

Why criminal justice scholars should study twenty-first century corporate security

Kevin Walby and Randy K Lippert explain the growth of corporate security and argue that there is a troubling lack of accountability



Corporate security is a practice and a concept that may not be familiar to criminal justice scholars and policymakers. Yet, it points to a form of regulation taking place in organisations all around the globe. Sometimes corporate security is referred to as in-house or industrial security. While corporate security might still conjure up the image of an ex-police officer hired to watch over employees and visitors from a dingy backroom, twenty-first century corporate security is increasingly central to organisations - high-tech, and professionalised. And its effects are farther reaching.

Corporate security's goals and practices contrast with those of contract security firms offering guard services strictly for profit, and are dissonant too from an understanding of policing as a public good. But inside their host organisations, corporate security personnel are equally or even more influential than public police, for reasons explored below.

The corporate security model involves centralised management of access control, physical security, personnel security, and information security inside organisations (Petersen, 2013). It entails investigating employees, regulating facility access, designing secure building layouts, monitoring assets, protecting executives, and preventing corporate espionage. Corporate security does all this in-house, which Challenger (2006) aptly calls 'the

corporate security smorgasbord'. Corporate security units conduct these diverse tasks solely to protect their host organisations and promote their goals.

The model of in-house corporate security, associated with the Ford Motor Company in the early twentieth century, is now a cornerstone of the biggest corporations on the planet. Corporate security units around the world seek to manage reputational, financial, and physical risks. The stakes are high. Corporate losses resulting from theft of trade secrets each year are immense, especially where corporate security is underdeveloped. Corporate security is professionalising too due to the growing efforts of associations like ASIS International. ASIS International has global aspirations with numerous local chapters in countries across the world (the UK chapter has 750 of the 38,000 ASIS International members) and established credential programmes. Below we explore these developments and explain why criminal justice scholars should consider them further.

Our research

Little scholarly attention has been paid to corporate security, and what is available tends to be mostly aimed at security managers rather than the

broader academic, policymaker, and public readerships. We call corporate security the forgotten third of the security world because it is estimated it makes up more than one-third of the security industry (Nalla, 2005).

The focus of our own research is the transfer of the corporate security model developed in private companies to municipal or local governments. Specifically, our research explores establishment of municipal corporate security (MCS) units in Canada and the USA since the late 1990s. Municipal corporate security units use security techniques and

logics drawn from the private sector, but their budgets are drawn mostly from local government tax revenues. These offices provide security for City Halls, recreational facilities (e.g. pools, libraries), and other government-operated sites. The properties and buildings for which MCS units provide security and conduct threat assessments can number in the several hundreds. These municipal security personnel oversee CCTV and other surveillance systems at facility entrances, parks and other recreational areas. They engage in law enforcement and investigate municipal employees as well as provide personnel and building security. Much of this is clandestine, mirroring how private sector corporate security regulates

Corporate security units conduct these diverse tasks solely to protect their host organisations and promote their goals

employees, clients, and spaces in private corporations.

Corporate security creep, security credentialism, and the new keys to the city

The literature on public police and private contract security is insufficient to theorise developments in twenty-first century corporate security. We have, therefore, introduced three new terms. First, as noted above, there has been an emergence of corporate security in municipal or local, as well as higher levels of government in Canada, the USA, and beyond. We refer to this policy transfer as 'corporate security creep'. This process refers not only to corporate security's almost imperceptible growth within and movement up organisational ladders, which Challinger (2006) describes as the embedding of corporate security. It also points to corporate security model transfer to ever more organisations, including public bodies, across the world. If it was possible, at the end of the twentieth century, to write about the 'rebirth' of contract private security guarding or policing (Johnston, 1992), then the beginning of the twenty-first century is witness to corporate security's steady expansion into a distinctive, prominent model of security provision.

Second, corporate security personnel possess a type of training and expertise that differs significantly from that of public police or contract security personnel. These credentials are purchased from ASIS International and similar organisations through local chapters, seminars and training sessions. What we call the 'new security credentialism' refers to these commodities as well as to the growing sense of expertise and professional status that accompanies certification. Corporate security personnel, sometimes through their organisations, spend millions of

pounds on these credentials worldwide. As a result, corporate security personnel see themselves not as junior partners of public police, but rather as security leaders. The use of ASIS credentials to mark distinction in security networks is a key development. Other security associations compete with ASIS International with their own credentials and standards (Cubbage and Brooks, 2013), which further substantiates our claim about the role of credentials in

Corporate security personnel see themselves not as junior partners of public police, but rather as security leaders

professionalisation of corporate security. This new security credentialism fuels corporate security creep, providing corporate security personnel with cultural capital to advocate for more office space, technology, personnel, salary, and authority within organisations.

