

Career cards. Who works a case like this one

What each role does, what it takes, what it pays, and where it leads. With sources you can check.

HOW TO READ THESE

Every role below is one a real case like this one actually uses. Each card says what the job is on an ordinary day, what it takes to get in, what it pays, where it can lead, and one honest drawback. The pay figures come from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, with the year and the occupation code stated so you can check them. Where a job has no clean match in that data, the card says so instead of guessing.

TWO THINGS WORTH SAYING OUT LOUD

Most of these jobs are not what television shows. The same person rarely collects the evidence, tests it, and interviews anyone. Real casework is specialised, slower, and involves more paperwork and more waiting than any show has time for. And a median wage means half the people in that job earn less, so treat it as a middle of the range rather than a starting salary.

Who touched this case

Work back through what you did in this unit and count the hands. Somebody took the call. Somebody secured the scene and photographed it before anything moved. Somebody lifted the print you compared. Somebody mounted the hair. Somebody ran the plate and the gel. Somebody weighed the organs and took the tissue you identified. Somebody signed the cause, mechanism and manner. And if it ever reached a courtroom, several of them would have to explain their work to twelve people who do not do science for a living.

That last part is the one students never expect. A result you cannot explain in plain English to a stranger is a result that will not survive.

Roles at the scene and in the laboratory

Anna Garcia Forensic Methods Unit. Careers file. Eight roles that would work a case like this one, written for ninth grade.

How to read these cards

Every pay number here came off a Bureau of Labor Statistics page and was checked before it was written down. The Bureau of Labor Statistics is the part of the United States government that counts jobs and wages. People shorten it to BLS.

Median means the middle. If you lined up everyone in a job from lowest paid to highest paid, the median is the person standing in the middle. Half earn more than that. Half earn less. It is not the starting wage, and it is not the top wage. A new hire usually starts well below the median.

A SOC code is the number the government uses to file a job. SOC stands for Standard Occupational Classification. Two jobs with different names can share one SOC code, which matters here, because several of the jobs on these cards do not have a code of their own.

These numbers come from two Bureau of Labor Statistics releases, and each one says which. Forensic science technicians and detectives are from the May 2025 release, the most recent. The rest are from May 2024, because the 2025 figures for those jobs were not available to check when this was written. A year of difference is small next to the spread within any one job, but the label is there so you can check any number yourself. For a size comparison, the median for all jobs in the United States was **\$49,500** in May 2024.

Four of these eight jobs have no BLS page of their own. Latent print examiner, forensic biologist, forensic toxicologist, and forensic entomologist are all real jobs that the government does not count separately. Those cards say so and give the closest match, along with why the match is imperfect. Nothing on these cards is estimated or invented. Where something could not be verified, the card says "not verified."

Every link on these cards was opened and checked. A few good organizations were left off because their sites blocked the check, which is a limit of the checking tool and not a judgment about them.

1. Crime scene investigator / evidence technician

Where they showed up in this case. This is the person who powdered and lifted the latent print you compared in FP-3 and FP-4, and who collected and packaged the hair you put under the microscope in HR-1 through HR-4. In the time of death module, step 1 tells you to record the scene before you touch the body. That step is this person's whole job.

What they actually do all day.

- Photograph a scene three times over. Once wide to show the room, once at medium range to show where an item sits, and once close with a scale in the frame so the size is measurable later. Most of the day is a camera, not tweezers.
- Write a log for every single item. What it is, where it was, who touched it, and when. This is the chain of custody, the paper trail that proves an item was never left unwatched. If the log breaks, the evidence can be thrown out.

- Powder, tape, and lift latent prints from surfaces, then label each lift card with the exact spot it came from.
- Package wet and dry evidence differently. Wet biological evidence goes in paper so it can dry, because plastic grows mold and destroys the sample.
- **The part students do not expect.** Many crime scene investigators attend the autopsy. Somebody has to photograph the body and collect items from it at the medical examiner's office, and that somebody is often this person.
- **The tedious part.** Sitting in a van for two hours waiting on a search warrant, then spending the next three hours labeling and sealing envelopes. Also, many scenes turn out to be nothing at all, and you photograph them anyway.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** An associate degree is enough for some jobs. A bachelor's degree is what BLS lists as typical.
- **Typical degree fields.** Forensic science, biology, chemistry, or criminal justice with a heavy science load.
- **Licences, certifications, board exams.** No licence is required to start. The International Association for Identification runs three crime scene certifications: Certified Crime Scene Investigator, Certified Crime Scene Analyst, and Certified Senior Crime Scene Analyst. All three need full-time crime scene work within the past five years, a written test with a passing score of 75 percent, and 80 continuing education hours to recertify.
- **Background check, drug screen, polygraph.** Yes to all three at most agencies. Expect a full background investigation that contacts your former employers and neighbors, a drug screen, and at many departments a pre-employment polygraph.
- **How long from starting college to working.** Roughly 2 to 4 years of college, then 6 to 12 months of supervised on-the-job training before you handle scenes alone. If your agency requires investigators to be sworn police officers, add a police academy and often several years on patrol first.

What it pays. Median annual wage **\$72,060**, May 2025. BLS occupation title

Forensic Science Technicians, SOC code **19-4092**. This is a clean match for civilian crime scene staff. It is not a clean match if the job is filled by a sworn police officer, meaning an officer with arrest powers. Those positions are counted under Police and Detectives instead, where detectives and criminal investigators had a median of \$93,790, May 2025. Patrol officers, a different code (**SOC 33-3051**, police and sheriff's patrol officers), sit lower at \$76,290, May 2024.

Where it can go.

1. Crime Scene Investigator I to II to senior investigator, usually on a fixed pay scale tied to years and certifications.
2. Supervisor of a crime scene unit, then manager of the whole unit.
3. Training officer, teaching new investigators and running the agency's evidence procedures.
4. **Lateral move.** Into the laboratory as a bench analyst, or out to private work in fire and explosion investigation or vehicle collision reconstruction, where the same photography and measurement skills pay and nobody calls you at 3 a.m.

What high school courses help. Biology and chemistry, because you have to know what a sample is before you can protect it. Geometry, because impact angle and area of convergence in the bloodstain module are triangle problems. Photography or digital media, because the camera is the main tool. An English or writing course, because your report gets read out loud in court by someone trying to find a mistake in it.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm> Government pay, job growth, and education data for this job.
- https://www.theiai.org/crime_scene.php The three crime scene certification levels and how to apply.
- <https://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/19-4092.00> A plain list of the daily tasks, tools, and skills for this job.
- <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Law-Enforcement/Bureau-of-Criminal-Investigation> Ohio's own state crime lab and investigation bureau, which serves Cleveland agencies.

One honest caution. You will go to the worst day of a stranger's life on a regular schedule, and sometimes the family is standing right there. Crime scene work is shift work, which means nights, weekends, and holidays, and scenes do not wait for your shift to start. The images stay with people. Agencies know this and many now offer counseling, but the load is real and it is cumulative.

2. Forensic science technician (laboratory)

Where they showed up in this case. This is the analyst who set up the ABO and Rh plate you read for clumping in the blood and DNA module, and who loaded and ran the gel whose bands you measured against the ladder. Everything you did at your desk with a ruler, they did at a bench with a pipette.

What they actually do all day.

- Take in evidence from the scene team, check it against the paperwork, and refuse anything whose seal or label does not match. Saying no is part of the job.
- Run one type of test over and over on batches of samples, following a written procedure exactly, with no shortcuts and no improvising.
- Record every step in a case notebook that a stranger has to be able to follow years later.
- Write a report that states a bounded conclusion, then defend that conclusion in court under cross-examination.
- **The part students do not expect.** A large share of the week is not testing at all. It is proficiency tests, where you are secretly sent a sample with a known answer to check whether you are still getting it right, plus instrument calibration, quality paperwork, and review of other analysts' cases.
- **The tedious part.** Repeating the same extraction forty times in a row, then proofreading your own notes line by line looking for a typed digit that is wrong.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A bachelor's degree, per BLS. An associate degree is enough for some positions.
- **Typical degree fields.** Chemistry, biology, biochemistry, or forensic science. A degree from a program accredited by FEPAC, the group that reviews forensic science degrees, helps a lot. Only 54 schools in the world hold that accreditation, so most people get in with a straight chemistry or biology degree instead.
- **Licences, certifications, board exams.** No licence to start. The American Board of Criminalistics certifies analysts in Forensic Biology Screening, Forensic DNA, Drug Chemistry, and Foundational Knowledge. Before you can work cases on your own, you must pass a competency test set by your own laboratory.
- **Background check, drug screen, polygraph.** Background check and drug screen at every lab. Polygraph at some, mostly labs run by a police agency rather than a medical examiner's office.

- **How long from starting college to working.** 4 years of college, then 6 to 12 months of training in the lab before you sign a report by yourself.

What it pays. Median annual wage **\$72,060**, May 2025. BLS occupation title

Forensic Science Technicians, SOC code **19-4092**. This is the closest thing to an exact match on these eight cards, because BLS built the category around this job. BLS lumps scene and lab work into one number, so the figure covers both.

Where it can go.

1. Trainee, then qualified analyst in one discipline such as drug chemistry or firearms.
2. Technical leader for that discipline, the person who approves methods and signs off on new analysts.
3. Quality manager or laboratory director, which is mostly management and auditing.
4. **Lateral move.** Into a pharmaceutical, environmental, or clinical testing lab. The instruments are the same, the pay is often higher, and no one subpoenas you.

What high school courses help. Chemistry first, then the highest chemistry your school offers. The dilution and Beer's law steps in the toxicology module are exactly what an analyst does at the bench. Algebra II and statistics, because a standard curve is a line of best fit and you have to know when it stops being trustworthy. Any lab course where you keep a real notebook, because the notebook is the job.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm> Pay, growth, and what BLS says the work involves.
- <https://www.aafs.org/careers-forensic-science> The main professional society's page on the twelve forensic specialties and how students get started.
- <https://www.aafs.org/search/FEPAC-schools> Searchable list of every accredited forensic science degree program, filterable by state.
- <https://www.criminalistics.com/> The American Board of Criminalistics, which runs the certification exams.

