

ARTICLE

Lockdown under lockdown? Pandemic, the carceral and COVID-19 in British prisons

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Abstract

The relationship between pandemic, or chronic infectious diseases, and the carceral, meaning set-apart spaces of enforced confinement for “wrong-doers,” has a long, tangled history. It features in Foucault’s inquiries into disciplinary power and its associated spatial formations, not least in the shape of the modern prison. Drawing lightly from Foucault’s claims about disciplinary and biopolitical power, as well as on his anti-prison activism, this paper explores three possibilities for penal transformation arising during the early months of COVID-19 in UK prisons (circa March to August 2020). Consulting primary source material, these possibilities are respectively identified as “retrenching,” “reworking” or “reducing” the carceral. A chief finding is that under the press of pandemic “emergency,” the tilt of emphasis has been towards a retrenched or reworked “carceral state,” disappointing any promise of abolition, let alone more humble reduction in carceral conditions. The “biological sub-citizens” of prisons are hence being left especially vulnerable to the press of pandemic, in part precisely *because* of how carceral spatialities are being intensified.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Early during COVID-19 “lockdown,” Jonathan Freedland from the *Guardian* newspaper spoke with Erwin James, former prisoner and founder of the prison newspaper *Inside Time*, about the similarities between lockdown for the everyday population and what prisoners have long experienced. “There are so many resonances with prison”, James remarked, echoing contributions from prisoners to *Inside Time*, elaborating that “when one day is no different from the next, time becomes thick and amorphous, hard to keep hold of: ‘It’s like walking through treacle, in slow motion’” (in Freedman, 2020, n.p.). Freedland’s chief point was that lockdown “bends time out of shape,” but his article also provokes reflection on how, more precisely, pandemic, lockdown and prison space have become entangled and the latter also bent out of shape. More narrowly, it prompts the present authors to ask what might be disclosed in this respect from reading sources such as *Inside Time*.

Accounts emerging from researchers on COVID-19 in prisons provide insights and context. Barnert et al. (2020, p. 964) report that:

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... on February 29, 2020, nearly half of incident cases (233 of 565) of COVID-19 reported in Wuhan, China, were from the city's prison system. A separate prison outbreak, 450 miles away, in Shendong, China, was traced to officials who had visited Wuhan and infected seven prison guards and 200 inmates.

De Carvalho et al. (2020) state that more than 10 million people worldwide were incarcerated in 2018, largely in poor sanitary conditions,¹ while commentators have long identified prisons as epicentres for infectious diseases, providing ideal conditions for contagious viruses to thrive. Infections such as tuberculosis and syphilis spread rapidly between prisons and local communities, meaning that “when the pandemic was declared it was clear that many prison systems around the world would struggle to cope” (Heard, 2020, p. 849). Prisons were swiftly positioned alongside “cruise ships, care-homes and refugee camps” as “petri-dish’ spaces” (Sparke & Anguelov, 2020, p. 499) for COVID-19 contagion, even “hotbeds of death and disease” (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020, p. 98). Unsurprisingly, their perceived dangerousness on this count led to prisons in some world regions being near-physically “abandoned” by the authorities, prompting prison riots (Scott, 2020; see also Raghavan, 2020), but also fuelled a more diffuse sense of their being abandoned globally as spaces where occupants' health matters all that much.

In the UK (Thomas, 2022) there is ample evidence of the challenges posed to the prison estate by COVID-19. COVID-related deaths have certainly occurred, afflicting prisoners and prison staff, although it is as yet difficult to furnish a coherent mortality assessment. A source for our own research (*IT*, 11/06/20) noted a government report that 51 prisoners died from COVID-19 between March and May 2020, while Grierson (2020) reported in the *Guardian* that COVID death rates for prisoners have been three times higher than in the general population. That figure must nonetheless be treated with caution because some adult prisoners have been at greater risk due to pre-existing poor health (HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), 2021). The virulent spread of the virus in prisons has also created severe staff shortages, with one statement (HLPR, 24/04/20) highlighting absences sometimes approaching a quarter of all staff. In other sources consulted by us, the Prison Officers' Association (POA) (24/03/20a, p. 9) asserted how “staff throughout the country are expressing their fears to us,” decrying “an utterly negligent failure to ensure the protection of essential Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for those on the frontline of public services” (POA, 01/05/20, p. 4).

As such, we infer an upscaling of what Sykes (1958) long ago identified as the “pains of imprisonment,” later elaborated by Cohen and Taylor (1972), Goffman (1961) and others, including deprivations of personal liberty, autonomy and security. Recent studies by Haggerty and Bucerius (2020) and Crewe (2007, 2011) capture how these pains have evolved alongside changes in prison regimes and underlying cultures (also Crawley, 2005; Ugelvik, 2014), while Maycock and Dickson (2021, p. 322; also Maycock, 2022) argue that such pains are now “taking new forms and reaching new depths during the COVID-19 lockdown.” They specify how extended periods of confinement in the small space of a cell foster feelings of boredom, frustration and stress, ones also reported by prisoners in prison segregation units (Brown, 2020) and shared cells (Schliehe & Crewe, 2022).

