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Critical Workers?

Private Security, Public Perceptions and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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This article is among the first to explore the role and status of the private security industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing on the UK case, it illustrates how even though most private security officers were designated as 'critical workers' in this time of crisis, performing a range of functions essential to national infrastructure and law and order, the public have been slow or reluctant to recognise the contribution of the sector. It argues that this disposition is reflective of a longstanding public ambivalence or unease towards the private security industry which can ultimately be traced to the state-centric sociological terrain of the policing field.

Introduction

In the UK, private security officers have performed a variety of frontline roles throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, such as: maintaining social order in hospitals, test centres, vaccination centres and supermarkets; protecting commercial premises, industrial estates and goods supply-chains; and supporting police patrols, custody suites and emergency call-outs. Soon after the country entered its first lockdown, the government recognised the importance of these roles by conferring 'critical worker' or 'key worker' status (the two are used interchangeably) upon private security officers

undertaking functions essential to national infrastructure and/or law and order, placing them on a much sought-after occupational pedestal alongside doctors, nurses, paramedics, police officers, fire fighters, teachers and the like. Unsurprisingly, industry stakeholders were quick to publicise this new-found standing, with companies, professional associations and regulatory agencies enthusiastically advertising the 'critical worker' status of these officers. Interestingly, though, few people appear to have been listening. This became all too apparent in a YouGov poll commissioned by leading industry bodies after the lifting of the first lockdown. It found that the contribution of private security officers had barely registered in the public consciousness – a stark contrast with the gratitude expressed towards most other 'critical workers' (YouGov 2020). In a climate where the public is keen to celebrate the efforts of those who have toiled on the frontline during the pandemic, why is it slow or reluctant to acknowledge the role of the private security industry?

The purpose of this article is to shed light on this question. It argues that the disposition captured by the YouGov poll is reflective of a longstanding public ambivalence or unease towards the private security industry which can ultimately be traced to the state-centric sociological terrain of the policing field. In essence, the buying and selling of security as a discrete commodity has a tendency to grate against the widespread societal expectation that law and order functions ought to be delivered as non-rivalrous, non-divisible public goods – a tendency which holds true for the pandemic. At the same time, the article contends that the eagerness of industry stakeholders to hype up 'critical worker' status in the sector represents the latest in a long line of attempts to use the symbolism of the state to legitimate this marketplace in the eyes of a sceptical public. The assumption here being that drawing attention to this state-endorsed occupational category would make the public better disposed towards

the industry – an assumption which proved to be false. With this analysis, the article makes two original contributions to policing scholarship. To begin with, it adds a new dimension to recent work on pandemic policing. While there is already a sizeable literature on the role and experiences of the police during Covid-19 (see: Wood and Griffin 2021), equivalent studies of private security are virtually non-existent – an increasingly conspicuous gap. Furthermore, it offers up a pertinent case to the more established but still unfolding work on public perceptions of private security (see: Aitken 2021) and the corresponding legitimation strategies deployed by the industry to elevate its societal standing (see: Puck and White 2022). The article thus speaks to both contemporary and long-running debates in policing scholarship.

The analysis develops over five sections. The next section reviews the literature on pandemic policing to reveal a blindspot when it comes to private security. The subsequent section provides historical context on the industry with an emphasis on legitimacy and public perceptions. The following two sections examine the role and status of frontline private security officers in the UK during the pandemic, looking first at the designation of 'critical worker' status, before turning to matters of legitimacy and public perceptions. In methodological terms, these two empirical sections draw upon publicly available qualitative and quantitative data generated by the government (in particular the Home Office and Security Industry Authority), private security industry (most notably the British Security Industry Association and large companies such as G4S, Securitas and Mitie) and analytics group YouGov. The final section reflects on the significance of these findings and sets out an agenda for questioning further the connections between private security and Covid-19.