One honest caution. Most public crime labs run a backlog, meaning more cases arrive than get finished, so the pile on your bench never empties. On top of that, a defense attorney's job is to make a jury doubt your work, and the questions get personal. You will be asked about your training, your error rate, and any mistake you have ever made. People who need to be liked find that part very hard.

3. Latent print examiner

Where they showed up in this case. This is the person who did exactly what you did in FP-3. They locked a rule before opening the first pair, worked ten comparisons, and wrote one of three words on each. Identification, exclusion, or inconclusive. The method card you used is a simplified version of their real procedure.

What they actually do all day.

- Judge whether a latent print is even usable. Most lifts from real scenes are smeared, partial, or overlapped, and a large share get marked unsuitable before any comparison starts.
- Compare ridge detail on a screen at high magnification, marking features one at a time and accounting for every difference.

- Search unidentified prints against a national fingerprint database, then compare by eye every candidate the computer returns. The computer ranks. It does not decide.
- Document each comparison in enough detail that another examiner can repeat it and reach their own conclusion.
- **The part students do not expect.** Every identification you make gets checked by a second examiner, often without telling them what you concluded. That is called blind verification. Your colleague can disagree with you, and then a third person resolves it. Being overruled is a normal part of the week.
- **The tedious part.** Hours at a monitor in a dim room, alone, with your eyes six inches from ridge detail. Then writing it all up.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** There are three paths. A high school diploma with 4 years of full-time latent print experience, an associate degree with 3 years, or a bachelor's degree with 2 years. This is one of the few forensic specialties you can enter without a four-year degree.
- **Typical degree fields.** Forensic science, biology, criminal justice, or no degree at all if you came up through an agency and got trained internally.
- **Licences, certifications, board exams.** The credential is Certified Latent Print Examiner, from the International Association for Identification. To sit for it you need 160 hours of board-approved technical training taken within the previous 5 years, 16 hours of court testimony training, a moot court exercise, and a written statement of competency from your supervisor. The exam is 8 hours across three parts.
- **Background check, drug screen, polygraph.** Yes. These jobs sit inside police agencies and state bureaus, so expect a full background investigation and a drug screen, and a polygraph at many agencies.
- **How long from starting college to working.** You can be hired as a trainee right after a two-year or four-year degree, but you will not work cases alone for 1 to 2 years. Counting the experience you need before you can even apply for certification, plan on roughly 6 to 7 years from your first college class to certified examiner.

What it pays. There is no BLS occupation called latent print examiner. The closest match is **Forensic Science Technicians**, SOC code **19-4092**, median

\$72,060, May 2025. The match is imperfect in two directions. Latent print examiners are one narrow specialty inside a broad category that also includes drug chemists and crime scene staff, and many examiners are employed under civilian job titles like "identification technician" that may be filed elsewhere. Treat \$72,060 as a general range for the category, not as a measured wage for this specialty.

Where it can go.

1. Trainee examiner, then working examiner after your agency's competency test.
2. Certified Latent Print Examiner, which is where the pay steps usually sit.
3. Supervisor of the latent print unit, then a technical leader role setting the agency's methods.
4. **Lateral move.** Into fingerprint database administration, into training and teaching for a state academy, or into standards work with groups like OSAC at NIST that write the rules the whole field follows.

What high school courses help. Biology, because friction ridge skin is an organ with a developmental history and that history is why the pattern is stable. Geometry and any drawing or design course, because both train you to see a shape and describe it precisely. Most of all, any class that rewards slow careful looking. FP-2 asked you to name eight features plus the core and the delta on one print. That skill, scaled up and repeated for years, is the job.

Learn more.

- https://theiai.org/latent_requirements.php Exact education, experience, and training hours required for certification.
- <https://www.theiai.org/> The certifying association itself, including its other seven certification programs.
- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm> The closest government wage and outlook data, with the limits described above.
- <https://www.nist.gov/organization-scientific-area-committees-forensic-science> OSAC, where over 800 volunteers write the technical standards for 19 forensic disciplines including this one.

One honest caution. A person makes this call by eye, and the field has been publicly challenged on exactly that point. Your own method card cites a study where false positives ran about 0.1 percent and false negatives about 7.5 percent. You will be asked about numbers like those on the stand, and a wrong identification has a name and a life attached to it. There are also not many of these jobs. Openings appear when someone retires, and you may have to move to a different city to get one.

4. Forensic biologist / DNA analyst

Where they showed up in this case. This is the analyst who ran the gel you sized in the blood and DNA module, who measured migration distances against the ladder, and who had to decide whether a lane held one person's DNA or a mixture. They are also the one who reports the fraction of the population that cannot be excluded, which is the part you practiced writing carefully so the claim stayed small enough.

What they actually do all day.

- Screen items for body fluids first. Before any DNA work, someone tests a stain to see whether it is blood, saliva, or nothing, and decides which small piece of a large item to cut out.
- Extract DNA, measure how much is there, copy the target regions, and run the sample on an instrument that reports fragment sizes.
- Interpret the resulting profile, which is the hard part. Deciding how many people contributed to a mixture is a judgment call with real disagreement in the field.
- Calculate and state the statistic that goes with a match, then write a report that does not claim more than the statistic supports.
- **The part students do not expect.** You get swabbed. Analysts, scene staff, and often the manufacturer's employees are all entered into an elimination database, so that when someone's own DNA turns up in a case, it can be recognized and removed. Your profile lives in a file at work.
- **The tedious part.** Pipetting the same small volumes into the same plate layout for hours, and the validation studies, where you run hundreds of known samples to prove a method works before you may use it on a single real case.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A bachelor's degree. Many labs prefer a master's, and it helps in hiring.
- **Typical degree fields.** Biology, biochemistry, molecular biology, genetics, or forensic science with a biology concentration.
- **Licences, certifications, board exams.** No licence. The American Board of Criminalistics offers Forensic DNA and Biological Evidence Screening certifications. Separately, any lab that shares profiles with the national DNA

database must follow federal Quality Assurance Standards issued by the FBI. Those standards require specific college coursework in **biochemistry, genetics, molecular biology, statistics, and population genetics**, confirmed on a standards document hosted by NIST. The exact number of credit hours required is **not verified** here, because the FBI page holding the original standard could not be opened for checking. Ask a program advisor for the current number before you plan a schedule around it.

- **Background check, drug screen, polygraph.** Background check and drug screen always. Polygraph at agency-run labs.
- **How long from starting college to working.** 4 years for the bachelor's, then 6 to 12 months of training in the lab before independent casework. Add about 2 years if you get a master's, which many people do because the competition for these jobs is heavy.

What it pays. There is no BLS occupation called DNA analyst or forensic biologist. The closest match is **Forensic Science Technicians**, SOC code

19-4092, median **\$72,060**, May 2025. The match is imperfect because DNA analysts usually hold more education than the category average and often sit at the higher end of the range, and because analysts working in a hospital or university setting may be counted under a different laboratory occupation entirely.

Where it can go.

1. Trainee, then qualified DNA analyst after your lab's competency test.
2. CODIS administrator, the person who manages the lab's connection to the national DNA database, or technical leader for the DNA section.
3. Laboratory director.
4. **Lateral move.** Into clinical molecular diagnostics at a hospital, or into biotechnology and sequencing companies. The bench skills transfer directly, the pay is usually higher, and you never get subpoenaed.

What high school courses help. Biology, then the most advanced biology your school offers, because everything in this job is downstream of understanding what a gene is. Chemistry, because extraction and amplification are chemistry. Algebra II and statistics above all, because the number attached to a DNA match is a probability, and an analyst who cannot explain that number cannot do the job. Any class that runs a gel, which is the same measurement you did on paper with a ruler and a ladder.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm> The closest government wage and outlook data.
- <https://www.criminalistics.com/> The American Board of Criminalistics, which certifies Forensic DNA analysts.
- <https://nij.ojp.gov/nij-hosted-online-training-courses/principles-forensic-dna-officers-court/05-assuring-quality-dna-testing/best-practice-standards-forensic-dna-laboratory/national-quality-assurance-standards-qas> A National Institute of Justice page explaining the federal Quality Assurance Standards and who issues them.
- <https://www.aafs.org/search/FEPAC-schools> Accredited degree programs, filterable to find one near Ohio.

One honest caution. Contamination is the constant worry, and it is easy. A single skin cell from you, a coworker, or an earlier sample can appear in a result and cause real damage before anyone catches it. That is why the elimination database exists. Beyond the anxiety, mixture interpretation is genuinely contested science, and honest experts disagree in court about the same data. If you want a job where the right answer is always clear, this is not it.

5. Forensic toxicologist

Where they showed up in this case. This is the person who did the whole worked example in the toxicology module. They made the standards from stock, zeroed on the blank, read every standard, plotted the curve, and had to decide what to do with the one point that missed the line. When the practice unknown read off the top of the curve, they diluted it and ran it again, which is exactly the honest move.

What they actually do all day.

- Prepare standards, which are samples of known concentration used to teach the instrument what a reading means. Fresh standards, over and over.
- Screen blood, urine, and tissue for whole families of drugs, then run a second, different method to confirm anything the screen flagged. A screen alone is never the answer.
- Interpret the number. Reporting that a drug is present is easy. Saying whether the amount was enough to matter, in that person, is the hard part.
- Testify, and explain to a jury why "present" and "sufficient" are two different words.
- **The part students do not expect.** A lot of the job is answering the phone. Coroners, pathologists, and hospital doctors call to ask what a result means, and you have to give a careful answer fast without overstating it.
- **The tedious part.** Making standards, washing and drying glassware, entering data, and re-running batches that failed their quality checks for reasons you then have to track down.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A bachelor's degree gets you in the door as an analyst. The job title "forensic toxicologist," and any job directing a toxicology lab, generally needs a master's or a doctorate.
- **Typical degree fields.** Chemistry, biochemistry, pharmacology, or toxicology. Chemistry is the safest undergraduate choice because it opens the most doors.
- **Licences, certifications, board exams.** The American Board of Forensic Toxicology is the certifying body. It offers several credentials, and as of January 2026 the largest group was D-ABFT-FT with 275 certificants. The Fellow level recognizes people with doctoral degrees in a chemical, physical, biological, or clinical laboratory science. Total certificants across all ABFT categories number in the hundreds, which tells you how small this field is.
- **Background check, drug screen, polygraph.** Background check and drug screen. A polygraph is less common here than in police-run units, because many toxicology labs sit inside a medical examiner's or coroner's office.
- **How long from starting college to working.** 4 years to start as an analyst. 6 to 10 years if you are aiming for the toxicologist title and the certification that goes with it.

