Police and Detectives

Summary

Police officers enforce laws to protect people and their property.

Quick Facts: Police and Detectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$56,980 per year</td>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>See How to Become One</td>
<td>See How to Become One</td>
<td>780,000</td>
<td>5% (Slower than average)</td>
<td>41,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Police and Detectives Do

Police officers protect lives and property. Detectives and criminal investigators, who are sometimes called agents or special agents, gather facts and collect evidence of possible crimes.

Work Environment

Police and detective work can be physically demanding, stressful, and dangerous. Police officers have one of the highest rates of injuries and illnesses of all occupations. Working around the clock in shifts is common.

How to Become a Police Officer or Detective

Education requirements range from a high school diploma to a college, or higher, degree. Most police and detectives must graduate from their agency’s training academy before completing a period of on-the-job training. Candidates must be U.S. citizens, usually at least 21 years old, and able to meet rigorous physical and personal qualifications.

Pay

The median annual wage for police and detectives was $56,980 in May 2012.

Job Outlook

Employment of police and detectives is projected to grow 5 percent from 2012 to 2022, slower than the average for all occupations. Continued interest for public safety will lead to new openings for officers; however, jobs may be competitive, depending on location.

What Police and Detectives Do

Police officers are often assigned a patrol area in which they must be vigilant for anything unusual.

Police officers protect lives and property. Detectives and criminal investigators, who are sometimes called agents or special agents, gather facts and collect evidence of possible crimes.

Duties

Uniformed police officers typically do the following:

- Enforce laws
- Respond to emergency and non-emergency calls
- Patrol assigned areas
- Conduct traffic stops and issue citations
- Obtain warrants and arrest suspects
- Write detailed reports and fill out forms
- Prepare cases and testify in court

Detectives and criminal investigators typically do the following:

- Investigate crimes
- Collect and secure evidence from crime scenes
- Conduct interviews with suspects and witnesses
- Observe the activities of suspects
- Obtain warrants and arrest suspects
- Write detailed reports and fill out forms
- Prepare cases and testify in court

Police officers pursue and apprehend people who break the law. They then warn, cite, or arrest them. Most police officers patrol their jurisdictions and investigate suspicious activity. They also respond to calls, issue traffic tickets, and give first aid to accident victims.

Detectives perform investigative duties, such as gathering facts and collecting evidence.

Similar Occupations

Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of police and detectives with similar occupations.

More Information, Including Links to O*NET

Learn more about police and detectives by visiting additional resources, including O*NET, a source on key characteristics of workers and occupations.
The daily activities of police and detectives vary with their occupational specialty, such as canine units and special weapons and tactics (SWAT). Whether they work at a local, state, or federal agency also determines job duties; and duties differ among federal agencies, because they enforce different aspects of the law. Regardless of job duties or location, police officers and detectives at all levels must write reports and keep detailed records that will be needed if they testify in court. Most carry law enforcement tools, such as radios, handcuffs, and guns.

The following are examples of types of police and detectives who work in state and local law enforcement and in federal law enforcement:

State and Local Law Enforcement

**Uniformed police officers** have general law enforcement duties. They wear uniforms that allow the public to easily recognize them as police officers. They have regular patrols and also respond to emergency and non-emergency calls.

Police agencies are usually organized into geographic districts, with uniformed officers assigned to patrol a specific area. Officers in large agencies often patrol with a partner. During patrols, officers look for any signs of criminal activity and may conduct searches and arrest suspected criminals. They may also respond to emergency calls, investigate complaints, and enforce traffic laws.

Some police officers work only on a specific type of crime, such as narcotics. Officers, especially those working in large departments, may work in special units, such as horseback, motorcycle, canine corps, and special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams. Typically, officers must work as patrol officers for a certain number of years before they may be appointed to one of these units.

Some city police agencies are involved in community policing, a philosophy of bringing police and members of the community together to prevent crime. A neighborhood watch program is one type of community policing.

Some agencies have special geographic and enforcement responsibilities. Examples include public college and university police forces, public school police, and transit police. Most law enforcement workers in special agencies are uniformed officers.

