



Who's Going To Law School?

New American Bar Foundation-sponsored study examines the changing diversity of JD students by gender, race, and nationality since the Great Recession a decade ago.

By Miranda Li, Phillip Yao, and Goodwin Liu

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of recent U.S. law school enrollment trends. With two sets of JD enrollment data – one from the American Bar Association (ABA), the other from the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) – we discuss how the demographic composition of law students has changed since the Great Recession of the late 2000s, with particular attention to Asian Americans, who too often remain an invisible minority in contemporary discourse on diversity. We also analyze enrollment demographics by law school rank, grouping schools into six tiers based on nine-year average *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. Our study provides a fresh and thorough empirical foundation for discussions of diversity in law school and the legal profession.

A Closer Look

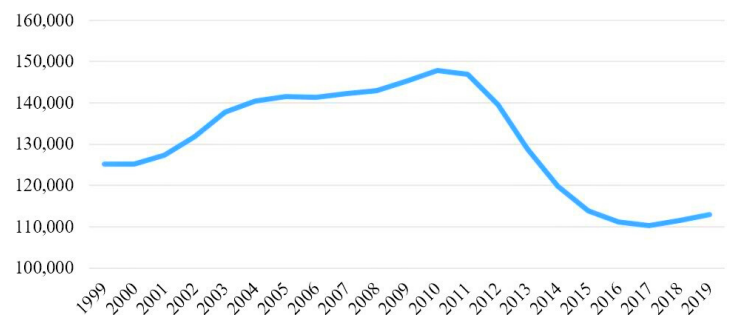
JD enrollment has declined almost 25% since its peak in 2010. Despite a recent increase, enrollment seems unlikely to rebound to levels a decade ago, especially given the potentially severe recession due to the coronavirus pandemic.

- Although law school enrollment increased significantly during the decade before the Great Recession of the late 2000s, it has decreased even more significantly during the decade since.
- Law school applicants have increased by nearly 11% since 2016, but new matriculants have increased by only 3%. The recent uptick in enrollment that some have called the “Trump bump” has been modest.
- Law school enrollment may decline further over the next decade, depending on the depth and duration of the economic slowdown due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Women have outnumbered men in law school since 2016. The recent increase in JD enrollment is entirely attributable to more women pursuing law.

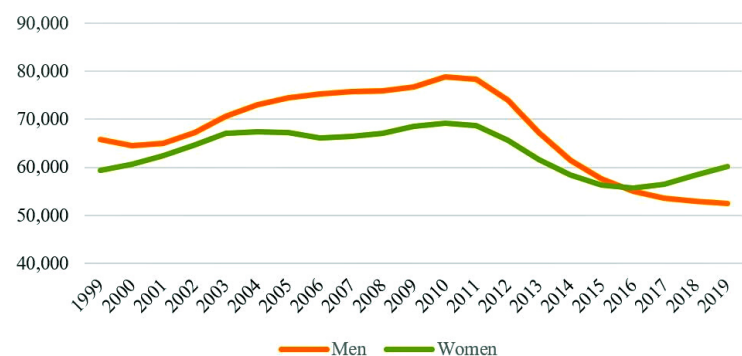
- Although women outnumber men at schools up and down the rankings, women are disproportionately enrolled in lower-ranked schools with lower rates of bar passage and post-graduation employment. It is

Figure 1
Total JD Enrollment, 1999–2019



Source: ABA

Figure 2
JD Enrollment by Gender, 1999–2019

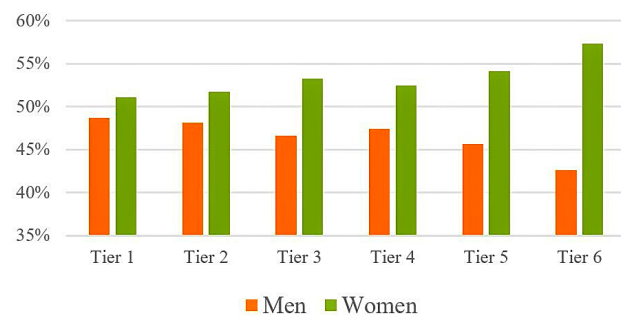


Source: ABA

thus unclear to what extent the growing percentage of women attending law school will alter the historic predominance of men in the legal profession, especially at the top ranks.

