

# Labor Informality in Private Police Forces in Mexico\*

[English Version]

La informalidad laboral en las policías privadas de México

A informalidade laboral nas polícias privadas do México

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Mexico

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To examine labor informality in private police forces in Mexico based on the results of the National Survey of Occupation and Employment, published quarterly by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography. **Methodology:** To understand its transformation, data from 2012 to 2024 are analyzed, and to deepen the study of the

phenomenon, various socioeconomic variables are examined using the results from the third quarter of 2024. **Results:** The findings show an increase in the number of people working in this sector as a consequence of the growing demand for security in the country, but they also reveal high levels of labor informality, which are particularly acute among guards and doormen in private households, and among individuals with vulnerabilities associated with gender, age, schooling, among others. This informality, in addition to directly affecting individuals' economic conditions, triggers other social problems that intensify among populations with greater vulnerabilities and deepen existing inequalities. **Conclusions:** The conclusions drawn for Mexico are contrasted with a review of the literature on this phenomenon in other Latin American countries,

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contributing to the discussion on labor informality in this sector, which constitutes a regional social problem.

**Keywords:** police; privatization; labor informality; working conditions; criminology (obtained from the UNESCO Thesaurus).

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** estudiar la informalidad laboral en las policías privadas en México a partir de los resultados de la Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo, que publica trimestralmente el Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía.

**Metodología:** para comprender su transformación, se analizan los datos del 2012 al 2024 y, para profundizar en el estudio del fenómeno, se estudian distintas variables socioeconómicas a partir de los resultados del tercer trimestre de 2024.

**Resultados:** se muestra el incremento de las personas que laboran en este sector como consecuencia de la demanda de mayor seguridad en el país, pero también se evidencian altos niveles de informalidad laboral, que se agudizan mayormente en los vigilantes y porteros en casas particulares, en las personas con vulnerabilidades asociadas al género, la edad, la escolaridad, entre otros. Esta informalidad, además de afectar directamente la economía de las personas, desencadena otros problemas sociales que se exacerban en la población con mayores vulnerabilidades, y profundiza las desigualdades. **Conclusiones:** las conclusiones de México se contrastan con la revisión de literatura de este fenómeno en otros países de América Latina, y permite abonar a la discusión sobre la informalidad laboral en este sector, que es un problema social en la región.

**Palabras clave:** policía; privatización; informalidad laboral; condiciones de trabajo; criminología (obtenidos del tesauro de la UNESCO).

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** estudar a informalidade laboral nas polícias privadas no México a partir dos resultados da Pesquisa Nacional de Ocupação e Emprego, publicada trimestralmente pelo Instituto Nacional de Estatística e Geografia. **Metodologia:** para compreender sua transformação, analisam-se os dados de 2012 a 2024 e, para aprofundar o estudo do fenômeno, diferentes variáveis socioeconômicas são examinadas com base nos resultados do terceiro trimestre de 2024. **Resultados:** observa-se o aumento do número de pessoas que trabalham nesse setor como consequência da demanda por

maior segurança no país, mas também se evidenciam altos níveis de informalidade laboral, que se acentuam especialmente entre vigilantes e porteiros em residências particulares, e entre pessoas com vulnerabilidades associadas ao gênero, idade, escolaridade, entre outros. Essa informalidade, além de afetar diretamente a situação econômica das pessoas, desencadeia outros problemas sociais que se agravam na população com maiores vulnerabilidades e aprofundam as desigualdades. **Conclusões:** as conclusões referentes ao México são contrastadas com a revisão da literatura sobre esse fenômeno em outros países da América Latina, contribuindo para a discussão sobre a informalidade laboral nesse setor, que constitui um problema social na região.

**Palavras-chave:** polícia; privatização; informalidade laboral; condições de trabalho; criminologia (obtidos do tesouro da UNESCO)..

## Introduction

Being a police officer is considered high-risk work, particularly in a country like Mexico. Statistics compiled by civil society organizations show that in recent years thousands of police officers have been killed, on average one per day (Causa en Común, 2023), in addition to other risks associated with police duties.

One of the main reasons people choose to become police officers is that they view it as an employment alternative to meet their economic needs, and as a source of stability and benefits that could improve their quality of life and that of their families. The National Survey of Police Professional Standards and Training (ENECAP) (2017) shows that 36.5% chose to become police officers due to “economic need or unemployment,” and 6.8% because they were “seeking economic stability” (INEGI, 2018). However, although the income of formal police officers in some cases allows them to cover basic needs such as food and housing, it is not sufficient to fully pay for expenses such as clothing and footwear, medical services, school costs, savings, among others. Paradoxically, even though policing is essential for society, police officers in Mexico earn precarious wages. This situation is even more frequent and severe among private police forces, whose income levels are generally lower than those of public police institutions. Compounding this, the sector is characterized by persistent labor informality.

In this study, private police forces are understood as “[...] private corporations that, operating as companies and under market logic, offer security services in exchange for financial remuneration” (Jasso, 2025, p. 143), some of which are formal and others informal. However, “[...] there are also individuals or groups who, on their own, carry out surveillance functions in more limited settings, such as streets, buildings, or small businesses, in exchange for payment in a more informal manner” (Jasso, 2025, p. 143).

Labor informality is more pronounced in private police forces. In addition to generally earning less than public police officers, labor informality in this sector has exceeded 75% in some of its modalities, in contrast to Mexico’s national average informality rate (55%) (INEGI, 2023c). As a result, the services provided to the public do not guarantee that personnel are adequately trained and equipped, and their social rights are undermined. This affects the quality of life of individuals who have no alternative but to work under these informal and vulnerable conditions. Evidence shows that “[...] workers in the informal economy work in this way mainly out of necessity, not by choice” (Espejo, 2022, p. 13).

