



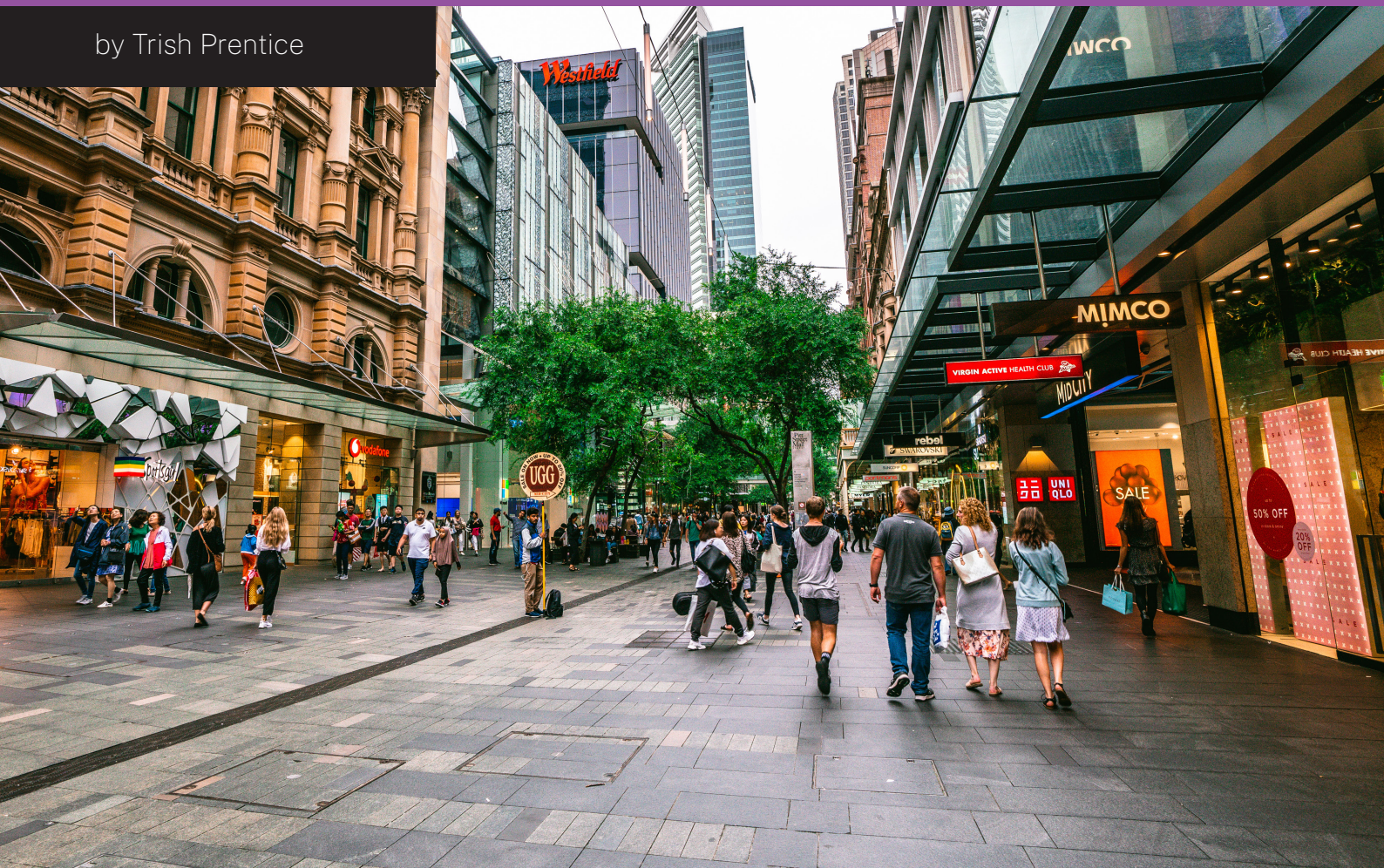
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Behind the scenes:

The essential work of security officers in ensuring public safety

by Trish Prentice





The author

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Content warning: this publication contains references to and descriptions of violence. Reader discretion is advised.

On 13 April 2024, Australia was confronted with the news that multiple people had been attacked by a knife wielding man at a Bondi Junction shopping centre, just near Sydney's eastern beaches. The shocking nature of the incident was magnified not only by the grievous nature of the attack, seemingly targeting women, but the place where it occurred – a Westfield shopping complex. The ordinary nature of the location caused a shockwave through Australian communities, with the realisation that even during the middle of the day in such a familiar environment, it might be possible to be confronted with armed violence.

As more details emerged, we learned of the heroes who confronted the perpetrator. Among them was Faraz Tahir, one of the centre's security guards, who went to the aid of the victims and lost his life. The actions of Tahir and his colleague Muhammad Taha, who was also on duty at Westfield at the time, provided a rare positive focus on an occupation often marred by negative press.

