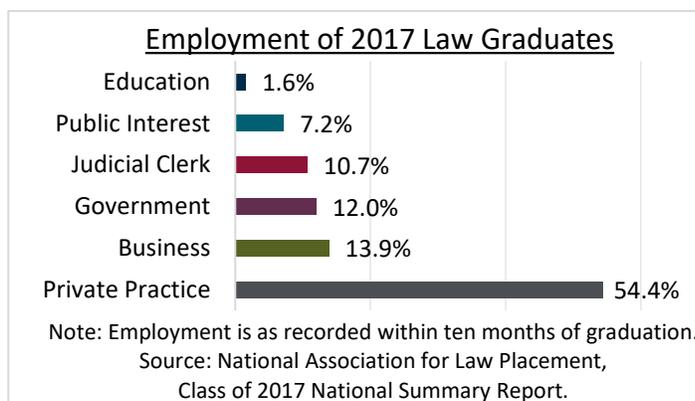




FACT SHEET: PSLF and Public Interest Law

For many aspiring and current attorneys, a career in public service depends on the financial security provided by the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program. PSLF enables more law graduates to pursue careers in public interest law, thereby increasing access to justice for populations in underserved communities. With federal labor projections indicating that lawyer positions will have the most job openings among occupations that require a graduate or professional degree between 2016 and 2026,¹ our nation’s justice system depends on ensuring that the field of public interest law is well-staffed.

In a recent survey of undergraduate students, roughly half of those surveyed cite a career in public service as a top motivation for considering a law degree.² Despite this, only about a third of law graduates begin employment in public service.³ Those that do provide essential services as prosecutors, public defenders, legal aid attorneys and law clerks.



Public Interest Law: Compensation

One challenge that public interest attorneys often face is that they tend to be compensated at a level much lower than what they might earn in the private sector for doing comparable work. The median salary for a 2017 law graduate who, within ten months of graduation, began full-time long-term work in the public sector was \$55,000, compared to \$100,000 for those in the private sector.⁴ The financial benefits of the PSLF program can help support law graduates to not only enter public service jobs, but to commit to sustained careers.



The disparity in compensation continues well beyond the first year of practice. Public defenders with five years of experience had a median salary of \$68,000 in 2018, compared to \$161,500 for law firm associates in 2017.⁵ If public interest attorneys move to the private sector later in their careers, to better meet their financial obligations, this could have a devastating effect on the communities that rely on their services.

Public Interest Law: Caseload

Aside from the disparity in compensation, public interest lawyers often handle large caseloads with fewer resources. For example, it can be common for public defenders to not have enough time to perform case-related tasks and prepare for cases to provide the most effective counsel.⁶ Ultimately, this undermines the integrity of our justice system and individuals' access to justice.

Prosecutors

As of 2007, when the most recent data available was made by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were 27,000 chief and assistant prosecutors at the state level. Collectively, these attorneys closed nearly 3 million cases and served nearly 300 million people—each attorney, on average, closed 110 cases and served 11,000 individuals.⁷

Public Defenders

As of 2013, there were approximately 15,000 public defenders across the country. Collectively, these attorneys closed nearly 2.7 million cases and served over 100 million people—each attorney, on average, closed 180 cases and served 6,700 individuals.⁸

Legal Aid Attorneys

Though roughly 60 million Americans are eligible for legal services-funded assistance (i.e., civil legal aid to low-income individuals), fewer than two million are served each year due to a lack of capacity and resources. Roughly 5,000 attorneys closed over 700,000 cases—each attorney, on average, closed 140 cases and served 360 individuals.⁹

¹ U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Projections of Occupational Employment, 2016-26*, 2017.

<https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2017/article/occupational-projections-charts.htm>

² Association of American Law Schools, *Before the JD: Undergraduate Views on Law School*, 2018. <https://www.aals.org/research/bjd>

³ National Association for Law Placement, *Class of 2017 National Summary Report*, 2017.

https://www.nalp.org/uploads/Classof2017_NationalSummaryReport.pdf (this figure represents the combination of the Education, Public Interest, Judicial Clerk and Government categories)

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ National Association for Law Placement, *2018 Public Service Attorney Salary Survey*, 2018. <https://www.nalp.org/0618research> | National Association for Law Placement, *2017 Associate Salary Survey*, 2017.

<https://www.nalp.org/uploads/Research/AssociateSalarySurveyReportPressRelease.pdf>

⁶ American Bar Association, *The Missouri Project: A Study of the Missouri Public Defender System and Attorney Workload Standards*, 2014.

https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2014/07/aba_report_on_missou

⁷ Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prosecutors in State Courts*, 2007. <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=1749>

⁸ Bureau of Justice Statistics, *State-Administered Indigent Defense Systems*, 2013. <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5826>

⁹ Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans*, 2017.

<https://www.lsc.gov/justicegap2017>