

Citizen satisfaction with private security guards in the Netherlands: Perceptions of an ambiguous occupation

European Journal of Criminology
7(3) 214–234

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DOI: 10.1177/1477370809359264

<http://euc.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

The employment of private security guards has increased in many European countries in recent decades and the Netherlands is no exception. However, despite large increases in the growth of the private security industry, little is known about how the public perceives agents of private policing and their role in crime prevention and enhancing the public's sense of safety. In this paper we examine public perceptions of private security personnel. More specifically, we examine citizens' attitudes toward the nature of security guards' work, their relationship with public police, and their level of satisfaction with private police services. Findings suggest that, on the whole, Dutch citizens have mixed opinions about private security guards. Nonetheless, contrary to what is often assumed about the public image of private security, findings also suggest that respondents tend not to view the nature of security guards' work and their professionalism in purely negative terms. Contact with security guards was a key predictor of satisfaction with guard services.

Keywords

Citizen Satisfaction with Security Guards, Private Security, Public Perceptions of Security Guards, The Netherlands.

Introduction

Private entrepreneurship and the privatization of public sector functions are phenomena common to all liberal market economies. Not only did thousands of privatizations occur during the 1970s and 1980s (Megginson and Netter, 2001); private enterprise in social

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control (for example, private security)¹ – a related development in recent decades – has spread to virtually all forms of economies. The function of policing and the governance of security have been decentralized with the expansion and creation of numerous regulatory agencies in both the public and private sectors (Nalla and Newman, 1991). Some call it a ‘dispersion’ and ‘diffusion’ of policing governance models (Kempa, 2007), while others call it ‘plural policing’ (for example, Crawford et al., 2005; Jones and Newburn, 2006; Loader, 2000). That is, the government role in offering security has become increasingly fragmented, resulting in law enforcement no longer being the monopoly of the state. Part and parcel of this trend is the growth of the security guard industry around the globe (De Waard, 1999; Van Steden and Sarre, 2007).

The Netherlands has not been immune to these developments (Van Steden, 2007). Over the past three decades, the number of personnel employed in the private security industry has grown significantly, from 10,000 in 1980 to over 32,000 nowadays. In particular, within the industry, the growth in employment of security guards is noticeable relative to staff numbers in public police (around 53,000). These increases in contract guards suggest a greater likelihood of citizen contact with agents of private security. Though much has been written about citizen perceptions of police services and satisfaction with police services (for example, Cheurprakobit and Bartsch, 2001; Correia et al., 1996; Skogan, 2005), very little research has addressed this important question in the private sector.

The purpose of this study is to examine citizen perceptions of private security guards as well as their satisfaction with security guard services in the Netherlands. First, this paper provides a brief overview of the nature and extent of private security in the Netherlands. Second, it discusses the importance of examining citizen satisfaction with contract guards in the context of the limited research conducted on this subject matter. Third, the paper presents the results of Dutch citizens’ perceptions of agents of private policing and their role in crime prevention and enhancing the public’s sense of safety. Finally, it closes with a brief discussion of how future work on citizen relationships with private security guards should proceed.

The security guard industry in the Netherlands

As previous studies on the private security industry have shown, its exact size and growth are difficult to measure (Jones and Newburn, 1995; Sarre, 2005). In particular, it can be unclear where ‘private security’ ends and other sectors take over. The guarding sector sometimes flows into activities such as limousine services or facility management that can be seen as beyond the realm of private security, making accurate quantification and classification very difficult. Additionally, the quality of statistical resources is not always ideal because of gaps in employment registration, the possibility of unregistered operators and poor occupational categorizations, all caveats that undermine accurate measurement. Finally, for commercial reasons, private security companies are hesitant to divulge information about staff numbers, market share and annual turnover. The industry is a highly competitive and often reluctant to disclose sensitive business information to inquisitive researchers. This means that the data collected have been based on partial information, which altogether makes up for a cautious but instructive picture of the Dutch guarding sector.

Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS)² provides a snapshot of the Dutch private security industry at large, but makes no clear distinction between various aspects of security work. The records simply aggregate private detective bureaus, dog training services, consultancy firms, alarm monitoring stations and manned guarding services. The last category includes cash-in-transit services, bodyguards, crowd controllers, mobile patrols, receptionists, shop guards and static guards, but does not include ‘in-house’ guards. CBS did not introduce the occupational category ‘guarding and investigation services’ before 1994/5, which makes it impossible to conduct long-term analyses. Successive editions of the Security Yearbook (*Beveiligingsjaarboeken*),³ drawing on annual reports and licence figures collected by the Dutch Ministry of Justice, slightly mitigate this problem as publications go back as far as the early 1980s. Unfortunately, however, the Ministry gave up counting in 2001 – a void filled with market figures from the Dutch private security association VPB (Vereniging van Particuliere Beveiligingsorganisaties). This market exploration, containing the most up-to-date and comprehensive impression of contract guarding over the five-year period 2002–7, is based on surveys of private security companies registered by VPB. Though 60 VPB members is a small number compared with the industry’s total, outcomes are still valid because they represent all serious players covering about 70 percent of the market. The key conclusions are outlined below.