COVID-19 restrictions in prisons, entailing what might be called “lockdown under lockdown,” spur important new questions for the recently emerging subfield of “carceral geographies.” Key themes for this subfield (Moran, 2015; Moran et al., 2018; Schliehe, 2021; Turner, 2016) – about the extent to which carcerality, as structure, practice and experience, diffuses beyond the prison gates; about the permeability of prison boundaries in terms of what (people, things, organisms) may be mobile across the threshold, in which direction, with what magnitude and effects; about the spatialities of social relations in prisons, particularly with respect to exerting or resisting disciplinary power – are all hailed by the coming of COVID-19. We will circle these themes throughout what follows, deploying a wealth of specific empirical materials – introduced in the next section – to picture *three* contrasting forms of response to COVID-19 arising within the UK penal system during the early pandemic months: responses we cautiously name “retrenching,” “reworking” and “reducing,” each encompassing different reshapings of prison space. These three responses encapsulated a range of *possibilities*, anticipating future possible trajectories in UK prison-based carceral geographies, but our argument is that some quickly appeared as more possible – more open to translation from principles to practices – than did others.

Framing each of these responses, we engage different dimensions of Michel Foucault's *oeuvre*: first, his well-known writings on disciplinary power; second, his increasingly familiar writings on biopower; and third, his less well-known activist anti-prison interventions. Our engagements are purposefully light-touch, covering items “good to think with” in relation to the empirical materials, and are not meant as a sustained working-through of Foucault *for* carceral geographers (cf. Philo, 2001; Schliehe, 2021). Rather, it exemplifies what a Foucauldian critical sensibility can bring to studying carceral geographies, set within a broad-brush framing derived from Agamben's arguments about “states” or “spaces of exception” (Agamben, 2005).² Indeed, our prime presumption is that COVID-19 has created a “state of emergency” with ramifications spiralling throughout civil society, in the UK and globally, leading to coercive developments within specific

“spaces of exception,” prisons included, that might not otherwise have occurred (or whose trajectories have now been markedly speeded up). A useful statement runs as follows:

The prison population of several countries, as well as graduates of the penal system, suffers from stigma, abandonment of public power and what the philosopher Mbembe (2019) calls necropolitics, based on a State of Exception, in which it has the power to dictate who should live and who should die, desizing from the subject his [sic] political status and, if not actively taking his life, exposing him to death.

(De Carvalho et al., 2020, p. 3497)

The upshot is that many prison critics raise concerns about pandemic being used to fortify “the carceral state” (Rasheed, 2014)³ well beyond its normal association with US hyper-confinement in “supermax” prisons.

Before turning to the nuts-and-bolts of our own contribution, it is important to acknowledge “the tremendous biosocial shockwaves sent by the disease” and “the geographically uneven human costs which COVID-19 has inflicted” (Chung et al., 2020, pp. 99–100). A familiar claim – voiced in different ways with differing critical-theoretical hues – is that the ravages of COVID-19 have unsparingly located and exacerbated existing fault-lines in conjoint sociologies and geographies of human vulnerability (e.g., Rose-Redwood et al., 2020, p. 101). Whether “inside” prisons and other segregated spaces or “outside” in all manner of marginalised locations – the latter typically entailing peoples and places already suffering intersectional affronts on the grounds of poverty, race, indigeneity, disability, chronic illness and more – the inhabitants of such geographies have been “laid bare as contexts of vulnerability in the pandemic” (Sparke & Anguelov, 2020, p. 499). Sparke (2017, p. 287), reworking Foucauldian biopolitics, speaks of “biological sub-citizens,” where the “sub” refers to “political-economic subordination” alongside “health rights disenfranchisement” with “various incarnations in adverse incorporation as well as exclusion.” The former, “adverse incorporation” could mean those who are imprisoned, but also flags the likes of low-paid service workers compelled, as has been obvious under pandemic, to labour in or circulate around bio-insecure workplaces and neighbourhoods. All are excluded from “healthful” biological citizenship; all, inside or outside prisons, might be cast as victims of a deleterious “co-pathogenesis” (Sparke & Vitale, 2022, n.p.) between pandemic and, in certain world regions, neoliberal austerity; all have been subject to lockdown, in part for good biomedical reasons, but maybe also as a worrying new authoritarianism takes hold with a grip remaining firmer in prisons than elsewhere.