Pandemic Policing

Writing just before the pandemic, Wood (2020) commented that while the relationship between the police and public health is receiving ever more scholarly attention, the connections between private security and public health are best described as 'neglected'. She goes on to lament this disregard, pointing out that the scattering of pieces which do examine these connections provide important insights as to how this marketplace can variously undermine or improve public health outcomes. When it comes to the emergent literature on pandemic policing, Wood's observations take on a somewhat prophetic quality. In the year and a half between the rapid spread of Covid-19 across the globe and the time of writing (September 2021), there has been an outpouring of work on pandemic policing. Policing scholars have been admirably swift in their response to the crisis. It is noticeable, however, that their attention has been almost exclusively focused upon the role and experiences of the police, with an emphasis on three core themes.

The first and most prominent theme relates to police enforcement of pandemic-related laws and regulations (such as lockdown restrictions) and public perceptions of and compliance with this enforcement (see: Biswas and Saltana 2020; Boon-Kuo et al 2020; Farrow 2020; Grace 2020; Jankovic and Cvetkovic 2020; Jiang and Xie 2020; Jones 2020; Ka-Ki Ho et al 2020; Luong 2020; Perry and Jonathan-Zamir 2020; Reicher and Stott 2020; Deckert et al 2021; McCarthy et al 2021; Mazerolle and Ransley 2021; Sargeant et al 2021; Scalia 2021; Terpstra et al 2021; Waseem 2021). The second theme concerns the police response to more established crimes and vulnerabilities within the context of the pandemic, such as domestic violence (Nix and Richards 2021; Walklate et al 2021; Workman et al 2021), mental health (Lersch 2020), cybercrime (Horgan et al 2021) and the production, supply and consumption of illicit drugs (Marks et al 2020; Trappen and McLean 2021). The third theme revolves around police

occupational culture and wellbeing during the pandemic (Rooney and McNicholas 2020; Stogner et al 2020; De Carmargo 2021; Fleming and Brown 2021; Kypriandes et al 2021). There is considerable geographical diversity on display throughout this literature, with case studies drawn from Australia, China, France, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, Serbia, the US and the UK, leading to the identification of manifold convergences and divergences. While taking stock of these trends would be an interesting and important exercise, it is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

The salient point here is that while policing scholars have already made significant headway into understanding the relationship between the police and Covid-19, they have continued to 'neglect' the connections between private security and Covid-19. Where issues relating to private security do come into frame, it is usually as a passing remark in a study about another aspect of the pandemic. For example, in their examination of community-level pandemic policing in New Zealand, Deckert et al (2021) note how private security officers have been used to quarantine refugees and overseas travellers in secure facilities and maintain order in Covid-19 testing centres (see also: Bozogmehr 2020; David and Mash 2020; Parker et al 2020; Smith 2020). The one exception is Leloup and Cools's (2021) investigation of private security and Covid-19 in Belgium, which brings to light a number of interesting dynamics, such as: the disruption of established markets, mostly notably in the transport, cash-in-transit and leisure subsectors; the emergence of new opportunities, especially health screening, the enforcement of social distancing and the provision of security in hospitals, vaccination centres and test centres; and the health risks to frontline officers. While this represents a welcome and valuable contribution, there remains a huge gap when it comes to understanding private security and Covid-19. We are still in the dark, for instance,

when it comes to the public perceptions of private security during the pandemic and the role of the UK industry in this time of crisis. These are the two gaps addressed over the following sections. To set up this analysis, it is first necessary to provide some historical context on the UK industry.

Private Security, Public Perceptions and Legitimacy

At first glance, the story of the UK private security industry over the past half century appears to be one of success. While estimates of size vary, in the mid-1960s the sector was comparatively small, playing host to roughly 10,000 private security officers engaged in guarding, patrol and cash-carrying services (White 2020a, p.89).[i] By March 2021, however, it had doubled in size many times over, counting no less than 364,040 licensed officers across seven frontline sub-sectors – cash and valuables in transit, close protection, door supervision, key-holding, public space surveillance, security guarding and vehicle immobilisation – not to mention tens of thousands more carrying out non-licensed frontline functions.[ii] This is more than twice the number of UK police officers, which in mid-2021 stood at 159,536.[iii] In the intervening decades, the industry had capitalised upon various market-expanding trends, such as: rising crime rates and feelings of insecurity; the contraction of social ordering occupations like ticket inspectors, roundspersons and caretakers; the emergence of mass private property such as shopping malls, industrial estates and gated communities; the ascendance of multinational corporations with long and vulnerable supply-chains; and the rolling out of neoliberal government outsourcing policies in the criminal justice sector (see White 2012, 2020b). In so doing, it had consolidated itself as a central feature of the contemporary policing landscape.