- There were approximately 1500 organizations, including pubs and hospitals, under licence in 2009, in contrast to 380 in 1995. The private security industry estimates that approximately 800 businesses are currently active in the market, of which 250–400 have a sizeable presence. Three companies – Group 4 Securicor (G4S), Securitas and Trigion – together employ 70 percent of the contract guards active in the Netherlands. Many private security companies are small ‘mum and dad’ businesses.
- The number of contract guard employees has grown from 10,000 (1980) to at least 32,000 (2009). Some 29 percent of industry employees are aged 35–45, followed by employees in the 25–35 (26 percent) and 45–55 (22 percent) age brackets. With regard to gender, private security is a male-dominated industry (76 percent), with females accounting for 24 percent. Figures do not distinguish between ‘full-time’ and ‘part-time’ employed persons.
- The gross annual turnover has grown from €429 million in 1994 to over €1.3 billion in 2009. A closer look at annual turnover generation reveals that contract guards usually serve the interests of the business world (75 percent), but (local) government bodies and the non-profit sector (for example, universities) also make use of their services (25 percent).

Dutch private security does not flourish in a social vacuum but rather operates in a globalizing environment of ever-expanding international markets. Indeed, the resurgence of security industries is a worldwide phenomenon. In this respect, the Netherlands takes a moderate position, with 185 security personnel per 100,000 population, which is below the European average of 253/100,000 (Van Steden and Sarre, 2007).⁴ These comparative data suggest that the influence of private security industries has generally been more extensive in other countries than it has been in the Netherlands.

The importance of public perception

Despite its rapid growth in employment and annual turnover, private security remains a precarious industry. Ever since academic research has been carried out on this business, there has been considerable criticism about the characteristics and competence of security personnel, particularly contract security guards. As early as the 1970s, Kakalik and Wildhorn (1977) portrayed private security workers as underpaid, poorly trained and hopelessly low-skilled ‘bodies in uniform’. These kinds of critiques, which are partly normative, are echoed in more recent studies on the ongoing debate over the merits and drawbacks of private security. As Prenzler (2004) shows, many academic scholars view private security as a ‘second rate service compared to the police’, doubt the effectiveness of guarding personnel, and warn against harmful social impacts expressed in terms of convenience, personal liberty and privacy. Exclusion is seen as being at the very core of private security undertakings (Young, 1999).

Consistent with such findings, contract guards are not typically cast in a very positive manner in the popular culture (Nalla and Newman, 1990). Indeed, as Livingstone and Hart (2003) argue, public images shadowing the private security industry through media channels such as tabloids and movies have not particularly helped to advance the status and integrity of contract guards. In everyday understanding of private security, its workers are at best depicted as somewhat shady ‘watchmen’, and at worst represent ‘corrupt gangsters’ or ‘hired guns’, unscrupulous and devoid of conventional ethics. Sensationalized coverage of maverick-type security workers has undoubtedly contributed to these dubious stereotypes. Thus, also from a non-academic account, the private security industry is criticized for the potential dangers it poses to citizens, as some contract guards have been known to abuse their position and (limited) powers vis-à-vis the general public. Another and closely related point concerns the quality of contract guarding available. Private security is viewed as a perilous business, mostly driven by low prices instead of high quality, because many customers, obliged by external pressures from insurance companies, buy their products and services fairly reluctantly. Value added by contract guards is still seen as a ‘grudge purchase’ (Zedner, 2006), which obviously hampers the popularity of their occupation. Such a vicious circle is hard to break, because customer’s reluctance to spend is often derived from, in their eyes, private security’s bad reputation.

The Dutch security industry association VPB is aware of this pitfall. In its recent vision document *Self-regulation, Better Performance (Zelf Regelen, Beter Presteren)*, VPB acknowledges the problem of a lack of, or at least ‘inadequate’, entrepreneurship owing to underperforming cowboy companies.⁵ At the same time, however, private security is continuously subject to media scrutiny at times of scandalous mismanagement. This negative view of contract guards is worrisome, because governments are increasingly delegating social regulatory functions to the private security industry (for example, Button, 2002; Johnston, 1992; Jones and Newburn, 1998; van Steden, 2007) – a trend that takes many forms, ranging from traditional static shop guards to relatively new occupations, such as parking attendants. Apart from their visible presence in ‘mass private properties’ (Shearing and Stenning, 1981), which include, for instance, shopping centres, leisure parks and airport terminals, private security has located itself in neighbourhoods and other urban public domains, thus becoming more similar to the role and

appearance of 'beat' police officers. As a result, citizens may find it increasingly difficult to tell public and private agents of social control apart, not only because they engage in some similar functions but also because many of their observable behaviours are identical. Kontos (2004) suggests that contract guards may not mind being confused with their public counterparts because such ambiguity serves their best interests and helps to create an air of legitimacy and authority.

