

Routledge Studies in Crime and Society

PRIVATE SECURITY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF PRIVATE SECURITY
COMPANIES WORKING WITH VICTIMS
OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Diarmaid Harkin



The role of private security in partnering with domestic violence services to help keep survivors of violence safe has grown quickly with limited oversight. Drawing on interviews with stakeholders, Harkin's accessible, timely and original analysis outlines the challenges, risks, and benefits and recommends an innovative, yet practical, pathway forward.

Professor Heather Douglas, *TC Beirne School of Law,
University of Queensland, Australia*

Dr Harkin's book is unique in both the domestic violence and private security fields. The world is desperately seeking solutions to the entrenched problem of violence against women and children. The book provides an honest and systematic analysis of the scope for prevention through the application of security industry services, with a key proviso regarding appropriate regulation of the industry. This is an essential source for anyone interested in making a real difference in this crucial area of policy and practice.

Tim Prenzler, *Professor of Criminology,
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia*

Dr Harkin has captured what occurs when non-profit, ethically driven, safety-first domestic violence services intersect with the for-profit security industry. Sometimes it works really well, and sometimes it's really dangerous. Finally in one place, a confirmation of what many professional domestic and family violence practitioners have been saying: technology can help survivors, but it shouldn't be done by unregulated 'cowboys' and it's not a 'silver bullet'. This is an invaluable book for Australian government policy makers and the domestic and family violence sector.

Karen Bentley, *National Director, WESNET
(the Women's Services Network) Inc., Australia*



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Private Security and Domestic Violence

Private companies are increasingly involved with the security of domestic violence victims. This has manifested in a number of ways, including private security companies working in partnership with domestic violence services, the proliferation of security-technology companies that seek a market within the domestic violence sector, and governments contracting private companies to provide security provision for victims. *Private Security and Domestic Violence* offers a world-first analysis of the risks and benefits of for-profit businesses engaging with a vulnerable and underprotected section of society.

Based on original data gathered in Australia, this book provides internationally relevant insights on the dangers but also the potential benefits of increasing private sector involvement with victims of domestic abuse. It offers a unique crossover of the literature on private security, crime prevention, and domestic violence. Aimed at scholars, policymakers, and frontline workers within the domestic violence sector, *Private Security and Domestic Violence* documents experimental new collaborations and partnerships between the private, community and governmental spheres and makes a case for the suitable regulatory solutions to be put in place to successfully manage private security involvement with domestic violence victims.

By outlining the risks and the benefits of this new form of security provision and detailing a potential model of regulation, this book offers a pathway for improving how we provide for a chronically underprotected population. It will be of interest to criminology and criminal justice students and researchers engaged in studies of abuse, domestic violence, violent crime, victims and victimology, crime prevention, and security.

Diarmaid Harkin is an Alfred Deakin Postdoctoral Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Deakin University. His current active research interests include the use of private security companies in the context of domestic violence, the consumer spyware industry, and the challenges of cyber-policing.

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Introduction

Introduction

Is it appropriate for private security companies to work with victims of domestic violence? This is the principal question that is explored in this book. Should profit-seeking companies play a role in responding to the security needs of victims of domestic violence? What are the risks of permitting security workers privileged access to victims of domestic violence? And ultimately, are private security companies welcome contributors for addressing the alarming deficit of safety and security experienced by victims of domestic violence? This book is the result of several years of reflecting on these questions. Data was collected from various case studies across Australia to provide insights from the frontline of this emerging phenomenon, and this book will explore the risks and benefits of this developing model of security provision.

Until recently, there has been no substantial record of victims of domestic violence receiving services from private security companies. While there have been some examples of security companies developing personal duress alarms or providing CCTV to victims (see Prenzler and Fardell 2016), there is no documentation of security companies visiting the home of victims and providing tailored, direct security services. However, in recent years, this has been occurring with increasing frequency within Australia. For example, in 2017, the Salvation Army's *Safer in the Home* program claims to have provided 670 women across the country with services using their private security company partners (Safer in the Home Newsletter February 2018). Such a service typically involves two primary elements including a 'security audit', which is a visit from a security worker who assesses the property and makes recommendations on the safety needs of the clients, and then a 'security upgrade', which is the installation of new locks, sensor-lighting, 'peep-holes', and window-security features and the completion of home repairs, or any other measures deemed relevant to the safety of the client. All fees and charges are carried by the domestic violence service.

