**Headline:** The Rise of Private Cops: How Not to Tackle Homelessness

**Teaser:** Like many cities with a serious housing problem, Portland is increasingly relying on private security to “clean up” the human debris of capitalism.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

During a recent visit to Portland, Oregon, my husband and I watched a private security guard help up an unhoused man from the sidewalk. Three white women looked on at the interaction that took place in the trendy Nob Hill neighborhood on August 7, 2023, right in front of a yoga studio.

But the guard was not responding with compassion. Seconds earlier, the tall and very muscular man sporting a flak jacket emblazoned with the word “security,” had walked right by me toward the unhoused man and savagely knocked him to the ground without provocation or warning. Blood streamed from the victim’s face and onto the sidewalk. He stood up as the guard hovered over him and stumbled toward the damaged glasses that had fallen off his face during the assault. The guard, who was twice the man’s size, picked up and offered him the hat that had also fallen off his head and ushered him away.

It’s increasingly common to see private security guards patrolling the streets of Portland—considered one of the most progressive cities in the United States. Not only are [businesses banding together](https://www.opb.org/article/2021/12/01/rise-of-private-security-firm-downtown-portland/) to pay for private armed patrols, but even [Portland State University](https://kpic.com/news/local/portland-state-university-resuming-armed-patrols-on-campus) is using such a service on its campus. The [city of Portland](https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2023/01/portland-will-pay-more-than-600000-for-3-new-armed-security-agents-at-city-hall.html) also recently increased its private security budget for City Hall by more than half a million dollars to hire three armed guards.

The trend is a knee-jerk response to [sharply rising homelessness](https://www.axios.com/local/portland/2023/05/12/2023-homeless-count-in-multnomah-county). There are tents belonging to unhoused people sprinkled throughout downtown Portland and Nob Hill. Like much of Portland, many of the unhoused are white, but, as Axios in a report about a homelessness survey pointed out, “the rate of homelessness among people in the Portland area who are Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander grew more rapidly than among people who are white.”

Three summers ago, Portland—one of the nation’s whitest cities—was also an epicenter of the nationwide racial justice uprising in response to the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. “There are more Black Lives Matter signs in Portland than Black people,” joked one Black resident to the [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/us/portland-oregon-protests-white-race.html). As Donald Trump’s administration sent [armed federal agents](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/analysis-can-trump-send-armed-federal-agents-to-u-s-city-streets) to Portland to quash the uprising, the city’s residents and [officials](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/18/portland-federal-agents-protests-trump-mayor) came to symbolize a heroic resistance to rising authoritarianism.

The brutal savagery of what we witnessed in Nob Hill was in jarring contrast to the signs, stickers, and posters that many Portland businesses continue to display on their windows, declaring that “Black Lives Matter,” or “All Genders are Welcome,” and that promise safety to everyone. Everyone but the unhoused, apparently.

Shocked by the violence of the security guard’s assault, my husband and I confronted the perpetrator. He responded that hours earlier the victim had allegedly assaulted a woman in the neighborhood. In the seconds before he was attacked, however, I had walked within a few feet of the unhoused man as he muttered to himself in what sounded like a mix of English and a foreign language. The man had been minding his own business.

In a [detailed three-part investigation](https://www.opb.org/article/2021/12/01/rise-of-private-security-firm-downtown-portland/) for Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) in December 2021, Rebecca Ellis examined how businesses have begun paying unknown sums of money to hire private security patrols. According to Ellis, “Private security firms in Oregon are notoriously underregulated, and their employees are required to receive a fraction of the training and oversight as public law enforcement.” She added, “They remain accountable primarily to their clients, not the public.”

Business owners and residents are claiming that rising homelessness is the result of [increased drug addiction](https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2023/04/pills-petty-crime-despair-a-perfect-storm-batters-heart-of-downtown-portland.html), forcing them to resort to private security. But [researchers](https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/homeless/new-study-housing-market-root-cause-homelessness/283-819457a7-9606-42c6-9cb3-62bd25661d2b) point to high rents and a lack of affordable housing—not drug use—as the cause of people living without homes.

As we responded to the assault against the unhoused man with an appropriate level of shock, the three white women who had also watched the incident unfold rushed to the guard’s defense. They seemed to know instinctively by our visible horror that we were visitors to the city, and informed us in no uncertain terms that the guard was simply doing his job. “Leave the poor man alone,” said one of them, sporting what appeared to be scrubs (I wondered, was she a health care worker?). She wasn’t referring to the victim, but rather his assaulter.

