



Jobs & JDs
Employment for the Class of 2021
SELECTED FINDINGS

Job Market for Class of 2021 Law Graduates
Was One of the Strongest Ever



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CLASS OF 2021 EMPLOYMENT AND SALARY OUTCOMES ARE THE STRONGEST SINCE 2007, BY SOME MEASURES THE STRONGEST EVER

Commentary and Analysis by James G. Leipold, Executive Director

What a difference a year makes. While members of the Class of 2020 faced significant bar exam and job market hurdles during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Class of 2021 benefited from the economic rebound and the pent-up demand for legal services that followed the widespread shutdown of 2020. Driven by an extraordinary demand for talent at the largest law firms, a healthy private practice market propelled strong, and in some cases record-setting employment and salary outcomes for this class.

At 91.9%, up a remarkable 3.5 percentage points from the rate measured for the Class of 2020, the overall employment rate for the Class of 2021 matches the modern record employment rate set by the Class of 2007 just before the Great Recession, the highest rate measured since 1988. More remarkable is the finding that jobs for which bar passage is required rose 3.6 percentage points to 78.2%, a record high. Similarly, jobs that were reported to be full-time, long-term, and bar passage required rose by 4.3 percentage points to 76.7%, also a record high. And in a fourth marker of the uniquely strong job market for law school graduates from the Class of 2021, jobs in private practice were measured at 57%, the highest percent measured since 2003.

The data also show that for the first time since 2013, the actual number of jobs obtained grew, increasing by almost 2,400 jobs compared to the Class of 2020,

and the number of jobs rose in every category except for solo practitioner, for which a record low number of jobs was reported. For the largest law firms, those of more than 500 lawyers, a record high number of jobs was measured. At 5,745, the number of jobs at the largest firms grew by more than 13% in a single year and accounted for the highest percentage of private practice jobs, at 31.8% — also the highest percent ever recorded. By contrast, jobs in the smallest firms of 1–10 lawyers were measured at the lowest level since 2002, representing just 30.7% of all private practice jobs.

One of the noteworthy features of the recent and current job market for new law school graduates is the dramatic decrease in the number of jobs secured in the business sector, both as a percent of all jobs and as a raw number. While both the percent and the number of graduates securing jobs in business rose modestly this year compared to last year, the overall number of jobs in business is still nearly 3,500 fewer than it was for the Class 2013, when the number of jobs peaked at 6,935. For the Class of 2021, the number of jobs secured in the business sector was 3,487, just 11% of all jobs, with the sector having essentially leveled off at 11.3%, 10.5%, and now 11% respectively for the Classes of 2019, 2020, and 2021, after peaking at 18.4% of all jobs for members of the Class of 2013. This suggests, among other things, that when the private practice market is strong, in the aggregate students choose private practice

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opportunities over business jobs when they exist. And, while business had long been the second-most common destination for law graduates after law firms, in the most recent three years graduates have secured jobs in business, government, and as judicial clerks in about equal distribution, between 11-12% in each category, with business now falling behind government for the third year in a row.

Similarly, the percentage of graduates taking jobs that are classified as JD Advantage jobs has fallen dramatically from the period 2014-2016 when they represented nearly 15% of all jobs. Over the last 3 years that figure has hovered around the 10.5% figure, having been measured at 10.7%, 10.4%, and 10.6%, respectively for the Classes of 2019, 2020, and 2021. This decrease suggests that despite the growth of new JD Advantage opportunities in areas like compliance, many law graduates prefer bar passage required jobs when they can be found.

By contrast, other employment sectors have remained remarkably steady, immune in some ways from the ups and downs of a turbulent economy. The number of judicial clerkships secured by graduates has varied from only 3,100 to 3,500 since 2008. For this class, the actual number of clerkships was 3,402, comfortably within that range, and was measured this year at just shy of 10.7% of all jobs secured. The government sector beyond clerkships has also been a remarkably steady source of jobs for law school graduates before, during, and after the recession, with the percentage of graduates employed in the government sector hovering between 11% and 13% for more than 20 years, and coming in this year at 11.1%, with 3,536 jobs.

Jobs in public interest, on the other hand, have gradually ticked up over the past 5 years, and were measured at 8.7% of all jobs for the second year in a row, the highest percent ever reported, with the

actual number of public interest jobs, at 2,758, setting an all-time high. Jobs in education remain a de minimis part of the overall jobs picture, representing just 1.4% of all jobs for members of the Class of 2021, or just 437 jobs.