A closer inspection, however, reveals a flip side to this success. Although the industry has expanded at great speed, this does not mean it has come to be embraced by the public. This is illustrated by the handful of attitudinal surveys comparing public perceptions of police officers and private security officers in the UK. The Audit Commission (1996), for instance, asked a cross section of the public to score the level of reassurance offered by different patrolling bodies between -100 and +100, with police officers coming in highest at +80 and private security officers ranking second lowest at -15. A decade later, Crawford et al (2005, p.64) used a Likert scale to capture the sentiments of reassurance expressed by residents in a deprived housing estate in Northern England, with police officers ('A lot', 23%; 'Quite a lot', 15%; 'A little', 26%) again rating notably higher than private security officers ('A lot', 16%; 'Quite a lot', 5%; 'A little', 20%). Another decade on, Rowland and Coupe (2014, p.273) applied a similar Likert scale to shoppers in five malls across Southern England, with police officers ('Very safe', 75%; 'Quite safe' 20%) once more performing better than private security officers ('Very safe', 23%; 'Quite safe', 55%).[iv] While these surveys suggest a gradual elevation of the industry in the estimation of the public over time, they unequivocally demonstrate that in terms of offering reassurance private security officers represent a second best option in comparison to police officers. These lukewarm public perceptions in turn hold important implications for the dynamics of the marketplace. On the demand side, these perceptions mean that private security is commonly regarded as a 'grudge purchase' – a commodity which fails to elicit positive consumer sentiments and, by extension, a willingness to invest resources (Goold et al 2010; Loader et al 2015). On the supply side, these perceptions mean that companies find it difficult to compete on quality and, as a consequence, frequently end up in a 'race to the bottom', offering cut-

price minimum-wage services (Button 2008, 2012). So while the expansion of the industry may well be impressive, its success remains limited by its public standing.

Why though is the public so decidedly cool in its appreciation of the industry? One explanation relates revolves around vicious circle alluded to just now. Indifferent public perceptions lead to cut-price minimum wage services which fail to inspire confidence and thus reinforce these perceptions (Button 2008). Another explanation, however, relates to the state-centric sociological terrain of the policing field. Over the past couple of centuries, the police institution and its promise of maintaining law and order functions as public goods has been at the heart of the modern state-building project. Sometimes this institution fulfils this promise, sometimes not. Either way, it has spread across the globe to become a permanent feature of the modern state. Importantly, this ubiquity has come to mean that, as Migdal (2001, p.137) puts it, most people consider this 'image' of the state 'to be as natural as the landscape around them; they cannot imagine their lives without it'. Reiner (2010, p.3) terms this phenomenon 'police fetishism' – 'the ideological assumption that the police are a functional prerequisite of social order so that without a police force chaos would ensue'. For present purposes, one notable consequence of this phenomenon is that when the market enters into the picture and by its nature challenges what Loader et al (2014, p.477) call the 'democratic promise of security', it often generates a hard-to-define feeling of something being not quite right. As Loader (1997, p.381) expresses it: 'the logic of market allocation offends against the social meanings that have come to be attached to security in liberal democracies'. This explanation arguably gets closer to the root of public ambivalence and unease towards the industry. Contrary to the minimum wage explanation, it suggests that even where the industry provides exemplary services, the underlying fact that these services are being delivered through market

rather than state auspices count against them when it comes to matters of public perceptions.