**State police officers,** sometimes called **state troopers or highway patrol officers,** have many of the same duties as other police officers, but they may spend more time enforcing traffic laws and issuing traffic citations. State police officers have authority to work anywhere in the state and are frequently called on to help other law enforcement agencies, especially those in rural areas or small towns.

**Transit and railroad police** patrol railroad yards and transit stations. They protect property, employees, and passengers from crimes such as thefts and robberies. They remove trespassers from railroad and transit properties and check IDs of people who try to enter secure areas.

**Sheriffs and deputy sheriffs** enforce the law on the county level. Sheriffs’ departments tend to be relatively small. Sheriffs usually are elected by the public and do the same work as a local or county police chief. Some sheriffs’ departments do the same work as officers in urban police departments. Others mainly operate the county jails and provide services in local courts. Police and sheriffs’ deputies who provide security in city and county courts are sometimes called **bailiffs.**

**Detectives and criminal investigators** are uniformed or plainclothes investigators who gather facts and collect evidence for criminal cases. They conduct interviews, examine records, observe the activities of suspects, and participate in raids and arrests. Detectives usually specialize in investigating one type of crime, such as homicide or fraud. Detectives are typically assigned cases on a rotating basis and work on them until an arrest and trial are completed or until the case is dropped.

**Fish and game wardens** enforce fishing, hunting, and boating laws. They patrol hunting and fishing areas, conduct search and rescue operations, investigate complaints and accidents, and educate the public about laws pertaining to the outdoors.

Federal Law Enforcement

Federal law enforcement officials carry out many of the same duties that other police officers do; however, they have jurisdiction over the entire country. Many federal agents are highly specialized. The following are examples of federal agencies in which officers and agents enforce particular types of laws.

- **Federal Bureau of Investigation** (FBI) agents are the federal government's principal investigators, responsible for enforcing more than 300 federal statutes and conducting sensitive national security investigations.
- **Drug Enforcement Administration** (DEA) agents enforce laws and regulations relating to illegal drugs.
- **United States Secret Service** uniformed officers protect the President, the Vice President, their immediate families, and other public officials. Other Secret Service agents investigate financial crimes.
- **Federal Air Marshals** provide air security by guarding against attacks targeting U.S. aircraft, passengers, and crews.
- **U.S. Border Patrol** agents protect international land and water boundaries.

See the [Contacts for More Info](http://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/print/police-and-detectives.htm) section for additional information about federal law enforcement agencies.

Work Environment
Police and detectives regularly work with crime and accident scenes.

Police and detectives held about 780,000 jobs in 2012. Most police and detectives work for local governments and some work for state governments or the federal government.

Police and detective work can be physically demanding, stressful, and dangerous.

The jobs of some federal agents, such as U.S. Secret Service and DEA special agents, require extensive travel, often on short notice. These agents may relocate a number of times over the course of their careers. Some special agents, such as those in the U.S. Border Protection, may work outdoors in rugged terrain and in all kinds of weather.

**Injuries and Illnesses**

Police and sheriff’s patrol officers have one of the highest rates of injuries and illnesses of all occupations. They may face physical injury when conflicts with criminals occur, during motor-vehicle pursuits, when exposure to communicable diseases occurs, or through many other high-risk situations.

Police work can be both physically and mentally demanding, as officers must be alert and ready to react throughout their entire shift. Officers regularly work at crime and accident scenes and deal with the death and suffering that they encounter there. Although a career in law enforcement may be stressful, many officers find it rewarding to help members of their communities.

**Work Schedules**

Uniformed officers, detectives, agents, and inspectors usually are scheduled to work full time. Paid overtime is common. Shift work is necessary because protection of the public must be provided around the clock. Because more experienced employees typically receive preference, junior officers frequently work weekends, holidays, and nights.

**How to Become a Police Officer or Detective**
Education requirements range from a high school diploma to a college, or higher, degree. Most police and detectives must graduate from their agency’s training academy before completing a period of on-the-job training. Candidates must be U.S. citizens, usually at least 21 years old, and meet rigorous physical and personal qualifications.

