

# Crane Operator

Lift steel, concrete and machinery hundreds of feet in the air. Paid apprenticeship, no tuition, high stakes.

## TYPICAL PAY

**\$68,080**

a year, full time

## PAY RANGE

**\$43k to \$104k**

starting to experienced

## TIME TO QUALIFY

**1 to 4 years**

after high school

## DEMAND

**Moderate**

job outlook

## LICENCE NEEDED

**Yes**

regulated job

## WHERE YOU WORK

**Construction sites, ports, steel mills, wind farms, rail yards**

## How you get there

- 1 High school diploma or GED (General Educational Development certificate)** Grade 12  
 Math you can do in your head matters here: load charts, angles, percentages. You must be 18 to operate.
- 2 Get on a site** Months to a year  
 Many operators start as a laborer, rigger or oiler, which is the person who greases and helps run the crane. This is where you learn what a crane actually does.
- 3 Apprenticeship** 3 to 4 years  
 Apply to a registered program, usually through an International Union of Operating Engineers local or a contractor association. Paid work plus classroom and simulator time.
- 4 Certification** Weeks  
 Pass a written exam and a practical exam for the crane type you want, given by an accredited testing organization such as the National Commission for the Certification of Crane Operators.
- 5 Employer evaluation, then your own crane** Days to weeks  
 Federal construction rules require your employer to evaluate you on the specific machine before you run it alone.

## Pros and cons

- + Paid from day one and no student debt
- + Union pension and health coverage in most of the country
- + A licensed skill that cannot be done remotely or offshored
- Serious danger. A mistake can kill somebody on the ground
- Weather and the construction cycle decide whether you work
- Early starts, long days, and travel to wherever the job is

## Good to know

### Tower cranes build themselves

A tall tower crane is not assembled at full height. It climbs, adding one mast section at a time using its own hydraulic jacking frame, so the crane grows with the building it is putting up.

### The load chart is the law

Every crane comes with a chart showing exactly what it can lift at each boom length and radius. Lifting outside the chart is not a judgment call, it is a violation, and an operator can refuse a lift on the...

## Optional boosts

More crane types. Rigger and signal person certification. Commercial driver's license. Lift director or crane inspector.

### Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Crane and Tower Operators  
 International Union of Operating Engineers: training  
 National Center for Construction Education and Research  
 Apprenticeship.gov: career seekers

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/crane-operator>



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