Similarly, the number of graduates starting out as solo practitioners, which has traditionally been very small but jumped substantially in the aftermath of the Great Recession, was measured at a record low number at just 210 jobs nationwide, dramatically fewer than the 1,059 jobs reported for the Class of 2011. For the Class of 2021, jobs as solo practitioners represented less than one percent of all jobs and just 1.2% of all private practice jobs.

Another measure of the strength of the job market for the Class of 2021 is the decrease in the overall unemployment rate, measured 10 months after graduation, which fell 3 full percentage points to 6.3% from 9.3%, and those who were unemployed but still seeking work fell from 8.1% to 5.2% compared to the previous year, and is well below the high water mark of 11.2% measured for the Class of 2013, still a modern high for that figure.

The other dramatic development in the job market for graduates from the Class of 2021 has been the jump in starting salaries, driven in large measure by a two-step jump in starting salaries for new associates at the largest law firms, another reflection of the tight market for talent at those firms. The mean salary for the Class of 2021 rose 6.4% from the previous year, to \$109,469 from \$102,858, reaching an historic high. The median salary for the Class of 2021 also rose to an historic high, to \$80,000 from \$75,000. The mean law firm salary rose 6.6% to \$137,844 from \$129,309, another historic high. The median law firm salary also rose, from \$130,000 to \$131,500. The jump in the salary numbers, and the fact that the mean grew by a significantly higher percentage than the median,

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reflects the jump in starting salaries at many offices of the largest law firms, where during the past 12 months starting salaries moved from \$190,000 first to \$205,000, and then in some cases to \$215,000.

This is as strong a set of employment and salary outcomes as I have seen in my more than 18 years here at NALP. Certainly, they confirm that the slight downturns in many markers measured last year were not the beginning of a larger downturn in the job market but instead were one-time downturns that reflected the market interruptions and many complicating factors brought on by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding those interruptions, the legal employment market for new law school graduates has remained strong, and as we have seen in the past, remarkably resilient despite economic challenges. The financial position of large law firms in 2021, measuring record profits in many cases, is the indisputable driver of the strong market described here for new graduates. Record numbers of law school graduates began their legal careers with the largest firms, and they began those careers with record-setting salaries. We know from our recruiting data from law firms that the market for summer associates has remained very robust for members of the Classes of 2022 and 2023, and we know that the size of the graduating class for the next two years will remain relatively flat, at about 35,500, so we would expect the job market for new graduates to remain relatively strong for those two classes, although the Class of 2023 may begin to face some headwinds, particularly if the United States enters into a period of recession, which many predict will be the case.

We also know that the largest law firms have begun to face the challenges of rising expenses (driven in no small measure by recent salary hikes) as well as a relative downturn in demand for legal services, the result in part at least of having worked through some of the pent-up demand that exploded after the pandemic shutdowns eased.

Finally, we also know that the size of the graduating Class of 2024 will be considerably larger than the 6 classes that preceded it. First-year enrollment for that class jumped by more than 4,500, to 42,718, up from the 38,202 starting members of the Class of 2023. Combined, these factors suggest that some of the record employment and salary figures measured for the Class of 2021 will come to be seen as somewhere near the top of a curve that will inevitably trend lower for a period of time, a downward curve that will almost certainly be in place by 2024 if not before. ■

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JOB MARKET FOR CLASS OF 2021 LAW GRADUATES WAS ONE OF THE STRONGEST EVER

A Summary of the Findings by Danielle A. Taylor, Director of Research

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a slightly weakened job market for the Class of 2020, a class that graduated in the early months of the pandemic and faced numerous obstacles in their job search including delayed, and in many cases, online bar exams, and shutdowns to parts of the economy. A year later, the employment outcomes for the Class of 2021 were some of the strongest that NALP has ever recorded, as the U.S. economy recovered from those pandemic-related disruptions.

