*Paper*

# Deaths of Despair in Irish Prisons and Beyond: A Necropolitical Analysis

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## Abstract

In the Republic of Ireland, the Prison Service is officially charged with ensuring the safety, security and dignity of the people who are imprisoned within its institutions and with creating an environment that facilitates rehabilitation. This article argues that this mission is substantively undermined by the necropolitical forces at work in and around Irish prisons. Written just as the Irish government plans to embark on the largest prison expansion project in the history of the state, our analysis is informed by an international literature that recognises the central role played by carceral institutions in both the expression and normalisation of state-sanctioned necropolitical violence. The article highlights the impoverished vision of "security" that is privileged within "build more prisons" discourses: the Irish government's promised expansion of prison spaces occurs at a time when the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) has been recorded as rowing back on existing commitments to climate change policy. We see these tendencies as related, with the latter underplaying the gravity of what this Special Issue's Call for Papers calls the "*environmental basis of survival*," while the former serves as the ideological red meat of populist diversion. Against such trends, and informed and inspired by ecological abolitionist politics, we argue for a multi-scalar conception of security that embraces and acknowledges the interdependence of environmental, economic and social justice. Empirically, we show how the prison institution operates at the sharp end of a biopolitical and necropolitical continuum, beginning with communities beset by problems associated with economic inequality, lack of housing, poverty, and material oppression, upon whom disposability is conferred. The Irish state's penal and social policies and rhetoric serve to maintain this necropolitical status quo by insisting that the carceral space of the prison is essential for "security"

and for some lives to flourish. At the same time, the state's structural violence generates conditions whereby the same constituencies of predominantly poor people circulate in and out of prison. Thus, we show how the Irish prison institution operates as a death-world, a reality that is persistently effaced or denied via official and academic claims that Ireland is moderate or pragmatic in its punitiveness.

**Keywords:** Prison, Ireland, necropolitics, abolitionist, ecological, security, violence.

# Mortes por desespero em prisões irlandesas e além: Uma análise necropolítica

## Resumo

Na República da Irlanda, o Serviço Prisional é oficialmente responsável por garantir a segurança e a dignidade das pessoas encarceradas em suas instituições e por criar um ambiente que facilite a reabilitação. Este artigo argumenta que essa missão é substancialmente prejudicada pelas forças necropolíticas atuantes dentro e ao redor das prisões irlandesas. Escrita justamente quando o governo irlandês planeja embarcar no maior projeto de expansão prisional da história do país, nossa análise se baseia em uma literatura internacional que reconhece o papel central desempenhado pelas instituições carcerárias tanto na expressão quanto na normalização da violência necropolítica sancionada pelo Estado. O artigo destaca a visão empobrecida de "segurança" que é privilegiada nos discursos sobre "construir mais prisões": a expansão prometida pelo governo irlandês ocorre em um momento em que o *Taoiseach* (Primeiro-Ministro) recuou em relação aos compromissos existentes com a política de mudanças climáticas. Consideramos essas tendências como relacionadas, com a última minimizando a gravidade do que a Chamada para Artigos desta Edição Especial denomina "base ambiental da sobrevivência", enquanto a primeira serve como combustível ideológico para o populismo. Contra essas tendências, e inspirados pela política abolicionista ecológica, defendemos uma concepção multiescalar de segurança que abrace e reconheça a interdependência da justiça ambiental, econômica e social. Empiricamente, demonstramos como a instituição prisional opera na ponta aguda de um continuum biopolítico e necropolítico, começando com comunidades assoladas por problemas associados à desigualdade econômica, falta de moradia, pobreza e opressão material, e às quais é conferida a condição de descartável. As políticas e a retórica penal e social do Estado irlandês servem para manter esse status quo necropolítico, insistindo que o espaço carcerário da prisão é essencial para a "segurança" e para que algumas vidas floresçam. Ao mesmo tempo, a violência estrutural do Estado gera condições em que os mesmos grupos de pessoas predominantemente pobres circulam dentro e fora da prisão. Assim, demonstramos como a instituição prisional irlandesa opera como um mundo de morte, uma realidade que é persistentemente apagada ou negada por meio de alegações oficiais e acadêmicas de que a Irlanda é moderada ou pragmática em sua punição.