The security sector is often maligned for its failings, yet it is playing an increasingly important role in ensuring public safety and security alongside the police and military. This essay reflects on the contributions of this growing industry through the lens of social cohesion. How does public safety facilitate social cohesion and how does the protection of public spaces build social connection and community strength? While the impetus for these reflections arose some time before the Bondi Junction stabbings, the attack underscored the importance of the security sector in ensuring public spaces are open, accessible and safe. Australia's security officers are crucial to these efforts.

The Bondi Junction stabbings

The Bondi Junction stabbings, as we now know them, took place at Westfield Bondi Junction, a sprawling, multi-floor retail complex, like many found in

Australian suburbs. The centre is home to a variety of popular retailers, as well as supermarkets, a food court and cinema. It is a place where thousands of Sydney-siders comfortably spend time over the weekend, browsing the shops, grabbing a quick bite to eat or catching a movie. The wide, bright open spaces, bustle of other shoppers and enclosed nature of the space add to a feeling of safety. Security is both visible, with guards present in several locations, and concealed, in the form of closed-circuit television monitoring. It is not a place where most people would expect danger.

On the Saturday afternoon in question, it is believed that the perpetrator entered the complex with a knife and began indiscriminately attacking passersby. The commotion drew security officers Faraz Tahir and Muhammad Taha to the scene. Faraz, a recent arrival to Australia, was working his first day shift as a security officer when he confronted the attacker. He was stabbed and later succumbed to his injuries. Muhammad was also wounded. Afterward, both men were hailed as national heroes who had selflessly put their lives on the line to protect others. Muhammad received permanent residency and a personal message of gratitude from the Prime Minister, who stated, "These are people who were ... putting themselves in danger in order to protect Australians

who they didn't know. This is the sort of courage we want to say thank you to. It's a bit of light in amongst the darkness".¹

In the week following the Bondi attacks, public safety continued to remain a national concern. A few days later, a high-profile Assyrian bishop was stabbed at a Sydney church while conducting his regular live-streamed service. The 16-year-old perpetrator was subdued by the congregants until police arrived. Reports followed of another three unrelated stabbing attacks across Sydney in proceeding days:² the stabbing death of a surfer on a Coffs Harbour beach on 2 May,³ a teenager attacking a man with a knife in a Bunnings car park in Perth on 4 May and another stabbing death in Melbourne's northeast on 5 May.⁴

At the same time, fear and anger about violence against women boiled over into the public sphere, sparked by the death of Samantha Murphy, a Victorian woman who was seemingly taken against her will by a man unknown to her while out running.

Not since the terrorism fears of the 2000s has Australia been so conscious of public safety. The unprecedented and apparently arbitrary nature of these attacks has led to a new level of public concern. It has also sparked calls for new measures to increase public security, from extra police powers to arming security guards. Some commentators have argued for a complete reassessment of security in public places.⁵

Australians' perceptions of safety

Safety is something Australians usually feel they can take for granted. The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's Mapping Social Cohesion study reported that in 2023, most people (64 percent) stated they feel safe (or at least fairly safe) walking alone in their neighbourhood at night. Almost all people (97 percent) feel safe at home, to some extent, during the day.⁶ Very few people, whether Australian-born or from migrant backgrounds feel worried about becoming a victim of crime in their local area (Figure 1).

