
Private Detectives and Investigators

Significant Points

- Work hours are often irregular, and the work can be dangerous.
- About 21 percent are self-employed.
- Keen competition is expected for most jobs.
- Most private detectives and investigators have some college education and previous experience in investigative work.

Nature of the Work

Private detectives and *investigators* assist individuals, businesses, and attorneys by finding and analyzing information. They connect clues to uncover facts about legal, financial, or personal matters. Private detectives and investigators offer many services, including executive, corporate, and celebrity protection; pre-employment verification; and individual background profiles. Some investigate computer crimes, such as identity theft, harassing e-mails, and illegal downloading of copyrighted material. They also provide assistance in criminal and civil liability cases, insurance claims and fraud cases, child custody and protection cases, missing-persons cases, and premarital screening. They are sometimes hired to investigate individuals to prove or disprove infidelity.

Private detectives and investigators may use many methods to determine the facts in a case. Much of their work is done with a computer. For example, they often recover deleted e-mails and documents. They also may perform computer database searches or work with someone who does. Computers allow investigators to quickly obtain huge amounts of information, such as records of a subject's prior arrests, convictions, and civil legal judgments; telephone numbers; information about motor vehicle registrations; records of association and club memberships; social networking site details; and even photographs.

Detectives and investigators also perform various other types of surveillance or searches. To verify facts, such as an individual's income or place of employment, they may make phone calls or visit a subject's workplace. In other cases, especially those involving missing persons and background checks, investigators interview people to gather as much information as possible about an individual. Sometimes investigators go undercover, pretending to be someone else in order to get information or to observe a subject inconspicuously. They even arrange to be hired in businesses to observe workers for wrongdoing.

Most detectives and investigators are trained to perform physical surveillance, which may be high tech or low tech. They may observe a site, such as the home of a subject, from an inconspicuous location or a vehicle. Using photographic and video cameras, binoculars, cell phones, and GPS systems, detectives gather information on an individual. Surveillance can be time consuming.

The duties of private detectives and investigators depend on the needs of their clients. In cases that involve fraudulent workers' compensation claims, for example, investigators may carry out long-term covert observation of a person suspected of

fraud. If an investigator observes the person performing an activity that contradicts injuries stated in a worker's compensation claim, the investigator would take video or still photographs to document the activity and report it to the client.

Detectives and investigators must be mindful of the law in conducting investigations. They keep up with Federal, State, and local legislation, such as privacy laws and other legal issues affecting their work. The legality of certain methods may be unclear, and investigators and detectives must make judgment calls in deciding how to pursue a case. They must also know how to collect evidence properly so that they do not compromise its admissibility in court.

Private detectives and investigators often specialize. Those who focus on intellectual property theft, for example, investigate and document acts of piracy, help clients stop illegal activity, and provide intelligence for prosecution and civil action. Other investigators specialize in developing financial profiles and carrying out asset searches. Their reports reflect information gathered through interviews, investigation and surveillance, and research, including reviews of public documents.

Computer forensic investigators specialize in recovering, analyzing, and presenting data from computers for use in investigations or as evidence. They determine the details of intrusions into computer systems, recover data from encrypted or erased files, and recover e-mails and deleted passwords.

Legal investigators assist in preparing criminal defenses, locating witnesses, serving legal documents, interviewing police and prospective witnesses, and gathering and reviewing evidence. Legal investigators also may collect information on the parties to a litigation, take photographs, testify in court, and assemble evidence and reports for trials. They often work for law firms or lawyers.

Corporate investigators conduct internal and external investigations for corporations. In internal investigations, they may investigate drug use in the workplace, ensure that expense accounts are not abused, or determine whether employees are stealing assets, merchandise, or information. External investigations attempt to thwart criminal schemes from outside the corporation, such as fraudulent billing by a supplier. Investigators may spend months posing as employees of the company in order to find misconduct.

Financial investigators may be hired to develop confidential financial profiles of individuals or companies that are prospective parties to large financial transactions. These investigators often are certified public accountants (CPAs) who work closely with investment bankers and other accountants. They also might search for assets in order to recover damages awarded by a court in fraud or theft cases.

Detectives who work for retail stores or hotels are responsible for controlling losses and protecting assets. *Store detectives*, also known as *loss prevention agents*, safeguard the assets of retail stores by apprehending anyone attempting to steal merchandise or destroy store property. They prevent theft by shoplifters, vendor representatives, delivery personnel, and store employees. Store detectives also conduct periodic inspections of stock areas, dressing rooms, and rest rooms, and sometimes assist in opening and closing the store. They may prepare loss prevention and security reports for management and testify in court against people they apprehend. *Hotel detectives* protect guests

of the establishment from theft of their belongings and preserve order in hotel restaurants and bars. They also may keep undesirable individuals, such as known thieves, off the premises.

