Logistical violence in the UK's short-term immigration detention and deportation system[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the nature, effects, and governance of use of force in the UK's fully outsourced immigration detainee escorting system. Drawing on material gathered from a long-term mixed-method study, I seek to explain the gap between official figures which show staff rarely physically restrain those in their custody, and the paperwork and processes which anticipate the need for violence at every turn. As I will argue, the information gathered by staff about using force shapes and justifies this form of border control from the number of officers assigned to a deportation, to the site of detention selected, and the treatment of people during custody, transportation, and deportation. These arrangements, in turn, diffuse coercion into and through everyday practices and paperwork. This "logistical violence," which inheres in technical details and data as well as in physical restraint, not only facilitates border control but shields the company from blame by firmly attaching the use of force first to the detained person whose actions demand it and then to the officers who mete it out. In so doing, it hides the coercive nature of this business from view while allowing the company to profit from it.

Key words

Violence; logistics; immigration detention; deportation; United Kingdom; use of force; privatisation.

Border control is inherently coercive. States everywhere wield wide-ranging powers over non-citizens, even as there are important variations in how (often) they use them and who they target (Brandariz, 2022; Könönen, 2023). In the UK, which provides the context for this article, foreign citizens must prove their right to remain, to work, to rent, and to access healthcare or education (Aliverti, 2015; Zedner, 2022). If they are found in violation of criminal or immigration law, they may be detained, removed, or deported. Their request to enter may also be denied, and increasingly, their claim for asylum too (V. Taylor, 2024).

As the extensive evidence of human rights abuses in immigration detention systems across the world demonstrates, border control may

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also be physically violent (Fili, 2025; Hiemstra and Conlon, 2025; Lindberg, 2024; Wistrich et al, 2008; Walters, 2017; D. Taylor, 2023; IMB, 2025). In Greece and France, for instance, scholars and human rights groups have shown men and women held for immigration matters are sometimes beaten by the police who detain (Troy-Donovan et al, 2025) or arrest them (Hagan, 2019). In the US, matters have been more lethal still (Grassini et all, 2021; Hiemstra and Conlon, 2025), while children have been forcibly separated from their parents (Human Rights Watch, 2024) and women sterilised without their consent (Ghandakly and Fabi, 2021). Everywhere injuries during deportation flights are not hard to find (see, for example, Radziwinowiczówna, 2020; Borrelli and Walters, 2024; Walters and Van Isacker, 2025; Ostrand, 2026). Even citizens are not immune. Those who provide humanitarian assistance have become targets not just of new criminal powers, but increasingly of physical abuse or assault at the hands of the authorities (Fekete, 2018; Tazzioli and Walters, 2019; Researchers X, 2024).

The cause(s) of suffering and duress at the border are sometimes harder to discern. This kind of cruelty is evident in the ‘slow’ or ‘structural’ violence of deportation centres where people are forced to wait even when they cannot leave (Lindberg, 2022); in the laws which push them into ever more dangerous journeys (Andersson, 2014; Jones, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022; Bachelet, 2025; Davies et al, 2022) or which punish them for seeking sanctuary (V. Taylor, 2024); in the courts where their rights are reduced or denied altogether (Barak, 2023); in the asylum systems where they are questioned, degraded, and disbelieved (Canning, 2017; 2019); and in the everyday racist, sexist or undignified treatment they encounter throughout (Parmar, 2020; Gerlach, 2022; Bosworth and Esposito, 2025). These practices and attitudes, which may fall short of “intentional encroachment upon the physical integrity of the body”, as historian Pieter Spierenburg (2013: 2) defined violence in his study of its relationship to punishment, hurt nonetheless and have widely acknowledged painful and long-term effects on those subjected to them (Shaw, 2016).

This article builds on these accounts. Heeding Ana Aliverti’s (2023: 349) call for “analytical reflection” on the “question of force and violence” it focuses on the instruction and management of ‘use of force’ within the UK’s privatised immigration detainee escorting system -- a term of art that encompasses the manual holds and mechanical restraints officers are taught to deploy to control and subdue the people in their custody. In this system, physical coercion is the exception not the rule, and yet, is everywhere anticipated in planning, policies, and training, as well as in everyday interactions and talk. It feels proximate. It is this paradox that I seek to explain. In so doing, I move away from discussions of the “moral and affective” quality of “everyday immigration enforcement” (Aliverti, 2023: 344) which have characterised much of the scholarship on criminal justice and immigration operatives (see also Borelli and Lindberg, 2019; Gariglio, 2017, Noppe, 2019). Instead, I focus on its logistical nature and

effects in this outsourced system that is designed to move people around the country and expel them as efficiently and, from the company's perspective, as profitably as possible.

