

Study shows governments escape blame by contracting services such as prisoner transport

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Governments and private contractors work together on countless

functions, but when something goes wrong, who is to blame?

Zach Mohr, associate professor of public affairs & administration at the University of Kansas, is involved in a series of studies to examine how people determine blame and hold those in power accountable.

While research has shown deaths in prisons have increased in recent years, there is little public data available about how those deaths occur in specific contexts. There are a few high-profile cases of deaths happening during transport like that of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, but the majority do not make national headlines.

To better understand how people view such service failures, Mohr led one study that examined [prisoner](#) transport—a common practice at local, state and national levels, although it is not clear just how often it is contracted. He and colleagues surveyed more than 1,000 respondents to understand whether contracting services for prisoner transport allows governments to escape blame if someone dies during the operation.

Researchers found that blame does shift, depending not only on who provided the service, but also whether the victim was a fellow prisoner or civilian.

The study found that people blame [government](#) less when a service is contracted, reinforcing the idea that governments can escape blame for failures by contracting services to private providers.

"Sometimes when there is government and contracted services it is hard to hold those folks accountable, or even know who to blame when something goes wrong," Mohr said.

The study also found people blame government more when the victim was another prisoner.

"There are a lot of people that are harmed in prisons. The common narrative is that people might not care about prisoners," Mohr said. "But this suggests that, if given all the information, they do care, and we hope that would help lead to accountability and realizing that people care more than we might think."

Published in the journal *Public Management Review*, the study was written with Jared McDonald of the University of Mary Washington and Jaclyn Piatak and Suzanne Leland of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

The experiment asked [respondents](#) to read a vignette about a prisoner transport that resulted in a [death](#). In some cases, the department of corrections was conducting the service. In others, a private contractor conducted the service. In some scenarios, a prisoner killed a fellow inmate, while in others the victim was a civilian. Respondents were then asked who they felt was to blame for the failure and if the characteristics of the victim made a difference.

"It's conclusive from our findings that contractors significantly reduce blame for governments in these types of failures," Mohr said. "Which is a good reason for contracting services. But I should point out businesses do this, too—contracting certain services to avoid blame."

By examining whether the characteristics of a victim influenced blame, the researchers were able to test whether the fundamental principle of equal protection under the law is possible.

Results showed people blame government more when the victim was another prisoner than when it was a bystander, contradicting social identity theory. That suggests people would not blame government more if the victim was of a lower social status, such as a prison inmate, compared to a citizen.

Mohr said that shows when a death occurs in a situation where the government should have more control, blame is higher, Mohr said.

An experimental look at how people assign blame when failures occur can help shine a light on [public attitudes](#) toward prison services and how prisoners are often treated like commodities, Mohr said.

Better understanding of how people assign blame in such cases could ultimately lead to better policies for accountability and ensuring people are properly held to account when failures lead to deaths of people in custody, he said.

More information: Zachary Mohr et al, Is government escaping blame? the effect of contracting and victim attributes in a prisoner transportation experiment, *Public Management Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2023.2200436](#)

Provided by University of Kansas

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