Work environment. Many detectives and investigators spend time away from their offices conducting interviews or doing surveillance, but some work in the office most of the day conducting computer searches and making phone calls. When an investigator is working on a case, the environment might range from plush boardrooms to seedy bars. Store and hotel detectives work in the businesses that they protect.

Investigators generally work alone, but they sometimes work with others, especially during surveillance or when they follow a subject. Some of the work involves confrontation, so the job can be stressful and dangerous. Some situations, such as certain bodyguard assignments for corporate or celebrity clients, call for the investigator to be armed. In most cases, however, a weapon is not necessary, because the purpose of the work is gathering information and not law enforcement or criminal apprehension. Owners of investigative agencies have the added stress of having to deal with demanding and sometimes distraught clients. Although considered a dangerous occupation, private detectives and investigators have a relatively low incidence of nonfatal work-related injuries.

Private detectives and investigators often work irregular hours because of the need to conduct surveillance and contact people who are not available during normal working hours. Early morning, evening, weekend, and holiday work is common.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most private detectives and investigators have some college education and previous experience in investigative work. In the majority of States, they are required to be licensed.

Education and training. There are no formal education requirements for most private detective and investigator jobs, although many have postsecondary degrees. Courses in criminal justice and police science are helpful to aspiring private detectives and investigators. Although related experience is usually required, some people enter the occupation directly after graduation from college, generally with an associate's or bachelor's degree in criminal justice or police science. Experience in police investigation is viewed favorably.

Most corporate investigators must have a bachelor's degree, preferably in a business-related field. Some corporate investigators have a master's degree in business administration or a law degree; others are CPAs.

For computer forensics work, a computer science or accounting degree is more helpful than a criminal justice degree. An accounting degree provides good background knowledge for investigating computer fraud. Either of these two degrees provides a good starting point, after which investigative techniques can be learned on the job. Alternatively, many colleges and universities now offer certificate programs, requiring from 15 to 21 credits, in computer forensics. These programs are most beneficial to law enforcement officers, paralegals, or others who already are involved in investigative work. A few colleges and universities now offer bachelor's or master's degrees in computer forensics, and others are planning to begin offering such degrees. Most computer forensic investigators learn their trade while working for a law enforcement agency, either as a sworn



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officer or a civilian computer forensic analyst. They are trained at their agency's computer forensics training program. Many people enter law enforcement specifically to get this training and establish a reputation before moving to the private sector.

Most of the work of private detectives and investigators is learned on the job. New investigators will usually start by learning how to use databases to gather information. The training they receive depends on the type of firm. At an insurance company, a new investigator will learn to recognize insurance fraud. At a firm that specializes in domestic cases, a new worker might observe a senior investigator performing surveillance. Learning by doing, in which new investigators are put on cases and gain skills as they go, is a common approach. Corporate investigators hired by large companies, however, may receive formal training in business practices, management structure, and various finance-related topics.

Because they work with changing technologies, computer forensic investigators never stop training. They learn the latest methods of fraud detection and new software programs and operating systems by attending conferences and courses offered by software vendors and professional associations.

Licensure. Most States and the District of Columbia require private detectives and investigators to be licensed. Licensing requirements vary, however. Seven States—Alabama, Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Mississippi, South Dakota, and Wyoming—have no Statewide licensing requirements. Some States have few requirements, and many others have stringent regulations. For example, the Bureau of Security and Investigative Services of the California Department of Consumer Affairs requires private investigators to be 18 years of age or older; have a combination of education in police science, criminal law, or justice and experience equaling 3 years (6,000 hours); pass a criminal history background check by the California Department of Justice and the FBI (in most States, convicted felons cannot be issued a license); and receive a qualifying score on a 2-hour written examination covering laws and regulations. In all States, detectives and investigators who carry handguns must meet additional requirements. Because laws change, it is important to verify the licensing laws related to private investigators with the State and locality where work will be performed.

There are no licenses specifically for computer forensic investigators, but some States require them to be licensed private investigators. Even where licensure is not required, a private investigator license is useful to some because it allows them to perform followup or related tasks.

Other qualifications. Private detectives and investigators typically have previous experience in other occupations. Some have worked in other occupations for insurance or collections companies, in the private security industry, or as paralegals. Many investigators enter the field after serving in law enforcement, the military, government auditing and investigative positions, or Federal intelligence jobs. Former law enforcement officers, military investigators, and government agents, who frequently are able to retire after 25 years of service, often become private detectives or investigators in a second career. Others enter from jobs in finance, accounting, commercial credit, investigative reporting, insurance, and law. These individuals often can apply their previous work experience in a related investigative specialty.

