

The Arkansas Lawyer

A publication of the Arkansas Bar Association

Vol. 61, No. 1, Winter 2026

A PROFILE OF THE ARKANSAS LAWYER

**WHO IS THE
ARKANSAS LAWYER?**

**FINDING PURPOSE IN
RURAL ARKANSAS**

**THE CHANGING RURAL
LANDSCAPE**

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

**ARKANSAS'S LAW SCHOOLS
AND THE NEXT GENERATION**

**ACCESS TO JUSTICE ACROSS
ARKANSAS**

What a Difference a Decade Makes: Has the Rural Landscape in Arkansas Changed?

By J. Cliff McKinney II

Introduction¹

In 2015, Lisa Pruitt, Bart Calhoun, and I published an article in the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Law Review titled “Justice in the Hinterlands: Arkansas as a Case Study of the Rural Lawyer Shortage and Evidence-Based Solutions to Alleviate It.”² That article provided an extensive review of the declining number of attorneys living and working in rural areas. Since then, efforts have been made to increase the number of attorneys in rural counties, including the University of Arkansas at Little Rock’s Rural Practice Incubator Project.

So, have the numbers changed in the last 10 years? Has the shortage of rural attorneys improved or worsened? This article will explore these questions by examining the latest data and trends. While the 2015 article remains highly relevant today, it is interesting to see how the situation has evolved.

The 10 Least Populous

The 2015 article was based in part on information available from the 2010 U.S. Census. The 2020 U.S. Census data is now available. In 2015, the state had a population of 2,915,918, and the 10 least populous counties in Arkansas were: Calhoun (5,368), Woodruff (7,260), Lafayette (7,645), Dallas (8,116), Monroe (8,149), Searcy (8,195), Newton (8,330), Cleveland (8,689), Prairie (8,715), and Nevada (8,997). As of the 2020 census, the state now has a population of 3,011,524 (+3.28%), and the 10 least populous counties are: Calhoun (4,740; -11.70%), Woodruff (6,268; -13.66%), Lafayette (6,306; -17.51%), Dallas (6,478; -20.18%), Monroe (6,797; -16.59%), Newton (7,226; -13.25%), Cleveland (7,551; -13.10%), Searcy (7,832; -4.43%), Prairie (8,283; -4.96%), and Nevada (8,315; -7.58%). Searcy County was the only county to change places in the list, but its overall population still declined. In total, the 10 least populous counties lost 9,668 people, or a 12.17% decrease.

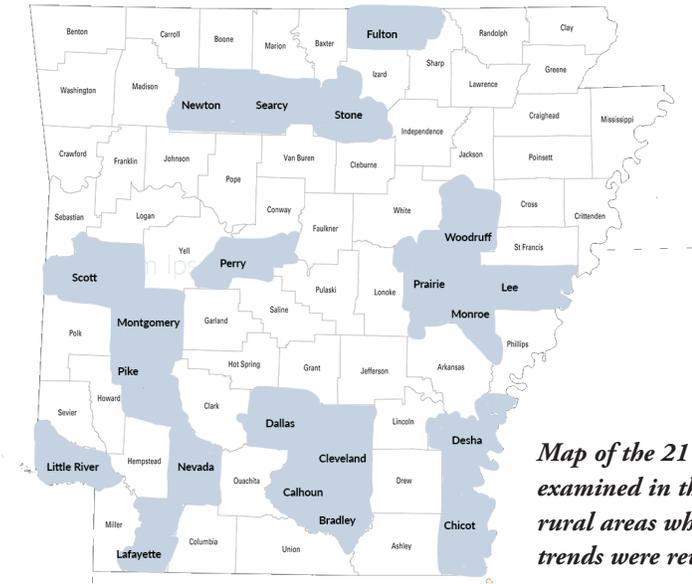
In 2015, Arkansas had 5,953 attorneys with a ratio of 2.04 attorneys per capita. Today, Arkansas has 6,808 attorneys with a ratio of 2.26 attorneys per capita. Here is the breakdown of the 10 least populous counties:³

About the Author



J. Cliff McKinney II is a Managing Member at Quattlebaum, Groom & Tull PLLC

	2015 Attorneys	2025 Attorneys	2015 Average Bar Year	2025 Average Bar Year	2015 Per Capita	2025 Per Capita
Calhoun	2	2	1975	1975	0.37	0.42
Woodruff	10	6	1982	1987	1.38	0.96
Lafayette	5	5	1985	2000	0.65	0.79
Dallas	7	10	1984	1992	0.86	1.54
Monroe	8	9	1988	1987	0.98	1.32
Searcy	9	10	1998	1997	1.1	1.28
Newton	3	3	1983	1978	0.36	0.42
Cleveland	0	3	N/A	1989	N/A	0.4
Prairie	7	9	1981	1998	0.8	1.09
Nevada	8	12	1999	1999	0.89	1.44



Map of the 21 Arkansas counties examined in this analysis, highlighting rural areas where attorney turnover trends were reviewed.

