

CAREER KIT

Detective Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Detective

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

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At a glance

Most police detectives start as patrol officers: you meet police hiring requirements, graduate from the academy, work patrol for several years (often 3–5), then pass a promotional exam or selection process for an investigative unit. Plan on about 4–7 years in total. Up-front costs are low if a department sponsors your academy, though a criminal justice degree, which many agencies prefer, can cost several thousand dollars or more.

Timeline	4–7 years (police officer first, then promotion)
Typical cost	\$0–\$20,000 (mostly optional college)
Education	High school diploma minimum; a college degree is often preferred and sometimes required
License	State POST certification as a police officer (private detectives need a state license in most states)
Median pay	\$93,790 per year
Job outlook	0% (2025–35), little or no change

Step-by-step path

1. Decide which kind of detective you want to be

Time: 1–2 weeks

Police detectives work for city, county or state agencies and almost always start as sworn officers. Federal criminal investigators (FBI, DEA, HSI and others) usually need a bachelor's degree and have their own hiring process. Private detectives work for clients or firms and need a state license in most states instead of police certification. Pick your path first, because the steps differ.

2. Get the education your target agency wants

Time: 0–4 years · Cost: \$0–\$20,000

A high school diploma or GED is the minimum for most local police jobs. Many departments prefer or require college credits for promotion, and federal agencies generally require a bachelor's degree. Criminal justice, criminology, accounting and computer science are useful majors for investigative work.

3. Get hired as a police officer and complete the academy

Time: 6–12 months · Cost: \$0 if sponsored

Apply to departments, pass the written, physical, psychological and background screening, and graduate from a state-certified police academy. Earn your state POST certification and complete field training. This is the same path as becoming a police officer.

4. Build a strong record on patrol

Time: 2–5 years

Most departments require several years of patrol experience before you can apply for detective, commonly 2–5 years. Write thorough, accurate reports, follow cases to court, and volunteer to help detectives on investigations. Supervisors' evaluations and your report quality often weigh heavily in selection.

5. Take investigative training

Time: Ongoing · Cost: Usually paid by the agency

Ask for in-service courses in interviewing and interrogation, evidence collection, search warrants and crime scene work. Many state POST agencies and regional academies offer these. Training in digital evidence, financial crime or crimes against children can open specialized units.

6. Pass the detective promotional exam or selection process

Time: 2–6 months of preparation

Depending on the agency, detective is a civil service promotion with a written exam and oral board, or an assignment based on interviews and performance. Study the department's policies, criminal law and investigative procedures listed in the exam announcement. Larger departments may assign investigators first and promote them to detective rank after a set period.

7. Learn the job in your first investigative assignment

Time: 1–2 years

New detectives usually start in property crimes or general investigations before moving to units like homicide or special victims. Work closely with senior detectives, keep organized case files and build relationships with prosecutors. Strong court testimony and case clearance help you advance.

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Police academy (agency-sponsored)	\$0	\$0	Most departments pay for the academy after hiring you.
Self-sponsored police academy (optional)	\$2,000	\$8,000	Only in states and agencies where self-sponsoring is common.
Associate degree in criminal justice (optional)	\$3,000	\$15,000	
Bachelor's degree (optional; needed for federal agencies)	\$20,000	\$100,000	Many departments offer tuition reimbursement once you are hired.
Promotional exam study materials	\$0	\$300	Agencies list the books and policies the exam is based on.
Private detective license, exam and training (PI path only)	\$100	\$2,000	Fees, required training and experience vary widely by state.
Total	\$25,100	\$125,300	

Requirements

Police experience	Most police detective roles require you to be a sworn officer first, usually with several years of patrol experience. The exact minimum varies by agency.
Age	Police hiring usually requires you to be at least 21 (some agencies accept 18–20). Federal criminal investigator jobs generally have a maximum entry age of 37, with exceptions for veterans.
Education	High school diploma or GED at minimum for local police. College credits or a degree are often preferred for promotion; federal investigators usually need a bachelor's degree.
Clean record	No felony convictions. You must pass a full background check, and integrity problems on the job can block promotion.
Certification	State POST peace officer certification. Private detectives instead need a state license in most states, often with an exam and documented experience.
Skills	Strong writing, interviewing, attention to detail and patience. Detectives spend much of their time on reports, records and court preparation.

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: Pick police, federal or private detective work and map the requirements.

- ☐ Write down which path you want: police detective, federal investigator or private detective.
- ☐ For police: list 3–5 departments and how many years of patrol each requires before detective.
- ☐ For federal: read the eligibility rules (degree, age, fitness) on the agency's careers site.
- ☐ For private: find your state's PI licensing board and its experience and exam rules.
- ☐ Check your record and driving history so nothing surprises you in a background check.
- ☐ Start a fitness routine aimed at your target agency's physical test.
- ☐ Talk to a working detective or investigator about how they got there.

Phase 2: Start the entry step

Days 31–60

Goal: Apply to a police agency or enroll in the training your path needs.

- ☐ Apply to several police departments, or enroll in college or PI training as your path requires.
- ☐ Prepare for the written entrance exam with a matching study guide.
- ☐ Gather the documents on the checklist below.
- ☐ Take a report-writing or English composition course; detectives write constantly.
- ☐ Learn the basics of your state's criminal code and search-and-seizure rules.
- ☐ Do a ride-along to see patrol work up close.

