X8]	I miss my student days when I could concentrate on one thing. Now sometimes you work on something, then get pulled to do something else. Work content has increased. In this environment, people easily become anxious.	Impeded focus state
[Z22]	I have less and less patience. I tell you (the party) to get to the point. Only tell me what's useful; I don't want to hear useless things. It's a waste of time.	Decreased patience

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M15]	For example, I used to spend an hour on calls with parties, listening carefully for 40 minutes. Now I might do other things while they talk.	Decreased patience
[Z7]	Judgments are long, dozens of pages. Criminal cases especially are 50-60 pages. Reading them is impossible. Stacked up, you can't see the upper body. I only read a little. No time to read so much. How can I familiarize myself with the case? It's impossible.	Reduced case familiarity
[M1]	Why don't we have more time to communicate with parties in detail? Because of work pressure. Look at caseloads I must close, plus some especially difficult complex cases.	Reduced case familiarity
[M16]	Complex cases require meticulous trial because they contain many conflicts. But time doesn't allow it. You can't be meticulous, just general. Frankly, as long as the direction isn't wrong, the existing evidence is generally checked. Sometimes what should be repeatedly checked isn't; sometimes it's dropped. I might prune branches, quickly trim them bare, and only handle the branches, not the leaves.	Reduced case handling meticulousness

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[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[X3]	<p>For simple procedure cases, we won't review carefully. If both parties have no objections and confess, we may not carefully grasp the facts. This doesn't exclude that some cases may not constitute crimes, but both sides confessed with no objections, so we handle quickly and simply...I think each case lacks careful evidence and fact review. Now with confessions, no one checks. If one day the defendant, already detained, wants to get out quickly, then later thinks and consults and finds the act may not constitute a crime, they may appeal. Upon investigation, it may indeed be not guilty, not a crime...</p>	Reduced case handling meticulousness
[X3]	<p>Time shortage affects case handling, possibly causing problems with ruling correctness. Because indeed, some cases, especially simple ones, are handled by assistants. We just go through procedures; substantive trial is done by assistants. But for us, without detailed case review, we're uncertain whether the case has problems.</p>	Lowered conviction standards
[X5]	<p>There will definitely be impact. Some cases make you hesitant. Second, precision deficiency...possible incomplete consideration may lead to hasty judgments that aren't perfect.</p>	Lowered conviction standards

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**Appendix Table 3: Original Data Examples of Work Time Poverty Personal Consequences**

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M5]	Writing judgment documents relies entirely on overtime.	Extended working hours
[M5]	I might need to wake at 4:00 AM to write my paper, leave at 6:40 to take my child to school, arrive at 7:30 to organize case files, start calling parties at 9:00 for various affairs, then return home at 8:30 PM.	Extended working hours
[X5]	I basically spend work time in court sessions. Noon and evening time is for writing judgments, otherwise you have no time. (Interviewer: You work after work?) Now I basically work overtime three days a week, at least one hour at noon, resting half an hour.	Extended working hours
[Z18]	Do you think I can rest? If I take annual leave but cases keep being assigned, it doesn't feel like leave at all. It's the same as not taking leave.	Reduced annual leave
[M13]	Now (working) less than 10 years means 5 days annual leave, over 10 years is 10 days, over 20 years is 15 days. But generally, some people don't take leave—no time. If you take leave, what awaits you may be even more disastrous.	Reduced annual leave
[M10]	I haven't seen a doctor. My classmates say you should consult someone, but I don't have time...	Insufficient health maintenance and recovery

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M15]	At noon, you might sacrifice lunch break for exercise, but sometimes a morning case runs until 1:00 PM, then 1:30 PM you have a new case scheduled, so you don' t even have enough eating time.	Insufficient health maintenance and recovery
[M9]	When I was a student, I' d take baths to relieve stress. After starting work, sometimes when stress is too high, I just eat out alone, because I found bathing no longer solves the stress.	Insufficient health maintenance and recovery
[Z15]	It' s very anxiety-inducing, always worrying about missing deadlines. In enforcement case handling, you often can' t sleep because there are too many cases and deadlines, always thinking about cases at night, fearing oversight.	Increased psychological pressure
[M1]	Recently a colleague found a lung nodule but had no time to go to the hospital—really no time, because once court sessions are scheduled, you can' t take leave.	Deteriorated physical condition
[M8]	Generally overtime until 8:00 PM, some directly stay overnight. Many judges in our unit directly live at the unit, especially at year-end, so always feeling time is insufficient. Look at many young judges with white hair—really, look, it' s all white.	Deteriorated physical condition

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M15]	I feel truly excellent judges, whether trial experts or not, can at least delve deeply in their field, continuously research...willing to find relevant books and papers to thoroughly understand problems. This is a very basic and necessary skill for judges. But now many judges seem to lack this, just wanting to simply close cases to meet requirements, with less self-improvement.	Reduced learning orientation
[M6]	When training notices come, leaders may ask who has no court sessions and wants to go. Actually, you may want to go but also don' t. No time—going means losing three days. In three days, you could hold 12 court sessions just for hearings.	Reduced professional study
[X5]	You can' t even keep up with daily work, can' t finish writing judgments—where' s the time for self-study? There' s simply no time for self-study.	Reduced professional study
[M9]	Actually, the court system organizes many activities from top to bottom, but you don' t have time to participate, and aren' t allowed time to participate.	Reduced professional study
[M2]	After having children, it' s especially busy. Work pressure is too high, no time for childcare, but children actually need family cultivation, requiring high time, energy, and money.	Reduced family companionship time
[X1]	Reduced personal rest time leads to less time with family.	Reduced family companionship time

