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FACTSHEET: Demographic and Job Characteristics of the Security Guard Workforce in Seattle and Washington

By Kassandra Hernandez, Enrique Lopezlira, and Nari Rhee

Security guards in Washington were essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic,[1] ensuring safety in buildings, hospitals, and transportation hubs. Yet their compensation and working conditions do not reflect the importance of their role. Security guards are often responsible for de-escalating conflicts, managing crises, and enforcing safety protocols, frequently without the hazard pay, benefits, or training provided to workers in comparable occupations.[2] They also face higher rates of workplace assaults and fatal injuries than many other workers.[3] Despite the growing use of private security services, the industry remains characterized by weak labor standards and limited policy attention.

This factsheet describes the characteristics of the private sector security guard workforce in the state of Washington,[4] highlighting the need to improve labor conditions in the industry.[5] With national revenues of $22.7 billion for unarmed guard services alone,[6] the labor conditions of this industry's workforce are foundational to broader questions of how states and localities achieve public safety.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 14,000 security guards work in Washington state, with roughly two-thirds (9,000) employed in the Seattle–Tacoma–Bellevue, WA Metropolitan Statistical Area (Seattle MSA). Data from the American Community Survey show that the workforce is predominantly male (about 80% in both the state and the Seattle MSA) and relatively young, with a statewide median age of 35. Just over half of security guards in Washington are white (53.3%). Educational attainment varies, but a majority (62.4%) have some education beyond high school. About one-third (31.5%) have attended some college and nearly one-fifth (18.6%) have earned a postsecondary degree. Roughly one-third are married (36.3%), and a similar portion have children (35.1%). Close to seven of ten security guards (67.1%) have access to health insurance through their employer or the employer of a household member (see Table 1).[7]

Table 1: Demographics and Job Characteristics of the Security Guard Workforce in Seattle and Washington

This table provides statistics for all private security guards in the state of Washington, along with the Seattle–Tacoma–Bellevue, WA Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Data are useful for understanding who works as security guards and the quality of their jobs.

Demographic / Characteristic	Percent of Workforce	
	Seattle MSA	Washington
Gender		
Male	79.3%	79.5%
Female	20.7%	20.5%
Median Age	34	35
†**Age**		
20-29	40.4%	33.2%
30-39	34.4%	27.0%
40-54	25.2%	25.4%
55+	—	14.5%
Race		
White	48.7%	53.3%
Black	—	12.1%
Latino	—	13.9%
Asian	—	10.1%
Other	—	10.6%
†**Education**		
High School or GED	33.2%	37.6%
Some College	42.8%	31.5%
Associate Degree		12.3%
Bachelor's Degree or more	17.6%	18.6%
Country of Birth		
U.S. Born	73.9%	79.7%
Foreign Born	26.1%	20.3%
Family Structure		
Married	30.2%	36.3%
Have Children	30.4%	35.1%
Full-Time / Part-Time Worker		
Full-Time *(35 or more hours per week)*	80.4%	83.0%
Part-Time *(fewer than 35 hours per week)*	19.6%	17.0%

table continued

Demographic / Characteristic	Percent of Workforce	
	Seattle MSA	Washington
Full-Year / Part-Year Worker		
Full-Year *(50-52 weeks per year)*	—	86.4%
Part-Year *(fewer than 50 weeks per year)*	—	13.6%
Health Insurance Provided by Employer/Union		
Yes	65.5%	67.1%
No	34.5%	32.9%

Data Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey pooled 2019-2023 data.

Note: Sample size constraints at the Seattle MSA level restrict our ability to report statistics; we leave those cells blank (—) but highlight statewide values whenever possible. Percentages for characteristics marked with † (age, education) reflect distributions within that characteristic only, due to limited sample sizes, and do not represent shares of the total security guard workforce.