**Palavras-chave:** Prisão, Irlanda, necropolítica, abolicionista, ecológico, segurança, violência.

# Muertes por desesperación en las cárceles irlandesas y más allá: Un análisis necropolítico


## Resumen

En la República de Irlanda, el Servicio Penitenciario se encarga oficialmente de garantizar la seguridad, la protección y la dignidad de las personas encarceladas en sus instituciones y de crear un entorno que facilite la rehabilitación. Este artículo argumenta que esta misión se ve sustancialmente socavada por las fuerzas necropolíticas que operan dentro y alrededor de las cárceles irlandesas. Escrito justo cuando el gobierno irlandés planea embarcarse en el mayor proyecto de expansión penitenciaria en la historia del estado, nuestro análisis se basa en una literatura internacional que reconoce el papel central que desempeñan las instituciones carcelarias tanto en la expresión como en la normalización de la violencia necropolítica sancionada por el Estado. El artículo destaca la visión empobrecida de la "seguridad" que se privilegia en los discursos de "construir más cárceles": la prometida expansión de los espacios penitenciarios por parte del gobierno irlandés ocurre en un momento en que el Taoiseach (Primer Ministro) ha sido registrado como retractándose de los compromisos existentes con la política de cambio climático. Consideramos que estas tendencias están relacionadas: la segunda minimiza la gravedad de lo que la convocatoria de artículos de este número especial denomina la «base ambiental de la supervivencia», mientras que la primera sirve como la carne roja ideológica de la distracción populista. Frente a estas tendencias, e informados e inspirados por la política abolicionista ecológica, abogamos por una concepción multiescalar de la seguridad que abarca y reconoce la interdependencia de la justicia ambiental, económica y social. Demostramos empíricamente cómo la institución penitenciaria opera en el extremo más agudo de un continuo biopolítico y necropolítico, comenzando por las comunidades acosadas por problemas asociados con la desigualdad económica, la falta de vivienda, la pobreza y la opresión material, y a quienes se les confiere la disposición. Las políticas y la retórica penal y social del estado irlandés sirven para mantener este statu quo necropolítico al insistir en que el espacio carcelario de la prisión es esencial para la «seguridad» y para que algunas vidas prosperen. Al mismo tiempo, la violencia estructural del Estado genera condiciones que permiten que los mismos grupos de personas, predominantemente pobres, entren y salgan de la prisión. Así, mostramos cómo la institución penitenciaria irlandesa funciona como un mundo de muerte, una realidad que se oculta o niega persistentemente mediante afirmaciones oficiales y académicas de que Irlanda es moderada o pragmática en su punibilidad.


**Palabras clave:** Prisión, Irlanda, necropolítica, abolicionista, ecologista, seguridad, violencia.



## Introduction

This paper seeks to advance an abolitionist ecological critique of the necropolitical tendencies of the Irish criminal justice system. Currently, Ireland appears to be beset by "penological amnesia" (Scott, 2024, p. 185) as it embarks on the largest prison expansion

project in the history of the state. And while invocations of 'evidence-based' decision-making have become the norm in Irish criminal justice policy rhetoric - if not in practice - the projected expansion overlooks consistent evidence that once prison spaces are built, they are inevitably filled. Thus, the problem of 'overcrowding', but what we call an 'imprisonment crisis', is exacerbated, not resolved.

The Irish Programme for Government 2025, sub-titled "Securing Ireland's Future", couches prison-expansion in humanitarian, biopolitical terms: "Providing adequate prison capacity is essential for ensuring public safety, facilitating rehabilitation, and addressing the needs of individuals within the justice system" (Government of Ireland, 2025, p. 119). Government thus commits to delivering up to 1,500 additional prison spaces, a 32% increase on the current bed capacity of 4,672. Accordingly, the Irish Prison Service capital budget reached €53 million from 2025 (Irish Prison Service, 2025a), an increase of €22.5 million from the 2024 allocation. To address what is being constituted as the problem of overcrowding, the total Irish Prison Service budget increased by €79m (18%) to €525m between 2024 and 2025 (Irish Prison Service, 2025a). Expansionist moves have strong populist appeal, but they are also rationalised by both conservative and (ostensibly) progressive NGOs and movements, that see the carceral work of the state as critical to social protection and well-being. As Puar (2007, p. XX) reminds us, promises of life, safety, protection and flourishing for some are bound up with the "folding out of life", safety and protection for others, showing how the governance of life and death are never far apart.



We argue that a necropolitical lens is normatively useful for spotlighting the unavoidably harmful consequences of prison expansion and how the disposability of *certain* lives (Butler, 2004) is accepted as a collateral consequence. We approach prison as both a site and an expression of institutionalised violence whereby, in the context of racialised, gendered and class-based inequalities, states use the threat and actuality of imprisonment to punish primarily poor populations (Davis and Shaylor, 2020; Gilmore, 2022; Kiely, *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, the issues circulating within and around carceral

and abolitionist politics that are explored in this paper can be seen as falling within the purview of a capacious and critically engaged environmental politics such as is the ambition of this journal. In this, we are inspired by Heynen and Ybarra's (2021, p. 30) elaboration of "abolition ecology", which "invites us to think about how to build freedom across relations of land and people". Carceral institutions are both symptomatic of and supportive of those very racializing and class-oppressive structural forces and institutions that confer disposability on certain humans, non-humans and environments. Therefore, abolitionist scholar/activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore, discussing opposition to prison expansion in California, asserts the need for comradeship between anti-carceral organising and campaigns for people "to have good health, and secure working conditions, and not be subject to toxicity" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 468). An abolitionist ecological imaginary can both sensitise us to the breadth of necropolitical institutions and forces that perpetuate unfreedom and harm for some *and* inspire us to pursue alternative modes of community building that reject arbitrary lines between justice and ecology (Gilmore, 2022; Brock; Stephens-Griffin, 2022). Indeed, the pursuit of such alliances becomes even more urgent when environmental protest itself is increasingly subject to criminalisation, state repression and imprisonment (Brock; Stephens-Griffin, 2022; Hamlin, 2023).