What it pays. There is no BLS occupation called forensic toxicologist. Two BLS occupations bracket the job.

- **Forensic Science Technicians, SOC 19-4092,** median \$72,060, May 2025. This fits a bachelor's-level analyst running screens in a crime lab.
- **Chemists, SOC 19-2031,** median \$84,150, May 2024. This fits a master's or doctoral toxicologist directing analysis.

Both are imperfect. Neither category was built for this job, and neither number was measured on forensic toxicologists specifically. The honest statement is that the real figure sits somewhere in that band and depends heavily on your degree level.

Where it can go.

1. Analyst, running assays under someone else's signature.
2. Certified toxicologist, signing your own reports and interpretations.
3. Technical director or laboratory director of a toxicology section.
4. **Lateral move.** Into hospital clinical toxicology, workplace and athletic drug testing, or a pharmaceutical company's safety group. Anti-doping labs for sports use the same instruments and methods.

What high school courses help. Chemistry, and then every chemistry course after that, because this job is applied chemistry all the way down. Algebra II and statistics, because the standard curve, the difference between interpolation and extrapolation, and the decision about the point that missed the line are all statistics questions. Biology or anatomy, because a concentration in blood only means something once you know what the body does with a substance over time.

Learn more.

- <https://www.abft.org/> The certifying board, its credential levels, and how many people hold each.
- <https://www.soft-tox.org/> The Society of Forensic Toxicologists, with a job board, internships, and a plain explanation of the field.
- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/chemists-and-materials-scientists.htm> Government data for the closest higher-education match.
- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm> Government data for the closest bachelor's-level match.

One honest caution. The best-paid version of this job needs a doctorate, which is four to six more years after your bachelor's on a small stipend. There are also not many positions. Most forensic toxicology work sits in government offices whose budgets are set by counties and states, so hiring freezes and flat pay years are common even when the caseload grows. Plan for a chemistry degree that could take you somewhere else if the forensic door does not open.

6. Forensic entomologist

Where they showed up in this case. This is the specialist behind step 4 and step 7 of the time of death module. Somebody has to identify which blowfly species laid the eggs at the nose and what stage the larvae have reached, because the Accumulated Degree Hours calculation you ran is worthless without a correct species and the right base temperature. Your fourth clock, the one made of a different organism, is theirs.

What they actually do all day.

- Almost none of them do this full time. Most are university professors who teach and run a research lab, and take forensic cases as consulting work on top of that.
- Teach classes, write grant applications, supervise graduate students, and publish research. That is the actual daily job for most people holding this title.
- On a case, collect or receive insect samples, identify them to species, and calculate a colonization window from temperature records.
- Write a report and testify about a number that has real uncertainty in it, and about every assumption behind it.
- **The part students do not expect.** You raise the maggots. To identify a species with confidence you often have to rear larvae to adult flies in the lab, which means keeping live fly colonies fed and alive year round. You also do decomposition research outdoors, sometimes at a facility using donated human bodies.

- **The tedious part.** Sorting and counting hundreds of larvae under a scope, measuring them, and maintaining temperature logs from the scene and the nearest weather station hour by hour, which is the same summing you did by hand.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A doctorate in practice. A master's can support some research and technician roles, but board certification and casework expect a PhD.
- **Typical degree fields.** Entomology, which is the study of insects. Also biology, zoology, or ecology with an insect focus.
- **Licences, certifications, board exams.** The American Board of Forensic Entomology certifies practitioners in North America through a written and practical board exam. The size of the field is the number to pay attention to. **The ABFE lists 12 active Diplomates**, the top credential, plus 4 emeritus. Twelve people. The Entomological Society of America separately offers a Board Certified Entomologist credential for the wider profession.
- **Background check, drug screen, polygraph.** Usually none of the law enforcement screening, because you are typically a university employee, not an agency employee. Expect a standard university background check.
- **How long from starting college to working.** About 9 to 11 years from your first college class through a doctorate, then several more years of casework before board certification is realistic.

What it pays. There is no BLS occupation called forensic entomologist, and this is the clearest example on these cards of a job the government does not count. Two imperfect brackets.

- **Zoologists and Wildlife Biologists, SOC 19-1023**, median \$72,860, May 2024. Imperfect because that category is dominated by fish and wildlife agency work, not insects and not forensics.
- **Biological Science Teachers, Postsecondary, SOC 25-1042**, median \$83,460, May 2024. This is arguably the better match, because most board-certified forensic entomologists earn their living as college professors and consult on cases separately.

Neither number is a forensic entomologist's salary. Consulting fees on individual cases are paid on top of a regular job and are **not verified** here, because no government source publishes them.

Where it can go.

1. PhD, then a postdoctoral research position.
2. Assistant professor, then tenured professor with your own research lab.
3. Board-certified Diplomate taking casework alongside the academic job.
4. **Lateral move.** Public health entomology, meaning mosquito and tick control for a county or state health department, which has far more openings and steady government pay. Agricultural pest management and museum collection curation are the other two common landing spots.

What high school courses help. Biology, then the most advanced biology available, because species identification rests on anatomy and life cycles. Environmental science, because insect development depends on temperature, moisture, sun, and shade, which is why your worked example had to account for continuous shade. Statistics, because the answer is a range with error in it. Get comfortable with Celsius and the metric system now, since insect development tables are written in Celsius and body cooling work is in Fahrenheit, and mixing them is a real mistake people make.

Learn more.

- <https://forensicentomologist.org/> The American Board of Forensic Entomology, including the current list of certified Diplomates.
- <https://www.entsoc.org/> The Entomological Society of America, with student resources, a career center, and the Board Certified Entomologist credential.
- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/zoologists-and-wildlife-biologists.htm> Government data for one of the two closest matches.
- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/postsecondary-teachers.htm> Government data for the professor path, which is how most people in this field are actually paid.

One honest caution. Do not plan a career on this alone. Twelve active certified Diplomates in all of North America means this works as a specialty that a small number of professors add to an existing job, not as a job you apply for. The realistic path is to become an entomologist who can support a family on teaching, research, or public health work, and then build forensic expertise on top of that. Anyone who tells a fourteen-year-old to aim straight at forensic entomology is selling something.

7. Police detective / criminal investigator

Where they showed up in this case. This is the person who has to hold everything you built at once. The print result, the hair result, the blood type, the DNA, the toxicology number, and three time of death windows that do not perfectly agree. The case closed module asks for exactly three defensible sentences about cause, mechanism, and manner. A detective works with the pathologist on those sentences and has to resist saying anything bigger, which is the same discipline your claim ceilings taught.

What they actually do all day.

- Interview people. Witnesses, victims, family members, and suspects, over and over, and most of them do not want to talk.
- Write. Reports, search warrant applications, and case summaries for prosecutors. Detectives write far more than they drive.
- Build and track a timeline from records. Phone data, video, receipts, and door cameras are where most modern cases actually turn.
- Work with the crime lab, which means understanding what a result does and does not mean, and not asking the lab for something the science cannot give.
- **The part students do not expect.** Court eats the calendar. You sit in a hallway for four hours waiting to be called, get sent home, and come back the next day. A detective can lose whole weeks a year to waiting.
- **The tedious part.** Phone tag, records requests that take months, and old cases with no new leads that you are still required to review and document on a schedule.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A high school diploma is the floor at many departments. Some require college credit hours or an associate degree, and federal agencies require a bachelor's degree.
- **Typical degree fields.** Criminal justice, sociology, psychology, accounting for financial crimes, or computer science for digital investigations. No degree field is required at most local departments.
- **Licences, certifications, board exams.** State peace officer certification, which you earn by completing a state-approved police academy. In Ohio the certification standards and the training curriculum are set by the Ohio

Peace Officer Training Academy, known as OPOTA. Whether Ohio's final step is a written state exam or an academy-administered one is **not verified** here, so ask OPOTA or a recruiter for the current requirement. Detective itself is usually a promotion or assignment inside a department, not a separate licence.

- **Background check, drug screen, polygraph.** The heaviest screening on these eight cards. A full background investigation, a psychological evaluation, a medical exam, a physical fitness test, a drug screen, and at most agencies a pre-employment polygraph. **Worth noticing.** In PG-1 through PG-4 you measured polygraph charts and wrote down that they record physiology and not deception. Many agencies still require applicants to sit for one. Both of those things are true at the same time, and you should know that going in.
- **How long from starting college to working.** You can enter after high school. Most agencies require you to be 21. Academy is roughly 6 months, then most departments expect 3 to 5 years on patrol before you can test for detective. Figure 4 to 6 years from high school graduation to a detective assignment.

What it pays. Median annual wage **\$93,790**, May 2025. BLS occupation title

Detectives and Criminal Investigators, SOC code **33-3021**. This figure comes from the pay detail inside the BLS Police and Detectives handbook page, where the whole group of police and detectives had a median of \$77,270 in May 2024. Note that this SOC code also holds federal agents, whose pay pulls the median up, so a detective at a city department will often earn less than \$93,790.

Where it can go.

1. Patrol officer, then detective in a general assignment unit.
2. Detective in a specialized unit such as homicide, financial crimes, or digital evidence.
3. Sergeant supervising a unit, then lieutenant or commander.
4. **Lateral move.** To a state agency like Ohio BCI, to a federal agency, or out to corporate security, insurance fraud investigation, or private investigation, where the hours are calmer and the pay can be better.

