



## Adrenaline jobs: High-intensity careers

*Elka Torpey | January 2016*

Jen Sharp understands risk. She routinely harnesses first-time skydivers to a parachute system and falls out of an airplane with them. As they plummet toward the ground at 120 miles per hour, Sharp is responsible for controlling the fall and deploying the parachute. “It’s like you’re flying,” she says. “You feel very powerful and very vulnerable at the same time.” After opening the parachute, she maneuvers herself and her student safely to the ground.



Helping students during a jump and successfully giving them their first skydiving experience is just part of the job for Sharp, a skydive instructor in Osage City, Kansas. Before each jump, Sharp checks the weather, readies the equipment, and teaches her students about proper jumping procedure. “We prepare so much,” she says, “but in the moment, you just have to act. That’s an intense, fun part of what we do.”

People like Sharp are drawn to the high-intensity careers described in this article. Keep reading for data and more information from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) about the job outlook, typical entry-level requirements, and pay for some of these occupations.

## Potential risk, excitement, and more

Across all occupations there is the possibility for intense situations. But in the occupations described here, the chances of encountering them are high. And in many cases, lives or property are at stake.

Uncertainty is also a given, as workers rarely know exactly what will happen next. “With a flick of the switch, everything changes,” says emergency medical technician (EMT) Frank Wagner of Elizabeth, New Jersey. “Everything can be perfectly normal one minute, and then it’s not.”

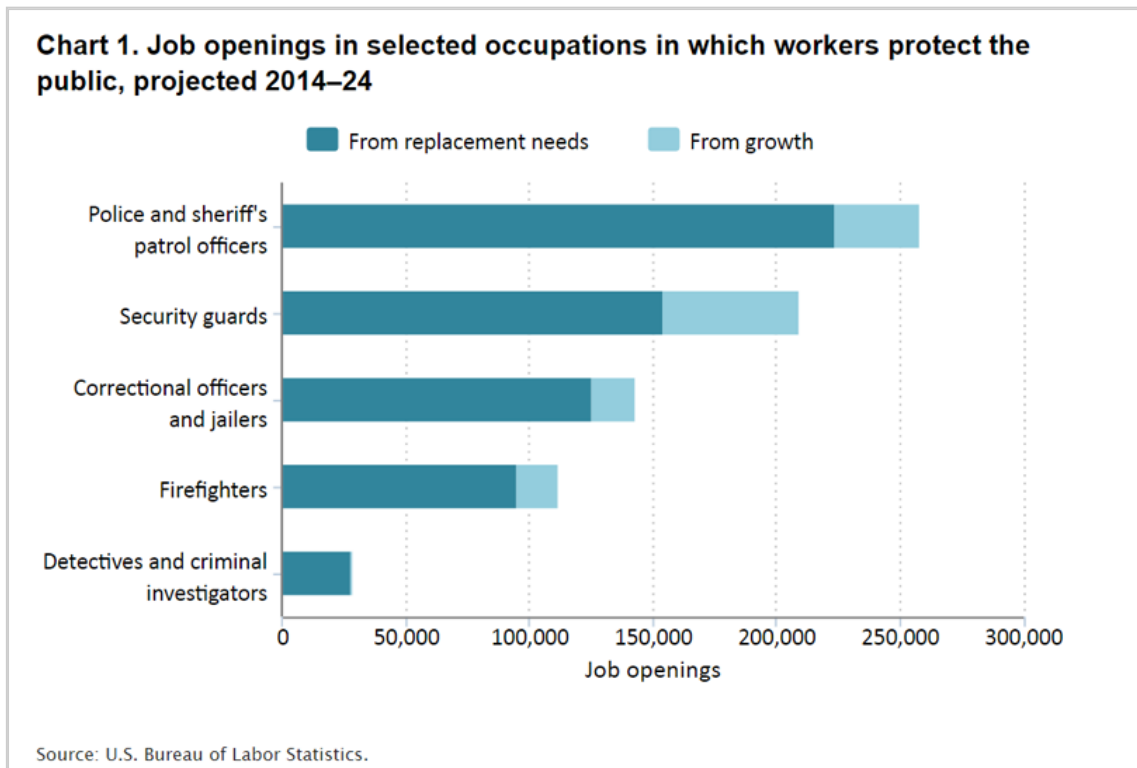
The occupations described in this section are grouped by those in which workers

- [Protect the public](#)
- [Save lives](#)
- [Encounter danger or adventure.](#)

Charts show 2014–24 projected job openings for selected occupations. These openings are expected to arise from the need to replace workers who leave an occupation permanently and from growth.