This is occurring in the context of domestic violence organisations dealing with huge numbers of clients who have alarming levels of insecurity and anxiety. Faced with large client bases that require substantial support, private

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security companies can become an attractive option for providing ‘security audits’ and ‘security upgrades’. As an indicator of the scale of the problem in Australia, there have been 126 domestic violence-related deaths in 2017 and 8,409 victims of domestic violence-related sexual assault; at least two out of five assaults in the same time period were also related to domestic violence (ABS 2018). Moreover, it is widely recognised that domestic violence comes in many other forms that can include coercion, control, emotional manipulation, surveillance, and a range of psychologically damaging behaviours (RCFV 2016: 15–31). Therefore, there are huge numbers of individuals relying on domestic violence services to provide them with strategies for increasing their safety and well-being. Their needs are diverse, and chronic levels of anxiety, insecurity, and psychological suffering are widespread. When domestic violence services feel that they cannot adequately respond to the range of security issues facing their clients, private security companies offer a potential alternative source of support. In principle, private security companies can be contracted by domestic violence organisations to address the needs of their clients, and to do so in ways that are accountable to the ‘bottom line’ of whether their clients experience increases in safety or security (Bayley and Shearing 1996: 593).

In practice, this research has uncovered reports of private security companies doing a huge variety of tasks and providing a broad range of services for victims of domestic violence. Some have visited the homes of clients and given them one-on-one consultation sessions where they have discussed strategies to address their feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Others have developed smartphone applications or bespoke pieces of technology such as personal duress alarms that offer practical methods for reporting abuse. Some security companies have chaperoned victims to court. Some have offered ‘cyber-security’ advice and have gone as far as to examine smartphones and personal computers for spyware. Sweeping for ‘bugs’ or physical tracking equipment is another service commonly offered. Likewise, the installation of CCTV cameras. Certain companies have also set up 24/7 call-centre support, whereby clients can open up live audio-channels with a call-centre through a 3G wristwatch if they are feeling under threat from their abuser. A range of companies also offer services to change the locks on windows or doors and provide ‘risk assessments’ of clients’ homes.

In this respect, security companies often find themselves doing whatever is demanded by the victim’s personal set of challenges. They are contracted by domestic violence services to be led by the needs of the clients, and this can take many shapes and forms depending on the nature of the abuse or the unique elements of the victim’s particular anxiety. As this book will show, this can often be to the benefit of victims. This research has found that private security companies can offer services and support that were previously unavailable to victims and under certain circumstances can make positive impacts on victims’ safety in addition to improving their perceived sense of security. Such benefits were reported by multiple domestic violence services, along with 15 victims who spoke directly to this research, in addition to many other government

representatives and stakeholders who corroborated examples of positive private security impact. As will be shown, private security companies can be a useful addition to the range of actors who are responding to the needs of victims.

However, it must also be factored and considered that private security companies were also reported to have acted improperly, unethically, and incompetently in many circumstances. This research has uncovered specific examples of security companies and security workers behaving in alarming ways. For example, in some situations it was reported that alleged perpetrators of domestic violence had been working in this field. This points to the concerning possibility that certain private security workers are entirely inappropriate to be operating in this domain. Likewise, some domestic violence services reported having experiences with security workers who used misogynistic language. Furthermore, there have been instances of security companies providing faulty technology to clients that has only added to their upset rather than alleviating insecurity, and there was one particularly concerning incident whereby a security company refused to provide CCTV footage relating to an assault unless further money was provided. It is clear, therefore, that some security companies do not have the level of ethical integrity to be working with such vulnerable clients, and there have been many more additional examples of security workers simply mishandling or mismanaging clients through incompetence.

There should always be a high degree of caution when exposing victims of domestic violence to private security companies. Victims of domestic violence are a vulnerable population that requires high standards of care and support. It is thoroughly documented that they often face pronounced issues of anxiety, mental health challenges, and trauma-related emotional distress (Ellsberg et al. 2008). It is not guaranteed, however, that security workers will have any specific training or expertise with dealing with such highly traumatised individuals. As will be discussed, there are currently no specific accreditation standards ensuring that companies that operate in this domain have the requisite skills or training for working with vulnerable clients. In this respect, there are clear risks that security companies may aggravate rather than alleviate victim insecurity. As outlined earlier, in Australia there have already been a number of security companies that have acted unethically, and furthermore, even the most qualified security companies face the risk of agitating traumatised individuals.

