

The unseen shift

Mental health, wellbeing and suicide prevention in the UK private security workforce

What the evidence shows. What the data cannot show. What has never been tried.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Six findings

- 1 **The evidence base is one study deep.** The largest UK study of security officer mental health surveyed 754 operatives in 2020 (University of Portsmouth). No large UK study has repeated it since. Industry press calls it the only published research on the question.
- 2 **Exposure defines the work.** In that study, 64.6% of operatives took verbal abuse at least monthly, 43% were threatened with violence monthly, and over 30% were assaulted within a year. Attacks on lone workers rose 132% in the three years to 2024 (SoloProtect). One security guard, Gary Stanley, was killed on duty in Milton Keynes in February 2026.
- 3 **Screening put PTSD symptoms at four in ten.** 39.3% of surveyed operatives showed PTSD symptoms on the PCL-C screening tool. The sample was self-selected, so the figure is an alarm bell and a screen result. It still stands far above every comparable frontline baseline.
- 4 **The suicide data is old and partial.** The only official rate analysis (ONS, England, 2011 to 2015) put male security guards at the national average, inside the male elementary occupations group that carries 44% elevated risk. Since 2015 the ONS has published counts only: roughly 25 to 35 male security guard suicides a year in England. The HSE does not record work-related suicide at all.
- 5 **The workforce concentrates the highest-risk profile.** SIA licence data (June 2026): 88.9% male, modal age 26, concentrated in door supervision, paid near the wage floor, on 12-hour shifts and nights, often alone. Men are about three quarters of UK suicides, and only 36% of NHS talking-therapy referrals are men.
- 6 **Nothing in the sector has been evaluated.** Proven and promising interventions exist in rail, police, ambulance and construction. No evaluated mental health programme exists anywhere in UK private security. The gap is the opportunity.

METHOD Peer-reviewed studies, official statistics and industry data, gathered and verified August 2026. ONS suicide-by-occupation data files and the SIA June 2026 licence dataset were parsed directly. Every figure carries its source on page 10. Claims that could not be traced to source were excluded, including one widely repeated industry violence figure.

01 • THE WORKFORCE

Hundreds of thousands of licensed officers, young and overwhelmingly male

514,578

active SIA licences held by
454,642 people

SIA • JUNE 2026

88.9%

of licence holders are male
(404,319 men)

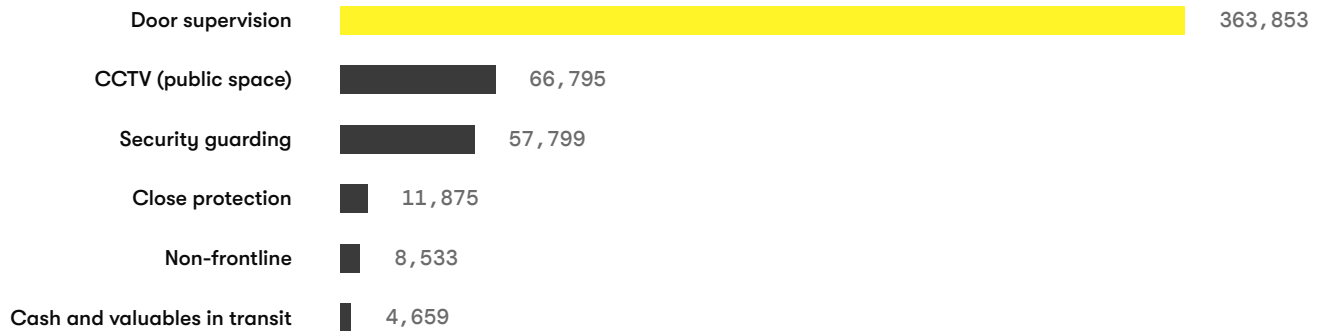
SIA • JUNE 2026

26

the modal age of a licence holder
(16,056 people)

SIA • JUNE 2026

LICENCES BY SECTOR



Where they are. London holds 127,659 licence holders, 28% of the national total. Manchester (31,630) and Birmingham (24,821) follow. 53.4% of holders are British nationals; the largest other nationalities are Pakistani (71,541), Nigerian (29,283) and Indian (21,718). The SIA publishes nationality and not ethnicity.

