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Underpaid, Undervalued, and Essential: The Security Guard Workforce in the United States



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# UNDERPAID, UNDERVALUED, AND ESSENTIAL

## THE SECURITY GUARD WORKFORCE IN THE UNITED STATES


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# Contents

# Executive Summary

Security officers are among the largest frontline workforces in the United States and among the least protected. About 1.3 million people work as security guards—more than the nation's police and sheriff's patrol officers—staffing the hospitals, schools, transit systems, stores, and office buildings where the public expects a visible security presence. During the COVID-19 pandemic they were designated essential critical infrastructure workers, and their responsibilities have expanded to include de-escalating conflicts, managing emergencies, and responding to mental-health crises. Yet their wages, benefits, training, and workplace protections do not reflect that role. This report synthesizes national data with the UC Berkeley Labor Center's series of state and metropolitan factsheets to profile the security guard workforce and to show why improving job quality in this sector is a matter both of economic justice and of public safety.

## Key Findings

- **Size and structure.** About 1.3 million people work as security officers nationally. Employment is projected to hold roughly flat through 2034, yet the industry generates some 162,300 openings a year—almost all to replace workers who leave. About 60% of guards work for contract security firms rather than the establishments they protect.
- **Who they are.** The workforce is predominantly male (76%) and majority workers of color (61%), with Black workers making up nearly one in three (31%). The median age is 40, and roughly six in seven guards have no bachelor's degree.
- **Low wages.** The median security officer earns $18.70 an hour—about 73 cents for every dollar earned by the typical U.S. worker—and $36,282 a year.
- **Below a living wage.** Seventy-one percent of security officers earn less than the MIT living wage for a single adult, and 41% are low-wage by the standard two-thirds-of-median benchmark.
- **Thin benefits.** More than four in ten guards (43%) lack health insurance through an employer or union.

- **High turnover.** Annual turnover in the security industry reached 89% in 2024—far above the 66% private-sector average—and has exceeded it every year for a decade, peaking near 99% in 2022.
- **Uneven training.** There is no federal training standard. Only about half of states set a minimum number of training hours for unarmed guards, ranging from 4 to 48, and few require the de-escalation and crisis-response training the job increasingly demands.
- **Elevated safety risk.** Security guards die on the job at more than twice the rate of the average worker, and nearly two-thirds of their fatal injuries result from assaults and other violent acts.
- **A policy path.** A growing number of jurisdictions—New York City, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C.—have adopted sectoral wage-and-benefit standards for security officers, and California is advancing legislation to raise training standards.

> Improving job quality in this sector is a matter both of economic justice and of public safety.

The poor job quality in the security industry is not only a problem for workers; it is a public-safety problem as well. Research on security work—most notably at San Francisco International Airport—finds that higher pay and lower turnover improve the quality and reliability of security services, while constant churn erodes the experience and readiness on which effective security depends. The policy tools to change this are increasingly well established: sectoral pay-and-benefit standards that take labor costs out of low-bid competition, meaningful and standardized training, responsible contracting, and career pathways that make security work a stable occupation. Improving job quality in this sector advances worker well-being and public safety together.


# 1. Introduction: The Essential but Overlooked Security Workforce

Security officers were among the essential workers who kept the country running during the COVID-19 pandemic—staffing the entrances of hospitals, office buildings, transit systems, and stores, and enforcing the health and safety rules that made those spaces usable. When federal and state governments defined who counted as essential, security guards were on the list.[1] Yet the compensation and working conditions of security officers do not reflect the significance of that role.

The job itself has grown more demanding. Security guards' responsibilities increasingly extend beyond deterring theft to de-escalating conflicts, managing emergencies, responding to mental-health and behavioral crises, and enforcing health and safety protocols—functions that the Bureau of Labor Statistics recognizes as similar to those of police officers and private detectives.[2] But guards perform this work without the hazard pay, benefits, and training available to workers in those comparable occupations, and they face higher rates of workplace assault and fatal injury than most other workers.[3] The use of private security has grown for decades, yet security officers continue to lack appropriate labor standards and sustained attention from policymakers.

Over the past year, the UC Berkeley Labor Center has examined the labor market outcomes and working conditions of this essential but underappreciated workforce across a range of geographies—from New York City and Baltimore to California and the Seattle–Washington region—documenting in each place a workforce whose low wages, high turnover, and thin protections carry consequences not only for workers but for the public safety that security services are meant to provide. This report is the culmination of that work at the national level. It examines the security guard workforce across the country—who these workers are, what they earn, the conditions under which they work, and the standards that govern the industry—and argues that improving job quality in security is a matter both of economic justice and of public safety. Drawing together national data with the Labor Center's state and metropolitan factsheets, it moves from the size and structure of the workforce (Section 2) through its demographics (Section 3), wages and living standards (Sections 4–5), job quality (Section 6), training (Section 7), workplace safety (Section 8), and policy options (Section 9).

## 1.1 The Role of Private Security in the U.S. Economy

Private security has become one of the country's largest frontline workforces. About 1.3 million people work as security guards nationally—outnumbering the nation's police and sheriff's patrol officers[4]—and the unarmed guard-services industry alone generates roughly $22.7 billion in annual revenue.[5] Over recent decades, institutions across the economy have come to rely on contracted and in-house security: guards now staff hospitals, schools, retail stores, hotels, transit hubs, entertainment venues, and office and government buildings (see Section 2.4). As public law-enforcement agencies contend with their own staffing pressures, private security increasingly performs the everyday, visible public-safety functions—access control, patrol, and incident response—that the public once associated primarily with police.

## 1.2 Security Officers as Frontline Public Safety Workers

At its core, the job is public-safety work. The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the role as guarding, patrolling, and monitoring premises to prevent theft, violence, and other infractions. In practice, that role has expanded well beyond crime deterrence. Guards are often the first responders on the scene of a medical emergency, a fire alarm, or a violent incident, and they are increasingly the first point of contact for people in acute distress—in hospital emergency departments, on transit systems, and in retail settings—where de-escalation and crisis response are required. This frontline role brings security officers into repeated contact with vulnerable populations and volatile situations: as Section 8 documents, roughly one in three nonfatal assaults on a guard is committed by a person in their care, such as a patient. It is because guards perform these quasi-policing functions—often alone, at night, and without backup—that the gap between their responsibilities and their preparation and protection matters so much.

## 1.3 Why Job Quality in Security Matters

The conditions under which security officers work fall short on nearly every dimension of job quality. As the sections that follow document, guards earn low wages (Sections 4–5), often lack employer-provided benefits (Section 6.1), work unstable or overnight schedules (Section 6.2), receive minimal and uneven training (Section 7), and face elevated risks of injury and death on the job (Section 8). For a workforce disproportionately made up of workers of color and carrying substantial family responsibilities (Section 3), these conditions translate into real economic insecurity.

But the stakes extend beyond the workers themselves, because job quality and public safety are linked. Research on security work finds that better pay and lower turnover improve the quality of the service delivered: in the widely cited study of San Francisco International Airport, raising screeners' wages sharply reduced turnover and absenteeism and improved screening performance, with the rate of security-breach detection falling measurably as turnover rose; a parallel finding for police shows that officers who received raises performed better on the job.[6] The security industry's exceptionally high turnover (Section 6.4) works in the opposite direction, continually replacing experienced guards with new ones and eroding the site knowledge and readiness on which effective security depends. Improving job quality in this sector is therefore not only a matter of fairness to workers but a means of achieving the public safety that security services are meant to provide—the through-line of this report.

# 2. Size and Structure of the Security Workforce

Security officers are one of the largest frontline workforces in the country, and their numbers, locations, and employment arrangements shape the labor-market conditions and outcomes that will be explored later in this report. This section sizes the national workforce, maps where guards are concentrated, and describes the industry structure that increasingly places them with contract firms rather than the establishments they protect.

## 2.1 National Workforce Size

As of May 2025, about 1.3 million people (1,283,470) worked as security guards in the United States,[7] making it one of the largest occupations in the protective-service field and one of the larger low-wage occupations overall. The figure counts wage-and-salary security guards (SOC 33-9032) and excludes the self-employed as well as the much smaller, separately classified gambling surveillance workforce.

Despite its size, the occupation is not projected to grow. BLS anticipates little or no change in security guard employment from 2024 to 2034—below the 3% average projected for all occupations—even as roughly 162,300 openings are expected each year.[8] Almost all of that demand comes from the need to replace workers who leave the occupation rather than from new positions—a churn-driven pattern that reflects the turnover and job-quality dynamics discussed in Section 6.4.

## 2.2 Geographic Distribution

Security guard employment tracks population and economic activity, concentrating in the largest states and metropolitan areas. The five states with the most guards—California, New York, Texas, Florida, and Illinois—together employ nearly half of the national total.[9] Relative to the size of their local workforces, guards are most concentrated in the District of Columbia, Nevada, Hawaii, and New York, where dense clusters of office buildings, government facilities, casinos, and tourism generate outsized demand. At the metropolitan level, the New York and Los Angeles areas alone account for more than 225,000 guards (Table 1).

