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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PRIVATE SECURITY IN SLOVENIA: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In recent years, Slovenia has experienced an increase in its employment of private security personnel, along with developments in the public law enforcement sectors. One of the related developments is that, relative to its neighbours in the region, this country has made significant strides as a transitional economy in the market sector. Despite large increases in the growth of the private policing industry in the last few decades in the emerging markets, very little is known about how the public perceives agents of private policing and their role in crime prevention. In this paper Slovenian youth perceptions of private security work are examined. In this preliminary analysis, we examine if systematic differences exist between criminal justice and non-criminal justice college students' perceptions of security work, goals, professionalism, and the role these play in crime prevention activities.

INTRODUCTION

Slovenia is a transitional economy.[1] In 1991, as one of the republics of the former Yugoslavia, Slovenia declared independence which was followed by ten-day armed conflict with Yugoslav People's Army, dominated by Serbs, the dominant nation of Yugoslavia (*The World Fact Book* 2004). Though there may be differences among transitional economies, typically countries that are in transition from government- or socialist-/state-owned to market-based economies experience shifts in organizational cultures that affect state sponsored services. One of the outcomes is the emergence of the private sector as a major partner in disbursement of some of the activities traditionally dispensed by the state. One of the areas in which organizations as well as the public sector experience changes is the manner in which policing and social regulation activities adapt to market based economy. The rise in private entrepreneurship, a natural outcome of transitional economy also propels the growth in private police.[2] The implications of these changes are felt both by providers and the recipients, the consumers.

A nation with a population of 2 million, Slovenia has over 9,200 police officers and over 4,000 private police, representing a ratio of 2:1 public and private police. Though this ratio of 2:1 is far below the rate typically found in developed economies (Cunningham and Strauchs 1992), relative to the long history of market-based economies of the developed nations, Slovenia has achieved a remarkable growth in this area within a short span of 13 years. To complicate the issue further, public police organizations experience growing pains when they shift from a totalitarian to a democratic form of government. These changes compel police organizations to radically redefine their goals and functions, thus influencing police culture. Further, the growing force of private security, hired by private entities, performing functions that not only resemble police functions, but perhaps, may even be taken over by private police in future. While these changes occur at a rapid pace, how does the general public adjust, perceive and react to these changes? What impact does this have on the values, attitudes, and mentality of the general public? What does the growing presence of an additional body of police mean to the general public in the context of social order and crime prevention? What

symbols and images are evoked in peoples' minds when someone says "private security"? Thus, in this paper, we assess the attitudes and perceptions of private security personnel by a segment of the population, namely college students. More specifically, we examine students' perceptions of the nature of security work and how similar or dissimilar it is from police work and to what extent these views influence their perceptions of the professionalism of security guards.

COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY

Except for a study by Meško in 1998, in which he studied customer satisfaction of private security, no systematic research has been done to assess citizens' perceptions of private security in Slovenia. In the 1998 study, Meško investigated client satisfaction of security activities in the areas of risk assessment, i.e. fear of crime, motivation for hiring a private security service, different security fields, physical security, technical security, physical and technical security with intervention, cash transport, mechanical protection and private security service advertising. The results of this survey show that customer satisfaction is directly related to security guard responsibilities, as defined in the contract, and the relationships between the expectations of the client. Other factors such as price, services and conditions of payment for private security services, quality of physical and technical security, intervention abilities of guards, quality of guards in terms of attitude, type of equipment used, and beat frequency, were found to be related to client satisfaction of private security. However, we know very little about what private citizens who are monitored and regulated by security guards think about them. In the following section, we examine the perceptions of one group of clients, namely, college students, and how they view various issues relevant to private security including security officers' training, nature and goals of security, and imagery surrounding security guards.

