



10 Steps to Joining the Force



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1) Learn about the law enforcement field

Many people have a preconceived notion of law enforcement based on the sensational scenes shown on the news or at the movies. But what is it really like to be a street cop? Or a federal agent? Or a conservation officer? There are hundreds of career paths within law enforcement and all are done for the love of it – not for the promise of fortune or fame. Find out the basics about law enforcement here, including:

- Types of agencies: local police departments and sheriff's offices, investigative agencies, conservation law enforcement, corrections, etc.
- What they do: a quick look at the missions and job functions of each major component
- Where they are: a glimpse at the environment you can expect to work in

Topics covered:

- Local Police Departments & Sheriff's Offices
- Highway Patrol & State Police
- Federal Investigative Agencies
- State Investigative Agencies
- Conservation Law Enforcement
- Corrections, Probation & Parole
- Campus Law Enforcement
- Specialized Agencies
- Homeland Security

Local Police Departments & Sheriff's Offices

Municipal and metropolitan police officers and county sheriff's deputies, for the most part, are what people think about when they hear the term "cop." These law enforcement officers (LEOs) serve as the front line against crime on every street in every town in America. These are the brave men and women that you looked up to and admired as a child.

Police departments and sheriff's offices offer the widest variety of opportunities available within law enforcement. Just about everyone who enters into the field will start as a patrol officer, but from there, the opportunities are endless. As your career progresses you may be given the opportunity to join a specialized unit, such as SWAT, K9, bike patrol or the motor squad. Almost all departments now have community relations officers, school resources officers, and public information officers. You may have the opportunity to become a detective or investigator, responsible for investigating serious violent crimes such as murder.

More and more, white collar and Internet related crimes are being investigated by local police departments. As a result, recruits with four year or advanced degrees are highly sought after because of the complexity and business nature of many of these crimes.

If you prove yourself as a great officer or investigator you will have ample opportunity for advancement. With over 10,000 police departments throughout the United States, there is always a need for educated and ambitious men and women to fill in the supervisory ranks, from sergeant all the way to chief.

Regardless of your specialty or rank, you can be sure of one thing: Your primary task every day will be interacting with the general public. The best cops are those who earn the respect of those they are protecting, those they are arresting, and those they are serving with.

Highway Patrol & State Police

The first thought most people have when they see a highway patrol car is "I hope I don't get a ticket."

The primary job function our states' highway patrol and state police troopers is to keep the highways and roadways safe through traffic enforcement using methods as varied as using traditional patrol car, police motorcycles, and even with pilot troopers flying fixed wing or rotary aircraft above the highways.

Traffic enforcement often leads to confronting very real and very dangerous criminals. It is not uncommon for state troopers to discover major drug smuggling operations, arrest fugitives, or apprehend felons through the course of their regular duties.

In addition to traffic enforcement, most state highway patrol agencies have specialized units similar to local police departments, such as SWAT teams, K9 units, and investigative units. In fact, several state police departments also act as the state's primary investigative agency.

Federal Investigative Agencies

Most people think of federal agents as special agents with the FBI. But did you know that the FBI is only one of almost 100 different investigative agencies employing special agents?

Special agents serve in all three branches of government – the Executive Branch, the Legislative Branch, and the Judicial Branch. Even some government corporations, independent agencies and quasi-government institutions have special agents working for them. Examples of these agencies include the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Social Security Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, Amtrak, and the Smithsonian Institution. Even the Library of Congress has several special agents who investigate crimes against the Library.

Federal agents investigate everything from internal fraud, waste and abuse to postal fraud to terrorism. If there is a federal law on the books, there is an agency responsible for investigating violations against it.

What can you expect if you're a federal agent? Well, probably not what you see Jack Bauer doing every week. But, like Jack, you will be working long hours investigating some very serious crimes that impact all American citizens. Because of the long hours most federal agents are required to work (a minimum of 50 hours per week), they usually receive Law Enforcement Availability Pay (LEAP), a 25% premium of their base salary. Expect to be moved around every few years and expect frequent travel. Many agencies, such as the FBI, DEA, ICE, and components of the DOD, now have resident offices in foreign countries. So, if you want to see the world, this may be the path you want to take.

Because of the demand for federal law enforcement jobs, and the high profile cases the agencies are involved in, getting hired is much tougher than at other law enforcement jobs. Most agencies now require a minimum of a four year degree, but would prefer an advanced degree. This means that unless you were in the top percentile in your undergraduate class, you should seriously consider an advanced degree. Most special agent positions will also require you to have a federal security clearance of at least the secret level, but may require even higher clearances such as top secret or compartmentalized. Expect a much more thorough background investigation and polygraph examination.

But most of all, expect to enjoy it. Federal agents are often times the most revered of all law enforcement officers.

State Investigative Agencies

Like federal investigative agencies, state level investigative agencies conduct complex investigations of crimes committed against the state. These can range from white collar crimes, to Internet related crimes, to alcohol and narcotics enforcement, to identity theft.

Because of the similarities and the fact that the focus of these investigations spans federal and state laws, state and federal agencies often work together.

Conservation Law Enforcement

If you are interested in the outdoors, wildlife, or biology, then conservation law enforcement should be a serious consideration for a career path.