What high school courses help. Government and civics, because search and seizure rules decide what evidence you are even allowed to collect. English and any course with heavy writing, because your report is the case. Spanish or another second language, which is directly useful in Cleveland and often earns extra pay. Psychology, for interviewing. Physical education and staying in shape, because there is a fitness test and you have to pass it.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/police-and-detectives.htm> Pay by role, education requirements, and job outlook.
- <https://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/33-3021.00> The daily tasks and skills list for detectives and criminal investigators.
- <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Law-Enforcement/Bureau-of-Criminal-Investigation> Ohio's state bureau, a common lateral destination and a place that hires investigators.
- <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Law-Enforcement/Ohio-Peace-Officer-Training-Academy> OPOTA, which sets Ohio's peace officer training curriculum and certification standards.
- <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/forensics> The National Institute of Justice's forensics research, which is where investigators learn what the science can currently support.

One honest caution. The stress is physical and it accumulates. Police and detective work has among the higher injury rates of any occupation, shift work disrupts sleep for years, and the emotional load of repeated exposure to violence is well documented. Add that overall employment for police and detectives is projected to grow only 3

percent from 2024 to 2034, so promotions depend on someone above you leaving. Go in with your eyes open about all three.

8. 911 dispatcher / emergency telecommunicator

Where they showed up in this case. Be honest about this one. You did not do a dispatch task in this unit. The dispatcher's work happens before any of it. They take the call, ask the questions that decide who gets sent, and create the first timestamp in the case. That timestamp matters to you directly, because every time of death window you calculated is only useful once it is compared against a known clock time, and the dispatcher is where that clock starts.

What they actually do all day.

- Answer emergency and non-emergency calls, decide in seconds what is happening, and send the right units.
- Track where every police, fire, and ambulance unit is and what each one is doing, usually while another call is coming in.
- Give instructions over the phone before help arrives. CPR, choking, childbirth, bleeding control. This is called emergency medical dispatch, and it saves lives from a chair.
- Keep a caller talking and calm while typing everything they say into a system another person is reading in real time.
- **The part students do not expect.** You almost never find out what happened. The call ends, the next one starts, and nobody calls you back to say the person lived. Dispatchers describe this as the hardest part of the job, harder than the calls themselves.
- **The tedious part.** Most calls are not emergencies. Parking complaints, noise, wrong numbers, and address verification fill the hours, and you sit in one chair wearing a headset for a 12-hour shift.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A high school diploma or equivalent. This is the shortest path to a real public safety career on these eight cards.
- **Typical degree fields.** None required. Coursework in criminal justice, communications, or emergency management can help you compete but is not expected.
- **Licences, certifications, board exams.** Many states and cities require certification. APCO International and NENA are the two organizations that write the training standards and run the courses, including Emergency Medical Dispatch certification. NENA publishes the Standards for 9-1-1 Professional Education. Ohio requires training for telecommunicators, and your local center will tell you exactly which course.
- **Background check, drug screen, polygraph.** A full background investigation and a drug screen. Many centers add a polygraph, a hearing test, and a typing and multitasking test you have to pass before an interview.
- **How long from starting college to working.** No college required. After a high school diploma, hiring plus 3 to 12 months of training on the floor next to a trainer. You can be working within a year of graduating.

What it pays. Median annual wage **\$50,730**, May 2024. BLS occupation title

Public Safety Telecommunicators, SOC code **43-5031**. This is a clean match. Note the name change. BLS still files the handbook page under the older title "Police, Fire, and Ambulance Dispatchers," but the occupation is now called Public Safety Telecommunicators, and that is the title on the page today. For comparison, the median for all jobs in the United States was \$49,500 in May 2024, so this job pays close to the middle of all American jobs.

Where it can go.

- 1. Telecommunicator, then a senior or lead position after a few years.
- 2. Communications training officer, the person who trains new dispatchers on the floor.
- 3. Shift supervisor, then communications center manager or director.
- 4. **Lateral move.** Into emergency management for a city or county, into a police or fire academy as an instructor, or into 911 technology and mapping work as centers upgrade to newer systems. Some dispatchers also use the experience and the inside knowledge to enter a police or fire academy.

What high school courses help. Keyboarding and computer applications, because you type while listening and both have to be fast and accurate. Geography and local map reading, because you have to know your city cold. Health science or any course with CPR and first aid certification, since you will be talking someone through those steps. Speech or communications, because your voice is the whole tool. A second language, which many centers pay extra for.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/office-and-administrative-support/police-fire-and-ambulance-dispatchers.htm> Government pay, education, and outlook data for public safety telecommunicators.
- <https://www.apcointl.org/> APCO International, which trained over 73,000 students in fiscal years 2024 and 2025 and runs the main certification courses.
- <https://www.nena.org/> NENA, the 9-1-1 Association, which writes the national standards and professional education requirements.
- <https://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/43-5031.00> The daily task and skill list for this job.

One honest caution. You hear the worst moments and you almost never hear the ending. Add mandatory overtime, holidays, nights, and a chair you cannot leave without someone covering for you, and turnover in 911 centers runs high. The pay sits near the median for all American jobs while the stress does not. Go visit a center and sit with a dispatcher for a shift before you decide. Every center in Ohio will let you ask.

What the eight cards look like side by side

Role	BLS occupation used	SOC	Median (year per row)	Match
Crime scene investigator	Forensic Science Technicians	19-4092	\$72,060	Good for civilian roles
Forensic science technician, lab	Forensic Science Technicians	19-4092	\$72,060	Exact
Latent print examiner	Forensic Science Technicians	19-4092	\$72,060	Broad category, no separate count
Forensic biologist / DNA analyst	Forensic Science Technicians	19-4092	\$72,060	Broad category, no separate count
Forensic toxicologist	Forensic Science Technicians / Chemists	19-4092 / 19-2031	\$72,060 / \$84,150	No BLS title, bracketed

Role	BLS occupation used	SOC	Median (year per row)	Match
Forensic entomologist	Zoologists and Wildlife Biologists / Biological Science Teachers, Postsecondary	19-1023 / 25-1042	\$72,860 / \$83,460	No BLS title, weakest match
Police detective	Detectives and Criminal Investigators	33-3021	\$93,790	Good, includes federal agents
911 dispatcher	Public Safety Telecommunicators	43-5031	\$50,730	Exact
<i>(All United States jobs, for scale)</i>	<i>Total, all occupations</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>\$49,500</i>	<i>Comparison only</i>

Source for every figure in this table: Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics. Forensic science technicians and detectives are May 2025. Every other row is May 2024. The year is repeated on each card so you can check any figure yourself. Outlook Handbook and Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2024 data, retrieved August 2026. All SOC codes checked against the BLS occupational structure list at https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_stru.htm

Three things worth saying out loud

Four of these eight jobs are not counted by the government. That is not a flaw in this file. It tells you something true about how narrow some of these specialties are. When a job is too small for the Bureau of Labor Statistics to measure, it is also too small to have many openings.

A median is not a starting salary. Every number here is the middle of a career, not the first paycheck. Expect to start below it, sometimes well below it, and to reach the median after years and a certification or two.

The fastest paths on these cards are not the lowest paid. A 911 dispatcher can be working within a year of high school graduation at \$50,730. A forensic entomologist can spend eleven years in school for a specialty with twelve certified practitioners in North America. Time in school and money out of it do not line up the way people assume, and it is worth checking that assumption before you pick.

Roles in the morgue, the hospital laboratory, and the courtroom

Anna Garcia Forensic Methods Unit. Written for ninth-grade PBS students.

You just spent a unit doing pieces of real jobs. You lifted features off a fingerprint. You measured hair under magnification. You ran a cooling equation and an insect calculation to bracket a time of death. You read stained tissue and named it from the cells. You typed blood and sized DNA fragments on a gel. You built a standard curve and back-calculated a concentration. Then you sat in an evidence conference and had your conclusion attacked by people who did not write it.

Every one of those tasks belongs to somebody's job. This file names eight of them. Seven are job titles. The eighth is something several of the other seven end up doing.

Nothing here assumes what killed Anna Garcia. The roles are described by what they do, not by any answer.

About the money numbers before you read them

Every salary in this file comes from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is a federal agency that surveys employers and publishes what jobs actually pay. People call it BLS. Nothing here is a guess.

Two things you should know so the numbers make sense.

First, there are two BLS products and they are on different clocks. The Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics survey, called OEWS, is the newest. Its current release is **May 2025**. The Occupational Outlook Handbook, called the OOH, is the friendly career website, and it is still showing **2024** figures. Every wage in this second set of cards is the **May 2025 OEWS** number, because it is newer. When you click an OOH link you will see a slightly different, older number. Both are real. The OOH just updates later.

Second, a median is not an average. The median is the middle. Half the people in that job earn more and half earn less. A brand new hire usually starts well below the median. Someone with twenty years usually earns above it.

SOC code means Standard Occupational Classification code. It is the number the government uses to file a job. If a job has no SOC code of its own, BLS does not report it separately, and this file says so instead of inventing a number.

9. Forensic pathologist / medical examiner

Where they showed up in this case. This is the person who signs the line your class fought over in Module 9. Cause, mechanism and manner are their call, built from the autopsy, the scene, the history and the lab work together. When the histology card said "a pathologist decides what any finding means," this is that pathologist.

What they actually do all day.

- Perform autopsies. That means examining a body inside and out, taking measurements and photographs, removing organs, weighing them, and cutting small blocks of tissue to send for slides.
- Read those slides later under a microscope, doing what you did in Module 8 but on real tissue with a real answer at stake.

- Order and interpret toxicology, meaning the drug and alcohol testing you modeled in Module 7, and decide whether a level actually explains a death.
- Write the autopsy report and sign the death certificate. The certificate is a legal document, and the manner of death written on it affects insurance payouts, criminal charges and what a family is told.
- Talk to families. Many people expect this job to be silent work with the dead. A large part of it is explaining findings to a parent or a spouse who is standing in front of you having the worst week of their life.
- The unglamorous part is paperwork and dictation. A single case can generate hours of typing, and a backlog of unsigned reports follows you home in your head.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A medical degree. There is no shorter route.
- **Typical degree fields.** A bachelor's degree in biology, chemistry, biochemistry, neuroscience or a similar science. Medical schools do not require a specific major, but they do require specific science courses.
- **Licences, certifications and board exams.** You must be a licensed physician, holding either an MD or a DO. Then you certify with the **American Board of Pathology** in anatomic pathology at a minimum, and pass a separate **subspecialty examination in forensic pathology**. Someone who has done all of that is called a board-certified forensic pathologist, shortened to BCFP. The residency and fellowship programs are accredited by the **Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education**, called ACGME.
- **How long from starting college.** Walk it honestly. A bachelor's degree is **4 years**. Medical school is another **4 years**. Pathology residency is **3 to 4 years**, where three years covers anatomic pathology alone and four covers anatomic and clinical pathology together. The forensic pathology fellowship on top of that is **1 year**. That is a **total of about 12 to 13 years after high school** before you are working as a forensic pathologist. You are in your early thirties when you start.

