

## **Retail Security Guards Under Siege: Exploring Work-Related Violence Against Shopping Centre Security Guards in Gauteng, South Africa**

Fana Simelane, University of South Africa, South Africa

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### **Abstract**

Workplace violence has become problematic in the private security sector in South Africa, especially for security guards stationed at shopping centres. In this study, the nature and impact of workplace violence experienced by retail security guards in selected shopping centres in Gauteng were investigated. A qualitative research approach was employed to understand the lived experiences of security guards exposed to workplace violence at Gauteng shopping centres. The sample included 10 security guards: five were stationed at Maponya shopping centre, three at Hatfield shopping centre and two at Menlyn shopping centre. The sample comprised four female and six male security guards. The structural violence perspective was adopted to understand experiences of security guards exposed to workplace violence. Unstructured interviews of approximately 45 minutes each were conducted to collect research data. The findings revealed that retail shops such as Sports scene and Science Step are more likely to be targeted by criminals because they sell expensive brands, including Adidas and Nike. The various forms of crime that are often committed in retail spaces include armed robberies, shoplifting and targeting automated teller machines. However, the findings highlighted structural factors such as inadequate training of security guards to deal effectively with workplace violence. In conclusion, addressing work-related violence requires policy reforms aimed at protecting security guards against such violence.

*Keywords:* workplace violence, security guards, Gauteng shopping centres, structural violence

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## Introduction

The aim of this study was to investigate violence retail security guards experience in the following shopping centres across Gauteng, South Africa: Maponya, Hatfield and Menlyn. Retail security guards are often the first line of defence and may find themselves under siege. Furthermore, they may be threatened and assaulted by customers. Therefore, the nature and causes of these threats in an endeavour to understand how violence affects the safety and psychological wellbeing of security guards were explored.

The private security industry is one of the fastest growing industries in South Africa and is considered to be one of the leading job creators in the country. According to Redaction Africanews (2024), South Africa has approximately 2.7 million registered private security officers, making the country's private security industry one of the largest security industries in the world. In South Africa, security guard services include unarmed guards, access control guards, event guards, retail guards, private guards and patrolling guards (Sys Control Secure, 2023). Despite the employment success of the private security industry in the country, Sefalafala and Webster (2013) noted that the industry is characterised by insecure employment, low wages, long working hours and a lack of social benefits. Furthermore, security guards feel stigmatized and lack social recognition (Sefalafala & Webster, 2013). Furthermore, Mbanja et al. (2021) explained that in South Africa there is problem of poor training standards for the security guards and unqualified security training facilitators. This led to serious injuries and death. Retail security guards also suffer these poor working conditions and receive poor training. As a result, they become vulnerable to workplace violence.

### Current State of Retail Security in Gauteng

Niekerk and Cloete (2020) noted that shopping centres contribute towards communities' social and economic wellbeing, implying that shopping centres are instrumental in creating job opportunities as shops employ people. Security guards are employed to provide security services to ensure the safety of customers. In addition, shopping centres may also be viewed as places for recreation, exercising and socializing (Niekerk & Cloete, 2020). Accordingly, shopping centres also create opportunities for networking and making friends because people from different walks of life can converge there. However, networking opportunities can be difficult when the retail security guards are attacked and fail to protect customers.

Retail security guards play a major role in ensuring customers' safety and security. They safeguard the valuable assets and infrastructure of shopping centres from damage. Retail security guards are stationed outside and inside retail stores to keep employees and customers safe (Sys Control Secure, 2023). These guards are usually unarmed but assisted by surveillance cameras installed in the shopping centre. However, they face numerous challenges that affect their safety and wellbeing, including being targeted by criminals during robberies and shoplifting incidents, physical assaults, and verbal abuse and intimidation from customers and criminals. One may deduce that retail security guards are under siege as they are exposed to work-related violence. The World Health Organization (2002) defines workplace violence as incidents where employees are abused, threatened and assaulted in circumstances related to their work. Terms such as discrimination, bullying and intimidation are also used in relation to workplace violence (Steinman, 2003). Arrive Alive (2020), for example, reported that a security guard was tragically shot and killed by unidentified

attackers at a shopping centre in KwaMashu, KwaZulu-Natal. The suspects fled the scene and took the guard's service firearm with them (Arrive Alive, 2020).

In this study, work-related violence of retail security guards was examined from a structural violence perspective. Therefore, systematic issues such as economic inequalities and social exclusion, which perpetuate the vulnerability of retail security guards to workplace violence, are highlighted. Webb (2019, p.53) defined structural violence as a "condition in which groups are harmed by general and persisting situations not of their own choosing; from which most have no real way of escaping. Great harm, including death, and limits on actualization potential are the results." Accordingly, problems shopping centre security guards experience are not self-created but are the consequences of inappropriate and ineffective socio-economic policies aimed at creating job opportunities for South Africans. Consequently, some people resort to crime and endanger retail security guards' lives.

