

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/alabama-prisoner-kenric-turner-forced-to-work-on-road-crew-killed-by-car/>

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Alabama prisoner Kenric Turner was killed last week near Loxley while working on an Alabama Department of Corrections road crew when a vehicle struck him while he picked up trash along the interstate. Another inmate on the road crew, Kelvin Jordan, also was hit and severely injured. Both were incarcerated at the Loxley Community Work Center, one of the Alabama correctional facilities that require inmates to engage in manual labor. The state passed new legislation this spring that expands the use of prison labor in Alabama.

The new law lets private businesses contract for inmate labor with the Alabama Department of Corrections, which gets to keep up to 40% of the inmates wages. African-American legislators filibustered the bill for several hours, arguing the program gives companies access to cheap workers without having to provide benefits or adequate safety.

Mr. Turner and Mr. Jordan were part of a five-inmate road crew that picked up trash and trimmed grass on the roadside, accompanied by a van with lights and caution signs. Such road crews, often wearing Black-and-white striped prison uniforms, evoke another brutal practice: the prison chain gang.

After their use had been discontinued for decades, chain gangs were reinstated in Alabama in 1995 under then-Governor Fob James. Inmates shackled at the ankles with leg irons and bound to several other inmates were forced to work outdoors, clearing trash and brush along highways.

In 1996, after an inmate on a chain gang was shot and killed by an officer and amid growing reports of injuries and safety concerns, the Department of Corrections agreed to permanently ban chain gangs.

Both Mr. Turner and Mr. Jordan were hit by a Ford F-150 pickup truck after it collided with another vehicle. The drivers of the two vehicles, both 17-year-old boys, were not injured. No citations have been issued because State Troopers and Loxley Police say the case is still under investigation.

Mr. Turner had been eligible for release in December 2013. Mr. Jordan, who was released from the hospital late last week, has a minimum release date of April 19, 2014.

In the United States today, approximately half of the inmates currently imprisoned in state or federal prisons work in some type of job assignment while incarcerated. Prison labor has become a hugely profitable institution, producing over two billion dollars in revenue per year.

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