What it pays. BLS does not report forensic pathologists separately. There is no SOC code for them. They are folded into the physician codes with everyone else who went to medical school.

- Closest match: **Physicians, Pathologists, SOC 29-1222**. Median annual wage **\$312,400**, May 2025. That code covers **11,110** pathologists nationally.
- Why that number is imperfect, and it matters. Most people in 29-1222 are hospital and private-practice pathologists, not medical examiners. Medical examiners usually work for a county or a state. The NIJ report cited at the bottom of this file found that public-sector forensic pathology salaries run "one-half or one-third" of what hospital and private-practice pathologists earn. So **\$312,400 is very likely higher than what a medical examiner actually makes**. Read it as the ceiling of the pathology field, not as the forensic pathologist's paycheck.
- A second, broader code is **Physicians, All Other, SOC 29-1229**, median **\$265,930**, May 2025.

Where it can go.

1. Associate or assistant medical examiner, which is the entry job after fellowship.
2. Chief medical examiner for a county, then for a larger county or a whole state. This becomes a management job with budgets and staff.
3. **Lateral move.** Go back to hospital pathology, where the pay is higher and nobody calls you at 3 a.m. for a scene. Some people do forensic work for a decade and then switch.
4. Teaching and research. Medical schools and pathology residencies need faculty, and fellowship directors train the next set of forensic pathologists.

What high school courses help. Biology and anatomy first, because tissue identification is the daily skill. Chemistry, because toxicology is chemistry. Physics, because the cooling equation you ran in Module 4 is physics. Statistics, because you will be asked how confident you are and you need to answer with a number. Take the hardest English and speech classes you can, because this job is judged on written reports and spoken testimony.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physicians-and-surgeons.htm> The BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook page for physicians. Pay, job outlook and what the training path looks like.
- <https://www.thename.org/> The National Association of Medical Examiners, the professional group for this exact job. Job listings and position papers on how death investigation should be done.
- <https://www.abpath.org/> The American Board of Pathology, the body that gives the board exams. Look for the forensic pathology subspecialty requirements.
- <https://www.acgme.org/> The council that accredits residency and fellowship programs. This is where you check whether a training program is real.
- <https://www.aafs.org/careers-forensic-science> Career descriptions across the whole forensic field, written for students.

One honest caution. This is the longest and most expensive path in this file. The NIJ report found that medical school graduates carry an average of **\$180,000 in student loan debt**, and forensic pathology pays less than the other things you could do with that same degree. On top of the money, you will autopsy children. You will autopsy people your own age. You will meet families on the worst day of their lives, over and over, for years. People in this field are open about the emotional cost, and the ones who last build real support around themselves early.

10. Medicolegal death investigator

Where they showed up in this case. Module 4 told you to record the scene before you touch the body, log the core temperature, and write down what you felt when you tested rigor and lividity. That is this person's job. A medicolegal death investigator, shortened to MDI, goes to the scene, documents it, and brings the body and the facts back to the pathologist. Almost every number your class worked with in the time-of-death module would have come from an MDI.

What they actually do all day.

- Respond to death scenes at any hour and decide, on the spot, what the office needs to take jurisdiction over.
- Photograph the body and the scene, take the liver or core temperature, record the ambient temperature, and test rigor and lividity, writing down what they observed rather than what they concluded.
- Interview family, police, paramedics and neighbours to build the person's medical history and last known movements. The history often matters more than the scene.
- Collect and label evidence, and maintain chain of custody, which is the written record proving nobody could have swapped or altered an item between the scene and the lab.
- Make the death notification to the family. Most students do not expect this. Telling a stranger their son is dead is a normal part of this job, and there is a technique to doing it well.
- The tedious part is the report. Every scene becomes a long written narrative, and you will spend more hours typing than standing at scenes.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A high school diploma or equivalent gets you in the door at some offices. That is genuinely the floor.
- **Typical degree fields.** Most competitive applicants now hold a bachelor's degree in forensic science, biology, criminal justice, nursing or mortuary science.
- **Licences, certifications and exams.** The credential is from the **American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators**, called **ABMDI**. There are two levels, and the real requirements are these. **Registry Certification** is the basic level. You must be at least 18, hold a high school diploma or equivalent, currently work for a medical examiner or coroner office, and document **640 hours of death investigation experience**. There are two tracks: Associate, for investigators without scene experience, and Diplomate, for those who work scenes in person. **Board Certification** is the advanced level. You need at least an **associate degree**, six months as a Registry Diplomate in good standing, and **4,000 hours of death investigation experience in the past six years**.
- **How long from starting college.** About **4 years** for the degree, then a first job, then roughly a year of work before you have the 640 hours for Registry certification. Board certification realistically takes several more years because of the 4,000-hour requirement. You are working and being paid the whole time, which is a real advantage over the pathologist path.

What it pays. There is **no BLS occupation code for medicolegal death investigator**. BLS does not report this job separately, so any single number you see online is somebody's estimate rather than a federal figure.

- Closest match: **Forensic Science Technicians, SOC 19-4092**. Median annual wage **\$72,060**, May 2025, covering **19,120** workers. Why it is imperfect: that code is mostly crime-lab analysts and crime-scene technicians who work for police agencies, not death investigators who work for medical examiner offices. Different employer, different work.
- A second, also imperfect match: **Detectives and Criminal Investigators, SOC 33-3021**, median **\$93,790**, May 2025. Some MDIs are sworn investigators and would land here. Most are not, so this figure likely runs high.
- Honest summary. The real number sits somewhere around and probably below the forensic science technician figure, and it varies enormously by county. A large urban office pays very differently from a rural one. **Not verified** as a single national figure, because BLS does not publish one.

Where it can go.

1. Senior or lead investigator, taking the complicated cases and reviewing other people's reports.
2. Chief investigator or operations manager for the office, running scheduling, training and quality control.
3. **Lateral move.** Into a crime laboratory as an evidence technician, or into police work as a detective, or into forensic nursing. The scene documentation and chain-of-custody skills transfer directly.
4. Training and accreditation work, teaching new investigators or helping offices pass their accreditation reviews.

What high school courses help. Biology and anatomy, so you understand what you are looking at. Photography or any visual arts class, because scene photography is a graded skill in this job. Psychology, for the family interviews. Any writing-heavy English class, because your report is the product. If your school offers criminal justice or forensics, take it, though be aware that a survey class is not the same as the science.

Learn more.

- <https://www.abmdi.org/> The certifying board. The Policy and Procedure manual on this site lists every requirement exactly, and it is worth reading the real document.
- <https://www.thename.org/> The National Association of Medical Examiners. Death investigators work inside these offices, and the job board here is real.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm> The closest BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook page. Read it knowing it is a neighbouring job, not this one.
- <https://www.aafs.org/careers-forensic-science> Career overviews across forensic science, including death investigation.

One honest caution. This job is shift work and it is on call. Deaths do not wait for business hours, so nights, weekends and holidays are normal. You will see decomposition, children, and scenes that stay with you. The pay is modest for what is asked. Offices are also short-staffed nationally, which sounds like good news for getting hired and often means the people already there are carrying too many cases.

11. Autopsy technician / pathologists' assistant

Where they showed up in this case. These are the hands that made your Module 8 material exist. Somebody opened the body, removed the organs, weighed them, and cut the small tissue blocks that later became the stained sections you identified. In most offices, that person is not the pathologist. It is an autopsy technician or a pathologists' assistant working alongside them.

These are two different jobs with different training, so this card covers both.

What they actually do all day.

- Prepare the body and the autopsy suite, then make the initial incisions and remove organs under the pathologist's direction.
- Weigh and measure organs, take photographs, and cut tissue blocks in the exact places the pathologist asks for.
- Reconstruct the body afterward so it can be released to a funeral home. Families usually still want a viewing, and doing that well is a real skill and a real kindness.
- Handle specimens, maintain the log, and keep chain of custody on anything that might become evidence.
- The surprise: a pathologists' assistant spends most of their time on **surgical specimens from living patients**, not on autopsies. Every time a surgeon removes a tumour, somebody has to describe it, measure it and cut it for slides. That is the bulk of the job in a hospital.
- The unglamorous part is cleaning. You clean instruments, tables, drains and floors, and you do it to a standard, every single day.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** For **autopsy technician**, a high school diploma plus on-the-job training in many offices. Some employers prefer an associate degree or mortuary science training. For **pathologists' assistant**, a **master's degree** from an accredited program. These are not interchangeable.
- **Typical degree fields.** Biology, anatomy, mortuary science or forensic science for autopsy technician. For pathologists' assistant, a bachelor's in a science followed by a master's in pathologists' assistant studies.
- **Licences, certifications and exams.** Pathologists' assistant programs are accredited by **NAACLS**, the National Accrediting Agency for Clinical Laboratory Sciences. Graduates certify through the **ASCP Board of Certification** and use the credential **PA(ASCP)**. Autopsy technician has no single national certification. Some people in this role hold a state embalmer or funeral director licence instead, which comes through mortuary science.
- **How long from starting college.** Autopsy technician, **0 to 2 years**, and some people are hired straight out of high school and trained on site. Pathologists' assistant, about **6 years**, which is a 4-year bachelor's plus a roughly 2-year master's program.

What it pays. Neither job has its own BLS occupation code. BLS does not report either one separately.