As we outline below, previous phases of prison expansion in Ireland have been interpreted as largely pragmatic moves to ease overcrowding, rather than as deliberate policy measures motivated by punitive ideologies. Although the current phase of prison expansion is criticised by advocacy bodies such as the Irish Penal Reform Trust, analyses that make connections between neo-liberal capitalism and prison as precarity management and places of violence and death, are largely absent from both Irish public and academic discourses (for exceptions see: JCFJ, 2024; McCann, 2020; Irish Penal Abolition Network, 2024; Wall, 2024). A key problem with interpreting Irish penal policy as 'pragmatic' is that it renders moves such as prison expansion as the inevitable, commonsensical even, response to the imprisonment crisis. While it would be one-

dimensional to argue that an increase in Ireland's prison spaces *alone* is indicative of 'necropolitics', this article discusses why a necropolitical analysis is both generative and necessary. Crucially, it enables us to link and make sense of the multiple, interrelated, cyclical and enduring harms caused by prisons. This is urgent, because Ireland's penal policy and practice – both historical and contemporary - are too often depicted as moderately punitive or even 'pastoral' relative to other countries, claims that do not withstand the scrutiny of a necropolitical analysis. While the latter lends itself most easily to analysing penality in contexts of authoritarian rule or excess, we explore what it offers an Irish context, where what happens backstage in prisons is masked by a frontstage, which claims to effect penal moderation, democratic government and European-state welfare stateism that buffers the worst excesses of market capitalism.

## Contesting the "Consensus": The limits of Irish Penal Pragmatism



Interpretations of Ireland's post-Independence penal history and its contemporary character have coalesced around a consensus that is derived from two interrelated claims. The first involves recognition of the historical decrease in numbers of people confined within Ireland's total institutions. Primarily overseen by the Catholic Church, and later the Irish state, well into the 1990s, such institutions were part of the colonial fabric and served as experimental ground for population control. Research into "coercive confinement" (O'Sullivan; O'Donnell, 2007, 2012) conclusively shows that huge numbers of those categorised as socially or morally deviant - unmarried mothers, 'unruly' children and young people, 'alcoholics' or those deemed 'mentally ill' etc. – were confined within a (formerly existing) carceral archipelago of total institutions that included Magdalene laundries, industrial and reformatory schools and psychiatric hospitals (Black; Ring, 2023; O'Sullivan; O'Donnell, 2007, 2012). From this perspective, punitiveness in Ireland evidently declined as Ireland shifted away from containing broad

swathes of alleged 'deviants' towards adopting "a distinctive path in criminal justice policy", aligning it more with "small jurisdictions in Europe—such as Slovenia, Scotland, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark" (Marder; Hamilton, 2022, p. 4). In June 2025, the rate of imprisonment in Ireland was 98 per 100,000 of the national population - including pre-trial detainees and remand prisoners – a rate categorised as "low" by the Council of Europe (2024).

The second part of this consensus takes the form of a 'Hibernian Exceptionalism' hypothesis, which characterises Irish penal policy as emerging 'late', as operating pragmatically, as relatively free of ideology and as devoid of commitments to clearly recognisable penal principles (Brangan 2021; Hamilton, 2016; Kilcommins *et al.*, 2004; Rogan, 2011). Underpinning this hypothesis, is the understanding that during the 20th Century, other countries' penal policy excesses did not take root in Ireland due to the state's culture of penal policy inertia and its dearth of data, inspiring principles or expertise (Brangan, 2022). Other features of a putative 'Hibernian exceptionalism' include relatively low prison incarceration rates up to the early 2000s; evidence of sentencing that was/is premised on rehabilitation and individuated justice; limited use of formal risk-assessments compared to other jurisdictions; and claims that, despite its flaws, the prison system maintains vestiges of humane treatment (Hamilton, 2023). Relatedly, Brangan suggests that Irish penal policy during the 1970s was characterised by a kind of "pastoral penality", focusing "…on the problems of the prison, rather than the problems of the prisoner, who is not viewed as inherently criminal and in need of treatment. The person imprisoned is largely felt to require support in coping with the degradations of imprisonment, its inevitable social harms and the severing of community ties and family bonds" (Brangan, 2022, p. 44). In contrast to this, however, Oisín Wall's (2024) accounts of the horrors and abuse, both physical and sexual, experienced by the prisoners he interviewed, point to the limitations of pastoral penality as an interpretative slant on Ireland's prison policy during the 1970s and 1980s.

Because Ireland tends to be represented as a penological outlier in the Anglophone world, contemporary moves such as small increases in investment in Restorative Justice tend to be regarded as indicative of its comparatively progressive approach to punishment (Marder; Hamilton, 2022). Such progress however, is belied by other evidence and trends. Imprisonment rates in Ireland have been steadily rising – from 25.2 per 100,000 population in 1970, to, 60.1 per 100,000 population in 1990, 95.8 per 100,000 population in 2011 to today's 98 per 100,000 population (The Law Society of Ireland, 2023). Countries with similar populations to Ireland – Finland, Norway, Denmark – and others including Bosnia & Herzegovina, Germany, the Netherlands, San Marino, Liechtenstein and Iceland all have lower imprisonment rates (Council of Europe, 2024). Additionally, use of short-term prison sentences - less than 12 months - which can be regarded as disruptive rather than "rehabilitative", has also been rising (Maguire; Carr, 2024). Numbers of people serving longer prison sentences have increased over the last decade: e.g. life-sentenced prisoners in the 1980s could expect to spend on average 7.5 years in prison before release on licence, but by 2024 this had risen on average to 24 years in prison before release (Cummins, 2024). Between 2022 and 2023, Ireland's recorded growth in imprisonment rates was the highest amongst Western European countries (Irish Legal, 2024) and the period 2014-2024 saw an 84% rise in women's imprisonment (Gallagher, 2024).