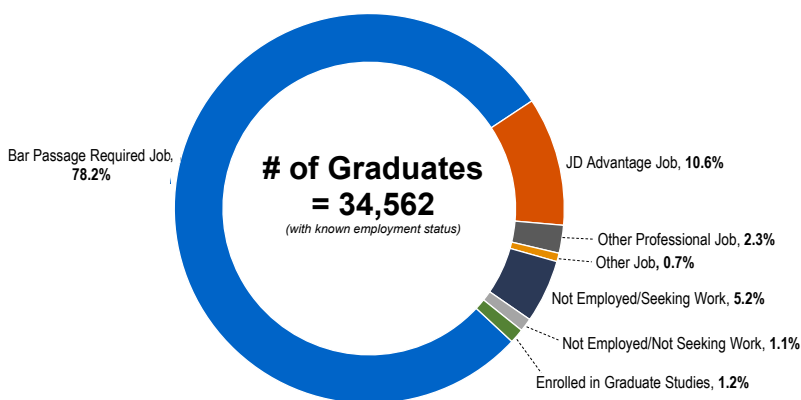
The overall employment rate for the Class of 2021 improved by 3.5 percentage points, to 91.9% of graduates for whom employment status was known, compared to 88.4% for the Class of 2020. This is the highest employment rate since the Class of 2007, when it was also 91.9%, and is a high-water mark for a period dating back more than

30 years to the Class of 1988. This year was the first time since 2013 that the total number of jobs increased, growing by nearly 2,400 jobs compared to the Class of 2020. This increase can be attributed to both the higher employment rate, as well as a Class of 2021 that was about 1,300 graduates larger than the previous class. This was the second year in a row of increasing class sizes.

With the Class of 2014, NALP began measuring the employment rate of law graduates as of March 15, or 10 months after a typical May graduation. Previously employment status had been measured as of February 15, an important distinction when making comparisons with employment rates prior to 2014. Analyses of these data for the Class of 2021 (measured in March 2022) show an employment rate that has increased by nearly 7.5

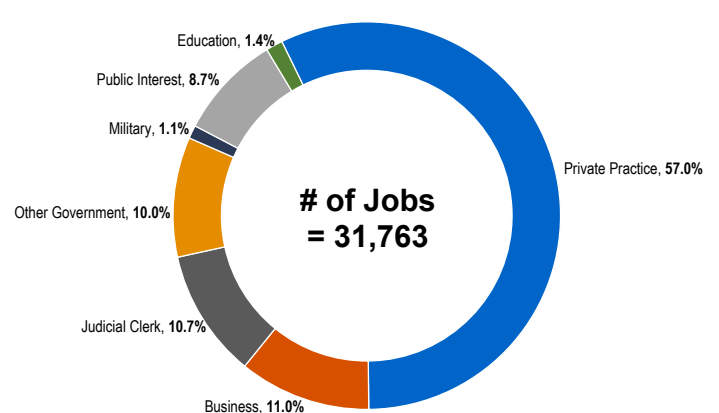
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Employment Status
Class of 2021 — as of March 15, 2022



Note: Jobs for which an offer has been accepted but for which the start date is deferred, and jobs for which type, e.g., bar passage required, was not specified account for 0.63% and 0.06% of graduates, respectively, but are not shown in the chart.

Employment Types
Class of 2021 — as of March 15, 2022



Note: Figures in this chart reflect all job types — both legal and other. For clarity, the category for unknown employer type, representing, 0.16% of jobs, is not shown. Overall, 96.9% of jobs were reported as full-time.

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percentage points since a post-Great Recession low of 84.5% for the Class of 2013, with one small pandemic-related setback for the Class of 2020.

Beyond the improvement in the overall employment rate, another historic high obtained by the Class of 2021 was the percentage of graduates taking jobs for which bar passage is required or anticipated. This percentage grew by 3.6 percentage points from 74.6% for the Class of 2020 to 78.2% for the Class of 2021 — reaching a new all-time high for the period since 2001 when NALP began using the current job classifications. Despite a one-year dip in this percentage for the Class of 2020, overall, the percentage of jobs for which bar passage is required or anticipated has increased by nearly 14 percentage points since reaching its lowest level of 64.4% in 2012 and 2013. A major factor underlying this increase was more jobs in the largest firms of more than 500 lawyers, both in percentage terms and overall numbers.

Some of the 78.2% of graduates for whom employment status was known and who obtained a job for which bar passage was required were reported as working part-time; consequently, the percentage employed in a full-time job requiring bar passage was 77.3%, an increase of 4.0 percentage points from last year. Further, because some of these jobs will last less than one year, the percentage employed full-time in jobs requiring bar passage and lasting at least one year was 76.7%, up 4.3 percentage points compared to 2020. This percentage has grown by 20 points since the Class of 2011, with

just the one setback observed for the Class of 2020.