Conservation law enforcement spans a broad spectrum of areas such as park patrol, marine patrol, animal control, fish and game enforcement, and environmental crimes investigation. Additionally, these laws are enforced at all levels of government as well: Local, state, federal and even at the tribal level.

The primary local level jobs have to deal with animal control and park patrol. The authority of these officers varies from location to location. In some places these officers are not sworn, but in others, they are sworn, armed officers with full arrest powers just like any city policeman.

State level agencies generally enforce fish and game laws, perform marine patrol, and investigate environmental crimes. As a state conservation officer or game warden you should expect to be serving in expansive, remote areas. It isn't uncommon for one officer to have an area of responsibility spanning several hundred square miles. Marine patrol officers enforce boating and fishing laws on both inland and coastal bodies of water. Some states have agencies whose sole responsibility is to investigate crimes such as illegal dumping, pollution violations, natural resources contamination or to regulate natural resources industries.

Federal conservation law enforcement spans much the same areas as both local and state conservation agencies, except they enforce federal laws and international treaties. Uniformed agencies include the National Park Service, United States Park Police, and the Bureau of Land Management, while the investigative agencies include the Department of the Interior, Department of Commerce, and Environmental Protection Agency.

Regardless of what level you want to work at, there is an conservation enforcement agency waiting for you to join.

Corrections, Probation & Parole

A corrections officer may have the most under appreciated job of all. Where a street cop may encounter a handful of criminals a day, a corrections officer is guaranteed to be face to face with dozens, if not hundreds, of hardened criminals for every minute of every shift.

The primary responsibility of corrections officers is for the care and custody of all criminals remanded to custody by our criminal justice system. Like other areas of law enforcement, you will find corrections officers at every level of government.

Starting at the local level, most counties in the country have a local jail staffed by jail deputies or correctional officers. Some areas of the country utilize regional jails that are used by a consortium of localities as a cost and resources savings measure. The duties of these officers handle intake, short-term, and some long-term care of inmates. State level departments of correction generally take custody of inmates serving longer sentences or more serious crimes. In other words, inmates who don't belong in a local jail. The so-called "Death Row" is also a state level function where criminals convicted of capital crimes end up. Many states also have dedicated juvenile corrections agencies that are independent from adult corrections agencies, but operate in much the same way.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons is the federal government's primary corrections agency and handles most federal prisoners. Another lesser known agency is the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Detention and Removal Operations (ICE DRO) agency. ICE DRO takes custody of immigration violators and arranges for their deportation from the United States.

Probation and parole agencies are often times part of the overall departments of correction. Probation and parole officers deal in community corrections with inmates who have been released on probation or parole. The job of the probation and parole officer is part social worker and part corrections officer. These officers must ensure that inmates who are in the community maintain good behavior and stay out of trouble by monitoring their whereabouts, behavior, and employment.

Campus Law Enforcement

Do campus cops exist solely to break up your parties? Absolutely not. They exist to keep the campus community safe from all threats, just as a city cop keeps the city streets safe. Although school and college campuses have a relatively low crime rate, they are not immune from crime.

Over the past decade many campus police departments have spent a lot of time and effort to become top-notch law enforcement agencies. In fact, the recent trend has been for these agencies to completely the term “campus” from their names. Most campus agencies work closely with surrounding jurisdictions through task forces and mutual aid agreements that allow the officers to cover areas around the campus instead of being confined to the campus boundaries. This type of expanded coverage often times leads to a more active police experience since officers encounter more serious crimes than what generally occurs on a college campus.

Campus law enforcement is often viewed as a good entry point into a law enforcement career and is often used as a stepping stone into larger agencies. Because having a safe campus is a number one priority for school administrators, joining the right agency can provide the opportunity for frequent and first rate training programs, whereas in a traditional city agency you may have to wait months or even years to attend a specialized training course.

Specialized Law Enforcement Agencies

What is a specialized law enforcement agency? Basically, it is an agency with a very defined mission. Some examples of these agencies would be airport police, transit police, railroad police, or port police. One mission all of these types of agencies share is the protection of visitors, employees, tenants and assets. This mission is carried out using many methods and usually in concert with surrounding local, state, and federal agencies.

Because of their importance to America’s commerce system, airports, railroads, and seaports are high are understandably high profile targets to terrorists. As a result, the law enforcement agencies entrusted with protecting them spare no expense when it comes to training and providing the latest equipment and technology.

Homeland Security

The federal government’s approach to law enforcement was drastically restructured following the 9/11 attacks. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created and many agencies which traditionally fell under other departments were moved or consolidated into the new DHS.

The agencies within DHS span every possible aspect of the law enforcement spectrum; from asset protection agencies like the Federal Protective Service to investigative

agencies like the United States Secret Service. DHS is even the parent agency to the Border Patrol and to the Customs and Border Protection.