The main source of information is the National Survey of Occupation and Employment (ENOE, for its Spanish acronym), conducted quarterly by

the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, for its Spanish acronym). Among other variables, ENOE measures labor informality in occupations related to private security. The analysis and results are compared with findings from the literature and empirical evidence, particularly in Latin America, where the growth of private police forces and labor informality are also persistent issues.

The analysis begins with a theoretical framework on labor informality as a social phenomenon, followed by an examination of private police forces in Latin America, considering the various effects of labor informality on their lives and the vulnerabilities associated with it as both cause and consequence. Regarding Mexico, using ENOE results, the study analyzes longitudinal growth from 2012 to 2024 and examines a range of socioeconomic variables based on the results of the third quarter of 2024 (INEGI, 2024). Among other factors, the analysis explores who these security guards are, their main characteristics and vulnerabilities, age, income, and education level, and examines labor informality across the different states of the country. Finally, public narratives surrounding this phenomenon are explored, and the study concludes by outlining proposals aimed at informing public policy design.

## Labor Informality

Labor informality is a concept that emerged in the 1970s and was coined based on the anthropological studies of Keith Hart, while the concept of the “informal economy” was not officially endorsed by the ILO until 2015 (Espejo, 2022). Historically, it is a social phenomenon that affects millions of people worldwide, undermining their ability to meet basic needs, generating unfavorable conditions, and overall harming their quality of life. It is considered “[...] a product of social inequality in Latin America” (Rubio, 2018, p. 18), a “structural characteristic” (Espejo, 2022, p. 7) of the region, which primarily affects people’s economies and triggers other social problems, problems that are exacerbated among populations facing greater vulnerabilities.

In turn, it functions as a cycle that deepens inequalities. People with limited possibilities of accessing formal employment enter informality as “[...] a way to overcome poverty” (Rubio, 2018, p. 20). It has become “[...] the alternative to unemployment for poor sectors” (Espejo, 2022, p. 10), yet this option rarely provides stability and may instead bring additional problems and complications into their lives.

The literature shows that labor informality is associated with “[...] gender, socioeconomic, ethnic and racial, age-related, and especially territorial inequalities” (Espejo, 2022, p. 7). The vulnerabilities that have been studied function as both cause and consequence, as labor informality increases workplace risks (Rubio, 2018). Poor or inadequate working conditions may lead to accidents or illnesses which, paradoxically, cannot be properly addressed in the public health system due to the lack of benefits such as social security, thereby affecting the economic situation and stability of families.

Labor informality also has effects on a nation’s economy. Over time, it has consolidated as “[...] an endemic feature of our labor markets” (ILO, 2022, p. 7). Economically, it affects “[...] regulatory evasion or the hidden economy, and it is quantified as a latent variable (as a percentage of GDP)” (Rubio, 2018, p. 19). Its economic impact can be significant.

To understand the situation in Latin America, it is relevant to consider the view that “labor informality” is “[...] a result of the functioning of peripheral capitalism” (Espejo, 2022, p. 10), and therefore has a greater impact than in other regions of the world.

In Latin America, the history of labor informality has been persistent. “61% of the jobs created in the 1990s were informal” (Espejo, 2022, p. 12), and by 2022, ILO data show that “[...] the regional informality rate (average of 11 countries) is nearly 50 percent” (ILO, 2022, p. 18). Although informality has decreased, it remains high, as the phenomenon manifests through “exclusion and escape factors,” and is associated with “deficiencies in social policy” (Espejo, 2022, p. 13).

In Mexico, informality has also been a persistent issue. INEGI (2014) explains that “informality” is “[...] the set of economic activities carried out by individuals who, due to the context in which they do them, cannot invoke the corresponding legal or institutional framework in their favor” (p. 26).

INEGI data (2023c) show that in 2022 “[...] the informal economy contributed 24.4% of national GDP at current prices”. The sector with the highest levels of informality has been retail trade (43.7% in 2022), followed by the construction sector and manufacturing industry (24.5% and 12.8%, respectively) (INEGI, 2023c). However, some occupations related to private security have reached even higher percentages.

## Literature Review on Labor Informality in Private Police Forces in Latin America

Labor informality is a phenomenon replicated within private police forces across Latin America. This is largely due to the increased social demand for this type of security, which has resulted in exponential growth in recent years, and in some countries has led to unequal dynamics, where private police forces even outnumber public police institutions (Kinosian & Bosworth, 2018).

There are companies, groups, and individuals who offer private security services and who, for various social or economic reasons, operate outside the legal framework and under conditions of labor informality. It is estimated that labor informality in this sector is also driven by “[...] the lack of information and of a centralized registry of activities” (Pérez, 2018, p. 131) on the part of governments, which have been overwhelmed by the phenomenon. Other studies have found that regulatory bodies have limited structure and insufficient capacity to carry out necessary oversight tasks (Jasso, 2025).

Understanding the magnitude and characteristics of labor informality in Latin America is difficult due to:

[...] the large number of private security services that are under-invoiced and/or belong to the informal economy, this is a problem in most countries of the region. Therefore, there is no real knowledge of the scale and growth rate of informality in this market, even though various reports estimate that it reaches nearly 50% of all services provided in most countries of the region. (Frigo cited in Pérez, 2018, p. 132. Own translation).

The literature on this phenomenon in Latin America generally shows that it is a problem in most countries of the region (Pérez, 2018, p. 132). However, the analysis is not homogeneous: While some countries recognize this social phenomenon as a historical issue (Losa, 2018) and have public databases that enable different levels of analysis, in others, information is fragmented. As a result, diagnoses and public policy proposals differ, as illustrated below.

In Uruguay, it is stated that “[...] the private security business has historically had a high level of informality and virtually nonexistent oversight” (Losa, 2018, p. 1), which led to efforts to strengthen inspection mechanisms.