2 | SOURCES, METHODS, RESEARCHERS

Our research offers a deep dive into three empirical “outlets” – the aforementioned *Inside Time* magazine (henceforth *IT*), the Prison Officers’ Association website (POA) and documents produced by the Howard League for Penal Reform (HLPR) – and a limited widening of the optic to capture several other “grey literature” reports. It involved locating, critically reading and interpreting relevant materials from nearly 90 individual sources from these outlets – articles or blogs, policy documents, guidance briefings, secondary testimonies, and more – relating to COVID-19 in UK prisons. Appendix S1 provides a full listing of these individual sources, indicating how they are referenced in the text. The primary research was undertaken by three student “interns” enlisted as co-authors (Carlin, Fallon, Penna),⁴ closely advised by the two lead authors (Schliehe, Philo), with ideas about both project and paper shared by the whole team. The time constraints of the internships allied to requiring clearly focused work tasks, with each intern tackling one set of sources, influenced the architecture of our project and its focus on the early months of the pandemic. The interns were trusted to make sensible judgements about what was pertinent for the research, their selections being theoretically informed (by both our project’s root concepts and their prior training as “geographical detectives” investigating empirical subject-matters) rather than needing to be justified as statistically “representative” of the overall universe of sources consulted.

IT is a magazine produced for prisons and prisoners, featuring varied voices including current and former prisoners, and comprising online content as well as paper versions freely available in all UK prisons and detention centres. During the research period, *IT* offered news, comment and information sections relating directly to emerging official COVID-19 communications, alongside more creative sections of mailbag, poetry and rap as outlets for prisoners dealing with prison life under COVID-19. The POA website carries a variety of sources, but we mainly focused on circulars from the POA General Secretary or National Chair informing members of all updates relating to COVID-19 and offering evaluative commentary. This material covered a range of topics: National Health Service (NHS) pandemic circulars, legal advice, PPE, social-distancing protocols for prisons, notifications of deaths of POA members, updates on staff testing, guidance

on prisoner transfers, and other trade union approaches to COVID-19. The HLPR is a charity striving to make society safer, reduce crime, decrease the number of people in prison and provide legal advice to prisoners; it lobbies for change at the institutional level and publishes reports showing unfair treatment endured by UK prisoners. During 2020 the HLPR undertook its own research, publishing pieces addressing the implications of COVID-19 for the prison system and concluding that already-existing problems – poor access to healthcare and education, limited communication with family and lawyers, mental health concerns caused by isolation – had all been exacerbated.

Complementing these sources, we accessed official publications, including Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) thematic review of the pandemic (HMIP, 2021) and the Prison Reform Trust's CAPPTIVE briefings 1–3 from their *COVID-19 Action Prisons Project: Tracking innovation, valuing experience* (PRT, 2020a, 2020b; PRT, 2021a). All sources consulted here provide frontline accounts of pandemic in prison, bearing expert witness to the bendings-out-of-shape of carceral time-space under the press of pandemic. We acknowledge that these sources have differing characteristics, highlighting specific matters, speaking for particular people within the UK's penal ecology, and often with a particular political agenda. We also acknowledge that our coverage is limited to the early months of the pandemic, but it is instructive to recover the three scenarios – of “retrenching,” “reworking” and “reducing” – that arguably comprised a momentary openness of possibility, not least because “reducing” carcerality was on the table, but now largely lost.

3 | RETRENCHING AND “THE ARTS OF DISTRIBUTION”

First, a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death ... Each street is placed under surveillance ... It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his [sic] place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion and punishment.

(Foucault, 1976, p. 195)

Foucault's claims in his most famous text, *Discipline and punish* (Foucault, 1976), about the spatial intricacies of modern “disciplinary power,” are now commonplace within carceral studies generally and carceral geographies particularly. They stem from a coherent body of theory and empirics – ripe for application and critique – alert to what Foucault terms “the art of distributions” (p. 141) central to how prisons and other carceral establishments, from late-eighteenth century Europe through to the present-day globe, have come to be constituted and managed. His arguments about how “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space” (p. 141) – from the four primitives of “enclosure,” “partitioning,” “function” and “rank” – remain, notably as refracted through Foucault's depiction of Jeremy Bentham's notorious Panopticon “prison-house” design, a cornerstone of social-scientific carceral inquiries. Less remarked, however, is that Foucault opens his chapter on “Panopticism” (Part 3, Chapter 3) *not* with the Panopticon, but with “orders” published at the close of the seventeenth century about how a “plague town” over-run by a terrible infection should be (spatially) organised, surveilled and, thereby, disciplined. The latter, “enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point ... constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism” (p. 197). The measures here for preventing *physical* contagion (and promoting physical “purity”) become reworked in Bentham's Panopticon as primarily ones for combatting *moral* contagion (and promoting moral “purity”), affording an ideational proximity between pandemic and prisons that is highly suggestive for our purposes. Residents of the plague town were to stay indoors, locked up by the city's “syndics”: they were locked into their homes behind the locked gates of the city, hence enduring lockdown under lockdown.

