

# Shortchanging Security:

How Poor Training, Low Pay and Lack of Job Protection for Security Guards Undermine Public Safety in New York City

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## KEY POINTS

### *How many security guard jobs are there in New York City?*

- 63,230, about 1.6% of citywide employment
- Of these workers, a relatively small number, about 3,000, are members of SEIU 32BJ
- Most commercial buildings contract with outside private security firms. Some buildings employ their own guards.

### *Who are New York City's security guards?*

- The security guard workforce is overwhelmingly comprised of people of color. The most dramatic differences between the security guard and citywide workforce is in the much higher share of the security workforce that is non-Hispanic black (one-half against one-fifth) and correspondingly low share that is non-Hispanic white (roughly one-in-ten compared to four-in-ten).
- The majority of security guards are “prime age” workers; 62.2 percent are 25 through 54 years of age, the period when people are most likely to be supporting families and reaching their peak earnings.

### *Security guard wages, fringe benefits, and training*

- The median hourly wages for New York City metropolitan area guards are well below the median for all workers—just \$10.14/ hour for guards compared to \$18.39 for all workers in the metropolitan area.

- The majority of workers in security guard firms do not receive employer-provided health insurance or paid sick leave.
- Legally required guard training is limited to sixteen hours of on-the-job training and an eight hour annual in-service course. However, recent investigations suggest a significant fraction of New York guards do not receive even this mandated minimum. This includes guards employed by large firms and assigned to Class A commercial Buildings and landmarks in Manhattan.

### ***The upshot for workers and the public***

- The annual job turnover rate in the contract industry nationally is as high as 300 percent.
- The lack of training and high rate of turnover in the security guard workforce raise also questions of public safety.

### ***The Workers' Point of View: Findings from Interviews with Security Guards in Manhattan's Prime Commercial Buildings***

- Non-union guards described themselves as struggling, making so little they could barely get by. Often they described a life of falling between the cracks. They didn't make enough to afford the basics, yet earned too much to qualify for government programs.
- Nearly all non-union guards labored without a single day of paid sick leave, and given their economic straits, this meant they had no choice but to come to work sick. While some firms offered health insurance, the workers told us they could not afford to take it given the high cost of their share of the premiums.

- They gave examples of being sent to annual mandatory training sessions as perfunctory exercises, where they were basically handed a certificate for little more than showing up and paying the fee.
- The perceived lack of job security also weighed heavily on the minds of the non-unionized workers and undermined their ability to do their jobs. They felt that there was no one watching their backs in a cutthroat environment, and they risked being arbitrarily fired without cause or even for so much as talking to a union representative
- In stark contrast, the 32BJ union security guards (who account for a small fraction of the city's security guards, about 3,000 of the 63,000) described themselves as earning enough to make ends meet, with health insurance and pensions providing a sense of financial security.
- The 32BJ guards also report that they receive sufficient training and enjoy enough job security to approach their work with confidence and professionalism.

***Implications for business, tourism, and jobs***

- It is essential, particularly post 9/11, that the city is perceived as a safe environment for doing business and tourism. As the first line of defense, most of us would want workers who perceive themselves as getting a fair wage, can take care of their health, and are prepared to handle routine and challenging conditions. Such workers, as was evidenced in our interviews with union members, have a stake in keeping these good jobs and are highly motivated to do their best.

- As an occupation that has become increasingly valued and cannot easily be out-sourced overseas, the security industry could potentially offer a pool of good jobs to those without a college education. Such jobs would help fill a critical gap in a city like New York, particularly for less educated men of color, who today experience high rates of joblessness and unemployment.
- The existence of good jobs in the unionized sector demonstrates that it is not only possible, but that it would yield substantial benefits to the buildings that employ security guards as well as to the general public.

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