## **Literature Review**

### **Structural Violence Perspective**

Johan Galtung, the Norwegian sociologist and peace researcher, introduced the concept of structural violence in *Violence, peace and peace research* (1969). According to Galtung, social structures such as economic, social and political systems systematically harm individuals by limiting their access to resources and opportunities. Unlike direct violence, structural violence is not visible. While a person (object) exposed to personal violence will see the violence and may complain about it, a person exposed to structural violence may not see it and thus, not complain about it. Therefore, structural violence is silent (Galtung, 1969).

In accordance with Galtung's theory of structural violence, workplace violence against retail security guards in Gauteng shopping centres is not related to individual acts of violence but rooted in structural violence. This implies that unemployment and poverty in South Africa may influence people to resort to crime and expose security guards to unsafe working environment such as shopping centres.

### **Work-Related Violence in Retail Settings**

There has been a sharp increase in crimes at shopping centres in South Africa, specifically in the Gauteng province. Furthermore, Lutchminarain and Minnaar (2012) confirmed that there has been a drastic increase in the level of violence used in robberies at shopping centres across South Africa as noted in media reports. These criminal incidents at shopping centres are not only limited to the actual shopping area, but also include criminal activities that occur in the designated parking areas of shopping centres. Majadibodu (2025) noted that a security guard who was patrolling outside Jubilee shopping centre in Gauteng was confronted by criminals who robbed him of his firearm before robbing a security guard of his cellphone inside the shopping centre. Furthermore, it was alleged that the perpetrators also bombed five automated teller machines (ATMs) and broke into one of the shops where they also bombed the drop safe (Majadibodu, 2025). The security guards at the shopping centre were disarmed, which may have put their lives as well as those the customers at the shopping centre at risk. Furthermore, Jordaan (2019) reported that a security guard is in a critical condition after being shot at a shopping centre in Diepsloot, North of Johannesburg. It is important to consider various factors that may influence workplace violence at retail establishments.

South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, which may be linked to poverty and violence. In relation to inequality, Aljazeera (2022) explained that South Africa ranks first among 164 countries, making it the most unequal country in the world. Thus, there is a wide gap between rich and poor. There is unequal access to education and healthcare. Consequently, this can be a risk factor of violence. Lamb and Warton (2025) stated that inequality is a fundamental risk factor for violence. In addition, conditions, which are associated with inequality, tend to increase risk of violence (Lamb & Warton, 2025). Moreover, Lamb and Warton argued that unemployment and poverty often contribute to feelings of stress, frustration and humiliation, which can lead to violent behaviour. Accordingly, socio-economic factors such as poverty and inequality alone may not cause violence at retail establishments but constitute part of the conditions that can lead to violence and affect security guards' wellbeing. It is imperative that employers consider socio-economic factors when designing policies related to security guards and customers.

Valuable goods in a retail establishment can attract potential violence. Grinavich (2023) noted that criminals often target valuable items such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and jewellery as these valuables are often small and easy to steal. For example, a security guard and civilian were shot and injured during a robbery at a jewellery store in Menlyn Park shopping centre (Bhengu, 2021). Jewellery stores are targeted because jewellery can be sold quickly, especially on the black market. However, this endangers retail security guards' lives because they need to protect jewellery stores. In addition, Grinavich (2023) argued that retail establishments such as restaurants and nightclubs that are open until late, are more likely to attract violence. Leino et al. (2010) stated that late working hours are associated with three forms of work-related violence, namely, verbal aggression, threats of assault and physical acts of violence. Security guards could have confrontations with perpetrators of violence at night, increasing the risk of violence. Other factors can also expose employees to workplace violence. Lee et al. (2014) claimed that part-time employees are more likely to suffer workplace violence than full-time employees. In comparison to the latter, the former are likely to have had no experience of dealing with workplace violence and therefore, are likely to have less training in how to deal with conflict and apply preventative measures of workplace violence.

In addition, Menendez (2012) stated that racial discrimination can trigger violence from employees and service users, thus implying that it may lead to a hostile work environment and trigger violent reactions. Furthermore, employees not trained to handle violence may be considered to be a risk factor for violence in the workplace (Runyan et al., 2005). Moreover, working long hours can lead to fatigue and less emotional control and management, which may be a high risk for workplace violence (Lee et al., 2014). All these noted factors can be considered as risk factors for workplace violence. Hence, an understanding thereof is crucial for improving safety and designing effective strategies to curb workplace violence at shopping centres.