In Nicaragua, it is seen as a current and growing issue. It has been found that “[...] concepts such as ‘informal work’ and ‘precariousness’ have increasingly taken root in existing labor conditions” (Mora *et al.*, 2023, p. 7). Meanwhile, in Ecuador, differences are observed in the provision of security services depending

on whether they are offered in formal or informal contexts and on the economic capacity of those who pay for the service:

Thus, while formal private guarding companies [...] provide services to banks, formal commerce, gated neighborhoods, and certain state offices, informal companies serve low-income sectors, reproducing the same problems of informality observed in other sectors of the country. (Carrión, 2006, p. 1. Own translation).

A study in Costa Rica documents that private security work is carried out by Nicaraguan migrants under conditions of informality. They are referred to as “Guachimanes,” and are hired informally, accepting precarious conditions due to their irregular migration status.

Despite these conditions, this informal work has been essential for migrants in Costa Rica. For seven out of ten respondents, “[...] income from informal private security work is their main source of livelihood” (Mora *et al.*, 2023, p. 10). Furthermore, two out of five respondents “[...] mentioned that their first job in Costa Rica was in private security” (Mora *et al.*, 2023, p. 11). These jobs can last many years; the study found individuals with more than twenty years in the sector. Most work an average of 12 hours per day, with some working 13 hours or more (Mora *et al.*, 2023).

Other social vulnerabilities also push them to accept these informal conditions. In Costa Rica, it was identified that private police officers “[...] are mostly young people who, combined with their irregular migration status, find in informality a primary source of income through private security services” (Mora *et al.*, 2023, p. 16).

In Colombia, it has been observed that because “[...] most verification and control efforts fall on legal companies and not on illegal ones, the cost associated with illegality is very low” (Pérez, 2018, p. 132). A similar pattern is found in other countries, where the costs of informal hiring are lower and, therefore, more attractive for those seeking private security services.

Additionally, a study aimed at “[...] identifying the variables that influence the informal provision of residential private security services” (Martínez, 2021, p. 7) examined a specific Bogotá neighborhood. It was found that this long-standing problem emerged in response to the demand for security and rising violence in the 1960s, and remains relevant today.

The findings show that the 40 informal workers in this residential neighborhood pay for their own social security and work 24-hour shifts every other day (Martínez, 2021, pp. 52-53). And although Colombia has regulatory frameworks for private security, “[...] neither clients nor established actors show significant



interest in complying with what the State requires” (Martínez, 2021, p. 57). It is even suggested that “[...] the informal provision of private security services constitutes, in itself, a substitute service threat as it displaces legal companies” (Martínez, 2021, p. 57).

Variables influencing informal service provision include: lack of educational opportunities, labor conditions that generate financial benefit for clients, economic support to friends or family through hiring, limited opportunities in the city, and economic need (Martínez, 2021, pp. 64–66).

In Buenos Aires, Argentina, research shows the proliferation of private police across multiple spaces: “[...] private security personnel guarding recreational venues such as football matches, shopping centers, both enclosed and open-air, banking institutions, educational centers, and even the least expected sectors” (Page & Glanc, 2024, p. 343).

As in other countries of the region, informality is a constant: “[...] many companies operate clandestinely, without regulation, and their private guards [...] are ‘off-the-books’ workers, or under an unregistered employment relationship, with low wages, poor working conditions, and lacking state oversight and protection” (Page & Glanc, 2024, p. 346).

The most significant contribution of Page and Glanc (2024) is their demonstration that informality in private police forces results in the precarization of their lives, with low wages that force them to take additional jobs, which may even fall into illegality, and leaving them without prospects for upward mobility. The lives of private police officers “[...] are characterized by impoverishment and vulnerability” (p. 348): they travel long distances to work, have little free time, reside in low-income neighborhoods, rely on loans to meet basic needs, and become trapped in cycles of debt that “[...] cannot be separated from their life histories” (p. 353). As one interviewee stated, it is “[...] a debt cycle that is difficult to escape” (p. 354).

Moreover, organizational dynamics within private police forces can contribute to labor informality. Spekuljak (2024) proposes the concept of the “proletarian amalgam of guards,” referring to the additional tasks and activities that guards regularly perform beyond security work. Through this, clients obtain more services and further exploit workers.

In summary, throughout Latin America, labor informality in private police forces is fueled by the vulnerabilities of the population, lower levels of education, older age, limited experience, irregular migration status, among others. In turn, it generates other conditions of vulnerability and precarization that affect quality of life, some of which become nearly permanent.

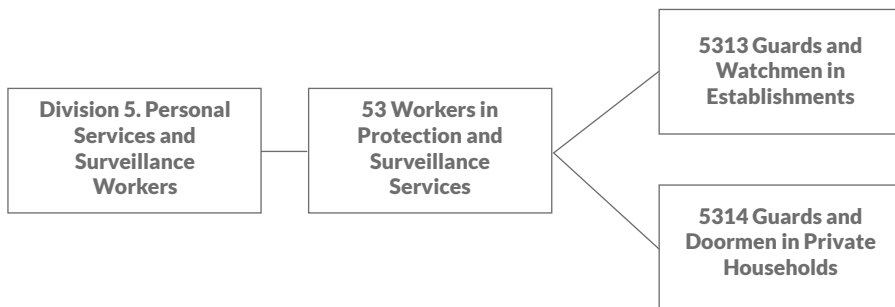
## Methodology

This research is primarily quantitative. Using descriptive statistics, it analyzes labor informality in private security in Mexico, its variation over time, and the socioeconomic characteristics of individuals who work informally in this activity. The main source of information is the National Survey of Occupation and Employment (ENOE, for its Spanish acronym), carried out quarterly by INEGI, which has produced these estimates since 2002, when it “[...] presented to the Delhi Group the first exercise for estimating informal employment” (INEGI, 2014, p. 2).

