

CAREER KIT

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# Police Officer Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

*How to Become a Police Officer*

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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

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To become a police officer you usually need a high school diploma or GED, to be at least 21 (some states allow 18–20), a clean record, and a pass on the written, physical, psychological and background checks. Most people go from application to sworn officer in 6–12 months, including a police academy of roughly 4–6 months. If a department hires you first, it typically pays for the academy; self-sponsored academy tuition runs from a few thousand dollars upward.

|              |                                                                               |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Timeline     | 6–12 months (application to sworn officer)                                    |
| Typical cost | \$0–\$8,000 (often \$0 if the agency sponsors you)                            |
| Education    | High school diploma or GED; some agencies require college credits or a degree |
| License      | State POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) certification               |
| Median pay   | \$76,210 per year (patrol officers)                                           |
| Job outlook  | +3% (2025–35), about as fast as average                                       |

# Step-by-step path

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## 1. Check that you meet the basic requirements

*Time: 1 week*

Confirm you are a US citizen, meet your state's minimum age (usually 21, sometimes 18–20), and hold a valid driver's license. Look at the disqualifiers on your target agency's recruiting page: felony convictions, certain misdemeanors, recent drug use and a poor driving record are common ones. If you have something on your record, ask a recruiter before you apply instead of guessing.

## 2. Get in shape for the physical test

*Time: 6–12 weeks · Cost: \$0–\$300*

Find your agency's exact fitness standard. Many use a timed run (often 1.5 miles), push-ups, sit-ups and an obstacle or agility course. Train 4–5 days a week for at least 6–8 weeks before the test date, and practice the events at test pace.

## 3. Decide between agency-sponsored and self-sponsored academy

*Time: 1–2 weeks*

In most departments you apply first, get hired as a recruit, and the agency sends you to the academy on salary. In some states, such as parts of California, Texas and Florida, you can pay your own way through a POST academy first, which can make you more attractive to smaller departments. Compare both before spending money on tuition.

## 4. Apply and pass the written exam

*Time: 2–8 weeks · Cost: \$0–\$75*

Submit applications to several agencies at once, since hiring cycles are slow. The written test usually covers reading comprehension, writing, basic math, memory and judgment. Some agencies use the PELLETB (California) or a vendor test such as FrontLine National (offered through the National Testing Network); buy a study guide or take a practice test for the exact exam named in the posting.

## 5. Get through the background check, interview and psych exam

*Time: 1–4 months*

Fill out the personal history packet completely and honestly; omissions disqualify more candidates than past mistakes do. Expect a polygraph or voice stress test in many agencies, an oral board interview, a psychological evaluation and a medical exam with drug screening. Gather your documents early so the investigator is not waiting on you.

## 6. Complete the police academy

*Time: 4–8 months · Cost: \$0–\$8,000 if self-sponsored*

Basic academy training averages about 21 weeks nationally, though state minimums vary widely. You will study criminal law, patrol procedures, firearms, defensive tactics, emergency driving, first aid and report writing. Show up fit, study every night, and treat inspections and deadlines as part of the test.

## **7. Pass the state certification exam**

*Time: 1–2 weeks · Cost: \$0–\$100*

Most states require you to pass a POST certification exam at the end of the academy before you can work as a sworn officer. The exam covers what the academy taught. Your academy staff will schedule it and tell you the passing score.

## **8. Finish field training and probation**

*Time: 6–18 months*

After the academy you ride with a field training officer for roughly 3–6 months and are graded on real calls. Most agencies keep new officers on probation for 6–18 months. Keep notes, ask questions, and take feedback without arguing.

## Costs & requirements

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### Estimated costs (USD)

| Item                                            | Low            | High            | Note                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Police academy tuition (self-sponsored)         | \$0            | \$8,000         | Usually \$0 if a department hires you first and sponsors you; self-pay academies at community colleges vary by state. |
| Written exam / application fees                 | \$0            | \$75            | Many agencies charge nothing; some vendor tests have a fee.                                                           |
| Study guide or practice tests                   | \$0            | \$50            |                                                                                                                       |
| Fitness preparation (running shoes, gym)        | \$0            | \$300           |                                                                                                                       |
| Academy gear and uniforms (if not provided)     | \$0            | \$1,500         | Sponsored recruits usually get gear issued.                                                                           |
| State certification exam                        | \$0            | \$100           | Often covered by the academy.                                                                                         |
| Associate degree in criminal justice (optional) | \$3,000        | \$15,000        | Only needed where the agency requires college credits.                                                                |
| <b>Total</b>                                    | <b>\$3,000</b> | <b>\$25,025</b> |                                                                                                                       |