Significantly, though, the UK private security industry has not just passively accepted its secondary status. Throughout the postwar era, it has sought to enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of the public by aligning its operations as far as possible with the preeminent state institutions in the policing field. The simple calculation here being that greater legitimacy will equate more market opportunities. Its first and most obvious strategy for doing so has been to borrow from the institution which enjoys the most legitimacy in the field – the police. For decades now, private security companies have dressed their officers in police-like uniforms, deployed them in police-like cars and equipped them with police-like paraphernalia such as utility belts and radios in an attempt to blur the public/private divide in the policing field (White 2010; Thumala et al 2011; Puck and White 2022). Its second and more ambitious strategy has been to generate new links with the Home Office by pressing for the introduction of a statutory licensing system. This process began in the 1960s with the lobbying activities of the British Security Industry Association (BSIA) – the main trade association in the sector – and a few large companies and, following three decades of gradually-building momentum, culminated in the passing of the Private Security Industry Act 2001 (White 2010; Smith and White 2014; Leloup and White 2021). This piece of legislation in turn established the Security Industry Authority (SIA) – a non-departmental public body accountable to the Home Office and tasked with issuing licences to frontline private security officers. From this point onwards, these officers have been required to display on their person an official-looking identification card which not only signifies that they have undergone mandatory training and 'fit and proper' person checks but (like police officers) enables them to trace their line of accountability to the Home Office, the

government, Parliament and the public. While the attitudinal surveys above suggest that these legitimation strategies have had only limited success in raising the standing of the industry in the eyes of the public, they do indicate something of upswing between the 1990s and 2010s, with the introduction of statutory licensing being an obvious turning point in this period. For present purposes, though, these long-running dynamics relating to public scepticism and industry legitimation are especially important because they help to shed light on the role and experiences of the UK private security industry in its response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Critical Worker Status

As the UK moved towards full lockdown during the first wave of Covid-19, the Prime Minister made an announcement which – though not its intention – came to hold significant implications for the private security industry. In a speech on 18th March 2020, Boris Johnson reasoned that to 'apply downward pressure' on the rising wave it was necessary for schools to close their doors to all except 'critical workers with children'. The rationale behind this exemption was that the tasks performed by these workers are of such importance that they cannot afford to be disrupted by schooling complications. He proceeded to explain that while teachers, health and social care workers, police officers and supermarket delivery drivers would qualify as 'critical workers', the government 'will be setting out more details shortly about who we mean in these groups'.[v] Understandably, this speech triggered panic among occupations with frontline workers. Unless their employees made the cut, they were likely to experience a sudden and sizeable contraction in workforce numbers and face some difficult conversations with clients and services users. The kicker here, of course, was that failure to qualify would also be tantamount to the government declaring that the

occupations in question were not making a significant contribution to the crisis and were unlikely to benefit from future critical worker privileges either – a reputational and logistical minefield for those occupations producing and delivering non-luxury goods and services.

The private security industry was among those occupations put on immediate high alert. On 19th March 2020, the Chief Executive of the BSIA released a statement which read:

> Our members provide security services critical to the UK infrastructure on a day-to-day basis, and in the current climate, these services become even more essential … We are therefore calling on the Government to urgently clarify the status of our industry members as critical services and the status of their employees as critical workers.[vi]

This plea, however, went unheard. When the government released its official list of critical workers on 20th March 2020, private security officers were not among them. Manoeuvring in front of the inevitable industry backlash to this decision, the Chief Executive of the SIA released the following dispatch to coincide with the government list:

> With regards to essential or key worker status, I can assure you that we continue to liaise closely with the Home Office and Cabinet Office to ensure the importance of private security in keeping the country safe, secure and running smoothly is fully understood. However, at present private security workers are not specifically or explicitly listed.[vii]

Over the next few days, continual pressure from the BSIA, SIA and other industry stakeholders paid off. On 26th March 2020, the Chief Executive of the SIA was able to confirm that 'the current definition of critical worker DOES include regulated (licence holding) security professionals, essential to national infrastructure … and supporting law and order'.[viii] After a nerve-wracking week, the majority of private security officers had in fact made the cut as critical workers.[ix]