## Table 1. States and metropolitan areas with the most security guards

| State | Guards | Metropolitan area | Guards |
|---|---|---|---|
| California | 199,480 | New York–Newark–Jersey City | 142,760 |
| New York | 134,700 | Los Angeles–Long Beach–Anaheim | 83,280 |
| Texas | 106,210 | Chicago–Naperville–Elgin | 48,360 |
| Florida | 95,370 | Miami–Fort Lauderdale–West Palm Beach | 41,530 |
| Illinois | 53,830 | Washington–Arlington–Alexandria | 40,950 |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), May 2025. States and metropolitan areas are ranked by security guard employment.

## 2.3 Industry Structure

The defining structural feature of the workforce is the split between guards employed directly by the establishments they protect and those supplied by contract security firms. About 60% of security officers work in the investigation and security services industry (NAICS 5616)—that is, for contractors that provide guard services to client businesses—rather than being hired in-house.[10] That share has grown over the past two decades, from less than half in 2004 to about three in five by 2023.[11]

The contract market is concentrated among a relatively small number of large national and multinational firms: roughly 71% of contracted guards work for companies with more than 250 employees.[12] The wage, benefit, and turnover consequences of this contracting structure—which are central to the job-quality analysis—are examined in Section 6.3.

> The security industry increasingly places security officers with contract firms rather than the establishments they protect.

## 2.4 Where Security Guards Work

Security guards work across a wide range of everyday settings. The largest numbers are found in elementary and secondary schools, retail (general merchandise stores), hospitals, and hotels—the institutions where a visible security presence is expected. Guards also make up an outsized share of employment in certain venues, such as performing-arts and sports facilities, gambling establishments, and bars and nightclubs, reflecting their crowd-management role. The five largest industries together employ about three-quarters of all security guards (Table 2).

## Table 2. Industries employing the most security guards

| Industry | Guards | Share of all guards |
|---|---|---|
| Investigation and Security Services | 768,900 | 59.9% |
| Elementary and Secondary Schools | 58,300 | 4.5% |
| General Merchandise Retailers | 51,740 | 4.0% |
| General Medical and Surgical Hospitals | 49,340 | 3.8% |
| Traveler Accommodation (hotels) | 31,310 | 2.4% |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of BLS OEWS, May 2025. Shares are each industry's security guard employment as a percentage of the national total (1,283,470). Industries are ranked by employment; the five shown together employ about three-quarters of all security guards.

Together, these patterns—a large, geographically concentrated, and increasingly contracted workforce whose numbers are stable rather than growing—set the stage for the demographic and job-quality analysis that follows.

# 3. Who Are America's Security Guards?

America's security officers are a large and demographically distinct workforce. Drawing on the American Community Survey (ACS),[13] this section profiles who works in the occupation—by gender, race and ethnicity, age, and nativity—along with their education, family circumstances, and household economic standing. Throughout, we also show how the lowest-paid guards (those earning below two-thirds of the area median wage) differ from the workforce as a whole, since it is this segment that policy most needs to reach.

## 3.1 Demographic Composition

The security workforce is predominantly male: about three in four guards (76.2%) are men and 23.8% are women. It is also racially and ethnically diverse, with workers of color making up a majority (60.8%) of the occupation. White workers account for 39.2%, Black workers for nearly one in three (31.3%)—a notably high share compared to their percentage of the overall population—followed by Latino workers (19.3%), Asian American workers (4.1%), and workers of other or multiple races (6.2%).

Security officers span a wide age range, with a median age of 40. The occupation draws heavily from both ends of the working-age distribution: more than a quarter of guards (28.7%) are under 30, while a comparable share (27.8%) are 55 or older, including about one in ten (10.4%) who are 65 or older. This bimodal pattern—attracting both young entrants and a substantial cohort of older workers—reflects the occupation's low barriers to entry and its role as a source of work later in life.

The large majority of security guards are U.S.-born (84.5%); 15.5% are foreign-born. This figure reflects nativity (place of birth), not legal status—the ACS does not identify immigration or work-authorization status—and should be read only as a measure of the occupation's immigrant representation.

## 3.2 Education and Skills

Security guard work has relatively low formal educational requirements, and the workforce's educational profile reflects this. Roughly nine in ten guards (84.8%) do not hold a bachelor's degree. About 45% have

a high school credential or less (6.8% have less than high school; 38.4% hold a high school diploma or GED), and another 39.6% have some college or an associate degree. Only 15.2% hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

Low formal educational requirements do not mean the job is uncredentialed. Most states mandate that security guards be licensed or registered, pass a background check, and—particularly for armed guards—complete specified training. Because these requirements vary widely across states and are central to the industry's professional-standards debate, they are examined in detail in Section 7 rather than here.

## 3.3 Family and Household Characteristics

Security officers carry substantial family responsibilities. More than a third (36.7%) are married, and nearly one in three (31.2%) have children. Their earnings are a meaningful source of household support: as documented in Section 4, the median guard earns $36,282 in annual individual earnings.

Measured against the federal poverty level, most guards live in families with incomes above 200 percent of poverty (77.4%), but a meaningful minority do not. About one in five guards (22.5%) live in a family below 200 percent of poverty, including 5.5% below the poverty line itself. Section 5.3 examines this economic insecurity—and its concentration among the lowest-paid guards—in greater depth.

The demographic profile of the lowest-paid guards differs from the workforce as a whole in consistent ways. Low-wage security guards are younger (median age 37 versus 40), somewhat more likely to be women (27.3 versus 23.8%) and Black (34.0 versus 31.3%), and less educated (12.3 versus 15.2% hold a bachelor's degree). They are also less likely to be married (29.6 versus 36.7%) or to have children (26.7 versus 31.2%), and far more likely to live in a family below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (39.7% versus 22.5%). The full profile appears in Table 3.

### Table 3. Demographic and household profile of security guards, United States

| Characteristic | All security guards | Low-wage security guards |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | |
| Male | 76.2% | 72.7% |
| Female | 23.8% | 27.3% |
| **Age** | | |
| Median age | 40 | 37 |
| Under 20 | 1.6% | 2.4% |
| 20–29 | 27.1% | 33.0% |
| 30–39 | 21.1% | 18.4% |
| 40–54 | 22.4% | 18.7% |
| 55–64 | 17.4% | 14.9% |
| 65 and older | 10.4% | 12.7% |

**Table 3 continued**

**Table 3 continued**

| Characteristic | All security guards | Low-wage security guards |
|---|---|---|
| **Race / ethnicity** | | |
| White | 39.2% | 37.3% |
| Black | 31.3% | 34.0% |
| Latino | 19.3% | 19.4% |
| Asian | 4.1% | 3.2% |
| Other | 6.2% | 6.1% |
| **Nativity** | | |
| U.S.-born | 84.5% | 85.1% |
| Foreign-born | 15.5% | 14.9% |
| **Educational attainment** | | |
| Less than high school | 6.8% | 8.8% |
| High school or GED | 38.4% | 40.5% |
| Some college | 28.9% | 28.8% |
| Associate degree | 10.7% | 9.6% |
| Bachelor's degree or higher | 15.2% | 12.3% |
| **Family structure** | | |
| Married | 36.7% | 29.6% |
| Has children | 31.2% | 26.7% |
| **Family income relative to federal poverty level (fpl)** | | |
| Less than 100% of fpl | 5.5% | 11.1% |
| 100% to 200% of fpl | 17.0% | 28.6% |
| More than 200% of fpl | 77.4% | 60.3% |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey 2021-2023 data. "Low-wage security guards" are those earning below the low-wage threshold defined in Section 5.1. The 100%–200% of poverty row combines the 100%–150% and 150%–200% categories.

# 4. Wages and Earnings

Security officers are among the lower-paid workers in the U.S. labor market. Drawing on the American Community Survey (ACS), we estimate that the typical security officer earns a median hourly wage of $18.70 and median annual individual earnings of $36,282. These figures place security guards well below the broader workforce and, as Section 5 shows, below the wage a single adult needs to meet basic needs in most of the country. This section documents national wage levels, compares security officers to the workforce as a whole, and examines how earnings vary by race, ethnicity, and gender.

## 4.1 National Wage Levels

The distribution of security guard wages is compressed near the bottom of the labor market. A quarter of security guards earn $13.98 per hour or less, the median guard earns $18.70, and average (mean) hourly earnings are $23.21. The gap between the median and the mean reflects a thin upper tail—a minority of better-paid guards (for example, armed officers or those in specialized settings) pulls the average above what most workers actually earn. On an annual basis, median individual earnings are $36,282, with the bottom quarter of guards earning $24,188 or less (Table 4).

### Table 4. Wages and annual earnings, security guards and all workers

| Earnings measure | Security guards | All workers |
|---|---|---|
| Hourly wage—bottom quarter (25th pct.) | $13.98 | $16.76 |
| **Hourly wage—median** | $18.70 | $25.65 |
| **Hourly wage—average (mean)** | $23.21 | $34.58 |
| Annual earnings—bottom quarter | $24,188 | $30,235 |
| **Annual earnings—median** | $36,282 | $52,405 |
| **Annual earnings—average (mean)** | $44,330 | $71,590 |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey 2021-2023 data. "All workers" refers to the full private-sector wage-and-salary workforce.