"The next decade can either bring resilience or retrenchment. The difference will be how—and whether—we choose to act."

I will confess that when I began writing this update, I assumed the problem would be worse today than it was in 2015. Thankfully, though, the reality is somewhat better than expected. Only one of these counties lost attorneys (Woodruff, which lost four attorneys). Three counties broke even, and five counties saw increases, most notably Cleveland County, which went from zero to three. Since all 10 counties experienced a decline in overall population, the per capita number of attorneys increased in every county except Woodruff. The total number of attorneys increased from 59 in 2015 to 69 in 2025, a 16.9% increase. This is remarkable considering that these counties decreased in population by approximately the same percentage.

Another issue is the average age of attorneys. The average bar year⁴ would need to improve by at least 10 years to maintain the status quo, as 10 years have passed since the 2015 research was conducted. This is where there is some bad news. Only Lafayette, Cleveland (by default of having zero attorneys previously), and Nevada had average ages of attorneys improve. A positive point, however, is that four of the counties have added attorneys licensed since 2015: Lafayette, Dallas, and Prairie each added two recent graduates, and Nevada added three recent graduates, resulting in a total of nine attorneys licensed since 2015 moving to these small counties. Nearly 14% of the 68 attorneys in these counties were licensed after the article was published in 2015.

The Next 10 (or 11)

The following 10 counties in terms of population in 2015 were: Montgomery (9,487), Lee (10,424), Perry (10,455), Scott (11,233), Pike (11,291), Bradley (11,508), Chicot (11,800), Fulton (12,245), Stone (12,394), and Desha (13,008). As of 2020, the following 10 least populous counties are now: Montgomery (8,480; -10.61%), Lee (8,597; -17.53%), Scott (9,834; -12.45%), Perry (10,023; -4.13%), Pike (10,162; -10.00%), Chicot (10,212; -13.46%), Bradley (10,542; -8.39%), Desha (11,395; -12.4%), Little River (12,022; -8.72%), and Fulton (12,071; -1.42%). Stone County (12,352 as of 2020; -0.34%) has moved to #21 with Little River (13,171 in 2015) falling from #21 to #19. Here is how these 11 counties stand:

	2015 Attorneys	2025 Attorneys	2015 Average Bar Year	2025 Average Bar Year	2015 Per Capita	2025 Per Capita
Montgomery	3	4	1992	1984	0.32	0.47
Lee	13	14	1984	1992	1.25	1.63
Scott	3	2	1983	1995	0.27	0.2
Perry	11	7	1986	1990	1.05	0.7
Pike	3	5	1994	2000	0.27	0.49
Chicot	12	17	1982	1995	1.02	1.66
Bradley	6	3	1978	1972	0.52	0.28
Desha	17	10	1980	1996	1.31	0.88
Little River	8	11	1984	2002	0.61	0.91
Fulton	3	3	1982	1994	0.24	0.25
Stone	11	14	1986	1995	0.89	1.13

"A decade after sounding the alarm in the 2015 article, the updated data offer both reassurance and renewed concern. Yes, more attorneys are serving Arkansas's smallest counties, and yes, new lawyers are planting roots in rural soil. However, many counties remain deeply vulnerable, relying on aging attorneys and still facing economic headwinds."

Of this block of counties, the total number of attorneys stayed the same. Four counties lost attorneys, a worse result than the 10 least populous counties. One county broke even, and six increased in number of attorneys. As with the 10 smallest counties, all experienced a loss of population, which contributed to the improved per capita number of attorneys; however, four counties saw a decrease in their per capita numbers.

The standout is Desha County, which suffered a 41.18% decline in attorneys (-7). Since Desha County's population declined by 12.4%, this resulted in a significant decrease in the per capita number ratio. Interestingly, however, Desha County is now home to three attorneys who have been licensed since the 2015 article, indicating that new attorneys are moving in. Neighboring Chicot County, though, gained five attorneys, an increase of 41.67%, almost matching the losses in Desha County. Notably, Chicot County has gained four additional attorneys since the 2015 article. This represents improvement with seven new attorneys moving to Chicot County and Desha County. Overall, these 11 counties added 19 attorneys licensed since the 2015 article, which is a positive sign that there is greater interest in living in rural counties.

