



• From the Australian Institute of Criminology •

The role of private investigators in law enforcement

It is estimated that there are approximately 25,000 licence-holding private agents in Australia. In a study recently published by the Australian Institute of Criminology, an attempt was made to gauge the nature of their involvement with law enforcement. Interviewees claimed that they were able to obtain concrete evidence in 70 to 90 per cent of the cases they investigated. The most pertinent legal and ethical issue faced by private investigators related to breaches of privacy. This included physical trespassing, along with gaining sensitive information about people. Interviewees reported that tougher licensing and enhanced pre-service training were required to enhance competency and integrity in the industry.

The four main categories of private agent work

Anti-fraud work. Mainly for insurance, including factual and surveillance work. For factual matters, the agent usually starts by interviewing claimants. Most surveillance work involves a standard 20- to 30-hour surveillance and tracking of the person(s). Insurance work includes investigating stolen vehicles, accidents, arson and welfare fraud.

Legal work. Background and factual work for lawyers in civil and criminal cases. This may include locating and interviewing witnesses or claimants. In some cases agents will locate and analyse forensic evidence, such as documents. At times, agents will serve legal summonses direct to recipients (process service).

Commercial inquiry. Private businesses hiring investigators to carry out several different tasks. These may include debugging, liability investigation, workplace investigations into theft or harassment and pre-employment checks. An associated area of work is that of repossession and debt collection to enforce legal contracts.

Domestic investigation. More personal tasks, such as checking partner fidelity, abducted child recoveries, missing persons.

SOURCE: Prenzler, T. & King, M. 2002, "The Role of Private Investigators and Commercial Agents in Law Enforcement", *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, no. 234, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

Full report available on AIC web site: <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi234.html>

Australian Institute of Criminology • GPO Box 2944 Canberra ACT 2601

• Tel: 02 6260 9251 • Fax: 02 6260 9201

• Email comments: Michael.Bareja@aic.gov.au

• Visit online: <http://www.aic.gov.au>