**Education**

Police and detective applicants must have at least a high school education or GED and be a graduate of their agency’s training academy. Many agencies and some police departments require some college coursework or a college degree. Knowledge of a foreign language is an asset in many federal agencies and in certain geographical regions.

Candidates must be U.S. citizens, usually be at least 21 years old, have a driver’s license, and meet specific physical qualifications. Applicants may have to pass physical exams of vision, hearing, strength, and agility, as well as competitive written exams. Previous work or military experience is often seen as a plus. Candidates typically go through a series of interviews and may be asked to take lie detector and drug tests. A felony conviction may disqualify a candidate.

**Training**

Applicants usually have training as a recruit before becoming an officer. In state and large local police departments, recruits get training in their agency’s police academy. In small agencies, recruits often attend a regional or state academy. Training includes classroom instruction in constitutional law, civil rights, state laws and local ordinances, and police ethics. Recruits also receive training and supervised experience in areas such as patrol, traffic control, use of firearms, self-defense, first aid, and emergency response.

Detectives normally begin their career as police officers before being promoted to detective.

State and local agencies encourage applicants to continue their education after high school, by taking courses and training related to law enforcement. Many applicants for entry-level police jobs have taken some college classes, and a significant number are college graduates. Many junior colleges, colleges, and universities offer programs in law enforcement and criminal justice. Many agencies offer financial assistance to officers who pursue these, or related, degrees.

Fish and game wardens also must meet specific requirements; however, these vary. Candidates applying for federal jobs with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service typically need a college degree; and those applying to work for state departments often need a high school diploma or some college study in a related field, such as biology or natural resources management. Military or police experience may be considered an advantage. Once hired, fish and game wardens attend a training academy and sometimes get additional training in the field.

Although similar to state and local requirements, requirements for federal law enforcement agencies, such as the FBI and Secret Service, are generally stricter. Federal agencies require a bachelor’s degree, related work experience, or a combination of the two. For example, FBI special agent applicants typically must be college graduates with at least 3 years of professional work experience.
required are lie detector tests, as well as interviews with the applicant’s references. Jobs that require security clearances have additional requirements.

Federal law enforcement agents undergo extensive training, usually at the U.S. Marine Corps base in Quantico, Virginia, or at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers in Glyco, Georgia. Furthermore, some federal positions have a maximum age for applicants. Specific education requirements, qualifications, and training information for a particular federal agency are available on its website. See the Contacts for More Info section for links to various federal agencies.

Other Experience

Some police departments have cadet programs for people interested in a career in law enforcement who do not yet meet age requirements for becoming an officer. These cadets do clerical work and attend classes until they reach the minimum age requirement and can apply for a position with the regular force.

Advancement

Police officers usually become eligible for promotion after a probationary period. Promotions to corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, and captain usually are made according to a candidate’s position on a promotion list, as determined by scores on a written examination and on-the-job performance. In large departments, promotion may enable an officer to become a detective or to specialize in one type of police work, such as working with juveniles.

Important Qualities

**Communication skills.** Police and detectives must be able to speak with people when gathering facts about a crime and to express details about a given incident in writing.

**Empathy.** Police officers need to understand the perspectives of a wide variety of people in their jurisdiction and have a willingness to help the public.

**Good judgment.** Police and detectives must be able to determine the best way to solve a wide array of problems quickly.

**Leadership skills.** Police officers must be comfortable with being a highly visible member of their community, as the public looks to them for assistance in emergency situations.

**Perceptiveness.** Officers must be able to anticipate another person’s reactions and understand why people act a certain way.

**Physical stamina.** Officers and detectives must be in good physical shape, both to pass required tests for entry into the field, and to keep up with the daily rigors of the job.

**Physical strength.** Police officers must be strong enough to physically apprehend offenders.

Pay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police and Detectives</th>
<th>Median annual wages, May 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police and detectives</td>
<td>$56,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective service occupations</td>
<td>$36,620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, all occupations</td>
<td>$34,750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.
The median annual wage for police and detectives was $56,980 in May 2012. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $33,060, and the top 10 percent earned more than $93,450.

