The Culture of (Border) Control in Britain: Staff, Precarity and Distress[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe key findings from a survey of 'staff culture' that we designed and then administered to 170 private-sector custodial officers employed on the immigration detainee escorting contract in the UK in 2023. The 'Detainee Escorting Staff Survey' (DESS) offers the first independent measure of staff attitudes to and experiences of enforcing this form of border control. The final part of a multi-year, mixed-method study, it recorded a range of views about the purpose and nature of the job and of immigration control more broadly. It also found striking levels of distress, including a high rate of suicidality, particularly among ethnic minority participants, as well as among those who had been employed in this job for a long time. The survey responses reveal a system that exploits and creates conditions of precarity and exclusion for staff as well as for those in their custody. Viewed in this light, it makes clear how the culture of border control is rooted in and shapes much wider and detrimental social and economic relations.

Keywords

immigration detention; deportation; staff; culture; suicide; precarity; distress

Each year, the UK government detains tens of thousands of people in a national system of short-term immigration detention to facilitate their identification, circulation around the UK and, on occasion, their deportation or administrative removal.[2] Unlike the better-known, longer-term immigration removal centres (IRCs), there has been very little scholarly attention paid to 'immigration detainee escorting' as it is formally known. In this article, we fill some of that gap by drawing on a survey of 'staff culture' we designed and administered in 2023 as the final part of a large, mixed-methods research project that was the first academic study of this system (Bosworth, 2025).

Immigration detainee escorting in the UK is a wholly outsourced venture, currently operated on behalf of the Home Office by the self-proclaimed "leading facilities management and professional services company"[3], Mitie Care & Custody. Together with IRCs, populist debates, and an ever-changing set of laws and policies, it forms an important element of what we might consider, in David Garland's (2001: 163) classic phrasing, as the border control 'complex' of 'late modernity'; in which high rates of irregular immigration are

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[2] Although legally distinct, deportation and removal have the same effect on those subject to them: expulsion from UK territory. Deportation orders are given to those whose presence is judged not to be 'conducive' to the public good, usually following a criminal conviction. Removal, by contrast, typically is ordered following an unsuccessful immigration or asylum case. Both bring with them a temporal ban on re-entry.

[3] https://mitie.com

considered a “social fact” and “emotional investment” in border control “is widespread and intense, encompassing elements of fascination as well as fear, anger and resentment”.

Staff on this contract, which was valued at over half a billion pounds when it was announced in December 2017, are employed either as ‘in-country’ (ICE) or ‘overseas’ escorts (OSE). In the former role, they operate over thirty short-term holding facilities (STHFs) where people can be held for some hours or, in some sites, when their removal directions have been set, for up to seven days.[4] They also transport people under immigration act powers in custodial vans around the country and sometimes to the airport. In the latter they force people onto scheduled and charter flights, expelling them from UK territory and accompanying them to their country of origin, where they hand them over to local authorities.

While there is a small body of interdisciplinary scholarship on the experiences of immigrants and asylum seekers in this system (see for example Fisher et al, 2019; De Noronha, 2020; Bhatia, 2024; Walters, 2024), we know very little about the officers who administer it. There are no published statistics on them, nor any publicly available information about their training or selection. While they are mentioned in passing in reports by human rights monitors (HMIP, 2020a; 2020b; IMB, 2020), most of what we know is gleaned from the media, who tend to pay attention only in times of crisis. In 2022, for example, there was widespread coverage of racist comments made in a Mitie staff WhatsApp group, and later, that same year, about male officers paying women for sex in the countries to which they deport people (Sharpe, 2022; Taylor, 2022a; 2022b). When the Short-Term Holding Facility at Manston, designed to hold people who crossed the channel in search of asylum, became dangerously overcrowded, accounts emerged of staff violence (Dearden, Walawakar, and Rose, 2023). Journalists at Liberty Investigates have also documented the use of force in specific, often high-profile, deportations (Walawakar et al, 2021; Walawakar, 2024). While such reporting is vitally important for uncovering abuse and in holding people to account, it does little to explain how these sorts of practices and behaviour emerge, nor whether they are common or contested. Neither the media nor the official monitors consider the motivation of officers in taking up this line of work. They do not ask about their reaction to it or describe the effect of this form of employment on them, or on the communities where they live.

