

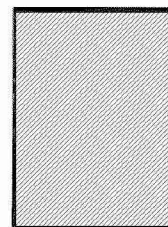
WHO GUARDS THE

SECURITY

GUARDS?

THE PEOPLE ASKED TO ENFORCE COVID SAFETY RULES PUT UP WITH LOW PAY, MINIMAL TRAINING, AND SOME DANGEROUSLY ANGRY CUSTOMERS

BY POLLY MOSENDZ, KIM BHASIN, AND ANDERS MELIN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RACHEL BUJALSKI



One Sunday last May, Karmen Kolda arrived early for his 11 a.m. shift as a security guard at a medical marijuana dispensary southeast of downtown San Jose. He'd made the 30-mile commute from his home in San Mateo wearing his usual all-black gear, with "SECURITY" printed on the back of his shirt. Kolda, who's employed by Genesis Private Security in San Jose, spent the day checking IDs and reminding customers to stay 6 feet apart and wear face masks. A little after 3 p.m., he heard a commotion. A man without a face covering was yelling at a clerk who'd asked that he put one on. Kolda stepped in and told the man to calm down or get out. The customer got in his face, cursed at him, and shoved him hard in the chest, sending Kolda—5 feet 9 inches, 190 pounds—into a display case. The attacker fled, and staff called the police.

After four days in the hospital with a fractured vertebra, Kolda went home. He says he spent three months partially confined to a recliner and had to sleep on his side to relieve his back pain. It wasn't until Labor Day that he could even move around without a walker. His doctor told him the injuries could have been worse had he not been wearing the ballistic vest his wife got him for Christmas. "Most security officers are really nice," says Kolda, 49, who's been in the industry since leaving the Army in 1994. "We're trying to survive through this pandemic as well."

It's hard to know how many of the industry's roughly 1.2 million employees have faced anything like what Kolda did. There are no national numbers on incidents involving guards trying to enforce pandemic protocols. But there have been reports of violence across the country. Two days before Kolda's back was broken, Calvin Munerlyn, a guard at a Family Dollar in Flint, Mich., told a customer to leave because her daughter wasn't wearing a mask. They argued, and the woman left, returning with two men to confront him 20 minutes later. One shot Munerlyn in the back of the head, police said, killing him. The three were charged with first-degree murder.

In July a guard in Gardena, Calif., got into a fight with a maskless man who entered a grocery store while waiting for a tow truck. The guard allegedly shot and killed the man, and he was arrested on murder charges. The next month in St. Louis, three maskless men beat and badly bruised a guard who'd told them to leave a Shell gas station, according to authorities. The guard shot one of the men, who was hospitalized. (The other two fled.) And in December, two men were charged with attempted murder after shooting up a strip club in Anaheim, Calif.; they had been asked to leave for not wearing masks. At least three people were injured, said the district attorney.

It's also unclear to what extent Covid-19 itself is killing Americans in the profession, because the U.S. doesn't keep data on this either. In the U.K., however, male security guards die from the disease at some of the highest rates of any job, with 100.7 deaths per 100,000 workers from March to December, according to the Office for National Statistics.

Even though the pandemic has devastated the service economy, security work is now one of the stabler paths to a paycheck. Retailers are spending on guards, despite the economic downturn, to assure compliance with coronavirus safety regulations. The job is often a dull one, performed by contract without benefits, usually for about \$15 an hour. In 2019, guards earned a median annual wage of \$29,680, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the pandemic era, some jobs now advertise health benefits and above-average wages. **Allied Universal Security Services LLC**, based in Conshohocken, Pa., says it pays some guards as much as \$25 an hour, or \$52,000 annually, to ensure it can fill jobs that require certain skills or are in competitive markets.

One certainty is that the industry is in a hiring blitz. Since last March, Allied has signed up 105,000 people, a spokesperson says. It's looking to hire an additional 30,000 by April. Allied's moves alone have increased the size of the field by more than 10% in less than a year. Many of these new security workers now find themselves at the center of a culture war over mask-wearing.

Allied has been holding 60 to 70 drive-through hiring events each week, from Jacksonville, Fla., to the San Fernando Valley in California, as well as conducting interviews online. In the months after Covid's appearance in the U.S., the company quickly hired 30,000 guards for retailers, as well as hospitals and office buildings that wanted to make sure they were following safety protocols.

At a business park off Interstate 88 in Naperville, Ill., dozens of cars rolled up to a tent in late May. The interviewees, many dressed in suits crumpled during commutes, lined up in their vehicles and moved from the tent to two others. At the first tent, organizers provided information about the role and the hiring process. (Armed guards are hired at separate events.) At the second, applicants provided their name and a brief work history; at the third, they learned about the next steps. The interview took five to seven minutes.

Kelly Taylor, Allied's Midwest recruiting director, said her team had been told to hire 600 people in 60 days at four Chicago-area enrollment sites. (Taylor, who's no longer with the company, exceeded her goal, making 681 hires, according to the spokesperson.) She put ads on TV, Facebook, LinkedIn, and CareerBuilder. "Being outdoors in the fresh air makes people feel safer," she says. The company wanted to hire 45 people in three hours in Naperville, but it signed up only 22. Later, the new employees went through a background check, drug screening, and a 20-hour training course. Those who weren't hired typically hadn't been able to agree on pay or job location.

