

Lawyers unevenly distributed across California and the country

Counties range from having one attorney for every 1,000 residents to one for every 41.

Lawyers are unevenly distributed across California and in the United States as a whole, according to the ABA's 2020 Profile of the Legal Profession, released Tuesday.

This disparity has significant impacts on access to justice, according to attorneys who appeared in a Tuesday webinar titled "Legal Deserts in America: A Threat to Justice For All," moderated by ABA President Judy Perry Martinez.

Fewer lawyers in rural areas isn't just an issue in criminal law, panelists said, but also in specialties like eviction defense and employment.

But Lisa R. Pruitt, a professor at the UC Davis School of Law, said law schools could address the problem by encouraging students to consider moving to rural areas.

"When they facilitate getting them into rural areas and expose them to rural practice, that attachment to rural places often takes hold," Pruitt said.

Georgia State University College of Law Professor Lauren Sudeall said law schools generally prepare students for what is considered the traditional track: finding a specialty and getting an associate position, often at a large firm in a big city.

Rural law often involves starting a sole practice as a generalist, she said. Sudeall's school has a program that matches interested students with mentors in rural areas.

Pruitt and Sudeall were among the co-authors of a 2018 article in the Harvard Law & Policy Review titled "Legal Deserts: A Multi-State Perspective on Rural Access to Justice."

It cited U.S. Census statistics that showed, out of California's 170,000 attorneys, Glenn, Kings, Lassen and Merced counties had fewer than one attorney per 1,000 residents. San Francisco, by contrast, had one attorney per 41 residents. Los Angeles, Orange and Sacramento counties all had around one lawyer per 150 people.

A lot of the reason has to do with money. According to this week's ABA report, the two best-paying legal markets in the country are San Jose and San Francisco. Los Angeles and Oxnard ranked in the top six.

The ABA report flagged law school debt -- including what it said was a disproportionate amount taken on by Black and Latino students -- as a key reason graduates choose certain areas and specialties.

-- Malcolm MacLachlan