It can be demonstrated that many dimensions of how UK prisons – and the overall UK prison system – have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic have, in effect, achieved a retrenching of (an intensifying return to) *exactly* the sorts of spatial practices identified by Foucault as core to the operations of disciplinary power.⁵ A concise summary of such practices, as instigated near the start of the pandemic's grip, appeared in a briefing paper for Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) from April 2020:

Social distancing was enabled by a new instruction by HMPPS on March 24 to implement a restricted regime. This stopped all social visits, all education, training and employment activities (except for essential workers), all access to gyms, religious association and general association, and introduced restrictions on numbers of people unlocked, numbers of people in exercise yards at any one time, and supported enforcement of social

distancing of 2 M [2 metres] for staff and prisoners wherever possible. Intra-prison movement of prisoners was strongly discouraged and for specific areas with especially vulnerable prisoners, staff cross-deployment was advised against where possible.

(O'Moore, 2020a, p. 2)

O'Moore used the powerful spatial metaphor of “compartmentalisation” (recalling Foucault’s partitioning) to capture initiatives at both the macro level, restricting *inter*-prison movements, and the micro level, restricting *intra*-prison mixings. The explicit reference to “a restricted regime” signalled a reigning in of previous spatial freedoms and flexibilities, an intensification of lockdown in settings already, by their very nature, locked down.

3.1 | Isolating prisons

Some sources, occasionally referencing the longer-run history of prisons as “breeding grounds of disease” (HLPR, 18/03/2020), made plain that prisons inevitably became, under COVID-19, spaces of risky over-crowding and likely disease transmission. It is unsurprising that a response was to curtail “traffic” across the prison boundary, from outside to inside and vice versa, so that infections could not easily gain access and, if a prison did become full of infection, could not then easily egress. An urgency about isolating prisons themselves arose early, reinforcing the essentially bounded character of these disciplinary spaces, as conveyed in a notable tonal shift from a POA *Coronavirus Update* circular in late March 2020 (POA, 24/03/20a). The O'Moore briefing paper agitated for an “increase[d] compartmentalisation of the prison estate”, as mentioned, to be accomplished “by reducing significantly transfers between prisons with an order issued by HMPPS on March 31. Reducing movements between prisons was recommended to reduce risk of ‘seeding’ infections and subsequent outbreaks in prisons receiving infected prisoners” (O'Moore, 2020a, p. 2).

Prison visiting by family and friends was also foregrounded, with normal visiting arrangements quickly suspended by edict from the government (*IT*, 08/06/20): “The ultimate decision to stop all visits is out of control of the POA, but, in light of Public Health England and the Government’s advice, we are pursuing all options and have relayed ... concerns” (POA, 24/03/20a, p. 2). “Inspectors found that some women [prisoners] had not seen their children for months” (HLPR, 02/07/20); while, specifically regarding young people in secure accommodation, for whom visitors might also have professional duties, “[t]he absence of external visitors not only affects children’s access to services and support; it also reduces the opportunities for external scrutiny and therefore has worrying implications for safeguarding” (HLPR, 07/05/20). Virtual visiting became a possibility for some, with one piece in *IT* reflecting on the experience in Scotland, cheering for some but upsetting for others when online connections had poor sound quality, broke or only worked intermittently for a small amount of the designated “visiting time” (*IT*, 20/08/20a).

By July 2020, the visiting situation had changed, allowing prisons to restart visits (*IT*, 01/08/20). Some attempt to reopen the boundary occurred, and visiting spaces became “the setting for emotional scenes, as families separated for months were reunited at last. Prison visits halls began reopening for business last month as the coronavirus lockdown eased – and they have taken on a variety of new looks” (*IT*, 01/08/20). The point about “new looks” was telling because the greater sealing of a prison’s outer boundary often necessitated knock-on changes to internal spatial arrangements. Different prisons took different approaches – the images presented in [Figure 1](#) show preferences for screens or for clear markings on the ground indicating 2 metre distancing – and some prisons implemented new rules, including mandatory face coverings and limiting one visitor per prisoner. Across all prisons a strict no-touching policy was implemented.

3.2 | Isolating prisoners

As implied by “no touching” between bodies, the most fundamental responses under COVID-19 strove to reduce as far as possible embodied mixing within the spaces internal to a prison. Preventing “nomadism” in the prison and breaking up collectivities are deep-set principles of “panoptic” carceral regimes, as Foucault emphasised (Philo, 2001, 2014), and it is to be expected that such principles – originally learned in the plague town – should become intensified once plague threatened the prison. From now on, the circulation of prisoners – and indeed staff and objects that might carry viral load – were to be constrained as much as possible, inevitably limiting prisoners’ opportunities for using spaces and hence engaging in activities beyond their own cells.



FIGURE 1 Different spatial arrangements in HMP visits halls (*IT*, 01/08/20).