## 4.2 Wage Comparison with Other Workers

Security officers earn substantially less than the workforce as a whole at every point in the distribution. The median security officer earns about 73 cents for every dollar earned by the median worker ($18.70 versus $25.65). The gap is wider in annual terms—median security guard earnings are roughly 69% of the overall median ($36,282 versus $52,405)—and wider still at the mean, where security guards earn annually about 62% of average worker earnings ($44,330 versus $71,590). The annual gaps exceed the hourly gap because security guards are somewhat less likely than the average worker to work full time and full year (see Section 6.2), so differences in hours compound the differences in hourly pay.

These comparisons are consistent with the occupation's position among frontline, low-barrier-to-entry jobs. Security guards' responsibilities—deterring and reporting crime, de-escalating conflict, managing emergencies, and interacting with vulnerable populations—have grown more demanding, but their compensation has not kept pace with occupations of comparable responsibility in the protective-service field.

## 4.3 Wage Disparities

Average wages vary by race and ethnicity, though these disparities among security officers are notably compressed relative to the workforce as a whole. Among guards, average hourly wages range from $22.47 for Latino workers to $25.19 for Asian American workers—a spread of under $3. Across all workers, the same racial and ethnic categories span nearly $20 (from $26.65 to $46.48). In other words, the security guard occupation pays low wages fairly uniformly: the flat, low wage floor leaves little room for the racial pay gaps that open up in the broader labor market (Table 5).

### Table 5. Average hourly wages by race and ethnicity

| Race / ethnicity | Security guards (avg. hourly) | All workers (avg. hourly) |
|---|---|---|
| Non-Hispanic white | $24.00 | $37.29 |
| Non-Hispanic Black | $22.52 | $27.46 |
| Latino | $22.47 | $26.65 |
| Non-Hispanic Asian | $25.19 | $46.48 |
| Other | $22.63 | $33.01 |
| **Total** | $23.21 | $34.58 |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey 2021-2023 data. Figures are average (mean) hourly wages and are unadjusted for hours, experience, setting, or armed vs. unarmed status. Wages are in 2025 dollars.

Gender gaps follow a similar pattern. Female security officers earn an average of $21.54 per hour, about 91% of the $23.73 earned by male guards. That 9-percent gap is meaningfully narrower than the roughly 18-percent gap among all workers (where women average $30.84 against men's $37.83), again reflecting wage compression at the bottom of the market rather than pay equity in any positive sense. The gender gap persists within every racial and ethnic group of security officers, as shown in Table 6.

## Table 6. Average hourly wages by race, ethnicity, and gender

| Race / ethnicity | Security guards | | All workers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Non-Hispanic white | $24.45 | $22.13 | $41.32 | $32.63 |
| Non-Hispanic Black | $23.32 | $20.81 | $28.64 | $26.39 |
| Latino | $22.55 | $22.19 | $28.34 | $24.40 |
| Non-Hispanic Asian | $25.35 | $24.29 | $51.51 | $41.01 |
| Other | $23.27 | $20.45 | $35.93 | $29.89 |
| **Total** | $23.73 | $21.54 | $37.83 | $30.84 |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey 2021-2023 data. Figures are average (mean) hourly wages; gaps are unadjusted. Wages are in 2025 dollars.

These are unadjusted gaps. Differences in setting, tenure, geography, unionization, and whether a guard is armed or unarmed all affect wages and could account for part of the observed differences; a decomposition is beyond the scope of this report and is flagged as an area for future work.

> The security guard occupation pays low wages fairly uniformly: the flat, low wage floor leaves little room for the racial pay gaps that open up in the broader labor market.

# 5. Living Wage Analysis

Comparing security guard wages to a fixed low-wage line understates the strain these workers face, because the cost of meeting basic needs varies enormously across the country. This section benchmarks security officer earnings against the MIT Living Wage—a needs-based standard—and against poverty thresholds, to gauge how far typical guard pay falls short of economic self-sufficiency.

## 5.1 Comparing Security Officer Wages to Living Wage Benchmarks

Using the MIT Living Wage Calculator, we estimate a national living-wage benchmark for a single adult with no children of $24.64 per hour,[14] weighting each state's living wage by the share of workers employed there. The median security officer, at $18.70 per hour, earns roughly $6 below this threshold—about a quarter short of what a single adult needs to cover housing, food, transportation, health care, and other basic costs. Measured against this benchmark, more than seven in ten security guards (71.4%) earn less than a living wage for a single adult. That share would be higher still for guards supporting children or other family members, since the single-adult standard is the least demanding version of the benchmark.

A second, more conventional low-wage line reinforces the picture. Defining low-wage work as earning below two-thirds of the overall median hourly wage—$17.10 nationally—we find that more than four in ten security guards (41.3%) are low-wage workers by this standard. The demographic profile of this lower-paid segment is examined alongside the full workforce in Section 3; here it is enough to note that a large minority of guards earn below even this austere threshold (Table 7).

### Table 7. Security guard wages relative to living-wage and low-wage benchmarks

| Benchmark | Value | Share of guards below |
|---|---|---|
| MIT Living Wage (1 adult, 0 children, worker-weighted) | $24.64/hr | 71.4% |
| **Low-wage line (2/3 of overall median hourly wage)** | $17.10/hr | 41.3% |
| **Security guard median hourly wage** | $18.70/hr | — |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey 2021-2023 data and the MIT Living Wage Calculator (livingwage.mit.edu). The living-wage benchmark is a worker-share-weighted average of state single-adult living wages. Wages are in 2025 dollars.

## 5.2 Cost-of-Living Pressures

The living-wage benchmark is not an abstract line; it is built up from the actual cost of housing, food, transportation, health care, and other necessities for a given household in a given place. The finding that 71.4% of security guards earn below the single-adult living wage therefore means that most guards do not earn enough to cover these basic categories of spending on their own earnings—before accounting for children or dependents. Housing and health care are typically the largest and fastest-rising components of that budget, and they weigh most heavily on workers who are concentrated in higher-cost metropolitan labor markets, like the majority of security officers.

## 5.3 Economic Insecurity

Low wages translate into measurable economic insecurity. About one in five security guards (22.5%) live in a family with income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level—a common threshold for eligibility for public benefits and a widely used marker of economic hardship. Among the lowest-paid guards, that share nearly doubles: roughly two in five (39.7%) of low-wage security officers have family incomes below 200 percent of poverty. The fact that most guards work full time and full year (Section 6.2) yet a substantial minority remain near poverty underscores that this is a problem of job quality, not of hours worked (Table 8).

### Table 8. Family income relative to the federal poverty level

| Family income relative to poverty | All guards | Low-wage guards |
|---|---|---|
| Less than 100% of poverty | 5.5% | 11.1% |
| 100% to 150% of poverty | 7.0% | 12.1% |
| 150% to 200% of poverty | 10.0% | 16.5% |
| More than 200% of poverty | 77.4% | 60.3% |
| **Below 200% of poverty (subtotal)** | 22.5% | 39.7% |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey 2021-2023 data. "Low-wage guards" are those earning below the low-wage threshold defined in Section 5.1.


# 6. Job Quality in the Security Industry

Wages are only one dimension of job quality. Security officers also contend with uneven access to benefits, variable hours and schedules, and—across the industry as a whole—a contracting model and high turnover that shape day-to-day working conditions. This section documents the benefits and scheduling characteristics that can be measured for the national workforce and frames the contracting and turnover dynamics that the report develops further.

## 6.1 Benefits and Compensation

Access to employer- or union-based health coverage is far from universal among security officers. More than four in ten guards (42.7%) have no health insurance through their own employer or that of a household member. Among the lowest-paid guards the gap is larger still: a majority (53.3%) lack such coverage. This measure is generous—because it counts coverage obtained through any household member's employer or union, it overstates the share receiving coverage through their own job. The true rate of guards with employer-sponsored coverage of their own is lower than these figures imply (Table 9).

### **Table 9.** Employer- or union-based health insurance coverage

| Employer- or union-based health insurance | All guards | Low-wage guards |
|---|---|---|
| Has coverage | 57.3% | 46.7% |
| No coverage | 42.7% | 53.3% |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey 2021-2023 data. Coverage may be held through the worker's own employer/union or that of a household member; the measure therefore overstates own-employer coverage.

## 6.2 Work Hours

Most security officers work substantial hours: about four in five (80.7%) work full time (35 or more hours per week), and 87.3% work full year (50–52 weeks). Yet a meaningful share do not. Nearly one in five guards (19.3%) work part time, and one in eight (12.7%) work only part of the year. The lowest-paid guards are more exposed to reduced hours—23.5% work part time, compared with 19.3% of all guards—so reduced hours compound low hourly pay for the workers who can least absorb it. Because annual earnings depend on both wage and hours, this variation in hours worked is part of why the annual earnings gap with other workers (Section 4.2) is wider than the hourly gap (Table 10).

