

Careers in the Law

Over one million lawyers work to assure the principle of equal justice under the law to the people of the United States. The legal field has grown swiftly in recent decades, with the number of lawyers up by more than 400 percent since the 1950s.

A *lawyer* is both an advisor and an advocate. As an *advisor*, a lawyer

- informs clients about the legal consequences of proposed actions,
- drafts legal agreements,
- helps put tangled affairs in order through counseling and negotiation.

As an *advocate*, a lawyer represents a client in court. A lawyer also advocates on behalf of clients in other settings to resolve disputes out of court.

All lawyers—even those who work for private companies—are officers of the court. This means that they are regulated by court rules as well as by laws and professional ethics rules.

Some lawyers have been appointed or elected to serve as judges. Judges preside in the courtroom. In a jury trial, they rule on points of law and tell the jury about the law that governs the case. If there is no jury, the judge determines the facts, rules on motions, resolves disputes, and issues the judgment. There are about 30,000 state and federal judges in the United States.

Becoming a Lawyer

Being a lawyer usually requires both a college degree and a degree from a law school. Law school usually takes three years of full-time study or four or five years of part-time study. Then, in almost all states, the graduate must pass a rigorous test, called the bar exam, to get a license to practice law.

Lawyers at Work

Most lawyers spend much of their time outside the courtroom and are encouraged by judges to settle disputes without a trial.

A lawyer's work can include defending or prosecuting those accused of committing crimes (criminal law) or representing persons, businesses, and the government in such matters as contracts and real estate transactions (civil law). Lawyers

- talk to clients and to others on behalf of clients;
- research legal issues;
- draft contracts, wills, and other documents;
- counsel, mediate, and negotiate settlements.

Some lawyers specialize in advising corporations; some concentrate on tax laws or on wills, trusts, and estate planning; some focus on public interest law by working, for example, to protect the environment.

About 8 percent of lawyers work for various governmental units in either criminal or civil law. A much smaller number become teachers of law. Others become judges.

Still others use their legal skills and education in varying fields. Some lawyers are corporate executives, bankers, legal affairs reporters, or school administrators, just to name a few options.



Skills Needed to Be a Lawyer

The qualities needed for a successful legal career include attention to detail, thoroughness of preparation, and integrity and high ethical standards.

Other important abilities include

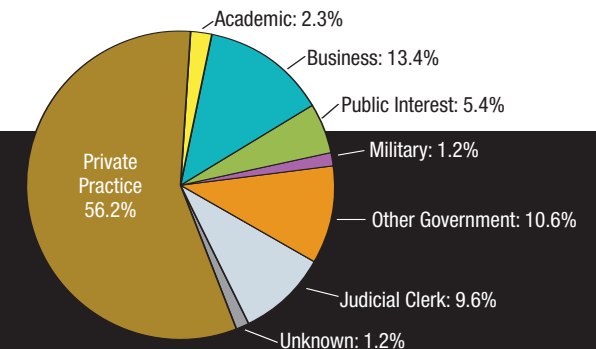
- a skill in applying applicable law to the facts of each case,
- a good vocabulary,
- sound reasoning skills,
- the ability to understand complex written material as well as to write clearly and concisely,
- a good memory,
- good listening skills,
- the ability to communicate well orally.

Lawyers interested in a career in a courtroom also need the ability to think quickly on their feet, speak with ease and authority in public, pursue details, and understand courtroom strategy.



Where Do Law School Graduates Work?

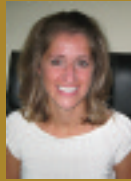
Source: National Association for Law Placement (www.nalp.org) Survey of 2008 law school graduates six months after graduation.



Nonlawyer Careers in the Law

Paralegals, also known as legal assistants, assist lawyers. They interview clients, conduct legal research, and draft legal documents under the supervision of lawyers. There are about 238,000 paralegals in the United States. Many colleges, as well as for-profit private schools, offer paralegal training. The Web site for the ABA's Standing Committee on Paralegals has helpful information on finding a school (www.abanet.org/legalservices/paralegals/).

Paralegal

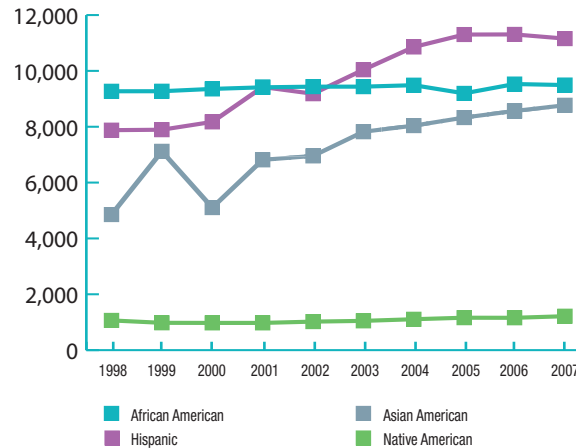


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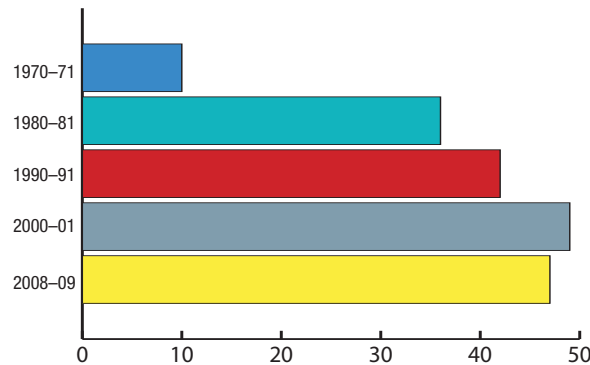
Mediators help people resolve disputes without going to court. They meet with the parties, discuss options, and help the parties come to an agreement. Mediation is a rapidly growing field. Mediators are often lawyers, social workers, or mental health professionals who have participated in a mediation training program.

Court reporters are integral to the trial process as they record everything said as part of the formal trial. (There are nearly 19,000 court reporters in the United States.) Court reporting is taught at about 130 colleges and private business schools. Training programs take two to four years. A high school diploma and strong English skills are a must. For a listing of schools approved by the National Court Reporters Association, see the association's Web site (www.ncraonline.org).

Minority Law School Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity



Percent of Women in First-Year Law School Classes for Academic Years from 1970-71 to 2008-09



For More About Legal Careers

You can find more about legal careers in the ABA booklet *A Life in the Law* (PC # 2350257, \$2.50; call 800.285.2221 or visit ababooks.org to order). The Web site of the ABA's Section of Legal Education and Admission to the Bar includes much helpful information (www.abanet.org/legaled/). For more information about the law school experience and selecting a law school, explore the Web site of the Law School Admission Council (www.lsac.org).



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