In terms of the average age of the attorneys in these counties, Montgomery County and Bradley County experienced a decline, with the average bar year in Montgomery County decreasing from 1992 to 1984, and the average bar year in Bradley County decreasing from 1978 to 1972. As previously noted, a county's average bar year would need to increase by 10 years to keep pace with the passage of time since the 2015 article. Only Scott, Chicot, Desha, Little River, and Fulton managed to improve the average bar year by more than 10 years. Six counties failed to keep up, indicating that the aging of attorneys is worsening overall.

Retirees Going Rural?

Another angle worth examining is attorney turnover in these 21 rural counties. Although the raw data gathered intentionally does not include attorney names, it does list bar admission years. For purposes of this analysis, I assumed that attorneys with the same admission year in both 2015 and 2025 are the same individual. For example, Calhoun County had two attorneys in 2015—admitted in 1975 and 2001—and still reports two attorneys with those same admission years today. I therefore assume these are the same two individuals. With that framework, here is the observed turnover:

- **Calhoun County:** No change (same two attorneys)
- **Woodruff County:** Lost 1971, 1974, 1979, 1992, 1995; Gained 2024 (**Net -4**)
- **Lafayette County:** Lost 1984, 1991, 1995; Gained 2007, 2018, 2022 (**Net 0**)
- **Dallas County:** Lost 1978; Gained 1979, 2006, 2011, 2019 (**Net +3**)
- **Monroe County:** Lost 1979; Gained 1974, 1976 (**Net +1**)
- **Searcy County:** Lost 2001, 2007; Gained 1976, 1983, 2013 (**Net +1**)
- **Newton County:** Lost 1989; Gained 1976 (**Net 0**)
- **Cleveland County:** No losses; Gained 1975, 1991, 2002 (**Net +3**)
- **Prairie County:** Lost 1977 (two attorneys); Gained 2013, 2014, 2020, 2021 (**Net +2**)
- **Nevada County:** Lost 1976, 2009;

Gained 1999, 2007, 2012, 2016, 2018 (two attorneys) (**Net +4**)

- **Montgomery County:** Lost 2004; Gained 1980, 1981 (**Net +1**)
- **Lee County:** Lost 1968, 1979, 1982, 1993, 1999; Gained 1977, 1993, 2005, 2010, 2017, 2025 (**Net +1**)
- **Perry County:** Lost 1961, 1970, 1978, 2003, 2005; Gained 2000 (**Net -4**)
- **Scott County:** Lost 1973, 2007; Gained 2022 (**Net +1**)
- **Pike County:** Lost 1983; Gained 1976, 2004, 2006 (**Net +2**)
- **Bradley County:** Lost 1971, 1983, 1998; No gains (**Net -3**)
- **Chicot County:** Lost 1963, 1970 (two attorneys), 2005; Gained 1979, 1991, 1993, 1998, 2000, 2016 (two attorneys), 2021, 2023 (**Net +5**)
- **Fulton County:** Lost 1982, 1988; Gained 1995, 2011 (**Net 0**)
- **Stone County:** Lost 1960, 2011; Gained 1999, 2001, 2008, 2019, 2020 (**Net +3**)
- **Desha County:** Lost 10 attorneys (1948–2012 range); Gained 2016, 2017, 2019 (**Net -7**)
- **Little River County:** Lost 1970, 1984, 2009; Gained 2015 (two attorneys), 2016, 2020 (two attorneys), 2022 (**Net +3**)

There is some reason for optimism here because several rural counties have attracted attorneys who were admitted to the bar after 2015. That trend suggests at least some renewed interest in rural practice. However, the results also raise a red flag. Assuming a typical bar admission age of 25, any attorney admitted before 1985 is now likely over the retirement age of 65. Notably, 12 of the "new" additions across these counties have bar years predating 1985, indicating that they may be retirees. While retirees can make meaningful contributions to rural legal services, their presence does not help the long-term outlook.

Beyond the numbers themselves, the turnover data reveal critical regional trends. Counties like Desha and Woodruff suffered substantial net losses, raising serious concerns about the sustainability of local legal services. Desha County, for instance, lost 10 attorneys and gained only three, all of whom were licensed after 2015.

