

Attorney

Interview by Amy Entwisle

Jordan Lancaster Estes Assistant United States Attorney

After earning a law degree from Harvard in 2008, Jordan Estes worked as a law clerk and then a litigator at a private law firm. Since 2014, she has been an assistant U.S. attorney in the Criminal Division of the Southern District of New York. As Estes explains, it was the philosophy classes she took in high school and college that helped prepare her for her job as a prosecutor.



Many people have a double major in college, but you had three. Why?

I always knew I wanted to go to law school, so I decided that in college I would just study subjects I really liked. Math is something I've always loved. I always liked reading, too, so majoring in English was an opportunity to do something I enjoyed. Philosophy was a bridge between these disciplines. It exposed me to logic games, which are essentially like higher math problems, and a level of reading comprehension that turned

out to be very helpful in studying and analyzing cases in law school.

After law school, you worked as a law clerk. What did that involve?

As a law clerk, you work for a judge. The judges rely on clerks to spot and analyze issues—any factual circumstances that could present a challenge when trying or defending a case—and write the first draft of the judges' opinions. As a prosecutor, issue spotting comes up a lot. For example, if law enforcement is working a case, as the prosecutor you have to ensure they're doing everything within everybody's constitutional rights.

What kinds of cases do you work on?

Assistant U.S. attorneys represent the federal government in all litigation involving the United States. Where I work, you spend your first year in general crimes, your second in narcotics, and your third in a senior unit such as violent and organized crime, terrorism and international narcotics, or complex frauds and cybercrime. I'm in my second year, so

I'm in narcotics. A number of my cases deal with drug trafficking organizations that move large quantities of drugs. For instance, many organizations move cocaine from Puerto Rico to New York; others move prescription pills and heroin from New York to Maine. We're doing a lot of prescription pill cases right now, given the opioid crisis.

How do philosophy and logic come to bear on your work?

When you're building cases, you're putting building blocks together like you would in a logic problem. For example, having x, y, and z as pieces of evidence might lead me to the probable cause I need to charge a person with a crime. On the other hand, maybe I have some evidence that suggests they committed the crime, but other evidence, such as an alibi, that indicates they couldn't have. By assessing the evidence, you're putting the pieces together, much as you would in a logical proof, and deciding whether you think someone is guilty.

I just had a trial where the defendant was charged with conspiring to distribute narcotics. The case against him was largely built by putting little pieces of a puzzle together, including evidence from his cell phone showing he was in certain locations at certain times. Seeing that cell phone in all these locations spread out over the city at various times where illegal activities were happening strengthened our case that this person was the one involved in those activities.

Once you're assigned a case, what do you do?

In some places, prosecutors get cases when they're already kind of neatly wrapped up, but here we do a lot of the investigative work ourselves. I begin by reaching out to the investigating agent, whether it's a DEA agent, FBI agent, or the NYPD. We discuss who the targets are and what they know about them. Based on what you know about the organization, you determine the best way to get the evidence you need to be able to charge the targets. There are many ways to



You have to be tenacious and willing to go after tough cases and pursue tough issues.

gather evidence, such as search warrants, wire-taps, subpoenas for documents, or cooperating witnesses. Once you gather the evidence, you have to charge the targets and prosecute the case. The time between charging a defendant and the case going to trial can be anywhere from eight months to more than a year.

What's a typical day like for you?

I probably work on at least seven cases every day. I'm usually in court at least once a day, often for short appearances such as pleas, sentencing, status conferences, or bail arguments. I interview cooperating defendants, meet with victims and witnesses, and draft search warrant applications, oppositions to motions, and charging documents. During a trial, though, I have to set aside almost everything else, so I have to carve out little pockets of time to work on other cases.

In total, I have around 50 cases right now. During a trial, I come in at 7:30 a.m. and leave around midnight. But there are relative lulls, too. After I charge someone, there's a period where the defense counsel is reviewing the evidence, and I'm often at a standstill for a bit. Then I focus on other cases.

Why did you want to be a prosecutor as opposed to a defense attorney?

I think either would be great jobs. A lot of people go back and forth. People are drawn to this work because they believe in justice, but you can pursue justice as a prosecutor or a defense attorney. Being a prosecutor is a great opportunity to see what it's like from the inside and get trial experience, which is really hard to do at a law firm, especially when you're junior. As a prosecutor, you're immediately in charge of your own cases, so you get a lot more experience earlier in your career than if you were a defense attorney at a large law firm.

What's the most challenging aspect of your job?

You want to be sure you're not going after someone just to make a charge. You have to take very seriously both the possibility of a criminal going free and putting someone in jail. No matter how bad their actions have been, all defendants have families. They're not one-dimensional.

What's the best part of your job?

I love arguing in court! You have to constantly be on your toes. It's fun.

What skills or qualities are important for someone in this career?

You have to be very logical and good at spotting and analyzing issues. You also have to be personable, because the job involves working with lots of different people, including agents, victims, and defendants. You have to be tenacious and willing to go after tough cases and pursue tough issues.

Do you have any advice for someone interested in a career like yours?

Debate can be incredibly helpful, as can mock trial. I also think it's important to always be thinking about keeping good relationships with people you meet. Growing up, you don't realize how much of your career someday will be based on building relationships with people—whether it's your colleagues in high school who could grow up to be somebody important, or your professors who will give you recommendations, or an employer who may help you get the next job. Always try to build good relationships, because your career is ultimately the product of many relationships over the years. ■

What Lawyers Do

Lawyers advise and represent individuals, businesses, and government agencies on legal issues and disputes. They use knowledge of legal precedents to analyze the probable outcomes of cases. They select jurors, argue motions, meet with judges, and question witnesses; interpret laws, rulings and regulations; and present evidence to defend clients or prosecute defendants in criminal or civil litigation.

Where They Work

The majority of lawyers work in private and corporate legal offices. Some work for federal, local, and state governments. Some lawyers travel to attend meetings with clients at places such as homes, hospitals, or prisons.

Education Required

All lawyers must have a law degree and must also pass the written bar examination of any state(s) in which they practice.

Salary Range

The U.S. Department of Labor listed the median annual salary for lawyers in 2015 at \$115,820.

For more information

American Bar Association
americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/pre_law.html

Law School Admission Council
lsac.org/jd/thinking-about-law-school/being-a-lawyer