

# Painting and Coating Workers, Except Construction and Maintenance

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## Significant Points

- Nearly 70 percent of jobs are in manufacturing establishments.
- Most workers acquire their skills on the job; for most operators, training lasts from a few days to several months, but becoming skilled in all aspects of automotive painting usually requires 1 to 2 years.
- Employment growth for highly skilled transportation painters and automotive refinishers is projected to be faster than for lesser skilled painting, coating, and spraying machine operators, whose jobs are subject to automation.

## Nature of the Work

Millions of items ranging from cars to candy are covered by paint, plastic, varnish, chocolate, or some other type of coating solution. Often, the protection provided by the paint or coating is essential to the product, as with the coating of insulating material covering wires and other electrical and electronic components. Many paints and coatings have dual purposes; for example, the paint finish on an automobile heightens the visual appearance of the vehicle while providing protection from corrosion.

Painting, coating, and spraying machine setters, operators, and tenders control the machinery that applies these paints and coatings to a wide range of manufactured products. Perhaps the most straightforward technique is simply dipping an item in a large vat of paint or other coating. This is the technique used by *dippers*, who immerse racks or baskets of articles in vats of paint, liquid plastic, or other solutions by means of a power hoist. Similarly, *tumbling barrel painters* deposit articles made of porous materials in a barrel of paint, varnish, or other coating, which is then rotated to ensure thorough coverage.

Another familiar technique is spraying products with a solution of paint or some other coating. *Spray machine operators* use spray guns to coat metal, wood, ceramic, fabric, paper, and food products with paint and other coating solutions. Following a formula, operators fill the equipment's tanks with a mixture of paints or chemicals, adding prescribed amounts of solution. They adjust nozzles on the spray guns to obtain the proper dispersion of the spray and hold or position the guns to direct the spray onto the article. Operators also check the flow and viscosity of the paint or solution and visually inspect the quality of the coating. When products are drying, these workers often must regulate the temperature and air circulation in drying ovens. Individuals who paint, coat, or decorate articles such as furniture, glass, pottery, toys, and books are known as *painting, coating, and decorating workers*.

Painting workers use various types of machines to coat a range of products. Frequently, their job title reflects the specialized nature of the machine or the coating being applied. For example, *enrobing machine operators* coat, or "enrobe," confectionery, bakery, and other food products with melted chocolate, cheese, oils, sugar, or other substances. *Paper coating machine operators* spray "size" on rolls of paper to give it its gloss or finish. *Silvering appli-*

*cators* spray silver, tin, and copper solutions on glass in the manufacture of mirrors.

In response to concerns about air pollution and worker safety, manufacturers increasingly are using new types of paints and coatings on their products, instead of high-solvent paints. Water-based paints and powder coatings are two of the most common. These compounds do not emit as many volatile organic compounds into the air and can be applied to a variety of products. Powder coatings are sprayed much as are liquid paints and then are heated to melt and cure the coating.

The adoption of new types of paints often is accompanied by a conversion to more automated painting equipment that the operator sets and monitors. When using these machines, operators position the automatic spray guns, set the nozzles, and synchronize the action of the guns with the speed of the conveyor carrying articles through the machine and drying ovens. The operator also may add solvents or water to the paint vessel that prepares the paint for application. During operation, these workers tend painting machines, observe gauges on the control panel, and randomly check articles for evidence of any variation from specifications. The operator then uses a spray gun to "touch up" spots where necessary.

Although the majority of these workers are employed in manufacturing, the best known group refinishes old and damaged cars, trucks, and buses in automotive body repair and paint shops. *Transportation equipment* or *automotive painters* are among the most highly skilled manual spray operators, because they perform intricate, detailed work and mix paints to match the original color, a task that is especially difficult if the color has faded.

To prepare a vehicle for painting, painters or their helpers use power sanders and sandpaper to remove the original paint or rust and then fill small dents and scratches with body filler. They also remove or mask parts they do not want to paint, such as chrome trim, headlights, windows, and mirrors. Automotive painters use a spray gun to apply several coats of paint. They apply lacquer, enamel, or water-based primers to vehicles with metal bodies and flexible primers to newer vehicles with plastic body parts. Controlling the spray gun by hand, they apply successive coats until the finish of the repaired sections of the vehicle matches that of the original, undamaged portions. To speed drying between coats, they may place the freshly painted vehicle under heat lamps or in a special infrared oven. After each coat of primer dries, they sand the surface to remove any irregularities and to improve the adhesion of



*Spraying machine operators use spray guns to coat a variety of products and surfaces.*

the next coat. Final sanding of the primers may be done by hand with a fine grade of sandpaper. A sealer then is applied and allowed to dry, followed by the final topcoat. When lacquer is used, painters or their helpers usually polish the finished surface after the final coat has dried.

### **Working Conditions**

Painting and coating workers typically work indoors and may be exposed to dangerous fumes from paint and coating solutions. Although painting usually is done in special ventilated booths, many operators wear masks or respirators that cover their noses and mouths. In addition, Federal legislation has led to a decrease in workers' exposure to hazardous chemicals by regulating emissions of volatile organic compounds from paints and other chemicals. This legislation also has led to increasing use of more sophisticated paint booths and fresh-air systems that provide a safer work environment.

Operators have to stand for long periods, and, when using a spray gun, they may have to bend, stoop, or crouch in uncomfortable positions to reach different parts of the article. Most operators work a normal 40-hour week, but self-employed automotive painters sometimes work more than 50 hours a week, depending on the number of vehicles customers want repainted.

### **Employment**

Painting and coating workers held about 187,000 jobs in 2002. Lesser skilled coating, painting, and spraying machine setters, operators, and tenders accounted for about 103,000 jobs, while more skilled transportation equipment painters constituted about 50,000. About 34,000 workers were painting, coating, and decorating workers.