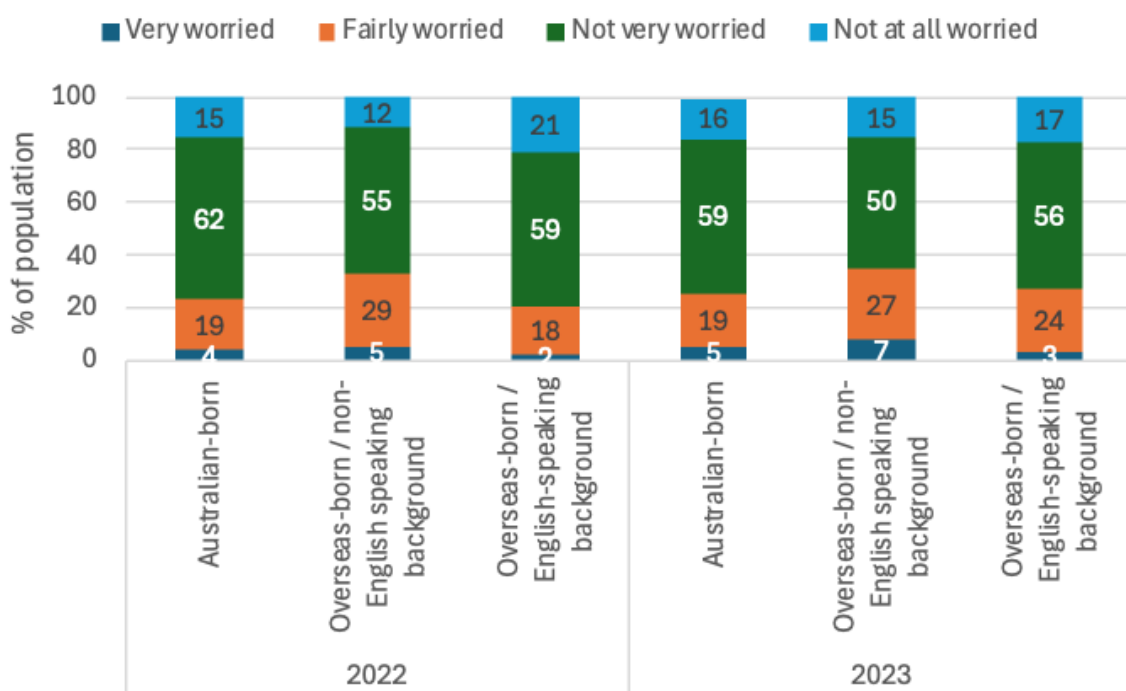


Figure 1 - Fear of becoming a victim of crime according to cultural/linguistic background (Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2023)

However, there are some caveats to this. As Figure 2 shows, individuals who were born overseas and who are from non-English speaking backgrounds tend to feel less safe than migrants from English-speaking backgrounds and those who were born in Australia.

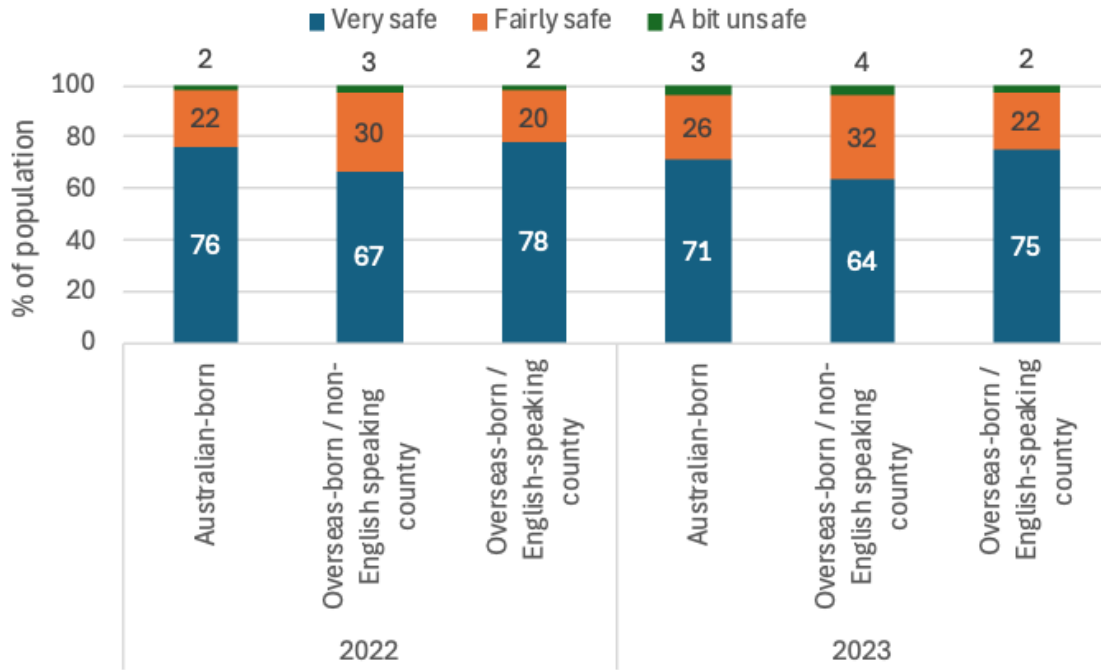


Figure 2 -Feeling safe at home during the day according to cultural/linguistic background (Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2023)

Notably, women tend to feel a lot less safe walking alone in their neighbourhood at night (Figure 3).