### Table 10. Work patterns: full- and part-time, full- and part-year

| Work pattern | All guards | Low-wage guards |
|---|---|---|
| Full-time (35+ hrs/week) | 80.7% | 76.5% |
| Part-time (<35 hrs/week) | 19.3% | 23.5% |
| Full-year (50–52 weeks) | 87.3% | 87.2% |
| Part-year (<50 weeks) | 12.7% | 12.8% |

Source: UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of American Community Survey 2021-2023 data.

## 6.3 Contracting and Job Quality

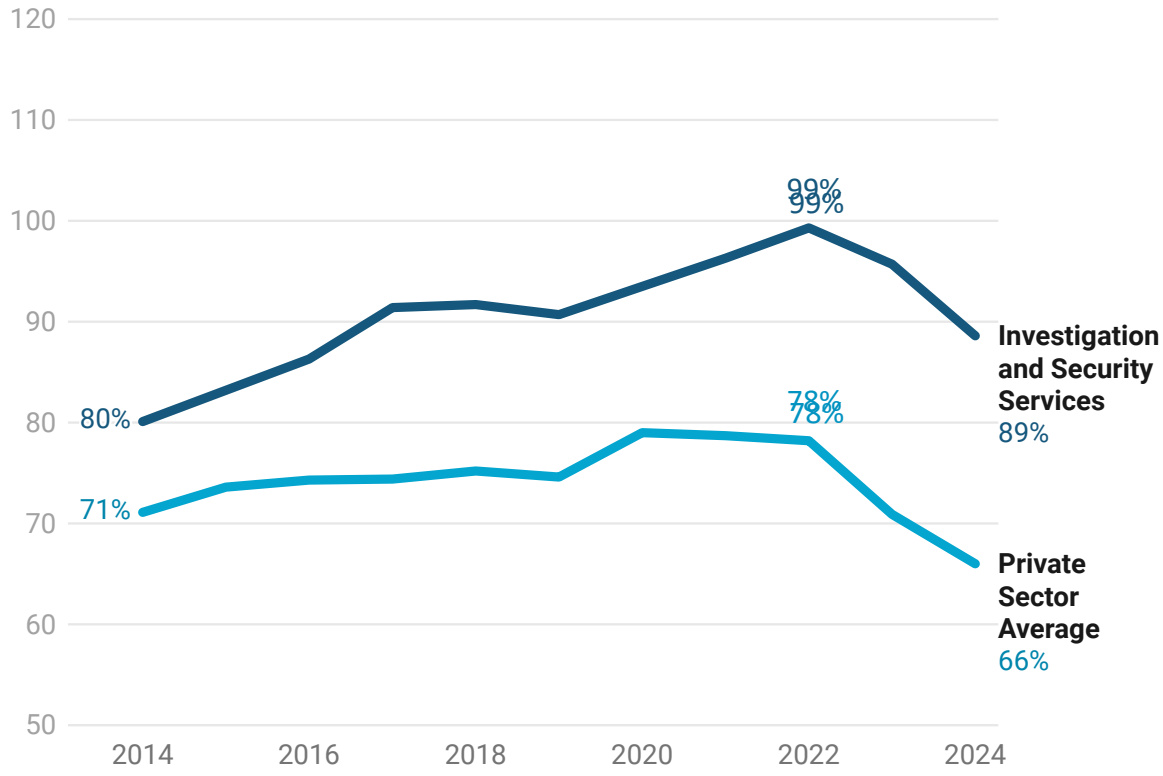
A defining feature of the security industry is the prevalence of contracted, rather than directly employed, guards. Firms across sectors increasingly purchase security as an outsourced service from specialized contractors rather than employing guards in-house. The research literature finds that this outsourcing is associated with lower wages: in their study of janitors and security guards, Dube and Kaplan (2010)[15] document a wage penalty for outsourced guards relative to otherwise-similar in-house workers. Competitive bidding among contractors—addressed through responsible-contracting standards in Section 9.3—can put sustained downward pressure on the wages, benefits, and training that contracted guards receive, since labor is the largest cost a bidder can cut.

## 6.4 Turnover and Retention

High turnover is a persistent, defining feature of the security industry—and a direct consequence of its job-quality deficits. Using the Census Bureau's Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI),[16] we calculate annual turnover in the Investigation and Security Services industry (NAICS 5616) as total separations divided by average employment. Turnover in the industry has exceeded the private-sector average every year over the past decade. In 2024, annual turnover in security services was 88.6%, against 66.0% for the private sector as a whole—a gap of nearly 23 percentage points. Across 2014–2024, turnover in the industry averaged about 16 percentage points higher than the private-sector benchmark, and the gap widened over the decade rather than closing.

The scale of this churn is striking. At its 2022 peak, annual turnover in security services reached 99.3%—the equivalent of the entire workforce turning over within a single year. As seen in Figure 1, turnover in both security services and the private sector overall rose during the tight pandemic-era labor market of 2020–2022 and eased somewhat in 2023–2024, but security turnover remained far above the private-sector rate throughout, and its post-2022 decline still left it well above where it began the decade (Figure 1).

## **Figure 1.** Annual employee turnover in U.S. security industry vs. all private sector, 2014—2024




Note: Authors' calculations based on Census Bureau's Quarterly Workforce Indicators (NAICS 5616). Turnover is calculated as the total number of separations divided by average employee count each year. Data are for calendar years.

This constant churn imposes real costs. Employers bear continual recruiting, screening, and training expenses to replace departing guards. Clients and the public bear a subtler cost: turnover erodes the experience, site familiarity, and consistency on which effective security depends. The evidence that pay and job quality drive retention is strong—when San Francisco International Airport raised wages under its living-wage policy, annual turnover among security screeners fell sharply, absenteeism declined, and screening performance improved (Reich, Hall, and Jacobs 2003, 2005).[17] The national turnover figures for security officers are consistent with that finding: an industry built on low wages, thin benefits, and reduced hours gives workers little reason to stay. Improving job quality is therefore not only a matter of worker well-being but of the reliability of the security service being provided.


# 7. Training and Professional Standards

Security officers are increasingly asked to perform quasi-policing functions—deterring crime, enforcing rules in high-pressure public settings, managing conflict, and responding to medical, mental-health, and behavioral emergencies. Yet the standards governing who may do this work, and how they are prepared for it, are strikingly uneven. Unlike most licensed occupations, private security has no federal licensing or training standard (apart from narrow exceptions for airport screeners and nuclear-facility guards).[18] Instead, requirements are set state by state—and in many places by localities or individual employers—producing a patchwork in which a guard's preparation depends heavily on where they happen to work. This section documents that patchwork, the gaps it leaves in critical skill areas, and why those gaps matter for both workers and the public.

## 7.1 Licensing Requirements

There is no national system for licensing security officers. Regulation is left to the states, and it varies from comprehensive to nonexistent. According to a systematic review of state statutes and regulations by the Center for Private Security and Safety at John Jay College (for the National Association of Security Companies, NASCO),[19] 10 states have no statute governing the private security industry at all—Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming—though some municipalities in these states regulate at the local level. Where state regulation does exist, it typically requires guards to register or obtain a "guard card," to meet a minimum age (generally 18 for unarmed and 21 for armed positions), and to pass a criminal background check. Armed guards face uniformly more stringent vetting, including additional firearms training and, in many states, a separate permit.

Background-check requirements are similarly uneven. At the federal level, the Private Security Officer Employment Authorization Act of 2004 (enacted as part of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act)[20] authorizes employers to request fingerprint-based FBI criminal-history checks on guards and applicants through a participating state agency. But the program is voluntary—states may opt out, and employers are permitted rather than required to use it—so coverage is incomplete in practice; a

Congressional Research Service review characterized combined state and federal background checks for security guards as the exception rather than the rule. Efforts to strengthen and standardize this screening, such as the proposed Private Security Officer Screening Improvement Act of 2021,[21] have recurred but not been enacted, leaving background-check rigor a function of state law and employer practice.

## 7.2 Training Requirements

The clearest illustration of the patchwork is training. There is no federally required training curriculum for private security guards, and states diverge widely in whether—and how much—training they mandate. In the John Jay/NASCO review, 27 states (about 55%) specify a minimum number of training hours for unarmed guards; the remainder either have no private-security statute, regulate but are silent on training, or require training without specifying its length (Nevada, Texas, and West Virginia leave the scope to the employer or licensing agency).

Among the states that do set an hourly minimum, the requirement ranges enormously—from as few as four hours to as many as 48 hours of initial training for unarmed guards, with an average of about 20 hours and a median of 16. Put concretely, a guard in Tennessee may begin work after a four-hour course, while a guard performing similar duties in California, Florida, Oklahoma, Vermont, or the District of Columbia must complete 40 hours, and one in Alaska 48. Requirements for armed guards run roughly double—from four to 96 hours, averaging about 40—reflecting the added firearms and use-of-force instruction. Timing rules add further variation: in nearly half of the states that mandate unarmed training, guards are permitted to complete some or all of it after they have already started working. Table 11 (page 23) shows initial training-hour requirements for the states that specify them.