Drawing on published and unpublished data, as well as on internal reports and ethnographic observations and conversations from a long-term mixed-method study with escorting staff, the article proceeds as follows. It starts with an overview of the research project and methods, before sketching the contours of the escorting system and its workforce. The body of the article then describes the instruction, application, and reporting of use of force. Weaving together staff testimonies, field notes, and examples of paperwork and process, I trace the bureaucratic means through which the official application of violence is defined, regulated, monitored, and understood by workers. The resulting forms of knowledge, which firmly exclude the testimonies and viewpoints of those deported or detained (Davies et al, 2021), I argue, not only discursively justify and explain border control, but like all forms of data in the private sector are designed to ensure its profitability. Converted into administrative categories, coercion seeps into daily operations and contractual management where it sits alongside a range of other measurements, ubiquitous yet hidden from view; a necessary and acceptable part of the business of border control.

A methodological note

The material reported in this article is drawn from research I conducted between July 2019 – August 2023 with private sector security staff employed in the UK's immigration detainee escorting system. Like immigration removal centres (IRCs) where people can be held indefinitely for the purpose of their identification or expulsion from the territory (Bosworth, 2014; Griffiths, 2013), this system is wholly contracted out by the Home Office. Unlike IRCs, however, which are run by multiple providers, immigration detainee escorting has, for many years, been outsourced to one company at a time. During the research period it was managed by Mitie, Care & Custody on a ten-year contract awarded in December 2017 at an initial cost of just over half a billion pounds to the public purse. Originally an industrial cleaning company, Mitie is now a full-service provider to the government, offering security not just at the border, but in military and nuclear sites as well as in hospitals and universities, where they have other staff present too, washing floors and serving food. They have an AI portfolio and work also on net zero business services.[2] In 2024 they were awarded their first prison contract at HMP Millsike, billed as "the UK's first all-electric 'green' prison" (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

Formal approval for my study was eventually granted in July 2019 after more than two years of negotiation with the Home Office in response to growing official concerns about the escort 'staff culture' (Shaw, 2016;

[2] For more details, see https://mitie.com

2018). Officers, who were then employed by Tascor, a subsidiary of the Capita group, had been accused of treating detained people unprofessionally. They were rough with vulnerable detainees and were found to have relied too often on handcuffs and other mechanical forms of restraint (Eves, 2023: 84). Seven months into what was originally meant to be a 24-month project, the UK went into lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. Over the next three years the research stopped, started and occasionally went fully online in reaction to COVID and to my university and domestic responsibilities. It finally drew to a close in August 2023.

Primarily ethnographic, the study combined non-participant observation, with semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, as well as documentary analysis and a staff survey (Bosworth, 2025). By the end of the research period, I had logged hundreds of hours of in-person and online observations, taken notes from informal conversations with well over 200 officers and formally interviewed 50 staff from a range of sites and seniority. In conjunction with a research assistant, I designed and administered a survey that elicited 170 responses (Bosworth and Haas, 2023; 2025). I spent time in over half the sites of short-term detention, observed the boarding of numerous deportation flights, and sat in vans, vehicle bases, and in the corporate headquarters observing people at work. At the beginning of the project, I observed and participated in a range of staff training, including in the use of force, and throughout I was provided a range of internal statistics and reports.[3]

To build rapport I revisited sites and spoke with individual officers multiple times. Nonetheless, the wide geographical distribution of the system made it difficult to meet everyone, or to garner their trust equally. Matters were further complicated by the pandemic, when my fieldwork was forced to move online. Although I lost touch during those periods with front line operational staff, attending those meetings deepened my relationship with members of the senior management team and allowed me to observe their daily negotiations with their Home Office counterparts. Both offered an organizational perspective I would not otherwise have had, which helped clarify my understanding of the system.