The bottom line is that the agencies that make up the Department of Homeland Security provide the largest variety of law enforcement careers under one roof. Depending on what you want to do, you can be conducting traditional patrol duties in a downtown, urban environment as Federal Protective Service police officer, protecting the nation's borders in remote areas of the country as a U.S. Border Patrol agent, keeping the sky safe as a Federal Air Marshal, protecting the president as a Secret Service special agent, or enforcing customs and immigration laws as an inspector or special agent with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

(2) Decide if you're ready

Will you fit in? Are you old enough? Are you too old? Do you have a criminal record? Understand the basic requirements of joining a department here with:

- Basic eligibility requirements
- Reasons to join
- Benefits overview
- Law Enforcement vs. Civilian Comparison

Basic Eligibility Requirements

Eligibility requirement can vary from department to department. You should always talk with a recruiter from the specific agencies you want to apply with to ensure you know their requirements. However, you can use the following list as a generic guideline:

- 21 years of age
- No previous drug use
- No felony criminal history
- Be in good physical condition
- Be of sound mental condition
- Be of good moral character

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- Pass a written exam
- Pass a polygraph exam
- Pass a background investigation

Reasons to Join

Any cop will tell you that they don't do it for the pay. In fact, many cops find it necessary to take on a second job or work overtime to help make ends meet. So why do they do it? They do it for the love of the job.

This is truly a job you do because you have a calling or a sense of civic duty. There is no better feeling than being able to help someone by doing something as simple as giving directions or even as serious as saving a life. There is no other job that can give you the satisfaction of knowing that you took a murderer, rapist, or child molester off the streets. You do this job because you want to help your community by keeping it safe.

There are of course tangible benefits like education, training, advancement, vacation, retirement, etc. Keep reading for more information about benefits and to view our law enforcement vs. civilian benefits comparison chart.

Benefits Overview

Benefits vary greatly from state to state and city to city. However, all will likely have at least the basic benefits packages available to full time employees:

- Employee enrolled health plans
- Retirement after a minimum commitment (generally 20 to 25 years)
- Annual leave, scaled based on years of employment
- Sick leave with no accrual limit
- Equipment or equipment stipend
- Paid holidays
- Training

Federal law enforcement officers will be eligible for the standard federal employee benefits. Additionally, many federal LEOs will be eligible for locality pay and a 25% premium on their base pay known as Law Enforcement Availability Pay (LEAP).

Law Enforcement vs. Civilian Comparison

Law enforcement life is like civilian life in many ways: for the most part, you work a regular job, have to keep your life, bills, housing, car and other things in order. You will work with other people, have a boss, and have to exhibit initiative if you want to get ahead.

On the other hand, the law enforcement lifestyle carries much more responsibility. There is always threat of not coming home at the end of your shift. You must be on time to work - there are no "getting stuck in traffic" excuses - or face punishment. You must consistently be well-groomed, live up to working and presentation standards, and talk to others according to specific rules. You usually do not have the option of saying "no" and just quitting when you feel like it. After all, you are charged with protecting your community. If you fail, people may be seriously hurt or killed.

Here is a table of some common aspects of life that would be important no matter what you choose to do. In general, civilian life offers more money. But there is a catch: you must first spend more to get yourself educated. You must spend more to travel, stay in hotels, find a place to live, move your things, and pay for health care. The responsibility for you is held entirely by you, whereas in law enforcement, many things may be subsidized or taken care of: for example, health care, insurance, and housing. Finally, the pride that you will have by serving your community is a tremendous feeling that can be matched by few jobs elsewhere.

Let's have a look at some law enforcement-civilian comparisons:

	Law Enforcement	Civilian
Pay	Basic pay, overtime pay, holiday pay. Federal LEOs may be eligible for LEAP).	Civilian pay is usually higher for comparable jobs in the white collar sector. However, private security jobs are usually much lower pay.
Health Care	Most local and state governments will provide the same health care options to	Depends on employer. Often you must pay your own or pay partial

	LEOs as all government employees. The plans will generally require some level of employee contributions.	amounts & co-pays.
Housing	Some agencies in areas with high costs of living are starting to offer housing subsidies or tax breaks for public safety officers to encourage them to live within their jurisdiction. Federal agencies may offer locality pay to accommodate for higher housing rates. Check with your recruiter for availability.	Civilian companies rarely, if ever, offer housing subsidies or locality pay.
Insurance	Similar to the civilian market, life insurance is generally available with employee contributions.	Insurance may or may not have insurance plans.
Education	<p>In addition to academy training, almost all officers are required to attend in service training each year. Most officers can also attend specialized training with approval from the department. Some agencies may have a tuition reimbursement program to encourage officer to obtain degrees.</p> <p>There are many scholarships available exclusively to aspiring or active duty law enforcement officers. Download the PoliceLink Scholarship Guide to find one that applies to you now.</p>	Some large corporations may provide tuition reimbursement, but generally this is your responsibility and you pay for it.