Compared with Canada and the USA, where commercial 'parapolice' forces (Rigakos, 2002) are allowed to carry firearms, in the Netherlands the public/private distinction is still meaningful in terms of legal merits. Contract guards, after all, do not formally hold any special powers over and above those enjoyed by private citizens (such as citizen arrest). Nonetheless, in line with empirical research abroad (Button, 2007; Mopas and Stenning, 2001; Sarre and Prenzler, 2009), under contract law (for example, house rules) Dutch security personnel are allowed to control access to (quasi-)public space, search people and, if necessary, eject them from a property. Although private guards usually have different legal resources as compared with those of the public police, mass private property owners vest private security with powers that constitute considerable policing 'tools' (Stenning, 2000). The Dutch police, who have traditionally enjoyed a monopoly on (lethal) violence, are slowly losing ground on patrol and even law enforcement services to a commercial industry of uniformed contract guards.

For the Dutch state – as the ultimate provider of citizen safety as well as a licensing and governing body relating to private security⁶ – citizen satisfaction is a critical measure of the legitimacy of such 'marketization of policing' (Terpstra, 2008). Citizens are, in the end, the main subjects (and sometimes consumers) of services offered by security guards, and therefore it is critical to assess these services in a manner similar to studies that address police services (Flanagan, 1985). To be able to consult effectively with the community, the state should have a good sense of what the public thinks the private security officers are doing and what the public would prefer the security guards to be doing. Such an assessment resonates with what the police have done systematically for years (Beck et al., 1999). Just as positive images of police officers are necessary for the police to function effectively, security personnel's efficacy may be determined in part through an assessment of how positively the public views security guards. Negative attitudes toward security guards can only result in a lack of respect, mutual ill feeling and ineffective service. Information about public satisfaction with regard to private security, in other words, offers insights into citizens' confidence in the guarding sector's services.

Previous research findings

To date, although much has been written concerning the popular perceptions of public police, there are only a few studies that approach the private sector from this angle. Shearing et al. (1985), in the mid-1980s, interviewed 209 Canadians to assess their perceptions of private security personnel, the nature of their work and their relationship to public law enforcement. Inspired by Shearing and colleagues' endeavours, Nalla and Heraux (2003) carried out a large-scale survey of American college students. Their findings refute what is commonly assumed to be a negative image of private security, because most respondents held a positive attitude toward private security personnel.

However, respondents who personally had an interaction or encounter with security personnel had a less positive view of the nature and goals of security work as well as the professionalism of security officers. This perhaps suggests that the industry needs to incorporate elements that heighten the security guards' image, as well as their utility to be an effective and trusted presence in quasi-public spaces where a large amount of public life takes place. At the same time, respondents may also develop negative images of private security guards after being stopped, searched and chastised as a result of previous misbehaviour.

A similar study in Singapore confirmed these findings (Nalla and Lim, 2003). Singaporean youth turned out to have a fairly positive view of contract guards. As in the US research, those Singaporeans who had an encounter or interaction with a security officer were less likely to be positive about various attributes of security guards. Interestingly, however, those who reported a positive encounter with guards also had a positive view on various dimensions of security guards, including professionalism, work and image. Further, respondents emphasized the customer-oriented roles and functions of private security staff instead. Although such conclusions are limited by the participation of only a small student subgroup of the entire citizen population, they might signal a greater acceptance of private security than is often believed. In other words, people perceive security personnel in the context of their behaviour and personality rather than from an established professional imagery. 'Private security', as Shearing et al. (1985: 227) underline, 'has not established itself as a stereotypical cultural object about which people have clear and distinct images.' Additionally, although these prior studies examined various attributes of the security guard industry, none of them directly addresses citizen satisfaction concerning security guards. The current paper contributes to the limited research on citizen views of private security guards by exploring perceptions of contract guards at the level of a wider audience by analysing a select group of Dutch citizens living in the capital city of Amsterdam, and by directly assessing citizen satisfaction with private security guards.

The present study

A questionnaire was developed using earlier work by Nalla and Heraux (2003) and Nalla and Lim (2003), which examined student perceptions of security guards in the USA and Singapore respectively. The survey was first written in English, later translated into Dutch, and then translated back into English to check for validity and reliability. Questions were written to elicit citizen responses on a wide range of issues, including the nature of security work, goals, professionalism and integrity, and satisfaction with guard services. Subsequently, demographics and details about those having contact with security guards were included to distinguish their global views. Finally, an open-ended question was added to enable the respondent to briefly describe what comes to mind (first image) when he or she hears the term 'private security'.

Data were collected in 2008 by the Department for Research and Statistics (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek, O+S),⁷ the research facility of the municipality of Amsterdam.⁸ This department carries out assignments for the local government, town boroughs and municipal services as well as for other municipalities, universities, provinces, the European

Union and a number of local media agencies and private companies. It has an independent position within the municipality of Amsterdam, which can be compared to that of Statistics Netherlands (CBS) within the national government. At this time the O+S has a panel of about 3000 citizens who have volunteered to be respondents for various surveys. About once a month these members receive an invitation by email with a personalized link to the online questionnaire.