An additional 10.6% of graduates obtained jobs for which a JD provides an advantage in obtaining the job, or may even be required, but for which bar passage is not required. (These are often described as law-related jobs.) This figure is up slightly by 0.2 percentage points in comparison to the Class of 2020, but remains at its second-lowest level since the Class of 2009 when it was 9.2%.

The percentage of graduates employed in other capacities was 3.0%, down by 0.3 percentage points from 2020. The unemployment rate, counting both graduates still seeking a job and those not seeking, fell by 3 percentage points for the Class of 2021, decreasing from 9.3% for the Class of 2020 to 6.3%. This is the lowest unemployment rate recorded since the Class of 2007 when it was 5.8%. Of the remaining graduates for whom employment status was known, 0.6% had accepted a job as of March 15, 2022, but had not yet started that job, and 1.2% were enrolled in graduate studies.

For the Class of 2021, the percentage of jobs reported as part-time fell to just 3.1% as compared to 4.8% for the Class of 2020. Prior to 2020's COVID-19 related disruptions, the percentage of part-time jobs had been on an 8-year decline and stood at 3.7% for the Class of 2019. For the Class of 2021, just one percent (1.1%) of jobs were both temporary (defined as lasting less than one year) and part-time, down from 2.0% for 2020.

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76.7%
of graduates* were employed in a full-time, long-term bar passage required job.

**with known employment status*

96.9%
of jobs were full-time.

31.8%
of law firm jobs were in firms of more than 500 lawyers.

20.3%
of all law firm salaries were reported as \$215,000.

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This compares to figures of 2.7-2.8% observed for the Classes of 2013-2016.

Upswing of Employed Grads in Private Practice Continues, Driven by Job Growth in the Largest Firms

Additional analyses of the employment data for the Class of 2021 reveal that 57.0% of employed graduates obtained a job in private practice, a modest increase of 0.2 percentage points over 2020, and the highest this percentage has been since 2003 when the figure was 57.8%. For most of the more than 45 years that NALP has collected employment information, the percentage of jobs in law firms has been in the 55-58% range and has been below 55% during only 2 time periods — prior to 1981 and from 2010-2018.

In addition to the growth in the percentage of law firm jobs, the overall total number of jobs in the sector rose for the fourth year in a row, after declining from 2014-2017. Despite Class of 2021 private practice jobs increasing by more than 1,400 jobs compared to the previous year, employment in this sector is still

down by more than 2,500 total jobs when compared to the Class of 2007.

This rise in the total number of law firm jobs can be attributed to an increase in job numbers across all firm sizes, except for solo practitioners. However, the bulk of this growth can be ascribed to more jobs at the largest firms — those with more than 500 lawyers — which increased by about 670 jobs, pushing their share of law firm jobs up from 30.5% in 2020 to 31.8% in 2021. This compares to only 16.2% of law firm jobs in the largest firms in 2011 and is even higher than the pre-Great Recession levels of over 25% in 2008 and 2009. In addition, the nearly 5,750 jobs taken by the Class of 2021 in firms of more than 500 lawyers surpassed for the first time the levels of approximately 5,200 jobs taken by the classes of 2008 and 2009.

At the other end of the spectrum, jobs in the smallest firms of 1-10 lawyers (which includes graduates working for a solo practitioner) accounted for 30.7% of law firm jobs, down from 32.8% for the Class of 2020. In 2020, small firm jobs experienced a

1.3 percentage point increase, after a 7-year decline from 2013-2019 in the share of private practice jobs in this firm size. The percentage of jobs in the smallest firms is now at its lowest level since 2002, when it was 28.9%. This was also the first year in which the number of jobs taken in the largest firms of more than 500 lawyers surpassed the number of jobs in firms of 1-10 lawyers. For the Class of 2021, large firm jobs held a nearly 200-job advantage over these smallest firm jobs. This compares to a 400-job advantage in the other direction for firms of 1-10 lawyers in 2020. By contrast, from 2011 to 2013, the number of jobs in firms of 1-10 lawyers was more than double the number of jobs in the largest firms.