Such limited attention from academics, journalists and civil society groups is curious, since in border control, as elsewhere, staff in concrete and in more symbolic ways, like the unfleshed out “administrative actors” in Garland’s (2001) study of crime control, create and maintain the system in which they are employed. In their actions and through their words, they establish and reproduce the (social, cultural and economic) conditions that enable border control and its enforcement, even as these same conditions keep them in precarious and devalued forms of labour (Bourdieu, 1977). Understanding their experiences, motivations, actions and views, which together constitute ‘staff culture’, in other words, not only helps us better grasp how border control operates in practice but illuminates the tangled and sometimes contradictory justifications which keep it in place.

[4] This rule applies only to the three “residential” facilities. Without removal directions, the time limit there is five days. By comparison, there is no statutory upper time limit for a period of detention in an immigration removal centre in the UK.

The article begins with an overview of the wider study and its context, including existing accounts of staff culture. We then turn to the survey design process, before moving onto its main findings and their implications. As we will demonstrate, staff responses reveal not only some (predictable) suspicious and hostile beliefs about the people in their custody, but also broader economic and psychological forms of vulnerability which culminate in high rates of suicidality. In considering these matters together, the survey helps to unearth a much wider set of social and economic roots and effects of border control. Staff "culture", it suggests, has detrimental effects not only on the people in detention, but on the workers and, by extension on their communities as well. Their behaviour and attitudes, which reflect and amplify populist antagonisms towards migrants, are rooted in and reaffirm unequal economic arrangements, in which staff, like those in their custody, are always already precarious and devalued. This job which all too often seems to create and depend on hostile sentiments towards others, is also marked by and produces economic inequalities. Together, such matters render staff, and those whom they detain, precarious, vulnerable, and expendable.

Short-term Immigration Detention and Deportation in Britain: The Context

Each year the UK government detains tens of thousands of foreign citizens for brief periods of time under immigration powers, a proportion of whom they require to leave the country. The short-term holding facilities where many are placed, act as carceral junctures connecting different legal systems and government institutions (Gill et al, 2018). Those within are either moved swiftly to a different site in the UK, which may be a hotel, an asylum processing centre, an immigration removal centre, or the foster care system. Or they may be forcibly expelled from British territory.

The numbers detained range from barely a handful each month in some units like those at Holyhead port in Wales or at London City Airport, to thousands across the five holding facilities within Heathrow Airport and on the former Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Manston near Dover. The custodial institutions are used in distinct ways. For example, three 'residential' short-term holding facilities (RSTHF) in Manchester, Belfast and Swinderby in rural Lincolnshire, connect the immigration system to the prison, housing people who have completed their criminal sentence either en route to the airport or to a site of longer-term immigration detention (Turnbull and Hasselberg, 2016). Some pass through these places under the 'early release scheme', allowed to complete their prison term before the usual time if they agree to leave the country. Holding rooms in reporting centres and tribunals, by contrast, facilitate the operation of immigration and asylum law. These places are primarily used for those whose asylum cases have been denied, or when people attend court to request bail or appeal their deportation. Five establishments in Northern France, which are run under juxtaposed controls, prevent entry to Britain (Bosworth, 2022). All are governed by the Short-Term Holding Facility Rules 2018, which were amended in 2022 and again in 2023 to take account of the varied roles they play.

Other than the three RSTHFs in which people are housed like prisoners, in cells, these sites of short-term detention follow a simple two-room design, with one designated for 'families', and another for 'single adult males'. Despite being secure, they are not obviously penal. Instead, most are little more than waiting rooms, where people sit on chairs bolted to the

ground, waiting for the next stage of the border control process to begin. Staff observe them through a pane of glass, and, once they have completed their induction, interact with them only rarely, to offer food and drink, or to change the DVD or the television station.

Officers work 12-hour shifts. They wear uniforms and are trained in and entitled to use physical methods of restraint on those in their custody; yet they do not carry keys like colleagues employed in prison or in long-term detention. There is little chance for career progression – the vast majority are and will remain 'detainee custody officers' (DCOs). A few rise to the level of a 'detainee custody officer manager' (DCOM), paid a little more in return for significantly increased administrative responsibilities and paperwork; their seniority is signalled by a slightly different uniform - a white shirt instead of a blue one. A very small 'senior management team' (SMT) work in business attire in offices far removed from the border.