For private detective and investigator jobs, most employers look for individuals with ingenuity, persistence, and assertiveness. A candidate must not be afraid of confrontation, should communicate well, and should be able to think on his or her feet. Good interviewing and interrogation skills also are important and usually are acquired in earlier careers in law enforcement or other fields. Because the courts often are the judge of a properly conducted investigation, the investigator must be able to present the facts in a manner that a jury will believe. The screening process for potential employees typically includes a background check for a criminal history.

Certification and advancement. Some investigators receive certification from a professional organization to demonstrate competency in a field. For example, the National Association of Legal Investigators confers the Certified Legal Investigator designation upon licensed investigators who devote a majority of their practice to negligence or criminal defense investigations. To receive the designation, applicants must have 5 years of investigations experience. They also must satisfy educational requirements and continuing-training requirements and must pass written and oral exams.

ASIS International, a trade organization for the security industry, offers the Professional Certified Investigator certification. To qualify, applicants must have a high school diploma or the equivalent; must have 5 years of investigations experience, including 2 years managing investigations; and must pass an exam.

Most private detective agencies are small, with little room for advancement. Usually, there are no defined ranks or steps, so advancement takes the form of increases in salary and assignment status. Many detectives and investigators start their own firms after gaining a few years of experience. Corporate

and legal investigators may rise to supervisor or manager of the security or investigations department.

Employment

Private detectives and investigators held about 45,500 jobs in 2008. About 21 percent were self-employed, including many for whom investigative work was a second job. Around 41 percent of detective and investigator jobs were in investigation and security services, including private detective agencies. The rest worked mostly in State and local government, legal services firms, department or other general merchandise stores, employment services companies, insurance agencies, and credit mediation establishments, including banks and other depository institutions.

Job Outlook

Keen competition is expected for most jobs despite much faster than average employment growth.

Employment change. Employment of private detectives and investigators is expected to grow 22 percent over the 2008–18 decade, much faster than the average for all occupations. Increased demand for private detectives and investigators will result from heightened security concerns, increased litigation, and the need to protect confidential information and property of all kinds. The proliferation of criminal activity on the Internet, such as identity theft, spamming, e-mail harassment, and illegal downloading of copyrighted materials, also will increase the demand for private investigators. Employee background checks, conducted by private investigators, have become standard for an increasing number of jobs. Growing financial activity worldwide will increase the demand for investigators to control internal and external financial losses, to monitor competitors, and to prevent industrial spying. More individuals are investigating care facilities, such as childcare providers, hospices, and hospitals.

Job prospects. Keen competition is expected for most jobs because private detective and investigator careers attract many qualified people, including relatively young retirees from law enforcement and military careers. The best opportunities for new jobseekers will be in entry-level jobs in detective agencies. Opportunities are expected to be favorable for qualified computer forensic investigators.

Earnings

Median annual wages of salaried private detectives and investigators were \$41,760 in May 2008. The middle 50 percent earned between \$30,870 and \$59,060. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$23,500, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$76,640. Wages of private detectives and investigators vary greatly by employer, specialty, and geographic area.

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2008	Projected Employment, 2018	Change, 2008-2018	
				Number	Percent
Private detectives and investigators.....	33-9021	45,500	55,500	10,000	22

(NOTE) Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

Related Occupations

Other occupations whose duties involve collecting information include:

Bill and account collectors
Claims adjusters, appraisers, examiners,
and investigators

Other occupations whose duties involve property protection include:

Police and detectives
Security guards and gaming surveillance officers

Other occupations whose duties involve preparing financial profiles and conducting asset searches include:

Accountants and auditors
Financial analysts
Personal financial advisors

Sources of Additional Information

For information on local licensing requirements, contact your State Department of Public Safety, State Division of Licensing, or local or State police headquarters.

For information on a career as a legal investigator and about the Certified Legal Investigator credential, contact:

► National Association of Legal Investigators, NALI World Headquarters, 235 N. Pine Street, Lansing, MI. 48933.

Internet: <http://www.nalionline.org>

For more information about investigative and other security careers, about the Professional Certified Investigator credential, and for a list of colleges and universities offering security-related courses and majors, contact:

► ASIS International, 1625 Prince St., Alexandria, VA 22314-2818. Internet: <http://www.asisonline.org>

The Occupational Information Network (O*NET) provides information on a wide range of occupational characteristics. Links to O*NET appear at the end of the Internet version of this occupational statement, accessible at <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/ocos157.htm>