The reason for conducting the research in Amsterdam is twofold. First, Amsterdam is a large city where 3000–4000 uniformed contract guards⁹ are an increasingly visible presence. It is thus highly likely that citizens frequently encounter private security personnel in their daily lives. This is partly owing to the fact that municipal boroughs tend to make progressively more use of private security operations within the public domain. Consequently, for the state, being a client and regulator of commercial security markets, better knowledge about how people perceive contract guards may facilitate future decision-making regarding private security personnel taking over police patrol functions. Second, data could relatively easily be collected from the panel established by O+S.¹⁰ A random sample of 1092 members was sent an email invitation to take part in a questionnaire posted on the department's web site.¹¹ This questionnaire was online for two weeks; members of the panel were approached twice to take part in the web survey. A total of 428 useable surveys were returned, representing a 39 percent response rate.

Demographics

Respondent characteristics are presented in Table 1. Age was broken down into three categories: 34 years and under (18 percent), 35 to 54 years (52 percent), and 55 and over (29 percent). Of all the respondents, 44 percent are male and nearly half own their homes. A majority of the respondents have university degrees (67 percent), 21 percent have intermediate vocational or polytechnic training and the rest have less than high school education. Data suggest that about a third (31 percent) of the respondents earn one to two times the modal income (€30,975) and 25 percent earn more than two times the modal income; 17 percent earn the modal income and the same number of people earn less than the modal income; 10 percent of the respondents did not answer this question. Finally, 30 percent of the respondents indicated that a family member or friend works in public law enforcement, compared with only 14 percent who have a family member or friend working in private security. Being closely related to somebody in private security or public law enforcement is expected to make a difference in how citizens perceive contract guards. On the whole, our sample has a bias toward highly educated and fairly affluent respondents. This may have influenced the results.

First image of private security guards: open-ended question

At the outset of the questionnaire respondents were asked what comes to mind (first image) when they hear the term 'private security' (four words maximum). The summary of these responses reflects a range of positive, neutral and negative comments. Examples include: 'strong', 'necessary', 'glad they are around', 'blue uniform', 'macho', 'grumpy',

Table 1. Sample demographic characteristics (N = 428)

Variables	Description	N	Percent ^a
Age	1 = 34 years or less	74	18
	2 = 35–54 years	223	52
	3 = 55 years or above	127	29
Gender	1 = Male	186	44
	2 = Female	237	55
Property ownership status	1 = Rental	204	48
	2 = Owned property	217	51
Employment status	1 = Yes	349	82
	2 = No	74	17
Education	1 = Less than high school (Low)	44	10
	2 = Intermediate vocational education/ polytechnic (Average)	89	21
	3 = University degree (High)	288	67
Annual family income (mode = €30,975)	1 = Less than average	71	17
	2 = Average	73	17
	3 = 1 to 2 times average	134	31
	4 = More than 2 times average	105	25
Family/friends working in law enforcement	1 = Yes	127	30
	2 = No	298	69
Family/friends working private security	1 = Yes	58	14
	2 = No	364	85

Note:

^a Totals may not add up to 100 percent because missing cases are not reported or percentages have been rounded to nearest number.

‘dog’, and ‘fake police’, Eleven percent of the words made reference to the place of work, which includes shops, train and underground stations, business complexes, pubs, clubs and Schiphol airport (Amsterdam). Others make reference to terms such as ‘safety’, ‘security’ or ‘control’, the nature of private security work (for example, ‘driving around and responding to alarms’ or just ‘protecting’), types of security guards and particular private security companies. Other references were made to the ambiguity and vagueness of contract guards’ roles, rights and powers. Although these statements are not exhaustive and do not lend themselves to a detailed analysis, the comments touch upon some of the key questions related to a lack of understanding of the nature of security work as well as uncertainty about their powers and responsibilities.

Contacts and experiences with private security guards

Over half of all the respondents (51 percent) said they have had personal contact with a security guard. Table 2 displays information about these respondents’ experiences (contact) with security guards: 45 percent characterized their interaction as positive, 18 percent reported negatively, and 37 percent felt neutral about their experiences. However, although 57 percent of the respondents indicated that the guard’s behaviour was

courteous/polite, 16 percent remarked that it was impolite/rude and 26 percent reported it as being neutral. All things considered, it can be concluded that, though a quite large group holds no strong view, respondents seem to be more positive than negative in their opinion. This result is surprising given the unpleasant image journalists and academics usually portray of contract guards.

Citizen perceptions of security guards

Tables 3–7 show the percentages of respondents' views on various statements about the professionalism of security guards, satisfaction with security guards, the image of security guards, and the relationship between police officers and security guards. Three categories were developed: 'strongly agree' and 'agree' (SA/A); 'neutral' (N); and 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' (D/SD) ('don't know' cases were excluded). A total of 24 statements were administered to the panel. This exercise is relevant, because we know very little about public perceptions of private security compared with the literature on public confidence in the police and contract guards have become an increasingly familiar presence in city streets and neighbourhoods. As Shearing et al. argue, to plan effectively for a reasonable and acceptable allocation of policing resources in the future, policy-makers will need to take into account citizens' attitudes vis-à-vis contract guards, which 'effectively shape the legitimacy of private security's role in terms of their exercise of power' (1985: 251).