The potential damage that security companies can inflict must also be balanced, however, against the urgent need for better responses for victims of domestic violence. Currently, the primary sources of organised support for victims comes from the police, the criminal justice system, and third-sector domestic violence services. But it is clear that these groups are struggling to address the breadth and depth of the damage of domestic violence. It has been significantly documented that on many occasions the criminal justice system can exacerbate the trauma of victims (see for example Douglas 2012; Walklate 2008), and, in general, the current landscape of actors who are addressing the security needs of victims are not adequately responding to this challenge. Victims still face alarming levels of insecurity and chronic feelings of unsafety. It is

within this context that we must consider whether private security companies can provide a net benefit. The most important question is: will the introduction of private security companies to this context create an overall improvement for the capacity to address the insecurity and deficits of safety experienced by victims? Is it an acceptable risk to permit security companies a greater involvement with victims of domestic violence in order to improve upon the inadequate status quo?

This book will argue that private security companies can deliver improvements to our capacity to address the needs of victims of domestic violence. This position will be qualified against a detailed and empirical articulation of all the risks and damage that private security companies can create. It will be shown that there needs to be a healthy degree of precaution when deploying private security companies or allowing them to deliver services for victims. However, this book will equally depict and demonstrate the advantages and benefits that can be gained by victims when they have access to the capabilities and skills of private security companies. There are many ways victims can exploit the services offered by private security companies to improve their security and well-being. In order to mitigate against the risks of private security companies and to promote the best possibility of exploiting the benefits, this book will also outline options for regulating this model of security provision. It is hoped, therefore, that this research can play a role in outlining how to best navigate the growing influence of private security companies operating in the domain of domestic violence.

Scholarly contribution

This book also aims to make a contribution to the scholarly literatures on private security and domestic violence. These two sets of literature have hitherto been unconnected and separate, but this book represents a unique meeting of these two bodies of work. The increasing relevance of private security companies in the context of domestic violence has been largely unanticipated and unexpected; therefore, this emergent empirical development can offer important conceptual contributions for the established literatures. For instance, it will be argued throughout this book that the deployment of private security companies in this context can challenge many of the dominant conceptualisations of private security in the criminological literature. In general, the literature adopts a predominantly sceptical and critical perspective on the capacity of the private security industry to contribute to the common good. There are many important reasons why the literature takes such a stance. Analysis of the private security industry commonly highlights its general ‘tarnished image’ (Gibson 2007: 2) and underlines its many notable examples of illegal and unethical behaviour (Prenzler and Sarre 2008). Furthermore, the industry often has a deserved reputation for delivering ‘poor-quality services’ and is vulnerable to entry and exploitation from individuals with histories of criminal offending (Zedner 2006: 272). Private security is also critiqued at an

industry level over questions of its motives, levels of accountability, and impact on society (Loader 1997; Zedner 2006; Prenzler and Sarre 2012; da Silva Lopes 2015; Loader and White 2017). Likewise, private security is also critiqued at the level of consumption. A number of scholars identify the ‘troubling’ aspects of ‘buying and selling’ security (Loader et al. 2014) and the counterproductive elements of pursuing security through commodities and private security contracts (Zedner 2003).

However, this book offers a corrective to this generally sceptical perspective of private security’s capacity to deliver services for the common good. Through illustrating the benefits of private security companies working with victims of domestic violence it will be shown that this is a unique context in which the industry can contribute to improved outcomes for a chronically vulnerable and underprotected population. It will be illustrated that there are many advantages to be gained from private companies showing an interest in this social problem. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that some of the dangers and critiques that are commonly aimed at the private security industry do not apply in this context. Fears of the ‘coercive’ and ‘punitive’ elements of private security are not relevant to this type of work (Singh 2005), and the risks and dangers of the most wealthy and powerful in society directing the security industry to exclude vulnerable groups are also not applicable in this circumstance. While Zedner (2003) has convincingly argued that there can be a problem when powerful groups deploy the private security industry to represent their narrow set of interests, victims of domestic violence can significantly benefit from having their ‘narrow’ interests better served.