- Closest match for **autopsy technician: Healthcare Support Workers, All Other, SOC 31-9099**, median **\$48,430**, May 2025. It is imperfect because it is a catch-all bucket holding many unrelated support jobs, so it tells you the neighbourhood and not the street.
- A second reference point, **Embalmers, SOC 39-4011**, median **\$58,780**, May 2025. Relevant only because some autopsy technicians come from mortuary science and some do both.
- For **pathologists' assistant**, the honest answer is **not verified**. There is no BLS code, and the salary surveys you will find online come from the professional association rather than the government. Those surveys report pay well above the two codes above, which makes sense for a master's-level job, but this file will not print a number it could not verify at bls.gov. The closest federal bucket, **Health Technologists and Technicians, All Other, SOC 29-2099**, median **\$50,290**, May 2025, is a poor fit and almost certainly understates it.

Where it can go.

1. Lead or senior autopsy technician, running the morgue's daily schedule and training new staff.
2. Go back to school for the pathologists' assistant master's. Autopsy technician is a common on-ramp, and you earn while you decide.
3. Supervisor or manager of a pathology laboratory or a hospital's anatomic pathology department.
4. **Lateral move.** Into histotechnology, into organ and tissue procurement for transplant programs, or into mortuary science and funeral service. The anatomy and the handling skills carry over.

What high school courses help. Anatomy and physiology above everything, since you need to know normal structure by sight. Biology and chemistry. A hands-on class where you build or make something, because manual skill with a blade is the core of this job and it is learnable. Health science or a CTE pathway if your school offers one.

Learn more.

- <https://pathassist.org/> The American Association of Pathologists' Assistants. Explains the role, accredited programs and what the work actually involves.
- <https://www.ascp.org/boc> The ASCP Board of Certification, which grants the PA(ASCP) credential.
- <https://www.nacls.org/Students.aspx> NAACLS student pages, listing every accredited program type including pathologists' assistant.
- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/clinical-laboratory-technologists-and-technicians.htm> The nearest BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook page, useful for the laboratory side of the work.

One honest caution. You will be in the room with the dead every working day, and the physical reality is not what television shows. There are smells. There are sounds. There are cases involving children and cases involving people who look like someone you know. Some people find they are fine with it and some discover in their first week that they are not, and there is no way to know which one you are until you are standing there. Ask for a job shadow before you commit years to it.

12. Histotechnologist / histotechnician

Where they showed up in this case. Every slide in Module 8 came from this person. They took the tissue block, sliced it thin enough for light to pass through, mounted it on glass, and stained it with hematoxylin and eosin so the nuclei went purple and the cytoplasm went pink. When you told smooth muscle from dense regular connective

tissue, you were reading their work. A section cut badly or stained badly cannot be identified by anyone, no matter how good the pathologist is.

What they actually do all day.

- Process tissue, which means running it through a series of chemicals so water is replaced by wax and the tissue becomes firm enough to cut.
- Embed the tissue in a wax block, oriented the right way. Orientation decides what the pathologist can see. Get it wrong and the diagnosis is harder or impossible.
- Cut sections on a microtome, a machine with an extremely sharp blade that shaves slices a few thousandths of a millimetre thick. This is a hand skill that takes months to get good at.
- Stain slides, run special stains when the pathologist asks, and run immunohistochemistry, which uses antibodies to light up one specific protein in the tissue.
- Troubleshoot. When slides come out with folds, tears, bubbles or the wrong colour, you have to work out which of about twenty steps went wrong.
- The part students do not expect is how much of this is chemistry and machine maintenance rather than microscope work. You will spend more time with reagents and instruments than looking down an eyepiece.
- The tedious part is volume. A busy hospital laboratory produces hundreds of slides a day and every one has to be labelled correctly, because a mislabelled slide can put one patient's cancer in another patient's chart.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** For **histotechnician**, an associate degree or an accredited certificate program. For **histotechnologist**, a bachelor's degree.
- **Typical degree fields.** Histotechnology, biology, chemistry or medical laboratory science.
- **Licences, certifications and exams.** The **ASCP Board of Certification** grants **HT(ASCP)** for histotechnician and **HTL(ASCP)** for histotechnologist. Training programs are accredited by **NAACLS**. Some states also license laboratory personnel, so check your own state's rules before you pick a program.
- **How long from starting college.** Histotechnician, about **2 years**. Histotechnologist, about **4 years**. This is one of the faster routes into skilled laboratory work in this file.

What it pays. BLS does not break out histotechnology. It sits inside a combined code.

- Closest match: **Clinical Laboratory Technologists and Technicians**, SOC **29-2010**. Median annual wage **\$62,930**, May 2025, covering **332,940** workers.
- Why it is imperfect. BLS used to publish technologists and technicians as two separate codes, 29-2011 and 29-2012. It now reports them as one. So this single median mixes people with two-year degrees and people with four-year degrees. It runs a little high for a new histotechnician and a little low for an experienced histotechnologist. Histotechnology specifically is not broken out at all.

Where it can go.

1. Lead technologist, running a bench area and training new staff.
2. Histology laboratory supervisor or manager, which adds budgets, staffing and inspections.
3. **Lateral move.** Into a company that sells laboratory instruments and stains, as a technical specialist or applications scientist. These roles pay well and the laboratories already know your name.

4. Into research histology at a university or a hospital research group, or into quality assurance and laboratory accreditation.

What high school courses help. Chemistry, because staining is chemistry and processing is chemistry. Biology and anatomy, so you recognise what a good section should look like. Any class that trains steady hands and patience, such as art, ceramics, welding or sewing, is genuinely relevant to microtomy. Take math through algebra 2 for the dilutions.

Learn more.

- <https://www.nsh.org/certification> The National Society for Histotechnology certification page, explaining the HT and HTL routes.
- <https://www.ascp.org/boc> The ASCP Board of Certification, which gives the HT and HTL exams.
- <https://www.nacls.org/Students.aspx> Find accredited histotechnology programs near you.
- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/clinical-laboratory-technologists-and-technicians.htm> The BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook page covering this occupation group.

One honest caution. Almost nobody outside the laboratory knows this job exists, and that shows up in pay and in respect. You work with chemicals including formalin and xylene every day, so ventilation and safety practice are not optional. The work is repetitive and deadline-driven, because a surgeon is waiting on that slide. If you need to be seen and thanked to stay motivated, this is a hard place to be.

13. Clinical laboratory scientist (medical laboratory scientist)

Where they showed up in this case. Module 6 and Module 7 are their work. The ABO agglutination reactions you read, the gel you used to size DNA fragments, the standard curve you built with Beer's law and then used to back-calculate an unknown concentration, all of that is daily bench work for a clinical laboratory scientist. They are also the reason your toxicology result meant anything, because a number from an instrument that was not calibrated against known standards is just a number.

The job has two names for the same work. Older sources say medical technologist. Current sources say clinical laboratory scientist or medical laboratory scientist, shortened to MLS.

What they actually do all day.

- Run and interpret tests across several benches, including blood chemistry, blood counts, blood typing and crossmatching, microbiology cultures and coagulation studies.
- Run quality control before patient samples, every shift. You test known material first, and if the known answer comes out wrong you stop and fix the instrument before you report anything real.
- Recognise a result that cannot be true and chase it down. A potassium level incompatible with a living patient usually means a sample problem, and catching that is the judgment part of the job.
- Crossmatch blood for transfusion. This is the one where a mistake kills someone the same day, and MLS professionals carry that quietly.
- Maintain, calibrate and repair instruments. A large share of your week is spent keeping machines honest.
- The surprise is how much of the job is decision-making rather than button-pushing. Automation runs the test. You decide whether the answer is believable and what to do when it is not.
- The tedious part is documentation and inspections. Everything is logged, and laboratories are inspected against those logs.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A bachelor's degree for MLS. A two-year associate degree gets you in as a medical laboratory technician, or MLT, which is a real job and a common stepping stone.
- **Typical degree fields.** Medical laboratory science, clinical laboratory science, biology or chemistry, usually followed by a clinical training year.
- **Licences, certifications and exams.** Programs are accredited by **NAACLS**. Certification is through the **ASCP Board of Certification**, giving **MLS(ASCP)** at the bachelor's level and **MLT(ASCP)** at the associate level. Several states also require a state licence to work in a clinical laboratory, so check your state before choosing a school.
- **How long from starting college.** MLT, about **2 years**. MLS, about **4 years** including the clinical rotations, which are usually built into the degree.

What it pays.

- BLS occupation title **Clinical Laboratory Technologists and Technicians**, SOC 29-2010. Median annual wage **\$62,930**, May 2025, covering **332,940** workers nationally.
- The same caveat as the previous card applies. BLS folded the old technologist code 29-2011 and technician code 29-2012 into this one figure, so the median mixes the four-year job and the two-year job. That means this number sits below what a certified MLS typically earns and above what a new MLT typically earns. BLS does not publish the split any more, so this file will not guess at it.

Where it can go.

1. Specialist certification in one area such as blood banking, microbiology or molecular biology, which usually comes with a raise.
2. Lead technologist, then laboratory supervisor, then laboratory manager or director.
3. **Lateral move.** Into a crime laboratory as a forensic DNA analyst or forensic toxicologist. Many forensic laboratories hire out of clinical laboratories, because the instruments and the quality-control discipline are the same.
4. Into industry, working for a diagnostics or biotechnology company on product support, validation or research.

What high school courses help. Chemistry is the single most useful class, and take it as far as your school goes. Biology and anatomy. Algebra 2 at minimum, because dilutions, standard curves and unit conversions are the math of this job and you saw all three in Module 7. Statistics if it is offered, for quality control.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/clinical-laboratory-technologists-and-technicians.htm> The BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook page. Pay, outlook and daily duties.
- <https://ascls.org/> The American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science, the professional association for this field.
- <https://www.ascp.org/boc> The ASCP Board of Certification, which grants the MLS and MLT credentials.
- <https://www.naacls.org/Students.aspx> Search accredited programs by state.

One honest caution. Hospital laboratories run 24 hours a day, so nights, weekends and holidays come with the job, especially early in your career. Laboratories are short-staffed across the country, which means you can find work almost anywhere and it also means you will often be covering someone else's bench. Patients almost never know you exist, and the doctor gets the credit for the diagnosis your result made possible.