The hiring is fueled by big-box retailers, other national chains, and grocery stores, which don't want their untrained employees enforcing mask-wearing and social distancing. After altercations between shoppers and staff over compliance became a regular occurrence, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, which ►

A guard at the Westfield San Francisco Centre



◀ represents 1.3 million retail employees in the U.S. and Canada, asked retailers to institute safety measures that included hiring guards. In addition to Allied, Securitas AB, based in Stockholm, hired 10,000 guards for the U.S. market by July, then announced it needed another hiring round to meet demand. G4S USA, with headquarters in Jupiter, Fla., hired 15,000 last summer.

In pre-pandemic times, security guards' main concerns were signing visitors into buildings, directing delivery workers, scolding mischievous teens, and trying to stop theft ("loss prevention," to use the industry term). A guard in Pittsburgh who makes \$11.30 an hour and declined to be named because he didn't have permission from his employer to speak to the news media, says that he's the human equivalent of yellow lines on the highway—or a traffic cone with legs. In some job descriptions, Allied says individuals may need to lift or carry up to 40 pounds; work in rain, snow, cold, or heat; climb stairs, ramps, or ladders; and stand or walk for long periods. They also may need to operate a Segway (which can weigh as much as 250 pounds), which is what actor Kevin James rides in the 2009 comedy *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*.

Between being a punchline, missing out on the union benefits and protections that some retail staff get, and the jobs being readily available, industry turnover is high. For

many, it's a temporary gig to supplement income for, say, paying off a medical bill. It's a way for former police officers to earn money after leaving the force, and the profession attracts ex-military members, such as Kolda, too. New guards are constantly rotated into stores, often with limited institutional knowledge.

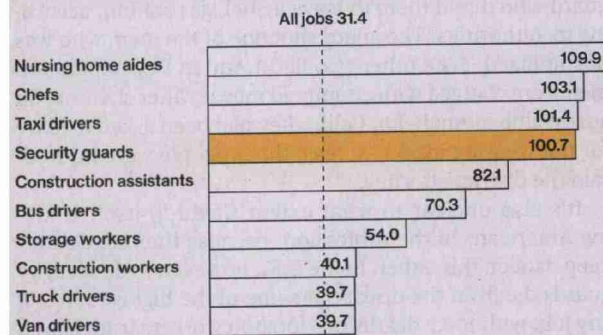
In the Covid era, guards are expected to act as public-health officials, in addition to law enforcement, without having the authority and often the experience of either. They're even being trained to secure testing sites, including recording temperatures. Recently, in Long Island City, N.Y., an Allied guard stood at the door of a CityMD clinic, turning away people without appointments. Most visitors just left, but occasionally someone would raise a ruckus: "What do you mean I can't come in? There's no line!" a woman yelled, her mask down under her chin. "You have to come back tomorrow," the guard responded, over and over. "You have to come back tomorrow."

The major companies train guards to de-escalate situations like this, but some smaller ones don't. Generally speaking, guards say that training focuses on what they can't do—which is most things, including making physical contact. As the Pittsburgh guard says, people look at you as if you have either no power or all the power. Simon Property Group Inc., the largest mall operator in the U.S. with more than 200 facilities in 37 states and Puerto Rico, had guards read statements to patrons entering malls when they started to reopen in May. They continue to promote "healthy shopper habits," such as encouraging customers to socially distance and suggesting that people with fevers go home. Simon properties offer temperature screenings with infrared thermometers, but they're not mandatory for entrance. Some guards who do this kind of work say they're performing "security theater." But that doesn't mean it isn't dangerous.