While I transcribed all interviews verbatim, I took detailed notes during the ethnographic conversations in field diaries that I carried with me, in which I also jotted down general observations and personal reflections. Where possible, I took external photographs of the sites. At the end of each day, I would record additional thoughts and recollections. Those audio files were also transcribed verbatim. The written material was loosely coded into themes that emerged while I was in the field. This was an iterative process and has generated publications on distinct topics (see for example, Bosworth, 2023; 2025; Bosworth and Singler, 2022; Bosworth

[3] The project was granted ethical approval by the University of Oxford's Social Science Division via the CUREC process (Ref No: R63710/RE001). The project followed the usual processes for obtaining informed consent from participants.

and Haas, 2025). This article uses unpublished statistics provided by the company along with more recently released data from the Home Office, alongside previously unused interviews and fieldnotes about processes and practices of use of force.

As scholars of bureaucracy point out, the sorts of administrative processes I describe below and the paperwork they generate have important epistemological and ontological effects. They are the means by which people make sense of their role and others around them (Drybread, 2016; Borelli and Lindberg, 2019). They facilitate control (Lipsky, 2010; Herzfeld, 1992) and may explain, justify, or deny violence (Arendt, 1963; Gupta, 2012; Redman and Fletcher, 2022), by breaking down tasks into banal and composite elements (Bauman, 1989). In the interdisciplinary field of logistics, by contrast academics emphasise how technical processes like these reflect and play a key role in the shifting relationship between labour and capital, facilitating movement and profit (Neilson, 2012; Cowen, 2014; LeCavalier, 2016). In my analysis I draw on both approaches to make sense of the processes as well as the data individuals and the company produced to better understand the nature of violence within this system where, officially, force is rarely used.

Immigration detainee escorting and use of force in the UK

The immigration detainee escorting system is made up of two parts: 'in-country' (ICE) and 'overseas' (OSE). While the former includes over 30 sites of short-term detention, mainly located at ports and airports, along with a fleet of secure vehicles to move people around the UK, the latter facilitates the administrative removal or deportation of foreign citizens who have been determined to have no right to remain in the UK. Although managed under the same contract, these two sides of the business hire separately, and pay their staff different salaries. During the research period, those who worked in ICE earned little more than the equivalent of the national minimum wage, with a salary of around £25,000, in contrast to their colleagues of equivalent rank in Overseas who were paid closer to £30,000. Whereas those employed in-country tend to work 12-hour shifts that may include nights, overseas escorts work to an 'availability pattern', required to do as little or as much work as required within a ten-day period, followed by some days off. Prior to the pandemic, OSE escorts were able to enhance their salary by working additional hours, however, fiscal 'reforms' brought in by Mitie removed that economic incentive.

Employees of all levels tended to claim that the two parts of the business were distinct and attracted different kinds of workers. In practice, however, I found that members of both groups held many views and characteristics in common. Most of these private sector workers were white men, aged below 50, with limited formal education and varied prior forms of employment, often in other kinds of noncustodial transportation from ambulances to lorries. On the survey I administered as well as in general conversation, most expressed support for restrictions on

immigration, including automatic detention of people seeking asylum. They were particularly concerned about individuals with a criminal record. This was not a contented workforce. Staff were commonly frustrated by their senior colleagues and concerned about their pay and working conditions. In the survey they reported a high rate of suicidality (Bosworth and Haas, 2023; 2025). Other similarities sprang from overlaps among the personnel who regularly moved within the business, generally from overseas to in-country, when they tired of the physical side-effects of flying, its family-unfriendly hours and uncertain workload. Occasionally, during the research project, agents from the short-term detention facilities assisted in deportations due to insufficient availability of overseas officers. When deportation rates were low, overseas staff drove custodial vans around the UK.

Overall, the officers I observed interacted rarely with the people in their custody and had little cause or opportunity to do so. Unlike immigration removal centres, very few of the short-term holding facilities (STHFs) provided activities other than a wall-mounted television or a handful of religious books. Matters in the vans and planes are even more constrained. Instead, wherever they were based, the Detention Custody Officers or DCOs as they are called, spent most of their time on banal and repetitive administrative tasks, entering data online, on paper, or on both. In the vans, for example, one employee records the departure and arrival times into a ‘personal digital assistant’ (PDA), and onto the physical ‘Person Escorting Report’, known as the PER. If their passenger is at risk of suicide or self-harm, this staff member must regularly update an additional form – the Assessment Care in Detention and Teamwork (ACDT). At the end of the journey, the driver completes a checklist on the state of the vehicle, leaving it at the Vehicle base ready for the next team. In the short-term holding facilities (STHFs), reception staff take possession of some of this paperwork, before commencing their own local induction process, organised around another set of forms, certain details from which are entered into the online Mitie Escorting Services Data System (MEDS) as well. There, throughout the day, the manager monitors and notes down the temperature of the fridge; the number and use-by date of snacks, sandwiches and juice boxes; the sum of apples and bananas.