Why the profile matters. Private security outnumbers the police roughly three to one. The workforce skews young, male and migrant, spread across dispersed sites and subcontracting chains. Every one of those traits weakens the reach of conventional workplace health provision, and the same traits define the groups least likely to seek help.

Source: SIA licence holder demographics, June 2026 dataset (gov.uk), parsed from the official ODS file.

02 • EXPOSURE

Violence and abuse are routine, and the trend is up

64.6%

of operatives suffered verbal abuse at least monthly; half of those weekly

PORTSMOUTH • 2020

43%

threatened with violence at least monthly; one in ten daily

PORTSMOUTH • 2020

30%+

physically assaulted at work within a year

PORTSMOUTH • 2020

+132%

physical attacks on lone workers over three years; weapon incidents up 104%

SOLOPROTECT IMPACT REPORT 2024

2,000+

daily incidents of violence and abuse against retail staff at the 2025 peak; ~1,600 a day in 2026, four times the 2020 level

BRC CRIME SURVEYS 2025 / 2026

Later surveys repeat the pattern. A 2021 industry survey of over 1,000 security professionals found 51% face verbal abuse every shift, 36% are physically attacked monthly, and 48% suffer flashbacks after incidents. A 2024 GMB survey of over 900 Job Centre guards found 83% verbally abused within the year.

The law now protects the person beside them, and not them. The Crime and Policing Act 2026 created a standalone offence of assaulting a retail worker. Security officers are outside it. A Security Industry Federation petition for parity passed 10,000 signatures and drew a government response in May 2026.

The cost is occasionally fatal. Gary Stanley, 52, was stabbed to death on duty at Centre:MK, Milton Keynes, on 28 February 2026.

Sources: Talas & Button, Policing and Society (2020) • SoloProtect (Feb 2025) • BRC (2025, 2026) • TwinFM/Working the Doors (2021) • GMB (2024) • gov.uk • petition.parliament.uk.

03 • THE MENTAL HEALTH EVIDENCE

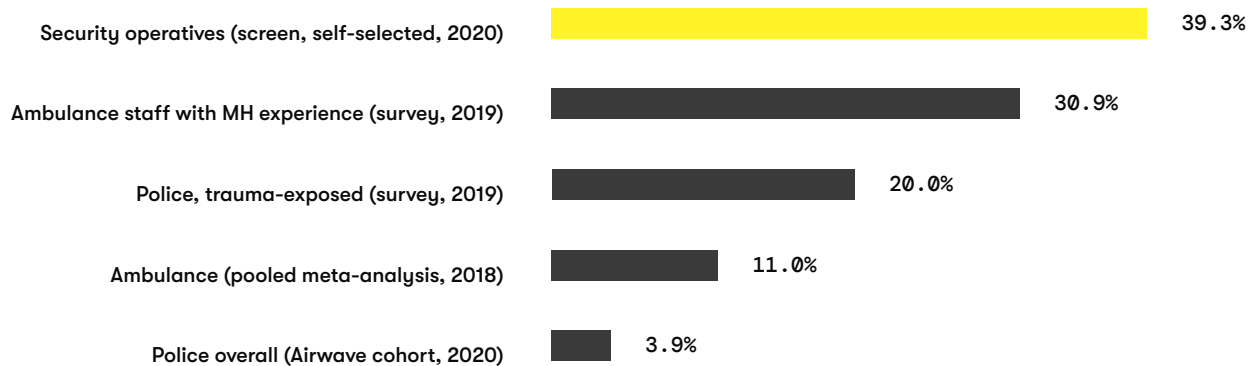
One landmark study, six years old, and nothing since

The anchor. Talas, Button, Doyle and Das, University of Portsmouth: 754 operatives surveyed with SIA and GMB support, published in Policing and Society (2020). It used validated instruments (WEMWBS wellbeing scale, PCL-C trauma screen, CAGE-AID substance screen) plus 15 interviews. It remains the largest UK study of security operative mental health.

The headline. 39.3% of respondents showed symptoms of PTSD. The study also found managers "unable or unwilling to accept that some employees were suffering from poor mental health" and a lack of employer provision for mental health support.

The caveat, stated plainly. The sample was self-selected and the PCL-C is a screen, and a diagnosis needs a clinician. The figure below is a comparison of screen results across different tools and samples. It sets the scale of the problem; a probability sample would set the true rate.