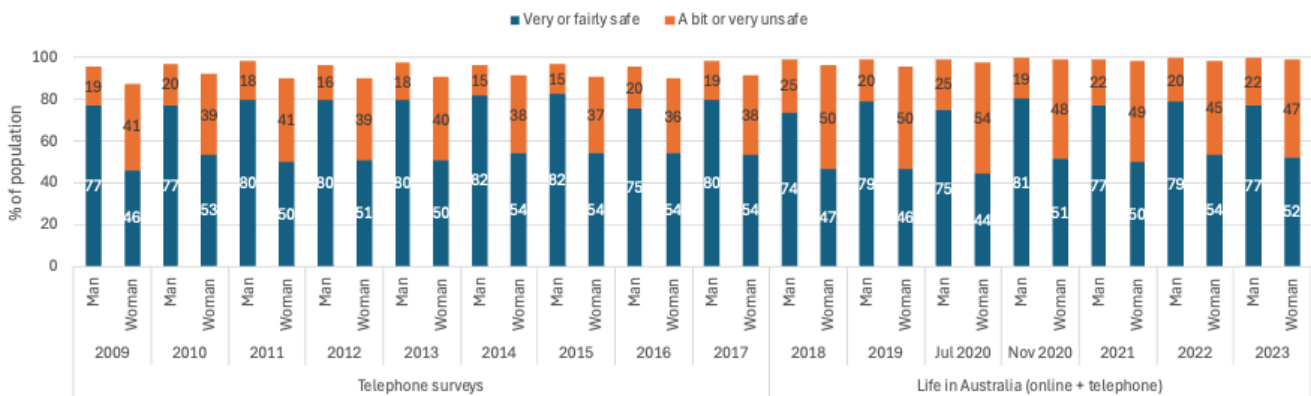


Figure 3 -Feeling safe walking alone at night according to gender (Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 2023).

Yet overall, perceptions of safety in Australia tend to be positive.

Who keeps Australians safe?

In Australia, public safety is the responsibility of different bodies. The police often play the most visible, frontline role, responding to community safety concerns, resolving disputes, attending accidents and attending critical incidents and emergencies.⁷ Each police force operates under state/territory jurisdiction, with separate divisions focussing on specific areas. For example, Victoria Police’s Protective Services Unit provides specialised security services on public transport and at major events.⁸

Other functions fall under the national powers of the Australian Federal Police (AFP), particularly when they relate to organised or transnational crime or complex, cross-jurisdictional matters. The AFP also employs protective service officers in frontline roles. These officers provide uniformed security at Parliament House and defence sites and are trained to respond to terrorism threats, violent protests and “other events motivated by violence.”⁹

The Australian Defence Force has also taken on a frontline community role in recent years, most visibly during national disasters¹⁰ and throughout Operation COVID-19 Assist. During this operation, personnel oversaw hotel quarantine and border controls¹¹ and, in some local areas, enforced lockdowns.¹²

Alongside these functions are security officers like Faraz and Muhammad, who work under the direction of private security firms. Approximately 13,000 private security firms operate in Australia, working under the licensing requirements of various state and territory bodies with input from the industry’s peak professional association, the Australian Security Industry Association Limited (ASIAL). These private

firms employ more than 160,000 individual licence holders nationally, a number that has increased across all states and territories except the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in the past 12 months.¹³ According to ASIAL, the number of licensed security officers and guards in Australia is likely to exceed 200,000 in the next five years,¹⁴ dwarfing the number of police officers and defence personnel combined.¹⁵

Today, it is more likely that most people will encounter security personnel rather than police officers as they go about their daily lives.¹⁶ This shift means that both the responsibility for public safety and the symbolic representation¹⁷ of law and order are increasingly falling onto the shoulders of private security.

The Australian security industry

The growth of the private security sector has been a worldwide phenomenon.¹⁸ While in the past, the police played a significant role in protecting resources and providing public safety, today, increasing demands



and decreasing governmental resources have created an environment where private security firms are taking on a larger role,¹⁹ sometimes even adopting quasi-police functions. This came to public attention recently when the Northern Territory (NT) government came under scrutiny for paying security guards to provide a law-and-order presence on its streets. The media reported that Territory Protective Services personnel were supporting the “overstretched NT police force,” managing areas “that police are unable to get to at any point in time.”²⁰ Critics pointed to the danger of this practice, noting that security personnel were effectively working as police but without the “legislative ability” or practical training to carry out the role.²¹

Even so, industry commentators suspect the practice is likely to continue, with security officers increasingly taking over more functions of the police in the future.²² In some jurisdictions, including shopping centres, work sites, transport hubs and leisure venues, security personnel already outnumber police by as much as two to one.²³

Despite its growing presence, the security industry tends to operate largely invisibly, often coming to public attention in the wake of a negative event or scandal. In recent months there have been media reports highlighting concerns about the powers of private security guards in Darwin,²⁴ unlicensed guards providing security for Taylor Swift during her Australian tour,²⁵ and excessive force used by a security officer at a self-service checkout in suburban Melbourne.²⁶ Common criticisms of the industry include untrained staff, poorly operated companies, inappropriate use of force by security officers and subcontracting issues. These concerns have led to several government inquiries into the industry.²⁷