<p>Travel</p>	<p>Federal agents should expect frequent temporary and extended travel. Overseas assignments may also be available in some agencies. There is little opportunity for travel in local departments.</p>	<p>You may have the option of moving in the civilian workforce, but you generally are responsible for paying for it.</p>
<p>Vacation</p>	<p>Most agencies provide annual leave that is scaled depending on how many years have worked there. Annual leave may accrue up to a certain threshold (usually one month).</p>	<p>Most employers offer only 10 – 14 days of general leave, which includes sick time. This generally doesn't increase for several years and may only accrue only to one week.</p>
<p>Sick leave</p>	<p>Most agencies provide a separate sick leave that accrues without limit. When you retire or leave the agency this leave will be paid to you.</p>	<p>Fewer and fewer employers now offer separate sick leave. If they do, it is probably a use it or lose it policy and does not accrue.</p>
<p>Work hours</p>	<p>Expect to work shift work, weekends, and holidays. You are on call 24/7. Shift work, weekend, holidays, and overtime will be compensated accordingly.</p>	<p>Full time jobs are usually 35 – 50 hours per week with no overtime or special pay.</p>
<p>Opportunities for advancement</p>	<p>Excellent! You are constantly challenged by your superiors and expected to advance. Every agency has a rank structure they expect you to advance through. The rate of advancement is up to you!</p>	<p>Vary widely. In small companies you may not have much opportunity. In larger companies you may have opportunities, but often have to work much longer hours to prove yourself.</p>

Retirement	Most agencies offer a guaranteed pension after 20 or 25 years of service. In some cases you may receive a partial pension after only 15 years.	It is rare for any company to offer a pension these days. If you want a retirement it is up to you save throughout your career – and don't expect to retire until your 60s.
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3) Choose the right path

There are limitless paths you can take within law enforcement, and they all start at the same place: the street. Your first few years should give you a good idea of the direction you want to take in your career. Do you want to stay on the street the whole time? Do you want to make sergeant, lieutenant, or even chief? Do you want to focus your talents on a specialized unit? Look at many of the options available to you here with:

- Patrol officer
- Detective / Investigator
- Specialized Units
- The Brass

Patrol Officer

Patrol officers perform general policing work on an assigned shift. Their primary duties involve protection of life and property, responding to reports calls from citizens, investigating crimes, and enforcing laws.

Officers work under the direct supervision of a higher ranking officer and must adhere to all general orders, rules, and regulations. They will be exposed to dangerous situations and encounter life threatening incidents.

Detective / Investigator

Detective and investigators are responsible for responding to all major crime scenes to evaluate, process, photograph, document, collect and preserve evidence.

They perform follow up and ongoing investigations on serious and complex crimes not handled by patrol officers. They will consult with their counterparts in other agencies and will participate on task forces regarding cross-jurisdictional crimes. There may be opportunity for traveling to locations through the state or country to conduct investigations or to make arrests on active investigations.

Specialized Units

Specialized units exist to answer specific needs of the community by providing a few highly trained officers with special talents. These may include units such as a SWAT team, K9 unit, aviation unit, or school resource officers.

Special units are desirable within the law enforcement community because they signify that you have a high level of training that qualifies you for such an assignment. Specialized officers may receive a higher rate of pay for their abilities. The experience of being a member of a specialized unit may also help you advance into a higher rank as it shows that you have the drive to be the best officer that you can be.

The Brass

The commanding officers, or “the brass” as they’re affectionately referred to, are the supervisory officers, from sergeant to chief, in a department’s chain of command. They are known as “the brass” because of the brass colored badges and regalia often used to distinguish them from the lower ranking officers.

The responsibility of the supervisory officers is to oversee the daily operations of a police department. They do everything from hands-on incident command to setting high level policy and direction for an entire department. As you progress through the ranks your expectations of performance are accordingly set higher. Your actions will be much more scrutinized by those above you and even to civilian officials, such as city council members or the mayor.

As a commanding officer you will be responsible for the actions of all officers below you on the chain of command. That means that you will have to answer for their mistakes.

Some people may not want this level of responsibility and choose to stay as a patrol officer for as long as possible.

(4) Pick an agency and meet the recruiter

You've done some research and are interested in finding out more - a lot more. Now it's time to talk with recruiters! Though it can be nerve-racking, just remember that you are under NO OBLIGATION when talking with a recruiter. However, you must be prepared and on your best behavior. Your first meeting with a recruiter has the potential for making or breaking the rest of the application process.

- PoliceLink Career Center
- PoliceLink Career Network
- PoliceLink Discussion boards
- 10 tips on visiting a recruiter
- Questions to ask recruiters

PoliceLink Career Center

The first step to getting a job is finding an agency that is hiring. A good place to start is by checking with your local police department or sheriff's office where you live. However, don't rely on applying to just one agency. When looking for a law enforcement job you should apply to as many agencies as you possibly can. Yes, it is time intensive, but your odds of getting an offer go up dramatically with the more agencies you apply to.

A great resource for finding agencies that are hiring in your area, or even out of your area if you're interested in moving, is the [PoliceLink Career Center](#). The Career Center is a central location where agencies from throughout the country post their job openings for both law enforcement and civilian positions. It is your one stop shop for finding the law enforcement job where you want it.

Visit the [PoliceLink Career Center](#) now.

You may wish to also visit these other recommended law enforcement career websites:

- [Monster.com](#) - for local and state positions
- [USA Jobs](#) - for federal positions

PoliceLink Career Network

What's the difference between the PoliceLink Career Center and the Career Network? The Career Center is a place for hiring agencies to formerly post job openings. The Career Network is a place for law enforcement officers to network with each other to ask questions about or to find contacts within a particular agency.

The Career Network is a great opportunity to make contacts within a department. Recruiters will always pay more attention to candidates who have recommendations from an officer currently serving with their department. The Career Network provides a tremendous opportunity for rookie officers and lateral transfers to reach out to others from the area to learn about the departments they want to work for.

