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Drones in the Wrong Hands: How Criminals Use UAVs to Threaten Prisons and Jails

January 28, 2025 by Miriam McNabb — 1 Comment

Bad actors use drones to threaten jails, prisons

By DRONELIFE Features Editor Jim Magill

This is the second in a series of articles, examining the problems posed to critical infrastructure sites and other significant potential targets of drone incursions by hostile actors. Part one described current federal laws pertaining to the use of counter-drone technology.

This article will explore the problems that drones flown for nefarious purposes can present to jails and prisons.

Jails and prisons in the United States and across the world are facing a growing problem of criminals delivering contraband via drone to inmates. And many officials fear that the weaponization of drones, seen

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methamphetamines, cell phones and tobacco, into the McConnell state prison unit in Bee County, Texas. In the UK, a recent report found there were 1,296 drone incidents at prisons in England and Wales in the 10 months ending in October 2024, a 10-fold increase since 2020, according to the Guardian.

“From a criminal perspective drones are often used for smuggling contraband into security areas, such as prisons,” Scott Parker, chief of unmanned aircraft security at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, said in an interview.

Emery Nelson, a spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP), said the problem of contraband delivery by drone at the nation’s prisons has increased in recent years. “We have had more confirmed sightings and contraband introductions via drones than ever before, including an increase in the number of locations where these events occur,” he said in an email statement.

The BOP, which houses about 143,000 federal inmates, began to formally track drone incidents at its federal facilities in 2018, and the data shows the number of reported incidents more than doubled in the first year of tracking, from 23 in 2018 to 57 in 2019. More recent data was not available, Nelson said.

He said the BOP employs a multi-faceted approach to prevent contraband from entering its facilities, including that delivered by drones. We proactively research, rigorously evaluate and deploy emerging and proven security technologies and practices to detect,

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109 of our 122 institutions.” Rules for the deployment of counter-drone mitigation measures that can be legally undertaken at federal prisons are spelled out in a federal statute, 6 USC 124n: Protection of Certain Facilities and Assets from Unmanned Aircraft.

The law calls for the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Attorney General, in coordination with the secretary of Transportation, to develop for their respective departments certain actions to protect prison facilities from malicious drone activity. These actions can include: detecting, identifying, monitoring and tracking an unmanned aircraft; warning the operator of the UAV; disrupting control of the drone by interfering with its radio signals; seizing control of the UAV; seizing or otherwise confiscating the drone itself; and using “reasonable force, if necessary, to disable, damage, or destroy the unmanned aircraft system or unmanned aircraft.”

Drone incursions present potential threats to local jails

The problem exists across the landscape of correctional facilities, from federal and state prisons to local jails. Shawn Laughlin, president of the American Jail Association, said the 3,000 members of his association worry that Congress is not doing enough to pass laws to counteract the drone delivery of contraband to the nation’s vast network of jails and holding facilities.

“About 8 million people get processed to a local jail every year,” he said in an interview. “About 7.2 million of those people get released back into the community. So, it’s a huge churn, given that on any given day, about 750,000 individuals sit in local county and city correctional facilities, jails.”

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queries from its jail operator members as to what to do when confronted with a drone that's being operated suspiciously.

"The first thing we tell them is you can't shoot it down. That's obviously the very first question we get is what weaponry could be used to shoot it down," he said. "There's some cool stuff out there, like net guns, and in Europe, they have trained falcons and eagles to take them down or send a drone to take down a (suspicious) drone."

However, in the U.S., FAA and Federal Communications Commission rules limit the kind of counter-drone technologies that jails can deploy to those that identify and track drones within the facility's airspace, and even then, "there are only two or three available technologies that are on the market that they can deploy."

Laughlin, who in his day job is a police commander in Broomfield, Colorado, said another pending drone-related problem that the nation's correctional institutions are facing is the threat of UAVs carrying weapons, which could be used to threaten jail facilities and personnel.

"The weaponization of these drones and the ability for them to carry weapon payload just scares the crap out of us," he said. "We've seen, in Central America, assassination attempts with them and you've got the insanity of what's going on in Ukraine right now and on the Gaza Strip."

He said he worries that the same weaponization technology could soon be used in the United States and "corrections or law enforcement officers, who are basically defenseless sitting in an institution or out on perimeter guarding these institutions."

Although there are several bills pending before Congress to address the issue of potential threats posed by the malicious use of drones in

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thing being much of an issue as it relates to correctional institutions.”

He called on Congress to enact legislation to give correctional facilities such as local jails greater authority to deploy more robust counter-drone measures against UAV’s that pose potential threats.

“Even with a drone-detection system, I might know that a drone’s coming and I might know where it came from, if the technology’s good enough, but I don’t know what they dropped,” he said.

“So, no matter what, 100 percent of the time, I have to lock down my entire campus, stop all inmate programming, stop inmate movements, stop legal visits, stop church services. You need to stop everything to send staff out to find out if contraband ended up getting onto the property,” Laughlin said. “And that’s a point that is often overlooked by our legislators and regulators.”

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Jim Magill is a Houston-based writer with almost a quarter-century of

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