Sample size constraints at the Seattle MSA level restrict our ability to report statistics as detailed as the statewide values. When considering only prime-age (20-54) workers, we find that 40.4% of security guards in the Seattle MSA are 20 to 29 years old, 34.4% are 30 to 39 years old, and 25.2% are 40 to 54 years old. Just over half (51.3%) of all security guards in the Seattle MSA are non-white (Black, Latino, Asian, or Other). Of security guards with at least a high school diploma or GED, over two in five have attended some college or have an Associate Degree (45.7%) and almost one in five have a B.A. or more (18.8%). Three of ten are married and/or have children (30.2% and 30.4%, respectively).

Table 2 presents annual earnings and hourly wages for security guards in Seattle City, the Seattle MSA, and Washington state. In Washington, security guards earn a median annual income of $42,309 and a median hourly wage of $21.29, substantially below the median wage of $30.75 for all workers in the state. The bottom quarter of security guards earn less than $16.12 per hour.

Earnings are somewhat higher in the City of Seattle, where security guards have a median annual income of $47,116 and a median hourly wage of $23.35. Even so, these earnings remain well below those of the typical worker in the city, whose median hourly wage is $41.14. Security guards' median income in Seattle (both City and MSA) is also less than half of the region's Area Median Income (AMI) of $110,000 for a single-person household.[8]

We define a low-wage worker as someone getting paid less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage for all full-time workers in the region. Based on this benchmark, the low-wage threshold is $20.50 statewide and $25.01 in the Seattle MSA. Most security guards in the Seattle MSA are low-wage workers, although this is not the case when compared to the statewide threshold.

Almost three of four security guards in the state and the Seattle MSA earn below the MIT Living Wage for their region (70.5% and 72.2%, respectively). The MIT Living Wage estimates the hourly wage required for a full-time worker to cover basic living costs. This amount is $29.44 per hour in the MSA and $26.36 in the state, for a household with one adult and no children.[9]

Table 2: Annual Earnings and Hourly Wages of Security Guards in Seattle and Washington

This table provides earnings statistics for all private security guards in Seattle City, Seattle MSA, and the state of Washington. Data are useful for understanding how security guards compare to all other workers in and across each region. For example, half of the security guards in the City are paid $23.35 or less per hour, while the median hourly wage of all workers in the area is almost $18 more—$41.14.

	Seattle City		Seattle MSA		Washington	
	Security Guards	All Workers	Security Guards	All Workers	Security Guards	All Workers
Annual Income						
Bottom quarter	$32,128	$47,550	$32,128	$43,944	$29,381	$36,458
Bottom half (median)	$47,116	$84,944	$45,624	$77,108	$42,309	$62,763
Average (mean)	$63,701	$117,754	$61,455	$106,781	$55,126	$87,131
Hourly Wages						
Bottom quarter	$17.20	$24.85	$17.71	$23.24	$16.12	$19.94
Bottom half (median)	$23.35	$41.14	$23.12	$37.51	$21.29	$30.75
Average (mean)	$30.83	$55.33	$30.22	$50.76	$27.14	$42.06
MIT Living Wage	$29.44				$26.36	
Low-wage	$27.43		$25.01		$20.50	