PTSD SIGNAL ACROSS FRONTLINE WORKFORCES (DIFFERENT TOOLS AND SAMPLES)



Since 2020: silence. Security Journal UK (2024) describes the Portsmouth paper as effectively the only published UK research on security industry mental health and calls for it to be repeated. Searches in August 2026 found no peer-reviewed UK follow-up, no SIA prevalence study and no BSIA survey. Smaller polls fill the space: useful for direction, unusable for rates. Internationally the picture is the same; the largest recent study (Taiwan, 2024, 1,032 guards) confirms violence exposure predicts worse mental health.

Sources: Portsmouth (2020) • Mind Blue Light (2019) • Police Care UK/Cambridge (2019) • Petrie et al. (2018) • Stevelink et al., PLOS ONE (2020) • Security Journal UK (2024) • Frontiers in Public Health (2024).

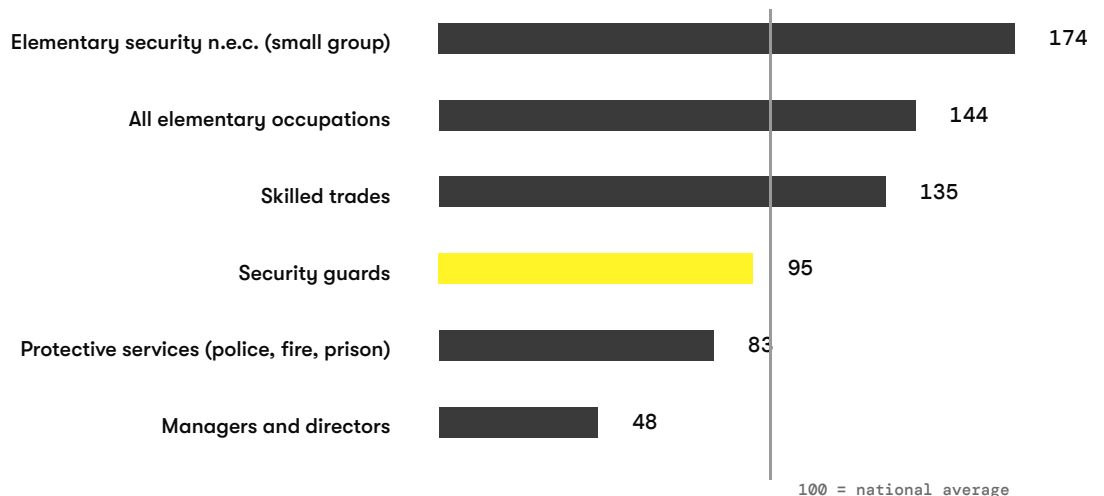
04 • SUICIDE: WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

The state measured the risk once, eleven years ago

The one rate analysis. The ONS has published suicide rates by occupation once: England, deaths registered 2011 to 2015, ages 20 to 64. Male security guards sat at the national average (118 deaths, SMR 95). The small residual group "elementary security occupations n.e.c." was significantly elevated (SMR 174). The wider group male security guards belong to, elementary occupations, carried 44% elevated risk (SMR 144), against SMR 48 for managers and directors.

Since then: counts only. Every later ONS occupation release publishes counts and states that counts cannot establish risk. The counts run at roughly 25 to 35 male security guard suicides a year in England (249 male deaths 2011 to 2021; 34 in 2023; 27 provisionally in 2024). No security-specific rate has been published since 2015.

MALE SUICIDE RISK BY OCCUPATION GROUP, ENGLAND 2011-2015 (SMR, 100 = AVERAGE)



The context. Men are about three quarters of the 6,190 suicides registered in England and Wales in 2024; the 2023 rate was the highest since 1999. The Hazards Campaign estimates around 650 UK suicides a year, roughly one in ten, may be work-related.

The blind spot. The HSE does not record or investigate work-related suicide; RIDDOR excludes it. A workforce of hundreds of thousands therefore has no current occupation-level suicide rate, no regulator recording work-linked deaths, and one rate analysis that predates Martyn's Law, the pandemic and the retail crime wave.

Sources: ONS suicide by occupation (2017 analysis; 2011-2021 and 2023-2024 count datasets, parsed directly) • ONS suicide registrations 2023, 2024 • Hazards Campaign (2022) • CIEH (2019).