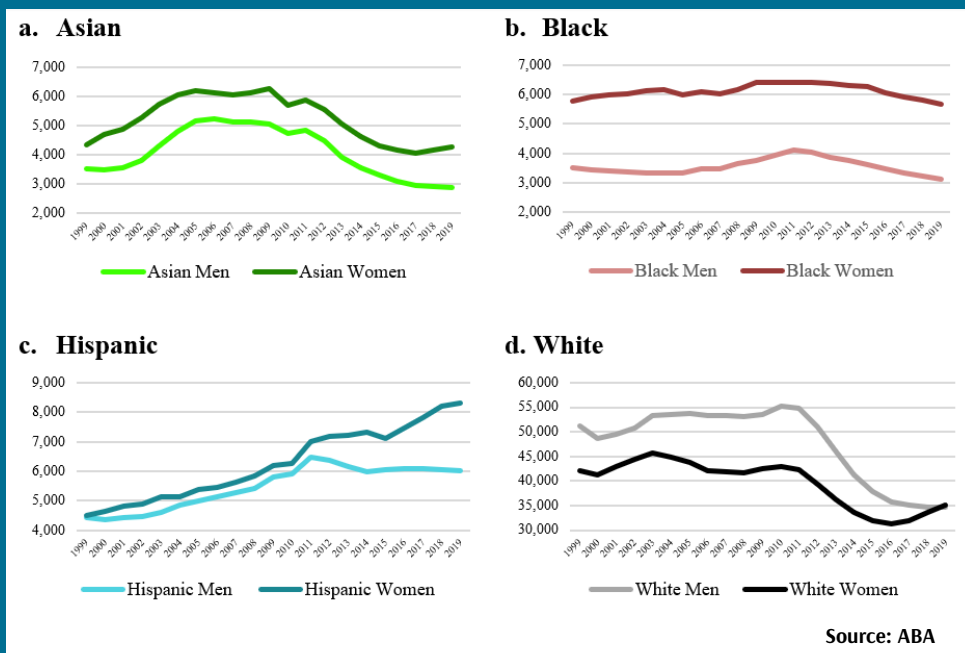
- The majority status of women in law school is almost wholly due to the substantial predominance of women among Asian, Black, and Hispanic students.

Figure 3
JD Enrollment by Gender and Law School Tier, 2019



Source: ABA

Figure 4
JD Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Gender, 1999–2019

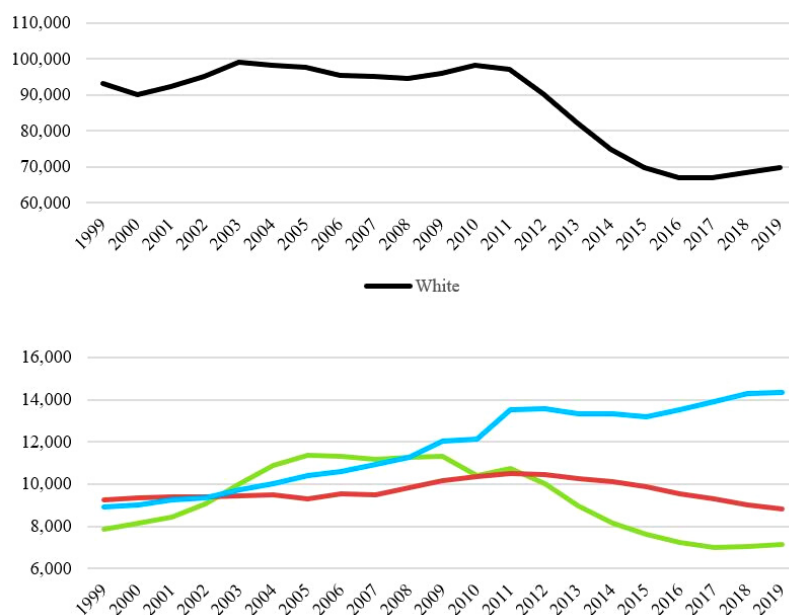


Source: ABA

Since the Great Recession, Asian Americans and Whites have comprised a smaller share of enrollment, while African Americans and Hispanics have comprised a larger share.

- The overall decline in JD enrollment over the past decade is primarily attributable to large decreases in Asian American and White enrollment, especially in lower-ranked schools. Black enrollment has declined modestly during this period, while Hispanic enrollment has increased.
- Black students and Hispanic students are disproportionately enrolled in lower-ranked schools. Further analysis is needed to determine how many of these students go on to graduate, pass the bar, and practice law. Given the substantial indebtedness and opportunity costs that students incur by attending law school, the changing racial and ethnic makeup of recent enrollments should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 5
JD Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 1999–2019