While the private security literature offers a series of useful warnings and precautions about the motives and competence of the private security industry, its core focus has been on circumstances where the consumers of private security are wealthy and empowered contractors. Attention has primarily focused on middle-class consumers (Goold et al. 2010; Loader et al. 2014), businesses (Shearing and Stenning 1981), and high-end industrial clients or hybrid state-industry partnerships (Dupont 2014; White 2011). What has been less considered are the ways in which vulnerable populations with acute safety concerns may participate in ‘markets for security’ (Bayley and Shearing 1996: 603). It was largely unexpected and unanticipated that security companies could ever be deployed for the benefit of victims of domestic violence, and, therefore, many of the same risks do not apply. It is unlikely that security companies working with victims of domestic violence could damage broader ‘social solidarity’ (Zedner 2003: 171), for instance.

Nevertheless, many of the critiques of private security regarding their ethics, competence, and motivations are still significant to this investigation and, as will be seen, are often confirmed or reinforced by the experience of security companies working with victims of domestic violence. In this respect, this book offers some attempts to challenge existing conceptualisations within the private security literature whilst also supporting others. Private security studies can thus benefit from this study examining its impact over a new domain

of influence. This book also makes a useful contribution to studies of family and domestic violence. To date, no major work has considered the risks and benefits of security companies working with this vulnerable group (for an exception see Prenzler and Fardell 2016). Research into family and domestic violence covers a large number of disciplines from medical health, psychology, law, criminology, gender studies, and victimology. It covers a vast number of perspectives and contemplates a wide variety of policy solutions for improving the general well-being of victims. The predominant focus, however, is often on criminal justice solutions or improvements to health and social policy. As yet, there has not been a substantial exploration of whether private security companies may play a beneficial role in responding to the needs of victims of domestic violence. This book, therefore, can provide a useful new addition to the wider policy discussion of how best to support victims and strengthen our overall strategies for alleviating widespread insecurity.

Outline of the book

This book will attempt to make the argument that private security companies can become a useful addition to the landscape of actors who are responding to the needs of victims of domestic violence. This argument will unfold over six chapters. Chapter 1 has several interrelated aims that will attempt to answer the question of why private security companies have suddenly entered the domain of domestic violence in Australia over the past few years. Chapter 1 will offer a number of key reasons for ‘*why now?*’ and demonstrate how this phenomenon developed most significantly within Australia at first but is also likely to emerge elsewhere. It will begin by depicting the inadequacies of the current status quo for responding to domestic violence. It will demonstrate the failures of the state to address the needs of domestic violence victims and how this vulnerable group have been perennially undersupported and underprotected. It will also demonstrate that the past few decades have also witnessed an explosive expansion in the private security industry. Significant growth in this industry has set the stage for security companies aiming to find new markets and new activities they can profit from. This has then dovetailed with two more recent developments. First, there is the rise of technology-facilitated domestic violence, which has created acute new challenges for protecting victims from abuse, and, second, the sudden rise in political and cultural prominence of the issue of ‘domestic violence’ in Australian political life. It will be argued that the unprecedented cultural attention on domestic violence in recent years in Australia has translated into significant upswings in funding to the domestic violence advocacy sector which has subsequently spent a lot of new funding on private security.

Chapter 2 then provides a more detailed articulation of the various programs and examples of how Australian state governments and federal government, along with domestic violence organisations, have contracted security companies to deliver services for victims. It describes a number of arrangements that exist across Australia where security companies have been deployed into the

field. It also crucially details how this research collected data on each of these case studies. The methods and data collection of this research are outlined in this chapter, including a description of how this research recruited 15 victims of domestic violence and spoke with more than 90 key stakeholders including representatives from government, domestic violence organisations, and police. Some notes are also provided on the limitations of the data along with some general commentary on researching victims of domestic violence.