Finally, deportations also generate and are structured by documents and choreographed tasks. Before they set off, the team must have all their own visas and passports checked while they are given a formal verbal and written risk assessment about the person they are collecting. At the point of collection, the designated ‘team leader’ switches on a body-worn camera to record the initial meeting with the person being deported. The person being expelled is searched and the content and weight of their luggage checked to ensure there will be no unexpected problems at the airport. The team may include a paramedic, subcontracted from a different company, who can administer medication during the flight and fill in detail to the person’s medical records. The PER reappears, (and if

necessary, the ACDT), for updating on the way to the airport and on the plane.

Other than the PER and the ACDT, which are statutory documents ‘belonging’ to the Home Office, many of these bureaucratic processes have been devised by Mitie to manage the contract and monitor their staff behaviour. In an outsourced system like this, such paperwork has a financial value, either as a means of avoiding a fine – by proving contractually agreed processes were followed -- or to keep costs down through minimising waste. The use of force is similarly bureaucratised and regulated. While its statutory basis rests in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act (section 146), passed by the then Labour government as part of a series of reforms which expanded immigration detention and deportation, its administration and instruction is closely managed, monitored, and reported by the company.

For most of the research project, DCOs followed practices set out in the *Home Office Manual for Escorting Safely,* commonly referred to by its acronym HOMES (NOMS, 2014). The techniques were taught by prison officers from the National Tactical Response Group (NTRG) as part of the initial training course all new staff complete. Under the terms of the Act, all custody officers must attend a refresher course every twelve months to retain their accreditation, and thus their job. This is the only part of their training that is regularly updated (Home Office, 2026a).

In 2022 the company changed their policy. In-country escorts were now to be taught ‘control and restraint’ (C&R) through the programme used in prisons and IRCs. Officers employed to deport people continued with HOMES. This bifurcation, designed to save money by reducing the costs associated with the external training provided by HMPPS, created a host of practical difficulties. Because the schemes use different physical ‘holds’, people cannot be cross posted with colleagues who have not completed the same training. On operations with shared staff, Mitie was forced to distinguish visually between those trained in C&R and others in HOMES, by allocating them different coloured lanyards. Finally, anyone with contact with children should be trained in a third technique: MMPR (Minimising and Managing Physical Restraint), which was designed by the prison service for use in young offender institutions. Staff should be ‘refreshed’ in the details of that course every nine months. However, by May 2023 when I last asked, I was told that no training in it at all had yet been provided.

One of the most unexpected documents the company gave me was their use of force records from July 2018 to February 2023. This data, which was drawn from formal “incident reports”, reflected official categories of physical intervention as set out in the HOMES manual which range from lightly grasping a person’s elbow while walking alongside them, known as the ‘guiding hold’, to wrestling someone to the ground and placing them in a fabric ‘waist restraint belt’. Over nearly 5 years, which included the

COVID-19 pandemic when the rates of detention and deportation significantly dropped, Mitie chronicled just over 1000 instances of this form of officially sanctioned and defined physical coercion. While, of course, we cannot know how many violent interactions were not noted down, to put those that were in context, over the same period Mitie recorded more than 150,000 ‘completed moves’ in-country and around 7,500 ‘completed moves’ overseas. They also documented more than 345,000 instances of detention in ports, airports, ‘residential short-term holding facilities,’ and in the tents at Manston.[4] During the corresponding period, just over 111,000 people entered long-term detention in the UK; all of whom would have been transported there in a Mitie van by a member of ICE (Migration Observatory, 2024).[5]

Since the research project ended, following a concerted effort by Patrice Petit, who files regular ‘freedom of information’ (FOI) requests,[6] the government has been forced to publish more detail about use of force during charter flights (Walters and Van Isacker, 2025). While those documents suggest the numbers deported have returned to pre-pandemic levels, force continues to be used against a small proportion. In the third quarter of 2024, for example, Mitie escorted 851 men, women and children out of the country, using force on 27 of them, representing just over 3% of the people on the planes.[7]

