

The Best Places to Practice in 2019

You've earned that precious JD and passed the bar. Now you're ready to settle down somewhere and practice your craft. But where should you live? Should you choose a state that's already home to tons of attorneys? Or one that costs very little to buy a home? Or maybe in a state that boasts a high concentration of legal jobs?

While there's no right or wrong place to live, we can help you narrow it down depending on your desires and values. The *ABA Journal* brings you the "Best Places to Live" for lawyers. Looking at statistics from various providers, we looked at several factors, including standard of living, housing prices and concentration of legal jobs to determine the best cities and states in each category.

Cost of Living

Obviously, there are many things to consider when picking a place to live and practice law. Maybe you enjoy being able to maximize your paycheck and wish to live somewhere with a low cost of living. Where are the best places in the country to live if you want your dollar to go the furthest?

In May, 27/7 Wall St. released a report reviewing the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis' estimates for price parity in 2016. They determined the value of a dollar by reviewing the BEA's per capita personal income data and dividing that by the regional price parity value. Based on their findings, these are the states where the value of \$1 is highest:

Highest Value of \$1 Per State

1. Mississippi: \$1.16
2. Alabama: \$1.15
3. Arkansas: \$1.15
4. West Virginia: \$1.14
5. Kentucky: \$1.14
6. South Dakota: \$1.13
7. Oklahoma: \$1.12
8. Ohio: \$1.12
9. Missouri: \$1.12
10. Iowa and Tennessee: \$1.11

Or maybe you're looking for a metropolitan area to settle down in, and you want to know how far your money will go.

In August 2018, the Tax Foundation, analyzing data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, released a report analyzing purchasing power in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas in 2016. Basing their analysis on the real value of \$100 in a given area, this is what they came up with:

Highest Value of \$100 Per Area

1. Beckley, West Virginia: \$126.90
2. Morristown, Tennessee: \$125.80
3. Danville, Illinois: \$124.40
4. Valdosta, Georgia: \$123.60
5. Rome, Georgia: \$123.30
6. Jonesboro, Arkansas: \$122.20
7. Hattiesburg, Mississippi: \$121.80
8. Jackson, Tennessee: \$121.80
9. Jefferson City, Missouri: \$121.70
10. Sebring, Florida: \$121.10

However, some lawyers might see their practices suffer as a result of living somewhere more affordable. Thomas Simeone, a personal injury attorney

with Simeone & Miller in Washington, D.C., points out that some practice areas require lawyers to have a more wealthy client base. “If the attorney is going to practice in an area where his or her services are needed by people with wealth and assets, such as trusts and estates, copyright law, real estate and corporate law, then it is good to have an office in an affluent area,” he says. “However, if the attorney is practicing in an area that is not related to wealth, such as personal injury law—then affluence is less important.”

On the other hand, due to social conditions, there is usually more of a demand for lawyers in criminal law in less-affluent areas, Simeone notes.

Meanwhile, rural areas need attorneys too. “If a lawyer is considering more of a general practice, opportunity is ripe for such lawyers in rural communities throughout America,” says Kelby Rasmussen, a personal injury attorney in Louisiana. “Understandably, not every person entering the field of law knows which practice area will be the best fit. In these cases, I would advise selecting a state where reciprocity from other states is given to licensed attorneys, and gives more of a bang for one’s buck in terms of the geographic location one is permitted to practice.”

Housing

“Housing affordability could be an important factor for would-be attorneys deciding where to locate, especially if they do not plan to relocate in a couple of years,” says Donald E. Petersen of the Law Office of Donald E. Petersen in Orlando, Florida. Plus, he says, “Many Rust Belt cities have low housing costs, and some are on the rebound.”

Lowest Median Home Price by State

(according to U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 American Community Survey five-year estimates)

1. West Virginia: \$119,800
2. Mississippi: \$120,200
3. Arkansas: \$128,500
4. Oklahoma: \$137,400
5. Kentucky: \$141,000
6. Indiana: \$141,100
7. Alabama: \$141,300
8. Ohio: \$144,200
9. Iowa: \$149,100
10. Kansas: \$150,600

Petersen warns young attorneys not to base their career decisions on home prices—at least at the extreme ends of the scale. “At the extreme highs such as New York or the San Francisco Bay Area—the returns for practicing law are usually not enough to support a decent lifestyle in such areas,” he says. At the other end, some cities have depressed housing prices because the economy is so poor. “Far too many residents can’t pay mortgage payments or even rents at national-average rates,” he says. “How likely is such a community going to support lawyers?” He reiterates that lawyers, especially those who rely on hourly rates or even flat fees “must consider the clients’ ability to pay.”