Salaries Grow Across All Employment Sectors, But Largest Increases at Big Firms

Salary information was provided for 68.4% of the jobs reported as full-time and lasting at least one year. The national median salary for the Class of 2021 based on these reported salaries grew to an all-time high of \$80,000, up 6.7% compared to the

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Table 1. Median Starting Salaries 2008–2021

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Change 2019 – 2021
Overall Median	\$72,000	\$72,000	\$63,000	\$60,000	\$61,245	\$62,467	\$63,000	\$64,800	\$65,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$72,500	\$75,000	\$80,000	+ 6.7%
Law Firm Median	\$125,000	\$130,000	\$104,000	\$85,000	\$90,000	\$95,000	\$95,000	\$100,000	\$104,000	\$117,000	\$120,000	\$125,000	\$130,000	\$131,500	+ 1.2%

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median of \$75,000 for the Class of 2020. This is the third year in a row in which the median salary has risen. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, median salaries fell, and it took until the Class of 2019 for the median to surpass its pre-recession peak of \$72,000 observed for the classes of 2008 and 2009. The national mean salary for the Class of 2021 was \$109,469, up 6.4% when compared to \$102,858 for the Class of 2020.

In the latter part of 2021 and early part of 2022, there were several publicly announced salary increases by large firms — with some firms in major cities now paying entry-level salaries of \$215,000. This resulted in three distinct peaks on the right-side of NALP's salary curve for the Class of 2021 at \$190,000, \$205,000, and \$215,000. For the Class of 2021, salaries of \$215,000 accounted for 12.0% of all full-time, long-term salaries reported. This compares to 6.5% of all full-time, long-term salaries that were \$190,000 and 3.8% that were \$205,000. Combined, these three salaries accounted for 22.3% of the full-time, long-term salaries reported, slightly higher than the 21.3% of salaries that were reported at \$190,000 for the Class of 2020.

Despite increasing salaries at the largest firms, the overall law firm median salary only grew by 1.2% to \$131,500. The relatively small increase in the median salary may seem surprising given that several large firms in major markets increased their starting salaries to \$215,000 between the time that the Class of

2020 graduates and Class of 2021 graduates started working. However, median salaries in firm sizes of 500 or fewer lawyers for the Class of 2021 were relatively stable as compared to 2020. The only substantial increase was observed in firms of more than 500 lawyers, where the median salary grew from \$190,000 last year to \$205,000 for the Class of 2021 (a 7.9% increase).

Although growth in the law firm median salary slowed this year, it did finally surpass the previous all-time high median salary of \$130,000 that was recorded for the Class of 2009 and that was matched by the Class of 2020 last year. This is also the seventh consecutive year in which law firm median salaries have increased over the previous year. (See Table 1.) For the Class of 2021, salaries of \$215,000 accounted for 20.3% of all law firm salaries, while salaries of \$190,000 still accounted for 11.0% of law firm salaries. Salaries of \$205,000 comprised an additional 6.5% of law firm salaries. Combined, these three salaries represented 37.8% of all reported law firm salaries. For comparison, salaries of \$190,000 made up 36.5% of reported law firm salaries for the Class of 2020.

Median salaries in all other employment sectors were up for the Class of 2021, although some more so than others. The two generally lowest paying employment sectors for new law graduates, public interest and education, experienced the largest increases in median salaries, both growing by approximately \$3,000 to

8.6%

Of employed graduates continued to seek another job.

\$58,000 for the Class of 2021. Median salaries in business, government, and judicial clerkships each grew by just \$1,000 as compared to the Class of 2020 and now stand at \$81,000, \$65,000, and \$61,000, respectively.

Other Key Findings from *Jobs & JDs: Employment and Salaries of New Law School Graduates — Class of 2021:*

- Overall, 3.1% of jobs were part-time and such jobs were found in all employment sectors, but were especially prevalent in education settings where nearly one-fifth of jobs were part-time (19.5%), followed by the business sector at 9.3%. Just under 3% (2.8%) of public interest jobs were reported as part-time, a figure that has overall trended downward in recent years, as fewer of these jobs are short-term or part-time opportunities funded by law schools.
- Information collected on law school funded jobs reveals that both the number and percentage of jobs reported as funded by the graduate's law school were down to 1.3% of jobs and 427 jobs, compared with 488 jobs (1.7% of jobs) for 2020. This compares to figures for the Classes of 2011 and 2013 that were approximately 4 times as large. For 2021, nearly 72% (71.7%) of these jobs were reported as bar passage required;

