

Private Detective/Investigator

Snapshot

Career Cluster(s): Business, Management & Administration; Law, Public Safety, Corrections & Security

Interests: Law & justice; investigation; surveillance

Earnings (Yearly Average): \$50,510

Employment & Outlook: Much Faster Than Average Growth Expected

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Private detectives and investigators search for information about legal, financial, and personal matters. They offer many services, such as verifying people's backgrounds and statements, finding missing persons, and investigating computer crimes.

Work Environment

The work environment for private detectives and investigators ranges from office work, such as computer research and phone calls, to field work such as interviewing and surveillance. Private detectives and investigators often work irregular hours because they conduct surveillance and contact people outside



A private detective may conduct surveillance as part of the job, often from a hidden position. Photo via iStock.com/Andrey Popov. [Used under license.]

of normal work hours. They may work early mornings, evenings, weekends, and holidays.

Occupation Interest

Private detectives and investigators are inquisitive, highly analytical individuals who enjoy taking on challenging cases and solving real-world mysteries, at the behest of clients. They typically come from related fields such as law enforcement, the military, or intelligence, where the required skill set is honed through years of work experience.

A Day in the Life—Duties and Responsibilities

Private detectives and investigators offer many services for individuals, attorneys, and businesses. Examples include performing background checks, investigating employees for possible theft from a company, proving or disproving infidelity in a divorce case, and helping to locate a missing person.

Private detectives and investigators use a variety of tools when researching the facts in a case. Much of their work is done with a computer, allowing them to obtain information such as telephone numbers, details about social networks, descriptions of online activities, and records of a person's prior arrests. They make phone calls to verify facts and interview people when conducting a background investigation.

Detectives also conduct surveillance when investigating a case. They may watch locations, such as a person's home or office, often from a hidden position. Using cameras and binoculars, detectives gather information on people of interest.

Detectives and investigators must be mindful of the law when conducting investigations. Because they lack police authority, their work must be done with the same authority as a private citizen. As a result, detectives and investigators must have a good understanding of federal, state, and local laws, such as privacy laws, and other legal issues affecting their work. Otherwise, evidence they collect may not be useable in court, and they could face prosecution.

Profile

Interests: People, Data, Things

Working Conditions: Both Inside and Outside

Physical Strength: Medium Work

Education Needs: On-the-Job Training, High School Diploma with Work Experience

Licensure/Certification: Varies By State

Opportunities for Experience: On-The-Job Training

Interest Score: EC

Duties and Responsibilities

- Interviewing people to gather information
- Searching online, public, and court records to uncover clues
- Conducting surveillance
- Collecting evidence for clients
- Checking for civil judgments and criminal history

OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES

Skip Tracer

Skip tracers specialize in locating people whose whereabouts are unknown. For example, debt collectors may employ them to locate people who have unpaid bills.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Immediate Physical Environment

Private detectives and investigators work in many environments, depending on the case. Some spend more time in offices, researching cases on computers and making phone calls. Others spend more time in the field, conducting interviews or performing surveillance. In addition, private detectives and investigators may have to work outdoors or from a vehicle, in all kinds of weather, to obtain the information their client needs.

Human Environment

Although investigators often work alone, some work with others while conducting surveillance or executing large, complicated assignments. Some may also choose to employ a team of investigators. Investigators must be comfortable dealing with clients and members of the public, sometimes in highly stressful situations. They may also need to deal professionally with the police and give evidence in court.

Technological Environment

Private detectives and investigators must be able to use all tools at their disposal for solving cases, including standard computer software, databases, and a familiarity with social media and the Internet. Sophisticated camera equipment may also be required, as well as standard field tools such as binoculars. Private detectives and investigators should ideally have their own mode of transportation because travel is often required. On the business end, investigators who run their own firms must be familiar with standard software such as accounting and payroll.

EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND ADVANCEMENT

High School/Secondary

Education requirements vary greatly with the job, but most jobs require a high school diploma. Students with an interest in this line of work should prepare as though for a career in law enforcement, with courses such as English, civics, history, psychology, and sociology.

Suggested High School Subjects

- Algebra
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Civics
- Earth or Life or Physical Science
- Economics
- English
- Forensic Science
- Geometry
- History
- Physics
- Psychology
- Sociology
- Statistics

Related Career Pathways/Majors

*Business, Management & Administration
Career Cluster*

- General Management Pathway

Law, Public Safety, Corrections & Security Career Cluster

- Law Enforcement Services Pathway
- Security & Protective Services Pathway

Postsecondary

Some jobs may require a 2- or 4-year degree in a field such as criminal justice.

Private detectives and investigators must typically have previous work experience, usually in law enforcement, the military, or federal intelligence, each with its own educational requirements. Those in such related jobs, who retire after 20 or 25 years of service, may become private detectives or investigators in a second career.