The nature of private security guards' work

Table 3 presents information regarding citizens' perceptions of private security guard as an occupation. The responses suggest that, overall, citizens do not have a clear idea about what security work entails. For instance, a third (34 percent) of the respondents viewed security guarding as a high-risk or injury-prone job, while a similar number (34 percent)

Table 2. Respondents' contact with private security guards ($N = 220$)

Variables	Description	N	Percent ^a
Reason for contact	1 = Needed information	77	35
	2 = Information/help offered by security guard	18	8
	3 = Remark from security guard about conduct	19	9
	4 = Other	92	42
Type of experience	1 = Positive	98	45
	2 = Negative	39	18
	3 = Neutral	57	37
Security guard behaviour	1 = Courteous/polite	125	57
	2 = Impolite/rude	33	16
	3 = Neutral	57	26

Note:

^a Totals may not add up to 100 percent because missing cases are not reported or percentages have been rounded to nearest number.

Table 3. Citizens' views on private security guard work

	SA/A		Neutral		D/SD		Mean ^a
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	
Security guards run a high risk of getting injured in the course of their work (N = 410)	139	34	138	34	133	33	3.00
Security work is paid well (N = 278)	32	12	118	42	128	46	3.43
Security work is stressful (N = 399)	148	37	125	31	126	32	2.96
Security work (N = 415) is dangerous	146	35	158	38	111	27	2.93
Security work is complex (N = 411)	121	29	126	31	164	40	3.17

Note: Missing cases not reported.

^a 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree.

were neutral and the rest disagreed with the statement. Similarly, many respondents felt unsure or neutral about the statements that security work is stressful (31 percent), dangerous (38 percent) and complex (31 percent). However, nearly half of all the respondents felt that security guards are not paid well (46 percent). Only 12 percent thought otherwise and 42 percent were neutral. Private security guards are still seen as minimum-wage employees. Overall, we find that nearly a third of all the respondents were unsure or neutral (N) about their view of security guards, a percentage similar to the strongly agree/agree (SA/A) and the disagree/strongly disagree (D/SD) categories, providing no clear-cut perception of their views on security work.

The professionalism and integrity of private security guards

Citizens' views on the professionalism and integrity of private security guards are presented in Table 4. Overall, the respondents do not overwhelmingly endorse the private security guard community as well-trained, well-educated and honest. Furthermore, only 33 percent believe the guards are able to handle complex situations. The remaining groups, more often than not, fit into the 'neutral' category. Again, citizens expressed ambivalent opinions regarding private security guards.

Satisfaction with security guards

Table 5 presents the findings on citizens' satisfaction with security guards. Half of all the respondents expressed satisfaction with the way security guards respond to calls for assistance (50 percent) and conduct themselves (51 percent). About half of all citizens (53 percent) conceded that guards are generally helpful; 41 percent indicated that they

Table 4. Citizens' views on the professionalism and integrity of private security guards

	SA/A		Neutral		D/SD		Mean ^a
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	
Security guards are well educated (<i>N</i> = 309)	75	24	120	39	114	37	3.19
Security guards are well trained (<i>N</i> = 304)	94	31	120	39	90	30	3.03
Security guards, in general, are able to handle complex situations (<i>N</i> = 375)	125	33	166	44	84	22	2.91
Security guards are generally honest (<i>N</i> = 324)	108	33	173	53	43	13	2.82

Note: Missing cases not reported.

^a 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree.

Table 5. Citizen satisfaction with private security guards

	SA/A		Neutral		D/SD		Mean ^a
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	
I feel safe when I see security guards around (<i>N</i> = 424)	175	41	119	28	130	31	2.96
Security guards, in general, are sensitive to the public (<i>N</i> = 376)	156	42	146	38	74	20	2.82
Security guards are generally helpful (<i>N</i> = 396)	210	53	111	28	75	19	2.68
Security guards handle calls for assistance with politeness (<i>N</i> = 376)	189	50	135	36	52	14	2.65
Generally, I am satisfied with the way security guards conduct themselves (<i>N</i> = 410)	207	51	140	34	63	15	2.65
Citizens can generally trust security guards to protect their lives and properties (<i>N</i> = 391)	79	20	162	41	150	38	3.29

Note: Missing cases not reported.

^a 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree.

feel safe when they see security guards around; and 42 percent indicated that security guards, in general, are sensitive to the public. The majority seem quite positive about how customer-friendly contract guards are. Perhaps, the most interesting finding was the relative ambivalence related to the issue of trusting security guards to protect lives and

Table 6. Citizens' views on the image of private security guards

	SA/A		Neutral		D/SD		Mean ^a
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	
Security guards are hard to distinguish from police officers (<i>N</i> = 427)	38	9	41	10	348	81	3.96
Security guards should be able to use force to arrest suspects (<i>N</i> = 405)	90	22	90	22	225	56	3.52
The primary role of security guards is to apprehend suspects (<i>N</i> = 412)	66	16	60	15	286	69	3.74
Security guards, in general, spend very little time in catching criminals (<i>N</i> = 357)	114	32	129	36	114	32	2.97
Security guards act as social workers (<i>N</i> = 399)	35	9	75	19	289	72	3.79

Note: Missing cases not reported.