The data for this research were gathered from college students attending a large university in Slovenia during spring semester of 2004. One of the instructors of the institute explained the nature of the survey and described to the attendees about the voluntary nature of participation in the study. To assess the student perceptions of private security officers, a questionnaire was developed with items from earlier research conducted in the United States (Nalla and Heraux 2003) and in Singapore (Nalla and Lim 2003). The questionnaire was modified to suit the demographic characteristics of Slovenia. Responses were elicited on a Likert Scale with the range of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The questionnaire, which was written in English, was translated into Slovene and back-translated into English to validate the instrument. A total of 600 surveys were distributed to all the criminal justice (CJ) majors and a random sample of non-criminal justice (other) majors at the University. Five hundred and nine useable questionnaires were returned, representing a nearly 85% percent response rate.

RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

The demographic characteristics of all survey respondents are presented in Table 1. Respondents were evenly split in terms of age, with 45 percent in the age group of 18 to 21 years and 55 percent 22 years or older. Half of all those who responded were criminal justice majors. The sample consisted of 67% females. The majority of the students come from rural areas (60%) and nearly half of all the respondents (50%) live with their parents or family while attending college. Twenty eight percent of the respondents rated their family income as low, 51% rated as middle, and the remaining ranked it as high. Only 11% of the respondents work. As such, very few respondents

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actually come in contact with private security officers in the work context. However, this does not mean that they do not encounter them in apartment complexes and shopping malls. We also asked the respondents about their family connection to professions related to private security. One-third of all the respondents indicated that their parents or relatives worked either for police or military organizations while only 7% of the respondents' parents or relatives work or had had prior work experience in private security.

Table 1. General Characteristics of Respondents (N = 509)

Demographics	N =	Percentage*
Age		
18 – 21	230	45.3
22 and above	278	54.7
Major		
Criminal Justice	255	50.1
Other	254	49.9
Gender		
Female	341	67.0
Male	168	33.0
Your hometown was in		
Urban area	198	39.4
Rural area	305	60.6
Current residence		
With parents/family	256	50.3
University housing/Rental	253	49.7
Family income		
Low	126	27.6
Middle	233	51.0
High	98	21.4
Work		
Yes	54	10.6
No	455	89.4
Parents/relatives in law enforcement/military		
Yes	170	33.4
No	336	66.4
Parents/relatives in private security		
Yes	36	7.1
No	472	92.9

* Missing cases not reported

FINDINGS ON PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY GUARDS

We asked the respondents' views on what they believed about various aspects of private security that included professionalism of security guards, amount of discretion security guards have, and the similarity of police officers and security guards. The respondents were asked on a 4-point Likert scale to rank their opinions on the above listed issues with 1 being strongly agree and 4 being strongly disagree.

Professionalism of Security Guards: Security officers play a very important role as guardians of peace and property, as well as public relations representatives for the owners of the company. Thus, one of the dominant issues regarding security work relates to how effective professional security officers are in executing their work.

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Various questions that tap into the issue of professionalism were listed on the survey and the results are presented in Table 2. Findings represent those who agree and strongly agree with various statements relating to security guards work. Nearly two thirds of criminal justice and other majors believe that security guards have a lot of discretion. Nearly half of all the criminal justice and other majors believe that security officers are unaware of customers' needs and well trained though they are generally honest. Nearly half of the students from each group are also of the opinion that though security guards are well trained they are also likely to abuse their power.

Table 2. Mean differences for criminal justice and other majors' perceptions regarding professionalism of security officers."

Demographics	Criminal Justice Majors (n = 255)	Non-Criminal Justice Majors (n = 254)
	A/SA*	*A/SA**
1. Have a lot of discretion	154/60.4	152/59.8
2. Security officers are unaware of customers' needs	136/53.3	136/53.5
3. Security officers are generally honest	135/52.9	123/48.8
4. Security officers are well trained	127/49.8	131/51.6
5. Security officers abuse their power	121/47.4	142/55.9
6. Security officers in general are helpful	120/47.1	125/49.2
7. Security officers are professionals	112/43.9	100/39.4
8. Security officers are sensitive to the public	108/42.3	109/42.9
9. Security officers have good planning skills	103/40.4	100/39.4
10. Security officers are well educated	74/29.02	68/26.77

**A/SA represents Agree and Strongly Agree categories from a 4 point scale of 1: Strongly Agree, 2: Agree, 3: Disagree, 4: Strongly Disagree.

