

Research Summary

Income at the Bar by Gender and Ethnicity



Background

The Bar Standards Board (BSB) has a statutory duty to encourage an independent, strong, diverse, and effective legal profession. In 2020 and 2022, the BSB published research into differences in income by gender and ethnicity, which showed that female barristers are likely to earn less than male barristers and that those from minority ethnic backgrounds are likely to earn less than White barristers. The BSB has now undertaken a further piece of research, which builds on the 2022 research, as well as subsequent research into barrister incomes undertaken by the Bar Council in February 2025. This research complements the previous research by looking at income trends since the 2022 report, and by considering additional factors linked to income beyond those detailed in the recent Bar Council research (such as looking at region and employed and self-employed status).

The scope of the research was to assess:

- The extent to which the previously identified disparities in income by gender and ethnicity were still present; and
- The extent to which incomes and income disparities have changed since the 2022 report.

Research Approach

The Bar Standards Board (BSB) collects data on the income of the practising Bar as part of our Authorisation to Practise process (ATP). This is an annual process in which members of the profession renew their Practising Certificate and provide information covering demographic and background characteristics, and information on their practice (such as whether they are in Employed or Self-employed practice, or the proportion of their income from particular areas of legal practice). Around one fifth of barristers are employed. We have analysed their gross income before tax and national insurance etc. For the four fifths of barristers who are self-employed, we have analysed their total fee income (excluding VAT) before they pay the costs of their chambers, which is estimated typically to be between 20 and 40 per cent of their income, and other costs such as pension provision.

This research analyses the impact of gender and ethnicity on the income levels of barristers. The report uses quantitative analysis of the income data from barristers' ATP declarations, and looks at data for the 2021/22, 2022/23, and 2023/24 financial years.

Key Findings

Income Disparities - Female barristers and barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds are likely to earn less than White and male barristers. This holds true whether the comparison is limited to employed barristers, self-employed barristers, QCs, and barristers based both inside and outside London. When barristers are grouped by their main area of practice and seniority by year of Call, female barristers and barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds earn less on average than equivalent male and white barristers. This suggests that even among barristers of similar experience, working in similar areas of law, there remain differences in income by both gender and ethnicity (although the research was not able to assess the impact of working patterns, such as hours worked).

Income Disparities - Female barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds are the lowest earning group, whereas White male barristers are the highest earning group - female barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds have average incomes of 47% of those of White male barristers when considering the profession as a whole. There are also differences in the income of barristers from different minority ethnic backgrounds, with Black and Black British barristers earning less than Asian and Asian British barristers overall.

Income Disparities - Differences in average income are larger when comparing male with female barristers than when comparing White barristers with those from minority ethnic backgrounds. Overall, average incomes for women are 57% of those of men, whereas average incomes for barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds are 74% of those of White barristers.

Income Changes Over Time - Comparing incomes between 2021/22 with 2023/24, all groups analysed saw an increase in income. This analysis suggests the largest increases have been for female barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds, and barristers based outside of London. The self-employed Bar has experienced larger increases in mean and median income over this period when compared to employed barristers. This may well reflect the fact that the self-employed Bar suffered larger drops in income over the Covid pandemic, and therefore a larger boost in income since as incomes recovered.

Income Changes Over Time - In general, minority ethnic barristers and female barristers have seen larger increases in mean incomes than White barristers. In 2023/24, barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds had mean incomes 74% of White barristers, compared to 71% in 2021/22. For female barristers, their mean incomes in 2023/24 were 57% of male barristers, compared to 54% in 2021/22. However, median income differences increased for both female barristers and barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds compared to male and White barristers respectively. In 2023/24, barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds had median incomes 69% of White barristers, compared to 71% in 2021/22. For female barristers, their median incomes in 2023/24 were 70% of male barristers, compared to 71% in 2021/22.

Income Changes Over Time - Analysis of changes in income shows that for both Female barristers from minority ethnic backgrounds, the narrowing of mean income differences is driven by a reduction in the income gap among the top earning female and minority ethnic barristers and their male and White counterparts, whereas most female and minority ethnic barristers have seen an increase in their income disparity with their male and White counterparts (thus increasing the difference in median incomes).

How will the BSB use these findings?

- The research findings will be used to inform the BSB's five-year strategy, and shape recommendations about our approach to Equality and Diversity at the Bar.
- As a risk and evidence-based regulator, the research will inform the BSB's wider work to identify and address risks at the Bar in relation to Equality and Diversity. It will also be used as a benchmark to assess the impact of the BSB's work to ensure fair work allocation within chambers.

What do the findings mean for key stakeholders?

- In the light of these findings, the BSB will work with the profession to consider what can be done to reduce the income disparities identified.
- Chambers are already expected to monitor work allocation, and may wish to consider the [Bar Council's guidance](#) on good practice in this area. If this monitoring identifies disparities in the allocation of work, chambers should develop plans to address the issue and help ensure equality in work allocation.
- Similarly, chambers and employers may consider analysing and publishing their income pay gap data by ethnicity and gender.

The main report can be found here: <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/data-and-research/research-and-analysis.html>