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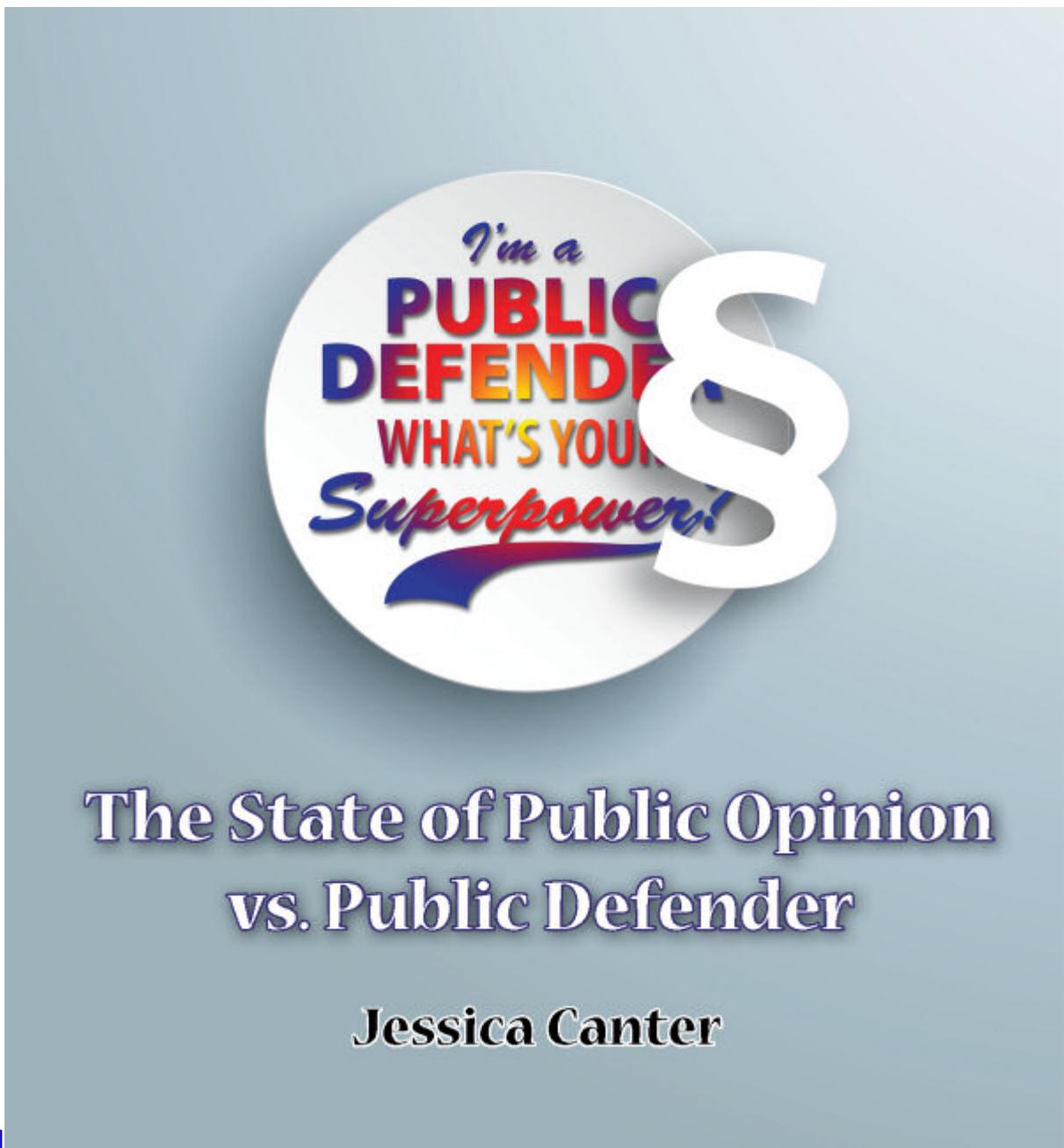
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The State of Public Opinion vs. Public Defender

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When one reads about public defender offices, topics tend to center around the problems that public defenders face. There are articles dedicated to the lack of appropriate funding, the often times unmanageable caseloads, and being short staffed. There are even pieces on public defender offices being disciplined for neglecting clients. As I browsed the World Wide Web, digging through public defender association websites, newspapers, and blogs, I came to the realization that there is very little on the advantages of being a public defender and the few I did find could be summed simply: we get trials, we argue a lot, we have resources, and poorer lawyers are happier.

I am here to tell you that there is so, *so* much more to it than that.¹

Public defenders are in the perfect position to attack systemic issues of injustice such as transport fees, attorney's fees, and other court costs. We are able to observe and attack bad law enforcement practices, and can go even further than that—we know which law enforcement officer is a bad apple and which one does his best to do his job correctly. We can tell by the name alone on the search warrant affidavit if we are going to have to fight the warrant, and which officer has a habit of making bad stops and bad arrests.

That being said, despite a few bad-apple officers, over time a sort of mutual respect has been built up between our office and law enforcement. Law enforcement understands why we are here—that we have a job to do just like they do—and being on good terms has proven to be beneficial. Some law enforcement investigators are more willing to speak with us about a case that we are prepping for trial, to explain their notes in more detail, and we are able to get reports and videos from the police department directly if need be. We are still adversarial in court when we need to be, but many officers have come to learn that sitting through a rough cross is meant to educate them, not attack them personally.

Our relationship with law enforcement also allows us to monitor the jail population. Our investigators get a jail log every day, which helps them keep up with 15-, 30-, and 90-day relief. If someone is at their 90 days and they are not our client, we have no shame in nudging either the attorney assigned/hired or the court to make sure that they receive relief as well. And speaking of investigators, we *have* them. They are built into our office. We do not have to ask the court for money to hire an investigator, and we also do not have to ask the court for money to hire an expert. We have a small budget that keeps us from needing to convince a judge for funds to properly do our jobs.

Another advantage is that we are a part of the community. We have built relationships not only with law enforcement, but with our clients, judges, and prosecutors. Yes, I said prosecutors. This may come as a surprise to some, but many of the prosecutors in our small jurisdictions are agreeable. That is not to say that tiffs do not occur, but unlike in big cities, we see the same prosecutors day in and day out. Burning a bridge for one client could mean burnt bridges for the rest (a con, but that is an article for another day). In a way, it is like a game of chess, ensuring that our relationship with a prosecutor is not tarnished all while zealously advocating for our clients. Despite this game, however, there is a trust between the prosecutors and our office, and I do not think that one person I work would say that's a disadvantage.

So, while there are still major issues that need to be addressed in public defender offices across the country, there are also many advantageous reasons, some of which didn't make the cut for this article, to working in a public defender office. And hopefully one day, I will come across something on the internet that highlights these advantages and more—and showcases that public defenders are more than just numbers and struggles.

1. Shout out to Michelle Ochoa who "voluntold" and encouraged me to write this!

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