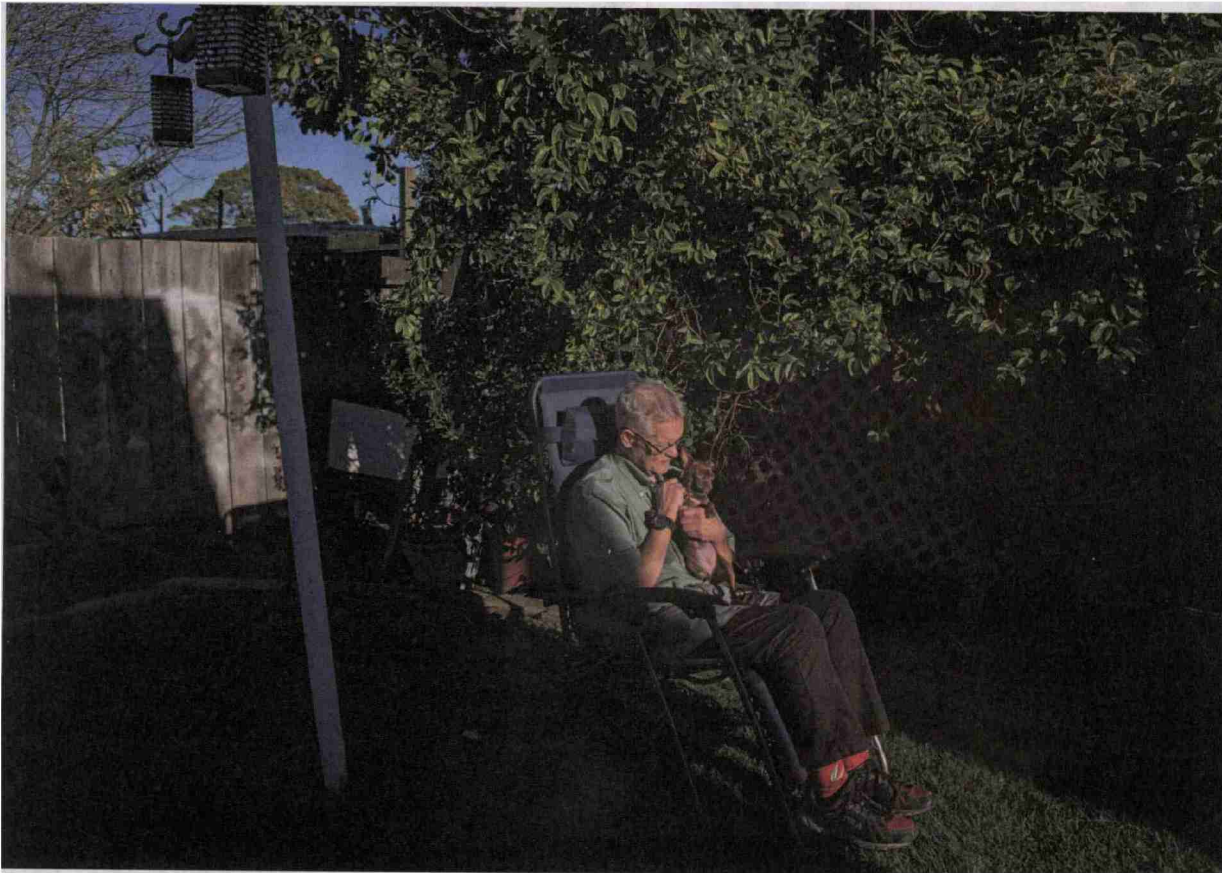
Tension around mask-wearing has risen in part because rules vary by state, county, and city, a legacy of former President Trump's decision to delegate Covid-related policy to governors. (President Biden has signed executive orders mandating masks on federal property and during air

A Hazardous Job

Covid-related deaths per 100,000 male workers, March-December 2020



FOR WORKERS AGE 20-64. DATA: U.K. OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS



travel.) In Missouri, for example, there's no statewide mask order, but St. Louis County has one, even as enforcement varies. A customer at the Saint Louis Galleria in the central Richmond Heights area will have to put one on to enter and browse because guards will enforce the policy and enlist local police as backup if need be. At the Chesterfield Mall, about a 15-minute drive west, there's also a mask mandate, but local police have said they won't enforce it. Still, if a guard there asks someone to put on a mask and the customer refuses, the mall can ask the customer to leave. Refusing to do so would mean that person is trespassing, and the cops would come to deal with that. Of course, enforcement discrepancies aren't the only complications. Anti-maskers, who think face-covering mandates violate their freedoms, or Covid hoaxers, who traffic in unfounded virus-related conspiracies, sometimes show up specifically to cause a scene.

Violence occurs because "everybody's nerves are frayed," says James Keenan, a former New York City police officer who consults for security companies. "People don't know if their jobs are going to be left. They may have lost a relative or a friend. You can't see your favorite sports team, go to a bar and slam a drink, or go hike in your favorite park. Some people just can't see the end of it. And then here's Joe Mall Cop saying you can't come in unless you have a mask on. 'Well, f--- you!'"

Another incident in Flint—this one a five-minute drive from

the dollar store where Munerlyn was killed—turned violent when a customer attacked a security guard who wouldn't let him inside the Carpenter Road Superette. The guard shot the customer in the ankle, police said. In Los Angeles, two men scuffled with staff after being escorted out of a Target for not wearing masks. Video footage shows a guard getting slammed to the floor. (He suffered a broken arm.)

Attacks with a weapon can be charged as aggravated assaults, punishable by hefty sentences. In Illinois, Governor J.B. Pritzker signed a law in August that makes assaulting a worker trying to enforce Covid-related rules, even without a weapon, a felony that can lead to up to 10 years in prison and a \$25,000 fine. The same month, a Democratic state senator in Pennsylvania introduced legislation to upgrade to a felony the assault of any employee enforcing mask and social distancing requirements.

There's been no justice for Karmen Kolda. Law enforcement passed out flyers with the attacker's picture but came up empty. He says he still feels pain when rolling out of bed some mornings. He's lost 40 pounds, is 3 inches shorter than he was before the assault, and has a permanent, 2-degree forward tilt. He says his employer, Genesis, covered his medical bills and paid his salary while he was recovering. He's back at work now because he was bored at home. "No doubts," he says, "no reservations." **B** — *With Alyce Andres*