DEA Special Agent

Investigate drug trafficking for the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration). An age window, four rounds of testing, and 14 weeks of training at Quantico.

TYPICAL PAY	PAY RANGE	COST TO QUALIFY	TIME TO QUALIFY
$93,790	**$55k to $161k**	**$30k to $120k**	**5 to 7 years**
a year, full time	lower end to upper end	tuition, fees, exams, kit	after high school

DEMAND	LICENSE NEEDED	WHERE YOU WORK
Limited	**No**	**Field offices across the country, border posts, surveillance vehicles, courtrooms**
job outlook	no license to hold	

How you get there

1. **High school** — Grade 12
   Keep your record clean. The background check is for a Top Secret clearance, and you must disclose any past drug use.
2. **Bachelor's degree** — 4 years
   Any subject. A GPA of 3.0 or better, or finishing in the top third of your class, qualifies you for the starting grade straight from university.
3. **Apply when the posting opens** — A week
   Postings open on set dates and close early once 5,000 people apply. You must be 21 to 36 when you apply.
4. **Four rounds of testing, then the checks** — Not published
   A physical task test, a written test, a review of your résumé, and a panel interview. Then a polygraph, a medical exam, a drug test and the background investigation.
5. **Basic Agent Training** — 14 weeks
   A residential course at the agency's training academy in Quantico, Virginia. Then you are sent to an office anywhere in the country.

Pros and cons

+ Paid from the first day of training, with a federal pension
+ A 25% pay premium on top of base pay
+ Clear pay steps you can look up before you apply
- A hard age window: apply by 36 or lose the chance
- You can be sent anywhere, often near the border
- Substantial overtime, nights, weekends and holidays

Good to know

About 4,100 agents

The Drug Enforcement Administration's 2026 budget pays for about 4,136 special agents. Its 2027 request asks for 881 more, so hiring is set to grow.

The posting closes at 5,000

Drug Enforcement Administration special agent postings open on set dates, and in 2026 the posting said it would close as soon as 5,000 people had applied, which can be before the closing date. Have your…

Optional boosts

Spanish you can read, write and speak · A graduate or law degree · Military service · Prior federal agent training

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Detectives and Criminal Investigators (33-3021.00)
O*NET OnLine: Detectives and Criminal Investigators
USAJOBS: Drug Enforcement Administration, Criminal Investigator (Special Agent), announcement BA2026-4B
USAJOBS: Drug Enforcement Administration public notice for special agent positions, 2026

Numbers checked October 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/dea-agent

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