

Working as a Security Guard in Western New York Owen Field

Introduction

Being a security guard is something to be proud of. A security guard protects people, and the job can be challenging and even dangerous. Guards have to be licensed, and there are certain safety measures and skills that they have to learn. Security guards can save lives, stop terrorism, and make entire neighborhoods feel more comfortable. Under the right circumstances, security can make a good career. There can be opportunities for increased rankings and advancements, and security guards may go on to start their own contracted security companies.

What seems incongruous, however, are the low wages that security guards are often paid despite the importance of their jobs. Too many jobs in the field pay wages below a living wage and offer no opportunity for advancement.

Who is Jeff?

Jeff is a hospital public safety officer for the Erie County Medical Center. His position is now part of public safety, but his job used to be part of a security department. His experience gives him valuable insight on the differences between both situations. Jeff has a wife and a baby on the way.¹

Jeff is not a complainer. Throughout our interview he alluded to several challenges he faces in his line of work but recognizes he is “happy just to be employed.”



What does a security guard do?

According to the Standard Occupational Classification System, the duties of a security guard include to guard, patrol, or monitor premises to prevent theft, violence, or infractions of rules. The term actually covers a wide range of possible occupations varying in required training, wages, opportunity for advancement, and risk. Security guards could be in-house, hired directly by private companies or developments, or they could work for security companies that contract out to other private companies.

Security guards can be para-police, hired for different reasons to assist the police such as through investigation. They can be hired by government agencies to protect agency properties such as hospitals or social service departments.

Security guards may stand on their feet all day long, or patrol around on foot or in cars. They may stare at a monitoring television or make sure people do not cheat at a casino. They often have to interview witnesses and testify in court. They write extensive reports about their shifts and the related happenings.ⁱⁱ



According to Jeff, in the scope of his job he “inspects buildings and grounds for potential fire hazards, conducts searches of the facilities when threatening situations occur, such as bomb threats, amber alerts and absconding psych patients.” These are important life saving tasks.

During the years following the attacks of 9/11, the Congressional Research Service recognized the importance of security guards in critical areas and identified that it is possible that the low wages and high turnover of security guards was a potential source of weakness in the field.ⁱⁱⁱ

What kinds of risks do security guards really face?

The rate of fatal injuries to security guards in 2007 was 9.4 out of 100,000 workers.^{iv} Although this may seem like a small percentage, it is more than twice the rate of 3.8 out of 100,000 fatal injuries for all workers. What is worse, 51% of these fatalities were a result of homicides.

Interestingly, nonfatal injuries for which days of work were missed occurred for 107.8 in 10,000 security guards in 2007, which is less than the 122 out of 10,000 rate for all workers. Maybe this is due to the stationary nature of guards’ work, or maybe it is related to an increased resolve and seriousness towards their work. The good news is that conditions are improving; fatalities in the field declined 23% in 2008.^v

Jeff, soon to be a family man, has become increasingly aware of these risks. “I will probably think more conscientiously about my safety as I perform my job.”

How much do security guards make?

Wages will depend heavily on the type of security guard you are and who you work for. You also will make significantly more as an armed security guard because of the higher level of training required and increased dangers.

For a security guard, the mean hourly wage nationally is \$12.42 (\$25,840 a year). The median nationally is \$11.28/hour (\$23,460/year) with the bottom 25% making less than \$9.21/hour (less than \$19,150/year).^{vi}

In New York State these numbers rise slightly to a mean of \$13.58/hour (\$28,250/year). In New York state, security guards represent 1.161% of the state's employment.^{vii}

In western New York the mean hourly wage is lower than what it is for the state and the country at \$11.54/hour (\$24,000/year). That means that 25% of the field are receiving less than \$8.37/hour (\$17,410/year) and 10% receive less than \$7.60/hour (\$15,800/year). Security guards represent 3580 people in the local workforce.^{viii}

Jeff confirms that "NYS Security and Armed Security Officers are way under paid in my opinion." The change to from security to public safety that his department went through meant an improvement on wages, though. "Once you obtain a NYS Peace Officer or Police Officer status, the pay considerably increases." The private security guard industry is a highly cost competitive business.^{ix}

What does it take to be a security guard?

In New York State, in order to be a security guard you must acquire a security guard license according to the Security Guard Act of 1992. The training is not too extensive.

Below is an example of the different training courses offered at Buffalo Security & Investigation, a private security company that also offers the New York State training.



Classes offered:

- 8 hour Pre-Assignment- \$55.00
- 16 hour On-the-Job Training- \$90.00
- 47 hour Firearms Training- \$425.00
- 8 hour Annual In-Service- \$55.00
- 8 hour Annual Firearm Training- \$100.00^x

In most places in order to be a security guard you cannot have committed a serious crime.^{xi} For information on New York Licensing requirements see <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/olcny/secuguard.shtm>. As of August 11, 2008, there were 139,990 active licenses outstanding for this occupation.^{xii}

Jeff believes this training should be increased. “Training, training and more training is the most important thing we need in this field.”

