CAREER KIT

Crime Scene Investigator Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Crime Scene Investigator

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

howtobecome — independent career guides

SECTION 1

At a glance

Crime scene investigators (CSIs) photograph, document, and collect physical evidence at crime scenes. Most civilian CSI jobs ask for a bachelor's degree in forensic science, biology, chemistry, or a related field, though some accept an associate degree; other CSIs are sworn police officers who move into the role after patrol experience. After about a year on the job you can earn voluntary IAI crime scene certification.

Timeline	2–5 years (degree plus hiring), or several years of patrol for sworn CSIs
Typical cost	$3,000–$100,000+ (mostly the degree)
Education	Bachelor's degree in forensic science or a natural science is typical; an associate degree may be enough for some jobs
License	None required; voluntary IAI crime scene certification after field experience
Median pay	$72,060 per year (forensic science technicians)
Job outlook	+13% (2025–35), much faster than average; about 2,800 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Decide between a civilian and a sworn CSI path

Time: 1–2 weeks

Many agencies hire civilian crime scene technicians or investigators who are not police officers. Others staff crime scene units with sworn officers who have completed the police academy and usually some years of patrol. BLS notes that some CSIs at police departments are sworn officers. Look at job postings in your area to see which model local agencies use.

2. Earn a degree in a natural or forensic science

Time: 2–4 years · Cost: $3,000–$100,000+

BLS lists a bachelor's degree as the typical entry-level education, often in physical science, biology, or forensic science; an associate degree may be enough for some positions. Take chemistry, biology, physics, and math, plus photography and criminal justice courses if you can. Some community colleges offer crime scene technology certificates or associate degrees.

3. Build practical skills

Time: 3–12 months

Crime scene work depends on careful photography, sketching and measuring scenes, note taking, evidence packaging, chain of custody, and fingerprint processing. Internships with a police crime scene unit, medical examiner's office, or crime lab are the best way to show these skills. Courses on courtroom testimony help too, since CSIs testify about their work.

4. Apply and pass the background process

Time: 2–6 months

Because you handle evidence, agencies run thorough background checks, often including a polygraph, drug screening, and a psychological evaluation. A valid driver's license is usually required because you travel to scenes. Sworn CSIs must first meet all police hiring standards and graduate from the academy.

5. Complete on-the-job training

Time: 6–12 months

New CSIs train under experienced investigators, learning agency procedures, equipment, and evidence systems before handling scenes alone. BLS describes moderate-term on-the-job training. Expect to work shifts, nights, weekends, and outdoors in all weather, and to be on call.

6. Earn IAI crime scene certification

Time: After about 1 year of crime scene work · Cost: Varies; check IAI fee schedule

The International Association for Identification (IAI) certifies crime scene professionals at three levels: Crime Scene Investigator, Crime Scene Analyst, and Senior Crime Scene Analyst. Eligibility requires working crime scene experience and approved training hours, and the exact prerequisites are in the IAI certification manual. Certification is voluntary but valued for promotion and court credibility.

7. Specialize or advance

Time: Ongoing

Experienced CSIs often specialize in latent prints, bloodstain pattern analysis, forensic photography, or shooting reconstruction, each of which has its own IAI certification. Others move into supervisor roles or into crime lab analyst jobs, which usually require more lab science coursework.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Bachelor's degree in forensic science or a natural science	$20,000	$100,000	Typical range, varies by school
Associate degree or certificate in crime scene technology	$3,000	$15,000	Typical range, varies by school
Camera, notebook, and personal field gear for coursework	$0	$1,000	Employers supply evidence kits and equipment once hired
Short crime scene training courses (outside a degree)	$0	$2,000	Often paid by employers once you are hired; typical range
IAI membership and certification fees	$0	$500	Typical range; see theiai.org for current fees
Total	**$23,000**	**$118,500**	

Requirements

Education	A bachelor's degree in forensic science, biology, chemistry, or another natural science is typical for civilian CSI jobs. An associate degree may be enough for some technician positions. Sworn CSIs follow police hiring rules, which vary by agency.
Sworn vs. civilian	Civilian CSIs are hired directly into crime scene units. Sworn CSIs are police officers who completed the academy and usually transfer into the unit after patrol experience. Which model your local agency uses decides your path.
Background	Extensive background investigation, drug testing, and often a polygraph and psychological evaluation. Past drug use or a criminal record can disqualify you.
Driver's license	Usually required, since CSIs drive to scenes across the jurisdiction.
Certification	Not required to enter the field. IAI crime scene certification is voluntary and requires field experience before you can apply.
Physical and schedule demands	Long hours on your feet, work outdoors in any weather, on-call and overnight shifts, and exposure to disturbing scenes and biohazards.
Skills	Detail-oriented documentation, photography, scientific thinking, report writing, and calm courtroom testimony.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Choose your path

Days 1–30

Goal: Find out how local agencies hire CSIs and plan your education.