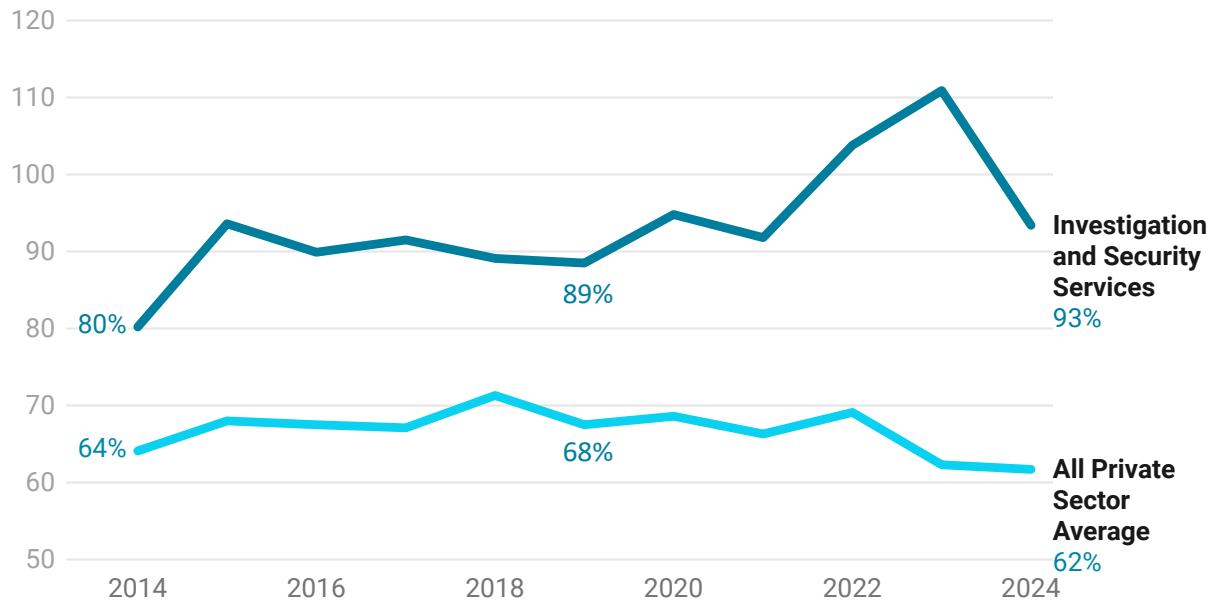
Data Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey pooled 2019-2023 data.

Notes: Values are in 2025 dollars. Hourly wages are constructed from self-reported annual earnings divided by reported weeks and usual hours worked in the American Community Survey. Measurement error in these components can cause some workers to appear below the legal minimum wage; this reflects data limitations rather than wage noncompliance. MIT Living Wage Calculator, "Living Wage Calculation for Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA," accessed January 27, 2026. MIT Living Wage Calculator, "Living Wage Calculation for Washington," accessed January 27, 2026.

We analyzed employee turnover in the Investigation and Security Services sector—an industry in which security guards account for roughly three-quarters of employment—between 2014 and 2024. Turnover in the Seattle MSA security industry has risen over time and remains substantially higher than in the private sector overall (Figure 1). In 2024, turnover in the security services sector reached 93%, up from 89% in 2019 and 80% in 2014. By contrast, turnover in the broader private sector declined from 68% in 2019 to 62% in 2024, after a temporary spike during the pandemic.

