

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/prisoner-abuse-in-private-prison-transport-industry/>

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An investigative report by the Marshall Project reveals a pattern of prisoner abuse and neglect in the prisoner transportation industry, in which private, for-profit companies operate with almost no oversight.

Tens of thousands of people, including many who have not been convicted of a crime, are transported each year by small private extradition companies. The Marshall Project reviewed thousands of court documents, federal records, and local news articles and interviewed more than 50 current or former guards and executives. The investigation revealed that at least four people have died in the past four years in private extradition vans, all operated by Prisoner Transportation Services, the nation's largest for-profit extradition company.

The private companies are paid 75 cents to \$1.50 a mile per prisoner, and poorly-trained guards with no medical expertise travel up to weeks at a time across the South and Midwest in fully packed 15-passenger vans with no beds, toilets, or medical supplies. There have been more than 50 crashes involving private extradition vehicles since 2000, and in almost every accident, the passengers were shackled but not seat-belted. Twelve prisoners and guards have been killed, and a dozen prisoners have suffered neck, skull, or spine injuries.

Trips often last days, during which passengers are fed only fast-food sandwiches, water is rationed, and bathroom stops are limited so that prisoners often are forced to urinate in bottles or on themselves, and sometimes defecate on the floor of the van.

At least 14 women have alleged in court since 2000 that they were sexually assaulted by guards while being transported by a private extradition company.

A federal law passed in 2000 mandates notification of local law enforcement after an escape, requires a ratio of one guard per six prisoners, and sets basic standards for the training of guards and treatment of prisoners. But the Marshall Project reports the law is almost never enforced. At least 60 prisoners have escaped from private extradition vehicles since 2000, but the Justice Department could identify just one instance, in 2011, where the law was followed.

State and local jurisdictions that hire these private companies manage to avoid responsibility because the prisoners are not directly in their custody, the Marshall Project reports, and federal regulators have mostly ignored the industry.

This month, United States Attorney General Loretta Lynch told the House Judiciary Committee that her office will investigate lapses in federal oversight of private prisoner transport companies.

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The Marshall Project

The Marshall Project

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