This was just the opening sequence of the critical worker story, however. Once the short-term goal of stabilising the labour market had been accomplished, industry stakeholders soon began to direct this state-conferred status towards a different end. Echoing past legitimation strategies, they started to use this official designation to further align their operations with the state-centric leanings of an ever-sceptical public. Two examples serve to illustrate this trend, one a new take on an old formula, the other completely novel. The first and more familiar example revolves around the British Security Awards – an annual ceremony run by the BSIA which celebrates industry achievements. Loader and White (2018) have already called attention to how this ceremony performs a key legitimation function by commending the deeds of private security officers who have engaged in acts of heroism which transcend their narrow contractual obligations and resonate with wider conceptions of the public interest. In its continuation of this tradition, the July 2020 ceremony was no different to previous ones, with the notable exception that it leavened a heavy measure of state-centric critical worker rhetoric into the discursive mix (and took place online for the first time due to social distancing restrictions).

For instance, midway through the ceremony, the Chief Executive of the Security Institute (another leading professional body in the sector) boasted how 'in these

strange times our frontline cohort especially have knocked it out of the park. They have been performing above and beyond expectations and are quite rightly recognised now as *key workers'* (emphasis added).[x] Towards the end of the ceremony, honouring the convention of a prominent state official in the policing field making an appearance to praise the sector, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police came on to 'thank all of you in the industry … [who] as *key workers* have played an invaluable role throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic' (emphasis added).[xi] Concluding the ceremony, the Chairman of the BSIA presented the Chairman's Recognition Award not to an individual, but to all 'frontline officers for the work they have carried out during Covid-19 … to recognise their part as *critical workers* to keep the country running' (emphasis added).[xii] Taken together, these keynotes have a clear intention: to impress upon observers how private security officers not only continue to go 'above and beyond expectations' in performing their everyday duties, but now do so as state-endorsed 'critical workers' who are 'playing an invaluable role' in a time of national crisis – a sentiment underscored by the top police officer in the country no less. The intention, in short, is to use the state-centric language of the pandemic to enhance the status of the industry in the eyes of the public.

The second and more ground-breaking example centres upon the SIA. This regulatory agency was initially the end-product of an earlier legitimation strategy – the desire of the BSIA and large companies, among others, to bring about a statutory licensing regime which would establish a visible official-looking connection between private security officers and the Home Office (White 2010). Over time, however, the SIA has gradually changed its modus operandi from straightforwardly delivering its statutory functions to simultaneously promoting the contribution of the industry within the extended policing family (Booth 2019) – in other words, to devising its own pro-

industry legitimation strategies. This slow-moving process underwent a notable step-change in mid-2020. On 6th March 2020, the SIA launched its ongoing #SIAHeroes initiative – a social media campaign which aims to 'share the stories' of 'security operatives who go above and beyond to protect the public' with 'the private security industry and the general public'.[xiii] This is a significant development in and of itself since it represents the first time any state institution has set about systematically disseminating the commercially advantageous public interest messages previously confined to industry channels such as the British Security Awards.

In terms of the present discussion, however, the key point is that from the end of March 2020 this campaign came to be shot through with state-centric critical worker rhetoric. This can be seen in the spotlighting of 'heroic' actions performed by private security officers engaged in pandemic-related functions – such as risking infection to manage aggressive crowds or helping save lives in Covid-19 'Nightingale' hospitals – as well as adding the following tagline to non-pandemic-related accounts: 'There are over 400,000 licensed security operatives in the UK, and … many continue to work as *critical and key workers*, guarding hospitals, sheltered accommodation, supporting social distancing in supermarkets, and other essential operations' (emphasis added).[xiv] The goal of these social media posts is thus the same as the aforementioned British Security Awards speeches: to showcase how private security officers not only 'go above and beyond to protect the public', but now do so as state-endorsed 'critical and key workers' undertaking 'essential operations' in a time of crisis. The striking difference between these two examples, of course, is that these posts were disseminated through state rather than market channels – a powerful mode of communication in the state-centric sociological terrain of the policing field. But did this dual frequency legitimation strategy work? Was the public listening and receptive to this discourse?