Meanwhile, an employee of [prAna](https://www.prana.com/portland-store.html), the storefront where the attack took place, shooed us away from the still-wet blood spatters that now stained the sidewalk. He used a spray cleaner to wipe away the evidence, seconds after I photographed it. The yoga studio, which also sells high-end clothing, boasts on its [website](https://www.prana.com/about-us.html) that the Sanskrit word for which it is named, is “the life-giving force, the universal energy that flows within and among us, connecting us with all other living beings.”

Although the unhoused man bled the same way as any of us would, he was not seen as a living being in the moment that the security guard brutally slammed him into the sidewalk. He was an inconvenient object, a nuisance, marring the enjoyment of consumers who simply wanted to practice their mindfulness without having to face the ugly underbelly of racial capitalism.

The consequences of private muscle are as serious and as potentially deadly as state power. In 2021, a private security guard named [Logan Gimbel](https://www.koin.com/local/multnomah-county/security-guard-gets-life-sentence-in-2021-lowes-parking-lot-killing/) was sentenced to a life term in prison for fatally shooting a resident named Freddy Nelson with an unlicensed firearm. [Ellis reported](https://www.opb.org/article/2021/12/02/part-two-police-prosecutors-downtown-portland-wary-role-of-private-security/) in the second piece of the OPB series that a private security guard working for a company named Echelon had engaged in a brutal assault on a 46-year-old unhoused woman named Katherine Hoffman. The assault sounded similar to what I had seen happen in Nob Hill. When speaking with police, the guard who beat Hoffman with his baton bizarrely claimed it was the baton that did it, not he. “I had it in my hand, I didn’t hit her with it,” he told police. “But it did hit her.”

The mercenary reliance on private security is embedded in a belief that Portland’s police have been “defunded.” But detailed analyses such as [this one](https://pdx.vote/defund-the-narrative-the-portland-police-have-been-defunded-talking-point-is-really-absurd-and-needs-to-stop/) reveal that it is not true that the police force has been stripped of funding. As was the case in many American cities, Portland’s city council representatives initially paid lip service to racial justice protesters in the summer of 2020 by voting to make modest cuts to police budgets, [only to restore them](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/portland-among-u-s-cities-adding-funds-to-police-departments#:~:text=Among%20the%20rallying%20cries%20were,partially%20restored%20the%20cut%20funds.) merely months later.

There is indeed a serious problem of homelessness in Portland and the business owners who have resorted to private security claim they simply want to “[clean up](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/may/26/portland-oregon-homelessness-policy-change)” the problems that the city refuses to. A political battle is ensuing over allowing homelessness to flourish rather than cracking down on the unhoused.

But there is a glaring omission in the police-versus-private-security and violence-versus-the-unhoused fights, and that is the fact that Oregon is simply an unaffordable place to live. One economist told [OPB’s April Ehrlich](https://www.opb.org/article/2023/07/26/oregon-cost-of-living-housing-construction-building-land-use-high-rent/), “We have the worst affordability… Low vacancies and high prices… [are] indicative of a housing shortage.” According to Ehrlich, “Oregon is among states with the lowest supply of rentals that are affordable to people at or below poverty levels.”

When housing is in short supply and rents are out of reach, it’s inevitable that the number of people without homes will rise. Hiring private security firms to supplement policing does little to address this systemic cause of homelessness. Just as the yoga studio’s employee cleaned away the blood of the unhoused man from the sidewalk, the use of private security is intended to sweep away the human detritus of economic injustice.

About 30 minutes after the assault that I witnessed took place, the Portland police showed up, blocking the intersection outside the yoga storefront with a large patrol car. Were they on the scene to arrest the security guard, I wondered?

No. We spotted the guard walking freely on the sidewalk and then disappearing into a nearby store, which was presumably one of his employers. Meanwhile, the police officers had placed the unhoused assault victim in the back of their patrol car. We offered the cops our testimony, but they appeared uninterested. Ultimately, it was clear to us that the guard and the police were both paid to lock up the unhoused man (who clearly needed mental health treatment), in service of their wealthy white patrons—Nob Hill’s business owners and residents.

Unless city, state, or federal governments directly address the fact that the rent is too damn high and wages are too damn low, people will continue to lose access to housing and services and find themselves on the receiving end of blows and batons from either private guards or the police, as business owners and wealthier residents look on with approval.