

Private security industry puzzle

The industry cannot resolve our crime situation and has problems but also has untapped potential

YELLOW-BIBBED private security guards ambling down a busy public road. Cash-in-transit guards tensely clutching their firearms while refilling an ATM in a shopping mall. Armed response vehicles cruising through dark suburban streets. Sponsorship logos of local private security companies displayed at public schools and parks.



Private security has become entrenched in our security landscapes – admittedly more in some spaces more than others. Yet, apart from recent debates about, or prompted by, the Private Security Industry Regulation Amendment Bill, which is still under discussion, very little attention is given to private security in comparison to, say, the South African Police Service (SAPS).

The fact remains that the industry, internationally and locally, is a multibillion-dollar industry – with guesstimates at \$165bn (R1.63 trillion) globally and R50bn locally. According to the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA) there are more than 9 000 security businesses registered and at least 2 million registered security guards, both active and inactive.

The industry is incredibly diverse – from highly specialised services offered, such as close protection services and special events consultancies to mundane activities of, for instance, static guarding. And the industry is ever-expanding. For instance, more than 80 000 applications for registration as a security service officer were received by PSIRA in the 2011/12 financial year. This is more than half of the total number of sworn police officers in the SAPS. The industry is also increasingly operating in public spaces – consider for instance, its role in city improvement districts. This raises particular issues in terms of regulation when private security becomes the forefront of interaction with the public.

So in light of what we know about the industry – which admittedly is very little. What do we want from private security? The best way to answer this, is perhaps to ask what we don't want. We don't want the industry to operate un- or under-regulated, given the fact that according to PSIRA statistics, about half of businesses provide armed response or cash-in-transit services. We don't want the industry to contribute to crime because of the criminality of its own personnel who enter or stay in the industry with criminal records. We also don't want the industry to be a clone of state

policing nodes and I will argue this point in a moment. We especially don't want the industry to contribute to the problem of inequality, which seriously undermines our desire for a free, just and democratic society.

The Private Security Industry Regulation Amendment Bill speaks of promoting crime prevention partnerships between the industry and other security role players. We therefore seem to have shifted somewhat to a more optimistic role that private security can play in making South Africa safe (or perhaps it's desperation). By legislating the need for partnerships we are opening up a new future for private security in this country. This is not to say that partnerships do not already exist - far from it - it is to say that formalising partnerships will require us to seriously think about the dream we are aspiring towards in making South Africa safe.

As mentioned, we do not want private security to be a clone of the police. Why? Because a good way to resolve the crime issue is not necessarily more state police, more arrests and more prisons (although there are clearly benefits to this) but, according to world renowned criminologist, Prof Clifford Shearing, we need a whole- of-society approach to making South Africa safe. This means that we want to reduce crime not only through punishment but by attempting to solve the problem of crime in a more holistic way to prevent its recurrence.

This will require drawing in everyone who can contribute to resolving that problem. For instance, who knows more about street gangs than the communities in which they operate, mothers of gangsters, the street gangs themselves? Who knows more about bank fraud than banks? Who knows more about cybercrime than hackers, internet service providers and users?

I am not saying we should collaborate with the very people contributing to crime, or that state policing knowledge is not needed or relevant. I am simply making the point that knowledge about the crime problem is not necessarily vested in one agency, but in a range of institutions, companies and communities. The trick is to draw on and mobilise this knowledge as well as local capacities to be able to solve the problem of crime. And private security has a range of knowledge and capacities that can be drawn on which, I argue, can complement state policing rather than duplicate it.

Private security should be mobilised to contribute to our ways of thinking about and acting on crime challenges rather than simply used to boost the numbers of the state police who think and act in specific ways.

Yes, private security can be a force multiplier but it can also be so much more. The challenge is to be able to draw on its strengths and regulate its weaknesses. The challenge too is to be able to mobilise the industry to contribute to a safer, more equitable and just South Africa given its nature as a forprofit entity. So how do we get this? Dialogue with the industry is a starting point - who alone but the industry knows what incentives will drive it to perform whole- of-society functions?



Much of our future engagement with private security also depends on our attitudes towards it. Instead of viewing the industry as a panacea or a problem, perhaps we should simply view it as a relatively untapped potential. It is not a panacea, it cannot resolve our crime problem and although it has problems, I don't think it is a problem. Julie Berg is a senior lecturer in the department of public law and a member of the Centre of Criminology at the University of Cape Town