

'I'm a lawyer and I'm striking because I only earn £17K a year as a criminal barrister in Central London'

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A striking barrister with an eye-watering debt is considering leaving the profession after sometimes earning an annual salary of just £17,000 year as a lawyer in Central London. Zayd Ahmed completed his training as a criminal barrister in 2019 and loves what he does, but has been forced to take on a second job to cover his rent and food bills each month.

The 27-year-old, who rents a room in a flat share in Angel, North London, now works three evenings a week as a police station representative, where he gives advice to people who have been arrested. But this has had a knock on effect and he is now finding it harder to switch off and is feeling constantly tired.

Speaking to MyLondon, Mr Ahmed said: "I'm always tired, I'm not able to rest. Not counting my student loan, I'm £24,000 in debt. You have to have a balance, because it's unsustainable to be working all the time. The striking barristers, we're not asking for much - just the bare minimum."

There are two types of barristers - civil and criminal. The majority of criminal barristers are paid for by the Government via legal aid because most Brits don't have enough money to pay a lawyer out of their own pocket. The government set these rates, which have not changed in 25 years.

On the other hand, civil barristers do not get paid by the Government. They charge an hourly rate which criminal barristers generally do not do.

In 2019 - the year Mr Ahmed qualified as a criminal barrister - he earned just £17,300. In 2020, he earned even less, at £16,700 while last year he made £20,090. He continued: "If there's no change then I will have to leave this job. I have had this decision with my colleagues and my family. Some of my colleagues have families, and they can't afford to raise them. I would have to leave the profession - whether that's in law or away from the sector completely.

"No one does this job for the money. My goodwill for my clients is eroding and I just can't do it anymore. More than 300 people left the bar last year, one of whom quit the profession to instead work as a barista. And around 500 scheduled trials did not go ahead in the same year due to a lack of lawyers.

"We are not asking the Government to pay us millions of pounds. We want to continue helping people and we are asking for the bare minimum."

The young barrister, who grew up in West Sussex, has worked on five jury trials this year - and all five of his clients have been acquitted. He cited two cases in which he had managed to prove his clients' innocence after they'd been accused of serious crimes.

This, Mr Ahmed says, shows the importance of his work, and highlights the need not only for criminal barristers to be paid more, but also the fact that "something like this could happen to anyone". He added that there is also a need to attract more lawyers to the profession - given that they can currently be paid much more working in other areas of the sector including in commercial law.

As of the end of April 2022, there was a backlog of 58,271 cases, whilst 567 criminal trials were unable to go ahead last year due to a lack of prosecutors or barristers. The Legal Aid rule sets limits on fees, which means a solicitor earns around £250 for 12 hours of work, an hourly rate that equates to £20. Lawyers who work for private corporate law can expect to earn £100,000 a year from very early in their careers, whilst junior barristers start on an average salary of £12,200.