The definition of “labor informality” guiding this study is that of INEGI, which, in line with the International Labour Organization (ILO) consensus, understands informality from the labor perspective as:

[...] all work carried out without the protection of the corresponding legal or institutional framework, regardless of whether the economic unit using the labor is an unregistered household business or a formal enterprise; therefore, the term ‘informal employment’ applies. (INEGI, 2014, p. 6. Own translation).

The analysis examines two categories: “guards and watchmen in establishments” and “guards and doormen in private households,” which correspond to the provision of private security and surveillance services included in Division 5: Personal Services and Surveillance Workers.



**Figure 1.** *Classification of personal services and surveillance workers (ENOE).*

Source: author’s elaboration based on INEGI data (2019).

The study examines longitudinal changes in the percentage of labor informality in both categories from 2012 to 2024, considering all four quarters of each year. This component relies on the systematization developed by the Secretariat of Economy (2025) on the platform “*Data México. Perfiles*”, which allows exploration of occupational data derived from the ENOE.

A more in-depth analysis focuses on ENOE results for the third quarter of 2024 (INEGI, 2024). Among other variables, the characteristics of individuals working in these occupations are explored and compared, comprising 3,056 “guards and watchmen in establishments” and 98 “guards and doormen in private households”. The sample size is undoubtedly a limitation, but it offers an approach to socioeconomic indicators. This analysis is relevant given that the ILO has found higher levels of informality among women, younger and older populations, and in territorial terms, in rural areas (Espejo, 2022).

Complementarily, this research incorporates qualitative analysis through the review of academic literature and open sources on labor informality in private police forces, in order to contrast the quantitative findings. Public narratives regarding this issue in Mexico are also examined, with the aim of identifying short- and medium-term perspectives for public policy development.

## Results

Over time, the number of people working in private security in Mexico has clearly increased, most likely in response to society’s growing demand for security. Their presence is visible across a variety of public and private spaces, yet the exact number of individuals employed in this industry remains unknown.

Some estimates suggest that private police forces in Mexico exceed one million people, and that around 10% of them are armed (Barragán, 2020). Official measurements, such as those from the National Census of State Public Security, indicate that by the end of 2022 there were 149,939 individuals employed in private security (INEGI, 2023b). However, other sources such as the ENOE, used in this study, report significantly higher figures.

The following pages present the research results. The analysis focuses on labor informality. The initial sections examine the phenomenon of private police forces, explaining their growth and characteristics, such as gender, income, and education, elements that help contextualize labor informality, which is explored in

depth through quantitative data and through an examination of public narratives surrounding the phenomenon.

The Increase in Private Security Guards

The number of private security service providers has increased over time. “Guards and watchmen in establishments” (hereafter “guards in establishments”) rose from 687,582 individuals in 2012 to 887,899 in 2024. Meanwhile, “guards and doormen in private households” (hereafter “guards in households”) decreased from 26,853 to 22,184 over the same period. Altogether, 910,083 people work in this occupation (INEGI, 2024).

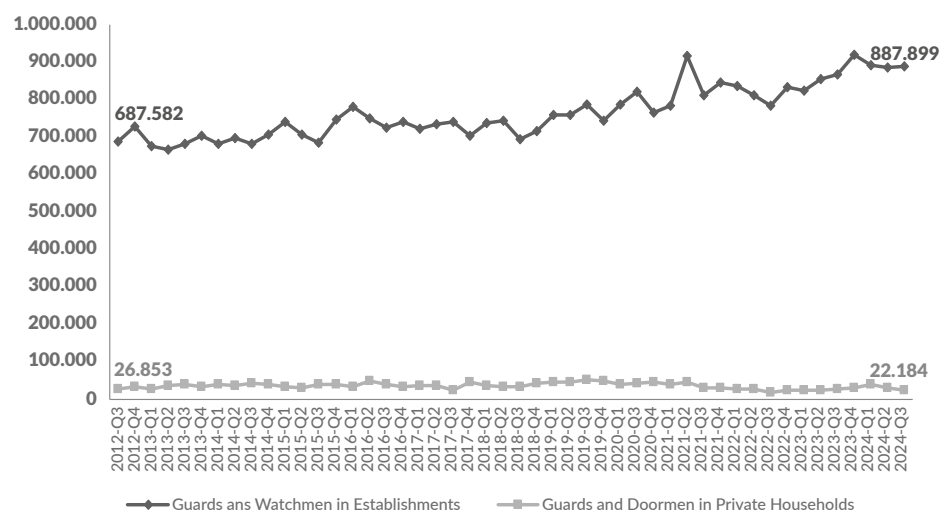


Figure 2. Guards in establishments and in private households, 2012-2024.

Source: Author’s elaboration based on ENOE 2012–2024 and Secretariat of Economy (2025).

Regarding the “guards in households” occupation, it is likely that the actual figures are much higher than those reported by ENOE, considering that ENVIPE 2023 showed that 1.6% of households nationwide reported hiring private security, equivalent to approximately 619,863 households (INEGI, 2023a).

## Who Are the Individuals Working in Private Security?

As in other occupations related to the security and justice sectors, men outnumber women. In 2024, among guards in establishments, 83.4% were men and 16.6% women; among guards in households, 98.4% were men and 1.55% women (INEGI, 2024). Male predominance in the sector is evident, though not as extreme as in some countries like Argentina, where in 2011 an estimated 92% were men, combined with “low levels of formal education” (Page & Glanc, 2024, p. 347).