However, our critique of dominant conceptions of Irish (non-)punitiveness goes beyond the mere marshalling of alternative statistical indicators of incarceration rates and durations. It involves being attentive to who is othered, harmed and rendered disposable through the structures, ordering and everyday practices of imprisonment. In this, we are indebted to abolitionist frameworks and understandings of what prison does and to whom it is done (See also, Kiely; Meade; Swirak, 2024). As Michael Albert (2025, p. 158) explains, abolitionist research and practices call attention to "the structural and ideological coherence of military-police-prison-border apparatuses – which we can call racial capitalist security assemblages – as interlinked practices through which racial

capitalist order is produced and reproduced at multiple scales". For example, it has become commonplace in Ireland and other contexts for imprisoned persons to be profiled in terms of their 'risk factors' or their 'adverse childhood experiences' but such accountings typically evade analysis of the systemic and structural forces within which carceral architectures are imbricated and which they normalise. Writing from the USA, abolitionist scholar/activists Angela Y. Davis and Cassandra Shaylor (2020, p. 93) remind us that "Prisons are places within which violence occurs on a routine and constant basis; the functioning of the prison depends upon it" (see also Jackson, 2013; Kundnani, 2021; O'Donnell, 2022). They go on to detail what can be recognised as the necropolitical character of such violence: risks of physical assault from the hierarchies within individual institutions; violence against "the psyche as well as the body" (Davis; Shaylor, 2020, p. 94); that incarceration has become an alternative but key strategy for managing the mental distress of poorer peoples; the denial or neglect of prisoners' rights to medical attention, education, political voice etc.; and rules or prohibitions that subject prisoners to the arbitrary and sanctioned power – or potential domination - of officers, often with limited or no scope for redress (Davis; Shaylor, 2020).



Here we are interested in if/how Mbembe's lens, and associated responses, can help us to illuminate the violence and the conditions for life/death in and after prison in Ireland – and beyond. For our still unfolding project of research and analysis, the scholarship that is discussed in the following section has made us more attentive to if/how necropower is enacted via the hierarchical endowment of rights and protections; the differential allocations of injury, risk and responsibility; and the structural and institutional sanctioning of violence over/against life. Furthermore, it has made us increasingly wary of the impoverished vision of 'security' that is privileged within 'build more prisons' discourses, thus underlining the importance of an abolitionist ecological imaginary. The Irish government's promised expansion of "prison capacity" (Government of Ireland, 2025, p. 119) occurs at a time when the Taoiseach (Prime

Minister) has been recorded as rowing back on existing commitments to climate change policy:

> I don't think we can mitigate for climate change … This might be controversial, because I believe in addressing climate change. But if we get into a position where we're going to challenge every single thing, saying it's against the climate, we're going to divide society fairly fast and we'll then get a negative reaction against good, progressive policies that seek to address climate and very serious issues (Taoiseach Micheál Martin, in Friends of the Earth, 2025, np).

Essential questions of environmental justice and security are thus constituted as politically disruptive and as potentially eliciting populist backlash, at the very moment that the quick fix of detention is projected as commonsensical. We see these tendencies as related, with the former underplaying the gravity of what this Special Issue's Call for Papers calls the "*environmental basis of survival*", while the latter serves as the ideological red meat of populist diversion. In line with abolitionist thinkers and activists, we argue for a multi-scalar conception of security that embraces and acknowledges the interdependence of ecological, economic and social justice. As Arun Kundnani (2021, p. 5) explains:



> An abolitionist framework entails understanding that genuine security does not result from the elimination of threats but from the presence of collective well-being. It advocates building institutions that foster the social and ecological relationships needed to live dignified lives, rather than reactively identifying groups of people who are seen as threatening. It holds that true security rests not on dominance but on solidarity, at both the personal and the international levels. Only from an internationalist perspective can security problems like climate change and pandemic diseases be addressed (Kundnani, 2021, p. 5).

## The Necropolitics of Space, Place and Prisons

Mbembe (2019, p. 37) observes that necropolitics encompasses the "power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge – people for whom living means continually standing up to death". Through practices that include the re-configuration of space, rights and states of exception or by ensuring stratified exposure to protection and risk, *necropower* differentiates between those whose lives are perceived to count – the subjects of biopolitics - and those upon whom *disposability* is conferred. Mbembe's (2003) account positions necropolitics as an ongoing and historical phenomenon - given effect in the context of plantation slavery and colonial war-making, but which continues to be pervasive today. As Ariadna Estévez (2021) and Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2021) explain, his work, therefore, reflects a vital postcolonial critique of the conceptual and explanatory limitations of Foucault's biopolitics in the face of the scale, severity and the politics inherent to death-making in the Global South.



Mbembe's (2003; 2019) conceptualisation illuminates dynamics of disposability and death-dealing that characterise relationships between the Global North and the Global South, but also those that prevail within the context of the Global North itself. Here/there necropolitics can manifest as wilful neglect, through the deadly consequences of social state retrenchment (Gržinic; Tatlic, 2014) or what abolitionist scholar-activists Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore (Gilmore, 2022) call "organized abandonment". Estévez (2021, p. 17) notes that in putative "first world" contexts, configurations of necropower are typically advanced and expressed through legal, bureaucratic and technocratic instruments that grant them the sheen of legitimacy. People experience death in its most literal sense, but they are also condemned to *living deaths* through subjection to danger, threats to life or to diverse modalities of confinement, incarceration and prohibition on movement (Gržinic; Tatlic, 2014; Haritaworn; Kuntsman; Posocco, 2014; Jackson, 2013; Jha, 2023; Mbembe, 2003).

