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FACTSHEET:**Demographic and Job Characteristics
of NYC's Security Guard Workforce****By Carmen Brick, Enrique Lopezlira, and Nari Rhee**

Security guards in New York City ("NYC") were essential workers during the pandemic¹—ensuring public safety in buildings, hospitals, and transportation hubs—but their compensation and working conditions do not reflect their significant role. Security guards' responsibilities have evolved to include de-escalating conflicts, managing crises, and enforcing health and safety protocols—and they do this all without the hazard pay, benefits, and training offered to workers in similar occupations.² They also experience higher rates of assaults and fatal injuries while on the job compared to many other workers.³ Although the use of private security services has grown in recent decades, security guards lack appropriate labor standards and a sufficient focus from policymakers.

This factsheet highlights the characteristics of the private sector security guard workforce in NYC,⁴ home to a large part of the nation's security guard workforce.⁵ With its scale and visibility, NYC has the potential to set a national standard for improving labor conditions in the security services industry, which has national revenues of \$22.7 billion for unarmed guard services alone.⁶ The labor conditions of security guards are also foundational to broader questions of how cities achieve public safety.

According to data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey, approximately 81,900 security guards work in NYC. These workers are primarily men (77.3%) and workers of color (90.6%). In NYC, Black workers⁷ account for one out of every two security guards (50.8%).⁸ Almost half of the security guards in NYC are foreign born (44.7%), and about two in four have educational attainment beyond high school (47.1%), including post-secondary degrees and some college. Overall, security guards have a median income of \$40,311, which is less than 40% of the NYC Area Median Income (AMI).⁹ About one in five NYC security guards has a family income below 200% of the poverty level (21.7%), and more than one in three (37.8%) are without health insurance through their employer or the employer of a household member (see Table 1).¹⁰

Most security guards in NYC work full time (84.7%) and full year (88.7%), and have a median hourly wage of \$20.29. Relatedly, about one out of two security guards earns less than this median wage. Although nearly all the security guards working in NYC live in the city (89.5%), and thus bear the city's higher cost of living, more than four out of five security guards (80.1%) earn less than the living wage for a single adult according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator (\$32.85).¹¹

Table 1: Demographics and Job Characteristics of NYC Security Guards (all figures are percentages unless otherwise noted)

This table provides useful data about who works as security guards in NYC and the quality of their jobs. The first column estimates these statistics for all private security guards in NYC. The second column only examines these statistics for private security guards earning less than 2/3 the area median wage, equal to about \$20.75.

	Percent of Workforce	Percent of Low-wage Workers (those paid < \$20.75/hr)
Gender		
Male	77.3	73.0
Female	22.7	27.0
Median Age	42	38
Age		
18-19	0.7	1.1
20-29	22.9	29.6
30-39	20.8	21.6
40-54	35.6	32.3
55-64	20.0	15.5
Race/Ethnicity		
White	9.4	5.7
Black	50.8	56.7
Latino	27.8	24.2
Asian	5.4	5.3
Other	6.6	8.0
Education		
Less than High School	12.0	14.9
High School or GED	40.9	42.0
Some College	22.3	23.1
Associate's Degree	12.2	11.2
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	12.6	8.8
Country of Birth		
US Born	55.3	53.6
Foreign Born	44.7	46.4

Table 1 continued

Table 1 continued

	Percent of Workforce	Percent of Low-wage Workers (those paid < \$20.75/hr)
Family Structure		
Married	36.4	26.4
Have Children	33.9	27.3
Family Income Relative to Poverty Level		
Less than 100% of Poverty Level	4.7	6.9
100% to 200% of Poverty Level	17.0	26.7
More than 200% of Poverty Level	78.3	66.4
Median Individual Annual Earnings (2025 Dollars)	\$40,311	\$30,233
Full-Time / Part-Time Worker		
Full-Time (35 or More Hours per Week)	84.7	80.5
Part-Time (Fewer than 35 Hours per Week)	15.3	19.5
Full-Year / Part-Year Worker		
Full-Year (50-52 Weeks per Year)	88.7	90.9
Part-Year (Fewer than 50 Weeks per Year)	11.3	9.1
Health Insurance Provided by Employer/Union		
Yes	62.2	58.9
No	37.8	41.1
Median Hourly Wage	\$20.29	N/A
% Workers Earning Less than Living Wage (\$32.85)	80.1	100.0
NYC Resident	89.5	92.8