As commonly underlined for society at large under pandemic, enforcing “social distancing” requires spatial distances between bodies, but imposing such socio-spatial distancing is tough in many prisons, notably older ones beset by overcrowding. “Social distancing is extremely difficult, particularly in old Victorian prisons where the landings are narrow” (*IT*, 01/05/20, p. 11), and in practice has not always occurred: “Staff throughout the country are expressing their fears to us. We are ignoring Government advice in every aspect. We do not socially distance, we allow gatherings of people” (*POA*, 24/03/20a, p. 9). Jason, a prisoner at HMP Doncaster, described the situation as “confusing” because distancing was maintained *in* cells, an “enforced lockdown,” but individuals were still permitted to associate *outside* cells in exercise sessions involving 20–30 prisoners (*IT*, 02/08/20b). Nonetheless, what *should* occur was seemingly undoubted: “There are no exceptions. Social distancing is vital to prevent the spread, so significant numbers of prisoners/patients unlocked at any one time is not acceptable” (*POA*, 27/03/20b, p. 1).

Producing the desired socio-spatial distancing hence became essentially about “locking up,” lockdown under lockdown, with official guidance mandating the keeping of prisoners inside their cells for as long as possible:

... the advisory body said that due to the effectiveness of other measures including keeping prisoners locked in their cells for 23 hours a day and isolating infected cases it was cutting its forecast for prisoner deaths from an initial estimate of 2500 to 3500, to only 100.

(*IT*, 26/05/20)

Thus, “[s]ince March, most prisoners have been confined to their cells for 23 hours a day and even when out have faced restrictions on mingling” (*IT*, 20/07/20), with a two-pronged approach of maximising cell time and clamping down on “mingling” outside of cells.

Confinement to cells has not necessarily been the same as enforcing single occupancy, although a parallel move arose to reinvigorate an older model of “solitary confinement.” Some complaints arose about single-occupancy cells *not* being the norm, it being recognised that sharing cells 23 hours a day with one or two other people might itself heighten infection risks (*POA*, 16/03/20; for social consequences of cell sharing, see Schliehe & Crewe, 2022). A Ministry of Justice (MoJ) spokesperson speaking in the House of Lords declared that 14,653 cells in English and Welsh prisons are occupied by prisoners on a *shared* basis: “If all of them were double cells, that would mean 29,306 prisoners were sharing cells. However, as some of them are likely to be triple cells, the true figure is likely to be over 30,000” (*IT*, 26/05/20). To counter a perceived shortfall in accommodation suitable for single occupancy, itself a partial recognition of prison over-crowding, a statement from the *POA* read:

Work to expand the Prison Estate by installing the first of 500 temporary, single occupancy cells will begin this week, as part of the Government’s unprecedented action to protect the public and NHS during the Coronavirus pandemic.

(*POA*, 10/04/20, p. 4)

Confinement to cells has thereby gone hand-in-glove with an envisaged extension of prisoner solitude, indeed returning the British prison system to one of its central nineteenth-century emphases (Ogborn, 1995).

This development has raised concerns about the physical and, particularly, mental health of prisoners:

While coronavirus has been contained in prisons, thanks to the extraordinary efforts on the ground of people living and working in them, tens of thousands of prisoners, including children, have been forced to endure 100 days of solitude in grim conditions, spending more than 22 hours a day in their cells.

(HLPR, 02/0720)

“One young adult told the Howard League that living in prison during the pandemic was ‘hell.’ He said, ‘I do a lot of sleeping to make the time pass. I sleep, I work out and eat and that is all I do’” (HLPR, 08/06/20). Frances Crook, CEO of HLPR, accepted that this approach could lead to a reduction in numbers of violent crimes in prisons (see below), but she also identified a possible link to increasing *self*-injury by prisoners and, more broadly, called for attention to longer-term consequences of prisoner being so isolated from close human contact (HLPR, 30/07/20). Other parties suggested a drop in male self-injury, with Robert Buckland QC, the Justice Secretary, proposing a “Covid factor” rendering male prisoners less likely to self-harm during lockdown, perhaps due to “finding it actually a slightly easier regime in the sense that they are more worried [than female prisoners] about contact with other prisoners and find that a difficult aspect of prison life” (in *IT*, 20/07/20). That said, evidence regarding female self-injury has tended to be the reverse: “HM Inspectorate of Prisons visited three women’s jails – Bronzefield, Foston Hall and Eastwood Park. At all three prisons, most women were spending 23 hours a day in their cells – and at all three, the rate of self-harm had risen since March” (*IT*, 08/06/20).

3.3 | “A state of lockdown”

Crucially, this retrenchment into disciplinary uses of prison space has been perceived by some as occurring under the “cover” of pandemic: a retrenchment that certain authorities perhaps want to occur *anyway*; a retrenchment that, under the camouflage of an Agambendian “state of exception,” was being squeezed into legislation and imprinted on the ground. Unapologetic remarks in this vein surfaced in *IT*, centring on the “emergency” provisions rushed through by the 2020 Coronavirus Act, worrying that a trajectory was being set towards something longer-term and akin to the US “supermax” prison model:

The MoJ and HMPPS will now use the Act as a tool to keep us in a state of lockdown, which smells to me like a new regime mimicking the American prison model ... Every prisoner has been in lockdown and suffering from a lack of support and the law that allows these lockdowns to happen and be enforced with an iron fist is called the ‘Coronavirus Act 2020’ and that is an Act of Parliament that gives prison governors and HMPPS the right to keep prisoners in lockdown for years to come.

