

Memphis is Tennessee's private security capital. It can be a murky industry. Here's why:



Brandon Jackson, a 33-year-old who has just launched his own security guard company, Urban Security Solutions of Tennessee, poses for a portrait in Memphis, Tenn., on Friday, Sept. 10, 2021.

ARIEL COBBERT/ COMMERCIAL APPEAL



STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- In Shelby County, 12 new security companies were incorporated within the past 12 months, according to state data.
- Founders report a world of casual work relationships, cash payments and sometimes unlicensed guards.
- Alvin Motley's shooting at a Kroger gas station, reportedly by an unlicensed guard, highlights industry problems.

Brandon Jackson and a business associate launched a private security guard company this spring, and for the few months of the firm's life, Jackson also kept his day job as a pharmacy tech at Walgreens.

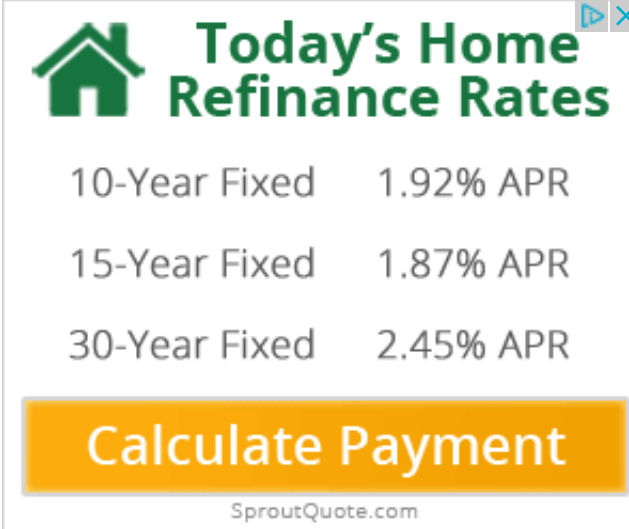


Then the new security company quickly lined up contracts to provide guards to churches, restaurants and a religious school, he said.

"I didn't expect it to go this fast," said Jackson, 33. He said that on Sept. 10, he told his supervisor at Walgreens that he was quitting. He said he plans to focus full-time on the new company, called Urban Security Solutions of Tennessee.

Jackson's experience reflects bigger trends.

Shelby County has far more armed security guards and security guard companies than any other county in Tennessee, a situation that likely reflects the city's high violent crime rate, the ongoing struggle by local police to control crime, and the business community's desire for protection.



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New guards and new companies are jumping into the business. Twelve new security companies began operations in Shelby County within the past 12 months.

But the growth of private security here carries with it some risks. State standards require just 16 hours of training to work as an armed guard, carry a deadly weapon, and interact with the public, far less training than for a police officer.

And two guards-turned-business owners interviewed for this article described the security industry in Memphis as a murky world that sometimes involves unlicensed guards, cash payments and casual employment relationships. A third CEO of a guard company said he sometimes pays guards in cash and issues them 1099 tax forms as independent contractors.

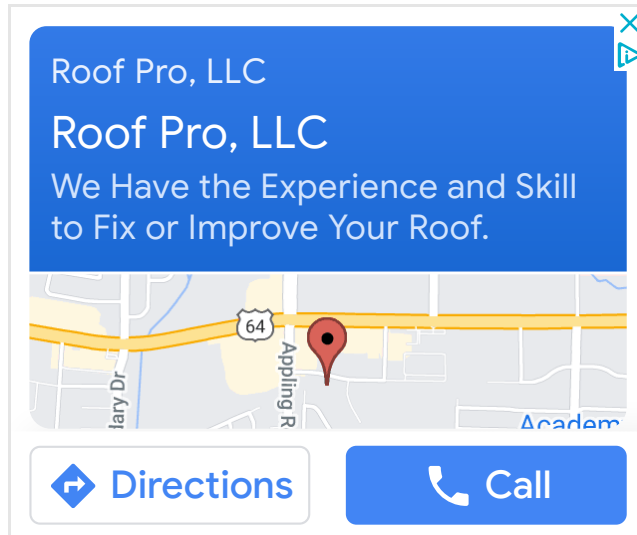
Memphis security industry in the spotlight after shooting



Carol Adams , a cousin of Alvin Motley Jr., speaks during the "Music for Motley" rally for Alvin Motley Jr. on Aug. 26, 2021, in Germantown, Tenn. A white security guard, is accused of shooting and killing Motley Jr., a 48-year-old Black man from Chicago, on August 7, at Kroger Fuel Center, in Germantown, Tenn.

