

Police Detective

Take the cases that patrol officers hand over and work them until they close. You patrol first, for years.

TYPICAL PAY

\$93,790

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$55k to \$161k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

4 to 8 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

**Police departments, crime scenes,
interview rooms, courtrooms, fed...**

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma or equivalent** Grade 12
 That is the legal minimum in most states. Keep your record clean: the background investigation looks at everything, including school discipline.
- 2 College, optional but useful** 0 to 4 years
 Not required by most city departments. Effectively required by federal agencies, which usually want a bachelor's degree or equivalent experience. Criminal justice, accounting, computer science and languages all pay off later.
- 3 Get hired and pass the academy** 1 to 2 years including hiring
 Written test, physical test, background investigation, medical and psychological screening, then a state-certified academy. Expect roughly six months of academy plus months of field training.
- 4 Patrol** 3 to 5 years
 Three to five years answering calls. This is where you learn to talk to people, write reports that stand up, and handle a scene. Detectives who skipped it are obvious.
- 5 Promote or transfer to investigations** Ongoing
 By examination, interview or assignment, depending on the department. Then specialist training in your unit: property, robbery, homicide, financial crime, digital forensics.

Pros and cons

- + Real problem-solving work with a clear result when it lands
- + Good pay with no required degree and no student debt
- + A pension, which almost no private job offers anymore
- Years of patrol shifts first, including nights and holidays
- You carry what you see, and the worst cases stay with you
- Caseloads are far bigger than the time available, so most cases never close

Optional boosts

Homicide. Financial crime and fraud. Digital forensics. Special victims.

Good to know

Two very different jobs share one wage line

The federal wage survey counts city detectives and federal criminal investigators together under one occupation. That is why the median sits at \$93,790 while the top tenth reaches \$160,540. When you read...

Being on call is worth 25% of your salary

Federal criminal investigators receive availability pay, an extra 25% on top of base salary, because the job expects unscheduled duty hours. On grade 13 of the General Schedule, which starts at \$90,925 in 2020...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Detectives and Criminal Investigators, wages and tasks
 Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, California
 Los Angeles Police Department: salary and benefits
 Office of Personnel Management: 2026 General Schedule base pay table

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/police-detective>



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