Phase 3: Build investigator habits

Days 61–90

Goal: Pass hiring steps and develop the skills that get you promoted later.

- ☐ Practice the 12 interview questions below out loud.
- ☐ Complete the background packet completely and honestly.
- ☐ Set up a system for organized notes and records you will use for every case.
- ☐ Read about interviewing techniques and evidence handling.
- ☐ Plan your first 3 years: which in-service courses and specialties you will pursue.
- ☐ If you are already an officer, ask to assist detectives on a case and request investigative training.
- ☐ Get the reading list for your agency's next detective exam and start studying early.

Documents checklist

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

- ☐ Birth certificate or passport
- ☐ Social Security card
- ☐ Driver's license and driving record
- ☐ High school diploma or GED certificate
- ☐ College transcripts
- ☐ DD-214 if you served in the military
- ☐ Employment history with supervisor contacts
- ☐ List of past addresses for the last 7–10 years
- ☐ Personal and professional references
- ☐ Records of any arrests or citations, with dispositions
- ☐ Training certificates (POST, in-service, investigative courses)
- ☐ Performance evaluations and commendations (for promotional applications)

Exams & how to prepare

Police entrance exams

What it is: The written test, physical ability test, psychological evaluation and oral board you pass to be hired as an officer.

How to prepare: Use prep material for the exact written test named in the posting and train to the published fitness standard.

State POST certification exam

What it is: End-of-academy exam required to work as a sworn peace officer in most states.

How to prepare: Keep up with academy coursework and review state learning objectives.

Detective / investigator promotional exam

What it is: Agency written exam on criminal law, procedure, department policy and investigative techniques, often followed by an oral board or assessment center.

How to prepare: Get the reading list from the exam announcement, study it for 2–3 months, and practice oral scenarios with a current detective.

Private investigator licensing exam (PI path)

What it is: Many states require a written exam on state law, ethics and investigative practices before issuing a PI license.

How to prepare: Check your state licensing board for the exam outline and required experience hours.

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a detective?

Tip: Tie your answer to solving cases for victims, not to TV shows.

2. What have you done on patrol that prepared you for investigations?

Tip: Give a specific case where your work led to an arrest or charge.

3. Walk us through how you would handle a burglary investigation from start to finish.

Tip: Show a logical order: scene, evidence, witnesses, records, suspects, warrant, report.

4. How do you prepare for court testimony?

Tip: Talk about reviewing reports, meeting the prosecutor and answering only what is asked.

5. How do you interview a reluctant witness?

Tip: Show patience, rapport-building and respect for legal limits.

6. How do you manage a heavy caseload?

Tip: Describe how you prioritize cases and keep organized files and follow-ups.

7. What would you do if a partner mishandled evidence?

Tip: Integrity answer: you document and report it through the chain of command.

8. Tell us about a report you wrote that you are proud of.

Tip: Explain why it was clear, complete and useful to the prosecutor.

9. How do you stay objective when a case is emotional?

Tip: Show that you follow evidence and procedure, and use support resources.

10. What do you know about search warrants?

Tip: Explain probable cause, specificity and getting a judge's approval.

11. What are your weaknesses?

Tip: Pick a real one and show what you are doing to improve.

12. Why should we select you for this unit?

Tip: Point to evidence: case results, evaluations, training and work ethic.

Resume bullet examples

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

- Wrote 600+ incident and arrest reports over 3 years on patrol with no reports returned for corrections in the last year.
- Assisted detectives on 15 burglary investigations, including canvassing, evidence collection and suspect interviews.
- Identified a pattern in vehicle break-ins that led to the arrest of a suspect linked to 12 cases.
- Completed 80 hours of in-service training in interviewing, evidence handling and search warrants.
- Testified in 10 criminal court cases with no suppressed evidence.
- Earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice while working full-time shifts.
- Served as field training officer for 3 new recruits.
- Received two department commendations for investigative work.

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Treating patrol as a waiting room instead of building the case record that gets you promoted.
2. Writing sloppy reports; detective selection boards read them.
3. Skipping college credits when your department requires them for promotion.
4. Studying for the promotional exam only a few weeks before it.
5. Assuming you can join a police department directly as a detective.
6. Starting a private investigator business without checking state licensing rules.
7. Overlooking how much of the job is paperwork, records and court preparation.

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			

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Police and Detectives**

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/police-and-detectives.htm>

- **BLS: Private Detectives and Investigators**

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/private-detectives-and-investigators.htm>

- **IADLEST: find your state POST agency**

<https://www.iadlest.org/>

- **FBI Jobs: Special Agent careers**

<https://fbijobs.gov/>

- **USAJOBS: federal criminal investigator (1811) jobs**

<https://www.usajobs.gov/>

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
\$55,390	\$93,790 per year (detectives and criminal investigators)	\$160,540

Outlook: BLS projects little or no change (0%) in employment of detectives and criminal investigators from 2025 to 2035. Openings come mainly from detectives who retire or move up, so competition for detective spots inside departments can be strong. Private detectives earn less on average: BLS reports a median of \$51,220 in May 2025.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook and Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2025 data — <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/police-and-detectives.htm>

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