(*IT*, 02/08/20b)

Similarly, HLPR worried that the legislation expands state and police powers, raising concerns about the fate of people’s rights – and specifically prisoners’ rights – in the face of such powers. It was revealed that, “speaking to the Joint Committee on Human Rights on 20 April, the Secretary of State for Justice admitted that measures taken to deal with the pandemic inevitably involve a ‘dilution’ of human rights” (HLPR, 24/04/20). Additionally, the same source noted the halting of most prison inspections, another dimension to how the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19 were stripping away certain protections of prisoner rights previously taken-for-granted.

An *IT* piece addressing the Scottish Prison Service’s COVID-19 response identified a perceived need to implement measures quickly, prompting certain “prisoner entitlements” to be withdrawn because they were seen as inessential in a time of crisis (*IT*, 13/04/20). Specific mention was made of hygiene, with the right to daily showers being replaced by showering “at least twice a week” and the diktat that in “exceptional circumstances” daily clean underwear and socks were unnecessary. Elsewhere, it was reflected that release from COVID-19 restrictions might need to occur more slowly in prisons:

In society there is an expectation that at some stage there will be an easing off of restrictions in the coming weeks. Prisons are totally different and expectations will have to be managed with care.

(POA, 28/04/20, p. 2)

There was also reference to government favourably reviewing what had occurred under COVID-19 lockdown in prisons, the implication being that restrictions might *not* be “eased off” in prisons because of apparent wider benefits that were resulting. For Jason at HMP Doncaster, the easing of lockdown outside in the wider community felt difficult when *not* being replicated inside prisons nor having any effect on prisoners still held in lockdown (IT, 02/08/20b).

Another IT piece discussed data released to the UK Parliament showing an apparent decline in riot or disorder incidents affecting English and Welsh prisons since the start of COVID-19 lockdown (IT, 27/07/20). On average, ten incidents of “concerted indiscipline” per month were being reported before the pandemic, while lockdown saw this number reduced to only four:

The figures, released in Parliament, may fuel calls for a permanent end to ‘association time’ when prisoners are allowed to mix socially ... The Prison Officers’ Association has called for association to end. The Ministry of Justice has said it will review the events of recent months to see what lessons can be learned about how prisons should be run in future.

(IT, 27/07/20)

The enduring question became who would really benefit from a potential loss of “association time”: “Prison reformers said that rather than making life better for prisoners, ending association would simply make things easier for staff” (IT, 20/07/20). Jason at HMP Doncaster explicitly linked the Coronavirus Act 2020 to his sense that the POA favoured greater locking-down, reducing association opportunities:

For many years we know that the [POA] has been asking for the prison system to be locked down as a tool to control the flow of drugs and bring down the violence and suicides, and assaults on staff to a level more benefiting the POA, the government and the community, and one thing that the Coronavirus has done over the last three months is achieve what the POA could not.

(IT, 02/08/20b)

Andy Keen-Downs, CEO of the Prisoner Advice and Care Trust, objected that “[t]here is a dangerous narrative around that actually prisoners like this lock-up” (IT, 20/07/20), one easily manipulated to argue that the exception should become the norm: that the further locking-down of already locked-down prison spaces might be desired by *all* concerned.

4 | REWORKING AND SPACES OF “MAKING LIVE AND LETTING DIE”

Biopolitics’ last domain is ... control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the *milieu* in which they live ... And also the problem of the environment to the extent that it is not a natural environment, that it has been created by the population and therefore has effects on that population.

(Foucault, 2003, pp. 244–5)

Geographers (e.g., Philo, 2012) and other scholars are increasingly alert to the gear-shift occurring in Foucault’s 1976–1977 Collège de France lecture course “*Society must be defended*” from a focus on disciplinary power and an “anatomo-politics” of individual bodies in space, towards one on biopower and a “biopolitics” of human population (differentiated according to myriad physical capacities and features) set within diverse environments (or *milieux*) that might be natural, such as swamps or flood-plains, but could also be human-made, particularly urban settlement. This gear-shift propelled the emphases of Foucault’s next two lecture courses, *Security, territory, population* (Foucault, 2007) and *The birth of biopolitics* (Foucault, 2008), inspecting from diverse angles how post-eighteenth-century European societies have conjoined disciplinary power with a

biopolitics of “regulation” – marshalled by the fields of medicine and hygiene – in order to effect choices between who “to make live and [who] to let die” (Foucault, 2003, p. 241). Infectious diseases continue to figure prominently here, one example being the discussion of smallpox (Foucault, 2007, pp. 62–3), and so too do “disciplinary institutions” (Foucault, 2003, p. 253) as quite specific nodes within biopolitical calculation. Crucially, Foucault regards disciplinary power and biopower or regulation as frequently working in concert, not least because “medicine is a power-knowledge ... applied to both the body and the population, and it will therefore have both disciplinary and regulatory effects” (p. 252).