In the broader context, the security sector works



within a challenging regulatory environment. Like other justice functions, administration is state- and territory-based,²⁸ which means that firms operate under different state legislation and function largely independently of each other, causing “significant variation between jurisdictions.”²⁹ There are differences in licensing requirements for officers and differences in training regimes, resulting in fragmentation in competency standards³⁰ – an issue the industry has urged the Federal government to address for almost two decades. Most regulatory reforms of the security sector haven’t been proactive, but rather driven by scandal.³¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, violence associated with crowd controllers led to new industry-specific legislation in Victoria, Queensland and the ACT. In the 2000s, a series of high profile incidents, including “deaths and numerous injuries caused by security officers, thefts of firearms from security firms, prisoner escapes, security breaches at major government sites, lax airport security, the involvement of security officers in smuggling at major airports, and infiltration of the industry by organised crimes gangs involved in extortion and drug supply”³² sparked another set of legislative changes designed to ensure officer integrity and improvements to training curricula.³³

High profile incidents such as these have done nothing to improve public perceptions of the sector. In addition to structural issues and different licensing systems, the security industry operates in a business environment largely based on contracting, which tends to drive wages down, encourage subcontracting³⁴ and lead to a highly casualised workforce.³⁵ As a result, personnel are often poorly paid and face job insecurity, experiencing what is known as “labour market disadvantage.”³⁶ High staff turnover plagues the industry³⁷ and there is a perception that security work is only a short-term job,³⁸ rather than a career path. Overall, security is often a poorly regarded occupation.³⁹ Yet, like most essential industries, it is only in times of crisis that we realise how dependent upon it we are.⁴⁰

Who are Australia’s security officers?

Australia’s security officers are typically young and culturally diverse. Statistics show most are between 25 and 34 years old,⁴¹ although there is a cohort who have come to the industry later in life as either a third or fourth career, or as a way of generating additional income.⁴² Most security officers are men, although about 20 percent are female,⁴³ and many are from migrant backgrounds,⁴⁴ either recent arrivals or international students on temporary work visas.⁴⁵ While the archetype of a security officer is often white and male, exuding latent brute force,⁴⁶ the workforce is actually more nuanced, with individuals from many different backgrounds and motivations drawn to the job. In the following section, several individuals currently working in the sector share their stories, explaining what drew them to the industry, what their roles involve, and what a typical day is like working on the frontline.



Nitin

Nitin came to the security industry relatively recently. He arrived in Australia from India just after the COVID-19 pandemic and was looking for work. Reaching out to a friend already working in the industry, he sought an interview and eventually secured a job as a casual security officer. Two-and-a-half years later, he is still working in the industry.

In this short time, Nitin has already held several roles. His first shift was a night patrol at a local business premises, where he was tasked with ensuring the building remained secure overnight. While the work can be risky, working alone, Nitin enjoys the quiet evenings and the sense of responsibility keeping the entire building safe.

Since then, Nitin has worked at various building premises and construction sites, hospitals, corporate Christmas parties, and even an animal hospital, where he can interact with the dogs during his breaks. It is the sheer variety of the work that keeps him engaged. Each day offers a different experience, involving work in different places and with different people.





Meer

Variety seems to be a strong drawcard for many working in the security sector. In Australia, the security industry encompasses protective, information and physical security, security governance, cyber security and personnel security,⁴⁷ all of which involve different environments and operating procedures. Those working casually may find themselves in a different location or environment every day of the week.⁴⁸

Meer is someone who has experienced much of what the industry has to offer. Since he started in security four years ago, he has worked as a retail guard checking customer bags at JB Hi-Fi, as a crowd controller at major events, including regular shifts at the AFL, and at several bars and nightclubs. Like Nitin, Meer was introduced to the industry through friends. He came to Australia as an international student from India to study graphic design. After struggling to establish himself in that career path, he drifted through a few different jobs before landing in security. Now he feels he is where he is supposed to be.

While Meer appreciates the variety of the work, it's the customer focus that drives him. He loves interacting with different people and trying to help others. Like Nitin, it's the sense of responsibility – except for Meer it is in relation to people's safety – that drew him in. The feeling of giving back to the community, of putting in "something more" than a normal customer service officer is required to, that he finds really interesting and motivating.

Meer recalls one of the most rewarding days on the job. He was stationed at a stadium in Geelong when a parent approached him, frantic because she had lost her six-year-old child. There was a big game that day, and the crowd was surging. The child had been swept up in the press of bodies and vanished from sight. The family was beside themselves, calling and screaming for the child; even the elderly grandparent was scouring the stands. Meer and the other guards quickly coordinated a response, sharing a description of the child around the ground. Thirty minutes later they had located him and returned the child to the family. Meer can't even put into words what he felt in that moment: "I can't even explain."