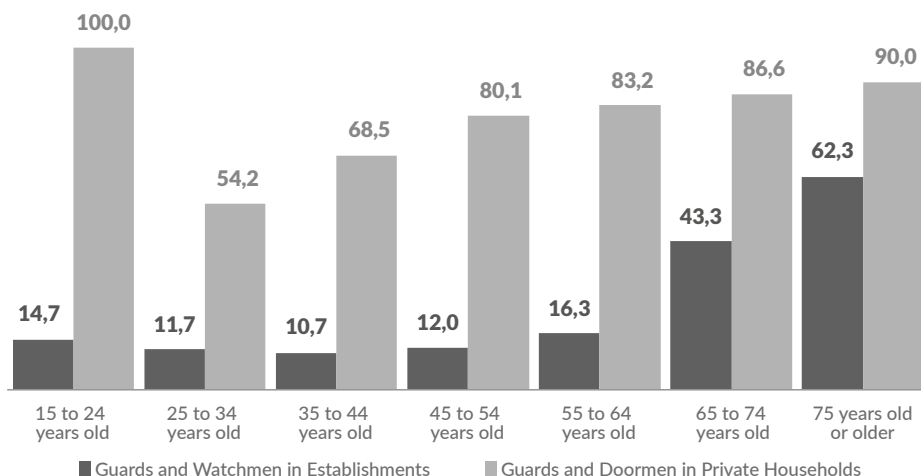
This gender difference is noteworthy, especially given that according to the 2023 National Census of State Public Security, by the end of 2022, of the 149,939 individuals working in private security, 24.2% (36,333) were women. In principle, female participation appears lower in private security than in public security institutions, where 38% of personnel are women (INEGI, 2023b). This may be due to social benefits, which tend to be higher in public security positions than in private ones (particularly informal private security), and which are among the main incentives for women to join these occupations.

On a positive note, the same census shows that 33% of managerial positions in private security are held by women. This contrasts with public security, where out of thousands of positions, only 33 women hold the rank of commissioner and 353 the rank of inspector (INEGI, 2023b), a significantly smaller proportion occupying high-ranking roles.

Regarding age, ENOE shows evidence of minors working as private security guards. Although the percentage does not exceed 1%, such cases reveal life trajectories marked by vulnerability at a very early age.

Older adults are also employed in this sector: 17.2% of guards in establishments are 60 years or older, with some individuals over 80 still working. Among guards in households, 25.5% are 60 or older (INEGI, 2024).

As age increases, labor informality also rises. The most extreme case is among guards in households, where informality affects 90% of those aged 75 or older.

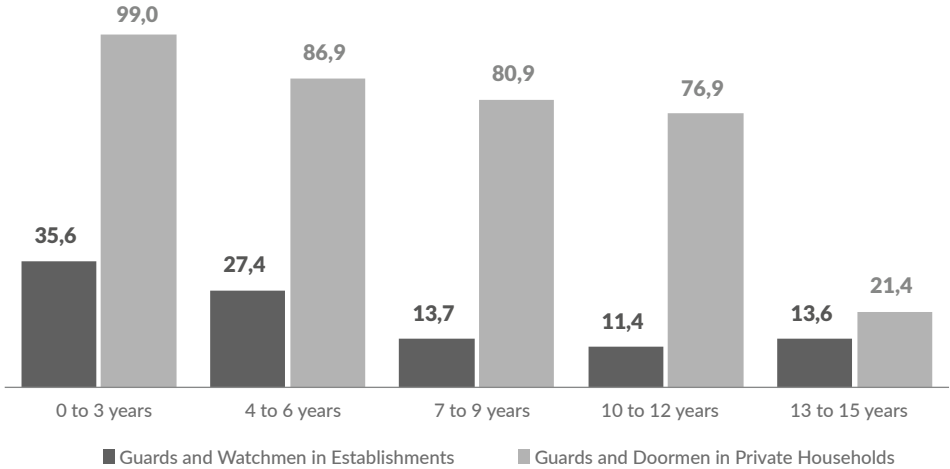


**Figure 3.** Labor informality among security guards by age (%), 2024..

Source: Author's elaboration based on ENOE 3T-2024 and Secretariat of Economy (2025).

Guards in establishments reported an average of 9.82 years of schooling, most having completed basic education (24% primary, 23.2% secondary) and fewer having completed upper secondary education (17.8%). However, 5.4% indicated they cannot read or write a simple message, and 3.1% reported no schooling at all. Guards in households have even lower levels of education, averaging 8.65 years of schooling.

There is a clear relationship: lower educational attainment corresponds to higher levels of labor informality in private security. Among guards in households, those with 0 to 3 years of schooling experience a 99% informality rate.



**Figure 4.** Labor informality among security guards by years of schooling (%), 2024.

Source: Author's elaboration based on ENOE 3T-2024 and Secretariat of Economy (2025).

Another relevant finding is that some guards report being enrolled in school. This likely indicates that private security work may be temporary, helping them subsidize expenses while they pursue studies that might later allow them to access better employment opportunities.

Regarding marital status, most guards live with a partner: 29.5% are married, 11.3% live in consensual union, and 36.6% are single. This is relevant considering the expenses they must cover with their private security income, especially when supporting dependents. While some have no children (15.5%), most have between one and three (22.9%), and some reported four or more.

In terms of contracts, 80% of guards in establishments reported having a written contract, of which 19.4% stated it was temporary or for specific tasks. Among guards in households, only 22.4% reported having a written contract, consistent with the high levels of informality in this occupation.

Regarding benefits, survey results show that among guards in establishments, 85.4% receive a year-end bonus, 76.2% paid vacation leave, and 21% profit sharing. However, 10% reported receiving no benefits at all. The situation is more severe among guards in households, where 36.7% reported receiving no benefits.

With respect to weekly hours worked, very few work 40 hours or fewer. Most have long workdays, and 36.5% work 72 hours or more per week. This

implies 12-hour shifts or longer, for six or even seven consecutive days. ENOE data show that 16.8% work seven days a week, and 46.4% work six.