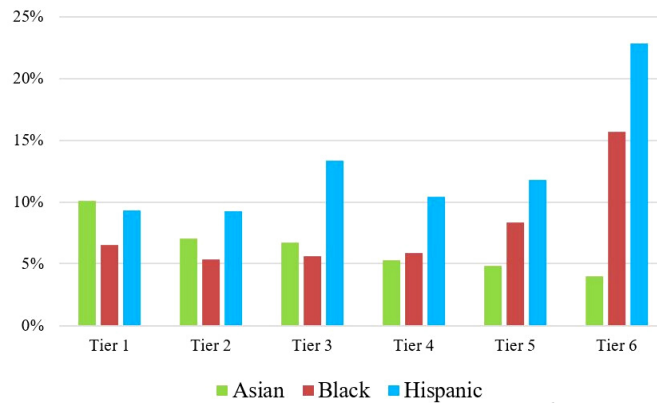
Source: ABA

Figure 6
JD Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 2011 and 2019

	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	N
2011	7.3%	7.2%	9.2%	66.1%	146,930
2019	6.3%	7.8%	12.7%	61.9%	112,879

Source: ABA

Figure 7
Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Law School Tier, 2019



Source: ABA

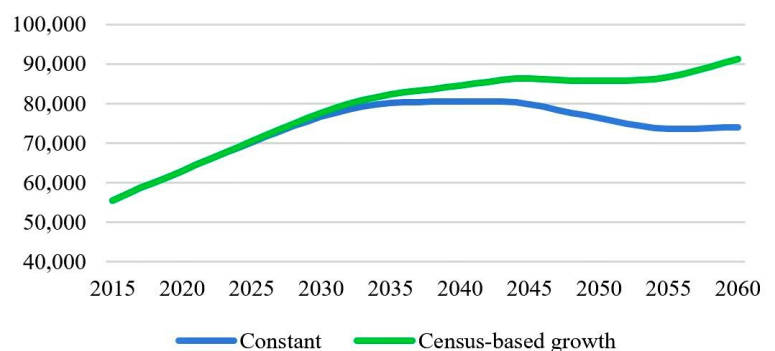
Asian American enrollment has declined more steeply than any other group since the Great Recession. As a result, the number of Asian American lawyers, after rising for four decades, will begin to stagnate in the year 2030.

- From 2011 to 2019, the number of Asian American first-year law students declined by 28% according to ABA data (not including multiracial students) and by 16% according to LSAC data (including multiracial students). Under either measure, Asian American enrollment declined the most of any racial or ethnic group.
- The observed decline may be because Asian Americans, compared to other groups, have greater concern about financial security in choosing a career or because they disproportionately lack encouragement toward law while facing growing pressure to choose a career path before completing college. Recessionary conditions due to the coronavirus pandemic may exacerbate these trends.
- Civic organizations, bar associations, and law student groups, such as the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association and the National Asian Pacific American Law Students Association, may wish to consider collaborating with guidance counselors and faculty at the undergraduate and high school levels to develop outreach strategies that inform students earlier in the educational pipeline about careers in law.

Figure 8
Change in First-Year Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 2011–2019

	ABA			LSAC		
	2011	2019	% change	2011	2019	% change
Asian	3,517	2,539	–27.8%	4,203	3,553	–15.5%
Black	3,795	3,034	–20.1%	3,875	3,524	–9.1%
Hispanic	4,940	4,914	–0.5%	5,027	5,287	+5.2%
White	31,358	24,385	–22.2%	30,072	25,571	–15.0%
Total 1Ls	48,996	39,270	–19.9%	47,110	37,417	–20.6%

Figure 9
Projected Number of Asian American Lawyers, 2015–2060



The “Constant” scenario assumes no change in the annual number of Asian American law graduates from 2020 onward. The “Census based growth” scenario assumes that Asian American law graduates will increase in proportion to the population of Asian 18- to 34-year olds in the U.S. population (an annual growth rate of roughly 1%).

The number of international students enrolled in JD programs has increased significantly in recent years. This growth has been concentrated in the upper tier of law schools.

- Among international students, Asians comprise the largest group, around 40%. Over the past decade, the enrollment of Asian foreign nationals has increased, while the enrollment of Asian Americans has decreased. These trends underscore the importance of distinguishing between Asians and Asian Americans in reporting enrollment data.
- In light of the coronavirus pandemic, it is uncertain whether law schools can maintain their current numbers of international students, at least in the short term.

The number of law students who identify as multiracial is increasing. This presents significant challenges for data collection and reporting.