## Protect the public

Every city and town needs workers to keep the public safe and maintain law and order. And doing so, at times, is risky. Chart 1 shows projected job openings for some of these protective service occupations.



**Correctional officers.** Overseeing accused or convicted criminals in jails or prisons requires [correctional officers](#) to be alert and prepared for the unexpected.



**Criminal investigators.** [Criminal investigators](#) get close to the action when they visit crime scenes, interview witnesses or suspects, and conduct raids and arrests.

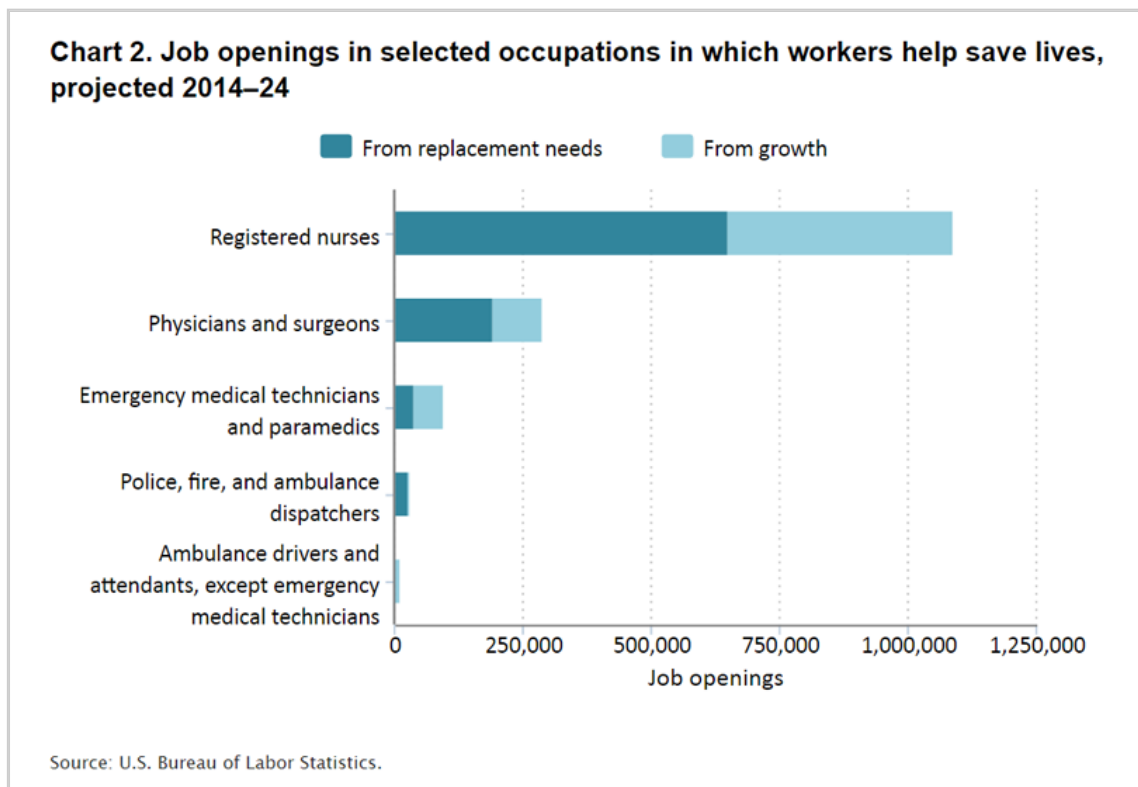
**Firefighters.** Whether rushing into a burning building or acting as first responders during medical emergencies, [firefighters](#) perform a variety of challenging tasks.

**Police.** [Police](#) are always on the lookout for trouble as they patrol areas for signs of criminal activity, respond to calls, and arrest people suspected of breaking the law.

**Security guards.** These workers monitor for theft, terrorist acts, and other illegal activity. [Security guards](#) may experience intense situations when called on to enforce the rules.