ARIEL COBBERT/ COMMERCIAL APPEAL

A recent high-profile fatal shooting highlights the risks that employment of unlicensed guards and other practices can pose to the public. Security guard Gregory Livingston faces a second-degree murder charge in the Aug. 7 Kroger gas station shooting of Alvin Motley. Police say Livingston argued with Motley over loud music, then shot him.



A state official says Livingston never had a license, and it's unclear what company he really worked for. The large company that reportedly employed him, Allied Universal, says he actually worked for a subcontractor. The company has refused to name the subcontractor, citing an ongoing police investigation.

Jackson says he's trying to build a company that moves away from shady practices. He said that after a major incident, like a shooting, security guards sometimes flee the scene because they don't have licenses.

At a coffee shop interview, he showed a reporter what the real credentials look like: a laminated green card from the Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance that identifies him as an armed security guard, and another card with his certifications, including firearms, handcuffing and defensive spray.





A picture of Brandon Jackson's state armed guard certification cards.

DANIEL CONNOLLY

"You always carry these items with you because it saves you from being locked up for impersonating a security officer. So it's a big deal."



Another guard-turned-entrepreneur interviewed for this article, Sidney Bolden is in the process of launching his own company, called Sidney Bolden LLC. Bolden, 58, likewise said he has encountered unlicensed guards.

"Some of them cats never been to the classroom," he said.

He said while working years ago as a supervisor for other guard companies, he would check guards' licenses. "And I have sent a lot of guards home. And I got chewed out about it because the posts weren't covered, but, hey, what would you rather have? Get chewed out, or a lawsuit?"

Companies are hungry for employees. "There's companies now, they're so desperate, they don't even drug test no more. They'll send you on out there. If you're unarmed, they'll send you on out there."

(Several of the larger security companies operating in Memphis did not return phone calls seeking interviews.)



And I have sent a lot of guards home. And I got chewed out about it because the posts weren't covered, but, hey, what would you rather have? Get chewed out, or a lawsuit?

SIDNEY BOLDEN, GUARD STARTING HIS OWN SECURITY COMPANY

In separate interviews, Jackson and Bolden said one of the factors contributing to problems in the industry is low pay.

Bolden said some companies will pay an armed guard \$11 per hour. "In security, an unarmed guard really should be making about \$15 an hour. An armed guard should be making anywhere from \$20 to \$24 per hour."

". . . They're not showing up, leaving early even though they go out and check to see if the guard's out there, he's nowhere to be found."

He said he learned from seeing all this. "And my company's not going to be like that." (Bolden said his company has not yet begun offering services.)



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More armed private guards here than MPD, Sheriff deputies combined

State data offer some additional insight into the state of the security industry here.

In 2009, there were 3,042 licensed armed guards and 68 guard companies operating in Shelby County, The Commercial Appeal reported at the time.

As of August, those numbers had jumped to 3,885 licensed armed private guards and 95 guard companies operating in Shelby County, even as the county's population has remained mostly flat.

The second-highest county, Davidson County / Nashville, had only 1,621 licensed armed guards and 57 guard companies in August, according to data from the Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance

Many of today's armed private guards are new to the profession: according to a state database, 42% statewide were certified for the first time within the past 24 months.



Why is this happening? A spokesman for the state agency declined to interpret the trends behind the numbers.

One person offering a possible explanation is Mahesh K. Nalla, a criminal justice professor at Michigan State University who has been studying the private security industry for decades.

He says when government police forces can't provide full security, businesses demand private security to fill in the gaps.

“The answer is if there is a deficit in some area, that deficit has to be filled.”

As far back as the 1990s, his research had described growth of the private security guard industry and stagnation in the growth of public police forces. He said that solid numbers are hard to find, but estimates suggest that that for every publicly funded police officer in the United States, there are two to three private security guards.



Nalla isn't familiar with the private security guard industry in Memphis, but it's easy to apply his analysis to the circumstances here.

The city government has set a public goal of increasing the size of the police force to 2,300 officers, but the number has remained around 2,000 for years as experienced officers leave or retire and the government struggles to recruit enough new ones.

The Shelby County Sheriff's office has 654 commissioned law enforcement officers, meaning that the number of licensed armed private security guards — 3,885 — is far more than the number of MPD officers and Shelby County Sheriff's commissioned officers combined. (The comparison isn't exact because some licensed security guards work part-time or might be licensed but not working.)