Join the [PoliceLink Career Network](#) now.

PoliceLink Discussion Boards

Were you unable to find someone in the PoliceLink Career Network? Try posting a message on the [PoliceLink Discussion Boards](#). Officers throughout the country read and post messages on the discussion boards. Maybe your questions have already been answered there. If not, post your question in a new thread and someone will be sure to give an answer.

10 tips on visiting a recruiter

For the past few years there has been a shortage of qualified candidates for law enforcement at the local, state, and federal level. Despite this shortage, only a single digit percentage of applicants make it all the way through the hiring process and actually become police officers.

1. WEAR A SUIT.

Always wear a suit or coat and tie. Wearing business attire shows that you hold yourself to the highest standards, and that is what a recruiter is looking for in a candidate. Many prospective recruits make the mistake of showing up in their every day street clothes. This does not go unnoticed and there is a high probability that your resume or application will end up on the bottom of the pile. If, for some reason, it is absolutely not possible for you to wear a suit then make sure you tell the recruiter before hand so they know.

2. SPEAK PROFESSIONALLY.

Just as you need dress professionally, you need to speak professionally. Don't act around the recruiter how you would act around your friends or family. Don't use slang or other profane language and stay away from making jokes. Even the most innocent jokes be offensive to some people.

3. ASK QUESTIONS.

Be prepared with a list of questions you have for the recruiter. This is your chance to get clarifications to questions you might have about the academy, your time with an FTO, or about general career advancement. Make sure your questions are relevant and aren't already answered through general literature.

4. DON'T BE A KNOW-IT-ALL.

Don't try to impress the recruiter with your knowledge (or perceived knowledge) of law enforcement. You're there to get information from the recruiter, not to give it. Even if the recruiter is telling you something you already know, listen intently and be thankful for the information.

5. LISTEN AND BE COURTEOUS.

When you meet with a recruiter there will be opportunities for you to get your questions answered. Don't interrupt or cause disruptions if the recruiter is speaking to someone else or isn't answering your question as quick as you would like. Be courteous and wait for the appropriate time to interject or clarify your question.

6. DON'T TALK JUST TO TALK.

Don't speak unless you are answering a question, asking a question, or engaging in appropriate dialogue. Don't talk just to talk.

7. BE EARLY.

Do not be late, especially if you have a one-on-one meeting with the recruiter. Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes early. Just drive around the block a few times if you arrive too early, but don't expect the recruiter to wait around for you if you show up late. And remember, cops are expected to be on call for roll call for every shift, with no excuses. Showing up late for your first meeting with a member of the department is not the way to get off on good start.

8. EXPECT TOUGH QUESTIONS.

Why do you want to be a cop? Do you have anything questionable in your past? When was the last time you used drugs? Those are just a few of the questions that you will be asked during your application process. Be prepared to answer them quickly and honestly even as early as your first meeting with the recruiter. Always remember that if you lie, they will find out and your career will be over before it even starts.

9. BE PREPARED TO STATE YOUR GOALS.

You should list out your career goals before you even make a meeting with the recruiter. Be true to yourself and be honest, but don't be stupid. Instead of saying you want the

job only to get into law enforcement you will move to another agency at the first opportunity isn't a good thing to say. Instead, consider saying you are eager to have the experiences only a street cop can get and that you aspire to someday be a federal agent.

10. REMEMBER YOU ARE SIGNING UP TO BE A POLICE OFFICER.

The authorities and responsibilities bestowed on a police are very serious. You must always be professional and courteous to everyone you encounter. Your attitude and demeanor must convey the embodiment of these principles to the recruiter.

Questions to ask the recruiter

Even though you've done a lot of research into the agency you are applying to and law enforcement in general, you probably still have a lot of questions. Here are some things to consider or to ask the recruiter if you don't already have an answer:

1. What is the timeline for career progress and promotions?
2. Can you explain the various benefits packages?
3. What distinguishes this agency from neighboring agencies?
4. What's the minimum service time until retirement?
5. How often can I attend specialized training?
6. Does the city/county offer any housing or cost of living benefits?
7. How long is the academy?
8. What is the pay like?
9. Are there any appearance standards (ie, hair length, tattoos, etc.)?
10. What are the next steps?

5) Get ready for the exams

There are many companies out there that offer study guides for generic law enforcement exams. If the recruiter you spoke to recommended one over another – buy it and study it from cover to cover. The exam is often times your key into the rest of the application process. Do good, because if you're applying with multiple agencies, you can expect that your results will be shared amongst the recruiters. Here are some more study tips for you:

- Study the study guides
- Go on a ride along
- Ask other cops

Study the study guides

There are career advice guides for just about industry out there. Law enforcement is a unique industry where applicants need to pass a series of exams; generally a written test, an interview, and a polygraph exam.

Most libraries have law enforcement related study guides available, however, it highly recommended that you purchase your own so that you can make notes in the book and take the practice exams without worry of defacing the library books. Below are links to many of the highly recommended study guides.

Visit the [PoliceLink Bookstore](#) for a selection of top rated study guides.