## Save lives

Although healthcare providers and emergency workers have some routine tasks, their responsibilities intensify when life-threatening situations arise. Job prospects vary by occupation. (See chart 2.)



**9-1-1 operators.** [Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers](#) answer emergency calls, notify first responders, and provide immediate assistance as necessary.

**Ambulance drivers and attendants.** With their vehicle lights flashing and sirens wailing, [ambulance drivers and attendants](#) transport patients to facilities quickly and safely so that patients can receive medical attention as soon as possible.



**Critical care nurses.** These [nurses](#) care for patients who require intensive care, which might involve, for example, monitoring people who have gone into shock.

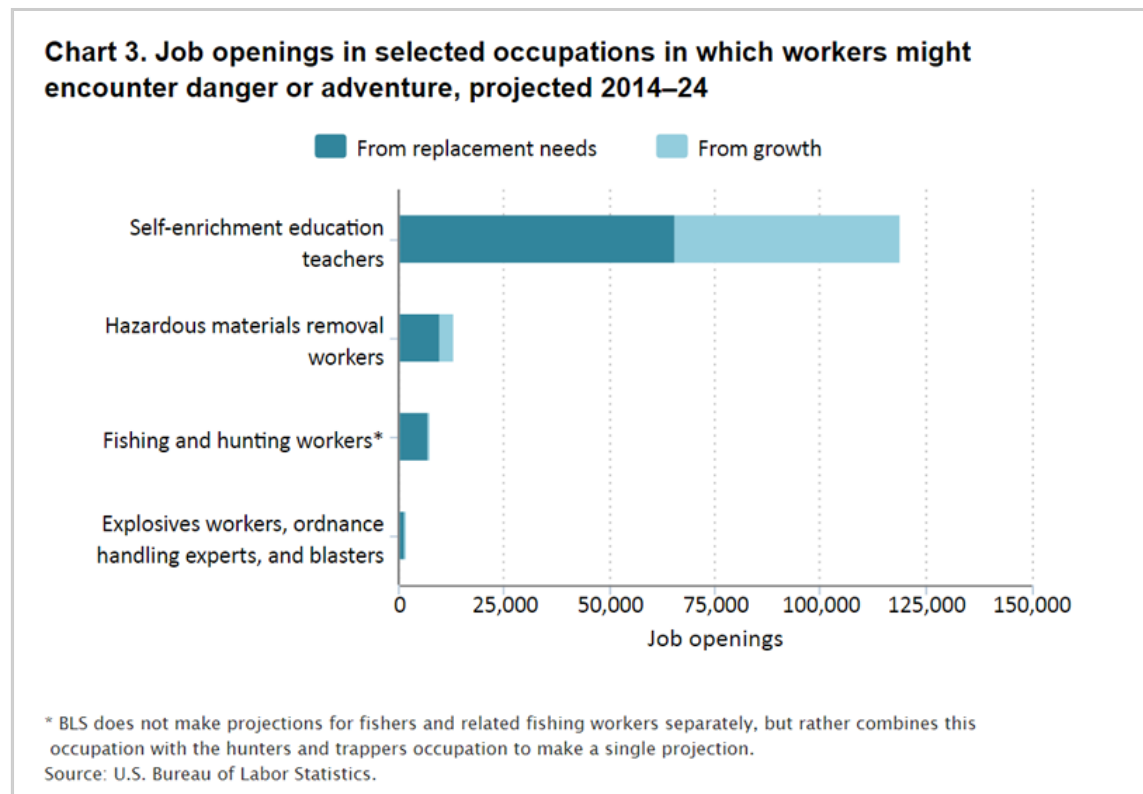


**EMTs and paramedics.** Among the first to arrive during a crisis, [EMTs and paramedics](#) treat sick or injured people on the spot and help get them to a medical facility for further care.

**ER physicians.** Heart attacks, severe trauma, accidental poisonings—lots of medical problems might present themselves in the emergency room that can cause these [doctors'](#) stress levels to rise.

## Encounter danger or adventure

These workers go places—or do things—that others dare not, all for the sake of their jobs. Chart 3 shows projected job openings for a few occupations in which danger or adventure are often intertwined with the work. Military careers are not included in the chart, because BLS does not make projections for those occupations. The number of military personnel is expected to remain fairly consistent through 2024, with job openings arising from the need to replace those who leave military service.



