

# NATIONAL PUBLIC DEFENSE WELL-BEING STUDY



## Project Goals

[BeSustained](#), a national nonprofit with the mission of improving access to justice by advancing the well-being of public defenders, is conducting the first of its kind national study of well-being in public defense. The findings and recommendations from this project will help support individual defenders, improve the organizations we work in, and inform the systems making budget and policy decisions that impact public defense. The future of public defense requires a community of thriving public defenders who are supported to provide client-centered advocacy, particularly in light of the current challenges that we face. This project provides an evidence-based path toward this goal. Led by current and former public defenders and well-being thought leaders, this study is generating critical data to help support and sustain public defenders.

Support individual  
defenders.

Improve work  
environments.

Inform budget and  
policy decisions.

## The Need for Research

Large and recent studies of lawyer well-being, such as [The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys in 2016](#) and the [2024 Attorney Well-Being Report: The Divide Between Health & the Legal Industry](#), have informed the field and fueled investment in well-being in the private legal sector. The [ABA and Krill Strategies](#) are currently collaborating with state bars on a nationwide research update on lawyer well-being.

There is less data on public defense. The groundbreaking 2011 Wisconsin study by Linda Albert, summarized in [The Toll of Trauma](#), establishes the impacts of trauma exposure on public defenders. Individual states have undertaken studies of public defender well-being, such as the [Kansas State Board of Indigents' Defense Services Well-Being Committee](#) and [An exploratory study of occupational and secondary traumatic stress among a mid-sized public defenders' office](#), but there has been little national research to guide data driven responses to support the well-being of public defenders. As public defenders struggle with the toll of trauma and occupational stress, and organizations struggle to recruit and retain defenders, this research is urgently needed.

## Timeline

This project utilizes multiple research methods that are both quantitative and qualitative, with the protection of privacy and scientific methodology.

**Phase One** explores the motivation that drives public defenders from recruitment through retention and separation decisions.

**Phase Two** will make a comprehensive review of occupational variables that impact well-being in public defense.

<b>PHASE ONE: Survey on Passion &amp; Sustainability</b> Fall 2025 - Winter 2025/26	<b>PHASE TWO: Defender Well-Being Study</b> Summer-Fall 2026
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Collaboration with a researcher at Harvard Business School, to deepen our understanding of what drives passion, energy and sustainability in public defense.</li><li>● In November 2025, survey participants answered a few short online questions twice a day for two weeks, taking 2-3 minutes per survey.</li><li>● Aggregated survey data is being used to identify key issues impacting well-being in public defense and priorities for additional research during Phase Two.</li><li>● Findings from Phase One will be shared starting on 4/1/26 at events announced at the <a href="#">Study Project Page</a> at BeSustained.org.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Collaboration with a researcher at the University of Utah, designed to survey issues affecting public defender well-being.</li><li>● Survey participation will be voluntary and anonymous. Univ. of Utah will conduct a scientific study with protection of privacy and scientific methodology.</li><li>● One-time in-depth survey conducted in Summer 2026 that should take no more than a total of 10 minutes to answer.</li><li>● The study will focus on a number of occupational domains (i.e., race, gender, age, region) and well-being measures (such as depression, anxiety, substance use, trauma, retention).</li></ul>

## Report of Findings

We will issue a report of the findings from each study in order to identify and advance recommended actions to better support well-being of defenders. From recruitment to retention, and maintaining motivation and zealous advocacy throughout our defense careers, we seek to support defenders so they can better serve clients. The final report will:

- Provide a comprehensive summary of current research on well-being of public defenders.
- Describe the challenges and impacts to well-being for public defenders and their organizations.
- Describe positive interventions: What do you and your organization need to be successful maintaining your well-being as a public defender?
- Identify recommended actions to better support defenders, and policy and legislative changes.



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