Nearly seventy percent of jobs for salaried workers were found in manufacturing establishments, where the workers applied coatings to items such as fabricated metal products, motor vehicles and related equipment, industrial machines, household and office furniture, and plastics, wood, and paper products. Other workers included automotive painters employed by independent automotive repair shops and body repair and paint shops operated by retail motor vehicle dealers. About 8 percent of painting workers were self-employed; most of these were transportation equipment painters.

### **Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

Most painting and coating workers acquire their skills on the job, usually by watching and helping other, more experienced workers. For most setters, operators, and tenders, as well as painting, coating, and decorating workers, training lasts from a few days to several months. Coating, painting, and spraying machine setters, operators, and tenders who modify the operation of computer-controlled equipment while it is running may require additional training in computer operations and minor programming.

Similarly, most transportation equipment painters start as helpers and gain their skills informally on the job. Becoming skilled in all aspects of automotive painting usually requires 1 to 2 years of on-the-job training. Beginning helpers usually remove trim, clean and sand surfaces to be painted, mask surfaces that they do not want painted, and polish finished work. As helpers gain experience, they progress to more complicated tasks, such as mixing paint to achieve a good match and using spray guns to apply primer coats or final coats to small areas.

Painters should have keen eyesight and a good sense of color. The completion of high school generally is not required, but is advantageous. Additional instruction is offered at many community colleges and vocational or technical schools. Such programs en-

hance one's employment prospects and can speed promotion to the next level.

Some employers sponsor training programs to help their workers become more productive. This training is available from manufacturers of chemicals, paints, or equipment or from other private sources. It may include safety and quality tips and impart knowledge of products, equipment, and general business practices. Some automotive painters are sent to technical schools to learn the intricacies of mixing and applying different types of paint.

Voluntary certification by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence is recognized as the standard of achievement for automotive painters. For certification, painters must pass a written examination and have at least 2 years of experience in the field. High school, trade or vocational school, or community or junior college training in automotive painting and refinishing may substitute for up to 1 year of experience. To retain their certification, painters must retake the examination at least every 5 years.

Experienced painting and coating workers with leadership ability may become team leaders or supervisors. Those who acquire practical experience, college, or other formal training may become sales or technical representatives for chemical or paint companies. Eventually, some automotive painters open their own shops.

### **Job Outlook**

Overall employment of painting and coating workers is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2012. Employment growth for highly skilled transportation painters and automotive refinishers is projected to be faster than for lesser skilled painting, coating, and spraying machine operators. In addition to jobs arising from growth, some jobs will become available each year as employers replace experienced operators who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force.

An increasing population demanding more manufactured goods will spur employment growth among coating, painting, and spraying machine operators. Similarly, increasing demand for hand-painted tiles and related specialty products will lead to growth among painting, coating, and decorating workers. Employment growth will be limited, however, by improvements in the automation of paint and coating applications that will raise worker productivity. For example, operators will be able to coat goods more rapidly as they use sophisticated industrial robots that move and aim spray guns increasingly as humans do; as the cost of robots continues to fall, they will be more widely used. Legislation has set limits on the emissions of ozone-forming volatile organic compounds and is expected to impede job growth among operators in manufacturing; as these firms switch to water-based and powder coatings to comply with the law, they will introduce more efficient automation.

Because the detailed work of refinishing automobiles in collision repair shops and motor vehicle dealerships does not lend itself to automation, painters employed in these establishments are projected to experience faster employment growth. As the demand for refinishing continues to grow, slower productivity growth among these workers will lead to employment increases that are more in line with the growing demand for their services.

The number of job openings for painting and coating workers may fluctuate from year to year due to cyclical changes in economic conditions. When demand for manufactured goods lessen, production may be suspended or reduced, and workers may be laid off or face a shortened workweek. Automotive painters, by contrast, can expect relatively steady work because automobiles damaged in accidents require repair and refinishing regardless of the state of the economy.

## **Earnings**

Median hourly earnings of coating, painting, and spraying machine setters, operators, and tenders were \$12.16 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$9.81 and \$15.17 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$8.11, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$18.73 an hour.

Median hourly earnings of transportation equipment painters were \$16.13 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$12.31 and \$21.40 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$9.70, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$26.48 an hour. Median hourly earnings of transportation equipment painters were \$15.86 in automotive repair and maintenance shops and \$23.23 in motor vehicle manufacturing.

Median hourly earnings of painting, coating, and decorating workers were \$10.19 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$8.16 and \$13.08 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$7.04, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$16.72 an hour.

Many automotive painters employed by motor vehicle dealers and independent automotive repair shops receive a commission based on the labor cost charged to the customer. Under this method, earnings depend largely on the amount of work a painter does and how fast it is completed. Employers frequently guarantee commissioned painters a minimum weekly salary. Helpers and trainees usually receive an hourly rate until they become sufficiently skilled to work on commission. Trucking companies, bus lines, and other organizations that repair and refinish their own vehicles usually pay by the hour.

Many painting and coating machine operators belong to unions, including the International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades, the Sheet Metal Workers International Association, and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Most union operators work for manufacturers and large motor vehicle dealers.

## **Related Occupations**

Other occupations in which workers apply paints and coatings include painters and paperhangers, woodworkers, and machine setters, operators, and tenders—metal and plastic.

## **Sources of Additional Information**

For more details about work opportunities, contact local manufacturers, automotive body repair shops, motor vehicle dealers, and vocational schools; locals of unions representing these workers; or the local office of the State employment service. The State employment service also may be a source of information about training programs.

Information on how to become a certified automotive painter is available from:

► National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE), 101 Blue Seal Dr. SE., Leesburg, VA 20175. Internet: <http://www.asecert.org>