Lowest Median Home Prices Per County

(according to 24/7 Wall St., which reviewed data from ATTOM Data Solutions, a real estate and property data provider)

1. St. Lawrence County, NY: \$75,000
2. Peoria County, Illinois: \$75,050
3. Trumbull County, Ohio: \$84,500
4. Saginaw County, Michigan: \$86,500
5. Richmond County, Georgia: \$93,000
6. Lucas County, Ohio: \$97,000
7. Allen County, Ohio: \$98,000
8. Clark County, Ohio: \$99,250
9. Baltimore City County, Maryland: Median sales price: \$100,500
10. Peoria County, Illinois: \$102,500

Lawyer Population

It's the age-old question. Should you go to a state with a lot of lawyers? Or should you go somewhere with fewer potential competitors? On the one hand, having a lot of lawyers nearby can be a good thing—even if the competition might be intense. “The volume of commercial and financial transactions, and higher wages tend to support a larger, more robust legal community,” says Petersen. “Furthermore, the economies of these states tend to provide higher wages, which, in turn, provides a larger potential client base for lawyers whose services depend upon their clients’ paying an hourly or flat fee.”

While there may be a large number of attorneys in these states, which could translate to a higher rate of competition, Simeone says he is pleased he works in D.C. because of its proximity to Maryland and Virginia. “As a result, I am admitted to practice in all three jurisdictions and regularly accept cases in all three jurisdictions,” he says, adding that he belongs to three separate bars and has knowledge of three jurisdictions because the laws of each differ.

In that vein, here is a list of states with the largest number of attorneys, according to the 2019 ABA National Lawyer Population Survey.

Largest Number of Attorneys Per State *(including Washington, D.C.)*

1. New York: 182,296
2. California: 170,117
3. Texas: 91,244
4. Florida: 78,448
5. Illinois: 62,720
6. Washington, D.C.: 56,135
7. Pennsylvania: 50,039
8. Massachusetts: 42,788

9. New Jersey: 41,152
10. Maryland: 40,800

But, Simeone says, the rules of supply and demand apply to lawyers as much as they apply to other services and businesses. “So if there are a lot of attorneys in your practice area already, that can make your practice more challenging,” Simeone says.

If fewer competitors is what you’re looking for, then these are the states with the least number of attorneys, according to the ABA National Lawyer Population Survey.

Fewest Number of Attorneys by State

1. North Dakota, 1,687
2. Wyoming, 1,773
3. South Dakota, 1,995
4. Alaska, 2,324
5. Delaware, 3,058
6. Montana, 3,184
7. New Hampshire, 3,523
8. Vermont, 3,612
9. Idaho, 3,911
10. Maine, 3,995

Demand for Legal Services

Most lawyers want to go where the jobs are. In May 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics listed the metropolitan areas that have the highest location quotient—in other words, if a location quotient is 1.00, then the demand for jobs in that area is consistent with the national average. A quotient of 2.00 means there’s double the demand for jobs in a given location compared with the national average, while 3.00 means triple, and so on.

Cities and metropolitan areas with the highest location quotient for lawyers

1. Washington, D.C.: 3.15
2. Tallahassee, Florida: 2.85
3. New York City: 1.92
4. Trenton, New Jersey: 1.90
5. Charleston, West Virginia: 1.85
6. Miami: 1.75
7. Albany, New York: 1.68
8. Santa Fe, New Mexico: 1.64
9. Missoula, Montana: 1.56
10. San Francisco: 1.53

Another factor to consider is the need for lawyers within a given community. According to the Legal Services Corp., 86% of the civil legal problems reported by low-income Americans in the past year received inadequate or no legal help. The National Center for Access to Justice lists these 10 states and territories as the ones where the access-to-justice gap is the greatest:

Biggest Access-to-Justice Gap

(total composite index measuring attorney access, number of pro se litigants and language and disability access)

1. Mississippi: 14.70 (out of 100)
2. Wyoming: 19.90
3. Puerto Rico: 22.94
4. Nevada: 23.91
5. South Dakota: 24.33
6. Indiana: 26.90
7. North Dakota: 27.01
8. Alabama: 27.82
9. Oklahoma: 28.21
10. Vermont: 29.05

According to David Udell, founder and executive director of the National Center for Access to Justice at Fordham University School of Law, there were four subcategories that were factored into a location's overall score: 1)

the state's ratio of civil legal aid lawyers per 10,000 low-income people, 2) the state's policies for assuring justice to people with disabilities, 3) the state's policies for assuring justice to people with limited English proficiency and 4) the state's policies for assuring justice to people without lawyers. Washington, D.C., led the pack with a score of 67.90 out of 100, which Udell attributes to the district's "high concentration of lawyers per poor person, which is also a product in part of D.C. being more in the nature of a city than a state." He adds: "The Justice Index findings show, numerically, that every state can do a better job on civil access to justice, with worst-performing states having much further to go."

Of course, there are other ways to maximize one's employment options. Petersen points out that if a lawyer is seeking small businesses or larger clients, they may need to locate in an area where those businesses are located.

Michael Dye, a Fort Lauderdale, Florida, criminal defense attorney, says he was previously licensed in North Carolina for four years before returning to his favorite place to practice: Florida. He suggests that lawyers consider first where they went to law school.

Graduates from the elite schools are welcome everywhere, but if you graduated from a fourth-tier school, you will probably need to stick to a state closer to that school, says Dye, who graduated from Nova Southeastern University's law school in Florida.

"If you didn't graduate from a local law school, or some school that supplies that area with its lawyers, I would recommend either staying close to where

you graduated, or, if you must move, move to a major metro area,” Dye says.

By Danielle Braff