

The Making of Lawyers' Careers

Funded by the American Bar Foundation with generous grants from the National Science Foundation, NALP Foundation, Law School Admissions Council, and AccessLex, the **After the JD** project has tracked the careers and pathways of a nationally representative cohort of lawyers during the first 20 years of their careers. Starting in 2000, researchers collected over 10,000 survey responses from more than 5,000 lawyers and interviewed more than 200 lawyers to draw insights from individualized stories, contextualizing data with theory.

The Making of Lawyers' Careers (University of Chicago Press, 2023) is the capstone book of this research project, providing an unprecedented account of the last two decades of the legal profession in the U.S. and offering empirically backed findings on the structure of the profession.

Gender Disparity in the Legal Profession

Despite public commitments to eliminating structural gendered inequality and discrimination in the legal profession, especially in the wake of the #MeToo movement in 2016, sexual harassment and gender discrimination impacted the careers of female lawyers. Women disproportionately work in government and nonprofits, are less likely to be promoted to partner in law firms, and are far more likely to be unemployed or work part-time, often due to childcare responsibilities.

Project data show that women of color experienced higher rates of workplace discrimination than their white counterparts.

50% of African American women, 45% of Latina women, 41% of Native American women, and 29% of Asian American and white women reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace within the last two years.

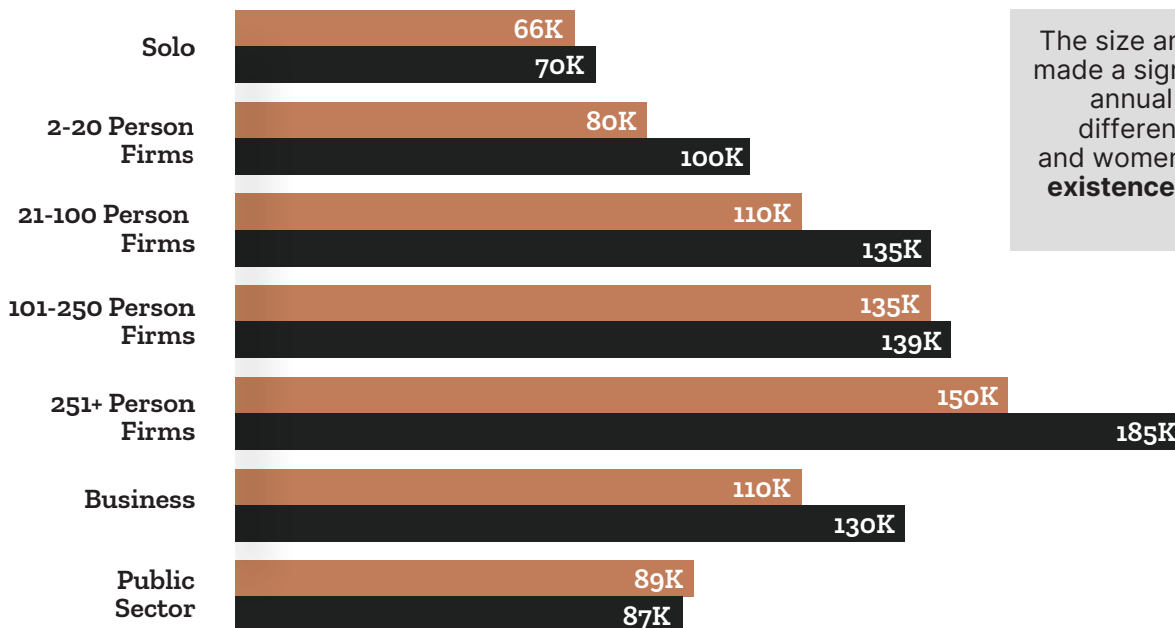
Gender, race, and school prestige shape lawyers' career prospects, yet they are not necessarily determinative in achieving upward mobility.

Success Story: "Constance"

"Constance," a Latina woman, attended law school at night while working as a full-time social worker in child-protective services, where her hard work and intelligence impressed the district attorney. This led to an internship during her last year of law school and, eventually, a job in the district attorney's office.

She was recruited away from the district attorney's office by a small law firm that specialized in lawyers' ethics. That firm merged with a large national law firm, where Constance became a lateral partner. Later in her career she has become an equity partner in a global law firm where she is a nationally recognized expert in the niche practice area of advising and defending lawyers on ethical issues.

Gender Disparity in Earnings



The size and type of workplace setting made a significant difference in median annual earnings for lawyers. These differences also vary between men and women, **confirming the continued existence of the gendered pay gap in the legal profession.**

■ Female Lawyers
■ Male Lawyers

Average Annual Earnings by Workplace Setting, Gender

Racial Inequality and Advancement Opportunities

Race and gender were both key determinants of the likelihood for a lawyer to make equity partner at a law firm.

White and African American lawyers have similar chances of making equity partner through the first six years of their careers. Later in their careers, white lawyers are much more likely to make this advancement, while African American lawyers are more likely to leave their law firms, disproportionately ending up in positions in government and the non-profit sector.



Job history data reveal that African American lawyers receive less training, mentorship, and client succession than white lawyers.

White lawyers make up 71% of the total survey but 80% of all equity partners.

Student Debt



Student debt is a major issue for respondents, who saw the cost of legal education skyrocket over the two decades before they went to law school. Only 13 percent of respondents had no debt at graduation, and by the last survey, only half of the cohort had paid off their debt.

Research showed that the burden of student debt is exacerbated for some racial and ethnic groups.

28%

Of African Americans lawyers finished paying off their debt by 12 years after graduation

40%

Of lawyers from all other racial groups finished paying off their debt by 12 years after graduation

"I'm still sitting on \$50,000 worth of debt. It's just a miserable, miserable thing. That debt has caused real problems in my life, real problems. That was a huge mistake I made taking on that debt."

-An African American male survey respondent, working in government at mid-career

Career Satisfaction

Despite these challenges, this study finds that most lawyers report being very satisfied with their decision to become a lawyer and would still make the decision to go to law school if they had to do it over again.

What parts of the job are especially appreciated?

Autonomy in small or solo practices

Social Contributions in govt. & public interest

Money and Prestige in large law firms

Support

Primary funding for the American Bar Foundation is provided by:



Source

The Making of Lawyers' Careers: Inequality and Opportunity in the American Legal Profession by Robert L. Nelson, Ronit Dinovitzer, Bryant G. Garth, Joyce S. Sterling, David B. Wilkins, Meghan Dawe, and Ethan Michelson.

This research brief was produced by the American Bar Foundation. The American Bar Foundation is an independent 501(c)(3) organization. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in publications or presentations are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Bar Foundation, nor the policy positions of the American Bar Association or its affiliates.