## Requirements

|                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Age</b>                       | Usually at least 21 at hire or academy graduation; some states and agencies accept 18–20. Some agencies have a maximum entry age, often in the mid-30s to 40s; many have none.                         |
| <b>Citizenship</b>               | US citizenship is required by most agencies. A few states let permanent residents apply; check your state's rules.                                                                                     |
| <b>Education</b>                 | High school diploma or GED at minimum. Some agencies require 30–60 college credits, a degree, or military service instead.                                                                             |
| <b>Criminal record</b>           | A felony conviction disqualifies you almost everywhere. Domestic violence convictions bar you from carrying a firearm under federal law. Other misdemeanors and past drug use are judged case by case. |
| <b>Driver's license</b>          | A valid license and a reasonably clean driving record. Multiple recent violations or a DUI can disqualify you.                                                                                         |
| <b>Physical fitness</b>          | Pass the agency's physical ability test, such as a timed run, push-ups, sit-ups or an obstacle course.                                                                                                 |
| <b>Medical and psychological</b> | Pass a medical exam, vision and hearing tests, drug screening and a psychological evaluation.                                                                                                          |
| <b>State certification</b>       | Graduate from a state-approved academy and earn POST certification (name varies by state).                                                                                                             |

# 90-Day Action Plan

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*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: Qualify and choose

*Days 1–30*

**Goal:** Confirm you are eligible, pick target agencies and start training.

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- ☐ Read the minimum requirements and disqualifiers for 3–5 agencies near you and list which you meet.
- ☐ Pull your own criminal record and driving record so nothing in the background check surprises you.
- ☐ Write a complete personal history timeline: every address, job, school and reference for the last 10 years.
- ☐ Take a baseline fitness test against your agency's standard (run, push-ups, sit-ups).
- ☐ Start a 4–5 day weekly training plan aimed at the test events.
- ☐ Call or email a recruiter at your top agency and ask about the next hiring cycle and test date.
- ☐ Decide whether you will wait for agency sponsorship or self-sponsor through an academy.

## Phase 2: Apply and test

*Days 31–60*

**Goal:** Submit applications and pass the written and physical tests.

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- ☐ Submit applications to at least three agencies to widen your chances.
- ☐ Identify the exact written test each agency uses and buy a matching study guide.
- ☐ Take two timed practice exams and review every wrong answer.
- ☐ Run a full mock physical test every two weeks and track your times.
- ☐ Collect the documents on the checklist below and scan them into one folder.
- ☐ Line up 3–5 references and tell them an investigator may call.
- ☐ Do a ride-along with your target department if it offers one.

## Phase 3: Background and interviews

*Days 61–90*

**Goal:** Clear the background, oral board and psych evaluation.

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- ☐ Complete the personal history packet slowly and disclose everything asked.
- ☐ Practice the 12 interview questions below out loud, ideally with a mock panel.
- ☐ Clean up your social media; investigators look at it.
- ☐ Prepare for a polygraph or voice stress test by reviewing your packet so your answers match.
- ☐ Get a routine medical and eye check so the agency exam has no surprises.
- ☐ Keep training; many academies test fitness again on day one.
- ☐ Follow up politely with each agency on your status every 2–3 weeks.

## Documents checklist

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*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 (MVR)
- ☐ High school diploma or GED certificate
- ☐ College transcripts, if any
- ☐ DD-214 if you served in the military
- ☐ Selective Service registration proof (men)
- ☐ List of every address for the last 7–10 years
- ☐ Employment history with supervisor names and phone numbers
- ☐ Personal references with contact details
- ☐ Court records for any arrest or citation, with dispositions
- ☐ Credit report (many agencies review finances)

## Exams & how to prepare

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### Police written entrance exam

**What it is:** Multiple-choice test of reading, writing, grammar, basic math, memory and situational judgment. Agencies use their own test or a vendor test (e.g. PELLETB in California, FrontLine National).

**How to prepare:** Find the exact test name in the job posting, buy a matching study guide, and take at least two timed practice tests.

### Physical ability test (PAT)

**What it is:** Timed fitness events such as a 1.5-mile run, push-ups, sit-ups or an obstacle course with a dummy drag and wall climb.