In overseas escorting (OSE), staff are a 'remote workforce' who only come together to facilitate deportation or removal. Most flights are aborted before they commence, or on the way to the airport, usually due to legal challenges, although they are sometimes caused by missing paperwork and other errors (Bosworth and Singler 2022). This side of the business is small. During the research period, which spanned the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers employed in it fell as low as 180. Over that time frame, official figures shared with Mary reveal that these men and women escorted anywhere between 30 to 280 people out of the country each month on a mix of scheduled flights and charter planes. While the staff group has since increased, along with the number of expulsions they facilitate, the 2017 contract only called for 300 officers. The in-country escorting (ICE) staff group is at least four times the size.

Wherever they work, most officers are male and white. They range in age from 18 to 75. For younger staff, this may be their first salaried post, after casual jobs in the nighttime economy or on zero-hours contracts. Many of those aged fifty and above, come to it after multiple redundancies elsewhere. Most ICE staff tend to live locally to their workplace. Overseas escorts, by contrast, drive to the operational control centre near Gatwick from cities and towns across the country to 'muster', like soldiers, before proceeding to collect the people to remove or deport. They earn somewhat more than their in-country colleagues. Yet all are paid less than they would be in the criminal justice system, where, in contrast to the flat salary structure of immigration detainee escorting, staff also progress up a pay scale.

Conceptualising and Measuring 'Staff Culture'

The wider research project, of which the survey formed the final element, was authorised by the Home Office as a study of 'staff culture' in July 2019, following years of negotiation by the first author.[5] This term of art is as common within the immigration sector as it is in the

[5] Originally designed as a mixed method, 18-month project, the research was significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. After the UK went into lockdown in March 2020, connections that had been forged in the first six months with key participants were lost, either as people moved on, or simply forgot about the study. In any case, the sprawling nature of the system, and its operation as two separate enterprises made it challenging to navigate. The political sensitivities of this part of border control, which occurred during the crackdown on immigration by consecutive Conservative Home Secretaries,

criminal justice system, despite having no clear definition. In September 2023, for example, the chair of the Brook House Inquiry, Kate Eves, identified that immigration removal centre's 'culture' as a leading cause of the violence and disorder which had been captured on film five years previously for BBC Panorama (Eves, 2023). The public inquiry heard numerous accounts of racist, violent and otherwise coercive or unprofessional staff actions and statements, which had been either ignored, glossed over, or encouraged by colleagues. While specific individuals were singled out, the whole staff complement was found to be lacking from the top down. A 'toxic' culture had taken over, seemingly without notice.

While the events in Brook House were presented in the Inquiry as particularly shocking, the kinds of examples that were described are not new. Nor is the terminology for explaining them. In 2005, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, Stephen Shaw, relied on similar terms in his analysis of the factors which had inspired strikingly similar events at the Oakington immigration reception centre near Cambridge (Shaw, 2005). Likewise, in 2016, Kate Lampard and Ed Marsden in their report commissioned by and for the institution's operating company, Serco, blamed staff and institutional 'culture' at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre as the cause of the racist and sexist comments about the detained women that had been recorded by a whistleblower (Lampard and Marsden, 2016). That year and again two years later, Stephen Shaw deployed the idea once more in his study of the treatment of vulnerable people in immigration detention centres (Shaw, 2016; 2018). Culture, he wrote in 2018, was best understood as "how organisations do things, and represents the values and beliefs that govern how individuals behave: most commonly described as 'how we do things around here'" (Shaw, 2018: 100).

In connecting actions with beliefs, this interpretation casts workplaces as morally inflected sites which differ from one another depending on staff views, practices and emotions. When applied to custodial institutions, this approach owes much to Alison Liebling's work on 'moral performance' (Liebling, 2004), in which prison officers play a key role in determining the nature of penal institutions. Although multiple staff cultures may be present in any one institution, a prison can be tipped in one direction or another by a dominant group (Tait, 2011; Crewe, 2011, Liebling & Kant, 2016).

While that approach to culture is closest to the general use of the term in the immigration sector, here, as our article's title suggests, we are also influenced by earlier punishment and society scholarship which connects sentiments and viewpoints to social structures, external institutions and political views (Garland, 1991; 2001; Smith, 2008; Brown, 2009; see also Fassin, 2018). The "practical operation" of border control strategies like immigration detainee escorting and "their political support", we suggest, depend on the same kinds of factors described by David Garland a quarter of a century ago: "widespread habits of thought, routines of action, and structures of feeling" (Garland, 2001: 165). 'Staff culture' is, therefore, worth studying, not just to learn 'how things are done around here', but also to try to better understand why things are done as they are. It illuminates the roots of policies and their implementation as well as their consequences.

compounded matters, as it was frequently made clear that research access was never entirely secure (for more detail of the wider study see Bosworth, 2025).