^a1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree.

property: 41 percent were neutral and 38 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed on the question of trusting guards on this issue.

Views on the image of private security guards

Table 6 shows the findings about citizens' views on the image of security guards. The findings suggest that citizens do not view security guards as substitutes for the police. For instance, only 16 percent agree that the guards' primary role is to apprehend criminals and 22 percent feel they should be able to use force to arrest suspects. About a third feel guards spend very little time in catching criminals and few (9 percent) believe they are social workers. Further, a majority of all respondents do not have any trouble distinguishing guards from police officers (81 percent). This contradicts findings from, for example, the USA and Canada where people are sometimes confronted with contract guards who are hardly discernible from fully fledged police officers.¹² Overall, Dutch citizens did not appear to relate well to the current image of security guards.

Views on the relationship between security guards and police officers

Over three-quarters of all respondents felt that security guards and police officers should work together (80 percent), which suggests that a sound relationship between the two sectors holds great appeal for citizens. The findings are displayed in Table 7. In addition, less than half of the respondents (44 percent) seem to agree that security guards and police officers together protect the public from criminals, perhaps suggesting and reiterating the need for the two sectors to work together. In spite of some overlap of responsibilities between private security and public police, those surveyed generally seem to view the security guards' purpose as distinct from that of their public counterparts; approximately 50 percent of people do not believe that, in the future, many police functions will be taken over by private security organizations.

Table 7. Citizens' views on the relationship between private security guards and police officers

	SA/A		Neutral		D/SD		Mean ^a
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	
Security guards and police officers often work together in solving crime problems (N = 301)	65	22	105	35	131	44	3.30
Security guards and police officers should work together (N = 418)	334	80	48	12	36	9	2.13
Security guards and police officers together protect the public from criminals (N = 406)	178	44	126	31	102	25	2.85
In the future, many police functions will be taken over by private security organizations (N = 388)	118	30	80	21	190	49	3.37

Note: Missing cases not reported.

^a 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree.

Additional analyses

Factor analysis was conducted to determine the unique structuring of various questions. We suspected possible correlations among variables, and therefore used principal component analysis to guide this process. As shown in Table 8, three factors emerged:

- the nature of private security guard work (4 items)
- satisfaction with private security guards (6 items)
- cooperation between private security guards and police officers (3 items).

All three scales were reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha of greater than .71. In order to examine whether the different groups of respondents held different views regarding these scales, analysis was conducted using analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare mean scores for the scales. Findings on the mean differences for various demographic characteristics on the three factors are presented below.

Non-significant mean differences

Four demographic characteristics were found to have statistically non-significant mean differences on each of the three scales (Table 9). These are gender, property status, family and/or friends in law enforcement and/or security. One would assume that respondents

Table 8. Factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha (N = 428)

Variables	Factor loading
Nature of private security guard work	
Security guards run a high risk of getting injured in the course of their work	0.79
Security work is stressful	0.81
Security work is dangerous	0.84
Security work is complex	0.73
<i>Cronbach's alpha = .82</i>	
Satisfaction with private security guards	
Security guards handle calls for assistance with politeness	0.84
Security guards are helpful	0.83
Generally, I am satisfied with the way security guards conduct themselves	0.80
Security guards are generally honest	0.76
Security guards, in general, are sensitive to the public	0.76
Security guards, in general, are able to handle complex situations	0.66
<i>Cronbach's alpha = .90</i>	
Relationship between private security guards and police officers	
Security guards and police officers often work together in solving crime problems	0.65
Security guards and police officers should work together	0.59
Security guards and police officer together protect the public from criminals	0.72
<i>Cronbach's alpha = .71</i>	

who have family or friends working in private security would have more positive views than those who do not. Not finding these differences might point to more homogeneity among citizens with regard to their perception of security guards than expected. A possible explanation is the lack of variation in the sample. The O+S panel mainly consists of higher-educated people with high income and relatively few family members or friends working in the security industry. Additional research on larger and more varied populations is required.

Significant mean differences

As Table 9 further indicates, not all demographics show insignificant differences. There are some significant findings among age, level of education, paid occupation and income on the three factors distinguished: the nature of private security guard work, satisfaction with private security guards and relations between private security guards and police officers. For example, older respondents appeared more satisfied with security guards than younger respondents, who were more likely to be a little uncertain or ambivalent. The level of significance, however, was marginal ($p < .1$).

For the most part, the findings from this table suggest a great level of doubt and hesitation among citizens about the nature of security work, satisfaction with security guards and police–security relationships. People are unsure about the advantages and disadvantages of private security's visible presence on the streets.