The Hidden Workforce?

Unsurprisingly, industry stakeholders were eager to know the answers to these questions. As such, in August 2020 after the lifting of the first lockdown, the BSIA, Security Institute and Security Commonwealth (another well-known professional body in the sector) commissioned the analytics group YouGov to explore public perceptions of private security officers in the UK. The resulting survey included 2,119 respondents who were balanced in terms of sex, social grade, age and working status. Before going any further, it is worth emphasising just how significant this survey is. In terms of respondent numbers, it is quadruple the size of the next largest equivalent study in the UK (Rowland and Coupe 2014) and more than double the size of the next largest equivalent study globally (de Silva Lopes 2018).[xv] In other words, it stands as the largest and most representative study of its kind ever produced and, moreover, the only one which takes account of the Covid-19 pandemic – and until now it has received no attention within the academic community.

The survey posed six questions, five of which are of particular relevance to the present discussion. The first asked respondents to provide an open answer to the question: 'During the recent COVID-19 crisis and whilst emerging from lockdown, which groups of key workers do you believe played an important role for the country?' Private security officers were mentioned not once. NHS workers (45%) were the most common of the 40 occupations cited, with the police (18%) in seventh position (YouGov 2020, p.8). The second gave respondents a list of eight common offences and asked: 'Which of the following crimes do you think security officers help prevent?' Covid-19 compliance (32%) came fifth, with the top three being shoplifting (64%), antisocial behaviour (46%) and petty crime (44%) (YouGov 2020, p.10). The third struck a more general

tone, inviting respondents to agree or disagree with three statements using a Likert scale: 'Security Officers are fundamental to keeping the UK safe and secure' (37% net agreement, 34% net disagreement); 'I have a lot of respect for Security Officers and the work they do' (41% net agreement, 29% net disagreement); and 'I feel safer in public areas when I know there are security staff on duty' (41% net agreement, 32% net disagreement) (YouGov 2020, p.9).[xvi] The fourth asked respondents to give an open answer to the question 'When you think of private security officers, what three characteristics would you use to describe their personality?' The most common descriptors were: honest, strong, tough (4%); confident (3%); and arrogant, rude, cocky, alert, brave, reliable, trustworthy (2%). The fifth provided respondents with a list of ten frontline occupations and asked: 'Thinking about your community during normal times, which of the following organisations or workers are vital for public safety and security?' Private security officers (15%) received the second fewest nominations, trailing only traffic wardens (11%). The top three occupations were: NHS (83%), ambulance service (82%) and police (77%).

From an industry perspective, the answers were not good. They illustrate how in this time of crisis private security officers had barely registered in the public imagination as either critical workers or pandemic crime fighters. Nor did they elicit clear-cut feelings of security, safety and respect in more general terms, especially compared to the police. Indeed, in this regard the survey suggests that, if anything, the level of reassurance offered by private security officers has actually fallen somewhat since the studies performed by Crawford et al (2005) and Rowland and Coupe (2014). Reflecting on these findings in October 2020, the Chief Executive of the Security Institute acknowledged that 'the average citizen in the UK pays little to no attention to what a security officer is doing'.[xvii] At the same time, the Chief Executive of the BSIA

conceded that 'although security officers were recognised by the UK government as key workers … it seems that the perception of the role they play in our daily lives is still at a low level'. In short, the public were not impressed by the critical worker status in the sector and continued to hold frontline private security officers in comparatively low esteem. Why was this the case?

The industry's understanding of the situation was revealed by its next move. Writing in the Autumn 2020 edition of the quarterly trade publication *Spectrum*, the BSIA, Security Institute and Security Commonwealth launched a still running campaign called 'The Hidden Workforce: Resetting Perceptions of the Security Office', which aims to 'showcase the security professional as a respected, valued, professional service provider … a key worker that is acknowledged and embedded in our daily lives'.[xviii] The assumption here is that the public was not receptive to the critical worker status of frontline private security officers because news of this official designation had not yet reached them. In effect, the legitimation discourse of the BSIA and SIA was 'hidden' amid the chaos of the pandemic. The process of 'resetting' public perceptions thus simply required more 'showcasing' of the 'professionalism' displayed by these critical workers. There is no doubt some truth to this explanation and it is difficult to see how else these leading industry bodies could have reacted. This remains, however, only a partial interpretation of public sentiments in the sector. Engaging with past scholarship on public perceptions of private security offers a more nuanced explanation.

