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This should go without saying: Not everyone who is charged with a crime is guilty.

Yet in most Louisiana parishes, suspects who can't afford their own counsel -- and who therefore rely on public defenders -- are likely to have a lot of trouble mounting a defense. A new report commissioned by the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and prepared by the National Legal Aid and Defender Association details some significant barriers.

Louisiana is one of only two states that finances **indigent** defense mostly out of court costs, the authors found. Unlike Alabama, the other such state, revenues from court costs remain in the judicial district in which they are generated.

In practice, sparsely populated parishes that write a lot of speeding tickets can devote far more money per **indigent** defense case than large parishes with more criminal trials. The current setup also means that the size of a judicial district's **indigent** defense budget may bear little relationship to the demand for public defenders' services.

Because the authors wanted to examine **indigent** defense in rural Louisiana, the bulk of the report focuses on Avoyelles Parish. And what they found was appalling: Lawyers received no particular training; the local **Indigent** Defense Board hired a lawyer with no trial experience as a public defender for all juvenile and misdemeanor cases; on average, a part-time contract attorney had about two hours to devote to each of her many felony cases.

Unfortunately, it's not likely that Avoyelles is the only parish in which such lapses occur. The report should inspire state legislators to revisit how Louisiana administers and pays for **indigent** defense.

A good public defense system isn't just good for defendants; it's in everyone's interest. When the wrong person is convicted for a crime, the real perpetrator goes free.