Go on a ride along

Many people want to become cops because of what they see on TV or in the movies. However, the typical cop does not spend his time shooting up the downtown streets. Most agencies have ride along programs available to citizens and recruits. It is a good idea for you to take advantage of this opportunity to spend a shift riding with an officer. This is the closest you will come to experiencing what a typical shift is like short of being an officer yourself.

For more information about conducting a ride along contact the agencies you are considering applying to or contact your local law enforcement agency.

Ask other cops

Another good way to get a lot questions answered is to ask other cops. Since you are interested in law enforcement already there is a good chance you know at least one cop. Ask that person your questions, or ask that person to refer you to someone else. The important thing is to get your questions answered early so you can most effectively make your decisions and map out your career goals.

6) Prepare for your background check

The background check may be the most invasive experience you've had in your life. Everything about you will be checked out. Your character, your finances, your driving and criminal records. There information here will help you prepare for the background investigation:

- Be honest and upfront
- Tell your friends and family
- The polygraph
- Security clearance basics

Be honest and upfront

The background check may be the most invasive experience you've had in your life. Everything about you will be checked out. Your character, your finances, your driving and criminal records.

The most important thing about your background check is that it be complete, accurate, and truthful. Intentionally leaving anything out or falsifying information is the kiss of death. The investigators conducting your investigation will find out. They are less concerned with some minor violation of the law then they are with the fact that you would tell them about it. They are expecting truthfulness. It is better that you tell them of a 10 year old misdemeanor arrest then them having to find out some other way.

Tell your friends and family

You probably noticed a place on your application packet to list friends, family and former neighbors. There's a reason for that. The background investigators will be making contact with your references. And from your references people they will get the names of "secondary" references, people you didn't list but who they find on their own.

Before your investigation begins be sure to let you for friends, family, former neighbors, and former coworkers that you are applying for a law enforcement position and that they may be contacted by an investigator. Let them know that they shouldn't be surprised and that they should feel free to honestly answer any questions the investigators ask.

The polygraph

Just about every agency out there administers a polygraph exam. They do this to verify the information you provided in the application packet is truthful and to address topics covered in the background investigation.

There is nothing fun about the polygraph. Everyone is nervous when they take one. As long as you were truthful during your interviews, in your application, and on your background investigation, you shouldn't have anything to be worried about.

But just for the fun of it, here are the types of questions you might be asked:

- Have you ever stolen anything
- Have you ever lied to your boss
- Have you ever looked at child porn

Security clearance basics

If you are applying for a federal law enforcement position there is a good chance you will also need to qualify for a federal security clearance of secret, top secret, or even higher.

The security clearance background investigations will be similar to the background investigation you have already gone through. Depending on the clearance level, however, the investigation may go further back into your past (ie, 10 years into your past instead of 5 years). Just like your background investigation, answer all of these questions truthfully and fully.

7 Get ready for the academy

Congratulations! You got hired and you're off to the academy. There is a lot to do before you start. Here we'll tell you about:

- Police academy basics
- How to get in shape
- What to bring
- Schedules and timelines

Police academy basics

The police academy is an environment of high discipline intended to get you into shape as a law enforcement officer, both mentally and physically. The basic academy has four primary missions:

1. Build your character
2. Build your problem solving skills
3. Teach you officer safety tactics
4. Teach you the laws you will enforce

The curriculum will be taught in a combination of classroom lectures, practical exercises, and physical training. Most academies these days are “commuter” academies that you report to each day, and then go home each night.

Because of the nature of the academy's mission, there will be very strict rules and regulations that you can expect. There will be strict attendance policies (don't be late, don't miss class, don't make up excuses). There will likely be a uniform or strict dress code. If a uniform is required, it will probably be supplied by the academy or your employing agency.

Depending on the requirements of your state or agency, the overall length of the academy session will differ. Most academies will be roughly 4 – 6 months long with no breaks except for state or national holidays. Don't plan any vacations or time off during the academy session and plan on spending nights and weekends studying.

During your time at the academy build friendships with as many of your fellow classmates as possible. It is always good to have contacts within your own department or within other departments.

How to get in shape

When you arrive at your law enforcement training, you will be placed in a stressful environment and expected to excel in law enforcement education, close quarter living, team work, and pass physical fitness tests (PFT). Most new law enforcement personnel labor over the physical events for several weeks prior. But for those who properly prepare themselves, the PFT can be just another workout.

Why show up at training unprepared for the physical fitness test? You would be surprised but many people are physically unprepared for life in the police force when they arrive, even though they are former varsity athletes in high school and college. The simple answer to this question is to practice running 4-5 times a week, do pushups, sit-ups, and other calisthenics and light weight, high repetition weights 3-4 times a week for at least three to four months prior to attending ANY law enforcement training. Why make life any more stressful than it already is? If you show up fit and able to pass your PFT easily, the fitness part of military training will be a STRESS releaser - not a STRESS INCREASER...

Too many recruits receive injuries within the first two weeks of training, which can either cause delay or expulsion from the training you are attempting. Most are overuse injuries due to running while overweight, lack of flexibility or lack of previous fitness training. Needless to say, when you fail or get injured, life is stressful in the law enforcement training programs. And showing up in shape to your training program enables you to be less stressed and more focused on learning your job – protecting Americans, your partner and yourself on potentially dangerous streets.