Across all the records, most instances of use of force occur on the plane during the boarding process. Two of the main London immigration removal centres-- Colnbrook and Brook House – form the next most common set of locations, reflecting their role as key points of collection for flights. Far less frequently, staff restrain people in vehicles, and even less often in short term holding facilities. Wherever they occurred, most instances of force were recorded in Mitie’s files as a response to ‘disruption or violence’, although around a small number were identified as part of an attempt to ‘prevent self-harm’. Before the pandemic, citizens from Iran and Iraq were the most frequently identified nationalities whom staff restrained. In 2022 and 2023 they were replaced by Albanians. Men accounted for over 95% of cases.

The company documents other aspects too. In cases involving mechanical fetters, for example, officers were most likely to use the ‘waist restraint belt’, although they occasionally deployed ‘rigid bar handcuffs’ as well. Less commonly they attached cloth leg restraints. The periods of time for which people were placed in these bonds varied. Some remained in the belt for more than 8 hours, although most were released in less than half

[4] That figure does not refer to 345,000 different individuals but rather to 345,000 records of detention since people may be detained in more than one site, particularly given the long period of time covered by the dataset.
[5] Again, that number does not refer to individuals, because people cycle in and out of long-term detention as well.
[6] See: https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/patrice_petit
[7] See: https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/deportation_charter_flights_q4_2_4/response/2905550/attach/html/3/00004%20Petit.pdf.html

that time. Handcuffs tended to be applied briefly, reflecting their use in inflicting ‘pain compliance’ – by twisting people’s wrists behind their backs -- rather than as a means of restricting their mobility (Walters, 2017). Although it was uncommon, use of force sometimes resulted in injury, with around one in 10 cases causing injury to the detained person, and about 4% wounding staff. Among these cases, a very small number were hurt so significantly that they were transferred to hospital.

It is important to acknowledge, as the Independent Monitoring Board pointed out in their thematic review of these practices in immigration detention, that each instance in these records would have been painful, frightening and undignified for the individuals concerned (IMB, 2025). Yet, it is also true that most people are detained, transported and removed without being subjected to such treatment. And indeed, most of the escorts I interviewed or who filled out the survey said they had never used force (Bosworth and Haas, 2025). However, they frequently anticipated it. “This will be a lively one”, they would always warn me as we set off to a deportation. On the bus to the collection point they would regale me with stories of previous physical altercations, often on charter flights, some of which had ended in injury. In these accounts, they deployed a shared vocabulary describing “rolling around on the floor having proper fisticuffs”, “wrapping people up”; and in an oddly religious turn of phrase “laying” on or “placing” of “hands”; sometimes shortened to “going hands on”.

The theatrical phrasing of these accounts which were demeaning and often racially charged, as officers frequently referred to events that had occurred on flights to Jamaica or Nigeria or to individuals from Iran or Iraq, no doubt played an important role in transforming what was a physically arduous job in which they had to stay awake for long periods of time managing vulnerable and upset people in constrained circumstances into something more heroic and exciting. Yet, such an approach and interpretation, with its emphasis on affect obscures the relationship between staff talk and the administrative processes they were taught and had to apply. It thus risks detaching violence from the system in which it circulates and the structures that generate and justify it. For while the stories staff told were likely exaggerated, their sense of threat was constantly reinforced through multiple, mundane administrative processes and routines. It is to such matters that I now turn.

Violence as process and paperwork

In September 2019, three months into the research project, I attended a week of HOMES training at the Prison Service NTRG headquarters located in Kidlington, just outside Oxford. The prison officers who delivered the course were members of the Prison service ‘Tornado Team’ designed to quell prison riots. They also train their prison colleagues in C&R.

