

# Salary surveys

Profession



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The legal field in the United States is constantly changing. Assisting attorneys is no longer a one title job. An attorney can call his or her assistant a paralegal, a legal assistant, a legal secretary, and so on and so forth. The process to become an attorney's assistant is also changing. Many attorneys in the United States prefer to hire paralegals.

The American Bar Association defines a paralegal as “ a person, qualified by education, training, or work experience, who is employed or retained by a lawyer, law office, corporation, governmental agency or other entity and who performs specifically delegated substantive legal work for which the lawyer is responsible” (American Bar Association, 1997). This broad definition allows a great variant in the salary paid to a paralegal. An entry level paralegal in Knoxville, Tennessee can expect to earn \$35, 000 per year according to [www. salary. com](http://www.salary.com).

An entry level paralegal is defined as a paralegal with 0-2 years experience, and may or may not possess an Associate's Degree in paralegal studies. In comparison, a Paralegal with five or more years experience and a bachelor's degree can expect to earn \$55, 000 per year. The salary ranges throughout the state of Tennessee for paralegals are standard. This is not the case throughout the United States. Each state within the United States must account for cost of living. The cost of living in Southern California is significantly higher per year than the cost of living in Tennessee.

The salaries that are paid to employees need to reflect this cost of living, at least to some degree. According to [www. salary. com](http://www.salary.com), an entry level paralegal in San Diego, CA can expect to earn \$40, 000 per year. A paralegal

with five or more years of experience and a bachelor's degree can expect to earn \$70,000 per year. Cost of living is not the only reason for differences in pay based on region. Competition, education, and demand for certain positions also plays a part in the salary an employee can expect to earn.

For example, in San Diego, CA major universities offer paralegal programs at the bachelor's degree level. Because of this attorneys expect to hire the best educated paralegal, and a paralegal with only an associates degree will not be able to compete for jobs effectively in this region. In contrast, Tennessee does not offer very many paralegal programs at the bachelor's degree level. The majority of paralegal programs in Tennessee are either certificate programs or associate's degree programs. Population plays a major role in salary variants.

The population of Knoxville, Tennessee does not require as many attorneys. The attorneys that do work in Knoxville, Tennessee most likely do not have the same work load as those attorneys who work in San Diego, California and do not need the same level of support from a paralegal. This also causes these attorneys to hire paralegals at a lower wage. The amount of money a person living in Knoxville, Tennessee can afford to pay an attorney is also less. Since attorneys in Knoxville, Tennessee earn less than attorneys in San Diego, California, the paralegals will also earn less.

Another factor that affects the salary a paralegal will receive is area of law. A paralegal working for the US Attorney's office in Knoxville, Tennessee can expect to make the same salary as a paralegal working for a private practice attorney in San Diego, California, educating and experience being equal.

However, that same paralegal working for the US Attorney's office in San Diego, California can expect to earn \$5 more per hour than he or she did working in the same capacity in Knoxville, Tennessee. The area of law that a paralegal chooses to work in has a major impact on the salary received.

By obtaining a bachelor's degree and a graduate level paralegal certificate, obtaining a competitive salary in Knoxville, Tennessee has been disappointing compared to the salaries available in San Diego, California.

However, due to the lower cost of living, a lower salary is acceptable.

Holding a bachelor's degree and a graduate level paralegal certificate also assists a paralegal in competing more effectively for the jobs that are available in Knoxville, Tennessee. The majority of the paralegals in Knoxville, Tennessee only possess an Associates degree in paralegal studies or relevant experience.

These paralegals consistently earn less than a paralegal with a higher level of education, which is fair under the circumstances. Paralegals who have achieved a lesser amount of education can have a tendency to resent the inconsistencies in salary. Many of these paralegals feel that they are doing the same job as the more educated paralegal and should be receiving equal compensation. However, through further investigation one would conclude that a more highly educated paralegal will be allowed to conduct more research, write briefs, and work with minimal attorney supervision.

This is in stark contrast to a paralegal with a lower level of education. In order to adjust for the inconsistencies in pay, an organization will usually offer bonuses for extra work put in as well as promotions. It is common

practice to promote a paralegal with years of experience even if that paralegal is lacking in education. The promotion rate for a paralegal with a lower level of education may be on a slower timeline than that of a paralegal with a higher level of education, but this is an attempt to minimize the inconsistencies in salary.

Receiving an adequate salary for a paralegal can be a complicated task. Many factors exist that provide for inconsistencies in salary. The region of the country a paralegal lives in, the type of law the paralegal works in, the amount of experience the paralegal has, and the level of education a paralegal has obtained all play a role in determining how much a paralegal should be paid. Reviewing the education programs available at the American Association for Paralegal Education will assist paralegals in receiving the highest possible salary throughout their career.