- Free Download: [Stew Smith's Lean Meal Options Food](#)

You can bet ALL law enforcement academies will have a physical fitness test that you need to prepare for. However, there is no ONE standard across the country and many states, counties, cities, as well as federal law enforcement agencies all have their own tests. Many PFTs are the same, in fact more than 50% of the test will share similarities to the Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard test – pushups, sit-ups, 1.5 mile run, a sit and reach, and a body composition test (height / weight – body fat). To prepare properly for your “entrance exam” – find out what you will be tested in and strive way above the minimum standards to ensure your chances of not getting injured at training. It is important to find out what the standards and testing exercises are for the academy you are seeking employment through and get on a plan.

To find out what your state law enforcement agency uses as its PFT, take a look at a near complete list of state law enforcement agencies PFT testing exercises and see for yourself how different each state is with its fitness measuring / testing

- Resource: [State by State PFT Requirements](#)

Here are the majority of hurdles you will face at any law enforcement academy:

CORE STRENGTH: To start, you are only as strong as your core, or torso. Ever see a tree whose limbs were bigger than its trunk? So, you need a program that will focus on lower back and abdominal strengthening. This will make sit-ups easier than and not as painful as to those who do not practice sit-ups. Usually pain is experienced if a candidate takes the PFT for the first time and the lower back or hips are weak. For starters, there is a downloadable to build core strength that many use as a warm-up for prior to workouts.

- Free download: [Stew Smith's Lower Back Plan](#)

UPPER BODY STRENGTH: All tests have some form of test for upper body strength – the most common is the pushup. But pull-ups, rope climbs, wall climbs are also common exercises for testing prior to the Academy. Practice climbing fences, getting over walls, and climbing ropes as you may see them at the Academy again. Do not assume you will make it over a wall. It is tough and requires technique, especially if you cannot do any pull-ups or have the strength to lift you over these obstacles.

RUNNING: There will always be running. Usually 1-2 miles is tested, but often an obstacle course, agility course and speed will be tested in shorter 300-400m runs. The only way to get better at running is to practice running using proper mechanics, breathing pattern, and it also helps not to be overweight. The running routine will focus on the above and the food plan and maybe some non-impact cardio activity like biking, swimming, elliptical gliding will be required IF you are 20-30 lbs over weight.

- Free download: [Stew Smith's 6 Week Running Plan](#)

MORE TIPS: In regards to the physical fitness test, the ways to combat anxiety are similar to those of academic testing taking anxiety. The PFT anxiety removing techniques are:

1. Be well prepared for the test – Do not start “studying” (exercising) for the PFT a week or two before the test. Fitness is a daily habit that needs to be developed 4-6 times a week. (See articles at <http://policelink.com/training> for ideas)

2. Test yourself – Take the PFT once a week. It is the stopwatch that causes most of your anxiety, so train with the stopwatch when doing pushups, sit-ups, running etc...
3. Maintain healthy lifestyle – Eat more fruits and vegetables than fast foods, sleep regular hours, drink more water, and exercise 4-6 times per week. You do not want to be overweight when attending any academy. Pain will only follow.
4. PFT taking meals – On the evening prior to the PFT, drink water, eat more fruits and vegetables as in salad, and lean forms of protein like fish and chicken. Pasta is a pre-race favorite among runners and swimmers also. On the morning of the test, eat fruits like apples, bananas, or baby carrots – all high on the glycemic index and provide blood sugar for immediate energy.
5. Test the way you train – Do not do something for the first time on test taking day like eat a protein bar or energy drink. Find out what works for you during your practice tests.
6. Relax – Take deep breaths before the stop watch starts and think positively.
7. Treat yourself to a reward IF you reach your training goals.

Once you arrive to your test well prepared, the PFT becomes “just another workout” and the only anxiety you will get is a healthy dose of adrenalin that enables you to compete with your counterparts. So, test and time yourself often. The anxiety felt by most LE personnel is largely due to performing within a time limit. The more your workouts are timed the better you are at "pacing" yourself, thus eliminating most anxiety.

Check out the [PoliceLink fitness article archive](#) for more information on nutrition, physical training, running, and other tips to make you a healthier person. Articles and eBooks available at [PoliceLinkFitness.com](#) are written by former Navy SEAL and law enforcement fitness author Stew Smith, CSCS. You can email him personally for answers to your fitness questions at stew@stewsmith.com.

What to bring

Most academies will tell you ahead of time what to bring, if anything. Many academies require that you only bring yourself, well groomed, and in conformance to the academy’s dress code. If there are any supplies you should bring to the academy you will have been told ahead of time. If you are still unsure contact your academy session’s administrator and ask nicely.

It is a universal rule that students are not permitted to bring firearms into academy classrooms. If you have a personal firearm, leave it at home. Check with the academy before showing up with a service weapon to ensure they have a place for you to store it while attending the training.

Schedules and timelines

Most states have an oversight agency that set the minimum standards required to be certified as a police officer, deputy sheriff, jailer, corrections officer, etc. The specific standards differ from state to state and also differ for each job role. The basic academy session, however, is generally anywhere from 4 to 6 months and is held weekdays during normal business hours. Depending on special classes or training programs, there may be some classes that are held on off hours, such as nights or weekends.