The HOMES course began with half a day of classroom instruction in key pieces of legislation, including the Human Rights Act 1998, along with

sessions on ‘de-escalation’ techniques, implicit bias, and how to fill out the ‘incident report’. From the start, students were told that the application of the techniques they were to learn must always be “reasonable”, “proportionate” and “necessary”.[8] Yet, how to judge such matters remained opaque. “There is no single criterion against which the lawfulness of a particular use of force can be measured,” an instructor admitted (Fieldnotes, September 2019). There were other challenges, too, the training made clear, noting that specific populations were particularly vulnerable: “The elderly bruise easily… Never hold a detainee around the neck…Never restrain anyone while they are having an epileptic fit.” (Fieldnotes, September 2019)

The members of the training course I observed were all men, ranging in age from their early 20s to their 60s. Most, like the workforce they were joining, were white, and had left school as early as they could. All but one was heading to a post in overseas escorting. Their previous jobs ranged from hospitality to other forms of security work. Some had recently been made redundant. Others were looking for more exciting opportunities. Two of the students, one of whom was employed by ICE in an airport holding unit in the north of the country, and the other who had worked as an overseas escort for many years, were there to complete their annual refresher training. Both had been working (unlawfully) without it for some time, due to delays in obtaining a place on the course. While their lack of up-to-date qualifications should have rendered them unfit to work in a direct role with detainee contact, they claimed such delays were common due to the costs of the training programme. I had no way of verifying their accounts.

The first day of instruction occurred in a classroom within a wingless, airplane fuselage parked at the NTRG site. The room had been set up with neat rows of desks and a monitor to screen PowerPoint slides as well as a set of short videos by the healthcare experts who had designed the restraint technique. The next three days moved downstairs to rooms in a nearby shed that were built to the measurements of the custodial vans, and to a space known as the ‘dojo’ where the physical manoeuvres for applying force were taught. The final day involved an examination in which students carried peers up the metal back stairway of the plane into the rear area which retained the original airplane seats and layout. While much of the training focused on physical techniques, the trainers constantly reminded the new recruits about the importance of paperwork.

Instructors began slowly with the ‘the guiding hold’, and ‘the figure of four’, before turning to the application of handcuffs, the waist restraint belt, and leg restraints. The waist restraint belt, they claimed was collaboratively designed by the Home Office and the Prison Service. “It’s a great piece of kit… There is nothing like this anywhere else in the world” they said, even though a quick search online later that evening revealed it

[8] For a more recent definition of these criteria as they are applied in sites of immigration detention see Home Office, 2026b.

closely resembles the ‘mechanical restraints’ used by public health workers in mental health settings, under terms dictated by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2015). What they omitted in their story was the origin of the device. For according to the Orwellian named ‘independent advisory panel on non-compliance management’, the waist restraint belt was brought in as part of a “bespoke approach to safe escorting” triggered by the “tragic death under restraint of an Angolan national, Mr Jimmy Mubenga” on board a British Airways flight in October 2010 (Shaw 2014: 3). Escorts, who then were employed by the global security firm G4S, had suffocated Mr Mubenga by placing him in handcuffs behind his back and pushing his head down (Monaghan, 2013). The fabric belt ensures that people’s hands are only ever bound to the front of their body. Yet, it remains a dangerous tool which, the students were advised, should neither be used on pregnant women, nor applied to a person who is prone on the ground (Fieldnotes, September 2019; see also NOMS, 2014: 124 – 139; 163 - 170).

New recruits learn physical holds and how to apply mechanical restraints through role play. Initially they practise on a peer who is told not to struggle, and then, once they have sufficiently mastered the order of movements, they do it to someone who tries to ‘resist’. When attaching the waist restraint belt to a ‘compliant detainee’, they are instructed to ask the person to hold their hands together as if in supplication or prayer with their fingers overlapped. One officer, standing on either side of the ‘detainee’, places their hand over the intertwined fingers and holds the person’s elbow. A third officer then places the belt around the person’s waist, before, from the back attaching the Velcro strap around their wrist, one at a time. At this point, my fieldnotes record, the instructor called out enthusiastically:

> “what do we say? ‘Cuff, cuff, pull! Remember: attach each wrist band first and *then* pull in the strip. Getting the waist band on is the hardest part of the job. We can always force the cuffs on him later.”

Pain, that corollary of violence, he warned them was a liability; not only was its impact on compliance limited, but it could lead to legal challenges. This tension was particularly important when using handcuffs, he said.

> “Don’t forget only apply pain briefly. Always move the cuff to the ninety-degree position as soon as you can. Because it makes them numb. And then they will realise that they can’t feel the pain anymore, so it won’t work to control them. Also, pay attention to how it looks for the camera. Because if they get injured and they say you applied too much pain, they will look to see where the cuff was.”

