Guiding Document - Irish Penal Abolition Network

> "Abolition is not *absence*, it is *presence*. What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities. So those who feel in their gut deep anxiety that abolition means knock it all down, scorch the earth and start something new, let that go. Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can."
>
> Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Introduction

The overarching vision of the Irish Penal Abolition Network (IPAN) is to see the number of people in prison greatly reduced; the centrality of the prison being displaced in society as the solution to social conflict; and funding for penal infrastructure being reallocated to housing, education and health services, particularly to the communities most affected by imprisonment. The goal is not only to provide equitable opportunities to these communities but to enable them to thrive. Actively campaigning for a moratorium on prison expansion - with a vision for the place of the prison to be reduced over the next ten years - will be a key expression of IPAN's work.

Prison abolition posits that society has no need for harmful penal institutions because social conflict and harm can be resolved through community-based restorative practices and that finite resources are better directed towards health, welfare, education, housing and employment programmes. However, the concept of prison abolition suffers because it seems so self-explanatory and apparent. As such prison abolition can be readily dismissed as utopian; along with the idea that the prison population should be greatly reduced, progressing towards a future where prisons are eventually closed and the place of the prison rendered obsolete. While this "deconstructive" approach to the prison is one face of prison abolitionist thought and practice, there is also a "constructive" face where abolitionists are concerned with what social goods (income support, education, housing, health etc) need to be in place to address needs, reduce social conflict and people's contact with the criminal justice system.

Background

Two contradictory statements can often both be true. At no point, have the Irish Government been more familiar and comfortable with the language of penal reform. Yet, in recent months, the prison population in the Republic of Ireland has soared beyond any previous levels seen in the history of the State. By the end of 2024, based on current committals rate, it is estimated that over 7,000 people will be in prison on the island of Ireland. With the potential of over 5,000 in the Republic and over 2,000 in Northern Ireland - the highest since the Good Friday Agreement and the end of the civil war - this represents a previously unimaginable scenario.

Yet, based on the justification of population growth, the Irish governments are embarking on a programme of prison expansion – 1,100 new spaces by 2030 - which commits us to the further embedding of the prison within society. Thornton Hall in North Dublin, a site purchased to build a 2,200-capacity prison during the Celtic Tiger but failed, is being pitched by politicians again as the site for a new prison to solve overcrowding. Already we have seen the addition of Limerick Prison for women to the Irish Prison Service estate—increasing capacity for imprisoning women in the face of overwhelming knowledge on the harms and ineffectual nature of women's incarceration—yet all the problems of prison that it sought to alleviate remain. Just with better chairs and a fresher coat of paint.

Recognising this as both an opportunity and a moral responsibility, it is these contradictions between policy and experience which IPAN is seeking to explore more fully. It is at this critical point that a space to resist prison expansion on the island of Ireland becomes an urgent endeavour. Aware that it is not sufficient to just critique prison policy, the IPAN seeks to create a space to reflect and act upon reductionist philosophies of imprisonment, and open up space for thinking about, cataloguing, and actively constructing alternatives. This can range from abolitionism to penal minimalism, alternative systems of justice, and everything in between. Emerging from discussion among academics and penal policy advocates, IPAN conceptualises its future work across three main strands: discourse, community and policy.

Guiding Values

The IPAN will organise itself based on the following **seven values**:

- **Critical thought** on prisons, taking for granted that prisons are places of harm and that the creation of more prison cells will only create more prisoners
- **Research and activism** are deeply connected and symbiotic
- **Speak truthfully** on the contradictions within our criminal justice system
- **Imagine new ways** of conceptualising crime and criminal justice
- **Centring and platforming** the voices of lived experience of criminal justice institutions;
- **Openness** to everyone from all walks of life and backgrounds
- **Welcoming** to those interesting in exploring abolitionist thought and practice
- **All Ireland** network, while Ireland has two different political jurisdictions responsible for criminal justice, the network understands ‘Ireland’ as a geographical entity; the whole island.