Regarding place of residence, ENOE data show that 1.3% of guards in establishments had recently moved to their current residence, similar to national figures, but for guards in households, the proportion rises to 3.1%. This suggests recent migrants joining the private security workforce, an important finding given the vulnerability hypothesis, which includes migration status (Mora et al., 2023). It also aligns with the view that “[...] the place where individuals reside or work can directly influence their chances of finding formal employment” (Espejo, 2022, p. 5). When asked why they moved, most respondents reported moving to reunite with family; second, due to insecurity and violence; and third, to seek employment.

Regarding workplaces, ENOE shows that most guards in establishments work in support services and schools. Guards in households are typically found in residential areas monitoring access to gated streets, using gates or barriers, or working inside buildings, either in guard stations with video surveillance or outdoors. However, as other studies have shown, such guards are becoming increasingly common and can be found nearly everywhere, even in unexpected locations (Page & Glanc, 2024).

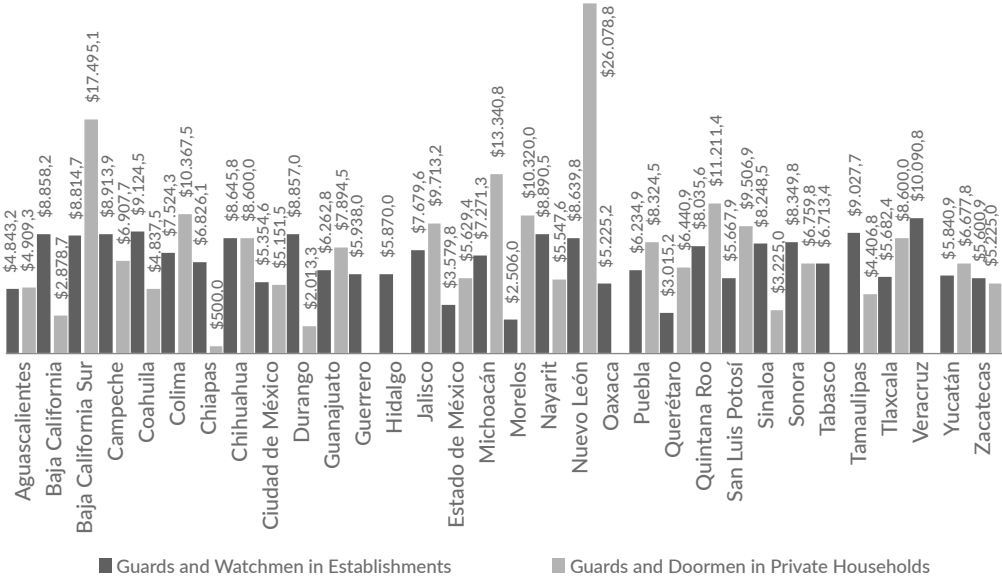
As observed, vulnerabilities emerge clearly when analyzing the socio-economic characteristics and labor conditions of this population working in private security services.

## **Security Guard Income**

On average, security guards earn low wages, even though income has increased over time. For guards in households, conditions are worse across most states.

In the fourth quarter of 2023, guards in establishments earned an average of MX\$6,130, whereas guards in households earned MX\$4,730. Both are low considering the prevailing costs of basic needs. By the third quarter of 2024 the pattern changed: guards in establishments earned MX\$6,941.6 on average, while guards in households earned MX\$7,872.7. This shift is largely due to states such as Nuevo León and Baja California Sur, where earnings for guards in households increased significantly, likely linked to high-income residential areas with higher security needs.





**Figure 5.** Monthly income of guards in establishments and guards in private households.

Source: Author’s elaboration based on ENOE 3T–2024 and Secretariat of Economy (2025).

Note: Income data for guards in households are not available (N/A) in Veracruz, Tabasco, Guerrero, Hidalgo, and Oaxaca.

Income in Mexico contrasts with those in other countries. In Argentina, “[...] the monthly base salary for general guards working 40 hours per week, without seniority, in August 2017 was 10,975 pesos (638 USD)” (Page & Glanc, 2024, p. 349).

Examining wages for guards in establishments across states reveals substantial variation. The highest earnings are in Veracruz (MX\$10,090.8), whereas in the State of Mexico, Querétaro, and Morelos, wages fall below MX\$4,000 per month.

Among guards in households, the highest wages are found in Nuevo León (MX\$26,078.8), Baja California Sur (MX\$17,495.1), and Michoacán (MX\$13,340.8). In contrast, Baja California, Durango, and Chiapas report wages below MX\$3,000 per month, so low they are insufficient for basic living.

Beyond wage differences across categories of private security, differences between formal and informal employment are also notable. In 2024, ENOE reported that informal guards in establishments earned an average of MX\$6,110.8, while those formally employed earned MX\$11,298.6 per month (INEGI, 2024).