Just as applying pain was risky, so too was determining when or indeed whether to attach restraints. A few days into the course, one of the

instructors asked the group, “under what circumstances would you use the waist restraint belt?” After some puzzled silence, one young man took a cautious approach: “If it said to do so in the risk assessment?” he proposed. “Yes, any other time?”, the prison officer responded a little impatiently. When nobody replied, he went on -- “What about if your ‘Spidey sense’ tells you something?” At that point, one of the two staff members whose annual refresher had been late butted in assertively, sick of his meek new colleagues. “Well, any time we think it’s necessary,” he said. “If he becomes difficult, or aggressive, we can.” The trainer was caught. “Yes, that’s right,” he agreed. “But you have to justify it. It’s up to you, but don’t forget, it has to be proportionate, necessary and justified.” The escort was unpersuaded. “If he has said he doesn’t want to go then I know he will kick off,” he stated. “Well, you have to have a reason,” the trainer reminded him, before returning to his superhero metaphor -- “So if your ‘Spidey sense’ tells you, then yes.” Intuition was not enough, however. “Be sure to write it all down,” he urged them.

In other words, it was not just the risk of asphyxiation the training sought to minimise, but also the possibility of a legal challenge. “Writing it all down”, as the trainer put it, involved jotting down notes as soon as any danger or disorder had passed, and, if possible, recording their role on a stick figure diagram. Were they ‘head control’ or did they have responsibility for one of the arms? What caused the violence and where did it happen? Who else was in the team and what was their role? These notes were designed to help them complete the formal “use of force incident report”, each of which would be analysed within the company and used to produce regular trend reports for the Home Office Use of Force Monitor. That civil servant, who attended some deportations in person, could also consult the original document.

The layout and detail of the use of force incident report is instructive.[9] On the first page the officer records their name and that of the detained person whom they restrained, along with the detainee’s ethnicity and nationality (but not their own). Next, they must select from a small number of events which “led up to the incident” and the “circumstance why force was used”, before recording the “location of the incident.” Over the page they document who else was present and everyone’s role in what happened. There they must also describe their actions from a list of “approved techniques” corresponding to three types: “Restraint Techniques”; “Pain Compliance Techniques”; and “Defensive Options”. When mechanical restraints like the belt are deployed more details are required about who applied and checked them, and the time they were put on and taken off. The officer must then declare (yes or no) whether they tried to “decelerate the situation” through “verbal reasoning,” and whether the person in their custody sustained any physical injuries. The

[9] While my description draws on my fieldnotes from 2022, in 2025 the Home Office published text from the current form online (Home Office, 2025). The Brook House Inquiry website also includes examples used in immigration removal centres (https://brookhouseinquiry.org).

location of any injury has to be noted down on a diagram of a human figure that is helpfully supplied.

Once officers have provided this detail and context, they are then given four pages on which to write a structured narrative about what happened. The first paragraph requires them to stipulate how long they have been employed by Mitie and when their training in HOMES was last updated. The final pages of the document are set aside for interview review first by their “Line manager” and then by another, unstipulated, “Manager.” The former is asked for “details of any CCTV footage” they may have been able to access, while both must describe more general “Details of evidence reviewed”. Both are also required to conclude (Yes or No) whether the “action of this officer” was “reasonable”, “proportionate” or “necessary,” and whether any “further action required”. The Manager may recommend the staff member for “Commendation” or “Further investigation.”

Predictably, the categories on the incident report foreclose, deny, and obscure the possibility that staff might use alternative, unapproved techniques or that there might be other, understandable causes for people to resist their detention or deportation like separation from their children or the lives they had hoped to lead. Common and widespread concerns about missing items of luggage and possessions left behind in police stations or lost during arrest which explain why some people are reluctant to board a plane or a van are also unacknowledged. At Harmondsworth, I once observed a man refusing to go because his sim card with all the photographs of his children had been taken from his phone and not returned. Unable to locate the artefact, and pressed for time, the staff placed him in restraints to get him on board the coach to the airport.

The form also notably leaves out aggressive forms of speech like swearing or yelling, while ignoring the effects of banter, sarcasm, or racism. Non-standard physical violence – “kick”, “punch”, “push”, “knee strike” are admitted, but they are always considered to be “defensive options”, caused by the detained person, rather than purposely enacted by the officer. Injuries, whether of staff or of the people moved and detained are simply physical, never moral. Finally, when staff do not use restraints, even though their actions are always coercive and may well feel threatening to those subject to them, no record is made. What is not recorded, which always includes its effect on those subject to it, disappears, generating forms of knowledge that are always partial and partisan (Bowker and Star, 1999; Damsa and Ostrand, 2025).

