

# 'Be Nice': the training of bouncers

Stuart Lister, Philip Hadfield, Dick Hobbs and Simon Winlow describe the training of those whose job it is to contain violence.

The dramatic expansion of the night-time economy has led to a surge in demand for the private policing services of licensed premises security or 'bouncers' (Hobbs et al., forthcoming). Tasked with the 'dirty work' of regulating behaviour within pubs and clubs, bouncers are often accused of being 'a law unto themselves', thus highlighting some inter-related, core criminological issues concerning their occupation. It intimates first, their high level of personal discretion and secondly, the sovereignty of self-serving processes of accountability: processes that are anchored to peer group custom rather than formal or legal mechanisms (Stenning, 1995). Both of these issues enable and oblige bouncers to seek recourse to private rather than public systems of justice. As such, customer and peer disputes are routinely settled informally, too often within the physical realms of 'retributive justice' (Lister et al., 2000). Occupational licensing, externally imposed upon large sections of the industry over the last decade, provides a regulatory mechanism designed to counter this absence of legal accountability and thereby increase public confidence in the trade. There are two end-point requirements of the licensing process: vetting criminal records and training course attendance; this article focuses exclusively upon the latter.

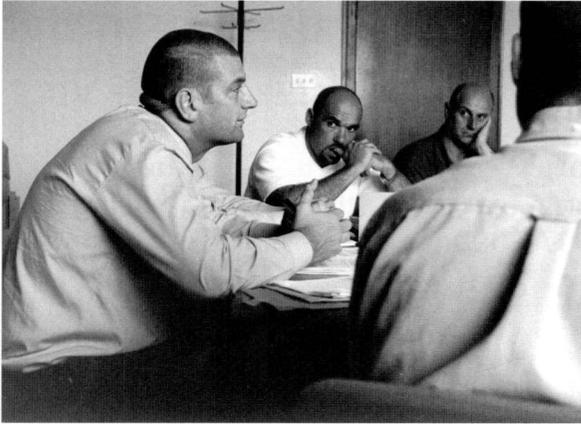
## Required training?

Training arrangements vary significantly across autonomous, municipal licensing districts. Courses must be 'recognised' by local authorities and to this end, some organise their own or out-source to training bodies. Others set up an internal market or 'approval list', mostly comprising of local

educational colleges and private companies. The localised structure of training fragments the market's supply side, a situation groomed by the long absence of effective, centralised coordination. Subsequently, costs vary between £5 and £375, dependent upon course option and provider, though the mean is approximately £80. Course duration also fluctuates between five hours and five days, with the majority providing twelve hours, which we argue is insufficient. Such variance leads to wide inconsistencies within the design, delivery and, therefore, quality of courses. Importantly, courses are customarily chosen and paid for by the individual bouncer rather than the employer. Bouncers interviewed during our recent research indicated that formal training does not increase earnings potential and is commonly regarded as an obligatory chore of little direct relevance to their work. Consequently, the least time-consuming and inexpensive training option is usually preferred. This is a telling feature, for it signifies the function of training as a means to an end (i.e. training to obtain a licence), rather than of intrinsic value in itself (i.e. training as investment). Vested interests within the marketplace ensure that training is packaged and sold as the cornerstone of the drive to professionalise the trade (Lister et al., forthcoming). Yet, given that complaints surrounding bouncers tend to centre around 'what they do' as opposed to 'what they don't know', it is perhaps surprising that most courses focus almost entirely upon knowledge rather than skill-based learning. Although variance exists, most formats cover fire safety, first-aid, criminal, civil and licensing law and social conduct, and are delivered in a classroom-type environment often without completion assessments. Whilst knowledge of emergency procedures is important, this is generic, baseline information and all rather remote from the main concerns surrounding bouncers' 'problematic' activities. Although the better courses do include more occupation-specific modules on drugs awareness, diffusion of aggression, equal opportunities and search procedures, too many syllabi are indicative of top-down, externally imposed directives that fail to appreciate the inherent dangers of the role and, therefore, the need for intensive risk-management tuition. Whilst training allows interest groups to promote 'their' bouncers as 'fully trained,' realistically, the majority of courses leave them nominally trained. The big question hanging over training concerns the practical demonstration of control and restraint techniques. Because the vast majority of training is steered, if not delivered, by publicly accountable bodies, courses nearly always shy away from the issue. Understandably, there are



Graham Hill photos courtesy of ESRC Durham University Bouncers Study



real economic and moral concerns over perceptions of sanctioning physical force. The use of legitimate force is indeed a thorny issue, particularly when, within this context, it involves private operatives enforcing non-negotiable, commercial rules of the house. However, within the bouncer's enacted environment, lawful ejection and self-defense are routine activities. We argue there are crime prevention benefits to be gained from attempting to refine and manage the use of such force. This issue cuts to the core of why security is employed at licensed premises: bouncers may increasingly function as commercial gatekeepers, but ultimately they must be able to ensure the protection of customers. Whilst the practicality of bouncers' formal training may be questionable, its very existence has considerable rhetorical currency as part of a wider package of 'managerial' initiatives for the night-time city (Hadfield et al., forthcoming). However, like the 'door trade' itself, training provisions are gradually consolidating and quality assurance processes developing. It is hoped that once operational the Security Industry Authority, established by The Private Security Act 2001, will evaluate the current plethora of arrangements, assert uniformity of standards and procedure and consolidate further this fractious industry.

### Breaking the mould of occupational culture?

We view bouncer training in a similar light to police training: there exists a profound gap between the trained and lived realities of the role. Training is perceived as highly abstract, and - to all intents and purposes - fails to penetrate the norms and values deeply ingrained by workplace processes of socialisation. Indeed, attempts to challenge occupational culture are a resonant training feature. Thus 'students' are encouraged to engage with the public justice system rather than resolving matters privately (Shearing and Stenning, 1983), an aim implicit in the teaching of criminal law, which includes legal definitions of 'reasonable force' and

'powers of arrest'. The latter instruction is intended to facilitate 'holding' suspects and invoking police intervention - procedures far removed from the traditional, heavy-handed 'back-alley' disposal. Although there is evidence that some bouncers now work more closely with the public police, the extent to which they can be persuaded to adopt processes of public rather than private justice remains suspect. Training provides only guidance rather than instruction and private security in the form of bouncers will always put commercial accountability ahead of legal accountability. Given that the Criminal Justice and Police Act (2001) provides new police powers to order the immediate closure of licensed premises in the event of disorder, strong pressures remain for bouncers to maintain an isolated detachment from formal processes of public law enforcement.

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