Aims of Network

Discourse (public commentary) - IPAN seeks to challenge historic and contemporary discourses on the value and efficacy of punishment and incarceration as a response to harms in society. It recognises the position of the state and deficits in housing, health and social welfare in the production of ‘crime’ in society. IPAN will produce counter-discourse on the harms and collateral damage of imprisonment in society and challenge ideas that criminal justice institutions reduce harm and make society safer.

Community (grass roots, interruptive policy) - IPAN recognises the increasingly fragmented nature of society and the failure of institutions of governance to provide an adequate safety net in society. In the face of this vacuum, we seek to create a space of community and solidarity where we can collectively aim to transform societal responses to harm.

Policy (within formal policy making structures) - Through a combination of expert knowledge whether in the form of lived experience realities, practitioner reflections, or academic scholarship IPAN seeks to challenge and inform existing criminal justice policy and practice and counter-expansionist policy and implementation as it emerges.

The Irish Prison Abolition Network aims to bring together a variety of stakeholders (practitioners, academics, those with lived experience, community members) to:

- Explore ways in which abolitionist principles and practice have been done historically in Ireland and currently farther afield
- Create an active network to progress abolitionist actions, ideologies, and principles in Ireland

Although this will be an inclusive space that welcomes people on different stages of their study and activism in relation to abolition, **we want to explicitly state that this is a space in which we aim to explore together how to abolish prisons and other avenues of state punitiveness.** This will not be a space to debate the legitimacy of abolition as a principle or question if it is the way forward. We find there are already many existing spaces that debate, explore, and challenge abolition and abolitionist theories. Instead IPAN will create a space to come together to shape how we want to progress prison abolition here in Ireland.

Principles for engagement

- In our collaborative work, we want to avoid reproducing the very structures and processes which result in the growth of punitive structures and processes in our societies.
- We want to cultivate an environment of care amongst each other, providing emotional support and space when and where necessary. We promote self-compassion, healthy boundaries, also so as to avoid burnout.
- We commit to entering into honest and authentic dialogue with each other, even when we don't agree; express our views empathetically and in appropriate spaces- not behind each other's back.
- We commit to using person-first language so as to ensure that we do not contribute to further stigmatisation of justice-involved persons.
- We acknowledge that everyone may be at different places on their abolitionist learning journey, approaches or lived experience and we will create space for this diversity.

- We commit to holding ourselves and each other to account when co-optation becomes a risk in our collaborative work.
- We create an atmosphere where we listen to each other and don't interrupt each other; while also being aware that space and time should be divided equally
- We create an atmosphere of nonviolent communication and when conflicts arise, commit to practices of conflict resolution that are productive and not reproducing the systems, ideologies structures and values our work aims to abolish
- We acknowledge that we will all be making mistakes in our collaborative work, and we commit to practise principles of compassion and forgiveness to others and ourselves.
- The spaces we engage in are safe spaces; we expect from each other to treat our discussions with confidentiality.

Suggested Reading and Resources:

If you are interested in learning more about abolitionist thought, theories, and work, we suggest checking out some of these readings and resources:

Websites

- Abolitionist Futures - Resources from activists in Britain and Ireland
- Interrupting Criminalisation - Resources from the US abolitionist experience

Essay

- Mariame Kaba (2020) 'So You're Thinking about Becoming an Abolitionist

Video

- David Scott - What would a world without prisons be like? - BBC Ideas

Abolitionist checklist

- Reformist reforms vs abolitionist steps

Journal Articles

- Nicolas Carrier and Justin Pichė (2015) - The State of Abolitionism
- Vincenzo Ruggiero (2015) - The Legacy of Abolitionism

Book Chapters

- Angela Davis (2003) 'Introduction: Prison Reform or Prison Abolition?; *Are Prisons Obsolete? pg. 9-21.*
- Thomas Mathiesen (1985) 'The Arguments Against Prison Construction' in *Abolitionism:Towards a non-repressive approach to crime, pg 83-89.*