- Neither the ABA nor LSAC reports data on the racial or ethnic composition of multiracial students. Based on intermarriage rates, multiracial Asian Americans likely comprise a significant share of these students.
- The ABA data, which are the most widely cited, report all non-Hispanic students who identify as multiracial in a separate category (“Two or more races”). Thus, the ABA data on Asian, Black, and White students will increasingly provide an undercount of those groups, as the number of students in the “Two or more races” category continues to grow.

Figure 10
JD Enrollment of Non-Resident Aliens, 2011–2019

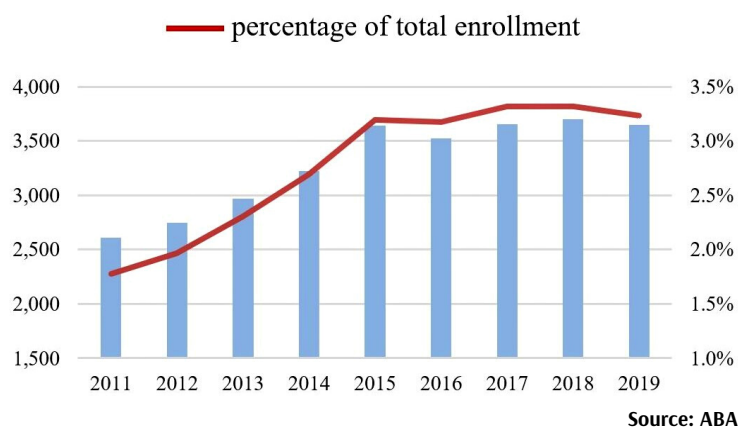


Figure 11
Non-Resident Aliens as Percentage of Total Enrollment, 2011–2019

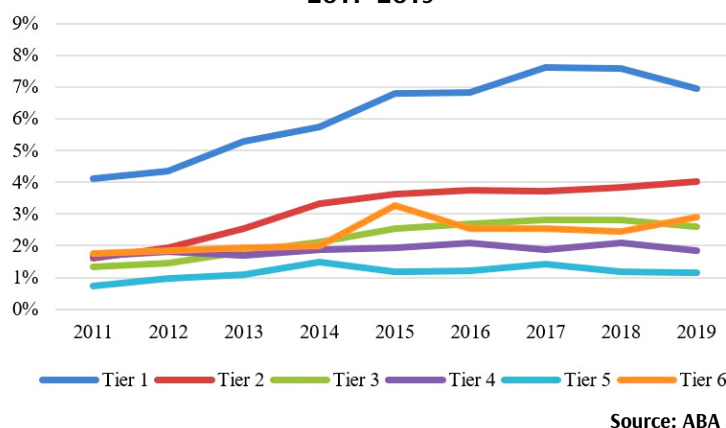
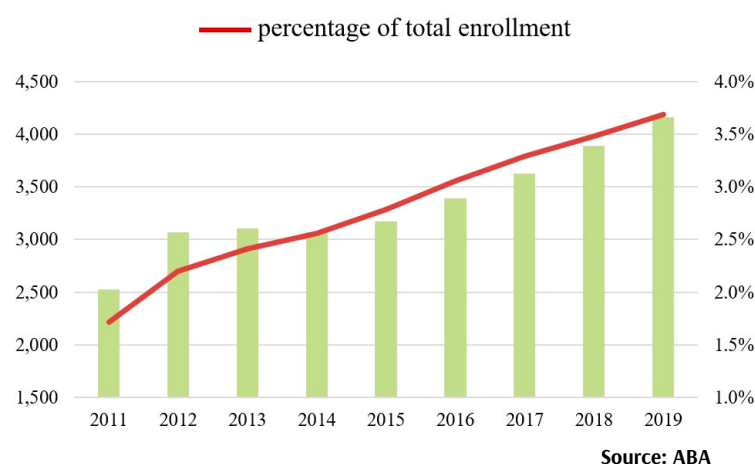


Figure 12
JD Enrollment of Students of Two or More Races, 2011–2019



This study is an outgrowth of earlier work that provided a systematic account of the experiences of Asian Americans in the legal profession. See Eric Chung et al., National Asian Pacific American Bar Association & Yale Law School, *A Portrait of Asian Americans in the Law* (2017). The findings here are part of ongoing research in collaboration with the American Bar Foundation (ABF) on diversity in the legal profession. Miranda Li, Phillip Yao, and Goodwin Liu are ABF Collaborating Scholars. The ABF is grateful for the generous financial support of Davis & Polk, Arnold & Porter, Asian American Bar Association of the Greater Bay Area, Asian American Bar Association of New York, Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Silicon Valley, Latham & Watkins, National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, and Yale Law School. Special thanks for additional support from Silvia Chin and the Asian American Law Fund of New York.