To make these links concrete we sought to measure staff values and beliefs on a range of topics, from the detained population to privatisation and immigration. In crafting the survey, we drew on qualitative insights from the wider project, as well as from studies of professions that resemble aspects of detainee escorting, including the police, prison officers, emergency medical services, and in the field of logistics (Liebling, 2022; Aliverti, 2021; Fassin, 2013; LeCavalier, 2016, Sexton et al., 2016). We were interested in the political views and motivations of the custodial workers as well as in their perceptions of the personal and wider impact of their labour. To that end, we included items from a range of established questionnaires, including the Civil Service People Survey and measures of job satisfaction and quality of work among nurses and other human service staff (Spector, 1985; Nanjundeswaraswamy, 2021). We also used some questions from social attitude surveys (Ford and Heath 2014; ISSP 2022; Ipsos 2022) and a measure of distress developed by Mary Bosworth and Alice Gerlach (2020) for people detained in immigration removal centres, alongside Brides et al.'s (2004) Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale.

The resulting Detainee Escorting Services Survey (DESS)[6] consists of five parts, starting with socio-demographic questions on ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, marital status, level of education, class, and role in Mitie. As Rea and Parker (2014: 6) have noted, gathering such descriptive information is essential "to better understand the larger population represented by the sample". In addition to descriptive information, surveys typically assess attitudinal and behavioural data to fully understand the relationship between those aspects and the "complexities of the population from which a sample has been drawn" (Rea & Parker, 2014: 4). Thus, our survey consists of a conglomeration of behaviour and attitude-related items.

In sequencing the questions, we followed established guidelines (Rattray & Jones, 2005; Rea & Parker, 2014; Blair, Czaja & Blair, 2014) and placed those with higher sensitivity later in the survey. Part two thus commences with straightforward questions about job satisfaction (i.e. "I feel satisfied with my job") and work conditions (i.e. "I am happy with my physical work environment"), before turning to attitudes towards detainees (i.e. "Many detainees are criminals"), immigration (i.e. "There are too many immigrants in Britain"), and the use of force (i.e. "My colleagues are too reluctant to use force on detainees"). In part three, we asked about the organisational climate, including relationships with colleagues and the prevalence of harassment and discrimination within the wider company. Section four contains the most sensitive questions of the survey concerning mental health, trauma, and distress. It is followed by open text boxes which invite people to write in more detail about the purpose and nature of their work. We finished the list with two "venting questions", to allow for feedback on aspects we should consider adding or removing (Rea & Parker, 2014). We put the open questions at the end of the survey to minimise attrition and incomplete responses.

As the first survey of immigration detainee escorting staff, the DESS went through multiple stages of development, starting with qualitative research from July 2019 - February 2023. In March 2023, we piloted a paper version in-person. Pre-testing allowed us to assess its clarity, comprehensiveness, and acceptability (Ria & Parker, 2014; Andrews, Nunnecke &

[6] Available at: https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DESS%20Survey_print%20version.pdf

Preece, 2003). Based on feedback, we then amended and transferred the survey to an online platform to enable participants to complete it anonymously and in their own time. The link was shared in emails to all detainee escorting staff between April and August 2023.

Despite our efforts, it proved difficult to recruit participants as trust remained hard to establish. The diffuse nature of the immigration detainee escorting system meant that even after more than three years of qualitative research, not all staff members were familiar with the project and the research team. Many remained unwilling to comment on a form distributed by someone they had either not met in person, or did not know particularly well. Even though we reassured participants of their anonymity, it is possible that, given the relatively small numbers of workers in some areas, that the assessment of sociodemographic information and questions about their role made some staff members anxious about being identifiable.

In total, 170 employees completed the survey, from a staffing group at the time of around 1200. Among them, 107 identified themselves as in-country escorts and 55 as overseas escorts. Eight people did not specify in which part of the contract they were based. Most were male (65%) and white (89%). One person self-identified as transgender. Of those who listed themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority (11%), almost all identified as either Indian, Pakistani, or 'any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background'. While all ranks participated, manager grades (including DCOMs) were over-represented, accounting for more than 1 in 4 respondents (28.2%). Finally, the average age of the survey population was 45, and most had worked in immigration escorting for 5 years or less (63%). Before they started with Mitie, they had mainly been employed in hospitality, security, and sales, although there was a wide range of occupations. The majority listed O levels/GCSE or A levels/college as their highest qualification. Their educational attainment rarely diverged much from that of their parents. Three out of four (74.7%) described themselves as coming from a working-class background.