14. Phlebotomist

Where they showed up in this case. Before anyone could type blood in Module 6, somebody had to collect it. In a death investigation, blood from the deceased is collected at autopsy. But the known samples, the ones you compared the evidence stain against, come from living people, and drawing those is a phlebotomist's job. Every ABO result in your module started with a tube that was drawn correctly, labelled correctly and handled correctly.

What they actually do all day.

- Draw blood from patients using a needle into vacuum tubes, choosing the right tubes in the right order for the tests being requested.
- Confirm patient identity before every single draw, using two identifiers. This sounds small and it is the step that prevents a fatal transfusion error.
- Label tubes at the bedside, immediately, and log them into the laboratory system.
- Find a vein on people who do not have obvious ones, including elderly patients, people who are dehydrated, and small children. This is the actual skill of the job.
- Calm people down. A meaningful number of patients are terrified of needles, and some faint. Talking someone through it is a daily task and nobody trains you for it as much as they should.
- The tedious part is the cart and the rounds. Early-morning hospital draws mean a long list, a fixed deadline, and a lot of walking, restocking and paperwork.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** A high school diploma or equivalent, plus a training program. This is the shortest path in this file.
- **Typical degree fields.** No degree required. Training is a certificate program at a community college, hospital or vocational school, and it includes a set number of successful supervised draws.
- **Licences, certifications and exams.** Certification is not required everywhere, and it is worth getting anyway. Common credentials are **PBT(ASCP)** from the ASCP Board of Certification, **CPT** from the National Healthcareer Association, and certification from the American Society of Phlebotomy Technicians. A few states require a state licence, California among them, so check yours.
- **How long from starting college.** About **4 months to 1 year** of training, then you are working. Some students finish a program while still in high school through a CTE pathway.

What it pays.

- BLS occupation title **Phlebotomists**, SOC **31-9097**. Median annual wage **\$45,230**, May 2025, covering **143,540** workers nationally. This is a clean match, with no proxy needed.
- For reference, the BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook page still shows the 2024 figure of \$43,660, so the number you see there will be lower.

Where it can go.

1. Lead phlebotomist or phlebotomy supervisor, running schedules and training new draws.
2. Go to school part-time while working and become an MLT, then an MLS. Employers often help pay for this, and it is one of the most common upgrade paths in healthcare.

3. **Lateral move.** Into donor collection at a blood centre, into a plasma centre, or into clinical research as a study coordinator's assistant collecting trial samples.
4. Into other patient-facing roles that build on the same skills, such as medical assistant, EKG technician or nursing.

What high school courses help. Anatomy and physiology, so you know where veins run and why. Biology. Health science or any CTE healthcare pathway, since some of these let you finish the certificate before graduation. A speaking or customer service class helps more than you would think, because half this job is putting a frightened person at ease.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/phlebotomists.htm> The BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook page. Pay, training and job outlook.
- <https://www.ascp.org/boc> The ASCP Board of Certification, which grants PBT(ASCP).
- <https://www.nhanow.com/> The National Healthcareer Association, which grants the CPT credential.
- <https://www.aspt.org/> The American Society of Phlebotomy Technicians.

One honest caution. This is the lowest-paid job in this file, and the pay does not rise much unless you use it as a step toward something else. You will be stuck with needles at some point in your career, and there is a whole exposure protocol for when it happens. You will also hurt people who did nothing wrong, because some draws are hard and some veins roll, and you have to be able to try again anyway.

15. Forensic nurse / SANE nurse

Where they showed up in this case. This is the role for when the person survives. A forensic nurse cares for a living patient and collects evidence from that patient at the same time, holding both jobs at once. The discipline is the one your whole unit was built on: document what you observed, keep chain of custody intact, and do not overstate what your findings can support. A SANE is a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, a forensic nurse with specialised training for those cases.

If a patient in a case like this one survived, this is who would examine them and document whatever was found. The evidence would then have travelled the same path your class followed.

What they actually do all day.

- Provide medical care first. The patient is a patient before they are a case, and treating injuries comes ahead of collecting anything.
- Take a careful history and perform a head-to-toe examination, documenting every injury with measurements, body diagrams and photographs.
- Collect evidence, package it, seal it and sign the chain-of-custody form. Swabs, clothing and fingernail scrapings all become laboratory items exactly like the ones in your modules.
- Explain to the patient what each step is for and get consent for every part of it, including the right to refuse any piece and still receive care.
- Connect the patient to advocates, counselling and follow-up medical care, including medications to prevent infection.
- Testify in court later, sometimes years later, about what they documented.

- The part students do not expect is how much of this job is standing still and listening. A large share of the value a forensic nurse provides is being an adult who believes the patient and does not rush them.
- The tedious part is documentation. A single examination can produce hours of charting, and that record is what holds up or falls apart in court.

What you need to get in.

- **Minimum education.** You must be a registered nurse first. That means either an associate degree in nursing, about 2 years, or a bachelor of science in nursing, about 4 years. The bachelor's is increasingly what hospitals want.
- **Typical degree fields.** Nursing. There is no forensic undergraduate degree that substitutes for it.
- **Licences, certifications and exams.** Pass the **NCLEX-RN**, the national licensing examination, and get an RN licence from your state board of nursing. Then complete SANE training, which is classroom hours plus supervised clinical practice. Then sit for certification. **Important and current:** the SANE-A credential for adult and adolescent patients and the SANE-P credential for paediatric and adolescent patients were held by the International Association of Forensic Nurses. On **April 3, 2026**, those credentials transferred to the **American Nurses Credentialing Center**, called ANCC, ahead of the dissolution of IAFN. If you research this job and find the old association's website is gone, that is why. Check ANCC for current requirements.
- **How long from starting college.** About **2 to 4 years** to become an RN, then usually **1 to 2 years** of nursing experience before SANE training, then the training and certification itself. Call it **4 to 6 years** from starting college to working as a certified forensic nurse.

What it pays. BLS has **no separate code for forensic nurses or SANE nurses**. They are counted with all other registered nurses.

- Closest match: **Registered Nurses, SOC 29-1141**. Median annual wage **\$97,550**, May 2025, covering **3,379,720** workers nationally.
- Why it is imperfect. That figure averages across every nursing specialty and every setting in the country. Forensic nursing pay depends heavily on the employer. Hospital-employed forensic nurses are usually paid on the regular nursing scale. Some SANE work is done on call, paid per examination or as a stipend on top of a regular nursing job, which does not resemble a salary at all.

Where it can go.

1. SANE program coordinator, running a hospital's or a region's response team.
2. Add the paediatric credential alongside the adult one and cover both patient groups.
3. **Lateral move.** Into a medical examiner's office as a death investigator, which is a well-worn path for nurses, or into legal nurse consulting, where you review medical records for attorneys.
4. Into teaching and training, preparing the next set of forensic nurses, or into policy work on how hospitals and police handle these cases.

What high school courses help. Anatomy and physiology, biology and chemistry for the nursing prerequisites. Psychology, because trauma responses are part of the clinical picture. Speech or debate, because you will testify. If your school offers a health science CTE pathway or a nursing assistant certificate, that gets you into a hospital early and tells you fast whether you like the work.

Learn more.

- <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/registered-nurses.htm> The BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook page for registered nurses, the base job.
- <https://www.nursingworld.org/our-certifications/> ANCC certifications, which is where the SANE credentials now live.
- <https://www.nursingworld.org/news/news-releases/2026-news-releases/american-nurses-credentialing-center-to-welcome-forensic-nurses/> The April 2026 announcement of the credential transfer. Read this so you are not confused by outdated pages elsewhere.
- <https://www.ncsbn.org/> The National Council of State Boards of Nursing, which administers the NCLEX and links to every state's licensing board.

One honest caution. This is emotionally the heaviest job on this list, and that is saying something. You will care for people immediately after the worst thing that has happened to them, including children. Then you will be cross-examined about it by an attorney whose job is to make you look careless. Burnout and secondary trauma are common and well documented in this field, and programs that last are the ones that build supervision and support into the schedule instead of expecting nurses to absorb it alone. One more practical note: IAFN dissolving means this field is in the middle of a real transition, so verify anything you read about certification against ANCC directly.

16. Expert witness and the courtroom side of forensic work

Read this first, because it is different from the other seven. Expert witness is not a job title. Nobody is hired as an expert witness and nobody has that printed on a badge. It is a **role that several of the people above take on**, usually as part of a job they already have. The forensic pathologist testifies about the autopsy. The clinical laboratory scientist testifies about how the DNA result was produced. The death investigator testifies about the scene. The forensic nurse testifies about the examination. Same person, same salary, different room.

Where it showed up in this case. Module 9, the evidence conference. When your group posted a claim and the floor's only legal move was to refute it, you were doing cross-examination with the names changed. The four challenge questions on that card are close to what a defence attorney actually asks. Name a finding that would make you wrong. Which of your evidence fits the other explanation equally well. Which item does everything else depend on. Point to the finding that establishes the cause and not just the classification. A witness who cannot answer those in a courtroom loses, and a conclusion that cannot survive them was never sound.

What it actually involves.

- Writing a report months or years before anyone reads it aloud. The report is the foundation, and everything you did not write down is something you may not be able to claim later.
- Meeting with attorneys beforehand to explain your findings in plain language. Attorneys are not scientists and part of your job is teaching them.
- Giving a deposition, which is sworn testimony recorded outside court, sometimes for hours, with opposing counsel probing for anything inconsistent.
- Testifying. You explain technical work to twelve people who have no background in it, without talking down to them and without overstating what your evidence supports.
- Being cross-examined. Opposing counsel will look for every place your certainty exceeded your evidence. The unit's rules about what each method can and cannot support exist because of this room. Hair similarity supports consistency or exclusion and cannot identify a person. Fingerprint pattern class narrows or excludes. A section shows no visible change rather than proving nothing happened. Saying more than that in court is how careers end.

- The part students do not expect is the waiting. You will clear a whole day, drive to the courthouse, sit in a hallway for six hours, and be sent home because the case settled or ran long. This happens constantly.
- The tedious part is scheduling. Court dates move repeatedly, and each move scrambles a working week you already planned around.