Cesar

Being on the frontline of a serious or life-threatening incident is a reality of working in the security industry. Cesar, who originally came from Chile, has been working in the industry much longer than Nitin and Meer. Over his 24 years on the job, he has worked as a retail security guard, on night patrols, in static armed work, in cash-in-transit, and as a control room operator. He's even done training working with dogs. Inevitably, he's seen a few things.

While he no longer works on the frontline, Cesar looks back on those times with fondness. Like Meer, he was drawn to customer interaction—he just loves hearing peoples' stories. He recalls the many times he helped elderly customers locate their vehicles in the multi-level carpark of a major shopping complex. For him, taking those extra two minutes to walk them back to their car, instead of just vaguely pointing out the direction, was the most rewarding: "It just makes their day," he says. "It makes my day as well."

During those years in retail, Cesar was called to attend four serious medical incidents. One particular event stayed with him. That day, he was thinking about grabbing some lunch when he received a call that a person had collapsed. He was the only guard stationed nearby. Calling for backup, he ran to the area and found a man collapsed on the floor, having trouble breathing. Cesar immediately started administering CPR, working on the man with the help of his colleagues until an ambulance arrived. They revived him. Although the man died in hospital several days later, their efforts meant that the family had time to say goodbye. They thanked him for the gift of that time afterward.

Today, Cesar draws on his extensive experience to mentor new security guards entering the industry. As a business manager for a medium-sized security firm, he oversees multiple contracts and manages stakeholder engagement. However, his true passion lies in working alongside other security officers. He loves interacting with "his guards," individuals from different cultures and backgrounds who seek his guidance on all kinds of situations. He draws on his own experiences and is able to say "Well, I've gone through that" and talk them

through what he did on the ground.

While Cesar recognises the value of formal training received by security officers – for him, it was the CPR training that “just kicked in” when he was called to revive the gentleman who had collapsed – he believes real-world experience is the greatest teacher. Both Nitin and Meer speak about the learning that occurs in the field, which teaches them “how to deal with the situations” (Meer), alongside respected experienced colleagues who are willing to give advice or just listen. “I discuss my incidents with my supervisor,” Nitin says. “And I ask them if I am correct here or wrong. If I’m wrong... I will be ready to tackle that situation next time...”



Naeem

The varied nature of security work means the sector draws people from different backgrounds and life experiences. This often sparks one of the main criticisms of the industry – whether security officers receive sufficient training to effectively handle the diverse environments and situations they encounter.⁴⁹ Yet, it is also a strength of the industry. There is room for diversity and for difference. As Cesar puts it, there’s space to try different things; “to grow and progress.”

Naeem, like Cesar, works as a business manager, which means a component of his work is managing and working with security officers on the frontline. He started in the industry as an international student at university. Being good with computers landed him a job as a control room operator. Over time, he moved to rostering and other managerial roles. Naeem says people come to the industry with very different skill sets and he loves the fact that his company is open to drawing upon “all the new stuff” people bring in.

With 14 years’ experience in the security industry, Naeem believes there is a suitable position for everyone and that each role attracts a “special kind of person” who embodies their unique passion.

“...Guys working in hospital spaces, the hospital security officers. You can offer them any corporate gig within the industry and they will say no to you purely because they are just so passionate about the health industry. They love to work day-to-day within the ER and the psych wards, with the nurses and doctors...

Similarly, you find officers working in the corporate sector. You can offer them anything and they just will not go. They're just people for that sector. They have a passion for working in a certain industry, at a certain level, at a certain place, dealing with certain types of situations. For example, a security officer working in a shopping centre.... they're helping people. There might be a medical emergency on site. Or they are dealing with troubled people. That's their niche. They enjoy that... and they're very proud about it. They know how to deal with those situations, how to work their protocol to save a certain shopkeeper from youth or troubled people vandalising it. Or how to stop a coffee shop owner being harassed....

You realise each sector has its own uniqueness and accordingly, we have people who love doing that piece. They're passionate about it.”

Security seems to be an industry that can accommodate a range of different people, many of whom differ from the stereotypical ‘archetype’ of a security officer.⁵⁰ With its strong migrant workforce, the security industry doesn't seem to suffer from the same lack of diversity that other sectors, like the police, struggle to address.⁵¹ Heterogeneity, whether stemming from cultural background or life experience, is an advantage the industry can harness. It “strengthens the sector's capacity to counter security threats and effectively protect...people, infrastructure and information.”⁵² It can also help to cement community trust, which occurs more readily when “people recognise values or characteristics they share with those protecting them.”⁵³ In the context of Australia's substantial and growing cultural and religious diversity, diversity is important for those institutions we are required to trust. And in critical situations, such as the incident at Bondi Junction, that trust can lead to lives being saved.