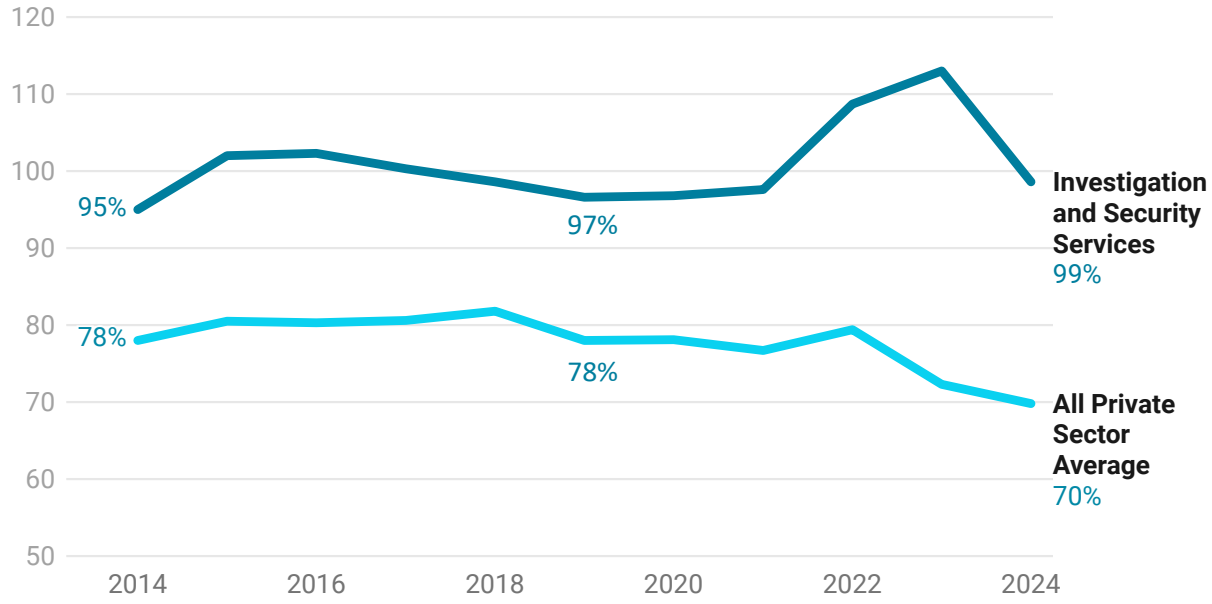
At the state level, similar patterns persist, with slightly higher turnover rates across the entire time period relative to Seattle. In 2024, the security services sector in Washington had a turnover rate of 99%, compared to the pre-pandemic rate of 97% in 2019 and 95% in 2014 (Figure 2). In contrast, overall private sector turnover in Washington decreased by eight percentage points from 78% in 2014 and 2019 to 70% in 2024.

Figure 1: Annual Employee Turnover in **Seattle MSA** Security Industry vs. All Private Sector, 2014–2024



Note: Authors' calculations based on BLS Current Employment Survey data. Turnover is calculated as the total number of separations divided by average employee count each year. Data are for calendar years.

Figure 2: Annual Employee Turnover in **Washington** Security Industry vs. All Private Sector, 2014–2024



Note: Authors' calculations based on BLS Census Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI). Turnover is calculated as the total number of separations divided by average employee count each year. Data are for calendar years.

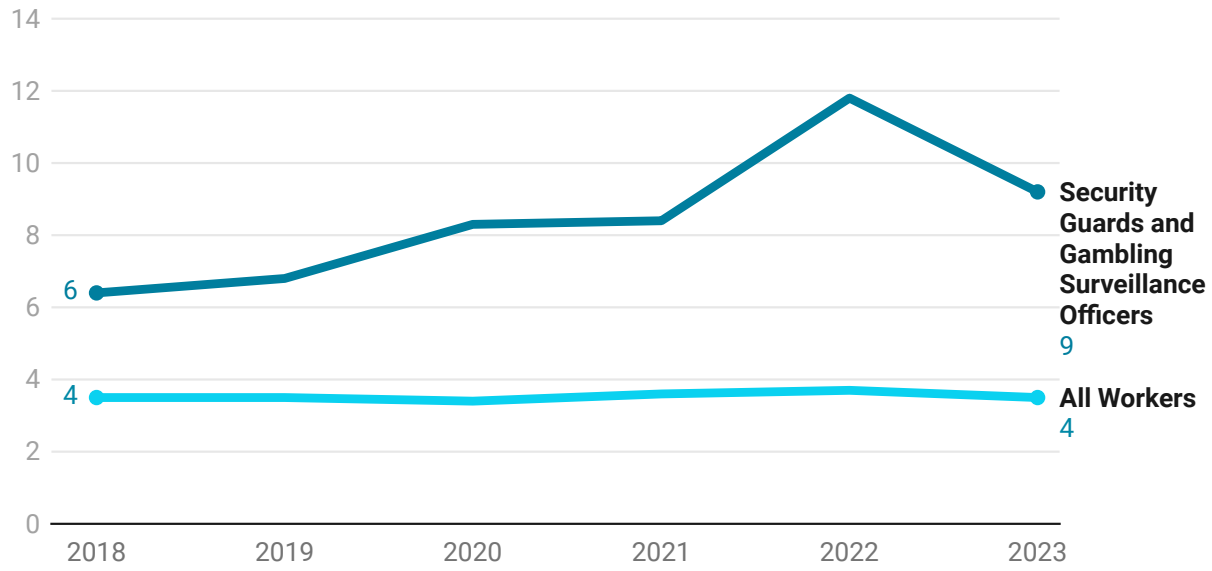
There is a wide body of research on the correlation between employee compensation and turnover across economic sectors, from fast food to health care to human services.[10] In turn, worker turnover and retention have direct impacts on worker productivity and service quality. In a study focused on airport security screeners at San Francisco International Airport (SFO), Reich, Hall and Jacobs (2005) found that the rate of security breach detection fell by 0.62% for every percentage point increase in turnover.[11]