What you need to get in. There is no expert witness degree, licence or exam. A judge decides whether a particular person may testify as an expert in a particular case, based on that person's knowledge, skill, experience, training or education in the specific thing being asked about. So the requirement is simply that you are genuinely qualified in your own field and can show it. The strongest foundations are the board certifications named in the cards above, because a credential from a recognised body is far harder to attack than a job title alone.

What you can build in the meantime is the skill of explaining technical work clearly and admitting the limits of it out loud. That is learnable and it is rare.

What it pays. There is no BLS occupation code for expert witness, and there cannot be one, because it is not an occupation. For the public employees who do most forensic testimony, meaning medical examiners, crime laboratory analysts and death investigators, testifying is part of the salaried job and there is no extra payment. Private consultants in some fields do charge hourly fees for review and testimony, and those rates are not collected by BLS and are **not verified** here. Use the salary for the underlying job in the cards above.

Where it can go.

1. From testifying occasionally to being the person in your office who handles the hard cases and trains everyone else on testimony.
2. Into technical review and quality assurance, checking other analysts' work before it ever reaches a courtroom.
3. **Lateral move.** Into standards and policy work, such as the scientific area committees that write consensus standards for forensic disciplines, or into training programs for attorneys and judges on how to evaluate forensic evidence.
4. Into teaching, at a university forensic program or a medical school, where testimony experience is what makes the teaching credible.

What high school courses help. Speech, debate and mock trial above everything else, because those teach you to be questioned in public without losing your footing. Government or civics, so you understand what a trial is for. English, for the writing. Statistics, because "how sure are you" is the question you will be asked most, and an honest numerical answer beats a confident adjective every time. Keep taking the science, because the credibility comes from the science.

Learn more.

- <https://www.aafs.org/careers-forensic-science> The American Academy of Forensic Sciences career pages, covering how forensic scientists work with the legal system.
- <https://www.nist.gov/osac> The Organization of Scientific Area Committees for Forensic Science, run by the National Institute of Standards and Technology. This is where the standards that testimony is measured against are written.
- <https://www.thename.org/> The National Association of Medical Examiners, which publishes position papers on what a pathologist may and may not say.
- <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/report-congress-needs-assessment-forensic-laboratories-and-medical> The federal needs assessment covering the whole forensic system, including courtroom demands on scientists.

One honest caution. Cross-examination is designed to make you look wrong, and it is personal in a way that classroom debate is not. A skilled attorney will take one sentence you wrote three years ago and spend twenty minutes on it in front of a jury. People describe their first testimony as one of the worst experiences of their working life. It gets better with practice and it never becomes pleasant. The people who handle it well are the ones who wrote careful reports, claimed only what their evidence supported, and are comfortable saying "I do not know" out loud.

The shortage nobody talks about

There are not enough forensic pathologists in the United States, and it is not close.

The National Institute of Justice, which is the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice, delivered a report to Congress on this. It found that there were **only 400 to 500 physicians practising forensic pathology full time**, against a national need it put at **1,100 to 1,200**. In the report's own words, the current workforce is "less than half of the total estimated need." The report also said the true need is likely higher still, because those estimates were made before overdose deaths climbed, and more than 70,000 people died of drug overdoses in 2017 alone.

The same report found more that is worth knowing.

- **About 10% of forensic pathologist positions sit vacant**, because offices cannot find qualified people or cannot fund the post.
- The training pipeline is not full. In one year it looked at, **76 forensic pathology fellowship positions were approved across 34 programs, and only 39 of them, 49%, were filled**. The seats exist. The people do not.
- The reason is mostly money. Medical school graduates carry an average of **\$180,000 in student loan debt**, and public-sector forensic pathology pays "one-half or one-third" of what those same doctors could earn as hospital or private-practice pathologists.

More recent counts from the National Association of Medical Examiners put the number of practising forensic pathologists higher than the NIJ figure, closer to several hundred more, and still several hundred short of what the country needs. This file has verified the NIJ numbers directly from the report and has **not independently verified** the newer association figures, so treat the 400 to 500 against 1,100 to 1,200 as the documented federal finding and the newer numbers as an improving trend rather than a solved problem.

What the shortage does to casework. When one pathologist has to cover the caseload of two, three things give. Autopsies get shorter or get replaced by an external examination only. Reports sit unsigned for months, so families wait, and so do criminal cases and insurance claims. And national standards recommend a cap on how many autopsies one pathologist should perform in a year, because quality drops past it. Offices that exceed that cap can lose accreditation. Some do it anyway, because the alternative is not examining the dead at all.

The same squeeze hits the roles that support the pathologist. The NIJ report specifically named **medicolegal death investigators, autopsy technicians and forensic photographers** as positions that need bolstering, for the same reason. When there are not enough investigators, scenes get documented more thinly, and a detail nobody wrote down at 2 a.m. is a detail that no laboratory can recover later.

Why this matters for you. Most fields you could enter are crowded. This one is not. There are open fellowship seats, vacant positions, and offices that would train someone who showed up interested. A student from Cleveland who takes anatomy seriously, gets through college and medical school, and chooses this specialty is filling a hole the federal government has formally told Congress about. That is unusual. Very few careers let you say that the work would not otherwise get done.

It is a long road and an expensive one, and this file has been honest about both. But if the histology module was the part of this unit you kept thinking about after class, the field is short of people and it is looking for you.

Sources for this section, both verified.

- <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/report-congress-needs-assessment-forensic-laboratories-and-medical> National Institute of Justice, *Report to Congress: Needs Assessment of Forensic Laboratories and Medical Examiner/Coroner Offices*, NCJ 253626, 2019. The landing page, with a summary.
- <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/253626.pdf> The full report as a PDF. The forensic pathologist workforce discussion is in the medicolegal death investigation chapter, and the summary of it is in the report's key findings near the front.

Where the numbers in this second set of cards came from

All wages are the **median annual wage**, national, all industries, from the

Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics survey, May 2025, which is the most recent release. They were pulled from the BLS public data API and cross-checked against the BLS occupation code reference file, so the occupation titles printed here are BLS's own wording.

Role, cards 9 to 16	BLS occupation title	SOC code	Median annual wage, May 2025	Match quality
Forensic pathologist	Physicians, Pathologists	29-1222	\$312,400	Poor. Mostly hospital pathologists. Runs high for a medical examiner.
Forensic pathologist, broader	Physicians, All Other	29-1229	\$265,930	Poor. Very broad.
Medicolegal death investigator	Forensic Science Technicians	19-4092	\$72,060	Poor. Different employer and different work.
Medicolegal death investigator, alternate	Detectives and Criminal Investigators	33-3021	\$93,790	Poor. Only fits sworn investigators.
Autopsy technician	Healthcare Support Workers, All Other	31-9099	\$48,430	Poor. Catch-all bucket.
Autopsy technician, reference	Embalmers	39-4011	\$58,780	Reference only.
Pathologists' assistant	none	none	not verified	No BLS code exists.
Histotechnologist / histotechnician	Clinical Laboratory Technologists and Technicians	29-2010	\$62,930	Fair. Histotechnology is not broken out.
Clinical laboratory scientist	Clinical Laboratory Technologists and Technicians	29-2010	\$62,930	Fair. Mixes two-year and four-year roles.

Role, cards 9 to 16	BLS occupation title	SOC code	Median annual wage, May 2025	Match quality
Phlebotomist	Phlebotomists	31-9097	\$45,230	Good. Clean match.
Forensic nurse / SANE	Registered Nurses	29-1141	\$97,550	Fair. All nursing specialties averaged together.
Expert witness	none	none	not applicable	Not an occupation.

What could not be verified, stated plainly.

- **Pathologists' assistant salary.** No BLS occupation code exists. Association salary surveys report figures well above the proxy codes above, and this file did not print them because they are not federal data.
- **Medicolegal death investigator salary.** No BLS code. Both proxies given are weak, and the real figure varies widely by county.
- **Expert witness fees.** Not collected by BLS. Not printed here.
- **The current count of practising forensic pathologists.** The 400 to 500 figure is verified from the NIJ report. Newer, higher association counts were found but not verified against a primary source, so they are described as a trend and not as a number.
- **The International Association of Forensic Nurses website** could not be reached and the organisation is dissolving, so it is deliberately not linked anywhere in this file. Use the ANCC links instead.

Every URL in this file was opened and checked for real content before it was included. A few association sites return a page that looks fine to an automated check but is actually a "page not found," so each one was read rather than merely pinged.

Go Hornets.

If none of these is for you

Everything you practised in this unit belongs to jobs that never touch a crime scene. The skill was never the fingerprint. It was measuring carefully, saying what your measurement cannot support, and changing your mind when the evidence says to.

Field	Where you would use the same thinking
Nursing and medicine	Reading a test result with its false positive rate. Telling a patient what a result does and does not mean.
Public health	Outbreak investigation is this unit at population scale: timelines, sources, what the data cannot show.
Quality control, in any manufacturer	Standard curves, calibration, control charts, and deciding when a measurement is out of range.
Environmental testing	Water and soil analysis runs the same standard-curve chemistry as the toxicology module.
Journalism and law	Provenance of a claim, the difference between a report and a verified fact, and how to question an expert.
Anything with data	Denominators, base rates, and why an inclusion is weak when the trait is common.

What to do next, if one of these caught you

1. Open the Bureau of Labor Statistics page linked on the card and read the Job Outlook and Work Environment sections. They are honest and free.
2. Find one person doing that job and ask them what their Tuesday looks like. County coroner and medical examiner offices, hospital laboratories and state crime laboratories all field student questions.
3. Ask about job shadowing or a summer programme. Several of these fields have a real shortage and are unusually open to students who ask early.
4. Check what the nearest community college offers. Several of these roles start with a two-year degree or a certificate, not a four-year one.

A NOTE ON COST

The training lengths on these cards are real, and some of them are long and expensive. That is worth knowing before you commit, not after. Several roles on this list pay well and take two years. One takes thirteen. Neither of those facts is a reason on its own, but both belong in the decision.