> A workforce that is churning constantly is also, at any given moment, disproportionately new to the post, so the accumulated site knowledge and judgment that make security effective never build up.

## 7.3 Gaps in Training

Even where training is required, its content often lags the realities of the job. Guards are routinely first responders to mental-health and behavioral crises, yet coordinated standards for de-escalation, crisis intervention, and mental-health response are largely absent, and where such content appears it is frequently brief and classroom-based. Research on the sector has repeatedly found training requirements to be uneven across jurisdictions and minimal relative to the quasi-policing functions guards perform,[22] and post-pandemic assessments document persistent gaps in preparing guards for the increasingly complex and volatile situations they encounter.[23,24]

## **Table 11.** Initial training-hour requirements by state (states specifying hours)

| State | Hours required | | State | Hours required | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Unarmed | Armed | | Unarmed | Armed |
| Tennessee | 4 | 16 | North Carolina | 16 | 36 |
| South Carolina | 6 | 10 | Washington | 16 | 24 |
| Alabama | 8 | 14 | Virginia | 22 | 54 |
| Arizona | 8 | 24 | Georgia | 24 | 39 |
| Arkansas | 8 | 24 | New Jersey | 24 | permit |
| Connecticut | 8 | 15 | New York | 24 | 71 |
| New Mexico | 8 | 44 | Illinois | 28 | 68 |
| Utah | 8 | 20 | California | 40 | 51 |
| Hawaii | 12 | permit | DC | 40 | 96 |
| Minnesota | 12 | n/s | Florida | 40 | 68 |
| North Dakota | 12 | 44 | Oklahoma | 40 | 72 |
| Oregon | 14 | 38 | Vermont | 40 | 56 |
| Delaware | 16 | 56 | Alaska | 48 | 56 |
| Louisiana | 16 | n/s | — | — | — |

Source: Center for Private Security and Safety, John Jay College, "Security Officer Training Requirements" (NASCO, 2021), state statutes and regulations as of June 2021. "Hours required: Armed" includes required unarmed hours where applicable. "Permit" = armed status governed by a state handgun permit rather than a security-specific training requirement; "n/s" = training required but hours not specified in statute. The 24 states and jurisdictions not listed either have no private-security statute, are silent on unarmed training hours, or leave the scope to the employer or licensing agency.

The problem is not only how much training guards receive but how it is delivered. A common complaint is that much security training is passive—recall of rules and procedures—when the skills most needed on the job are behavioral. De-escalation, in particular, is a behavioral skill performed under acute stress, and the strongest evidence from adjacent fields indicates it is built through in-person practice and role-play rather than passive instruction. In health care, systematic reviews of workplace-violence prevention find that effective programs are hands-on and scenario-based rather than lecture- or video-based. In policing, rigorous evaluations—including randomized controlled trials in Louisville and Tempe—find that well-designed de-escalation training measurably changes officer behavior in volatile encounters, with several studies showing reductions in injuries.[25] The consistent lesson across both fields is that how training is delivered determines whether the skills hold up on the job. A requirement that guards practice de-escalation in live, in-person scenarios is therefore likely to produce skills a guard can use under pressure. A requirement that can be met by watching a video or passing a written test is not: the evidence indicates that passive instruction does not build the behavioral skill the job actually calls for.

## 7.4 Consequences of Inadequate Training

The costs of this low-training status quo fall on the security workers and the public alike. For workers, security is a high-risk occupation—with above-average rates of workplace assault and fatal injury (documented in Section 8)[26]—and under-prepared guards are less equipped to manage the confrontations that produce those injuries. For the public, guards who lack de-escalation and crisis-response skills are more likely to mishandle encounters with people in distress, with consequences ranging from failed intervention to unnecessary use of force. And because inadequate training compounds low pay and reduced hours, it feeds the industry's exceptionally high turnover (Section 6.4): a workforce that is churning constantly is also, at any given moment, disproportionately new to the post, so the accumulated site knowledge and judgment that make security effective never build up.

These dynamics point toward treating training as a core component of job quality and public safety rather than a discretionary, firm-level decision. Establishing robust, standardized requirements—particularly in conflict de-escalation, use-of-force protocols, and crisis and mental-health response, delivered through live, scenario-based instruction—would better align worker preparation with the responsibilities the job now carries. Compensation and training operate as complementary channels to wages and turnover for retention and performance, rather than substitutes: raising both is what allows the sector to meet the demands of its expanding public-safety role. Section 9 develops specific training and pay-standard options.


# 8. Workplace Risks and Safety

Security officers face elevated occupational risk—particularly the risk of violence—that their pay, training, and workplace protections do not reflect. The Bureau of Labor Statistics groups security guards with police officers and private detectives by the nature of their duties,[27] yet guards perform many of the same confrontational functions with far less preparation (Section 7) and far weaker safeguards. This section documents the occupation's injury, assault, and fatality risks, the psychological toll of that exposure, and the workplace protections that too often fall short. Consistent with the Labor Center's state factsheets, the evidence describes a workforce whose health-and-safety conditions undermine both worker well-being and the public safety that guards are hired to provide.

## 8.1 Injury Rates

In the aggregate, security officers are injured on the job at about the same rate as other workers, but the character of their injuries is distinctive. In 2009, nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses requiring at least one day away from work occurred at a rate of 108.7 per 10,000 full-time-equivalent security guards, close to the rate of 117.2 for workers overall.[28] What sets the occupation apart is the cause. The events behind guards' nonfatal injuries are dominated by falls and assaults, and roughly one in three nonfatal assaults on a guard is committed by a person in their care who becomes violent—most often a health care patient during routine activities such as transport. Injuries from these encounters carry real severity: guards' nonfatal injuries involved a median of seven days away from work. The comparison with the broader workforce, and with related protective-service occupations, is summarized in Table 12.

## Table 12. Occupational injury and fatality indicators, security guards vs. all workers

| Indicator | Security guards | All workers |
|---|---|---|
| Fatal injury rate, 2009 (per 100,000 FTE) | 7.4 | 3.5 |
| Fatal injury rate, 2018–2023 (per 100,000 FTE) | ~6 to ~12 | ~3.5 to 3.7 |
| Nonfatal injuries w/ days away, 2009 (per 10,000 FTE) | 108.7 | 117.2 |

Sources: William J. Wiatrowski, "On Guard Against Workplace Hazards," *Monthly Labor Review* (February 2012), for 2009 rates; UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of BLS Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (2018–2023) for the fatal-injury range. "Security guards" for fatal-injury rates denotes the BLS grouping of security guards and gambling surveillance officers. Fatal rates are per 100,000 full-time-equivalent (FTE) workers; nonfatal rates are per 10,000 FTE workers.

## 8.2 Fatality Risks

The starkest measure of the occupation's danger is its fatality rate. Security officers die on the job at more than twice the rate of workers overall: in 2009 the fatal-injury rate for security guards and gaming surveillance officers was 7.4 per 100,000 full-time-equivalent workers, against 3.5 for all workers.[29] That gap has persisted and, if anything, widened. Between 2018 and 2023, the group's fatal-injury rate ranged from roughly 6 to nearly 12 deaths per 100,000 workers—exceeding the all-worker rate of about 3.5 to 3.7 in every year, with a pronounced spike in 2022.[30]

> Security officers die on the job at more than twice the rate of workers overall.

Violence drives this toll. Nearly two-thirds of security officers' fatal injuries result from assaults and other violent acts—a far larger share than for workers as a whole, whose fatalities more often stem from transportation incidents.[31] Between 2003–2009, 93% of security-guard homicides were committed by customers, clients, or robbers. The risk is also concentrated in time, with roughly two-thirds of fatal assaults on guards occurring between 8 p.m. and 4 a.m., when guards are most often alone. Taken together, these patterns indicate that the risk follows from the nature of the work rather than from anything about the workers who do it: guards are harmed by the people the job places them in front of, in the settings and at the hours the job requires. The same elevated exposure appears across protective-service occupations as a whole, which include both security guards and police—a group that accounted for about 19% of all U.S. workplace homicides over 1992–2019[32] and recorded the highest workplace-homicide count of any occupational group in 2022.[33]

## 8.3 Psychological and Emotional Stress

The hazards of the job are not only physical. Guards are routinely exposed to threats, confrontations, and violence, and are increasingly the first on scene in mental-health and behavioral crises (Section 7.3)—exposure that carries a psychological cost even when no physical injury results. National evidence specific to security officers is limited, but the broader workplace-violence research is indicative: about 15% of victims of nonfatal workplace violence report severe emotional distress as a result.[34] For guards, that exposure is compounded by the conditions under which it occurs—frequently alone, at night, and at remote posts—and by the recognition that much of their training does not prepare them for it (Section 7.3). The result is a workforce carrying cumulative stress that standard injury statistics do not capture.