Overall, the findings suggest that students are not positive about the professionalism of security guards. The students do not believe that security guards are honest, helpful, well trained, or professional. They also do not believe that security guards are well educated or have good planning skills. Only about two-fifths of students from each of the two categories believe that security guards have good planning skills and are sensitive to the public. Finally, a majority of the students (CJ=61% and Other=63%) believe that security officers are not well educated. Overall, both criminal justice and non-criminal justice majors have similar opinions of security officers and these views are generally not very positive.

Police Officers vis-à-vis Security Officers: The questionnaire contains a series of questions that tap into the similarities of police officers and security guards. Findings on these issues are reported in Table 3. Respondents feel that security guards should be able to use force to arrest even though they face many non-criminal situations and spend very little time apprehending criminals relative to police officers. Further, the respondents do not believe that security guards and police officers work together and that it is not difficult to distinguish between the two groups of professionals. Though the trends are similar among both criminal justice and non-criminal justice majors, only one question "... often work together in solving crime problems" was found to be dissimilar. This suggests that both criminal justice and non-criminal justice majors generally have a good sense of how security officers look despite the fact that security officers often wear uniforms similar to those of police officers and they drive around in patrol cars that are similarly painted with all the accoutrements that accompany a patrol car.

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Table 3. Mean differences for criminal justice and other majors' perceptions of police officers vis-à-vis security officers.

Demographics		Criminal Justice Majors (n = 255)	Non-Criminal Justice Majors (n = 254)
		A/SA*	*A/SA**
1.	Should be able to use force to arrest suspects	161/63.1	158/62.2
2.	Face many non-criminal situations	154/60.4	157/61.8
3.	Spend very little time in apprehending criminals	147/57.6	156/61.4
4.	Security officers and police officers often work together in solving crime problems	74/29.02	94/37.01
5.	Difficult to distinguish security officers	25/9.80	35/13.78

*A/SA represents Agree and Strongly Agree categories from a 4 point scale of 1: Strongly Agree, 2: Agree, 3: Disagree, 4: Strongly Disagree.

FINDINGS ON PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY WORK

Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding the nature and goals of security work, as well as how similar security work is in relation to police work. These findings are presented in Table 4. The respondents were asked on a 5-point Likert scale to rank their opinions on the above listed issues with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree. Given that respondents may not be completely familiar with security work, we included the response of "uncertain" in the range of responses that range from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Table 4. Mean differences for criminal justice and other majors' perceptions regarding the nature of security work.

Demographics		Criminal Justice Majors (n = 255)	Non-Criminal Justice Majors (n = 254)
		A / SA*	*A / SA**
1.	Security officers get injured in their occupation	210/82.3	199/78.3
2.	Security officers act as social workers	167/65.5	140/55.1
3.	Perform valuable service to their organization	160/62.7	112/44.1
4.	Security work is dangerous	154/60.4	155/61.0
5.	The public generally trust security officers to protect property and lives	142/55.7	131/51.6
6.	Security work is stressful	139/54.5	118/46.4
7.	Work toward making society a better place	137/53.7	125/49.2
8.	Security officers help reduce losses for businesses	133/52.1	95/37.40
9.	Security officers help protect customers	113/44.3	108/42.5

*A/SA represents Agree and Strongly Agree categories from a 4 point scale of 1: Strongly Agree, 2: Agree, 3: Disagree, 4: Strongly Disagree

A total of nine questions were asked regarding security work. Over three fourths of all the respondents believe that security work is such that guards get injured in their occupation. Nearly 66% of the criminal justice majors believe that security work is similar to social work compared to 55% of the non-criminal justice majors. Interestingly, however, 63% of CJ majors believe that security officers perform a valuable service to

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their organization, compared to 44% of non-CJ majors. This may in part be a result of unfamiliarity of security work by non-CJ majors. Nearly two-thirds of the samples from both majors believe that security work is dangerous while approximately half of all those who responded from each major felt that security work is also stressful but contributes to making this society a better place. We noted that CJ majors (52%) were more optimistic of the contributions of security work in the area of reducing losses for businesses compared to non-CJ majors (37%). Both majors were unsure if security work helps protect customers.

