

HOW TO BECOME A POLICE OFFICER

BY

TIMOTHY ROUFA The Balance Career.com

Updated May 25, 2020

Working as a [police officer](#) offers a chance to help others and to try to make the world a better place, and law enforcement careers often come with salaries and benefits that can provide a relatively comfortable living. In times of economic turmoil, [criminology and criminal justice careers](#), in general, hold considerably more stability and job security than many other fields.

These are just a few [reasons to be a police officer](#). For many, the question is not so much whether to work in law enforcement, but how to make it happen. There are a lot of steps to climb to [become a police officer](#). Rest assured, though, that the job is well worth the effort if you feel committed to it. The rewards, both tangible and intangible, will make for a satisfying career that you and your family can be proud of.

Here are some key tips to get you into a patrol car.

Check Your Gut

First, and foremost, make sure law enforcement is something you want to pursue. A [day in the life of a police officer](#) can be trying, and the job is not for everyone. Most officers are on shift work, which means the hours can be long and are often irregular.

As a police officer, you will often find yourself in difficult, uncomfortable, and unpleasant situations. Sometimes, these situations can be life-threatening.

It is important that potential candidates understand that sacrifice is necessary and that there will be hard days ahead. The officers that last are the ones who feel deeply committed to a career serving the public.

There are also minimum and sometimes [maximum age requirements](#), so check with your local department to be sure that your dream is realistic.

Stay Clean

Nearly every law enforcement agency conducts some sort of [background investigation](#) on its applicants to learn more about their suitability. Police and other public servants are necessarily held to [high ethical standards](#), so law enforcement agencies look to hire people who already exhibit behaviors that suggest a strong moral and ethical character.

Once you've made a choice to pursue a law enforcement career, make every effort to live a life that is above reproach. Avoid drug use, alcohol abuse, and other offensive behaviors. Use a designated driver if you drink. Be an exemplary employee at your current job. In general, be the kind of person you expect an officer to be, so you'll be in the best shape to make it past the background check.

Prioritize Your Education

A high school diploma is almost always required for working as a police officer. When it's time to attend the [police academy](#), you will be challenged both physically and academically. Law enforcement agencies and police academies alike need to know that you're up for the task, and one indicator of this is the ability to earn your diploma.

If circumstances prevent you from completing high school the traditional way, a GED certificate might be an acceptable alternative. A college degree is often expected or at least preferred. In any case, you will need to demonstrate that you have the ability to learn, comprehend, and apply your knowledge.¹

Seek Experience

Police work may not always require a college degree, but that doesn't mean you can jump right out of high school and into the academy. Somehow you need to get some life experience under your belt.

Most departments across the country require either some college education, prior military service, or experience in a job that required you to interact with the general public.

There are few better ways to gain appropriate experience than by serving in the military, but never underestimate the [benefit of a college education](#). If college is the route you decide to go, consider earning a [degree in criminal justice](#) or [criminology](#). Other beneficial courses of study include psychology, sociology, and communications.¹

Examine All Possibilities

There are thousands of law enforcement agencies at all levels of government across the United States, and there are countless departments around the world, many of which have uncommon missions and responsibilities.

There are plenty of opportunities to work in a number of specialties within law enforcement, including animal control and enforcement, wildlife and conservation, marine patrol, traffic enforcement, general law enforcement, and investigative agencies.

Take some time to research where you feel your interests and skills best fit you and your potential employer, then pursue jobs at agencies that provide opportunities for you to excel. If your ultimate goal is to land a [federal law enforcement career](#), be prepared—your future employer may want you to have some prior law enforcement experience under your belt. For starters, you may want to get your foot in the door working as a [state](#) or local police officer.

Prep for Your Basic Abilities Test

In order to enter a police academy and get hired in law enforcement, you might be required to take a written [basic abilities test](#) to measure your reading comprehension, cognitive reasoning, and problem-solving skills.¹

The purpose is to make sure you have what it takes to successfully complete your academy training. The test is not overly difficult, but it would be wise to look over the sample questions and test overview, which you can probably see after you register for the test.

Be Ready for a Fitness Assessment

To help ensure you are physically capable of performing the duties of a law enforcement officer and enduring the rigors of the police academy training, most departments require candidates to participate in some form of physical abilities testing.

Fitness tests may consist of an overall physical assessment including sit-ups, push-ups, sprints, and a 1.5-mile run. In such tests, applicants are expected to perform at a certain level of fitness, which sometimes varies depending on age and gender.²

An alternative to the fitness assessment is the obstacle course, or physical abilities test, which requires applicants to perform a series of simulated job tasks within a certain amount of time. Such tests are often easier to pass than the fitness assessment, and the time required to pass is not typically dependent on the age or gender of the applicant.

Pass a Polygraph Exam

Many departments require applicants to undergo a [polygraph exam](#) to determine their level of truthfulness. In most cases, the polygraph will serve to confirm the information a candidate provided in their supplemental application.³

Applicants are given the opportunity to talk about their answers with their polygraph examiner and go even more in-depth with questions. After questioning, applicants are hooked up to a polygraph instrument and asked a series of "yes or no" questions for the purpose of detecting truthfulness or deception.

Take Your Psych Test

Like the polygraph, not every agency requires a [psychological assessment](#). Those that do, however, want to assess a candidate's suitability for a job as a police officer.¹

It takes into consideration the fact that officers face many difficult situations, and it simply provides another independent indicator of whether a candidate will be successful in a law enforcement career.

Clear Your Medical Exam

In addition to a physical abilities assessment, you probably will be examined by a doctor to make sure you are physically fit and healthy enough to do the job. Unlike the fitness assessment, the medical assessment makes certain your body, heart, and lungs are up for the task.

A separate eye exam to check for depth perception, color blindness, and overall vision is also common. Generally, it is expected that your eyesight is correctable to 20/30 or better, and no worse than 20/40 uncorrected.⁴

Complete Police Academy

Whether the police academy comes before or after the hiring process, you're going to have to get through it. From the first day at the police academy, life is going to be tough one way or another.

Police academies consist of several weeks or even months of specialized training in areas such as firearms, defensive tactics, law and legal concepts, report writing, first aid, and criminal and crime scene investigation.

Physical fitness plays a strong role in academy training, so staying in shape during the hiring process will serve you well. Expect several tests along the way as well. Failing to achieve a passing score in any one academic or practical area often results in your failing the entire academy, so it's vital to develop good study habits.

Finish Your Field Training

The learning doesn't stop after graduation from the academy. There's still a field training program to get through.

Field training teaches candidates what it's really like to work on the street. You take on progressively more responsibility as you are evaluated on every aspect of the job, from your investigative abilities to your observance of officer safety and everything in between. Of course, once you've finished field training, the real learning begins, as you get on-the-job training patrolling the streets on your own.