## 8.4 Safety Equipment and Workplace Protections

The protections meant to offset these risks are uneven and largely unregulated. Because there is no federal standard for security-guard staffing, equipment, or safety protocols—and state requirements are thin (Section 7.1)—whether a guard has backup, working communications, or a clear procedure for a violent encounter is left largely to individual employers and clients. The risk data suggest where the gaps bite hardest: fatal assaults cluster in the overnight hours when guards are most likely to be working alone, and lone, remote, or nighttime posting recurs in the circumstances surrounding guard homicides and suicides. Adequate staffing, reliable communication, and clear response protocols are basic protections—yet the competitive, low-bid contracting model described in Section 6.3 puts downward pressure on exactly these line items, since they add cost without adding billable hours.

Taken together, these risks describe an occupation whose exposure to harm is high and whose protections are low. As the Labor Center's state factsheets have emphasized, this is not only a worker-welfare problem: high injury and fatality risk, weak protections, and the churn they help drive (Section 6.4) degrade the consistency and readiness on which effective security depends. Improving job quality in this sector—through pay, training, and enforceable safety standards—is therefore a matter both of economic justice and of public safety.


# 9. Policy Solutions and Industry Standards

The conditions documented in this report—low and stagnant wages (by one national estimate, security officers' median pay has hovered around $17 an hour for a decade and a half),[35] thin benefits, high turnover, uneven training, and elevated safety risk—are not inevitable features of security work. Over the past two years, a growing number of jurisdictions have moved to raise standards in the industry, and the evidence assembled here points toward a coherent policy agenda. This section reviews four complementary levers—minimum labor standards, training standards, responsible contracting, and workforce development—drawing on recently enacted laws in New York City, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., and on pending legislation in California.

## 9.1 Minimum Labor Standards

The most direct response to low pay is a wage-and-benefit floor for the sector. A number of jurisdictions have adopted what the Center for American Progress terms market-based sectoral pay standards—requirements that extend the wage and benefit rates long used for government-supported work to all employers in an industry, whether or not they receive public funds.[36] Three jurisdictions illustrate the approach in security. New York City enacted a compensation-and-training standard in early 2026 that extends the wage and benefit rates required of city security contractors to all security officers—currently at least $18.87 per hour plus a benefit contribution—phased in over three years and enacted in memory of a guard killed on the job.[37] Baltimore adopted a similar ordinance the same year, pegging guard pay and benefits to the federal Service Contract Act rate.[38] Washington, D.C., has required security officers in commercial office buildings to be paid at the Service Contract Act rate since 2008.[39] And in California, the pending Stand for Security Act (SB 1203) would direct the state to set a wage order for the property-services industry, which includes security, by 2028 (Table 13).[40]

## Table 13. Recent security-guard labor-standard laws and pending legislation

| Jurisdiction | Standard | Wage / benefit level | Status |
|---|---|---|---|
| New York City (Local Law 061) | Sectoral pay + training | ≈ $18.87/hr wages + $7.95/hr benefits | Enacted 2026; 3-year phase-in |
| Baltimore (Ordinance 26-094) | Sectoral pay (SCA-pegged) | ≈ $23.84/hr total ($18.29 + $5.55) | Enacted 2026; effective 2027 |
| Washington, D.C. | Sectoral pay (SCA-pegged), office buildings | ≈ $19.39/hr wages + $5.36/hr benefits | In effect since 2008 |
| California (SB 1203) | Training standards + state wage order | 34 hrs training; wage order by 2028 | Pending (passed Senate 2026) |

Sources: Center for American Progress (Walter 2026); New York City Local Law 061; Baltimore Ordinance 26-094; D.C. Code ch. 10; California SB 1203. Wage and benefit levels are current-year rates as reported and in some cases phase in over time; ≈ denotes approximate current rates.

These standards address benefits as well as wages—each requires an employer contribution toward health coverage or its cash equivalent, a meaningful provision in an occupation where roughly two in five guards lack employer-based coverage (Section 6.1). The research on sectoral and prevailing-wage standards is encouraging: such laws are associated with higher wages, narrower racial pay gaps, greater access to employer-provided health insurance, and reduced reliance on public assistance.[41] They are also designed to blunt the wage-suppressing dynamics of low-bid contracting, discussed below.

## 9.2 Training Standards

A second lever is training. As Section 7 documented, most states set minimal training requirements, and few mandate the de-escalation, crisis-intervention, and mental-health content the job increasingly demands. Recent measures begin to close that gap. California's SB 1203 would raise required training for licensed security officers to 34 hours—a portion completed within the first 30 days, delivered as classroom instruction on paid time at employer expense, and explicitly including evidence-based, trauma-informed de-escalation training. New York City's law pairs its wage standard with training requirements.[42] The design of these measures tracks the evidence reviewed in Section 7.3: because de-escalation is a behavioral skill built through practice, requirements that specify live, scenario-based instruction are more likely to translate into skills on the job. Certification and continuing-education requirements, such as annual refresher training, extend this logic across a career. Industry groups have opposed higher training mandates on cost grounds, warning of added expense and slower hiring—a tension policymakers weigh against the public-safety and retention benefits of a better-prepared workforce.[43]

## 9.3 Responsible Contracting

Because most guards work for contractors that compete for client business (Section 2.3), the terms of that competition shape job quality. When contracts are awarded to the lowest bidder, and labor is the largest cost a bidder can cut, competition pushes wages, benefits, and training downward—the dynamic described in Section 6.3. Two responses follow, one narrower and one broader.

The first works through public procurement. Governments are themselves substantial purchasers of security services—for public buildings, transit systems, schools, and airports—and can set the terms on which they buy. Best-value procurement rules direct public agencies to weigh qualifications, training, retention, and wage levels alongside price, rather than awarding to the lowest bidder. Private purchasers can adopt similar practices, but nothing requires them to: the reach of procurement policy stops at the boundary of public contracting.

That limit is precisely why the second response matters more. Wage standards in this industry have traditionally attached to government contracts: a firm holding a city security contract had to pay a specified rate, while the same firm's guards at a private office building did not. A sectoral pay standard removes that distinction by setting a common wage-and-benefit floor across every firm in the market. New York City's law is the clearest illustration—it takes the rates already required of the city's own security contractors and extends them to all security guards in the city, whether or not their employer holds a public contract. Because the floor is universal, labor costs come out of competition: contractors compete on the quality of the service they provide rather than on how far they can suppress pay, and responsible employers can no longer be undercut by low-road firms.[44]

## 9.4 Workforce Development

Finally, higher standards create the conditions for security work to become a more stable career rather than a way station. Compensation structures that reward experience and training—as New York's standard does, by setting higher pay for more experienced and better-trained guards—give workers a reason to stay, directly addressing the turnover that erodes both worker earnings and service quality (Section 6.4). More broadly, pairing better pay and benefits with meaningful training professionalizes the occupation: it raises the floor, builds a more experienced workforce, and aligns the incentives of workers, employers, and the public. As the evidence throughout this report suggests—and as the San Francisco airport experience showed (Section 1.3)—this is not a trade-off between worker well-being and public safety but a means of advancing both.

# 10. Conclusion

Security officers do essential public-safety work. They are the visible presence that deters and responds to crime, the first on the scene of a medical or behavioral emergency, and—designated essential critical infrastructure workers during the pandemic—part of the workforce that kept public spaces functioning. As this report has documented, the demands of the job have grown, extending well beyond deterrence to de-escalation, crisis management, and the enforcement of health and safety rules.

Yet the conditions under which guards work have not kept pace with those demands. They earn low and largely stagnant wages, most below a living wage for a single adult; a large share lack employer-provided health coverage; they receive minimal and uneven training; and they face fatality risks well above those of the average worker. These conditions fall hardest on a workforce that is disproportionately made up of workers of color and that carries substantial family responsibilities, and they help drive the industry's extraordinarily high turnover, which continually replaces experienced guards with new ones.

The central lesson of this report is that these are not separate problems. Job quality and public safety are linked: the same low wages, thin benefits, and weak training that harm workers also degrade the consistency, experience, and readiness that make security effective. Improving pay, benefits, and training is therefore not a trade-off against public safety but a means of advancing it—a conclusion borne out by the evidence that better-compensated, lower-turnover security workforces perform better.

That link is also an opportunity. A growing number of states and cities have begun to raise standards in the security industry—through sectoral wage-and-benefit standards, stronger training requirements, and responsible contracting—demonstrating that a higher-road model is both feasible and already underway. Extending these standards across the industry would raise the floor for more than a million frontline workers and strengthen the public safety their work is meant to provide. Security officers have long been essential but overlooked; the tools to match their conditions to their contribution are now within reach.

# Data and Methodology

This report draws on several federal and public data sources to profile the U.S. security guard workforce. This section describes the data, sample definitions, and methods underlying the report's core quantitative estimates. Additional descriptive statistics reported elsewhere in the report—employment counts, fatal-injury rates, and employment projections—draw on the BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) program, the BLS Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, and the BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, respectively, and are cited where they appear.