Police work vis-à-vis Security Work: Findings relating to students' perceptions relating to police and security work are presented in Table 5. Respondents are uncertain that police and security professionals work together to protect the public from criminals nor were they confident that many police functions will be taken over by security in the future. Nearly half the respondents from each major group felt that both security professionals and police officers work together to protect the public from criminals. Interestingly, however, while 49% of the CJ majors feel that in the future many police functions will be taken over by private security, only 39% of non-CJ majors have the same opinion. Regarding the question if security departments are generally organized similar to police agencies, only 22% of criminal justice majors and 28% of non-criminal justice majors agreed with this statement. On the issues of security work being structured similar to police work, law violators always being detected by security departments, and that the primary role of security is to apprehend criminals, the majority of both criminal justice and other majors disagreed with these statements. This suggests that the respondents do not believe that security work is similar to police work.

Table 5. Mean differences for criminal justice and other majors' perceptions of police work vis-à-vis security work.

Demographics	Criminal Justice Majors (n = 255)	Non-Criminal Justice Majors (n = 254)
	_A / SA*_	_A / SA*_
1. Security professionals and police offices together will protect the public from criminals	124/48.6	119/46.9
2. In the future, many police functions will be taken over by private security	124/48.6	100/39.4
3. Suspects are more likely to be released after security officers recover stolen property	69/27.06	66/25.98
4. Security departments are organized similar to police agencies	56/21.96	70/27.56
5. Security work is generally structured similar to police work	41/16.08	57/22.44
6. Primary role of security is to apprehend criminals	32/12.55	59/23.23
7. Law violators are nearly always detected by security departments	13/5.10	19/7.48

*A/SA represents Agree and Strongly Agree categories from a 4 point scale of 1: Strongly Agree, 2: Agree, 3: Disagree, 4: Strongly Disagree

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study we examined college students' perceptions on various issues relating to private security in Slovenia. More specifically, we have examined college students' perceptions of private security work and officers. Given the significant amount of growth in the employment of private security officers, it is important to assess how the clients of security view an officer's work as well as security work in general. The findings suggest that, overall college students do not have a positive view of security officers. They believe that security work may be helpful to their clients and their organizations but do not believe that, for the most part, it is helpful to the general public. They also believe that security officers should be able to use force. Overall they are positive about their work in terms of interaction with clients as well as encountering clients. In the area of professionalism, most believe that security officers are not professional and do not have planning skills nor are they well educated. Overall, the respondents also believe that security work is not stressful and dangerous, although most are aware that normal security work involves little time in apprehending criminals. The trends are fairly similar for both criminal justice and non-criminal justice majors though a few statistically significant differences suggest that knowledge of police work may contribute to these differences.

These findings suggest that security work and security officers in a transition economy do not enjoy a greater sense of acceptance from their clients, particularly younger clients. Though, due to the size of our sample, we are cautious about generalizing these findings to a larger society of young consumers and the general public, these findings suggest that more research is needed in this area. Part of the problem also stems from the fact that given major transitions in shifts from state controlled history to the adoption of market economy principles is occurring at such a rapid pace, police organizations as well as the general public are trying to cope with new directions and developments in their lives. This involves playing the respective roles of regulators and the regulated. Given the rate of growth in the private sector in Slovenia, as well as the belief among respondents that while they see private security is emerging, they will not necessarily replace police officers and, therefore, it is important to examine how security officers view their role as well as their own relationship with the public law enforcement.

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ENDNOTES

1   Transitional economies include Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) of the former Soviet Union, economies which move to transition to a more market-based economy.

2   In this paper, the terms "private police" and "private security" and also "security officers" and "security guards" are used interchangeably since they engage in activities similar to public police (Nalla and Newman 1990).

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