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

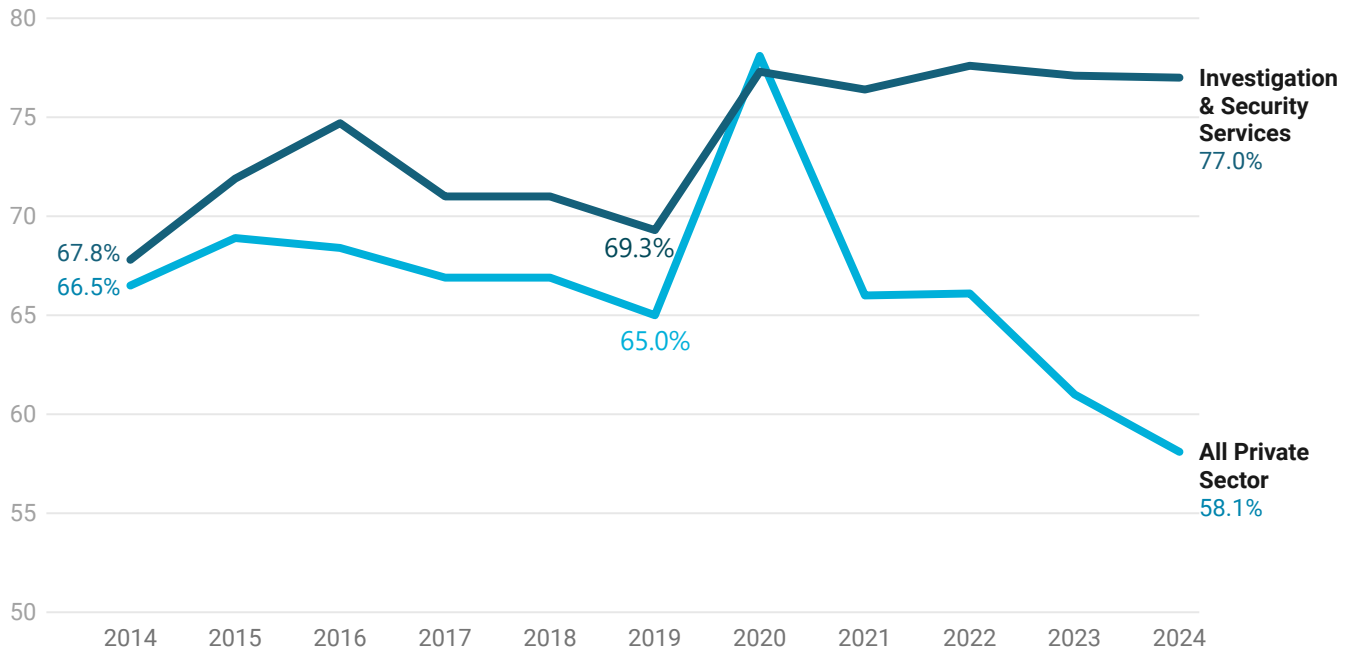
Wages for security guards vary notably by race and gender. Black security guards earn a median hourly wage of \$19.06, while female security guards earn even less, at \$17.59. In contrast, white security guards have the highest median wage at \$30.22—more than \$10 higher than most other groups.¹² Latino and Asian American security guards earn median hourly wages of \$21.47 and \$21.04, respectively, highlighting racial and gender wage gaps in the security guard industry.¹³ Establishing more robust labor standards for the security guard industry has the potential to reduce these gaps.

We also examined the demographic and job characteristics of security guards earning less than 2/3 of the area median wage—a common metric for low-wage work—which in NYC is equivalent to \$20.75 per hour (as shown in the second column of Table 1).¹⁴ Among the security guards earning these lower wages, almost six in ten (56.7%) are Black, and more than one in four are women (27.0%). Black and female workers are thus more heavily represented in this

especially low-paid portion of the security guard workforce. A third have family incomes below 200% of the poverty level (33.6%), and median annual individual earnings for this subset of workers equal \$30,233. Most work full-time (80.5%) and full year (90.9%), and four in 10 (41.1%) are without healthcare from their employer or the employer of a household member.

Finally, we analyzed employee turnover in the Investigation and Security Services sector (in which security guards make up about three-quarters of employment) from 2014 to 2024. We find that turnover in the NYC security industry has risen over time and is much higher than in the private sector as a whole. In 2024, the security services sector had a turnover rate of 77.0%, compared to the pre-pandemic rate of 69.3% in 2019. In contrast, overall private sector turnover in NYC decreased from 65.0% in 2019 to 58.1% in 2024, after a temporary spike during the pandemic.

Figure 1: Annual Employee Turnover in NYC 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, except 2024 which reflects July 2023-June 2024.

There is a wide body of research on the correlation between employee compensation and turnover across economic sectors, from fast food to healthcare to human services.¹⁵ In turn, worker turnover and retention have direct impacts on worker productivity and service quality. In a study focused on airport security screeners at SFO, Reich, Hall and Jacobs found that the rate of security breach detection fell by 0.62% for every percentage point increase in turnover.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

Despite their evolving responsibilities, security guards in NYC experience low wages, high turnover, and limited access to benefits and training—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. With its large and visible security guard workforce, NYC has a unique opportunity to lead the nation in setting higher labor standards for this growing and often overlooked industry.