Distrustful, Discontent and Distressed: Staff Attitudes to Work

Overall, our findings show that staff tend to be suspicious of foreigners and of each other. Their job is morally and politically contested, and there was evidence in both the qualitative portions of this study and in the survey responses that officers were keenly aware of and resented that. Thus, nearly two-thirds (63%) did not "feel that the public appreciates the work they do", while 70% simply did not think "the public understands the work they do". A significant proportion (41%) said they would like "to talk openly about their work" but could not.

During the period of research (2019 - 2023), successive Conservative Party Home Secretaries, aided and abetted by the media, promulgated a highly punitive and dehumanising discourse about foreigners (see for example, Taylor, 2024; Mayblin et al, 2024). Officers' responses reflected some of these views. While the majority (71%) initially agreed with the statement that "Britain's cultural life is enriched by migrants coming to live here from other countries", nearly half (48.5%) also thought that there were "too many immigrants in Britain". Three-quarters (74%) were of the view that "people in search of asylum should be detained", while 40% believed that "immigration increases crime".

Given these views, it was unsurprising that staff appeared at best ambivalent about many of those in their custody. Thus, while most (83.2%) claimed to find it easy to "build rapport" with detained people, they evidently did not trust them. More than two-thirds (69%) simply did not think "that most detainees are truthful", while almost one-third (32%) believed that "many detainees are criminals". Within these broad categories, respondents tended to differentiate between people on the basis of nationality and gender, with more than one in four (27.4%) claiming that female detainees were "harder to manage than male detainees" and more than two-thirds (68.5%) agreeing that detainees from "some countries were more difficult to deal with than others".

In their answers to questions about job satisfaction and the work environment, staff identified additional areas of concern, albeit with some exceptions. Slightly more than 70%, for example, reported being generally "satisfied" with their job and "happy with their physical work environment". A similar proportion agreed that they had "opportunities to use" their "discretion" and "skills" at work. However, these figures left one in four (26%) dissatisfied with their job. Almost one in three (30%) did not feel they had "a fixed or defined job responsibility and role", while one in four (25%) felt "overworked". There were widespread financial concerns as well. A majority (52%) believed that Mitie "defines success as keeping costs low," and close to half (44%) reported they had to "work overtime to make ends meet".

Staff were not just frustrated by the public or the company. A significant number were unhappy about how they were treated by their colleagues. Despite sharing many core views and beliefs, and notwithstanding long shift patterns, during which they would spend hours together, day after day, this was not a tight knit group. More than one-third (38%) reported a general lack of "camaraderie", while slightly over half agreed with the statement that "there is too much bickering and fighting at work" (53%). In response to "What is the worst thing about your job?" one officer wrote that "Some members of staff are childish and cannot take criticism. Often swearing and storming out of the office when challenged". For some, matters were far more serious. More than one in three (37%) reported "harassment or discrimination" in their workplace towards staff, while one-fourth (25%) of all officers claimed to have witnessed "inappropriate behaviour towards detainees in their workplace". A female participant who identified herself as British Asian (Indian) was blunt: "The racism within Mitie needs tackling [...]," she wrote. "The sexism and misogyny is rampant and needs serious addressing. There is a boys club culture."

Finally, the survey revealed significant mental health concerns. Just over 1 in 14 people (7.2%) reported that they had thought about self-harm "some" or "most of the time" in the past week. An even greater proportion – 1 in 8 (12.6%) -- had had suicidal thoughts "some", "most", or "all the time" over the same period. These rates are significantly higher than the current estimates of suicidal thoughts (5.4%) and those of self-harm (6.4%) in the general population (MacManus et al, 2016). The vast majority of participants also struggled with sleep (up to 75%), a lack of energy (up to 78%), and restlessness (78%).