### **Impact of Violence on Security Guards**

Work-related violence affects retail security guards. According to the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress (2025), people who suffer work-related stress such as violence are at risk for physical health problems such as bodily injuries, including bruises and bleeding injuries. Accordingly, the physical effects of workplace violence on retail security guards may be significant due to the nature of their work environment. However, workplace violence can also affect employees' psychological wellbeing. Lim et al. (2022) argued that workplace

violence may lead to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem and concentration difficulties. Consequently, as retail security guards are often exposed to verbal abuse and assaults in the workplace, this may be detrimental to their self-esteem and increase their stress and anxiety.

Furthermore, workplace violence may also have an impact on job satisfaction, especially among frontline workers such as security guards. Jansen van Rensburg et al. (2023) asserted that workplace violence threatens job satisfaction and turnover in the industry, implying that when employees are no longer happy at work because of workplace violence, job satisfaction decreases, leading to an intention to resign. Workplace violence can create a fear-based work environment that may affect employees' overall job performance. The guards may become less focused and efficient in performing their duties. Chao et al. (2015) noted that workplace violence is considered a reason for reduction in employee performance. The stress experienced due to work-related violence may increase sick days and affect the service rendered by the organization.

### **Legal and Policy Framework**

Although South Africans experience challenges associated with workplace violence, there are regulations in the country to address work-related violence. Even though these regulations may not be effective, they are implemented to protect workers against work-related violence. According to the Department of Employment and Labour (2020), the Employment Equity Act (EEA) is aimed at addressing all forms of harassment in the workplace, which may include physical force, threats and actual violence against another person in the workplace. This may result in social injustice, economic harm, injury, death and psychological harm (Department of Employment and Labour, 2020). Employees are accordingly within their rights to request the employer to implement provisions of the Employment Equity Act that deal with violence in the workplace. The latter provides guidelines on human resources policies, procedures and practices related to all forms of harassment in the workplace as well as appropriate procedures to deal with it and prevent its recurrence (Department of Employment and Labour, 2020).

Furthermore, the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHS) mandates employers to provide a safe work environment for employees. This Act outlines the duties of employers and employees to design health and safety policies in the workplace (Safety Cloud, 2024). Employers are legally obligated to ensure the workplace is free from violence and to take appropriate action when incidents of violence occur.

Moreover, there is a need to implement policies to deal with workplace violence. Somani et al. (2021) suggested that strategies aimed at addressing workplace violence should be implemented at organizational and individual levels. It is imperative to ensure that employees are well trained to handle workplace violence. Moreover, at an organizational level, employers should take steps to address barriers of workplace violence incidents to understand, address and prevent workplace violence (Somani et al., 2021), suggesting that policies need to address different aspects of the problem. For example, an organization should ensure that employees exposed to violence have access to counselling and medical care. Employers identify potential violent incidents and protect the clients.

## Methodology

The qualitative research approach was adopted by employing a case study design to investigate work-related violence against retail security guards in selected shopping centres in Gauteng. Purposive sampling was employed to select a sample of 10 retail security guards that had direct experience with violent incidents in the shopping centre at which they worked. Data were collected through unstructured interviews. The participants chose to be interviewed when they were not on duty and at their own residence. They were uncomfortable being interviewed at the workplace because they perceived this could lead to victimization and termination of employment. The participants each signed informed consent before the interviews to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the causes, nature and impact of workplace violence on retail security guards. Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee at the University of South Africa (240816-052).

## Results

Three themes, which are subsequently presented, emerged from the thematic analysis.

### **Retailers at Risk: The Crime Factor**

The types of retail shops that were more likely to be targeted by criminals across Gauteng shopping centres and endanger the lives of the security guards are highlighted in this theme. According to the participants, criminals target shops such as Sportscene and Science Step as they sell expensive brands such as Adidas and Nike. They are also shared that telecommunication companies such as Telkom and MTN are targeted. The criminals could attack three shops a week and some of the retail shops cannot detect if someone has a firearm. One participant explained,

The criminals get inside the Telkom shop. They just take the staff inside the office. Then [they] take the cellphones. They did not shoot anyone. The cameras saw those people as customers and therefore was easy for them to rob the shop.

This statement suggests that the security guards may have been overpowered by these criminals because they managed to steal cellphones in their presence. It appears none of the criminals were arrested during the robbery at Telkom.

### **Prevalent Crimes in Shopping Centres**

The participants shared a similar view about types of crime that are common in retail spaces, including shoplifting, armed robberies and criminals attacking ATMs. One participant remarked, "Someone steal a wine at Pick n Pay supermarket and we arrested him. Then we called the police. The shoplifting happens most on Fridays and Saturdays." This suggests that shoplifting is not always linked to putting food on the table but having fun and drinking alcohol. The customer was caught stealing wine at a Pick n Pay supermarket. It appears as though shoplifters have specific days to steal from supermarkets, specifically Fridays and Saturdays. The reason thereof is unknown.