Using our sources, we can show how elements of the UK prison estate’s response to COVID-19 have ushered forth a biopolitical reworking of prison *milieux*. Efforts have clearly been expended to ensure that prisons do not become hot-spots of death potentially threatening to wider society, and to an extent they have become “laboratories” for experimenting, not least through spatial arrangements, with how to control the COVID-19 pandemic as serious biopolitical threat. Contra Agamben’s COVID-19 pronouncements that deny any biomedical validity to governmental attempts at containing pandemic (see note 2), we recognise that the prison-based spatial rearrangements discussed here emerge from a genuine concern to prevent prisoner and staff deaths – and to damp down any threat of prisons acting as “deadly coronavirus transit hubs” (Mosk et al., 2020, n.p.) – but we also argue that they may still add, however inadvertently, to the retrenchment examined in the previous section.

4.1 | Population management strategies

The sources consulted are full of commentary on the ‘life and death’ dimensions of COVID-19 confronting the UK prison system. Some pieces reviewed the basic “numbers” of morbidity and mortality rates, and we have already noted some of this data when scene-setting the story of COVID-19 in UK prisons during 2020. Other pieces – sometimes repeating observations from prisoners and relatives – mention concerns over poor prison hygiene and prison staff failing to follow socio-spatial distancing measures or anti-infection measures (including failing to use correct PPE or even basic face-masks). “One concerned relative told us that: ‘there is no disinfectant, no gloves for staff or cleaners, no hand gel and the work parties are still moving between different sections, making a mockery of lockdown and isolating any contamination’” (HLPR, 09/04/20). Another specific concern was the differing health susceptibilities of different prisoner cohorts, notably the particular vulnerability of older prisoners to suffering and even dying from COVID-19, reflecting known correlations between older age and COVID-19 mortality (HLPR, 09/04/20). Similar worries were heard about, and from, asthmatic young offenders worrying about both infection and not receiving their medication (HLPR, 09/04/20).

In a biopolitical vein, remarks abounded about the dynamics of how infection gets transmitted through prison populations, affecting both prisoners and staff. Discussion of contagion, of viral load accumulating in prison atmospheres and on carceral surfaces (door handles, locks, keys, bathroom fittings, kitchen utensils and the like), was commonplace, dovetailing with debate over the precise “infection control” mechanisms that should be implemented in response. There were also nuances arising with a “technical” focus, sometimes directly engaging the “biochemistry” of the disease, as in articles about PPE, the use of chlorine-based products and the possible value of prisoners having seasonal flu vaccinations which, while obviously not preventing COVID-19, might limit the additional disease burden on prison medical services (POA, 16/03/20).

Of especial note, given Foucault on the biopolitics of population, is that the O’Moore briefing paper was explicitly titled an “interim assessment of impact of various *population management strategies* in prisons in response to COVID-19 pandemic in England” (O’Moore, 2020a, emphasis added). It stated that, “building on best evidence to protect the most vulnerable and reduce transmission of infection, new cohorting strategies were developed by HMPPS advised by PHE [Public Health England] which were implemented from March 31” (O’Moore, 2020a, p. 2). These “cohorting strategies” were threefold, all dependent on partitioning prison space, ensuring that quite specific cohorts either be present in or debarred from given spaces or *milieux*, thereby ensuring maximum biosecurity:

- **Protective Isolation Units (PIUs):** to accommodate known or probable COVID-19 cases, ideally in single-cell accommodation;
- **Shielding Units (SUs):** to protect the most vulnerable identified through collaboration with NHS England, with enhanced levels of bio-security including dedicated staff;
- **Reverse Cohorting Units (RCUs):** to accommodate new receptions or transfers in for a period of 14 days to detect any emergent infectious cases before entering the general population. These units could also accommodate anyone returning from hospital (to prevent incursion of infection through nosocomial transmission). (O’Moore, 2020a, p. 2, original emphases).

Echoing O'Moore's stress on "population management strategies," one source also proposed that something called a "Population Management Unit" should be notified in cases of a COVID-19 outbreak for the purposes of completing a "dynamic risk assessment" (POA, 16/03/20).