The survey cannot prove whether these elevated rates of thoughts about self-harm and suicide and general poor mental health were a result of organisational culture and working

conditions at Mitie or if they are, to what extent. Yet, the results of the secondary trauma stress scale by Bride et al. (2004) indicated that some of their mental health problems were, at least partly, a consequence of this job. The secondary trauma stress scale measures "symptoms associated with indirect exposure to traumatic events via one's professional relationship with traumatized clients" (Bride et al., 2004, p. 1). Our results show that four out of five respondents (81%) reported minor symptoms of secondary trauma stress. More than one-third of the group (38%) suffered from at least ten symptoms, either relating to avoidance (feeling emotionally numb, being less active than usual) or arousal (difficulties sleeping, concentrating, being easily annoyed). As we will discuss in more detail below, reflecting the cumulative effect of secondary trauma, officers who had worked in the job for more than five years were more vulnerable than more recently appointed colleagues.

On the one hand, these responses chime with criminological accounts of stigma and dirty work (Eriksson, 2022) as officers described a workplace and role "that is physically, socially or morally tainted by society" (Hughes, 1958: 122). Under these circumstances, to restore a positive personal and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), some developed 'warped badges of honour' (Higgins, 2022), presenting themselves as protectors of the country against unspecified security threats. In such accounts, as we will see more clearly in the responses of the Overseas escorts, those whom they detained and deported were cast as undeserving, dangerous and criminal.

Yet, this is more than a story of institutional taint. In their poor mental health and high rates of suicidality, the 'dubious virtue' (Garrihy, 2022) of border control is shown to exact a significant personal cost. Economically precarious, with few alternative realistic employment options, these officers either were already or were rendered (more) vulnerable by the very system they were employed to defend. In this system of temporary detention and enforced mobility where, as most respondents agreed, "success is defined as keeping costs low", the focus is on "deliverables" and profit maximisation, all of which are constantly monitored, measured and reported.

Poor working conditions, lengthy shifts, and low pay, which characterise this form of labour, are inherent to the neo-liberal enterprise. They create and depend on vulnerable workers who are easily replaced. Such matters have an effect. "For £11 an hour, would you be willing to enter a room filled with aggressive people in order to help a single individual? It's worth considering", an in-country escort wrote angrily on the survey. "We do this all the time and are still viewed as the bad guy in many sections of the media." In presenting his labour in these terms, this man connected his low economic value with his low social worth; he also linked both factors to his view of those in his custody as dangerous and difficult.

In his account, we see how the stigma of the detainee custody officer role, in Imogen Tyler's (2020) words, reflects a broader 'machinery of inequality', in which border control operates as cause and effect (see also Press, 2021). While migrants and refugees are the most adversely affected by this system, the survey suggests that the poorly paid, private sector security guards are not immune. Sharing many of the same markers of inequality as those whom they detain, staff are subject to and perpetuate a system that exploits their vulnerable and precarious status. As we will see in the next section, such matters affect some groups of officers more than others.

Roles, Gender, Ethnicity and Experience: Comparing Staff Groups

Throughout the qualitative portion of the study, participants routinely claimed that in-country and overseas escorts were 'culturally' distinct. The 'remote workforce' of OSE was widely understood to be harder to control. ICE staff, by contrast, who drove the custodial vans, were often dismissed as providing no more than a 'glorified taxi service'; not really security workers at all. They, and their peers in the holding units, sometimes disparaged their colleagues who facilitated the deportations as more likely to be hot-headed or aggressive. Although employed by the same company, ICE and OSE staff rarely mixed or socialised together; nor did people in different grades of seniority.

In fact, as the previous sections made clear, the survey suggests that staff groups had more in common than many appeared to realise. Yet, there were some views on which they diverged. Overseas escorts were more likely to believe that "many detainees are criminals" and that "people who come to the UK in search of asylum should be detained" than their colleagues in ICE. Despite having very little contact with women, few of whom are ever deported, OSE staff were also more likely to claim that "female detainees" and those from "some countries" were "harder to manage". These officers were less satisfied with their job, particularly with their pay and the amount of paperwork they had to complete, even though they earn more and do less than those who drive the vans or secure the holding units. They were also more negative about the organisational climate at Mitie, unlikely to consider their colleagues to be "close friends" and more likely to have difficulty engaging with them in banter or conversation. They were the most likely to believe Mitie is primarily focused on cost efficiency above everything else.

Some of their responses reflect different responsibilities of the two roles. Although part of the same border control system, ICE and OSE staff are set to different tasks, and to some extent, no doubt self-select into them. Generally, OSE officers have less contact with detained people, other than with the specific individuals they escort out of the country, many of whom are distressed and unwilling to leave. The deportations themselves, which are the most widely contested part of this system, follow a fixed routine, which emphasises the risks and dangers posed by the people being removed over their legal rights, personal aspirations, or family ties.