[Judge Code]	Original Material	Open Coding
[M17]	Mood becomes impatient, easily angry. At home with husband and children...when work isn' t going well, mood at home isn' t good either.	Reduced family companionship quality
[M1]	His mind must always be on work. For example, when taking children to school in the morning, he might think about something in the judgment that wasn' t written correctly and needs revision.	Reduced family companionship quality
[M7]	He (the child) constantly expects you. Even when very sensible, he has needs for you. But due to work pressure, even after speaking in court all day, you return home with no energy left to read picture books. (Interviewer: So it also affects family interaction.) Yes, absolutely. You might just throw him to Himalaya (audio app), play a story—more audio than parent-child reading...	Reduced family companionship quality

### Appendix 3: Validator Feedback and Corresponding Handling

The table below summarizes feedback and opinions from participant and non-participant validation processes and researchers' handling. In participant validation, this included: two interviewers from the in-depth interview phase (one psychology professor and one graduate student) and five judges who participated in in-depth interviews (all quota judges, three from grassroots courts and two from intermediate courts). In non-participant validation, this included three researchers not involved in interviews (one law teacher, one law postdoc, and one psychology PhD student).

#### Appendix Table 4 : Validator Feedback and Handling

Original Research Result	Validator Feedback & Opinion	Handling of Feedback
(Overall research results)	Participant-Judge: Objective, true, comprehensive. The article shows both oneself and colleagues. Nothing needs modification, just hope high-level officials can see it and genuinely explore rule-of-law reforms suitable for China' s characteristics for a rule-of-law country, reducing formalism. Courts are state adjudication organs, should be de-administrativized, letting judges truly become practitioners in the rule-of-law process.	No modification needed. Feedback noted for policy implications section.
(Overall research results)	Participant-Judge: Thanks the research team for attention to the judge professional group and for providing humanistic care and intellectual support for the great pressures judges face.	Acknowledged in acknowledgments.
(Overall research results)	Participant-Judge: After reading, it speaks to our hearts. The psychological analysis is very accurate! Thanks to outside experts for caring about this issue! Truly hope court and relevant department leaders can notice this problem.	No modification needed. Reinforces research significance.
(Overall research results)	Non-participant-Law Postdoc: From my understanding, Part 3 is fine. Your extraction is excellent, and your understanding of respondents' meaning is very accurate.	No modification needed.

Original Research Result	Validator Feedback & Opinion	Handling of Feedback
Original “Heavy Assessment Pressure” section	Participant-Judge: Compared to your interview time, assessment requirements are now higher. This year has started piloting stronger indicators: “closure rate within trial limits” and “first-instance rate of accepting judgments without appeal.” Formal implementation begins next year. Our time poverty will be more severe in the future.	Since this policy is new piloted after interviews and not formally implemented, and interview materials didn’ t cover it, after careful consideration, no handling was made for this feedback.
Original “Other Affairs Disrupting Rhythm” examples wrote “including but not limited to meeting participation, administrative affairs, political study, professional study, team affairs, and publicity work”	Participant-Judge: Similar trial-work-derived tasks include writing trial reports for cases of interest to People’ s Congress representatives and CPPCC members, major sensitive cases, which also occupy substantial judge time.	Returned to original materials and coding results. Found “trial report writing” materials were already coded under “other affairs disrupting rhythm.” After consideration, “trial report writing” was added to examples for “other affairs disrupting rhythm.”
Original “Inadequate Team Personnel Configuration” referred to: Judge teams lack stable, sufficient personnel support.	Participant-Judge: Z21’ s view also shows that although team personnel meets formal requirements ( “one judge, one clerk” or even “one judge, one assistant, one clerk” ), because assistants or clerks can’ t complete collaborative work content, judges must do work that should be done by clerks.	Returned to original materials and revised to: “Inadequate team personnel configuration refers to judge teams lacking stable, sufficient, professionally competent personnel support.”

Original Research Result	Validator Feedback & Opinion	Handling of Feedback
Original “Extended Working Hours” included “active overtime” and “reduced leave”	Non-participant-Psychology PhD: Reducing leave also seems to reflect active overtime.	Returned to original materials. Re-analysis found: “Active overtime” reflects overtime on workdays and weekends; “reduced leave” refers specifically to reduced annual leave. After consideration, “active overtime” was corrected to “active overtime on workdays or holidays” ; “reduced leave” corrected to “reduced annual leave.”
First category of “Case-Closure-Oriented Strategies” was “striving for pre-trial mediation”	Participant-Judge: Now pre-trial mediation is generally done by mediators. Judges do in-court mediation. If pre-trial mediation succeeds, only a mediation statement is needed, no court session, saving much work.	Checked legal professional terminology and corrected to “striving for successful pre-trial mediation.”

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.*