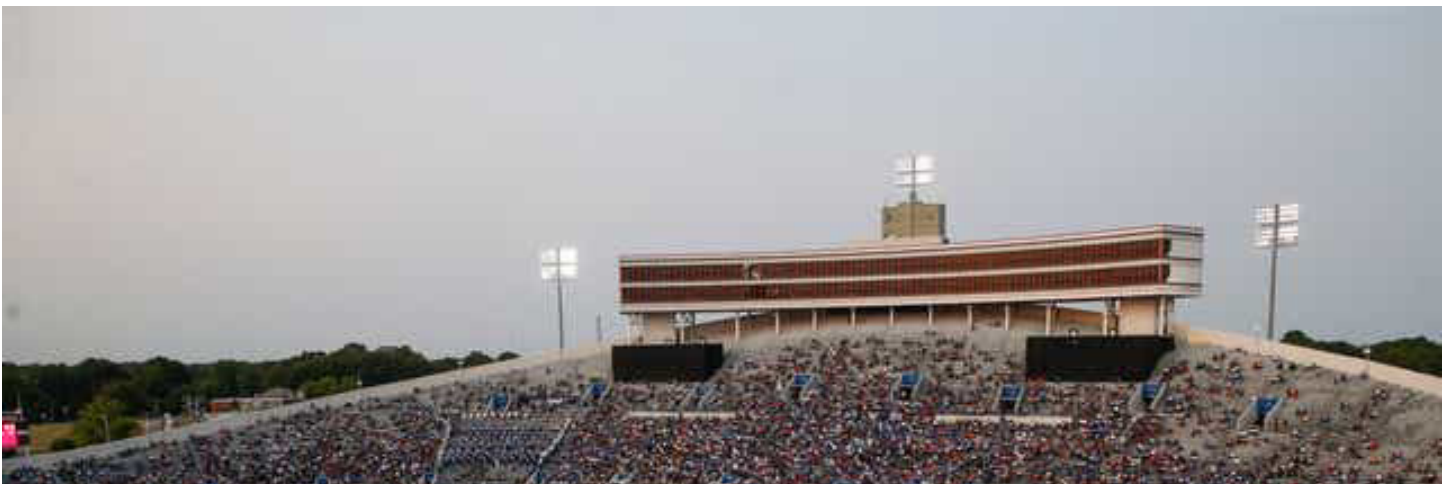
Crime spiked during the pandemic, gunfire is far too common, and the city saw more than 330 killings in 2020, a record. This year has also proved violent.



Businessman's perspective: 'Private security's going to be with us for a while.'

Business owners don't want gun violence and other crimes to ruin their activities. Fred Jones Jr. is the founder and producer of the annual Southern Heritage Classic football game, which took place Sept. 11 and brought more than 40,000 spectators to the Liberty Bowl. He said the Liberty Bowl hired private security for the event, and his company paid for the service, though he wouldn't discuss the price.

He described the complexity of pulling off an event like this safely: security forces carried out tasks including metal detector checks at the gate, patrolling inside the stadium, patrolling the grounds and directing traffic nearby. The game and related activities went off without major incident.





The stadium is nearly full for the Southern Heritage Classic between Tennessee State University and Jackson State University at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium in Memphis, Tenn., on Saturday, Sept. 11, 2021.

HENRY TAYLOR / COMMERCIAL-APPEAL

He said the game organizers worked with the MPD, Sheriff's office and other public law enforcement agencies, but there was simply too much security work to rely on these agencies alone — plus the public police agencies must provide security for the rest of the area at the same time.

“You wouldn’t expect the Memphis Police Department or the Sheriff’s department to be everywhere for every event,” Jones said.



"So private security's going to be with us for a while. You have to work with them."

He raised the specter of a mass shooting like what happened in Las Vegas in 2017, when a gunman opened fire on a country music concert and killed 58 people and wounded many more — two more people died later, bringing the total to 60.

"You do not want to have an event and something security-wise happen and you're not adequately staffed. You don't want that."

Though the Southern Heritage Classic is a big event, many other small business owners and church leaders in Memphis are reaching similar conclusions. That creates opportunities for entrepreneurs in the security space like Brandon Jackson, the Walgreens tech who's launching the new business.

From Flint to his own Memphis security firm

Jackson grew up in Flint, Michigan, and worked in the restaurant business in Memphis. He also applied to work as an MPD officer and was enrolled in the police academy. He said he didn't complete the training because his daughter was born prematurely and he missed too many days.

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Years ago, someone put him in touch with a state-certified trainer named Djenada Dunlap, who explained the licensing rules.

In Tennessee, armed guards must pass a background check and go through 16 hours

of training, much of it focused on using a gun. Jackson first got his armed guard license in 2018, according to a state database.