**How to prepare:** Train to the agency's published standard 6–12 weeks in advance and practice the events at test pace.

### Psychological exam

**What it is:** Written personality and psychological inventories, usually followed by an interview with a psychologist.

**How to prepare:** Answer honestly and consistently; there is nothing to memorize. Get good sleep before the test.

### Oral board interview

**What it is:** A panel of officers or supervisors asks why you want the job and how you would handle scenarios.

**How to prepare:** Practice answers out loud, know the department's mission and community, and use specific examples from your life.

### State POST certification exam

**What it is:** End-of-academy test on law, procedures and skills required for state certification as a peace officer.

**How to prepare:** Keep up with academy coursework and review the state's learning objectives before the exam.

# Interview questions

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**1. Why do you want to be a police officer?**

*Tip:* Give a specific, personal reason tied to serving people, not TV shows or excitement.

**2. Why do you want to work for this department?**

*Tip:* Mention something real about the agency or community you researched.

**3. Tell us about a time you made a mistake. What did you do?**

*Tip:* Pick a real mistake, own it, and explain what you changed afterward.

**4. What would you do if you saw a fellow officer steal something?**

*Tip:* Integrity questions have one answer: you report it, even if it is uncomfortable.

**5. How do you handle stress?**

*Tip:* Describe concrete habits such as exercise, sleep and talking things through.

**6. Describe a time you dealt with an angry person.**

*Tip:* Show you stayed calm, listened, and de-escalated rather than escalated.

**7. Have you ever used illegal drugs?**

*Tip:* Answer exactly as you did on your packet. Inconsistency hurts more than the answer.

**8. What does community policing mean to you?**

*Tip:* Talk about building trust, showing up before there is a problem, and solving issues with residents.

**9. How would you handle a call where you must use force?**

*Tip:* Show you understand force is a last resort and must follow law and policy.

**10. What are your weaknesses?**

*Tip:* Name a real one that does not disqualify you and what you are doing to improve it.

**11. How do you treat people who are different from you?**

*Tip:* Give an example of working respectfully with people of other backgrounds.

**12. Why should we hire you over other candidates?**

*Tip:* Summarize two or three strengths with proof: reliability, communication, fitness, life experience.

## Resume bullet examples

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

- Resolved 40+ customer complaints per week in a retail setting while keeping conversations calm and professional.
- Completed 8 weeks of agency-specific fitness training and exceeded the physical ability standard by 15%.
- Wrote daily incident reports as a security officer, documenting events accurately for supervisors and police.
- Served 4 years in the US Army, including 18 months as a team leader responsible for 5 soldiers.
- Volunteered 100+ hours with a local youth mentoring program.
- Trained new employees on safety procedures and cash-handling policies.
- Maintained a perfect attendance record for two consecutive years on rotating shifts.
- Earned CPR/First Aid certification and responded to two on-site medical emergencies.

## Common mistakes to avoid

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1. Leaving things off the background packet, even small ones; omissions look like lying.
2. Showing up to the physical test without training to the exact events.
3. Applying to only one agency and waiting months for a single hiring cycle.
4. Paying for a self-sponsored academy before checking whether local agencies sponsor recruits.
5. Keeping offensive or reckless social media posts public during the background check.
6. Giving generic interview answers like 'I want to help people' with no example.
7. Taking on debt or ignoring collections; many agencies review your credit.

# 13-week progress tracker

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*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

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## Resources

- **BLS: Police and Detectives**

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

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

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

- **California POST PELLETB Applicant Preparation Guide**

[https://post.ca.gov/portals/0/post\\_docs/publications/Applicant\\_Preparation\\_Guide\\_for-the-POST\\_Entry-Level-Law-Enforcement-Test-Battery.pdf](https://post.ca.gov/portals/0/post_docs/publications/Applicant_Preparation_Guide_for-the-POST_Entry-Level-Law-Enforcement-Test-Battery.pdf)

- **Discover Policing (IACP career site)**

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

- **Bureau of Justice Statistics: law enforcement training**

<https://bjs.ojp.gov/topics/law-enforcement>

## Salary

| Bottom 10% | Median                                                          | Top 10%   |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| \$47,510   | <b>\$76,210 per year (police and sheriff's patrol officers)</b> | \$115,120 |

**Outlook:** Employment of police and sheriff's patrol officers is projected to grow 3% from 2025 to 2035, about as fast as average. BLS expects about 60,100 openings a year for police and detectives combined, mostly to replace officers who retire or leave. Pay is usually higher in large cities and state agencies, and overtime can add significantly.

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.