**Data source and sample.** We estimate the demographic characteristics and wages of the security guard workforce using the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), pooling one-year samples from 2021 through 2023. We identify security guards using Census occupation code 3930. Our sample includes wage-and-salary security guards employed by private-sector or non-profit employers; it excludes guards paid directly by government employers and the self-employed, as well as workers with zero earnings and those working below minimum thresholds of hours and weeks. Because much security work is contracted out, some guards in our private-sector sample work in governmental or other public settings under contract. Throughout the report, comparisons to "all workers" refer to the private-sector wage-and-salary workforce. We report statistics for demographic subgroups—for example, by race, ethnicity, or gender—only where the unweighted subgroup sample contains at least 50 observations.

**Wage estimation.** The ACS does not report an hourly wage directly. We construct hourly wages from self-reported annual wage-and-salary income divided by the product of weeks worked and usual weekly hours, following the Labor Center's established methodology, and adjust all earnings for inflation to present them in calendar-year 2025 dollars. Because both income and hours are self-reported, this construction places a small number of workers below the applicable minimum wage; these cases reflect the limitations of survey data rather than evidence of noncompliance. We define low-wage work as earning less than two-thirds of the overall median hourly wage.

**Triangulation with employer-reported data.** Because ACS wages are self-reported, we compared our estimates against employer-reported figures from the BLS OEWS program, which surveys establishments rather than workers. The two align closely: our ACS-based median hourly wage of $18.70 (2025 dollars) is consistent with the OEWS May 2025 median of $18.28 for security guards (SOC 33-9032).[45] The ACS and OEWS use different occupational classifications—Census code 3930 and SOC 33-9032, respectively—but both correspond to the security guard occupation.

**Living-wage benchmark.** To assess the adequacy of guard wages, we compare them to the MIT Living Wage Calculator's estimate for a single adult with no children. Because the cost of living varies widely across the country, we construct a single national benchmark by weighting each state's living wage by that state's share of the overall U.S. workforce, using the same cleaned ACS sample described above (which excludes workers with zero earnings and those below minimum thresholds of hours and weeks worked). This yields a national living-wage benchmark of $24.64 per hour.[46] Because security guards are somewhat more concentrated than the general workforce in higher-cost states, this general-workforce weighting yields a conservative benchmark; a benchmark weighted by the geographic distribution of guards specifically would be modestly higher, and the share of guards earning below it correspondingly larger. State living wages and workforce shares are reported in Appendix Table A1.

**Turnover.** We measure turnover using the U.S. Census Bureau's Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI). QWI reports hires, separations, and employment by industry (NAICS) rather than by occupation, so we measure turnover for the Investigation and Security Services industry (NAICS 5616) and use it as a proxy for security guard turnover; security guards made up about 72% of employment in this industry nationally in 2024, which supports the proxy. Because the national QWI industry series is assembled from state programs that entered the system at different times, we pull state-level NAICS 5616 data and aggregate it to the national level. We calculate the annual turnover rate as total separations during a calendar year divided by average employment for that year (the mean of beginning- and end-of-quarter headcounts), and we apply the same method to the total private sector to provide a benchmark.

## **Appendix Table A1.** MIT Living Wage (single adult, no children) and share of the U.S. workforce, by state

| State | MIT Living Wage 1 adult, 0 children | Share of U.S. Workforce |
|---|---|---|
| Alabama | $21.06 | 1.37 |
| Alaska | $24.98 | 0.18 |
| Arizona | $24.47 | 2.14 |
| Arkansas | $20.01 | 0.83 |
| California | $30.48 | 11.34 |
| Colorado | $26.00 | 1.91 |
| Connecticut | $26.05 | 1.13 |
| Delaware | $23.79 | 0.31 |
| District of Columbia | $26.72 | 0.35 |
| Florida | $24.09 | 6.47 |
| Georgia | $24.21 | 3.23 |
| Hawaii | $31.01 | 0.36 |
| Idaho | $23.60 | 0.53 |
| Illinois | $24.42 | 3.99 |
| Indiana | $21.79 | 2.17 |
| Iowa | $21.29 | 1.01 |
| Kansas | $21.63 | 0.89 |
| Kentucky | $20.21 | 1.28 |
| Louisiana | $20.37 | 1.23 |
| Maine | $24.74 | 0.41 |
| Maryland | $25.94 | 1.68 |
| Massachusetts | $30.58 | 2.43 |
| Michigan | $22.07 | 3.09 |

**Table A1 continued**

**Table A1 continued**

| State | MIT Living Wage 1 adult, 0 children | Share of U.S. Workforce |
|---|---|---|
| Minnesota | $23.31 | 1.93 |
| Mississippi | $20.69 | 0.71 |
| Missouri | $21.27 | 1.95 |
| Montana | $24.23 | 0.30 |
| Nebraska | $21.75 | 0.64 |
| Nevada | $24.16 | 0.96 |
| New Hampshire | $25.77 | 0.47 |
| New Jersey | $27.35 | 2.75 |
| New Mexico | $21.93 | 0.50 |
| New York | $29.89 | 5.96 |
| North Carolina | $22.47 | 3.18 |
| North Dakota | $20.61 | 0.25 |
| Ohio | $21.00 | 3.73 |
| Oklahoma | $20.73 | 1.07 |
| Oregon | $26.46 | 1.29 |
| Pennsylvania | $23.32 | 4.14 |
| Rhode Island | $25.01 | 0.33 |
| South Carolina | $22.34 | 1.46 |
| South Dakota | $20.53 | 0.28 |
| Tennessee | $21.61 | 2.16 |
| Texas | $21.77 | 9.02 |
| Utah | $24.71 | 1.06 |
| Vermont | $24.92 | 0.20 |
| Virginia | $25.72 | 2.50 |
| Washington | $26.59 | 2.31 |
| West Virginia | $19.53 | 0.43 |
| Wisconsin | $21.88 | 1.96 |
| Wyoming | $21.45 | 0.16 |

# Endnotes

1 Federal guidance from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) listed security staff (e.g., security officers) among essential critical infrastructure personnel, and states adopted this designation through emergency orders—for example, Maryland Governor Hogan's Executive Order 20-03-23-01, Washington Governor Inslee's Proclamation 20-25 (both March 23, 2020), New York Executive Order 202, and California's essential critical infrastructure workers list. Accessed July 5, 2026.

2 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Security Guards and Gambling Surveillance Officers," Occupational Outlook Handbook. Accessed July 5, 2026.

3 This is documented in detail in Section 8. See William J. Wiatrowski, "On Guard Against Workplace Hazards," *Monthly Labor Review* (February 2012): 3–11.

4 On the scale of private security relative to public law enforcement: about 1.3 million people work as security guards (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, OEWS, May 2025), outnumbering the nation's roughly 665,000 police and sheriff's patrol officers (OEWS). See also Christopher Hendrix, Brandon Novick, and John Schmitt, "Employment Challenges Facing Security Guards" (Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2024). Accessed July 5, 2026.

5 Brendan McErlaine, "Security Services in the US" (IBISWorld, U.S. NAICS 56161 Industry Report, March 2025). National revenues for unarmed guard services were about $22.7 billion. Accessed July 5, 2026.

6 On the link between job quality and the quality of security services, see Michael Reich, Peter Hall, and Ken Jacobs, "Living Wage Policies at the San Francisco Airport: Impacts on Workers and Businesses," *Industrial Relations* 44, no. 1 (2005): 106–138, and "Living Wages and Economic Performance: The San Francisco Airport Model" (Institute of Industrial Relations, UC Berkeley, 2003); and Alexandre Mas, "Pay, Reference Points, and Police Performance," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121, no. 3 (2006): 783–821. These findings are developed in Section 6.4.

7 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2025: 33-9032 Security Guards," Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS). National employment (1,283,470), industry profile, and state and metropolitan-area estimates. Estimates exclude self-employed workers and gambling surveillance officers (SOC 33-9031). Accessed July 5, 2026.

8 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Security Guards and Gambling Surveillance Officers," Occupational Outlook Handbook. Accessed July 5, 2026.

9 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2025: 33-9032 Security Guards," Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS). National employment (1,283,470), industry profile, and state and metropolitan-area estimates. Estimates exclude self-employed workers and gambling surveillance officers (SOC 33-9031). Accessed July 5, 2026.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Contract-employment share and firm-size concentration are drawn from Aurelia Glass, "Low Standards Hurt Security Officers' Ability To Make Ends Meet" (Center for American Progress, October 2025), analyzing American Community Survey and Quarterly Workforce Indicators data: the contracted share of the security workforce rose from under half (2004) to about three in five (2023), and roughly 71% of contracted guards work at firms with more than 250 employees. On contracting and labor standards

more broadly, see Sara Hinkley, Annette Bernhardt, and Sarah Thomason, "Race to the Bottom: How Low-Road Subcontracting Affects Working Conditions in California's Property Services Industry" (UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2016). Accessed July 5, 2026.

12 *Ibid.*

13 U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis, using Census occupation code 3930 to identify security guards. Hourly wages are estimated from self-reported annual earnings and hours worked using the Labor Center's established methodology. "All workers" refers to the private-sector wage-and-salary workforce.

14 MIT Living Wage Calculator. The national benchmark used here is a worker-share-weighted average of state living wages for one adult with no children, compiled by the UC Berkeley Labor Center. Accessed April 25, 2026.