- ☐ Find 5 local agencies with crime scene units and check whether they hire civilian or sworn CSIs
- ☐ Save current CSI job postings and list their education requirements
- ☐ Compare degree programs, including FEPAC-accredited options
- ☐ Review your background for anything that could fail a polygraph or drug history check
- ☐ Read the IAI crime scene certification requirements
- ☐ Contact a local CSI for an informational interview

Phase 2: Build skills

Days 31–60

Goal: Develop the hands-on skills CSIs use every day.

- ☐ Practice manual camera settings and scale photography
- ☐ Learn to sketch and measure a room to scale
- ☐ Study evidence packaging and chain of custody procedures
- ☐ Apply for an internship with a crime scene unit, crime lab, or medical examiner
- ☐ Take a science course you are missing, such as chemistry or biology
- ☐ Write a sample scene report from a mock scene

Phase 3: Apply

Days 61–90

Goal: Submit strong applications and prepare for testing.

- ☐ Write a resume highlighting science courses, photography, and internships
- ☐ Apply to crime scene technician, evidence technician, and forensic technician jobs
- ☐ Prepare for oral boards using the questions in this kit
- ☐ Gather documents for the background investigation
- ☐ Practice explaining your work as you would in court
- ☐ Follow up on every application after two weeks

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- [ ] College transcripts
- [ ] Degree or proof of enrollment
- [ ] Valid driver's license
- [ ] Resume and cover letter
- [ ] Photography portfolio or sample scene photos
- [ ] Internship verification letters
- [ ] List of past addresses and employers
- [ ] Professional references
- [ ] Training certificates

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

IAI Crime Scene Investigator certification

What it is: The entry level of IAI crime scene certification. Requires working crime scene experience, approved training hours, supervisor endorsement, and a passing score on the written exam.

How to prepare: Study the IAI reading list for your level and review your agency's procedures for photography, sketching, and evidence collection.

IAI Crime Scene Analyst / Senior Crime Scene Analyst

What it is: Higher levels for experienced investigators, with more experience and training required.

How to prepare: Plan several years ahead and keep a log of scenes worked and training hours.

Agency hiring tests

What it is: Written tests, practical exercises, oral boards, polygraph, and psychological screening used by police agencies.

How to prepare: Read the job posting carefully and practice explaining evidence handling and chain of custody aloud.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a crime scene investigator?
Tip: Show interest in careful, science-based work, not TV drama.

2. Walk us through how you would process a burglary scene.
Tip: Secure, document, photograph, sketch, collect, package, and log.

3. What is chain of custody and why does it matter?
Tip: Explain that every transfer must be documented so evidence holds up in court.

4. How do you handle stressful or graphic scenes?
Tip: Be honest and describe healthy coping strategies.

5. Tell us about a time you made a mistake in documentation.
Tip: Show how you caught it, reported it, and corrected it properly.

6. What photography experience do you have?
Tip: Mention manual settings, scales, and lighting.

7. How would you avoid contaminating evidence?
Tip: Talk about PPE, glove changes, and packaging items separately.

8. What would you do if a detective asked you to skip a step to save time?
Tip: Follow procedure; integrity protects the case.

9. How would you explain your work to a jury?
Tip: Use plain language and stay factual.

10. Are you comfortable working nights and on call?
Tip: Be honest; this is part of the job.

11. What science courses prepared you for this job?
Tip: Connect coursework to real tasks like evidence collection.

12. Where do you see yourself in five years?
Tip: Mention IAI certification or a specialty like latent prints.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Earned a B.S. in Forensic Science with coursework in chemistry, biology, and crime scene processing
- Completed a 300-hour internship with a police crime scene unit
- Photographed and documented mock crime scenes using scales and manual camera settings
- Packaged and logged evidence following chain of custody procedures
- Processed latent prints on nonporous surfaces using powder techniques
- Wrote detailed scene reports reviewed by senior investigators
- Participated in mock courtroom testimony exercises

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Choosing a general criminal justice degree when local jobs require science coursework
2. Expecting the job to be like TV
3. Ignoring how the background check treats past drug use
4. Skipping internships and hands-on practice
5. Underestimating the shift work and on-call demands
6. Applying only to big-city agencies and ignoring county and state jobs

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Forensic Science Technicians**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm

- **International Association for Identification**

https://www.theiai.org

- **American Academy of Forensic Sciences**

https://www.aafs.org

- **AAFS: FEPAC-accredited programs**

https://aafs.org/find-school

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $48,250	**$72,060 per year ($34.65 per hour) for forensic science technicians**	More than $117,250

Outlook: BLS projects 13% growth from 2025 to 2035, much faster than average, but it is a small occupation: about 20,100 jobs in 2025 and about 2,800 openings a year. Expect strong competition for crime scene jobs. BLS groups crime scene and lab technicians together as forensic science technicians, so sworn CSIs may be paid on the police scale instead.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, Forensic Science Technicians, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.