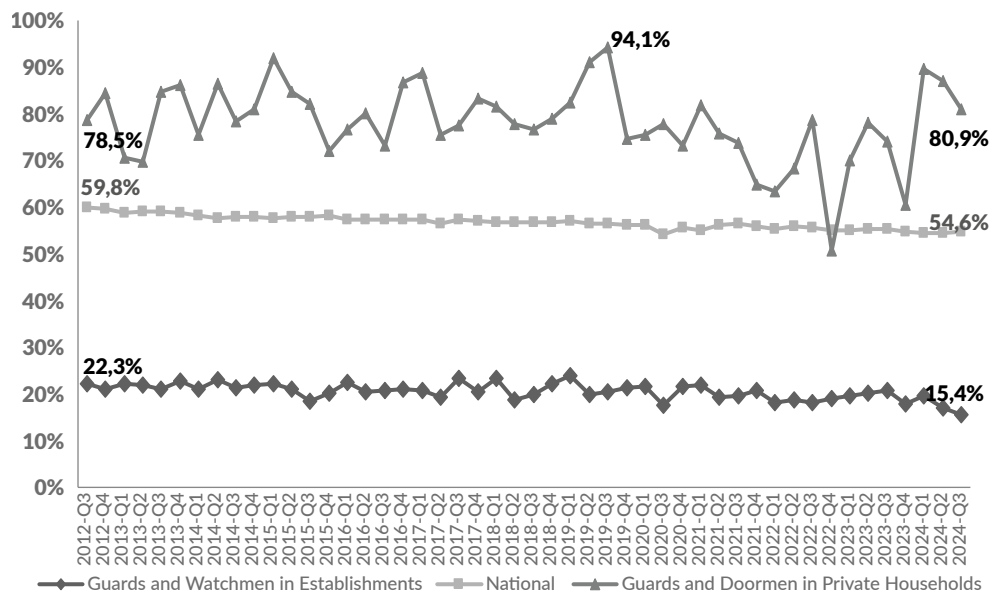
International research shows that low wages are sometimes accompanied by penalties. In Argentina, “[...] private security companies do not pay salaries on time, do not fully comply with collective bargaining agreements, and guards report unjustified deductions” (Page & Glanc, 2024, p. 357). It is likely that similar practices occur in Mexico, especially among more vulnerable populations working under informal or illegal arrangements. In household-guarding scenarios where a group of neighbors hires a guard, there is also the possibility that these neighbors fail to pay dues on time, resulting in delayed or incomplete salaries.

As for how these earnings are used, “[...] private guards’ income and consumption are mostly dedicated to covering basic needs such as food, health, and housing” (Page & Glanc, 2024, p. 357). Yet, considering ENOE-reported wages, these incomes are clearly insufficient.

## **Labor Informality**

In addition to the vulnerabilities, low wages, and illegal conditions under which a significant portion of private police officers in Mexico work, there is the phenomenon of labor informality, which affects this population to an even greater extent.

ENOE data show that in the third quarter of 2024, labor informality among guards in establishments was 15.4%, whereas among guards in private households it reached 80.9%. This exceeds the national labor informality rate, which during the same period was 54.6%.



**Figura 6.** Labor informality rate, national and private security guards in Mexico (2012–2024)

Source: Author's elaboration based on ENOE 2012–2024 and Secretariat of Economy (2025).

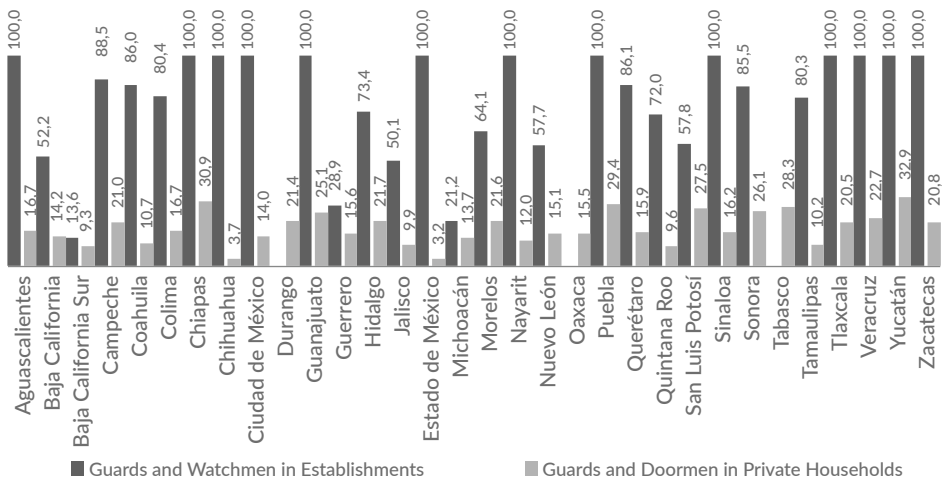
The graph highlights that historically, labor informality among guards in households has been higher than the national rate (with the exception of the fourth quarter of 2022). A notable case is the third quarter of 2019, when labor informality affected nearly all guards in households. According to the organization ASUME, “[...] in residential areas, the cheapest services are paid, and this is where informality is highest. People are placed as watchmen without training and often without even a uniform” (cited in Barragán, 2020, p. 1).

On average, labor informality among private police forces in Mexico stands at 48.1% (INEGI, 2024), higher than estimates in other countries. “In Argentina, 45% of workers are in informal employment” (Page & Glanc, 2024, p. 346). This is certainly alarming given the precarious conditions under which this vulnerable population survives.

Labor informality in Mexico has decreased over time, and this trend is also visible among “guards in establishments,” whose informality rate fell from 22.3% in 2012 to 15.4% in 2024. However, among “guards in households,” informality increased from 78.5% to 80.9% during the same period. Additionally, the graph shows no stability over time, with sharp changes from one quarter to the next. The third quarter of 2019 stands out again as the historical peak, with informality reaching 94.1%.

Comparing across states, it becomes evident that in some of them the problem is far more severe. These findings contribute to the scarce subnational analyses of informality (Espejo, 2022) and help understand the spatial dimension of the phenomenon. The situation of guards in households is particularly striking, with informality reaching 100% in 13 states (these results may reflect sample size limitations). The states with the lowest informality rates were Guerrero (28.9%), Michoacán de Ocampo (21.2%), and Baja California Sur (13.6%) (INEGI, 2024).

Among guards in establishments, the most critical situations in 2024 were found in Yucatán (32.9%), Chiapas (30.9%), and Puebla (29.4%) (INEGI, 2024).



**Figure 7.** Percentage of security guards and labor informality by state, 2024.

Source: Author’s elaboration based on ENOE 3T–2024 and Secretariat of Economy (2025).