Within necropolitical arrangements, the very (biopolitical) conditions regarded as making life liveable or worth living for some – projections of community, democracy, safety, security, sameness – become the basis for the denial, exclusion, degradation and death of others. As Estévez (2021, p. 17) outlines "what distinguishes necropolitics from biopolitics is not the 'making die' part, but the structural and power analysis of the relationship between the colonial power and subaltern subjects and countries, the capitalistic activities profiting from the death of the poor and the disposable people". For example, Davies *et al.* (2017) diagnose "dialectical" convergences between the biopolitical and necropolitical aspects of migration policy: contrasting the appalling living conditions and enforced suffering of refugees in the informal migrant encampments in Calais, France, with the homes of "normative French and EU citizens" who reside in "neat houses with kept gardens, even on the camp's very periphery" (Davies *et al.*, 2017, p. 1268).

Mbembe's (2003; 2019) theorisations of "necropower" and "necropolitics" have been enormously generative for researchers across disciplinary and geographical fields, especially for writers who are concerned about the limits of and possibilities for environmental justice within the parameters of contemporary racial capitalism. DeBoom's (2021, p. 909) concept of *"climate necropolitics"* captures "multiscalar processes, practices, discourses, and logics" that facilitate and confer legitimacy on the "extractive violence" that is routinely perpetrated under the auspices of mitigating or reversing climate change. Relatedly Deberdt and Le Billon (2024, pp. 1265-1266) analyse evolving global class relations and formations, whereby, poorer, racialised or indigenous communities – "still carbonised" or "uncarbonized classes" - shoulder dangers and burdens associated with carbon reduction policies, to the benefit of a comparatively privileged "decarbonised class". Necropower also configures and reconfigures space, place and the ecology of community life. Rishi Jha's (2023) research confronts its spatialised arrangements and consequences in Mumbai's Mahul township where, in the wake of resettlement under Slum Rehabilitation Schemes, 35,000 people reside in



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acutely hazardous, polluted and cramped conditions. Challenging constructions of these schemes as benign or progressive, Jha (2023, p. 3) coins the term "necrosettlements" to capture how urban policymakers, along with state and market actors, facilitate capital accumulation by "creating life-threatening housing exclusively for the poor". Similarly, Arnisson Andre C. Ortega (2020) highlights the structural violence associated with the enforced relocation of informal settlers in Manila, people whose homes are destroyed to facilitate the city's re-brand and property boom. "Necroburbia" refers to the inadequate and badly serviced "off-city" sites to which they are consigned, engendering exhaustion, precarity, and, sometimes, resistance among residents (Ortega, 2020).

Circling back to our own interest in carceral politics and abolitionist ecology, international scholarship provides valuable insights into the potential fecundity of research into the necropolitical tendencies of the Irish prison system. Che Gossett (2014) deploys such a framework when confronting the structurally racist, transphobic and queerphobic character of the US prison industrial complex. Imprisonment "institutionalizes forms of restricted life" (Gossett, 2014, p. 33), the negative and negating consequences of which profoundly diminish life prospects beyond the prison walls. The necropolitical bargain becomes evident as communities that are deemed to matter are promised safety and security, while those coded as disposable must live/die in the long shadow of incarceration. Broadfield *et al.* (2021) reflect on the emancipatory potential of necropolitics as a framework for attending to the structural violence that is both reflected in and reproduced through Indigenous Australians' disproportionate presence in prison populations. This involves taking seriously the extant legacies of a settler-colonial imposed criminal justice system, which has oscillated between eliminationist, assimilationist and criminalisation-based strategies to control Indigenous Australians. But it also means interrogating the enablers, specific forms, consequences of and resistances to the state violence that is normalised through the operations of contemporary prisons and carceral spaces (Broadfield *et al.*, 2021).



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Drawing on publicly available testimonies, Samantha O'Donnell (2022) highlights parallels between the necropolitical violence experienced by Indigenous young people in Australia's Northern Territory youth detention centres and by refugees in offshore and onshore immigrant detention centres. The layers of violence described in the accounts analysed attest to the pervasiveness of "structural", "epistemic", "physical" and "disciplinary violence", the total effect of which is to constitute incarceration as a "living death" (O'Donnell, 2022, pp. 291-298). Writing from the USA and characterising prisons as sites of necropolitics, which foster civic, familial and social forms of death, Jessi Lee Jackson (2013) highlights how an unlikely coalition of advocacy groups cooperated to press for the enactment of the Prison Rape Elimination Act. Advocates and policy makers failed to fully acknowledge how prison systems and staff may contribute to, facilitate and enact sexual violence against inmates. Reforms relied upon the introduction of additional physical surveillance methods or intimate searches of prisoners, ostensibly ignoring why/how prisoners might experience such practices as forms of sexual violence (at the hands of staff). As Jackson (2013, p. 211) observes "the technologies endorsed for supporting and protecting prisoners are just as easily employed to injure them". Together these studies animate our own concerns that projections of the Irish prison system as broadly humane or calls for investments in reform rather than transformation by progressive advocacy groups, may legitimise the continuation of prison as the dominant mode for managing and imagining justice.