Five features of the work compound the risk

ALONE

Lone working is standard across guarding and nights. HSE guidance (INDG73) demands specific risk assessment, monitoring and contact systems for lone workers. Half of lone workers report avoiding tasks out of safety concern (2025). No official figure exists for how many security officers work alone: a measurable gap.

NIGHTS

Night shift work carries a 43% higher risk of depression (meta-analysis of 11 studies, 2017); shift work generally raises adverse mental health outcomes by 28% (meta-analysis, ~28,400 workers, 2019). The standard security pattern is 12-hour shifts, four on, four off.

PAY

Advertised guarding pay clusters at £11.50 to £13.50 an hour, just above the £12.21 National Living Wage. 90% of the striking DWP Job Centre guards were on the wage floor (GMB). Officers commonly work 40 to 60 hours a week to reach a living income.

PRECARITY

Worker-reported data puts 35% of London security guards on zero-hours contracts (39% in Leeds). Subcontracting chains separate the officer from the client whose site they protect. Guaranteed-hours reforms under the Employment Rights Act are expected in force in 2027.

SILENCE

The workforce is 88.9% male. 40% of men will not talk to anyone about their mental health; men are around three quarters of suicides and 36% of NHS talking-therapy referrals. The Portsmouth authors titled the problem precisely: invisible. Operatives normalise abuse and under-report it.

Together, these factors describe a workforce with elevated exposure, depleted buffers and structural barriers to help. Each factor is individually evidenced; their combination in security has never been studied as a system. That combination is the study worth commissioning.

Sources: HSE INDG73 • Security Matters/SoloProtect (2025) • Lee et al. (2017) • Torquati et al. (2019) • Indeed/Glassdoor (2025-26) • GMB (2023-24) • Breakroom (2026) • Eversheds Sutherland (2026) • SIA (2026) • Priory • Counselling Directory.

The interventions are proven elsewhere and untried here

PROVEN

Means restriction (the strongest-evidenced suicide prevention there is; hotspot control cuts deaths at a site by over 90%). Safety planning (43% reduction in suicidal behaviour, meta-analysis 2021). CBT-based stress management and return-to-work support (meta-review, 2016). Organisation-level job design as the foundation tier (NICE NG212, 2022).

PROMISING

TRiM peer trauma support (Royal Navy RCT: safe, modest benefit; police studies: lower PTSD symptoms, less stigma; already licensed into ambulance, fire and private firms). The rail model: Samaritans training plus means restriction produced 2,284 recorded life-saving interventions in the year to March 2025. Multi-component sector programmes (MATES review, 2023). Site outreach plus a 24/7 helpline (Lighthouse construction charity: £5.05m delivered, 88 crisis rescues in 2024). Guided digital CBT.

UNPROVEN

Mental Health First Aid beyond awareness (HSE: no evidence of improved management of mental ill-health). Standalone wellbeing apps and resilience courses (Oxford study of 46,336 UK workers: participants no better off on any indicator). Gatekeeper training as a solo measure. Every existing security-sector offer: none has been evaluated.

The design lesson from the evidence. Fix the work before treating the worker: organisational measures first (rosters, hours, supervision, incident response), targeted support second, awareness last. Programmes that only train awareness or hand out an app do not move outcomes. Peer-delivered trauma support and gatekeeper skills work best inside a system that also controls exposure and measures results.

The precedent that maps cleanest. Rail: a dispersed, shift-based, public-facing workforce, trained at scale, with results counted year on year. Security officers hold the same bystander position in public space, at three times the police headcount, and no one has built them the equivalent.

Sources: Zalsman et al., Lancet Psychiatry (2016) • Nuij et al., BJPsych (2021) • Joyce et al. (2016) • NICE NG212 • Greenberg et al. (2010) • Network Rail/Samaritans (2025) • Health Promotion Int. (2023) • Lighthouse (2024) • HSE RR1135 • Fleming, IRJ (2024) • Oscar Kilo • Mind Blue Light (2019).

