

Criminal Defence Lawyer

Defending people charged with crimes. Mostly solo or in tiny firms, often paid by legal aid, and in court almost every day.

TYPICAL PAY

\$95,000

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$55k to \$200k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

7 to 8 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Small firms, solo practice, courthouses, jails

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 11 and 12
English and anything that makes you speak in front of people.
- 2 Bachelor's degree** 3 to 4 years
Criminology, psychology, philosophy and political science are common. Any subject works. Write the LSAT (law school admission test).
- 3 Law school (JD, juris doctor)** 3 years
Take criminal procedure, evidence, trial advocacy and the Charter. Join the criminal law clinic if your school has one.
- 4 Articling** About 1 year
8 to 10 months with a criminal defence firm, a legal clinic, or a Crown attorney office, plus the barrister and solicitor licensing exams. Ontario's Law Practice Program is the alternative to articling.
- 5 Called to the bar, then the legal aid panel** First year of practice
Most new defence lawyers join a small firm or go solo, and apply to Legal Aid Ontario's panel so they can take certificate work.

Pros and cons

- + You are in court and on your feet almost every day
- + You protect people against the power of the state
- + Independence: your practice, your cases, your name
- Legal aid pays a fraction of big-firm rates
- Emotionally heavy: violence, addiction, disturbing evidence
- Clients who lie to you, do not pay, or get convicted anyway

Good to know

One criminal law for the whole country

Canada has a single Criminal Code that applies in every province and territory. Unlike the US, where each state writes its own crimes, a defence lawyer in Halifax and one in Vancouver argue the same statu...

The clock is on the Crown

Since the Supreme Court's Jordan decision in 2016, a case that takes more than 18 months in provincial court, or 30 months in superior court, is presumed too slow and can be thrown out. Defence lawyers...

Optional boosts

Jury trial experience. The serious-matters panel. Appeals. Reputation.

Where these numbers come from

Job Bank: Lawyers and Quebec notaries, wages (updated Nov 2025)

Law Society of Ontario: Becoming a lawyer

Legal Aid Ontario: Tariff and billing (rates from April 2025)

Federation of Law Societies of Canada

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in Canadian dollars, based on Government of Canada Job Bank wage data and published salary grids. They vary by province, employer and experience. Tuition is for domestic students. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/ca/careers/criminal-defence-lawyer>



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