When SFO's living wage policy increased wages from $6.45 to $10 an hour, this led to a dramatic decrease in security screener turnover, from 94.7% to 18.7%. Wage increases also reduced absenteeism and resulted in more effective security screening. Another study of police officers found that those who received raises after a union negotiation process performed better on the job than those who did not.[12]

Security guards also face substantially higher risks of fatal workplace injury than the average U.S. worker. Between 2018 and 2023, fatal injury rates for security guards and gambling surveillance officers ranged from roughly 6 to nearly 12 deaths per 100,000 workers, compared with about 3–4 deaths per 100,000 workers for the workforce overall.[13] In every year shown, security guards experienced a higher fatality risk than the national average, with a notable spike in 2022. These figures highlight the elevated occupational hazards faced by workers whose jobs frequently involve confronting potentially dangerous situations.

Despite their evolving responsibilities, security guards in Seattle and across Washington experience high risk to their health and safety and high turnover—conditions that undermine both worker well-being and public safety. Improving job quality in this sector is a matter both of economic justice and of public safety, and thus requires policymakers' attention to strengthening labor standards for this growing and essential industry.

Figure 3: Annual Fatal Injury Rates among U.S. Security Guards vs. All Workers, 2018–2023



Note: Authors' calculations based on BLS Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries data. "Security Guards" includes security guards and gambling surveillance officers. Fatal injury rates represent the number of deaths per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers and are calculated using standard BLS methodology. Data are for calendar years.

Methodology

We used data from the U.S. American Community Survey (ACS) pooling one-year samples from 2019 – 2023 to estimate demographic characteristics of workers and to estimate wages for the security guard workforce, adjusting for inflation to present annual and hourly earnings for calendar year 2025. We used Census occupational code 3930 to identify security guards. The ACS does not include a wage variable, and instead we estimated hourly wages from self-reported income and hours worked using the Labor Center's established methodology.

Since the ACS data are self-reported, we triangulated our estimates of hourly wages with data sets collecting information from employers. For instance, the wages we estimated for security guards working in Seattle using the ACS align with available BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) data, which as of May 2024 showed security guards (SOC 33-9032) in the Seattle MSA having a median wage of $23.27. Our estimate of security guards' hourly wage was $23.12, in 2025 dollars. We present weighted shares of subgroups of security guards (e.g., by racial group or gender) only when the sample size for each subgroup was 50 or more.

We calculated employee turnover using data on quarterly employee counts and separations for NAICS code 5616 (Investigation and Security Services) from the U.S. Census Bureau's Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI) data explorer for Seattle MSA. BLS reports that security guards (SOC 33-9032) made up 72% of employment in this industry in 2024 nationally.[14] The annual turnover rate was calculated as the total number of separations in each calendar year, divided by the average employee headcount for that year based on end-of-quarter and beginning-of-quarter counts.