**Explosives workers.** The threat involved in detonating or transporting volatile substances makes [explosives workers](#)' jobs inherently dangerous.



**Extreme sports instructors.** A relatively small number of [self-enrichment education teachers](#) show others how to perform daring feats, such as rock climbing, skydiving, or whitewater kayaking.

**Fishing workers.** [Fishing workers](#) are on the seas in all conditions, doing very physical work on slippery surfaces and risking injury. However, excitement kicks in when they bring in a large haul.

**Hazmat removal workers.** In the chaotic aftermath of accidents or disasters, [hazardous materials removal workers](#) rush to the scene to help clean up.

**Military personnel.** Although combat specialty personnel are among the most likely members of the military to encounter danger, plenty of other [military personnel](#) might also work under stress.

## From highest highs to lowest lows

The median annual wage for most of the occupations in table 1 was higher than the \$35,540 median wage for all occupations in May 2014, according to BLS. In addition to providing good wages, intense or action-packed careers are often interesting and fulfilling, say workers in these occupations.

But the stress can take a toll, and despite workers' best efforts, there is no guarantee things will go as planned. "There are always those situations that don't have the happy ending we all hope for," says Blake Govan, a police dispatcher in Detroit, Michigan. "That's hard to deal with, and you may even second-guess your decisionmaking."

**Table 1. Employment and wages for selected adrenaline occupations**

Occupation	Employment, 2014	Median annual wage, May 2014 <sup>(1)</sup>
See footnotes at end of table.		
<b>Protect the public</b>		
Correctional officers and jailers	457,600	\$39,780
Detectives and criminal investigators	116,700	79,870
Firefighters	327,300	45,970
Police and sheriff's patrol officers	680,000	56,810
Security guards	1,095,400	24,410
<b>Save lives</b>		
Ambulance drivers and attendants, except emergency medical technicians	19,600	24,080
Emergency medical technicians and paramedics	241,200	31,700
Physicians and surgeons	708,300	≥187,200
Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers	102,000	37,410
Registered nurses	2,751,000	66,640
<b>Encounter danger or adventure</b>		
Explosives workers, ordnance handling experts, and blasters	8,100	52,140
Fishing and hunting workers	28,400	32,530
Hazardous materials removal workers	43,700	38,520
Military careers <sup>(2)</sup>	N/A	N/A

**Table 1. Employment and wages for selected adrenaline occupations**

Occupation	Employment, 2014	Median annual wage, May 2014 <sup>(1)</sup>
<b>Self-enrichment education teachers</b>	348,700	36,020

Footnotes: (1) Wage data do not include self-employed workers. (2) BLS does not collect employment and wage data for military careers. For more information about military pay, visit the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, which highlights data from the [U.S. Department of Defense](#).  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Schedules may be long and grueling, with some workers regularly having 10- or 12-hour shifts that include nights, weekends, or holidays. And in many of these occupations, injury, illness, and fatality rates are higher than average.

To reduce risk factors, workers take precautions, such as by wearing protective gear or adhering to workplace safety guidelines. Still, their jobs may expose them daily to disease, suffering, or other physically and emotionally taxing situations.



Support from colleagues helps these workers persevere through the hardships. And many are driven by a desire to succeed amid challenges. Working through difficult situations is important, says Sharp—especially when giving up is not an option. Wagner agrees. “You can’t get upset or shaken up,” he says. “You just do your job.”

The variety of work in many of the occupations is also a plus. “Every day is an adventure,” says Govan. But perhaps the greatest reward is the opportunity to have a positive effect on others. “When you go home, you feel like you’ve served a purpose,” says Kevin Stuart, a correctional officer in Brazos County, Texas. “That’s really satisfying.”



## Getting started

Workers in high-intensity jobs say it takes a lot more than a desire for action or excitement to succeed in these occupations.

For starters, you must be adaptable and perform well under pressure. Good judgment and self-control are also important. And the ability to communicate with all types of people is essential, as is following protocol. “When you take shortcuts, that’s when things become risky,” says Stuart.

In addition, some combination of education, training, or other preparation is typically required for entry. (See table 2.)