He worked for locally owned companies, most recently Mid-South Patrol & Protection.



Brandon Jackson, a 33-year-old who has just launched his own security guard company, Urban Security Solutions of Tennessee, poses for a portrait in Memphis, Tenn., on Friday, Sept. 10, 2021.

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He said Mid-South provided security to a lot of nightclubs and guards sometimes had to remove drunken and disruptive patrons. "And their thing was 'always go hands-on,'" he said, meaning that the company encouraged using physical force.

Jackson said he disagrees with that approach. He doesn't match the stereotype of a hulking bar bouncer — he stands five feet, four inches tall and weighs about 145 pounds.



He said he prefers to talk with people calmly and convince them to leave. "I train all my guys, because I'm in a de-escalation business. I'm not more in the physical contact, trying to fight, things like that. If we can de-escalate, let's de-escalate and go on about our day."

The CEO of Mid-South Patrol & Protection, Calvin Brown, confirmed that Jackson had worked with his company and described him as an "all-around good guy."

Brown disagreed that the company encourages use of force.

"No, that's not true. We tend to want to deescalate first before we go hands-on." He said he's a former Baton Rouge police officer and follows law enforcement guidelines for levels of force, saving physical force as a last resort.

Cash payments

Jackson said he's trying to differentiate his new company from companies like Mid-South in another way: pay practices. "To be able to get people to work, they just pay cash every day. So basically, that employee is like a 1099 employee," Jackson said.



A 1099 is an Internal Revenue Service form often used for independent contractors — taxes usually aren't deducted and the worker is responsible for reporting the payment to the government for tax purposes.

Jackson said his company pays by check and deducts taxes.

Brown, the Mid-South CEO, said his company does use 1099s and says the company writes checks or makes cash payments, depending on what the worker wants. The timing of those payments depends on the contract.

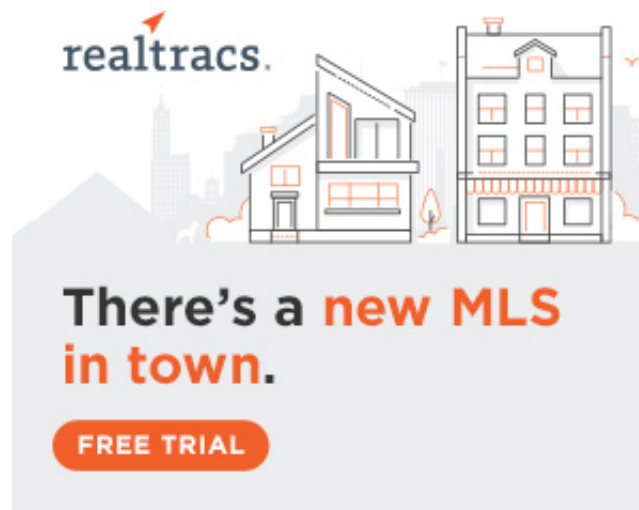


They can work for whomever they want to, whenever they want to. We can part ways whenever they choose or I choose.

CALVIN BROWN, CEO OF MID-SOUTH PATROL & PROTECTION

"Most people like cash, or whatever. I do 1099 basically as an independent contractor," Brown said. "They can work for whomever they want to, whenever they want to. We can part ways whenever they choose or I choose."

He says it's difficult to find experienced and licensed security officers. He's a certified trainer and can help people get licenses, and he said he doesn't tolerate working without a license.



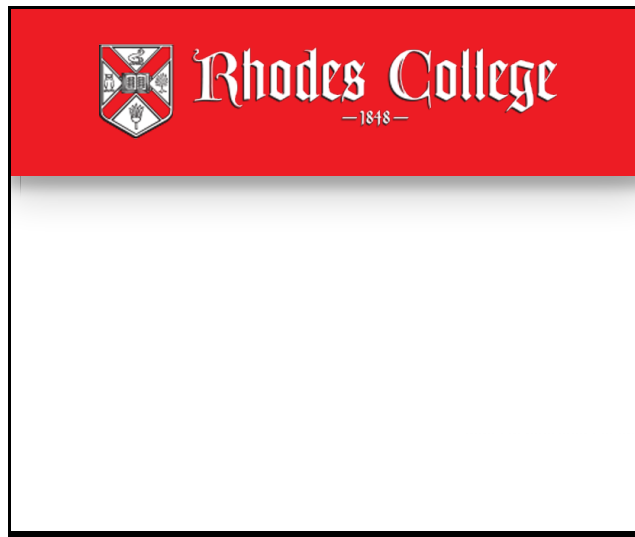
'You have to mentally be strong for this'

Jackson launched Urban Security Solutions of Tennessee Inc. along with Dunlap, the trainer who first helped him enter the field. State records say the company was first incorporated in May.