07 • THE GAPS

Seven things nobody can currently answer

- 1 The prevalence of mental ill-health in the workforce today. The last large study closed in 2020.
- 2 The current suicide rate for security occupations. The last published rate covers 2011 to 2015.
- 3 How many deaths are work-related. The HSE does not record work-related suicide; RIDDOR excludes it.
- 4 How many officers work alone, and for how long. No official figure exists.
- 5 What proportion of employers provide any mental health support. No open figure exists.
- 6 Whether any sector initiative works. None has been evaluated.
- 7 What the combination of exposure, nights, low pay, precarity and male silence does as a system. Never studied.

WHAT CREDIBLE RESEARCH MUST DO

Sample from the register. The SIA licence register is a complete sampling frame of the workforce. A probability sample drawn from it would replace self-selected surveys and set true prevalence for the first time.

Use validated instruments, longitudinally. Repeat WEMWBS and a current PTSD screen (PCL-5), add suicidal ideation measures, and follow the cohort so change can be attributed.

Link the deaths. Commission occupation-coded analysis of current suicide registrations for security SOC codes, and press the case for recording work-related suicide.

Trial at organisation level. Test rostering, supervision, post-incident response and peer support as controlled organisational interventions, and publish the results whatever they show.

SOURCES

PEER-REVIEWED

Talas, Button, Doyle & Das (2020) • Violence, abuse and the implications for mental health and wellbeing of security operatives in the UK: the invisible problem. *Policing and Society*. doi:10.1080/10439463.2020.1739047

Windsor-Shellard & Gunnell (2019) • Occupation-specific suicide risk in England 2011-2015. *British Journal of Psychiatry*

Lee et al. (2017) • Night shift work and depression risk, meta-analysis. *J Korean Medical Science*

Torquati et al. (2019) • Shift work and poor mental health, meta-analysis. *American Journal of Public Health*

Zalsman et al. (2016) • Suicide prevention strategies revisited. *Lancet Psychiatry*

Nuij et al. (2021) • Safety planning-type interventions, meta-analysis. *British Journal of Psychiatry*

Joyce et al. (2016) • Workplace interventions for common mental disorders, meta-review. *Psychological Medicine*

Fleming (2024) • Individual-level workplace wellbeing interventions. *Industrial Relations Journal* (Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre)

Greenberg et al. (2010) • TRiM cluster RCT, Royal Navy. *Occupational Medicine*

Petrie et al. (2018) • PTSD prevalence in ambulance personnel, meta-analysis

Stevellink et al. (2020) • Probable PTSD in 40,299 UK police. *PLOS ONE*

Health Promotion International (2023) • MATES in Construction systematic review

Frontiers in Public Health (2024) • Workplace violence and security guard health, Taiwan (n=1,032)

OFFICIAL STATISTICS AND GUIDANCE

ONS • Suicide by occupation, England 2011-2015 (2017); ad hoc datasets 15043 (2011-2021) and 2726 (2023-2024 provisional), data files parsed directly

ONS • Suicides in England and Wales: 2023 registrations; 1981-2024 registrations

SIA • Licence holder demographics, June 2026 (ODS parsed directly), gov.uk

HSE • INDG73 Protecting lone workers; RR1135 MHFA evidence review; violence at work statistics

NICE • NG212 Mental wellbeing at work (2022) • ISO 45003:2021 • Thriving at Work review (2017)

Crime and Policing Act 2026, gov.uk • UK Parliament petition 714242

SECTOR AND INDUSTRY

University of Portsmouth press release (2020) • Security Journal UK (2024) • Professional Security Magazine

SoloProtect Impact Report 2024 (Feb 2025) • BRC Crime Survey 2025 and Crime Report 2026 • Usdaw Freedom from Fear 2024, 2025

GMB Union (2023-2024, DWP Job Centre guards) • TwinFM / Working the Doors survey (2021) • Breakroom pay data (2026)

Network Rail / Samaritans partnership figures (2025) • Lighthouse Charity Impact Report 2024 • Mind Blue Light research summary (2019) • Oscar Kilo / NPWS

Hazards Campaign work-suicide research (2022) • CIEH (2019) • BBC News coverage, Milton Keynes, Feb-Mar 2026

EXCLUDED AFTER VERIFICATION

One widely repeated industry figure on violent incidents against security workers could not be traced to a primary source and is not used in this review.

An International SOS statistic on suicidal thoughts among rotational shift workers refers to remote rotation work, and it is not attributed to security officers here.

OnSiren Research • August 2026 • Compiled and verified from primary sources; confidence ratings and data files retained.