Table 9. Comparison of mean differences for respondent characteristics (N = 428)

	Nature of security work		Satisfaction with security guards		Relationship between police and private security guards	
	Mean ^a	N	Mean ^a	N	Mean ^a	N
Age						
1 = Less than 35 years	3.14	74	2.92	74	2.90	72
2 = 35–54 years	3.00	220	2.73	221	2.66	220
3 = 55 years and over	2.95	125	2.70*	123	2.56**	126
Gender						
1 = Male	3.03	184	2.71	183	2.68	184
2 = Female	2.99	234	2.79	233	2.68	234
Education						
1 = Low: less than high school	2.97	44	2.81	43	2.57	43
2 = Average: intermediate vocational/polytechnic	2.81	88	2.79	88	2.72	89
3 = High: university degree	3.08**	284	2.73	283	2.66	283
Property status						
1 = Rental	3.00	199	2.74	200	2.70	202
2 = Owned	3.03	217	2.77	214	2.65	213
Paid occupation						
1 = Paid occupation	3.05	344	2.77	345	2.71	344
2 = No paid occupation	2.86*	74	2.63*	71	2.50*	73
Income						
1 = Less than modal income	2.85	69	2.69	70	2.63	71
2 = Modal income	2.86	73	2.74	73	2.59	72
3 = 1 or 2 times modal income	3.07	132	2.82	131	2.73	131
3 = > 2 times modal income	3.22***	105	2.78	103	2.75	104
Family/friends in law enforcement						
1 = Yes	2.99	125	2.75	126	2.75	125
2 = No	3.02	295	2.76	292	2.63	294
Family/friends in private security						
1 = Yes	2.99	58	2.73	58	2.71	57
2 = No	3.02	360	2.76	358	2.66	359

Note:

^a 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p \leq .01$

Comparison of mean differences by contact, reason for contact and guard behaviour

Additional analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine contact variables and the nature of security work, satisfaction with security guards, and relations between police and security guards among different groups. The contact variables are whether the respondents had any contact, the reason for contact, the type of experience, and perceptions of security guard behaviour.

Table 10 presents a comparison of mean differences between respondents who had personal contact with security guards on the variables 'nature', 'satisfaction' and 'relationship'. Two of the three findings were statistically significant; the exception was 'satisfaction', which was marginally significant. The findings suggest that those who had contact with security guards were less positive in their perceptions of security work, satisfaction and relationship variables compared with those who did not. Yet again, however, these findings reflect ambivalence toward the three dimensions of security guards rather than a positive attitude. Since the variable 'personal contact' does not identify the reason for contact, one can assume that the nature of the contact was disappointing. Additional variables reported below will provide more insights into the nuances of contact variables.

Table 10. Comparison of mean differences by contextual variables (N = 428)

	Nature of private security work		Satisfaction with private guards security		Relationship between police and private security guards	
	Mean ^a	N	Mean ^a	N	Mean ^a	N
Personal contact						
1 = Yes	3.11	219	2.80	218	2.78	217
2 = No	2.90***	204	2.69*	203	2.55***	205
Reason for contact						
1 = Needed information/help	3.20	77	2.82	77	2.78	77
2 = Information/help offered by guard	3.28	18	2.62	18	2.56	18
3 = Remark from guard about conduct	3.15	19	3.33	20	3.18	20
4 = Other	2.95	92	2.68**	91	2.72*	89
Type of experience						
1 = Positive	2.89	98	2.42	97	2.44	97
2 = Negative	3.21	39	3.67	40	3.30	39
3 = Neutral	3.34***	81	2.82***	80	2.94***	80
Security guard behaviour						
1 = Courteous/polite	2.97	125	2.45	125	2.51	125
2 = Impolite/rude	3.21	33	3.79	34	3.41	33
3 = Neutral	3.34***	57	2.97***	57	2.99***	56

Note:

^a 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p \leq .01$

'Reason for contact' has four categories: 'needed information/help'; 'information/help offered by guard'; 'remark from guard about conduct'; and 'other'. The relationship between reason for contact and satisfaction was found to be statistically significant. Those who were 'offered information/help by security guard' (mean = 2.62) appeared satisfied with security guards, followed by the 'other' and 'needed information/help' groups (mean = 2.68 and 2.82 respectively). People not satisfied with security guards were those who received a 'remark from the guard about conduct' (mean = 3.33).

As a follow-up to the reason for contact, respondents rated their experience as positive, negative or neutral. The findings offer further support to the above-reported results on all three factors. Those who had positive interactions with contract guards were more positive about the nature of security work, more satisfied with guards and more positive about police/private security relationships. Those with neutral experiences had slightly negative views of the nature of security work, but were rather undecided about satisfaction and police–security relations. All these findings were statistically significant.

Conclusion and discussion

In this exploratory study, the present research examined Amsterdam residents' attitudes toward security guards, who are part of a growing industry of private social regulators in the European Union. The first part examined the global views of citizens on the nature of security guards' work, the professionalism and integrity of security guards, satisfaction with security guards, images of security guards and, finally, relationships between police and security guards. The second question assessed the relationship between various demographic characteristics and a set of contextual variables that relate contact with security guards with the nature of the work, satisfaction with security guards, and relations between police and security guards. The research indicates that private security does not evoke any stereotypically negative image in the Netherlands (at least in Amsterdam). Even though these findings do not suggest overwhelming support for citizen satisfaction with security guards or positive views of the nature of security guards' work, their professionalism and their relationships with the police, the study also suggests that there is a significant percentage of respondents who do not hold a negative view of these things.