Perhaps surprisingly, women and men in either ICE or OSE only differed in statistically significant ways in response to three questions. On the one hand, more female than male participants agreed that "immigration increases crime rates", suggesting a wider set of concerns about migration. On the other, at work, more women than men reported that they found it "easy to build rapport with detainees." They were also more likely to record that they felt "emotionally affected by their job" than their male colleagues.

By contrast, people's self-reported ethnic background seemed to be far more relevant to their views. Participants from "any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background" differed in their responses particularly often from those of other ethnicities. For example, not one person from that background agreed with the statement that "immigration increases crime rates". This group also found it easier than members from all other

ethnicities to “build rapport with detainees”, and were more likely to report that “most detainees are truthful”. At the same time, significantly more ethnic minority officers than participants from other backgrounds agreed that people who come to the UK in search of asylum “should be detained”.

Making sense of such matters is difficult. On the one hand, it is possible that staff whose parents had migrated to the UK may have had more understanding of the reasons people seek to relocate and do not wish to leave. In the qualitative portion of the project, however, staff from ethnic minority backgrounds often expressed some concerns about being viewed as biased in favour of those in their custody (see also Bosworth, 2018 for similar findings in long-term detention). One woman of mixed white/Jamaican descent, for example, claimed she always volunteered to work on charter flights to Jamaica to show her commitment to ‘’proper procedures” and her aversion to those who “broke the law”. Others called for more ‘deterrent’ policies like the touted flights to Rwanda, to process the asylum claims there, of people who had entered the UK by crossing the Channel on small boats, in a bid to punish those who had sought to jump the “queue”. At the same time, as the British Asian officer quoted earlier suggested, staff from ethnic minority backgrounds were also often critical of race relations within the company.

The tension between such matters may explain the significant differences in their mental wellbeing the survey revealed. Just as scholars have found in other sectors, ethnic minority respondents in this study were far more likely to struggle with their mental health than their white colleagues, reporting more symptoms of depression and increased thoughts about self-harm and suicide (Ngwena, 2014; Al-Sharifi et al., 2015; Bhui and Fossi, 2007). While the survey results cannot pinpoint the underlying causes of their worse mental wellbeing, the ethnic minority respondents here and in the qualitative portions of the project paint a picture of differential treatment which chimes with other research that has found that exposure to racial discrimination negatively impacts the mental wellbeing of ethnic minorities (Ricci et al, 2023). In the DESS, respondents who identified with an ethnic background from Pakistan or India and those from “any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background” were more likely to feel unable “to challenge inappropriate behaviour among their colleagues”. They did not believe that “Mitie encourages people to speak up when they identify a serious policy or delivery risk”. They also found it harder to engage with banter and conversations among colleagues than their white colleagues. The context of such responses was made vivid in a written comment box from a white colleague. “The race card is used against all negative behaviour,” this man complained, without providing evidence. “You are constantly labelled a racist. I feel the white man has no opportunity to progress within this company anymore.”

Like detained people, whom researchers have found become more distressed the longer they are confined (Bosworth and Gerlach, 2020), the duration of service seemed to adversely affect the mental health of escorting staff, irrespective of their race or ethnicity. Officers who had worked on the job for more than 5 years were significantly more likely to report symptoms of depression - including sleep difficulties, crying easier than usual, not enjoying the things they used to enjoy, or feelings of panic. They also reported significantly more secondary trauma symptoms, such as feeling discouraged about the future, feeling jumpy, having trouble concentrating, or having intrusive thoughts about detainees. They

were more critical of Mitie's efforts to create a "diverse and inclusive workplace", compared to their colleagues who were newer in post, and more discontent with their work conditions, including their pay and chances for promotion.

Although the mean length of time people had worked in immigration escorting was 6 years, that average was skewed by a small number of long-serving individuals. Most had either spent 1-5 years on the job (33.3%) or less than 1 year (29.8%). Reflecting its high turnover, or what management refer to as 'staff attrition', Mitie ran nearly constant recruitment campaigns during the four years of the research project. Most of those in the escort have a history of what Ullrich Beck (1992) refers to as "de-standardised labour", often like the migrants they detain and deport (Bosworth, 2024).