Endnotes

1 Governor Jay Inslee's Proclamation 20-25 on March 23, 2020, directing all residents immediately to heed current State public health directives to stay home, except as needed to maintain continuity of operations of essential critical infrastructure sectors and additional sectors as the State Public Health Officer may designate as critical to protect health and well-being of all Washingtonians. In accordance with this Proclamation, the Governor designated a list of essential critical infrastructure workers to help state, local, and tribal entities to protect communities, while ensuring continuity of functions critical to public health and safety, as well as economic and national security.

2 The Bureau of Labor Statistics categorizes security guards as similar to police officers and private detectives and investigators in terms of job duties. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Security Guards and Gambling Surveillance Officers: Similar Occupations."

3 Wiatrowski, William. 2012 (February). "On Guard Against Workplace Hazards," *Monthly Labor Review* 0(0):3-11. Also see: (a) Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2012 (March). "Workplace Safety for Security Guards," TED: The Economics Daily series. (b) Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Fatal occupational injuries, total hours worked, and rates of fatal occupation injuries by selected worker characteristics, occupation, and industries, civilian workers, 2023." Fatal injury rates are per 100,000 full-time (FTE) workers. (c) Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Incidence rates of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses involving days away from work by selected worker and case characteristics and occupation, All U.S., private industry, 2020".

4 The sample for this factsheet includes only security guards receiving wages from private sector or non-profit employers and does not include security guards receiving wages directly from government employers. However, given the extent of outsourcing of security services (Dube and Kaplan 2010), private sector security guards included in the sample may work in governmental settings. See Dube, Arindrajit and Ethan Kaplan. 2010. "Does Outsourcing Reduce Wages in the Low-Wage Service Occupations? Evidence from Janitors and Guards," *ILR Review* 63(2):287-306.

5 The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated approximately 1.27 million workers were employed as Security Guards and Gambling Surveillance Officers in 2024, with 14,000 working in the state of Washington. Of those, 9,000 work in the Seattle MSA. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Security Guards and Gambling Surveillance Officers: Summary."

6 McErlaine, Brendan. March 2025. "Security Services in the US Industry Data and Analysis," US NAICS 56161 Industry Report. IBIS World.

7 The ACS data reports employer- and union-provided health care for the household; therefore, a security guard with employer- or union-provided health insurance might receive this benefit through their own employer or union, OR through that of a household member. The questionnaire text for the variable reads, "Insurance through a current or former employer or union (of this person or another family member)," and thus should not be understood as a count of security guards receiving health insurance through their own employer.

8 The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development establishes the Area Median Income for all cities across the country, which then helps to determine eligibility and rents for affordable housing. The Seattle MSA AMI is $110,000 in 2025 for a one-person household, making the median annual income of security guards less than 50% of the AMI, which qualifies these workers as *very low-income* for affordable housing programs. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2025 (June 1). "FY2025 Adjusted HOME Income Limits: Washington State," HUD USER.

9 MIT's Living Wage Calculator estimates that a single person living in the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue MSA requires an hourly wage of $29.44 to meet their basic needs (https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/42660). That amount is about $3 lower across the state ($26.36) (https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/53).

10 For a review of the literature on the relationship between wages and turnover, see Gallear, Amanda. 2017. "The Impact of Wages and Turnover on Security and Safety in Airports: A Review of the Literature," UC Berkeley Labor Center.

11 Reich, Michael, Peter Hall, and Ken Jacobs. 2005. "Living Wage Policies at the San Francisco Airport: Impacts on Workers and Businesses," *Industrial Relations*. Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 106-38; Reich, Michael, Peter Hall, and Ken Jacobs. 2003. "Living Wages and Economic Performance: The San Francisco Airport Model," Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley.

12 Mas, Alexandre. 2006. "Pay, Reference Points, and Police Performance," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121 (3): 783–821.

13 Authors' analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (2018-2023)." Data accessed on February 4, 2026.

14 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "May 2024 National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates; NAICS 561600 - Investigation and Security Services."

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