This is similar to results from the United States (Nalla and Heraux, 2003) and Singapore (Nalla and Lim, 2003), which are based on much smaller student groups. Moreover, findings reveal that it does not matter whether people are surveyed in an American, Asian or European context. Private security is perceived as an ambiguous occupation worldwide – a conclusion that demands further attention in the light of extant literature on public policing. Unlike the police, the massive presence of private security is a relatively recent¹³ and under-researched development in modern society. When looking at research on public law enforcement agencies, scholars argue that personal contact and the nature of such contact are better predictors of satisfaction with and legitimacy of police services, compared with what people globally think of the police (for example, ; Carr et al., 2007; Schuck and Rosenbaum, 2005; Tyler, 2004). This is much in line with our observation that, although, in general, people are quite neutral about private security operatives, those who had positive contact(s) with contract guards had the most supportive view of the nature of private

security work; were satisfied with private security guards; and felt that the police and private security guards should work together.

Another similar finding from this study relates to police research on non-voluntary contact with citizens or as a suspect. Citizens who had been stopped by the police in the past year held more negative views of police officers (for example, Bordua and Tifft, 1971; Dean, 2005; Jesilow et al., 1995), an observation that also seems to apply to involuntary contact with private security guards ('remark from guard about conduct'). In other words, the public ambivalence about private policing reported in this paper seems to coincide with public ambivalence about policing more generally. People do not agree on a one-dimensional image or stereotype of either state or non-state policing. Personal contacts and experiences with police officers, whether public or private, appear to be the most important predictor of an individual's perceptions. Furthermore, there is evidence that gender, age, ethnicity and income may affect how people perceive the police (for example, Carter, 1985; Decker, 1981; Frank et al., 2005; Miller and Pan, 1987; Reisig and Correia, 1997; Reisig and Giacomazzi, 1998). Taking into account the 'fuzziness' (Worrall, 1999) of such individual characteristics measuring the support for law enforcement agencies, additional research is needed on how these conventional variables apply to the public as well as to the private sectors.

On a more fundamental level, however, citizens may not see the police mainly as providers of personal safety. They are also depicted as symbolic moral guardians (Jackson and Bradford, 2009; Loader and Walker, 2001). Public dealings with private security raise this issue to a new level. Contract guards in the Netherlands have less legal authority relative to the police (who still hold the monopoly on force), which may also undermine their symbolic mandate of maintaining formal social control. In Loader's view, 'the idea of policing ... brings to mind (and stomach) sensations of order, authority and protection; it makes it possible for people to believe that a powerful force for good stands between them and an anarchic world, that the state is willing to protect its citizens' (1997: 8). It is questionable to what extent such feelings have developed among people encountering private security guards. Future research should address issues about what exactly private security guards represent and stand for in the public imagery: whether they have to do with instrumental concerns such as safety from victimization or are symbols of actors associated with social stability and moral guardianship. This should become a central question in the field of criminal justice studies as more and more people come into contact with contract guards, who equal or outnumber public police officers.

Notes

1. In this paper we use the terms 'security personnel', 'security guard', 'contract guard' and 'agents of private policing' interchangeably.
2. Statistics are available online from Statline: <http://statline.cbs.nl/statweb/>.
3. These volumes were published between 1983 and 2001.
4. For more information, see the panoramic overview of private security industries in Europe published by the Confederation of European Security Services (CoESS): <http://www.coess.org/>.
5. For more information, see: <http://www.vpb.nl/>.
6. The 1997 Act on Private Security Providers and Detective Agencies (Wet Particuliere Beveiligingsorganisaties en Recherchebureaus) strengthened systems of regulation. Under current

legislation, in order to obtain a licence, applicants must make sure that they employ trustworthy and skilled staff. If companies meet the criteria for criminal background checks, training requirements and educational qualifications, certification is granted for a term of five years. Responsibility for screening security employees lies with the local police force in the area in which the security company is based.

7. For more information, see: <http://www.os.amsterdam.nl/>.
8. We are very grateful to Maddy Roelofs for her assistance in data collection and analysis.
9. This number is derived from an O+S estimation drawing on police data, information from the Amsterdam Chamber of Commerce and employment figures from G4S, Securitas and Trigion, three leading private security companies in the Netherlands.
10. Van Steden works closely with the Department for Research and Statistics under the umbrella of the research chair Safety, Security and Citizenship based at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
11. Every citizen of Amsterdam older than 12 years is eligible to participate in the O+S panel. Participation is always voluntary and no rewards are offered. Background information about most members is known, although giving this information is always voluntary. Once a year the database is updated to make sure the O+S has the correct background information for all members. The questionnaires put to the members are always online. Random sampling is possible when online surveys are administered to avoid selective answering effects.
12. See, for example, an observational study of the 'new parapolice' in Toronto (Rigakos, 2002).
13. There is, however, evidence that private security has a much longer (albeit 'hidden') history than contemporary public police forces (Johnston, 1992). Up until the 1970s/1980s, security guards operated on a much smaller scale, for example as 'in-house' personnel for large banks or petrochemical industries.

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