The only breaks you will have during the academy are state and national holidays. Don't plan to go on vacation during your academy session and be sure to be on time every day. Being late is not acceptable under any circumstances.

An academy session's full schedule, down to the hour, is planned out long before the academy session even starts. The schedule may be available on the academy's website or by asking for a copy from the instructors. But remember, the schedule is subject to change, so don't plan anything in your personal life that can't be cancelled at a moment's notice to accommodate any unforeseen changes to the academy schedule.

8 Take the oath

Getting sworn in is a major accomplishment and signifies that you have met all of your agency's high standards to become an officer. This is probably the culmination of a life long dream of serving one's community. Here is some information read about and reflect upon now that you have become a sworn officer:

- Law Enforcement Oath of Honor
- Rank Structures

Law Enforcement Oath of Honor

*On my honor,
I will never betray my badge,
my integrity, my character,
or the public trust.*

*I will always have the courage
to hold myself and others
accountable for our actions.
I will always uphold the
Constitution,
the community and
the agency I serve,
so help me God.*

*Developed by the
International Association of Chiefs of Police
Committee on Police Ethics*

Rank Structures

Each department is free to setup its own rank structure, however, the basic structure for a typical police department is as follows:

- Police Officer / Deputy Sheriff
- Police Officer First Class / Deputy First Class
- Corporal
- Sergeant
- Lieutenant
- Captain
- Major / Chief Deputy
- Chief / Sheriff

In federal investigative agencies, the rank structure would be similar to:

- Special Agent

Supervisory Special Agent
Assistant Special Agent in Charge (ASAC)
Special Agent in Charge (SAC)
Deputy Director
Director

9) Field training

What do you do now that you're on the street facing real criminals? Here are some tips on what to do now:

- Listen to and respect your FTO
- Ask questions

Listen to and respect your FTO

Directly out of the academy you will be assigned to a patrol shift with your department and you will be assigned an FTO. Consider your FTO your mentor. FTOs become FTOs because of their experience as police officers. They have to prove themselves to become FTOs, so they know what they're talking about.

Just like with all cops, each FTO will have his/her own personality and expectations. Learn quickly what that personality is and what those expectations are. Listen to everything your FTO has to say and don't second guess a command or instruction.

Don't ever say "but that's not what they taught us in the academy." Ask questions about the importance of the advice and discuss the differences between advice you've received in the past to what you're receiving now, but never discredit what you've been told.

It is only a matter of time before you mess up and your FTO bites your head off. Don't take it personally. Take it as a way to improve. Your FTO's primary mission is to ensure you, he, and all other officers go home at the end of the night. Officer safety will never be taken lightly and if you do something wrong expect to be corrected right then and there.

Ask questions

You will be spending countless hours with your FTO and other officers during your first few weeks on the job. Take every opportunity you can to learn from those around you, especially your FTO and other officers who have been on the job longer than you. It is a good idea to get perspective from officers of all ranks and experience.

10 Hit the streets!

You've finally been cut loose and your FTO is no longer breathing down your back. But you're still a rookie. Here are some tips that will help you get through your first year:

- Top 10 rookie mistakes
- What to expect your first few weeks

Ways to Avoid the Top 10 rookie mistakes

After riding with your FTO for a few weeks you'll be cut loose on your own. In larger departments you may have a partner, but usually you will be riding solo. Here are some tips to get a solid footing in your new career.

1. Most situations will not be how they were described in the academy. Don't lose sight of what is happening around you.
2. Don't forget your job is to help people. Don't be a jerk. Being cautious is good, but don't be out to bust people just to bust people.
3. Listen to and respect officers who have been on the street longer than you have. They have the street smarts you need to learn.
4. Don't neglect your family. Healthy family relationships are important to relieving job stress.
5. Don't move too quickly. Sometimes rushing things at an incident can escalate a situation unnecessarily.

6. Don't take things personally. You will be insulted regularly. Don't let it get under your skin or you may end up doing something that leads to complaints or administrative action against you.
7. Slow down and wear your seatbelt. The number one cause of death for LEOs is car accidents. Take the extra 30 seconds or minute to get to your call. Don't turn a simple call into a life threatening situation for you, fellow officers, or citizens.
8. Think before you speak. Whether you are speaking to a citizen, a suspect, a fellow officer, or a supervisor. Don't say something you may regret down the road. You never know who you may offend.
9. Always know where you are. Learn your city's streets and the directions they run in like it is second nature. Always know where you are and the direction you are going so that when you need backup you can tell dispatchers where you are.
10. Put your car in park.

What to expect your first few weeks

Even though your time with your FTO is over, you are probably still in a probationary period that will last anywhere from 6 to 12 months following your graduation from the academy. In many agencies you are not protected from termination until your probationary period ends, so you want to be sure you do everything right. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Your sergeant will watch you closer than he watches your fellow officers
- You may get stuck with less than desirable assignments; it is part of the learning process
- Always be courteous and don't overstep your bounds
- You still don't know everything, so don't act like it
- Reputations rub off easily - choose the right cops to associate with
- SLOW DOWN! Taking an extra 30 seconds to get to a call helps everyone a lot more than not getting there at all