To begin with, it is important to consider the possibility that ongoing public indifference has been shaped by the poor performance of unmotivated minimum-wage private security officers (Button 2008). Interestingly, though, the survey data suggest this is not the case. In response to the personality descriptor question, for example, the negative traits likely to elicit such a disposition (arrogant, rude, cocky) are

outnumbered by positive traits (honest, strong, tough) – although it is important to add that none of the traits are dominant, so the picture is not exactly clear. Another measure in this regard is malpractice picked up in the media. While the industry is no stranger to image-damaging scandals – the furore surrounding the failure of G4S to fulfil its contractual obligations in the London 2012 Olympics security regime being the most well-known contemporary example (White 2015, 2016) – none have arisen in the course of the pandemic. The small volume of journalism relating to the UK industry during this time has actually tended to strike a relatively sympathetic note, focusing on the difficulties faced by private security officers when enforcing social distancing restrictions in public places (for example see: Morris 2020). To be sure, some critical commentary did emerge when four women staying in a Covid-19 quarantine hotel made allegations of sexual harassment towards private security officers on site (Mitchell and McDermott 2021), but this fell short of erupting into a scandal – and in any case unfolded after the YouGov poll was carried out, so could not have informed the public perceptions under examination here. If anything, then, the absence of performance and malpractice issues during the pandemic arguably reinforces the working assumption of industry stakeholders – that if the public could only see the 'hidden' work of private security officers its estimation of the industry would 'reset'.

However, there is an alternative explanation which sheds light on these sceptical public attitudes – an explanation which takes its cue from scholarship on the state-centric sociological terrain of the policing field (see: Loader and Walker 2007; White 2010, 2012; Abrahamsen and Williams 2011). It may be that the lack of public recognition given to these officers results from the long-standing stigmatisation or 'tainting' of their occupation (Thumala et al 2011). That is, it may come from the widespread sense that law and order functions ought to be delivered not as discrete

commodities but rather as public goods – as they are, in principle at least, by the police. A sense which may well have been heightened during a time of unprecedented crisis, when the public tend to look towards those institutions which provide the most reassurance. Indeed, this sentiment probably accounts in part for why the NHS and police performed so favourably compared to the private security industry in the YouGov poll. Furthermore, and contrary to the logic of industry stakeholders, this explanation also suggests that unveiling the work of these officers would not necessarily raise their status. Even if rendered more visible, this work would in all likelihood continue to leave the public unmoved in their estimation of these officers, not because of anything they have done wrong, but because of the underlying state-centric leanings of the public when it comes to matters of policing. This explanation is certainly another plausible way of reading the YouGov poll.

It is an explanation, moreover, which implies that when it comes to public perceptions, the Covid-19 pandemic represents less a turning point in the industry's history and more the latest permutation of a long-running sociological phenomenon. Symbolically speaking, just as the private security industry was playing lowly understudy to the police over 25 years ago when the Audit Commission conducted the first ever survey of public perceptions in the sector, the same appears to be true today. This is not to suggest that these perceptions will never change. Public attitudes are not immutable. But given the deep cultural connections between policing and the state – nothing less a cornerstone of the modern-state building process – it will no doubt take a long time for the public to readily accept and embrace the market in this traditionally sovereign domain. As Abrahamsen and Williams (2011, p.111) write: 'History weighs heavily on the security field, which continues to be structured by norms and institutions (and forms of power) that have evolved from specific historic relations between