At the other end of the spectrum, informality among guards in establishments is below 10% in Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, and the State of Mexico. The State of Mexico stands out with the lowest informality rate (3.1%).

However, among guards in households, the lowest rate was observed in Guerrero with 28.9%, meaning that at least one in four individuals in this occupation works informally.

“[...] Local specificities can provide relevant information for diagnosing socioeconomic issues, developing public policies, and monitoring them” (Espejo, 2022, p. 7). As shown in this analysis, there are significant variations in informality across states; therefore, potential solutions could also be directed toward these specific territorial contexts.

## **The Construction of the Public Agenda on Informality in Private Police Forces**

Despite the direct impacts of labor informality, both on private police forces and on society, this issue has been addressed only tangentially in the public agenda. Although governments, academia, and civil society organizations have expressed concern about advancing toward a solution to this problem, or at least this is what public narratives suggest, it remains an unresolved issue in the country.

Federal and local governments have focused primarily on authorizing and registering companies, but they have not implemented specific actions to reduce informality in the sector, even though the General Law of the National Public Security System states that “[...] private security services are auxiliary to the public security function” (Art. 122).

In practice, private security organizations are the ones conducting diagnostics to understand the problem, its characteristics, and possible solutions.

The president of the National Council of Private Security (CNSP, for its Spanish acronym), referring to the “[...] reform that prohibits outsourcing in private security companies” (Venegas, 2022, p. 1), noted that personnel continued to be hired under this scheme, “[...] engaging in subcontracting practices that

evade taxes, operate informally, and create labor precariousness for private police officers” (Venegas, 2022, p. 1).

Regarding the magnitude of the issue, the general coordinator of *Agrupaciones de Seguridad Unidas por un México Estable* (ASUME), in addition to acknowledging the registration challenges faced by regulatory authorities, estimates that “[...] for every company that is registered, there are five that are not” (cited in Barragán, 2020, p. 1). He adds that illegality can extend beyond informal companies themselves: “[...] some companies have even been established to provide services to individuals who are outside the law” (cited in Barragán, 2020, p. 1).

Informality is primarily associated with society’s demand for cheaper security services, but to an even greater degree, it reflects responsibilities not fulfilled by governments and their regulatory institutions. Proposed improvements focus mostly on government regulation and oversight.

From this perspective, it is argued that incentives for companies to register are insufficient. The Director of Interinstitutional Affairs of the Mexican Association of Private Security Companies (AMESP, for its Spanish acronym) has stated that there are obstacles to registration, one of them being the large number and diversity of requirements. A study identified 114 unique requirements to register a company (cited in Barragán, 2020).

Some countries have adopted measures to reduce the problem. In Uruguay, the number of public officials dedicated to inspections was increased to conduct more oversight visits to private police forces. This was one of the demands made by the Chamber of Private Security Companies to prevent unfair competition generated by informality (Losa, 2018). In Colombia, a system of fines and sanctions has been implemented that applies both to guards who offer services and to those who hire them (Pérez, 2018, p. 133).

In Mexico, local governments have opted for awareness campaigns targeting those who hire private security services. In some localities, authorities warn about the risks of informality or irregularity. The website of the Secretariat of Citizen Security of Mexico City states: “Do not hire problems,” referencing the Private Security Law for the Federal District (now Mexico City), which specifies: “[...] Private security service providers shall be jointly liable for the commission of violations when they hire individuals or entities that do not have permission, license, or authorization from the Secretariat” (Art. 58). This affects not only the company but also the client.

Verification visits are also carried out to inspect companies. According to the National Census of State Public Security, a total of 6,599 visits were conducted in 2022 (INEGI, 2023b). However, inspection efforts vary across

states, and as in other countries, they tend to focus primarily on formal companies.

To a lesser extent, some narratives highlight the vulnerability of those working in private security. It is noted that informal employment schemes “[...] have disregarded labor rights, resulting in marked precariousness in job positions within this industry” (Barragán, 2020, p. 1).

It is acknowledged that “[...] the guards who experience the most precarious working conditions are those employed in condominiums, mass events, and residential complexes, where there is no oversight regarding training or whether companies operate legally” (Venegas, 2022, p. 1). However, such narratives centered on the social rights of workers in the sector are among the least addressed in the public agenda.

## Conclusions

Labor informality within private police forces in Mexico is a persistent social problem that undermines the quality of life of individuals, both those who provide security services under precarious working conditions, and those who hire these services, as well as society at large.

The data analyzed here show that private security has increased. ENOE estimates reveal that nearly one million people currently work in this sector, far exceeding the figures reported in the National Census, and it is likely that the actual number of individuals employed in private security is even higher.

Alongside the growth of private security, labor informality remains an ongoing problem that, although it has decreased, still affects thousands of people, particularly those facing vulnerabilities associated with gender, age, and educational attainment, which paradoxically become exacerbated when individuals lack access to dignified employment. Informality affects people's economic conditions and triggers other social problems that disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations. It is essentially a cycle that deepens inequalities.

The literature and the findings of this research highlight the need to bring greater visibility to these vulnerabilities, which are rarely emphasized in institutional or societal narratives or in public policies. In this regard, beyond governmental initiatives and actions that mainly focus on regulating and supervising formal companies, it is crucial to direct attention to those companies,

groups, or individuals operating informally. Social policy may be key to mitigating these inequalities.

Beyond regulation, which has traditionally shaped policy in this field, there is a need to implement support processes that ensure the labor rights of individuals in informal employment are recognized and that their human rights are upheld. Such actions, in addition to addressing social injustice, would generate positive externalities by improving the quality of security services provided to society.

In sum, labor informality in private security remains an issue marked by significant gaps in knowledge. From academia, it is essential to deepen the understanding of this social problem and explore potential solutions.

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