In this final element the economic roots and effects of the culture of border control once more come into view. Staff turnover is a liability for the company, since they risk being fined if they are unable to complete a task for the Home Office due to insufficient staff capacity. Yet long-serving officers are also undesirable, at least financially, and sometimes due to their attitudes and practices. A protracted battle with the overseas escorts' union, Community, for example, pertained to the enhanced pay and conditions of a handful of men who had worked in deportation for over a decade, some of whom were known to be physically aggressive, and who had been used by previous companies to manage what were considered 'complex cases'. Getting the balance 'right' for Mitie was primarily a financial matter, yet was typically presented, as others have documented in prisons in England and Wales, as a 'cultural' one of modernisation and 'reform' (Jones et al, 2024). While the disappearance of these individuals was hardly to be regretted, management's eventual success in the union dispute justified familiar, neoliberal work practices that kept all staff working longer, harder, and with fewer employment protections, further entrenched a fundamentally damaging and damaged system.

Conclusion: Staff Precarity and the Culture of (Border) Control

Twenty-five years ago in his influential account of why the UK and the US had revivified failing state apparatuses like the prison and were obsessed with crime control even as offending rates were declining across the industrialised world, David Garland (2001: 198) highlighted the key role of "market individualism" in which "the freedom of some is premised upon the exclusion and close control of others." Punitive practices, he argued, sprang from political, economic and legal arrangements, which, in turn, spawned and were reinforced by widely shared sentiments and beliefs. In this view, offenders are met with ever harsher responses even as over-investment in criminal justice practices, particularly in prisons, ensures under-investment in local communities (Gilmore, 2007).

Immigration detainee escorting is easily construed in these terms, at least in part. In the words of Katja Franko, the private sector staff who filled out our survey oversee a form of 'abnormal justice' (Franko, 2020), in which they refer to the purpose of their job in populist and criminalising terms to "make Britain safer" and "protect the country". Yet, to focus only on affect and sentiment, would be to miss the point. First of all, such punitive beliefs were by no means universal. More importantly, this is not a system designed to punish, even though officers wield considerable coercive powers and the right to use force. It is meant to

identify, circulate and expel foreigners who have been judged to have no right to remain. As one senior member of staff proposed early in the study, detainee escorting operates as a "logistics business," with all that entails in terms of efficiencies, technology, mobility and a reliance on a poorly paid workforce to turn a profit on small margins.

While individual officers sometimes contested this claim, asserting that "people are not packages", thinking about the nature of this job directs our attention to the socio-economic roots and consequences of border culture which may be obscured by a preoccupation with sentiment. As we have seen, these officers reported low levels of formal education or no qualification at all - an aspect they confirmed was also true for their parents, revealing a workforce with an entrenched, and precarious, class position. Many had poor mental health, and an alarmingly high proportion had thoughts of ending their own life, particularly among black and minority ethnic staff. They evidently felt (and likely were) undervalued by their corporate bosses and by the public. For these people, who also often lived in economically deprived areas of the UK where the STHFs are usually located, working as a detainee custody officer may not simply have been the best job they could get, but likely the only one, or at least the only one not on a zero hours contract. For them, and for those employed to deport migrants, their working conditions were basic and unlikely to change.

In the STHFs, where they labour for 12 hours per shift, there is little to do other than observe distressed people through a pane of glass. Many sites are cobbled together either from temporary prefabricated units, or from rooms carved out within buildings used for other purposes. Other than the residential units, none have access to fresh air, or to natural light. Those in the vans circulate around a set track, spending much of their day waiting in traffic or awaiting permission to enter or leave immigration or criminal justice institutions. During their ten-day availability pattern, overseas escorts can be asked to complete multiple flights one after the other. As one wrote into the open-text box, "this is a job with no progression, no proper recognition, too much sitting around and not enough rest or NO REST AT ALL on most removals abroad." (emphasis in original).

Designed to facilitate the social and legal exclusion of foreigners and justified in these terms, the survey suggests that immigration detainee escorting not only corrodes staff wellbeing but also creates and relies on a workforce who feel stigmatised, unfairly treated, distant, hostile, and vulnerable. These results not only invite us to think afresh about what "staff culture" means and how it is shaped by poor working conditions born from neoliberal forces, they also demonstrate how this (privatised) system of border control deepens and exploits existing structures of inequality. In so doing, they suggest new avenues and arguments for abolitionist discussions, but that is a matter for a different study.

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