15 Arindrajit Dube and Ethan Kaplan, "Does Outsourcing Reduce Wages in the Low-Wage Service Occupations? Evidence from Janitors and Guards," *ILR Review* 63, no. 2 (2010): 287–306.

16 U.S. Census Bureau, Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI). UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis for NAICS 5616 (Investigation and Security Services); Security guards (SOC 33-9032) accounted for roughly 72% of employment in this industry nationally in 2024, per U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS). Accessed July 6, 2026.

17 Michael Reich, Peter Hall, and Ken Jacobs, "Living Wage Policies at the San Francisco Airport: Impacts on Workers and Businesses," *Industrial Relations* 44, no. 1 (2005): 106–138; and Michael Reich, Peter Hall, and Ken Jacobs, "Living Wages and Economic Performance: The San Francisco Airport Model" (Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley, 2003).

18 Congressional Research Service, "Guarding America: Security Guards and U.S. Critical Infrastructure Protection," *CRS Report* RL32670. The report notes that there are no federal training requirements for private security guards other than airport screeners and nuclear-facility guards, and that combined state and federal criminal background checks for security guards have been "the exception rather than the rule." Accessed July 5, 2026.

19 Charles P. Nemeth, Center for Private Security and Safety, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, "Security Officer Training Requirements: An Overview and Analysis of State Training Requirements for Private Security Officers" (National Association of Security Companies [NASCO], June 2021). State figures, including Table 11, reflect statutes and regulations as of June 2021. Accessed July 5, 2026.

20 Private Security Officer Employment Authorization Act of 2004, enacted as § 6402 of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108–458; implementing regulations at 28 C.F.R. pt. 105, subpt. C. Accessed July 5, 2026.

21 Private Security Officer Screening Improvement Act of 2021, S. 3379, 117th Cong. (2021) (introduced; not enacted). Accessed July 5, 2026.

22 Mahesh K. Nalla and Vaughn J. Crichlow, "Have the Standards for Private Security Guards Become More Stringent in the Post 9/11 Era? An Assessment of Security Guard Regulations in the US from 1982 to 2010," *Security Journal* 30, no. 2 (2017): 523–537.

23 Adam White, "Critical Workers? Private Security, Public Perceptions and the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Security Journal* (2022): 1–16.

24 Security Industry Association, "Security After COVID" (Washington, DC, 2023).

25 Y.-F. Chung, Y.-C. Chang, S. J. Fetzer, L. Tessmer, M.-H. Tsai, and J.-Y. Feng, "The Effectiveness of Workplace Violence Prevention Education Training Programs on Healthcare Professionals' Confidence: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *International Nursing Review* 72, no. 4 (2025): e70107. In policing, see Robin S. Engel, Nicholas Corsaro, Gabrielle T. Isaza, and Hannah D. McManus, "Assessing the Impact of De-escalation Training on Police Behavior: Reducing Police Use of Force in the Louisville, KY Metro Police Department," *Criminology & Public Policy* 21, no. 2 (2022): 199–233, and, on the companion Tempe, Arizona randomized controlled trial, Michael D. White, "The Design, Delivery, and Evaluation of Police De-escalation Training" (CNA, September 2024), documenting the Tempe Police Department and Arizona State University Smart Policing Initiative evaluation. On pay and police performance, see Alexandre Mas, "Pay, Reference Points, and Police Performance," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121, no. 3 (2006): 783–821.

26 William J. Wiatrowski, "On Guard Against Workplace Hazards," *Monthly Labor Review* (February 2012): 3–11; and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data on fatal (2023) and nonfatal (2020) occupational injuries for security guards (SOC 33-9032). Detailed injury and fatality figures are developed in Section 8.

27 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Security Guards and Gambling Surveillance Officers: Similar Occupations," Occupational Outlook Handbook. BLS groups security guards with police and detectives by the nature of their duties. Accessed July 5, 2026.

28 William J. Wiatrowski, "On Guard Against Workplace Hazards," *Monthly Labor Review* (February 2012): 3–11. In 2009 the fatal-injury rate for security guards and gaming surveillance officers was 7.4 per 100,000 FTE workers, more than double the 3.5 rate for all workers; the nonfatal days-away-from-work rate (108.7 per 10,000 FTE) was close to the all-worker rate (117.2), but nearly two-thirds of guards' fatal injuries resulted from assaults and violent acts, and about one in three nonfatal assaults on a guard was committed by a health care patient. Ninety-three percent of security-guard homicides (2003–2009) were committed by customers, clients, or robbers; two-thirds of fatal assaults occurred between 8 p.m. and 4 a.m.

29 *See,* endnote 25.

30 UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI), 2018–2023 (hours-based fatal injury rates for security guards and gambling surveillance officers), as reported in Kassandra Hernandez, Enrique Lopezlira, and Nari Rhee, "Demographic and Job Characteristics of the Security Guard Workforce in Seattle and Washington" (UC Berkeley Labor Center, April 2026), Figure 3. Accessed July 5, 2026.

31 *See,* endnote 25.

32 Fifteen percent of victims of nonfatal workplace violence reported severe emotional distress. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, "Indicators of Workplace Violence, 2019" (2022). Protective-service occupations, notably police officers and security guards, accounted for about 19% of workplace homicides over 1992–2019. Accessed July 5, 2026.

33 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, 2022: protective-service occupations recorded the highest workplace-homicide count of any occupational group (121). Accessed July 5, 2026.

34 *See*, endnote 27.

35 Aurelia Glass, "Low Standards Hurt Security Officers' Ability To Make Ends Meet" (Center for American Progress, October 2025): security officers' median wage has been roughly flat at about $17 per hour for 15 years; about 40% lacked employer-provided health insurance and 17.8% were covered by Medicaid in 2023; contracted guards earn less and rely more on public assistance. Accessed July 5, 2026.

36 *Ibid*.

37 Karla Walter, "How Market-Based Sectoral Pay Standards Raise Wages and Improve Affordability" (Center for American Progress, May 2026). Accessed July 5, 2026.

38 Baltimore City Council, Ordinance No. 26-094, enacted March 9, 2026 (effective 2027), pegging security-guard pay and benefits to the federal McNamara-O'Hara Service Contract Act (SCA) rate; the current equivalent in the city is about $23.84 per hour ($18.29 in wages plus $5.55 in benefits). Accessed July 5, 2026.

39 Enhanced Professional Security Amendment Act of 2008, D.C. Law 17-114 (effective March 20, 2008; 55 DCR 1276), amending the Minimum Wage Act Revision Act of 1992, D.C. Official Code § 32-1003(h). The law requires security officers in commercial office buildings in the District to be paid a special minimum wage set at the federal Service Contract Act rate; as of 2025–26, at least $19.39 per hour in wages plus $5.36 per hour in benefits. Accessed July 5, 2026.

40 California Senate Bill 1203 (2025–2026), "Stand for Security: Security Industry Standards and Public Safety Act," introduced by Senator Lola Smallwood-Cuevas and sponsored by SEIU California. The bill would raise required training for licensed security officers to 34 hours (18 within 30 days of registration), delivered as classroom instruction on compensated, employer-paid time and including evidence-based, trauma-informed de-escalation training, and would direct the Industrial Welfare Commission to issue a wage order for the property-services industry by June 30, 2028. Industry groups, including CALSAGA and Allied Universal, opposed the bill on cost grounds. Passed the California Senate in 2026. Accessed July 5, 2026.

41 On the effects of sectoral and prevailing-wage standards, see Aurelia Glass, David Madland, and Karla Walter, "Raising Wages and Narrowing Pay Gaps With Service Sector Prevailing Wage Laws" (Center for American Progress, 2022), and Frank Manzo IV and Robert Bruno, "The Impact of Service Contract Prevailing Wage Laws in the United States and Illinois: Effects on the Labor Market Outcomes of Janitors and Custodians" (Illinois Economic Policy Institute, 2021), as synthesized in Karla Walter, "How Market-Based Sectoral Pay Standards Raise Wages and Improve Affordability" (Center for American Progress, May 2026). Accessed July 5, 2026.

42 New York City Council. Local Law 061 of 2026: Establishment of Compensation and Training Standards for Security Guards (Int. 1391-2025). Enacted January 29, 2026. Accessed July 5, 2026.

43 Enhanced Professional Security Amendment Act of 2008, D.C. Law 17-114 (effective March 20, 2008; 55 DCR 1276), amending the Minimum Wage Act Revision Act of 1992, D.C. Official Code § 32-1003(h). Accessed July 5, 2026.

44 Aurelia Glass, "Low Standards Hurt Security Officers' Ability To Make Ends Meet" (Center for American Progress, October 2025) Accessed July 5, 2026.

45 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2026. Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Profiles: Security Guards (SOC 33-9032). Accessed July 20, 2026.

46 MIT Living Wage Calculator. The national benchmark used here is a worker-share-weighted average of state living wages for one adult with no children, compiled by the UC Berkeley Labor Center. Accessed April 25, 2026.

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