When invoking "necropolitics" there is a danger that it becomes unmoored from its original meanings or that it loses its distinctive value as a concept that is grounded in colonial histories. Peters *et al.* (2025, p. 2) caution against the tendency towards "necro-everything" and "everything-necro", which could have the effect of overstating *and* understating the role and presence of *death;* of ultimately emptying a necropolitical analysis of its politics. As they elaborate, the former refers to the proliferating and at times uncritical expansion of the necro-prefix while the latter refers to work which focuses solely on death to the detriment of significant injury and suffering. Taking on

board this warning, here our analytical focus is not solely on death, it also attends to human suffering that is closer to death than to life on the life death continuum in Irish prisons and beyond.

## Contemporary Necropolitical Forces Surrounding Irish Prisons

A necropolitical lens invites and demands recognition of the continuities and circularities of harm that affect Ireland's prison populations. Imprisoned persons disproportionately come from a small number of Ireland's poorest neighbourhoods, to which they are returned after release (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2007). In Cork, Ireland's second largest city, a recent analysis of 5,000 court reports published in the print media over a five-year period (2020-2024), where 1,415 cases resulted in custodial orders, found that homeless persons received 25% of the prison sentences, with addiction and substance abuse featuring in 75% of the cases analysed. In the same study, seven areas classed as "disadvantaged" or "very disadvantaged" in the 2022 Pobal Deprivation Index, featured in the top ten areas of the city for prison terms imposed (English; Duggan, 2025). O'Brien (2018) records that over half of imprisoned persons in Ireland dropped out of the education system before taking the "junior certificate" state exams, i.e., before the age of fourteen. A recent report on persons on probation, showed median weekly earnings up to 30% less than those of the general population, while 64% of individuals with probation orders surveyed during the study period were not active in the labour market (CSO, 2022). Reflecting perhaps what Linsey McGoey (2012, p. 12) denotes as the "social usefulness of ignorance" for systemic and institutional self-preservation, neither the Annual Reports of the Irish Prison Service nor any other regularly published sources systematically record prisoners' socio-economic backgrounds (JCFJ, 2012). In 2012, the campaigning organisation for prisoners' rights, the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) (2012, p. 6) called on "government to commit funds to conducting studies at regular intervals



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into the profile of offenders, which IPRT believes will show a demonstrable link between social exclusion and crime", a call which has been ignored. More recently, the IPRT has itself commissioned (ongoing) research to analyse links between "social deprivation", "crime" and imprisonment (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2025).

Sarah Lamble (2013, p. 244) observes that 'doing time' in carceral institutions can erode 'human vitality', highlighting how the necropower of the prison makes itself felt post-release, as former prisoners struggle to find employment or homes, to reconnect with kin and community, or to deal with illnesses and addictions that have been exacerbated by confinement. "Marked as permanently failed, perpetually dangerous, and always suspicious, prisoners do not simply serve their time and move on; they pay the debt over and over in the form of stigma, shame and exclusion" (Lamble, 2013, p. 244-245). The proportion of homeless persons experiencing incarceration is indicative of the social recycling and containment functions of Irish prisons. A 2019 systematic review showed that 17.4 % of people were homeless on committal to prison, which is "…significantly higher than the prevalence of homelessness in the general Irish population" (Gulati *et al.* 2019, p. 42).



Between January 1st and June 8th, 2022, 113 imprisoned persons who applied for social housing presented at emergency homeless services on their day of release (Bowers, 2022). At the time of writing, officially recognised homelessness in Ireland has reached an all-time high with 16,996 in emergency accommodation as of November 2025 (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2025). The state's chronic lack of housing fuels competition among people in need of homes (Caden, 2023), acutely disadvantaging those with limited financial resources, those without stable employment, or those with criminal convictions. In 2021, the Interagency Group for a Fairer and Safer Ireland noted that post-release access to housing and shortage of accommodation were concerning, stating that: "the housing option is only identified within days or hours of release and the accommodation option offered is temporary accommodation or the

Housing Assistance Payment for the prisoner to self-accommodate" (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2021, para 5).

A necropolitical analysis allows us to interpret the underinvestment in housing for prison leavers, their exposure to homelessness more generally and their lack of access to adequate psychiatric and mental health services as interconnected elements of a carceral regime that confers and entrenches disposability. This is further shown by Ireland's disproportionately high recidivism rates. Despite the relatively low imprisonment rates outlined above, recidivism rates are nearly as high as those recorded in the United States. Data from 2021 demonstrates that 42% of people had reoffended within 1 year of release with figures from 2018 showing that 62% of people re-offended within 3 years of release (CSO, 2023). In a report from the Office of the Inspector of Prisons (2024c, p. 33), such repetitive and short prison sentences are described as "life sentences by increment", particularly in relation to mentally distressed and homeless prisoners. It notes that many civil psychiatric hospitals in Ireland will not admit homeless persons, because they lack the postcodes that the bureaucratic admission process requires. Having committed minor offences due to mental distress, these homeless persons do not receive appropriate mental health supports when serving remand or short-sentences, and upon release into the 'community' continue to oscillate between homelessness, prison and inadequate psychiatric care (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2024c). This points to Ireland's *de facto* use of prison as a flawed response to societal harm, whereby vulnerable groups of people linger in self-perpetuating loops between prison and poverty. That such evidence does not result in widespread and foundational questioning of the purposes and efficacy of imprisonment as a supposed force for 'justice' or 'law and order', reflects what Chamberlen and Carvalho (2022, p. 93) denote as the "naturalisation of punitive justice" and the associated societal compulsion "to pursue it".