The median wages for police and detective occupations in May 2012 were as follows:

- $74,300 for detectives and criminal investigators
- $55,270 for police and sheriff's patrol officers
- $55,210 for transit and railroad police
- $48,070 for fish and game wardens

Many agencies provide officers with an allowance for uniforms, as well as extensive benefits and the option to retire at an age that is younger than typical retirement age.

Uniformed officers, detectives, agents, and inspectors usually are scheduled to work full time. Paid overtime is common. Shift work is necessary, because protection must be provided around the clock. Because more experienced employees typically receive preference, junior officers frequently work weekends, holidays, and nights.

**Union Membership**

Compared with workers in all occupations, police and detectives had a higher percentage of workers who belonged to a union in 2012.

**Job Outlook**

Employment of police and detectives is projected to grow 5 percent from 2012 to 2022, slower than the average for all occupations.

Continued desire for public safety will result in a need for more officers. However, demand for employment is expected to vary depending on location, driven largely by local and state budgets. Even with crime rates falling in the last few years, there will be continued demand for police services to maintain and improve public safety.

**Job Prospects**

Applicants with a bachelor’s degree and law enforcement or military experience, especially investigative experience, as well as those who speak more than one language, should have the best job opportunities.

The level of government spending determines the level of employment for police and detectives. The number of job opportunities, therefore, can vary from year to year and from place to place. Job prospects should be best for trained officers with related work experience.

**Employment projections data for Police and Detectives, 2012-22**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police and detectives</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>780,000</td>
<td>821,300</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detectives and criminal investigators</td>
<td>33-3021</td>
<td>115,200</td>
<td>117,500</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish and game wardens</td>
<td>33-3031</td>
<td>6,600</td>
<td>6,700</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police and sheriff's patrol officers</td>
<td>33-3051</td>
<td>653,800</td>
<td>692,700</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transit and railroad police</td>
<td>33-3052</td>
<td>4,300</td>
<td>4,400</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Similar Occupations

This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of police and detectives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>JOB DUTIES</th>
<th>ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION</th>
<th>2012 MEDIAN PAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correctional Officers</td>
<td>Correctional officers are responsible for overseeing individuals who have been arrested and are awaiting trial or who have been sentenced to serve time in a jail or prison.</td>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>$38,970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMTs and Paramedics</td>
<td>Emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics care for the sick or injured in emergency medical settings. People’s lives often depend on their quick reaction and competent care. EMTs and paramedics respond to emergency calls, performing medical services and transporting patients to medical facilities.</td>
<td>Postsecondary non-degree award</td>
<td>$31,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firefighters</td>
<td>Firefighters control fires and respond to other emergencies, including medical emergencies.</td>
<td>Postsecondary non-degree award</td>
<td>$45,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Detectives and Investigators</td>
<td>Private detectives and investigators find facts and analyze information about legal, financial, and personal matters. They offer many services, including verifying people’s backgrounds, finding missing persons, and investigating computer crimes.</td>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>$45,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation Officers and Correctional Treatment Specialists</td>
<td>Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists work with and monitor offenders to prevent them from committing new crimes.</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>$48,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Guards and Gaming Surveillance Officers</td>
<td>Security guards and gaming surveillance officers patrol and protect property against theft, vandalism, terrorism, and illegal activity.</td>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>$24,020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contacts for More Information

For general information about sheriffs, visit
National Sheriffs' Association

For information about chiefs of police, visit
International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)

For more information about careers in state and local law enforcement, visit
The Bureau of Justice Assistance and IACP websites

For more information about federal law enforcement, visit
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
Drug Enforcement Administration
Federal Bureau of Investigation
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Marshals Service
United States Secret Service
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

O*NET

Immigration and Customs Inspectors
Intelligence Analysts
Fish and Game Wardens
Police and Sheriff's Patrol Officers
Police Patrol Officers
Sheriffs and Deputy Sheriffs
Criminal Investigators and Special Agents
Transit and Railroad Police
Police Identification and Records Officers
Detectives and Criminal Investigators
Police Detectives

Suggested citation:

Publish Date: Wednesday, January 8, 2014