Chapter 3 begins a series of results chapters that unpack the findings of this research. Specifically, it aims to address and document all of the discoveries of alarming behaviour by private security companies operating in this context. A litany of incidents and examples have been provided to this research regarding security companies or specific workers behaving inappropriately, unethically, dangerously, or incompetently. Many of the scholarly warnings regarding the private security industry have manifested within the context of companies working with victims of domestic violence. Certain relationships between domestic violence organisations and security companies have broken down because of misbehaviour on the part of the security company, and furthermore, certain well-meaning companies have also agitated or upset clients through incompetence or poor service. This chapter provides an illustration that domestic violence victims are particularly vulnerable and often have significant, ongoing mental health challenges (see for example Ellsberg et al. 2008; Tolman and Rosen 2001; Coker et al. 2002). While they may require high-quality service and support, security companies can often deliver services that do not match the suitable level of skill and competency to deal with such a vulnerable population, and furthermore, a number of companies and workers ought to be purged and prohibited from working in this space altogether. This chapter reports on all of the instances and circumstances of security companies having damaging or deleterious effects on victims of domestic violence.

Chapter 4 considers the technological ‘solutions’ often offered by private security companies. As outlined above, technology-facilitated abuse is on the rise for victims of domestic violence, and in a related development, private security companies have attempted to develop technology-facilitated responses. There are now a wide range of companies claiming to have the latest device, gadget, or technological ‘fix’ for supporting domestic violence victims. Multiple domestic violence organisations and peak-body organisations report that they are being regularly approached by security companies promoting the latest product that will solve problems for victims. Furthermore, there has been a rise in smartphone apps deployed by private providers and an increased use of CCTV, and some security companies now offer ‘debugging’ services along with forms of cyber-security advice. This chapter captures the reports from the research participants on whether technological ‘solutions’ offered by security companies have improved or hindered the safety and security of victims. It shows that domestic violence organisations generally welcome technological solutions as being practically useful for protecting clients and supporting prosecution efforts, whilst also often having a positive psychological effect

of reassuring or offering the victim ‘peace of mind’. This is contrasted, however, with some examples of personal duress alarms being dangerously faulty or CCTV causing hypervigilance amongst some clients. This chapter aims to depict the specific risks of deploying the private security industry’s technological ‘solutions’ with victims of domestic violence, whilst also acknowledging its general popularity with domestic violence organisations and the potential for improving victim safety and well-being.

Chapter 5 will focus on the specific reasons why private security companies may be a useful addition to the broader ‘nodal governance’ of domestic violence-based insecurity (Shearing and Wood 2003a). It will depict how private security can have significant positive impacts on the clients of domestic violence and also domestic violence organisations. The voices of the 15 victims of domestic violence who spoke with this research will be utilised in this section to illustrate how these programs can be popular with clients. Many domestic violence organisations also reported that private security companies helped them improve the overall service they could provide for their clients and often filled a number of crucial gaps in their knowledge, expertise, and capabilities. This chapter will build upon Shearing and Stenning’s (1983) observation that private security is often ‘victim-orientated’ and ‘victim-controlled’ and will detail how victims of domestic violence services can exploit this resource to improve their sense of security. It will be shown how private security companies often have to respond to the specific, personal, and hyperlocal aspects of clients’ anxiety and insecurity, and this is one of the key reasons these programs can be very popular with victims.

Chapter 6 then offers a reflection on how to balance the potential of private security companies being a beneficial and useful addition to the landscape of actors responding to domestic violence victims, with the real and glaring risks that unethical and incompetent operators can enter this arena to the detriment of victims and domestic violence organisations. If private security companies are to be a welcome addition to the established ‘nodal governance’ of domestic violence-based insecurity, there must be a mechanism that attempts to encourage the benefits and positive contributions of security companies, whilst mitigating against the risks. It is outlined in this chapter how private security companies are currently regulated when operating within the context of domestic violence. Furthermore, the various possible options for further regulating security companies are considered. It is ultimately suggested that a form of ‘civil regulation’ (Levi-Faur 2009) whereby information on poor performing security companies could be shared amongst domestic violence organisations and ‘buyers’ of private security could make more informed choices would be a significant improvement. Security companies must first negotiate with domestic violence organisations in order to get access to victims; therefore, there is a regulatory advantage in that domestic violence organisations are a ‘gate-keeper’ to their clients. Hence, regulation aimed at improving domestic violence organisations’ knowledge about security companies and developing the strength of their ‘consumer choices’ will make a significant impact on purging the market of bad actors while avoiding common mistakes made in the course