The document’s euphemistic terminology, in which physical coercion is labelled an “incident”, together with its format that is divided into composite, predetermined elements, deftly and in familiar ways, neutralises and denies the moral and ethical sting of actions inherent in enforcing the border (Cohen, 2001; Bauman, 1989). However, its effects

do not stop there. For while the paperwork asks for the names of everyone involved, each individual officer was responsible for completing their own report. Like neoliberal workers everywhere, they were also subject to individual penalties, which, they were warned in HOMES training, could include criminal prosecution if they failed to prove they had followed the rules, or even when they had, if the person in their custody was seriously injured or died. The “incident report” could appear as evidence in court, either for or against them. It could also be used by their line managers to assess their performance.

In fact, like all the other paperwork staff completed in the short-term holding facilities or in transit, this document was more commonly destined for ‘MEDS’, the Mitie Escorting Database System, where it was checked, summarised and entered by administrators who never encountered their operational colleagues or on those whom they detained or deported. Part of the ‘datafication of migration management and border control’, (Argyiou and Leese, 2025: 1617) this proprietary system which was developed for the purpose of managing and profiting from this contract, translated the details of coercive human interactions into measurable units. In it, violence was converted into fifty columns on an Excel file. Like all logistics data, that detail was used to identify economic “efficiencies”, risks, and profit. It formed the basis of daily internal reports for Mitie and external reports for their public sector ‘customer’, the Home Office. It provided proof of whether targets had been met, and when they were not, evidence of what went wrong.

In contrast to the focus of much of the existing scholarship on border violence, which has tended to emphasise its moral and emotional effects, either on those administering or others subject to it, the financial value of these coercive processes and the data they produced was unaffected by such matters. The form had no space for feelings. Perhaps more surprisingly, the paperwork was also detached from the practical consequences of physical coercion. Notwithstanding efforts to predict or pre-empt unrest, the effectiveness of restraints on moving people around the country or offshore was impossible to measure beyond each individual case. More importantly nobody tried, and there was no operational reason to do so. For Mitie is paid no matter whether or not detention, deportation, or internal transportation succeeds, so long as officers observe and above all record the process and procedures they follow. In this logistical system, it is the documentation of violence, rather than the physical manoeuvres themselves, that is linked to profit. It is the record rather than force itself that counts, at least for Mitie and the Home Office.

Conclusion: Logistical violence

As states around the world increasingly harden their immigration and asylum controls, evidence about border violence continues to mount. In this context, it is vitally important to acknowledge and address the physical and degrading treatment that occurs. In systems like the UK,

however, where official rates of violence remain low, we should not be complacent. For border control remains coercive, often undignified, and dangerous. It is, as criminologists have long observed about punishment thus always a cause for regret and one that demands close scrutiny and critique. In so doing, we need to be attentive to all its forms and consequences.

We know from other contexts that banal bureaucratic processes like those I have documented here can dehumanise and thereby prefigure and permit brutality. However, the kind of violence I observed rarely took a physical form. So, too, while it shaped staff views of their role and those in their custody, its effects were far wider and deeper. For in this outsourced system, like employees in other businesses designed to move objects, the DCOs and their administrative bosses sought above all to minimise blockages, reduce risk, and maximise profit. The anticipation of disorder, in other words, was primarily a logistical challenge, managed and made concrete in the "risk assessment" paperwork produced by the Home Office that was distributed before each time a person was collected, to the contract and the various shorter form agreements and targets in 'service level agreements' and 'key performance indicators.'

These anticipatory bureaucratic processes had important financial effects as they justified staff ratios and recruitment, shaped the choice of a scheduled flight or a charter, and determined who went, where, and when. They also shielded the company from blame by firmly attaching the danger and the use of force first to the detained person whose actions required it, and then to the officers who were taught how to mete it out. Diffused into technical training and regular reporting logistical violence hides the coercive nature of the business from view while allowing the company to profit from it. In this contract worth over half a billion pounds, the threat of force is not just an everyday part of border control, it is the business model.

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I have no competing interests to declare.

DATA
Restrictions apply to some of the data that support the findings of this study, the rest is available from the corresponding author, MB, upon reasonable request.

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