Mohammad

Risk is an accepted part of working in the security industry. All of the security personnel interviewed here have either personally experienced a situation where they felt at risk, or know someone who has been endangered. Nitin recalls a night shift working alone at a building site where a group of teenagers offered him money to let them “play” on the site. When he refused, the group left, only to return later to start breaking things. Despite their young age, he was significantly outnumbered – there were more than he could handle on his own. He sought help from the police who were stationed nearby.

Mohammad has worked as a security officer for several years and hasn't encountered any personal incidents in his roles at a weighbridge, as a property and warehouse security officer or as a building concierge. However, he knows colleagues who have faced dangers. For example, one of his friends was attacked during a night shift at a warehouse. A woman knocked on his car window, asking for a lighter, and when he wound it down to speak to her, her accomplice grabbed him around the neck. Another friend was punched in the face and lost two teeth by a woman stealing from Woolworths. Cesear, Meer and Naeem can each recount stories of the shoplifters,

vandals, drug-affected individuals and people with mental illness they (or others they know) have had to deal with. Recent media reports highlighting knife crime⁵⁴ have led to calls for better protective equipment and training for frontline personnel.

Mohammad says it's important not to be “a hero” in these situations. While it is his responsibility to fulfill his duties, whether protecting persons or property, there are prescribed limitations to his role. There are boundaries he must know and respect, which may involve putting his own safety first — like going to a safe place and calling triple zero. Physically restraining someone is permitted, and security officers are trained to do so, but it's not always the correct or the best response to a critical situation. This is something that comes with experience, says Mohammad, learning “not just to react” to what is happening around you.

Violent incidents involving security personnel are fortunately rare in Australia, but there are other challenges as well. More common is the general disregard shown by some members of the public towards security officers, ranging from muttered comments to explicit abuse. Meer often encounters comments like, “security guards are nothing... they are lazy... all they do is walk around...” Mohammad says you learn to just smile and say “thank you sir... thank you ma'am.” Each officer has ways of contextualising the negative experiences and focusing on the positive interactions, so they don't take them home after the shift ends.

Mohammad sees the value in responding pleasantly in the hope that the next time he meets the person, it will be reciprocated. “What you put into people is what you get back from them,” he says. For Mohammad, and others like him working on the front line, trust is mutual. While the public entrusts him with their safety, he also needs to trust them to feel secure — the relationship is reciprocal. Sociologists like Putnam (1993, 2000), Hardin (2002) and Fukuyama (1995) argue that these small daily incidences of trust-building play a critical role in societal functioning.⁵⁵ It is here that some of the “stickiness” of societal cohesion is set down.

