

The State of Painting in 2026

A Data-Driven Industry Report

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QUICK ANSWER: The U.S. painting contractor industry (NAICS 238320) has 38,036 employer firms generating an estimated \$27.86 billion in receipts, per the 2022 Economic Census and a related EPA analysis. Painters earn a median \$48,660/year (\$23.40/hour), with 4% employment growth projected through 2034. The broader remodeling market painters depend on is projected to grow just 0.5% year-over-year by mid-2027, per Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies — a slowdown, not a boom.

How big is the U.S. painting industry?

Metric	Figure	Source	Confidence
Employer firms (2022)	38,036	U.S. Census Bureau	High
Employer establishments (2022)	38,153	U.S. Census Bureau	High
Employer-firm receipts	\$27.86 billion	EPA analysis of Census data	High*
Employees (EPA analysis universe)	187,185	EPA analysis of Census data	High
Current annual revenue growth	Not found	—	No reliable figure
Occupational employment growth, 2024-34	4%	BLS	High (occupational only)

*Different data universe than the Census firm count — see methodology.

NAICS 238320 blends residential, commercial, and wall-covering work, and excludes solo operators without employees. There is no single government-verified “total size of the U.S. painting market” figure.

What does a painting business actually cost to run?

Source	Margin Estimate	Basis
American Painting Contractor	45% (target 50%)	Industry advisor benchmark
ServiceTitan (Guide 1)	10-30% net	Company guide
ServiceTitan (Guide 2)	20-50% "typical"	Company guide

Project Type	Average Cost	Typical Range	Labor Share
Interior room	~\$1,100	\$400-\$1,600	60-90% of cost
Exterior (whole house)	~\$3,177	\$1,819-\$4,551	\$1.50-\$4/sq ft

These margin figures conflict enough that no single average is presented as fact. Professional labor typically runs \$20-\$50/hour; paint runs \$20-\$70/gallon.

How often do homeowners repaint, and how do they choose a contractor?

Area	Typical Interval
High-traffic interior rooms	2-5 years
Low-traffic interior rooms	5-10+ years
Exterior (general)	5-10 years
Wood siding specifically	3-7 years

How homeowners choose (Modernize, 2021): 53% rely on friend/family referrals; 37% check online ratings and reviews. Review behavior (BrightLocal, 2025, n=1,026): 96% are open to writing a review; 46% think a review might look fake under certain circumstances. Likely journey: referral or awareness → local search → reviews → quote → selection — exact percentages per painting-specific step aren't available.

How do painting contractors actually get customers?

Existing/referral relationships dominate: a Modernize contractor survey (not painting-specific, somewhat dated) found existing/returning clients made up 37% of leads, with referrals closing at 45% versus 3-12% for other sources. Google explicitly lists painters as an eligible Local Services Ads category. What we could not verify: average digital marketing spend among painting contractors specifically — no transparent methodology exists for the figures commonly cited.

What licenses and regulations apply to painting contractors?

No single national license exists; requirements vary by state, county, and city (SBA). California has a specific C-33 Painting and Decorating Contractor classification as one example.

EPA RRP Rule Requirement	Detail	
Applies to	Paid work disturbing paint in pre-1978 housing or child-occupied facilities	
Firm status required	EPA-certified (or state-authorized equivalent)	
Applies to solo operators?	Yes, even sole proprietorships	
Threshold	6+ sq ft interior or 20+ sq ft exterior painted surface	
Certification validity	5 years	
Effective since	April 22, 2010	

OSHA Standard	Covers	Key Limit
29 CFR 1926.62	Lead exposure	Action level 30 µg/m3; PEL 50 µg/m3 (8-hr TWA)
29 CFR 1926.103	Respiratory protection	Incorporates 1910.134

OSHA Standard	Covers	Key Limit
29 CFR 1926.1053	Ladders	Load capacity, stability, securing
29 CFR 1926.451	Scaffolding	Must support 4x max intended load

Are painting contractors using AI and other technology?

Survey	Sample	AI Usage	Top Use Case
Housecall Pro, 2026	248 home-service pros	48% active	52% customer communication
ServiceTitan, 2026	1,000 residential contractors	~25% active	74% see value in principle

Neither survey is painting-specific. Color visualization tools are well-documented on the manufacturer side: Benjamin Moore's Color Portfolio app (3,500+ colors, ColorReader matching) and Sherwin-Williams' professional visualization tools are real, available products — contractor adoption rate in the field is not verified.

What do painters earn, and is there a labor shortage?

Metric	Figure
Median annual wage	\$48,660
Median hourly wage	\$23.40
Total employment	342,200
Projected growth, 2024-2034	4%
Annual job openings	~13,000

The strongest-sourced numbers in this report, via BLS. Labor shortage/turnover: no current painting-specific figure exists. American Painting Contractor's 2018 survey (too dated for 2026 use) found 35% of contractors cited hiring/retention as their top challenge. BLS JOLTS shows construction's overall 2025 quit rate at 1.8% — useful context, not painter-specific.

What's the outlook for painting through 2028?

Forecast Date	Projection
January 2026	2.1% YoY growth mid-2026, slowing to 1.6% by year-end; ~\$518B total spending by end of 2026
July 2026 (updated)	Growth slowing to ~0.5% YoY by Q2 2027; ~\$519B total spending through mid-2027

Harvard's JCHS cites weak housing sales, permitting slowdowns, and economic uncertainty as the main drags. Takeaway: a large underlying market, still growing nominally, but at a meaningfully slower rate.

What This Report Deliberately Doesn't Claim

Several commonly repeated painting-industry statistics were left out because no transparent, current, nationally representative source could verify them: a single precise total market revenue figure beyond Census/EPA employer-firm data; one agreed-upon average profit margin; an exact percentage breakdown of how customers find contractors; painting-specific marketing spend; painting-specific technology adoption rates; and current painting-specific labor shortage or turnover percentages. Where the data doesn't exist, we say so.

Sources

U.S. Census Bureau (2022 Economic Census) • U.S. EPA (2026 Economic Analysis; RRP Program) • U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Occupational Outlook Handbook; JOLTS) • U.S. Small Business Administration • California Contractors State License Board • OSHA (29 CFR 1926.62, 1926.103, 1926.1053, 1926.451) • Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies (LIRA) • American Painting Contractor • Angi (2026 Cost Guides) • Modernize • BrightLocal (2025 Survey) • Housecall Pro (2026 AI Survey) • ServiceTitan (2026 AI Survey) • Benjamin Moore • Sherwin-Williams

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