

Criminal Defense Lawyer

Stand between one person and the power of the state. Seven years of school, and the pay is nothing like television.

TYPICAL PAY

\$159,670

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$78k to \$352k

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

Public defender offices, small private firms, courtrooms, jails

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 11 and 12
 There is no pre-law requirement. Take the classes that teach you to read hard text and argue in writing.
- 2 Bachelor's degree** 4 years
 Any major is allowed. Political science, history, English and philosophy are common, but engineers and nurses get in too. Your GPA is one of the two numbers that matter.
- 3 LSAT (Law School Admission Test)** Months of prep
 The other number that matters. It is accepted by every law school approved by the American Bar Association, and applications run through the Law School Admission Council.
- 4 Law school** 3 years
 Three years full time. First year is contracts, torts, criminal law, civil procedure and property. After that, choose criminal clinics and a public defender internship.
- 5 Bar exam and admission** Summer after graduation
 Each state admits its own lawyers. Most now use the Uniform Bar Examination, which is being replaced by the NextGen version between July 2026 and July 2028. Add an ethics exam and a character and fitness review.

Pros and cons

- + The work genuinely matters. You are often the only person on your client's side
- + You are on your feet in court early, unlike most other kinds of law
- + Public Service Loan Forgiveness can erase six figures of federal loans
- Crushing caseloads in public defender offices, sometimes hundreds of open files
- Pay well below what the same degree earns at a corporate firm
- You will lose cases where losing means someone goes to prison

Good to know

The right to a lawyer is younger than your grandparents

In 1963 the Supreme Court decided Gideon v. Wainwright, which said states must provide a lawyer to people charged with serious crimes who cannot afford one. Public defender offices as we know them gre...

Almost nothing goes to trial

The overwhelming majority of criminal cases end in a plea agreement rather than a jury trial. Most of a defense lawyer's real work is investigation, suppression motions and negotiation, not the closing a...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Lawyers
 National Conference of Bar Examiners: the NextGen bar exam
 Law School Admission Council
 National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers

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/criminal-defense-lawyer>



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