Furthermore, the participants shared that the jewellery shop was robbed. Four men entered the shop at approximately 9:00 am, took out their firearms and shot the shop's window. They left with necklaces and watches, including a Rolex. From this incident, one may deduce that retail security guards are under siege. Robbers are often armed with firearms and may not hesitate to use them on security guards and customers. As noted previously, retail security guards are not armed in South Africa, making it difficult for them to deal effectively with armed criminals that target shopping centres.

### **Fear of Violence**

The participants also shared their fear of violence and believed it contributed to security guards' decision to resign and look for alternative employment. Customers often also threatened them with violence. Consequently, they felt unsafe and feared that their lives were in danger. One participant related that a customer thus threatened him, "I will get you when knock off." Another shared, "Sometimes you have the fear of meeting the perpetrator after work." Although security guards are regarded as the first line of defence at shopping centres, these statements suggest that they fear for their lives. They feel that the retail space is not safe for them to work at as security guards.

### **Discussion**

Three themes related to workplace violence at selected shopping centres in Gauteng, namely, Maponya, Hatfield and Menlyn emerged from the interviews. First, retailers at risk of crime were those that sold high-value goods such as Sportscene and Science Step. Both sell expensive brand clothing such as Adidas and Nike. Telecommunication companies such as Telkom and MTN who sell expensive electronic gadgets, including mobile phones and tablets, were also targeted. According to the South African Police Service, an average of 189 mobile phones are stolen daily in South Africa. The criminals use various methods to steal mobile phones (Lancaster, 2023). In this study, the focus was on armed robbery as a method to steal mobile phones. One may deduce that criminals in South Africa find mobile phones attractive and thus, telecommunication companies are at risk. The security guards patrolling telecommunication companies may be targeted by these criminals because they are involved in preventing and apprehending them, which may lead to confrontation.

Second, the prevalence of crimes at shopping centres included shoplifting, armed robberies and attacking ATMs. The patterns may have varied across the centres. It is evident from this data that security guards are under siege as at some point they have to deal with armed robberies. Molosankwe (2025) noted that at Park Meadows shopping centre in Bedfordview in Gauteng, eight armed men shot and killed a security guard during a robbery before stealing an undisclosed amount of cash and cellphones. It appears that retail security guards in South Africa are facing an increased risk of violence at shopping centres. South Africa has a high rate of crime, which includes armed robberies, resulting in a challenging environment for security guards. Cowling (2024) explained that violent crime in South Africa reached shockingly high levels. The most violent crimes in South Africa comprise assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, aggravated robbery and murder (Cowling, 2024). In addition, Cowling (2024) stated that cities with the highest crime indexes in South Africa, as well as the African continent, include Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria and Johannesburg. Poverty and unemployment are some of the factors that contribute to violent crime in South Africa.

Finally, the security guards feared violence. Some of them had even considered resigning and looking for employment in other sectors. Nalla and Cobbina (2017) asserted that the high turnover rate in the private security industry is directly correlated with job satisfaction and a challenging working environment, which may include exposure to violence. Therefore, dealing with aggressive individuals and exposure to high calibre weapons may exacerbate security guards' fear of violence.

Retail security guards' experiences at the selected Gauteng shopping centres reflect forms of structural violence as they face high exposure to workplace violence while lacking adequate training, making them vulnerable to workplace violence and reinforcing systemic structural challenges in South Africa. These structural challenges include social and institutional conditions that result in the security guards not receiving adequate training to deal effectively with workplace violence at the shopping centres. Without targeted policy reforms and improved labour conditions, these challenges rooted in structural violence are likely to persist and affect retail security guards.

### **Conclusion**

Workplace violence against retail security guards in Gauteng shopping centres remains a challenging issue. The findings in this study suggest that these guards are often exposed to armed robberies and shoplifting, which contributes to their fear of violence. On the contrary, security guards' persistent exposure to workplace violence reflects deeper structural violence in which guards operate in high-risk environments such as shopping centres. They are not well trained to deal with violent incidents. This demands institutional changes such as improved working conditions and policy changes that will ensure that security guards are well trained to manage work-related violence.

The implications of this study include the need for developing targeted workplace safety policies that deal with risks faced by security guards at Gauteng shopping centres. Furthermore, it is imperative to address broader socio-economic inequalities that render security guards vulnerable to violence. For instance, the high unemployment rate may lead to crime, which, in turn, endangers the lives of security guards at shopping centres because they have to protect shops targeted by criminals.

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### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

ChatGPT was used for brainstorming ideas. It was not used for plagiarism. For instance, ChatGPT was used to identify the factors one should consider when dealing with structural violence that affect security guards. Once ChatGPT had identified these factors, the author verified the information by conducting a literature review.

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