Transferable Skills and Abilities

Communication Skills

- Listening carefully and asking appropriate questions when interviewing a person of interest

Decision-making Skills

- Thinking on one's feet and making quick decisions, based on the limited information that they have at a given time

Inquisitiveness

- Wanting to ask questions and search for the truth

Patience

- Spending long periods conducting surveillance while waiting for an event to occur
- Investigating cases may take a long time, and they may not provide a resolution quickly—or at all

Resourcefulness

- Working persistently with whatever leads are available, no matter how limited, to determine the next step toward their goal
- Anticipating what a person of interest will do next

Other private detectives and investigators may have previously worked as bill and account collectors, claims adjusters, paralegals, or process servers.

Related College Majors

- Criminal Justice/Police Science
- Cultural/Archaeological Resources Protection
- Cyber/Computer Forensics and Counterterrorism
- Financial Forensics & Fraud Investigation
- Law Enforcement Recordkeeping and Evidence Management
- Maritime Law Enforcement
- Protective Services Operations

Professional Certification and Licensure

Most states require private detectives and investigators to have a license. Check with your state for more information; Professional Investigator Magazine has links to most states' licensing requirements. Because laws often change, jobseekers should verify the licensing laws related to private investigators with the state and locality in which they want to work.

Candidates may also obtain certification, although it is not required for employment. Still, becoming certified through professional organizations can demonstrate competence and may help candidates advance in their careers.

For investigators who specialize in negligence or criminal defense investigation, the National Association of Legal Investigators (NALI) offers the Certified Legal Investigator (CLI) certification. For other investigators, the American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS) International offers the Professional Certified Investigator certification.

Additional Requirements

Most private detectives and investigators learn through on-the-job training, typically lasting between several months and a year.

Although new investigators must learn how to gather information, additional training depends on the type of firm that hires them. For example, investigators may learn to conduct remote surveillance, reconstruct accident scenes, or investigate insurance fraud. Corporate investigators hired by large companies may receive formal training in business practices, management structure, and various finance-related topics.

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Earnings depend on the experience of the investigator, the nature of the cases they work, and the clients for whom they work. Median annual earnings of private detectives and investigators were \$50,510 in 2019. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$30,390, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$89,760.

Private detectives and investigators may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These are usually paid by an employer if the investigator works for a firm. Travel expenses may also be covered.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

Private detectives and investigators held 36,200 jobs in 2019. Three percent were self-employed. Employment is expected to grow much faster than all occupations through the year 2029, at a rate of 8 percent. However, because it is a small occupation, the fast growth will result in only about 3,000 new jobs over the 10-year period.

Continued lawsuits, fraud and other crimes, and interpersonal mistrust create demand for investigative services in industries such as legal services.

Background checks will continue to be a source of work for some investigators, as online investigations are not always sufficient.

Strong competition for jobs can be expected because private detective and investigator careers attract many qualified people, including relatively young retirees from law enforcement and the military.

Candidates with related work experience, as well as those with strong interviewing skills and familiarity with computers, may find more job opportunities than others.

Related Occupations

- Accountant/Auditor
- Bill/Account Collector
- Claims Adjuster/Appraiser/Examiner/Investigator
- Financial Examiner

- Fire Inspector
- Forensic Science Technician
- Paralegal/Legal Assistant
- Police Officer/Detective
- Security Guard/Gambling Surveillance Officer

MORE INFORMATION

ASIS International

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asis@asisonline.org
www.asisonline.org

Council of International Investigators (CII)

P.O. Box 1015
St. Helena, SC 29920
917.292.0613
lec@cii2.org
www.cii2.org

International Intelligence Network (INTELLENET)

P.O. Box 350
Gladwyne, PA 19035
734.320.9240
Intellenet@intellenet.org
www.intellenet.org

National Association of Legal Investigators (NALI)

P.O. Box 278
Bath, MI 48808
517.702.9835
www.nalionline.org

National Association of Professional Process Servers (NAPPS)

P.O. Box 4547
Portland, OR 97208-4547
503.222.4180
napps.org

National Council of Investigation and Security Services (NCISS)

P.O. Box 200615
Evans, CO 80620
800.445.8408
www.nciss.org

National Defender Investigator Association (NDIA)

P.O. Box 1900
San Marcos, CA 92079-1900
760.290.3909
nationaldefender@gmail.com
www.ndia.net

Professional Background Screening Association (PBSA)

110 Horizon Drive, Suite 210
Raleigh, NC 27615
919.459.2082
info@thepbsa.org
thepbsa.org

World Association of Detectives (WAD)

P.O. Box 20030
Evans, CO 80620
443.982.4586
Wad@Wad.net
www.wad.net