



The Transformation of Urban Space Surveillance – Who Exercises Power in Public Areas and Under What Authority?

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The private security sector has a long historical continuity that extends far before the emergence of the modern police system (Johnston 1992). The provision of security through private arrangements is not an exception, but part of the fundamental structure of societies. In recent decades, however, the sector has grown quantitatively, qualitatively, and technologically in a way that has fundamentally transformed its position. It is no longer a marginal support function, but an actor that actively participates in the production of everyday security in society (Paasonen 2021).

Urban space is a central arena for this transformation. The traditional distinction between public and private space has blurred, and at the same time, the forms of surveillance have diversified. The pilot project on order maintenance carried out in Jyväskylä illustrates this development. In the project, security officers operated in the city center as part of broader security cooperation aimed at addressing disturbances and strengthening the sense of safety (Poliisi 2025). At the same time, the project sparked public debate about who monitors urban space and under what authority.

At this point, a key tension within the current security system becomes evident. In practice, the everyday safety of urban space is increasingly maintained by private security actors. Legally, however, the maintenance of public order and safety still belongs exclusively to the police. The police have emphasized that security officers do not have the authority to maintain general public order or intervene in behavior that is not directed at their designated area (Poliisi 2025). This means that two parallel realities may exist simultaneously in urban space: operational surveillance and legal authority.

This development can be analysed through the theory of mass private property. According to this theory, modern urban space increasingly consists of environments where private actors define behavioral norms and are responsible for their enforcement (Shearing & Stenning, 1981). The Jyväskylä pilot indicates that this logic is extending into open urban space, even though the legal framework has not fully kept pace (Poliisi 2025).

The weakening of informal social control further deepens this transformation. Urbanization has reduced community-based supervision, increasing the need for institutional forms of control (Jones & Newburn 2002). In Jyväskylä, the role of security officers focused precisely on such situations: disturbances that are not crimes but weaken the sense of safety. At the same time, the police have emphasized that such activity must remain tied to clearly defined operational areas and cannot expand into general street patrols (Poliisi 2025).

The fiscal perspective highlights another key reality (George & Button 2000). Limited public resources have led to a reorganization of security tasks. In practice, this means that the private

security sector increasingly acts as a front-line actor in environments where continuous police presence is not possible (Paasonen 2026). The Jyväskylä pilot supports this observation: security officers were often the first to respond in many situations, even though authority remained with the police (Poliisi 2025).

This inevitably raises questions about the use of power. Johnston (1992) already noted that the growth of private security changes the relationship between the state and private actors. In urban space, this is visible in concrete terms: private actors guide behavior, intervene in disturbances, and influence what kind of space is considered acceptable. At the same time, their authority is limited in ways that do not always correspond to practical expectations (Paasonen 2020).

The role of the private security sector in crime prevention has increased as operating environments have become more complex. Research indicates that the presence of private security actors affects the operational environment of crime by increasing the risk of detection, the likelihood of intervention, and the costs of committing offences (Paasonen 2026). This means that private security actors often operate on the front line of crime prevention, even though they do not possess the same public authority as the police. In the Jyväskylä pilot, this was reflected in the early identification of disturbances and intervention before situations escalated (Poliisi 2025).

At the same time, private security actors increasingly participate in shaping the norms of urban space. For example, Hirvonen (2011) and Koskela (2009) have emphasized that surveillance is not merely reactive but also involves actively directing the use of space. In the Jyväskylä case, this was evident in efforts to improve the attractiveness of the city center, ensure smooth mobility, and facilitate everyday activities; in other words, surveillance became directly linked to urban space governance (Poliisi 2025).

The issue, however, is not only what private security actors do, but how their role relates to public authority. The police message in connection with the Jyväskylä pilot is clear: maintaining general public order constitutes a significant exercise of public power that belongs exclusively to the police (Poliisi 2025). This boundary is essential from the perspective of the rule of law, but it does not eliminate the practical security needs that arise daily in urban space.

This gives rise to a central paradox of the current system. The private security sector operates in practice where security is most needed, yet its authority does not cover all the situations in which it is expected to intervene. At the same time, the police retain formal responsibility but are not present in all situations. This is not merely an operational challenge, but a structural issue concerning the functioning of the entire security system.

For this reason, cooperation between private security actors and public authorities is not only beneficial but necessary. Effective crime prevention and the maintenance of everyday safety require a clear division of responsibilities, a shared situational awareness, and an effective exchange of information. The private security sector can complement public authorities, particularly in surveillance, observation, and preventive security work, while the police are responsible for the exercise of public power and the protection of legal rights.

However, the current situation cannot rely solely on practical cooperation and implicit divisions of labor. There is a need for conscious and strategic legislative development that recognizes the actual role of the private security sector. This requires a reassessment of which tasks belong to the police and which can be appropriately carried out by other actors without compromising legal protection or fundamental rights. At the same time, regulation must be developed to reflect the changing nature of urban space. The current system is largely based on spatial divisions that no longer correspond to the reality of modern cities. There is a need for regulation that takes into account hybrid environments, dynamic operational areas, and multi-actor surveillance.

The future of urban space surveillance will not be determined by asking who monitors, but by defining how monitoring is organized. The Jyväskylä pilot demonstrates that cooperation works, but it also shows that the current regulatory framework is falling behind reality. This contradiction must be resolved if both effective security and the principles of the rule of law are to be ensured.

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