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***Ill-treatment by prison staff and inter-prisoner violence***

As Arun Kundnani (2021, p. 4) explains, prisons perpetuate and institutionalise "officially sanctioned state violence", but custodial orders by Irish courts also expose imprisoned people to ongoing threats of 'illegal' or unsanctioned violence. Although, high levels of inter-prisoner violence in Irish prisons have been noted (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2019; Martynowicz; Moore, 2018), again, it appears that "strategic ignorance" (McGoey, 2012) is at play. Across Ireland's prison estate, the recording of injuries suffered by prisoners is cursory, incomplete and there is no onus on health care staff to formally record, or report alleged or suspected ill-treatment. However, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment and Punishment (EU CPT, 2025) profiled one illustrative example of the severity of ill-treatment encountered by the delegation when it visited Irish prisons in 2024. Newly installed CCTV footage in a prison escort van showed how a prisoner held at Cloverhill Prison, experienced life changing injuries perpetrated by a prison officer in November 2023. The footage recorded several prison officers entering the van, where the prisoner appeared dazed, tired but not agitated or violent. One prison officer pushed a shield against the prisoner and striking him, then continued to punch the prisoner with a closed fist. The prisoner lay motionless on the floor, posing no threat. The officer was also seen to grab the prisoner and shake him violently, ultimately leading to "an acute subdural haematoma" (bleed on the brain) (EU CPT, 2025, p. 15) and significant disabilities commensurate with brain injury, including memory loss. The CCTV footage was critical to the detection and investigation of this officer's violence, with the Committee observing that prison officers originally officially reported that the injuries were self-inflicted (EU CPT, 2025). This illustration evokes prison's 'necrositic' character, drawing attention to the ever-present risk of violence for persons in prison, violence which in this instance was planned not reactive and which seriously transgressed any suggestion of 'reasonable' force. While this case represents a necropolitical apex in terms of severity and impact (brain injury),



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the European Committee (EU CPT, 2025) has noted an escalation in prison violence since its 2019 visit, and its reports over time provide evidence of the systemic rootedness of violence in Irish prisons (see EU CPT, 2011). Significant also, and apparent in this exemplary case, is the closing of prison officer ranks; whereby officers through their conduct and their concealment of it, disregarded the Prison Service's (2025) stated mission to provide "safe and secure custody". This case also underlines the importance of a necropolitical analysis for illuminating prison as a site of injury and not just "death alone" (Peters *et al.*, 2025, p. 13).

***Death, drugs and poverty***

According to the European Drug Report 2024, Ireland topped the EU table for drug-related deaths with 322 drug-induced deaths in 2020, or 97 deaths per million of the adult population, compared to an EU average of 22.5 (O'Keeffe, 2024). These drug deaths are unevenly distributed throughout society but are more common in poorer communities (Kelleher *et al.*, 2021). Prisons themselves contribute to problematic drug use, leading to death, with the Department of Justice (2024) acknowledging that persons known to be drug free at the time of sentencing leave prison with addictions that developed while in prison. Substance misuse is a key factor associated with self-harm among Ireland's prison populations. Amongst the most preventable deaths occurring in Irish prisons relate to prisoners who die and are suspected of concealing drugs inside their bodies. An investigation by the Office of the Inspector of Prisons (2024b) into the death of "Mr K" in Cork Prison at the height of the Nitazine scare in Irish prisons, concluded that security had been the paramount concern of prison authorities rather than medical supervision or care of prisoners. A day before his death, "Mr K" had been discharged from hospital without being seen by a doctor, and when returned to prison, he was subjected to regular security but not health checks. In fact, he was dead for some time before his cell-mate noticed and raised the alert. That deaths related to drug



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overdose recur in Irish prisons, reflects the failure of institutions to both learn from and implement essential preventative measures (EU CPT, 2025, p. 22).

Another instance that demonstrates the disposability of lives in Irish prisons, was highlighted by EU CPT (2025). A profoundly mentally distressed prisoner placed in a Close Supervision Cell in Cloverhill, had no action plan for his care in place. While the post-mortem report noted that the man had not drank or eaten in the 48 hours prior to death, evidence of falsified welfare checks was identified (EU CPT, 2025). Indeed, false recordings of welfare checks on prisoners have been found across a number of prisons where prisoners have died (EU CPT, 2025) and the Prison Inspectorate has recommended the introduction of remote monitoring of vital signs technology in Irish prison cells - not yet in place - to compensate for these derelictions of responsibility by prison officers. How prisoners' deaths are dealt with in their aftermath by the Irish State is revealing of necropolitical neglect and disavowal, also. In 2024, it was reported that coroners had not yet conducted half of the inquests into prisoner deaths in the last 12 years: "Twenty-seven of the pending inquests relate to deaths which occurred in 2023 and to date this year, one relates to a death in 2013 while four others are for deaths in 2017 and 2018" (Murphy, 2024).