Jackson said for him, the work isn't just about money. "So what I did was, I stepped out on faith and decided to start my own company, because I'm a people person. And security is my passion because I can make a difference."

Jackson acts as chief and handles day-to-day operations. In the few short months that he's been operating, he's recruited 30 guards. Most work with him part-time.

"Just a lot from me working in the field. I know a lot of people. So I said, 'Hey, I'm starting my own company. Why don't you come on and join a legit company that has the right documentation?' And a lot of them did it."



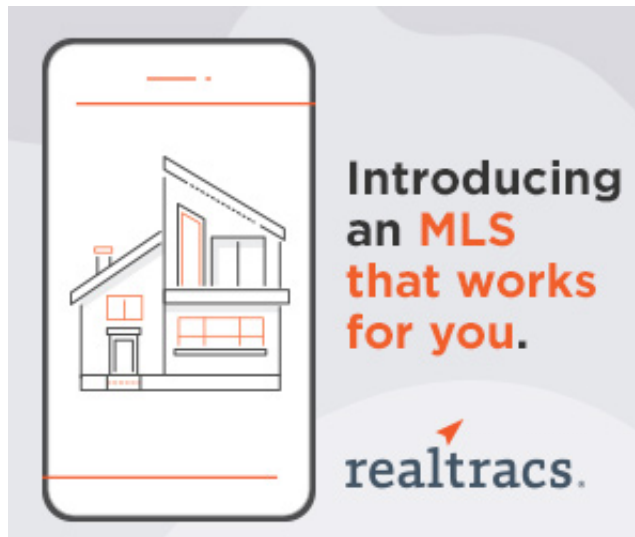
He sends his workers to certification and puts them through additional training after that.

He said most people don't realize that working as a security guard involves more than putting on a uniform, but rather people skills and handling emergencies.

"You going to deal with people that have mental issues, intoxicated people, people that they're high. You're going to run into a lot. And that's why I always ask, 'Are you sure you can deal with the public?'"

He said he tells employees that they are the first contact before the police and other emergency workers arrive on the scene. "So it's very important if you can deal with the public or any kind of situation. Whether somebody's running up to you being shot, stabbed, all of that stuff like that, it's very, very important."

A guard has to be prepared to deal with people who are drunk, on drugs, or who have mental problems, he said.



"You have to mentally be strong for this."

The future of the security business

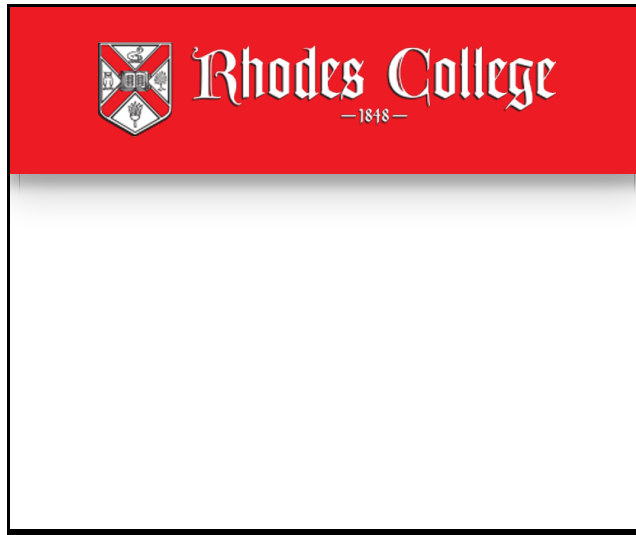
So where is all of this heading?

Security is a business that appears likely to keep going, no matter what else is happening in the world, Jackson said.

"Like when COVID first hit, man (companies were) picking security left and right to help protect businesses, while they're closed and things like that," Jackson said.

"So that's something that I'm preparing my team for now. I say, 'Well, if the world shuts down again, at least you guys know, if your full-time job let ya'll go, I have 40 hours for you then because everybody's gonna need security.'"

Earlier, Jackson had shown a reporter a message on his cell phone, one that he said he recently received from a Germantown police officer.



The officer wants to talk with him to learn how he could start his own security company.

Investigative reporter Daniel Connolly welcomes tips and comments from the public. Reach him at [529-5296](tel:529-5296), daniel.connolly@commercialappeal.com, or on Twitter at [@danielconnolly](https://twitter.com/danielconnolly).

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