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- 14.8% were reported as part-time, and 21.1% were reported as lasting less than one year. Since 2011, when NALP began tracking such funding, these jobs have generally become increasingly bar passage required, full-time, and long-term (lasting at least one year), though this figure may have peaked in 2015, at two-thirds of law school funded jobs. For 2021, nearly 65% (64.6%) of funded jobs fell into this category, just shy of the 2015 high-water mark. This compares with less than 8% of law school-funded jobs in 2011. Most funded jobs were in public interest, government, and education settings.
- The total number of public interest jobs, which includes jobs as public defenders and in legal services offices, remains higher than it was prior to 2009, in part due to the presence of law school-funded jobs in this sector, which accounted for 9.6% of all public interest jobs taken by the Class of 2021. The total number of jobs in education was essentially flat this year at 437 jobs, compared to 430 in 2020. However, this year's figure is about one-third of the total number of education jobs reported during the peak years of 2009 and 2010. School-funded jobs accounted for one-fifth (19.9%) of all education jobs, with the majority of education-funded jobs being research assistant/fellow positions (55.2%).
 - For the Class of 2020, business fell to its lowest percentage in nearly 30 years; however, the sector rebounded somewhat for the Class of 2021, growing by 0.5 percentage points to 11.0% of all jobs. Business has typically been the second-most popular employment sector for new law graduates, but fell to the fourth spot for the Classes of 2019 and 2020. For the Class of 2021, business has climbed to the third spot, but remains just behind government in popularity.
- About 28% (28.3%) of business jobs were reported as requiring bar passage, and more than half (51.7%) were reported as jobs for which a JD was an advantage.
- Just 1.6% of these business jobs represent graduates working for agencies that place individuals in temporary legal, law clerk, or paralegal jobs, a new all-time low. The percentage for 2021 translates to 56 jobs, far below the 700 temporary jobs in this category reached in 2011.
 - In-house lawyers were the most widely reported job in business. They accounted for 19.3% of all business job types.
 - Public service jobs, including military and other government jobs, judicial clerkships, and public interest positions, accounted for 30.5% of jobs taken by employed graduates, down somewhat from 2020 when they comprised 31.1% of all jobs. Although this percentage had remained relatively stable for nearly 4 decades at 26-30%, it is worth noting that despite the small decline this year, the percentage has been above 30% for the past 4 years. While the share of jobs in government and judicial clerkships dipped this year, jobs in public interest were flat at 8.7% of jobs, and remain at a level above that observed from 2011-2018 when public interest jobs ranged from 6.9% to 7.5% of all jobs taken.
 - Although the percentage of jobs accounted for by judicial clerkships has fluctuated somewhat, and stood at 10.7% in 2021, the number of clerkship opportunities has remained relatively steady since 2010, with between 3,200 and 3,450 jobs reported.
 - Of employed graduates from the Class of 2021, just 8.6% were seeking
- a different job, an all-time low. Except for 2020, this percentage has been declining since reaching an all-time high of 24.6% for the Class of 2011. The extent to which employed graduates are seeking a different job varies by the kind of job held. For example, 27.9% of graduates with a job for which a JD was an advantage were seeking a different job, compared to just 4.9% of those with a job requiring bar passage.
- The number of graduates setting up their own solo law practice after law school also reached a new low for the Class of 2021. Solo practitioners accounted for just 1.2% of law firm jobs and 0.7% of all jobs, compared with 1.6% and 0.9%, respectively, for the Class of 2020. Prior to a small uptick in the pandemic-impacted Class of 2020, the percentage of graduates employed as solo practitioners had been declining and reached previous all-time lows with the classes of 2018 and 2019.
 - There is much more to discover about the most recent developments in law school graduate employment. How did graduates of color, women, and first-generation college students from the Class of 2021 fare? Which cities and states offer the most employment opportunities, and where should graduates look for the best paying jobs? NALP's comprehensive *Jobs & JDs: Employment and Salaries of New Law School Graduates — Class of 2021* will answer these questions and more about the employment experiences of new law graduates and serve as a valuable resource and planning tool. This report is the only resource of its kind. To order a copy of the full *Jobs & JDs — Class of 2021* report, to be published in October 2022, email or mail a copy of the form on page 10 of these findings.

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