security and the public sphere and by the positions occupied by public security actors embedded within them'. What this in mind, then, what the YouGov poll actually captures is perhaps best described as the 'weight of history'.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the outset, this article makes two contributions to policing scholarship. First, it provides an important case study to ongoing work on the public perceptions of the private security industry and the corresponding legitimation strategies deployed by the industry to enhance its societal standing. In particular, it illustrates how many of the classic themes in this work find clear articulation within the context of the pandemic. Second, it adds a new dimension to recent work on pandemic policing which until now has displayed something of a blindspot when it comes to private security. To end with, it is useful to consider how to address this blindspot in more detail. In contemplating next steps, it is instructive to use the more developed literature on the police and Covid-19 as a roadmap. With this in hand, three research questions immediately come into view. First, to what extent do the perceptions examined in this article impact upon public compliance with private security officers when enforcing pandemic-related law and regulations? Second, to what extent do these same variables change when considering non-pandemic related crimes and vulnerabilities within the context of the pandemic, such as shoplifting, antisocial behaviour and petty crime (to borrow from the YouGov poll)? Third, to what extent has the occupational culture and wellbeing of private security officers changed within the context of the pandemic? Addressing these questions across a range of contexts and countries would help to bring research on private security and Covid-19 somewhat into parity with the already existing research on the police and Covid-19. It would also, by extension, go some way

towards remedying the 'neglected' relationship between private security and public health.

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[i] It is important to add that Jones and Newburn (2002, p.141) estimate the number of private security officers in the mid-20th century to be much higher. For instance, they draw attention to the fact that the 1951 census counted no less than 66,950 individuals in the 'security guards and related' category. While this number seems reassuringly official, it is not necessarily a reliable measure. In the 1951 census the category of 'security occupations' included those working as tidesmen, signalmen, meteorological reporters, park rangers and coast guards, to name but a few (General Register Office 1956, p.111). It is therefore difficult to ascertain how many of these individuals were actually working in the private security industry. Other estimates are also available for this period, yet they often differ significantly and fail to inspire confidence (see Brodeur 2010, p.269). In truth, it was not until the introduction of the Private Security Industry Act (PSIA) 2001 that reliable statistics became available.

[ii] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/sia-licence-holders. Note: all websites in this article were last accessed on the day of submission to ???????? - ?? September 2021.

[iii] This number combines police officers numbers for England and Wales (135,301) and Scotland 17,283 as of 31st March 2021 and police officer numbers for Northern Ireland (6,952) as of 31 July 2021. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-workforce-england-and-wales-31-march-

2021/police-workforce-england-and-wales-31-march-2021; https://www.gov.scot/publications/police-officer-quarterly-strength-statistics-31-march-2021/; and https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/strength-of-police-service-statistics/.

[iv] It should be acknowledged, however, that Kim, Button and Lee (2018, p.98) re-ran the Audit Commission survey among shoppers in one more mall in Southern England and discovered more evenly distributed levels of reassurance, with police officers scoring +62% and private security officers coming in at +59%.

[v] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-18-march-2020

[vi] https://www.bsia.co.uk/blogs/43/bsia-to-call-on-government-to-clarify-cr

[vii] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/a-message-from-our-chief-executive-20-march-2020

[viii] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/a-message-from-our-chief-executive-26-march-2020

[ix] It is interesting to note that on 30th March 2020, the European Commission followed suit by recognising private security as a critical occupation, see: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0330(03)&from=EN

[x] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjL4InpbiNI&t=1516s at 24:49-25:15.

[xi] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjL4InpbiNI&t=1516s at 44:38-45:00.

[xii] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjL4InpbiNI&t=1516s at 49:58-51:07.

[xiii] https://siaheroes.mailchimpsites.com/

[xiv] https://siaheroes.mailchimpsites.com/

[xv] Rowland and Coupe's (2014) UK study numbered 517 respondents. Da Silva Lopes's (2018) Brazilian study had 840 respondents.

[xvi] The survey question not analysed here is: 'How closely do you think security officers should work with the police force?' (choice of four statements).

[xvii] https://www.bsia.co.uk/blogs/131/

[xviii] https://issuu.com/thebsia/docs/spectrum2020