We are conscious also of the complex temporalities of necropolitical violence as expressed through imprisonment. In this, Rob Nixon's (2011) work is generative, because it reaches beyond conventional understandings of violence as eventful occurrences that make their presence felt in the moment of their enactment. Originally referring to environmental harms, but with much wider applicability, the concept of "slow violence" recognises "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). "Slow violence" can result in what Nixon (2011, p. 2) calls "long dyings", which are uncounted and for which accountability is absent, because they occur outside timeframes that allow a straightforward apportioning of responsibility or causality. Despite the likely harmful, long-term and even

death-inducing effects of imprisonment on people's lives far beyond dates of release, the official duty of investigating prison deaths ends one month post-release (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2019). Nor are there mechanisms or clear lines of responsibility for prisoners' 'progress' back into the community to be supported. For example, a recent report highlighted the lack of improvements in methadone users' lives, many of them with incarceration experience. Their mere survival is supported through methadone treatment, but their quality of life remains diminished: "half of the 12,000 people receiving methadone treatment have been doing so for up to 10 years and one in five are on the heroin-substitute medication for more than 20 years, research indicates" (O'Keeffe, 2024). That eight out of 10 methadone patients were not currently in education or employment is indicative of their most marginal status at the edge of our communities (O'Keeffe, 2024).

Quality of life issues experienced in the prison environment contribute to persons' deaths, as they do even before and still after people are imprisoned, with life struggles including financial insecurity, homelessness, unemployment, etc. (Samaritans, 2025). Authorising one's own death via suicide or responding to distress and pain through self-harm are desperate acts that can be viewed as emerging from conditions of poverty, induced social death, or persons' refusal to accept the marginality conferred upon them. Between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021, 421 episodes of self-harm involving 217 individuals were recorded in Irish prisons (Irish Prison Service *et al.*, 2024), with over one third of those who self-harmed in prison between 2022 and 2023 having repeated incidents (Irish Prison Service, 2024, p. 41). The State's inadequate response to such suffering denotes wilful denial and wilful neglect. Prisoners who are mentally unwell have excessively long waits to be transferred from prison to hospital, reflecting also the insufficiency of in-patient care in psychiatric settings (Walsh *et al.*, 2024). A recent Irish Prison Inspectorate report on mental health services tracked a vacancy rate of 38% for prison psychology, addiction and counselling service positions, damningly concluding that "people with serious mental health disorders in Irish prisons do not receive the right



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care, in the right environment in the right time" (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2024c, p. 30). This is indicative of a wider problem, which sees the Irish state spend a meagre 5.1% of its healthcare budget on mental health services (Office of Inspector of Prisons, 2024c, p. 13).

That Irish prisoners are "subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead"* (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40), is obvious from the extensive use of lock-up and the prevalence across the prison estate of squalid, cramped cells, that lack ventilation, appropriate heating or access to natural light (EU CPT, 2025). The persistence of such conditions prompted the EU CPT (2025, p. 32) to remind the Irish government and prison service of the minimum requirements for prison accommodation. Even when Irish prisons promise to be 'progressive', they remain institutions of inertia and punishment. The women's prison in Limerick, hailed as an architecture of hope and healing on its completion in 2023, was found by the EU CPT, who visited it in 2024, to provide limited opportunities for activity. The playground was usually closed, and prisoners ate meals in their cells because a large bright dining room and servery were not in use (EU CPT, 2025). This is reminiscent of Dóchas women's prison, also welcomed as a progressive institution when it commenced operations in 1999. By 2010, its governor had resigned in protest over its chronically overcrowded conditions and the pressure exerted on the prison administration to demonstrate greater punitiveness (Lally, 2010).



As the officially constituted 'overcrowding crisis'– in our view an 'over-imprisonment' crisis - deepens, its implications include greater restrictions on access to training and education, and worsening living-conditions across the prison estate with toilets, windows and lighting in need of repair (EU CPT, 2025). In Ireland, prisoners are afforded very little out-of-cell-time and they have limited access to communal dining or purposeful activity. They experience regular withdrawal of crucial services, and there are significant shortcomings in the prisoner complaints system (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2023). The state's dereliction of its duty of care to and for those it imprisons has become embodied in the suffering of prisoners and it has become emplaced in the failing

architectures of the institutions themselves. But the longer-term effects and deeper legacies of such inaction are not recorded in Ireland, where the temporal lags between prison and 'life after' renders "apprehension" (Nixon, 2011, p. 14) of the full extent of this slow violence and its effects simultaneously impossible *and* essential.

## Concluding Discussion

As shown in this paper, instances of death, injury and considerable suffering are ever present in the Irish prison experience. We regard them as necropolitical because they are perpetuated under the cover of 'security' through the actions and inactions of the Irish state and Prison Service. Lives, which are precarious outside of prison, are rendered even more fragile within these institutions, where the evidence shows that even basic standards of care and protection are profoundly compromised.



A necropolitical analysis of the Irish prison system enables us to position the state not as a neutral arbiter of justice but as an entity capable of exercising its power to hurt and injure. Claims that Irish penal policymaking is moderate and pragmatic fail to acknowledge the systemic quality and roots of the quotidian forms of violence, harm and desperation that pervade Irish prison spaces. As we see it, a necropolitical analysis steels us to resist government efforts to build our way out of a prison overcrowding crisis by adding more sites that promise hope but become "necrositic" (Loughnan, 2022, p. 2) with the passage of time. Inspired by the community building ethos of an abolitionist ecological imaginary, we refuse to be diverted or satisfied by the occasional accounts of lives turned around by prison or heroic arcs of rehabilitation that are repeatedly invoked to efface the inherent violence of imprisonment. There is already too much evidence that prisons predominantly punish poor and vulnerable populations. For those of us not in prison or never likely to be in one, a necropolitical analysis forces us to recognise that in

an unequal society, our flourishing is happening in the shadows of other lives that are made miserable.

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