Do security guards have an incentive to perform well?

According to Jeff, “From a department standpoint, I don't think my fellow officers have an incentive to perform above their duties.” Jeff instead turns to his religion as a source of motivation to do the best job he can “But for me, my incentive is to glorify God while performing my job.”

Are there opportunities for advancement?

Because of the flexible hours and easy training requirements, the job attracts many people looking for a second job or part time work.^{xiii} In 2008, about 16 percent of security guards and gaming surveillance officers worked part time.

The good news is that security guards are in a growing industry; needs have been increasing, and more people are choosing to rely on security guards as opposed to traditional police.^{xiv}

In some cases, particularly at larger organizations, guards may become supervisors or managers. In a few cases, guards become owners of their own contract security agencies.^{xv}

On the other hand, advancements often do not reap significant financial rewards. Only 10% make at least \$16.80/hour (\$34,980/year) or more in Buffalo.^{xvi} That

does not provide much incentive to “reach the top” if you are a security guard in Buffalo.

When asked if there were sufficient opportunities for advancement for security guards Jeff replied “No. There is presently one type of advancement and that is possibly becoming a Supervisor.” He said that the change in the department to public safety did make things a little better. “There are a few other law enforcement agencies that we could laterally transfer over to. Other than that, that’s about it.”



What needs to improve for security guards?

Even though training is not extensive, security guards play important roles, and mistakes on the field can have grave consequences including theft, vandalism, or injury. Companies should not be able to underpay security guards just because they do not have representation. Jeff said that a needed change is “being paid fair for the sacrifices we are willing to make when performing our job.” Jeff says that the worst part of his job is “being spit on by a prisoner or patient during an altercation [and] getting no respect for what we do.”

A related issue for security guards is the increasing frequency with which companies contract out security instead of hiring their own people. Although this practice may improve a company’s income statement, it is worsening conditions for security guards since staff guards are paid 25% more than contracted guards.^{xvii}



Around 35.6% of the protective services field is unionized^{xviii}, but the expansion of these unions could be the key to getting better wages. Jeff is fortunate to be part of the AFSCME Union, Local 1095. “The union fights for our health benefits, pay raises, retirement funds and job security.”

There has been movement on this front in New York City where the SEIU (Service Employee’s International Union), “Local 32BJ” believes security guards should earn \$2.10/hour more and get paid a minimum of \$14.35 an hour instead of earning as little as eight or nine dollars an hour.^{xix}

Local 32BJ also wants to make it so security guards can make as much as \$19.02 an hour. The union Local 32BJ president Michael Fishman believes, “we must transform dead-end security jobs into careers that can support working families,”^{xx} Local 32BJ has also done a lot of work in the DC area, where the union now represents over 10,000 security guards in the area who earn at least \$12.40 an hour.^{xxi}

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- ⁱ Personal Communications on 3/28/2010
- ⁱⁱ Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008-2009 Edition*. Child Care Workers. Retrieved on March 23, 2010 from <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos170.htm>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Parfomak, Paul W., “Guarding America: Security Guards and U.S. Critical Infrastructure Protection,” November, 2004. Library of Congress. Retrieved on March 30, 2010 from <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/RL32670.pdf> p 17.
- ^{iv} Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Security Guard Fact Sheet, Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities*. Retrieved on March 23, 2010 from <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/7960521/Security-Guards-Fact-Sheet-on-Injuries-Illnesses-and-Fatalities>.
- ^v “Fatal Work Injuries Dropped 10% in 2008; Down 20% in Construction.” *Insurance Journal*, August 20, 2009. Retrieved on March 30th from <http://www.insurancejournal.com/news/national/2009/08/20/103185.htm>.
- ^{vi} Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2008.” Retrieved on March 23 from <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes339032.htm>.
- ^{vii} id
- ^{viii} id. *see* downloadable excel sheet
- ^{ix} <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/RL32670.pdf> at p18
- ^x <http://www.bflosecurity.com/security-guard-training/>
- ^{xi} <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/olcny/secuguard.shtm>
- ^{xii} Id
- ^{xiii} Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008-2009 Edition*. Child Care Workers. Retrieved on March 23, 2010 from <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos170.htm>
- ^{xiv} <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/lswage2.asp>
- ^{xv} id
- ^{xvi} <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes339032.htm>
- ^{xvii} <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/RL32670.pdf>
- ^{xviii} <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>
- ^{xix} Greenhouse, Steven. “Office Security Guards Reach Union Accord.” *NY Times*, June 25, 2008. Retrieved on March 23, 2010 from <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/06/25/office-security-guards-reach-union-accord>
- ^{xx} Id.
- ^{xxi} “Security Guards Get Union Contract” *Washington Post*, April 14, 2008. Downloaded at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/13/AR2008041301764.html>