



## Are 'rent-a-cops' threatening security?

**Experts: guards are ill-trained, ill-equipped to handle threats**

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WASHINGTON - In the aftermath of 9/11, private security officers are being asked to step into the breach and fill gaps in the nation's homeland security plans. But experts warn that most of this 2 million person workforce receives little or no training, aren't subjected to rigorous background checks for previous criminal behavior and are paid so poorly that many quickly leave for better paying jobs.

Private security services are a nearly \$12 billion a year industry in the United States. They are employed to protect everything from the Empire State building to Rockefeller Center to the Mall of America to Ft. Bragg and West Point and nearly every nuclear power plant in the nation.

The General Services Administration says the Department of Homeland Security paid about \$257 million in 1,609 separate contracts or amendments to existing contracts for "private security guards or patrol services," according to the Scripps Howard News Service. The Federal Protective Service, the arm of DHS responsible for the protection of all federally owned and leased buildings, for example, includes a force of 10,000 contract security guards.

Yet national standards for private security officers do not exist. "There is no equalized [training] standard from state to state or region to region and in many cases it may not even be required," said Chris Grniet, vice president of the security arm of risk consulting company Kroll, a New York based company. "These are the people that we're entrusting the safety and security of our public and our assets to, our homeland security in general and we're putting people in positions that have no business being there," Grniet said.

### Regulating our safety

Ten states don't regulate the security industry at all. "The specific requirements for private security officers in [the remaining] 40 states vary significantly, even as to the extent of background investigations required for employment," says the National Association of Security Companies.

"Only 31 states call for FBI criminal history records checks, and at least seven of those limit the FBI checks to applicants for armed security positions (who constitute a distinct minority of all private security positions)," the association says. "Also among those 31 state laws are other state regulatory statutes that appear to permit the FBI checks, but do not require them, leaving yet another gap for an out-of-state convicted felon or an identity thief to gain security employment at a sensitive site," the group says. These gaps open the door for the very types of criminal conduct that our employees are typically assigned to prevent."

Two recent events raise questions about the effectiveness of the industry to carry out its mission and whether the nation is being served by a false sense of security.

On Feb. 14, New York's Public Advocate Betsy Gothbaum released a withering report regarding the capability of the city's private security forces to protect citizens in the event of another terrorist attack, calling the standards for New York City's private security officers "alarmingly low."

Gothbaum's report notes that a New York cosmetologist is required to have 40 times more training

hours than a security guard. "I am dismayed by the lack of training for private security forces that guard hundreds of buildings with thousands of workers," Gothbaum said. In addition, the report found that what little training the guards do receive doesn't concentrate on terrorism or working with the police or firefighters.

Meanwhile, in mid-February the Maryland Port Administration fired the security company providing contract security guard services to the Port of Baltimore after it was discovered that the company's guards were sleeping on the job, abandoning their posts during the night and violating federal security regulations. And according to a published report of the incident in the Washington Post, guards sometimes didn't even show up for duty. The \$1.5 million contract, which has been given to another private security firm, came from \$15.6 million in Department of Homeland Security grants that have gone to the Port since 9/11.

### **The trouble with money**

Industry officials and security experts say that money is the root of the problem when discussing private security guards.

"It's long term operating expenses with no ROI [return on investment.]," Grniet said.

Despite a temporary spike in guard hiring immediately following 9/11, government statistics show that between 1999 and 2003 private guard employment fell by 124,000. Reasons for the decline range from apathy to economics. The post-9/11 recession didn't help any, forcing many companies "to cut discretionary expenses, including security guard expenses, to maintain profitability," says a Congressional Research Report on private security guard deployment.

Security guards earn an annual mean wage of \$19,400, according the Bureau of Labor Statistics or about \$9.33 per hour. New York's public advocate report found that waiters, landscapers, maids and hotel desk clerks all made more than the city's security guards. And the Project for Governmental Oversight found a security guard at a nuclear power plant can earn up to \$4 less than the guy cleaning the toilets, mopping the floors or taking out the trash in the same plant.

"Security is a drain on resources, security doesn't help profits, except in a tiny percentage of those fields, so it's a necessary evil," said Danielle Brian, POGO's executive director. "What you see is, as a result, people are trying to spend as little as possible."

"There are certain jobs where clients only want to pay \$10, \$11 or \$12 an hour and when your clients only want to pay that it minimizes what you can pay the guards to even break even," said Gary Green, CEO of Classic Security, a New York-based contract security firm. "We don't take those jobs," Green said, "because nobody could do a good job when you're paying an officer \$6, \$7, or \$8 an hour."

"At those wages," Green said, "you're competing with McDonalds."

And the low wages apparently don't inspire loyalty or acts of heroism. In the report by New York's public advocate, one anonymous security guard is quoted saying his low wage "makes me not want to work." While another unnamed guard puts the issue in stark relief: "I'm not dying for \$9.80."

### **A period of complacency**

Green says a client has to be willing to spend the money on security, something he's seeing less and less of a willingness to do in New York, especially among those responsible for buildings off the main thoroughfares.

"They don't see themselves as targets," Green said, "they are definitely exhibiting what I call 'terrorism impatience,' in other words, since nothing's happened [since 9/11] then they are kind of

going back to the mindset they had before [9/11]."

Security companies are being squeezed by client requirements to keep costs low. "We know that because it's become such a competitive industry that a lot of contract firms are being pressed to become more and more competitive in their pricing," said Kroll's Grniet. "And in many cases to be competitive they have to use forces that are less qualified than they probably need or the job demands because they can pay them less."

Just how competitive is the market? "Sometimes you lose a contract because you're 10 cents per hour too high," said Yehuda Daphna, president of ISS Action, a New York-based security firm that only hires former military personnel and pays well above the industry average. "Sometimes these companies just want a warm body to stand in place... they don't really care about security," said Daphna, a 25-year veteran of the Israeli army.

Turnover rates among contract security guards range as high as 300 percent annually, according to the Service Employees International Union. "It's impossible to have a reliable workforce when you keep losing employees to McDonalds," Daphna said.

### **Another day, another dollar**

However, there are some indications that training for private security guards is on the upswing.

Congress tried addressing the issue of training and pay for the private security industry last year. While none of those efforts succeeded, mainly losing steam when the massive intelligence community reorganization bill sucked all the oxygen out of other legislative agendas, hearings were held and the problems were given voice.

Last year the University of Las Vegas was given a \$1.5 million grant to create a Homeland Security Institute. Run by Lee Van Arsdale, a former Special Forces officer, the institute will help train security guards working in "soft targets" like hotels, casinos, sporting events and shopping malls.

And in Connecticut, the state homeland security office has started a program teaching security guards how to recognize bombs, profile behaviors and spot potential suicide bombers. In years past such training was reserved for the military. Such classes are springing up around the country.

The International Council of Shopping Centers sponsored 20 such anti-terrorism programs last year and plan more in the coming months.

"Everyone has an obligation to be a soldier in this war," Connecticut Homeland Security Director John Buturla told the Associated Press.

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