



**EQUAL
JUSTICE
WORKS**



LSSE
UNDERSTANDING LEGAL EDUCATION

/ Law Student Perspectives on Public Interest Careers

Data Report, September 2024

I. INTRODUCTION

Our nation is experiencing an access to justice crisis. According to the Legal Services Corporation, 92% of low-income people’s civil legal needs went unmet in 2022, leaving a massive gap in our justice system. Scholars estimate that over 150 million legal problems go unresolved annually.¹ Across this nation, people are on their own to challenge unfit living conditions, avoid eviction, retain custody of their children, or pursue wages an employer illegally has withheld, for example.

We might draw comfort thinking of today’s law students, so many of whom enter law school planning to pursue social justice work for a living. In fact, more new law graduates than ever are working in the public interest sector, reaching a record high with 3,095 jobs, or 9.7% of all positions secured by the Class of 2023 according to the National Association for Law Placement (NALP).² Public service employment, collectively including government jobs, judicial clerkships, and public interest positions, accounted for 32.2% of jobs taken by the Class of 2023—the highest percentage since the Class of 1977.

Despite the recent rise in public interest and public service careers, there is the potential for further growth, though this may be challenging given current market conditions. The entry-level legal employment market has been extremely competitive and is currently absorbing the vast majority of graduates. The incredibly low entry-level unemployment rate over the past three years also highlights the importance of retention efforts on the part of employers. For example, the American Bar Association (ABA) reports that fewer than one percent of all lawyers are paid legal aid attorneys, yet more than three percent of Class of 2023 graduates secured a position in civil legal services.³

What accounts for this untenable gap in our legal system?

¹ See, e.g., Rebecca Sandefur and Emily Denne, *Access to Justice and Legal Services Regulatory Reform*, 18 *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 27, 34 (2022).

² Public interest includes positions found in public defender offices, civil legal services, and other non-profit organizations. Source: NALP’s *Jobs & JDs Employment for the Class of 2023: Selected Findings*, available at: www.nalp.org/classof2023.

³ American Bar Association, *Profile of the Legal Profession 2023*, available at: [POLP.pdf \(abajournal.com\)](https://www.abajournal.com/policy/pulp/pulp-2023).

To answer that question, Equal Justice Works sought out the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE), which annually surveys law students about their experiences, providing valuable insights for legal educators, career services professionals, policymakers, among others. Together, we developed questions to shed light on public interest law resources available to students and barriers to pursuing such careers. After the results were in, we wanted to share the important insights about professional development for law students garnered from the study with the broader legal education community, so we also partnered with NALP and the NALP Foundation, which are committed to the professional development of students.

Together, we see this project as the beginning of a conversation exploring how law schools can help close the access to justice gap. By sharing the results of this research with law school professionals, we seek to jumpstart a collaborative effort to foster pursuit of public interest careers.

II. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

LSSSE collects information annually from law students about the nature and quality of their law school experience. Since 2004, 186 law schools in the U.S. have administered the LSSSE Survey at least once to measure the extent to which their students engage in effective educational practices that are empirically linked to learning and other desirable outcomes. Over the past 20 years LSSSE has collected over 425,000 student responses—the largest such dataset in existence.

Annually, LSSSE surveys between 60 and 80 of the nation’s law schools. The survey engages in full population sampling, which frequently leads to a smaller sampling error than what could be achieved with a random sample. LSSSE Survey results mirror statistics collected from the ABA and other sources on national percentages of law students by race, gender, public vs. private school, etc.

For this project, LSSSE supplemented its 2023 survey with specific targeted questions our organizations developed regarding public interest resources. To ensure maximum participation, we focused on student perceptions of institutional climate for public interest law in three respects:

- Whether and how institutions support pursuit of public interest careers;
- Whether and how institutions educate students about public interest careers; and
- What barriers, if any, prevent students from pursuing public interest careers.

The Survey collected responses from law students at 24 LSSSE partner schools, ranging from first-year law students to those completing their fourth year of law school. There were approximately 5,800 respondents in total.

III. RESULTS

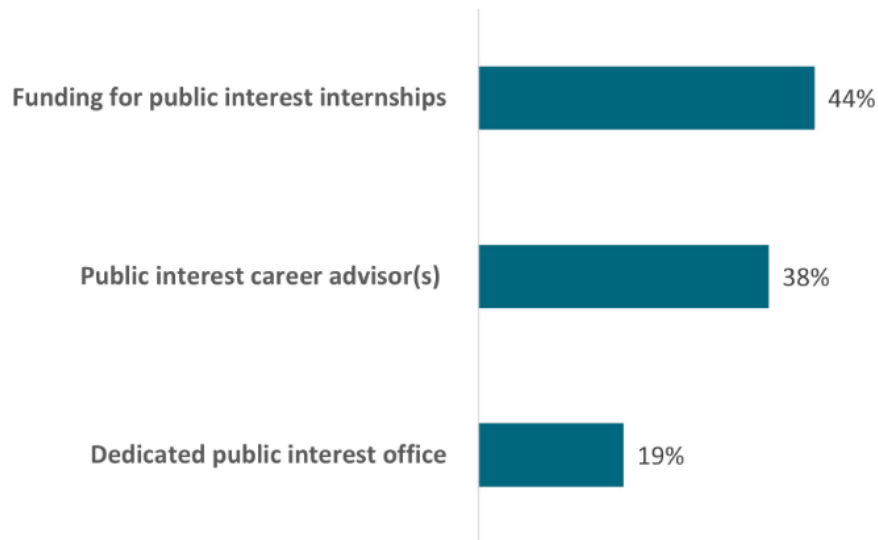
The data suggest that law students are unaware of many resources available at their institutions and, in some instances, their school lacks important supports for those planning to pursue public interest law.