Methodology

We used data from the U.S. American Community Survey (ACS) pooling one-year samples from 2021–2023 to estimate demographic characteristics of workers and to estimate wages for the security guard workforce, adjusting for inflation through December 2024 in order to present annual and hourly earnings for calendar year 2025. We used the census occupational code 3930 to identify security guards within the ACS data. 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 NYC 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 NYC metropolitan statistical area having a median wage of \$20.21. Our estimate of security guards' hourly wage through December 2024 was \$20.29.

We estimated the wages 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, aggregating data for the five boroughs of NYC. BLS reports that security guards (SOC 33-9032) made up 73% of employment in this industry in 2023 nationally.¹⁸ 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 See guidance issued by the New York State Department of Economic Development (d/b/a Empire State Development) to supplement New York State Executive Order 202, which restricted non-essential services and operations in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This guidance establishes security services as essential services. <https://esd.ny.gov/guidance-executive-order-2026>.
- 2 The Bureau of Labor Statistics categorizes security guards as similar to police officers and private detectives and investigators in terms of job duties, among other occupations. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/security-guards.htm#tab-8>.
- 3 Wiatrowski, William. 2012 (February). "On Guard Against Workplace Hazards," *Monthly Labor Review* 0(0):3-11. Also see: (a) Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). 2012 (March) "Workplace Safety for Security Guards." TED: The Economics Daily series. https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2012/ted_20120309.htm. (b) BLS. "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." <https://www.bls.gov/iif/fatal-injuries-tables.htm>. (c) BLS. "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." Retrieval at: <https://data.bls.gov/gqt/InitialPage>.
- 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 (BLS) estimated approximately 1.2 million workers were employed as Security Guards and Gambling Surveillance Officers in 2023, and our analysis estimates a current security guard workforce of nearly 82,000 in NYC alone. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/security-guards.htm>.
- 6 2024 Estimates. McErlaine, Brendan. 2025 (March). Security Services in the U.S., On lockdown: New Security Trends Will Enable Security Companies to Effectively Compete, Administration, Business Support and Waste Management Services (56161). IBIS World. Available at: <https://www.ibisworld.com/>.
- 7 The category of Black workers refers to non-Hispanic Black workers in the sample.
- 8 Black workers also have greater representation in the security guard workforce at the national level, making up more than 30% of the security guard workforce according to a 2024 analysis. See Hendrix, Christopher, Brandon Novick, and John Schmitt. 2024. "Employment Challenges Facing Security Guards." *Data Bytes* series. Center for Economic and Policy Research. <https://cepr.net/publications/employment-challenges-facing-security-guards/>.
- 9 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 New York City Area AMI is \$113,400 in 2025 for a one-person household, making the median annual income of security guards less than 40% of the AMI, which qualifies these workers as *very low-income* for affordable housing programs. <https://www.nyc.gov/site/hpd/services-and-information/area-median-income.page>.
- 10 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.

11 MIT’s Living Wage Calculator estimates that a single person living in New York County (i.e., Manhattan) requires an hourly wage of \$32.85 to meet their basic needs. Living wages for the NYC counties range between \$25.48 and \$32.85; we used the New York County wage in order to estimate the upward bound of a basic cost of living in one of the nation’s most expensive places to live. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/36061>

12 Racial wage gaps for security guards in New York appear to be larger than recent estimates at the national level. However, such disparities can vary significantly by region, industry, occupation, union density, and other labor market characteristics. At this time, we have not conducted a detailed analysis of the factors contributing to the wider racial wage gap for security guards in New York compared to other parts of the country. A deeper investigation into these differences is outside the scope of this report but represents an important area for future research.

13 The wages reported for the respective groups show unadjusted wage gaps. Factors such as setting, years of experience, and whether a security guard is armed or unarmed affect wages, and potentially could explain these gaps. Other factors such as outsourcing (Dube and Kaplan 2010) and unionization (Hendrix, Novick, and Schmitt 2024) also affect wages and could explain some part of these gaps. Future research on the contemporary wage gap in the security guard industry should focus upon explaining the processes producing the observable gaps.

14 The New York State Department of Labor estimates a median hourly wage for NYC using OEWS data, which was slightly more than \$31 at the beginning of 2025. Their estimates are based upon May 2024 OEWS reports, which NYSDOL inflated to first quarter 2025 dollars. These estimates are not official BLS statistics, and the NYSDOL adjusts these estimates based upon changing economic conditions. The median hourly wage should thus not be understood as reported wages for 2025, but rather as a reasonable threshold figure for defining low-wage work. See: <https://dol.ny.gov/occupational-wages-0> and <https://dol.ny.gov/occupational-employment-and-wage-statistics-technical-notes>.

15 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. <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/the-impact-of-wages-and-turn-over-on-security-and-safety-in-airports/>.

16 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. <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/living-wages-and-economic-performance-the-san-francisco-airport-model/>.

17 Mas, Alexandre. 2006. “Pay, Reference Points, and Police Performance.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121 (3): 783–821. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w12202>.

18 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “May 2023 National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates; NAICS 561600 - Investigation and Security Services.” https://www.bls.gov/oes/2023/may/naics4_561600.htm.

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