

Private Investigator

Find facts for lawyers, insurers and families. Far more records and databases than car chases.

TYPICAL PAY

\$51,220

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$37k to \$98k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

2 to 5 years

after high school

DEMAND

Good

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

**Cars, courthouses, law offices,
retail floors, a laptop anywhere**

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
 Write well, notice things, and stay out of trouble. A criminal record can end this before it starts.
- 2 Build a background** 0 to 4 years
 Two or four years of criminal justice, or a first career in policing, military intelligence, insurance claims or paralegal work. Roughly 38% of employers ask for a bachelor's degree and 25% accept a high school diploma.
- 3 Work under a licensed investigator** 2 to 3 years
 This is the real qualification. Most states require a set number of paid investigative hours before you can apply for your own license. California, for example, asks for several years of it.
- 4 License application and exam** Weeks to months
 Fingerprints, a background check, a written exam on the state's investigative law, and sometimes a bond or insurance.
- 5 Your own license, and maybe your own agency** After licensing
 At that point you can take clients directly, hire subcontractors and set your own rates.

Pros and cons

- + No degree required and low cost to enter
- + Every case is a different puzzle
- + You can own the business and set your own rates
- Long stretches of boredom in a parked car
- Income is uneven and freelance work has no benefits
- Some clients want things that are illegal, and you have to refuse

Optional boosts

Legal investigation. Insurance fraud and surveillance. Corporate due diligence. Skip tracing.

Good to know

It is a small field

Federal occupation data counts roughly 43,600 private detectives and investigators in the United States, with about 3,900 openings projected a year. Small, and most of it is a few people in a small agen...

Retail is the biggest single employer

In the federal data, retail trade employs more people in this occupation than any other sector. That is loss prevention: the people watching store floors and camera feeds, not private eyes on stakeou...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Private Detectives and Investigators (33-9021.00)
 O*NET OnLine: Private Detectives and Investigators
 California Bureau of Security and Investigative Services
 Texas Department of Public Safety: Private Security

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/private-investigator>



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