Institutional Support for Public Interest Law

We asked students to identify the ways in which their schools supported public interest law, among them: providing an advisor or dedicated public interest office, paid internships, and recognizing student participation in pro bono. The majority of students said their school provided some type of assistance for public interest work. Just 1% said their school offered none of the supports suggested. Worth noting, 19% said they did not know how their school assisted public interest minded students.

Students reported that the most common way schools supported public interest work was through clinical programs and internships (63% and 60%, respectively). Respondents also reported that schools offered public interest focused organizations (51%), funding for public interest internships, and recognition of public interest or pro bono work (44% each). Thirty-eight percent of respondents indicated that their school has a public interest career advisor(s); only 19% said their institution has a dedicated public interest office. Finally, 14% said their school provided loan repayment assistance for graduates in public interest positions.

Which of the following does your school provide to support public interest law?



The results suggest a knowledge gap for students about how to make the most of existing campus resources. Additionally, even recognizing that some student responses may not accurately reflect the assistance available, due to a lack of knowledge, there may be opportunities for law schools to provide additional public interest career advising support.

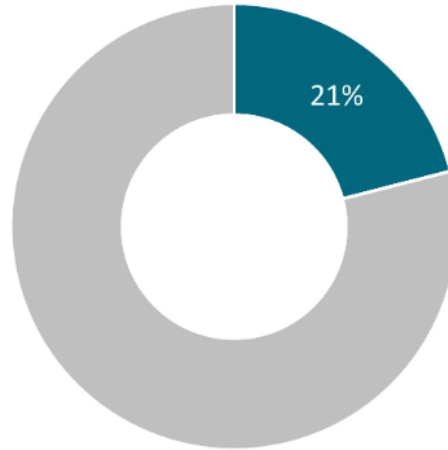
On-Campus Public Interest Education and Exposure

Students largely learned about practicing public interest law in courses dealing with trial advocacy (65%). Sizeable numbers of students reported that their schools offered courses about client counseling/interviewing and self-care practices (44% each), and implicit bias/antiracism/cultural competency (41%).

Fewer respondents said they learned about managing debt (33%) or the federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program (21%). This lack of knowledge may help explain the reluctance students feel about pursuing public interest law upon graduation.

Another gap students reported was in trauma-informed lawyering. Only 16% of respondents said they had been educated on trauma-informed lawyering, and 25% on community lawyering—two critical areas of exposure in the field of public interest. Lacking that background, students may feel ill-equipped to tackle the legal and social issues endemic in providing direct services to vulnerable communities.

School has provided education or exposure to Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program



Barriers to Pursuing Careers in Public Interest

When asked to consider what would prevent respondents from accepting public interest positions after law school, financial considerations were most prevalent.

A full 79% of respondents said they would not choose a public interest career because of low salary. A little less than half (44%) said student debt was a barrier to that path. Also, one-third (34%) of students indicated they preferred what they saw as more desirable opportunities in the private sector.

Student perceptions mirror the unfortunate reality that the average law student borrowed \$157,300 last year, while according to NALP, the median salary for Class of 2023 graduates working in public interest was \$66,620 compared to a median of \$165,000 for those entering private practice. Median salaries were only slightly higher for judicial clerkships (\$67,000) and government (\$73,500) employment. Beyond just the financial considerations about being a public interest lawyer, respondents also expressed concern over the emotional and mental toll of the work. One-third (32%) of students said anticipation of burnout or stress would play a part in their decision to accept a public interest job.

III. NEXT STEPS

When millions of people in the United States cannot access legal assistance to avoid eviction, maintain custody of their children, or escape an abusive partner, the legal community need an all-hands-on deck solution. Every part of the legal profession must focus on this crisis. Put simply, creating lasting change for communities and in our justice system requires more support for graduates with a desire to pursue public interest law. Law schools must continue to institutionalize their commitment to pro bono work and public service.

Thanks to these LSSSE survey results, our community has gained important information to help amplify these efforts. By continuing to work together, we can empower the next generation of advocates to be ready to direct their passion for impact where it's most necessary.