One consequence of these processes is what we call the 'new keys to the city'. The old keys to the city were over-sized symbolic tokens handed to esteemed visitors to signify openness. The new keys to the city are electronic ID swipe cards, assigned only to screened employees and visitors, and which must be continuously displayed to avoid suspicion from MCS staff now watching them in municipal buildings and urban spaces. Those without these keys are unable to access these areas and information.

Checkpoint monitoring

For employees, these keys must be swiped at new checkpoints established at computer control panels, at perimeters of buildings and recreational areas, and at other city properties. These keys are used to monitor and track productivity of those to whom they are assigned and control assets to which they are granted access. These new keys symbolise novel approaches to regulating local spaces, workers and residents alike, as well as an emergent model of urban governance based more on

corporate templates than some idea of transparent local government.

Why criminal justice scholars should study corporate security

Beyond the fact corporate security is a neglected realm of inquiry; we provide three additional reasons why criminal justice scholars should understand private and public sector corporate security developments. First, corporate security units hire contract private security firms to deal with more mundane guarding duties, which MCS personnel tend to view as lesser forms of security work, and are responsible for their practices. Second, corporate security units collaborate with public police. They share information about illegal activity and other conduct on municipal properties and sometimes call on public police to remove problematic employees who have broken the organisation's security protocol or have stolen assets. Third, as often, corporate security units use private justice to settle disputes and deal with losses inside their organisations.

Meerts (2013) has shown how corporate security units in private corporations use an array of sanctions from verbal cautions to dismissals to deal with employees suspected of engaging in such conduct. These units justify 'internal justice' by suggesting public police do not have the investigative skills for such work or would draw unwanted attention, thus increasing reputational risk for the organisation. Our research examines how public sector corporate security units investigate and monitor employees and citizens using municipal buildings and spaces to prevent violence and theft, as well as manage public protests and media coverage.

Transfer of the corporate security model to public bodies and governments raises conceptual and empirical questions for criminal justice scholars about changes in the security industry, and in government. It also invites queries into the accountability of corporate security personnel. Accountability means being answerable to others for one's

actions. The transfer of the corporate security model to the public sector has occurred without the development of oversight mechanisms in municipal or higher levels of government. Here it is present, beyond the purview of elected officials, and clear of the narrow demands and poor enforcement associated with state regulatory licensing. With corporate security units in the private sector, the public has no say over when their activities go beyond their organisation's domain either. We thus see an accountability deficit with corporate security in all its forms. We are not suggesting a mechanism like police boards or

*We see an
accountability deficit
with corporate security
in all its forms*

civilian oversight would necessarily improve accountability, as these mechanisms have consistently proven to be of limited efficacy in relation to public policing. The idea of special public directorships applied to organisations may be one option. What is certain is that twenty-first century corporate security is so uniquely positioned in organisations, and spreading so rapidly, that criminal justice scholars, policymakers, and organisational leaders will need to innovate to improve accountability. ■

Kevin Walby is Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, University of Winnipeg. **Dr Randy K Lippert** is Professor of Criminology, University of Windsor, Canada.

References

- Challenger, D. (2006), 'Corporate Security: a Cost or Contributor to the Bottom Line', in Gill, M. (ed.), *Handbook of Security*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Cabbage, C. and Brooks, D. (2013), *Corporate Security in the Asia-Pacific Region: Crisis, Crime, and Misconduct*, Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Johnston, L. (1992), *The Rebirth of Private Policing*, London: Routledge.
- Meerts, C. (2013), 'Corporate Security – Private Justice? (Un)settling Employer-Employee Troubles', *Security Journal*, 26(3), pp. 264-279.
- Nalla, M. (2005), 'Assessing Corporate Security Departments' Internal Relationships and Linkages with Other Business Functions', *Journal of Security Education*, 1(1), pp. 29-40.
- Petersen, K. (2013), 'The Corporate Security Professional: a Hybrid Agent between Corporate and National Security', *Security Journal*, 26(3), pp. 22-235.

A call to action

The harms women face are widespread yet consistently ignored. Many criminal justice interventions and support services serve to replicate and reinforce unequal gender relations rather than tackle the root causes of harm. Women facing criminalisation and gender based violence are repeatedly failed by society.

We need to think about and develop social interventions that get to the root of these problems. We are calling on others to work with us to challenge structural inequality and eradicate punishment and control in women's lives. We want to start talking about and acting in ways to:

EMPOWER women.
RESIST injustice.
TRANSFORM lives.

Equality benefits everyone. By speaking together in greater numbers our voices will be stronger. Help to build a collective confidence and critical mass for change.

We have big ambitions, but limited resources. We are seeking ways to build this initiative and work with others to inspire the radical and urgent change needed for women.

**If you want to support our call, make a pledge, spread the word and find out more about the thinking behind the initiative, then visit the project page:
www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/justice-matters-women**