This suggests that an entire generation of attorneys has aged out without being replaced in a meaningful way. On the other hand, some counties, such as Chicot, Nevada, and Cleveland, experienced modest net gains or demographic refreshes, indicating pockets of resilience. The overall picture, though, is fragmented. Turnover is uneven, and gains in one county do little to offset severe attrition in others.

An Economic Impact?

When considering the rural lawyer shortage, it is also essential to examine broader economic trends that influence whether rural counties are attractive for attorneys. Poverty rates and median household incomes often closely correlate with a rural community's ability to support attorneys and sustain viable legal practices. A review of updated census data from 2015 to 2022 provides insights into this problem.

Across the 21 counties re-examined in this article, there have generally been modest improvements in economic conditions. Nearly every county experienced growth in median household income from 2015 to 2022 (the most recent economic data), with notable increases in counties such as Perry (from \$43,020 to \$56,640), Cleveland (from \$44,123 to \$55,533), and Newton (from \$33,679 to \$47,996). Despite these encouraging signs, however, median household incomes remain significantly lower than statewide averages.

Similarly, poverty rates have generally declined in these counties, though often marginally. Woodruff County, for instance, reduced its poverty rate from 25.8% in 2015 to 22.6% in 2022. Newton County improved from 24.2% to 19.4%, and Monroe County saw a meaningful drop from 30.9% to 24.9%. Still, some counties saw poverty rates remain extremely high. For instance, Lee County's poverty rate remains above 35%, essentially unchanged, and Desha County's poverty rate has significantly increased, rising from 21.2% in 2015 to 27.9% in 2022.

Interestingly, the data reveal a mixed correlation between improved economic conditions and the attorney population. Some counties with significant economic improvements, such as Cleveland and Nevada, have also experienced growth

in the number of attorneys, suggesting a relationship between economic health and attorney retention or attraction. On the other hand, counties such as Desha, where poverty has notably increased, experienced substantial attorney losses, underscoring that deteriorating economic conditions negatively impact lawyer retention.

One key finding is that while several counties have simultaneously experienced growth in attorney numbers and economic improvement (e.g., Cleveland, Dallas, and Prairie), economic gains alone do not consistently translate into increased lawyer populations. For example, Perry County experienced significant income growth, yet it saw a decrease in the number of attorneys practicing there. Conversely, Chicot County, despite maintaining relatively high poverty rates, managed to add new attorneys. This suggests that other factors may also influence attorneys' decisions to practice in rural areas.

The persistence of high poverty rates in several counties and relatively low median incomes across the board means that challenges remain for rural Arkansas. Although the overall economic picture is more favorable today than in 2015, the modest nature of these improvements suggests that attracting and retaining younger attorneys in rural Arkansas will likely continue to require concerted support, potentially through loan repayment programs, economic development initiatives, and enhanced practice management resources.

Conclusion

A decade after sounding the alarm in the 2015 article, the updated data offer both reassurance and renewed concern. Yes, more attorneys are serving Arkansas's smallest counties, and yes, new lawyers are planting roots in rural soil. However, many counties remain deeply vulnerable, relying on aging attorneys and still facing economic headwinds.

The strategies proposed in the 2015 article remain not only relevant but are critical to reversing the trend. Programs like the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Rural Practice Incubator, along with targeted incentives, economic development efforts, and recruitment, are among the best tools available to address the problem.

PRACTICEPANTHER
All-in-One Legal Practice Management

From intake to invoice, all in a single tab

NEW ARKBAR MEMBER BENEFIT

SCAN TO GET YOUR 10% DISCOUNT

Rural Arkansas deserves a sustainable legal infrastructure. The next decade can either bring resilience or retrenchment. The difference will be how—and whether—we choose to act.

Endnotes:

1. I am grateful to our firm's summer law clerk, Arin M. Soileau, for assistance in the research for this article.
2. Lisa R. Pruitt et. al., *Justice in the Hinterlands: Arkansas as a Case Study of the Rural Lawyer Shortage and Evidence-Based Solutions to Alleviate It*, 37 U. ARK. LITTLE ROCK L. REV. 573 (2015).
3. Note: I determined the number of attorneys in each county using the address the attorneys have on file with the Arkansas Judiciary. Of course, some of these attorneys may be nonpracticing or sitting as judges. Conversely, there could be additional attorneys practicing in these counties who have their bar dues invoice sent to a different county.
4. The Arkansas Judiciary tracks the year that an attorney is first admitted in the state, which is referred to as the bar year. ■