**Table 2. Education and training designations for selected adrenaline occupations**

Occupation	Typical education needed for entry	Work experience in a related occupation	Typical on-the-job training needed to attain competency in the occupation
See footnotes at end of table.			
<b>Protect the public</b>			
<b>Correctional officers and jailers</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
<b>Detectives and criminal investigators</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	Less than 5 years	Moderate-term on-the-job training
<b>Firefighters</b>	Postsecondary non-degree award	None	Long-term on-the-job training
<b>Police and sheriff's patrol officers</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
<b>Security guards</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Short-term on-the-job training
<b>Save lives</b>			
<b>Ambulance drivers and attendants, except emergency medical technicians</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
<b>Emergency medical technicians and paramedics</b>	Postsecondary non-degree award	None	None
<b>Physicians and surgeons</b>	Doctoral or professional degree	None	Internship/residency
<b>Police, fire, and ambulance dispatchers</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
<b>Registered nurses</b>	Bachelor's degree	None	None
<b>Encounter danger or adventure</b>			
<b>Explosives workers, ordnance handling experts, and blasters</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	Less than 5 years	Long-term on-the-job training

**Table 2. Education and training designations for selected adrenaline occupations**

Occupation	Typical education needed for entry	Work experience in a related occupation	Typical on-the-job training needed to attain competency in the occupation
<b>Fishers and related fishing workers</b>	No formal educational credential	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
<b>Hazardous materials removal workers</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
<b>Military careers<sup>(1)</sup></b>	Varies, but at least a high school diploma or equivalent	Varies	Varies
<b>Self-enrichment education teachers</b>	High school diploma or equivalent	Less than 5 years	None

Footnotes: (1) BLS does not designate typical entry-level education and training for military careers

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

## Education

To enter most of the occupations mentioned in this article, you'll need a high school diploma or the equivalent. But even then, employers may prefer to hire workers with additional education. Only [fishing workers](#) typically can enter their occupation without a formal educational credential.

Among the occupations that typically require higher levels of education for entry are [firefighters](#) (certificate or other postsecondary nondegree award), [registered nurses](#) (bachelor's degree), and [doctors](#) (professional degree.)



## Training

Performing well in high-stress situations requires a certain level of competency, which is frequently honed while training on the job. Table 2 shows the length of this training typically needed once employed in an occupation.

[Security guards](#), for example, typically need no more than 1 month of on-the-job experience and informal training. [Hazardous materials removal workers](#) are among those who may need up to 12 months of training. And [firefighters](#) and [explosives workers](#) usually develop their skills on the job for more than a year.

In some occupations, such as those in [protective service](#), workers attend special training academies after being hired. Graduates from these training academies then receive additional on-the-job training at their own facility.

## Other requirements

Like workers in other occupations, those in high-intensity jobs must meet a variety of additional requirements. To become an entry-level [criminal investigator](#), for example, you typically need work experience as a [police officer](#). And in many of these occupations, such as [registered nurse](#), workers need a professional license.



Still other qualifications might include age requirements, U.S. citizenship, and a valid driver's license, as well as passing a physical exam, drug screening, or background check.

Because of the unique rigors of these jobs, you may want to experience the work firsthand before pursuing a career. You might, for example, do a ride-along with an [ambulance driver](#) or shadow a [fishing worker](#). Internships are also helpful.

In fact, there may be lots of ways to get a sense for what these workers do. Govan first became interested in emergency response work after his uncle gave him a police scanner, so he could listen in on the action. He became so intrigued, he asked to do a sit-along at a local 9-1-1 center, which confirmed his passion. "That's what grasped me and got me addicted to the job," he says.

For people who thrive on action, their attraction to these occupations may differ. But high-stakes careers often have at least one thing in common: The daily uncertainty offers a chance to develop as a person. “I still learn new things,” says Sharp. “You can always keep growing.”

## For more information

Learn more about the occupations in this article and many others, such as surgical technologists, logging workers, and emergency management directors, in the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) (OOH).

To identify occupations that fit your interests, check out the career exploration tools on the U.S. Department of Labor’s [My Next Move site](#).

Additional resources are available on the U.S. Department of Labor’s [CareerOneStop site](#).

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Elka Torpey, "Adrenaline jobs: High-intensity careers," *Career Outlook*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 2016.

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