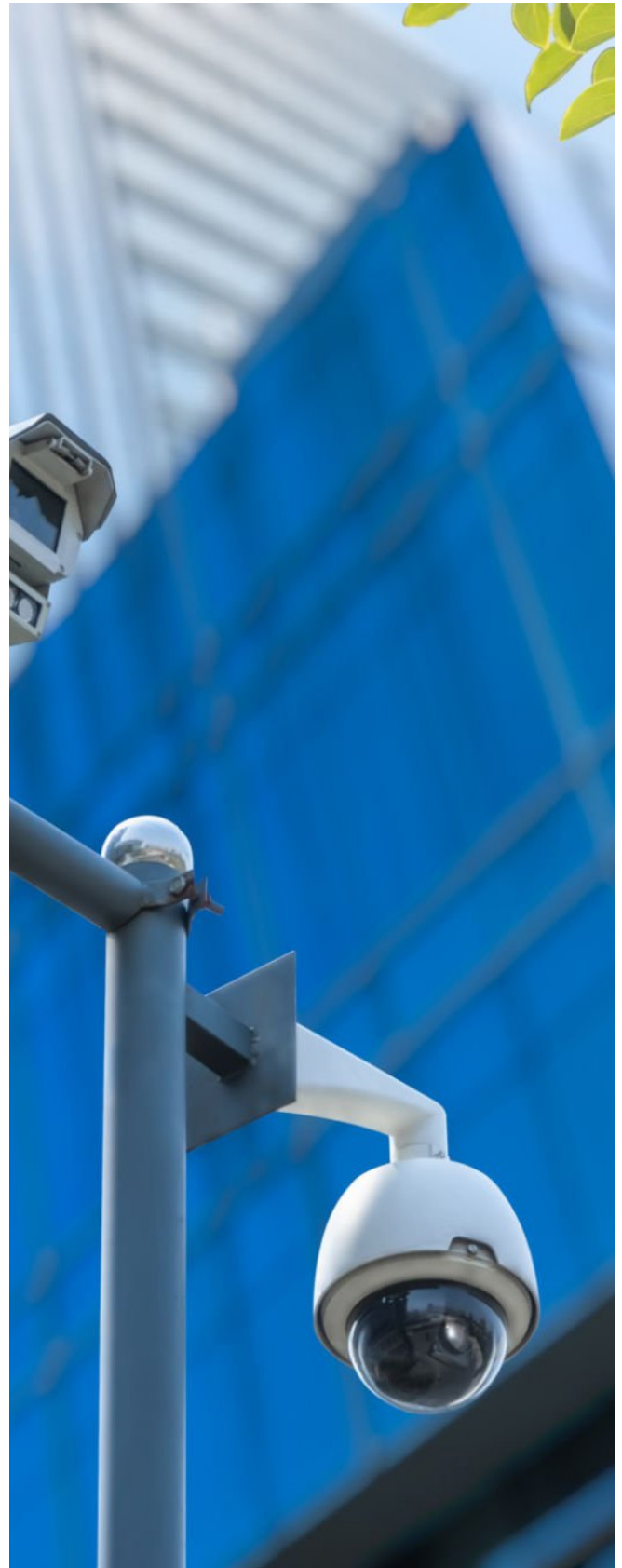


The relationship between safety, public spaces and social cohesion

Westfield Bondi Junction is a place where many residents of Sydney choose to spend leisure time on the weekend. Although privately owned, it functions like a public space⁵⁶ — a gathering place where “no one can be turned away.”⁵⁷ Public spaces play an important role in our neighbourhoods and communities, serving as physical and social hubs, bringing people together for leisure, cultural activities, relaxation and recreation.⁵⁸ Whether at beaches, parks, town squares or shopping centres, public spaces facilitate encounters with other people.⁵⁹ In public spaces, we can be taken from our familiar social circles to meet those we’d never usually come into contact with. Public spaces can play a role in broadening our horizons, in taking us out of our comfort zones.

Public spaces meet other needs too. They are thought to be crucial for community wellbeing.⁶⁰ They help us form attachments to our local area, which nurtures our sense of community and belonging.⁶¹ They are central to democratic life, providing a place where people can “speak out” or “be heard.” In public spaces, people can come together to celebrate, protest or even mourn.⁶²

What happens when public spaces are perceived to be unsafe? Research on this question tends to come from overseas, from places where crime or social disorder is more frequent, or where there is active conflict or civil unrest. However, there is a body of literature that looks at Western societies where public safety is a concern. In neighbourhoods in the United States, for example, researchers have found that where there are public safety issues, residents tend to avoid forming broad social networks and



withdraw into “closed relationships.”⁶³

It is here that perceptions of safety intersect with social cohesion. When people feel safe, they are more likely to “engage positively with one another,” establish social bonds, and participate in “collaborative efforts” that strengthen the community. They are also more likely to be active citizens⁶⁴ and participate in civil society.⁶⁵ Public safety is thus a cornerstone of social cohesion, fostering trust and unity in our communities, neighbourhoods and residential areas,⁶⁶ strengthening resilience and ultimately our prosperity.⁶⁷

Fortunately, incidents like the one at Westfield Bondi Junction are relatively rare in Australia. The attacks heightened awareness of public safety and raised questions about whether knife crime is increasing in the country.⁶⁸ But compared to other places, it seems Australians have little to fear. Yet the Bondi Junction stabbings also highlighted the crucial role that security officers play in ensuring public places are safe. When incidences like these occur in public places, these individuals – not police or the military – are often the frontline responders.

Australia’s security industry is frequently criticised for its failings, often rightly so. Nothing should diminish the acknowledgement or accountability when such failings occur. However, sometimes it takes an incident as grave as the Bondi Junction stabbings to highlight the unseen work of the men and women who are increasingly bearing the responsibility for keeping us safe. Many of these individuals are new Australians, carrying out their work with dedication in the place they have decided to call home. Their work makes a crucial contribution to our social cohesion and, as we have seen recently, often involves considerable risk. This is a timely

reminder to recognise their work. Without them, we would be much less safe. In the words of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese at Faraz’s funeral on 26 April 2024:

“Faraz Tahir gave everything to help others: his time, his energy, his optimism and dedication, his heart and his soul. And on that devastating Saturday afternoon at Bondi Junction, he gave his life. Running toward danger, to protect people he had never even met. Without doubt, he helped save lives that day. Without question, Faraz Tahir died a hero...”

Faraz Tahir counted himself lucky to have come to Australia. In truth, Australia was lucky to have him. He was grateful to Australia. Today.. our nation remembers his bravery...”

Let’s not take their bravery in ensuring our safety for granted.



Photo credit: Jeremy Piper / NewsWire / Newspix

End notes

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