4.2 | Applied population geographies

It is helpful to dig deeper into what might be called the "applied population geographies" integral to these population management strategies. Nothing more appears to have been said in our sources explicitly about PIUs as specifically designated prison spaces, although the ideal of single-cell occupancy was a recurrent theme (see above) and perhaps superseded the notion of a dedicated PIU. Resonating intriguingly with the widely deployed metaphor of waging "war" on COVID-19, one source posited prison "field hospitals" to treat prisoners catching the virus (*IT*, 06/04/20b). The term RCUs did not obviously leap from our sources either, excepting reference to new arrivals needing to be immediately tested for COVID-19 and isolated if showing symptoms (POA, 16/03/20). The experience of Walsh, prisoner at HMP Wymott, illustrated the intended outworking of RCU-type principles, even in the seeming absence of a dedicated space named as such. Walsh had to spend time in hospital outwith the prison, not for COVID-19, and was placed in 14-day isolation on his return, but he expressed concern that staff on "bed-watch" for him were not similarly isolating: "They have risked being in contact with the virus and, not only could they have been home and risked passing it to their loved ones, ... they are now back on the wings mixing with the very same inmates ... being protected from *me* having been to hospital" (*IT*, 13/07/20, emphasis added).

There was a tantalising suggestion of the term "cohorting" being used to describe cases where two individuals with confirmed COVID-19 or COVID-like symptoms were placed *together* in a cell (*IT*, 06/04/20b), a move perhaps necessitated in overcrowded prisons with insufficient single-occupancy rooms. Moreover, "cohorting areas" – spaces housing groups of confirmed or suspected cases, wherever their origin – began to be referenced, although speaking of "cohorting areas" (lower-case "c" and "a") likely implied ad hoc arrangements rather than formal "Cohorting Units" (upper-case "C" and "U"). Mention was made of "cohorting areas" that divided prisoners but not staff (*IT*, 06/04/20b), the arrangement criticised by Walsh, and concerns were aired about the appropriateness of combining "confirmed" cases with "suspected" ones, given that the latter – prisoners with colds or flu, say, rather than diagnosed COVID-19 – were then exposed to more serious infection. Arguably, these were areas ending up more like the PIUs than the RCUs of the O'Moore briefing paper, although it was also hinted that sometimes such areas were enlisted to cope simultaneously with elements of both functions. In one source, discussing an inspection of three women's prisons, the suggestion was of "cohorting" being used to segregate prisoners with COVID-19 symptoms *and* those "newly arrived" from the remainder of the prison population, albeit with subtle differences in the timings-spacings involved (*IT*, 08/06/20).

Our sources often considered "shielding," with one piece speaking of government directives about establishing 'Shielding Units' (SUs) for prisoners classed as vulnerable due to being elderly or with underlying health conditions (*IT*, 06/04/20b). A mother of a prisoner stated:

My son is in an open prison, and has been identified by NHS England as being someone at severe risk if he catches COVID-19 ... He is absolutely terrified as healthcare and prison staff are not helping shielding prisoners[,] they have put all shielding prisoners in one billet with no one helping them.

(*IT*, 31/05/20)

Such an account is disturbing, implying the spatial clustering of the prisoners concerned and also a measure of "abandonment," a concept lent acute theoretical-ethical charge through Agamben's (1998, 2005) claims about the suspension of normal duties, of care and protection, inside "camps" and other closed institutions. The mother added:

These vulnerable prisoners are not getting any help and are being pushed into signing some form that takes them off the shielding list in the prison. My son and other prisoners who are terrified of COVID-19 have been asked by officers to sign this form many times and some prisoners have – as they get more help off other prisoners than they do off officers and healthcare.

(*IT*, 31/05/20)

The inference is that some prisoners prefer to remove themselves from the SUs, perceiving that they will be safer elsewhere in the prison, but it is sobering to learn of a "shielding list" from which prison authorities are seeking to *remove* certain prisoners

– or encouraging some to remove themselves – presumably to reduce the numbers needing SU accommodation and associated staff resources. It cannot be doubted just how difficult it must be to create and operate dedicated SUs in prisons hard-pressed financially, spatially and with insufficient staff, particularly at a time when staff are also getting sick. Nonetheless, it is hard to escape the sense here of a mechanism – a list that one is either on or off – poignantly, if unintentionally, enacting a Foucauldian biopolitical logic of choosing between who to “make live” (to shield) and who, potentially, to “let die” (to unshield) (see also our conclusion).

5 | REDUCING THE EXTENT AND SENSE OF THE CARCERAL

[There are] interviews where Foucault expressed belief in the capacity of prisons to treat people humanely, whereas *Discipline and punish* never proposes reforms for the problems it describes ... Be that as it may, Foucault was not a philosopher confined to an ivory tower, as he also was an activist involved in diverse initiatives to assist prisoners ... A peaceful protest outside a prison even led Foucault to be arrested and struck by a hostile policeman ... While French liberals criticised Foucault in his lifetime for promoting an ‘anti-reformist’ activism, ... his proposals encompassed pragmatic reforms for more humane prisons. (Jouet, 2022, p. 203)

Hardly noticed by carceral geographers, Foucault’s interest in prisons during the early-1970s extended beyond history and theory into forms of activism (Terwiel, 2020).⁶ The overarching tone of *Discipline and punish* (Foucault, 1976) is opposed to prisons as inherently oppressive, with the panoptic disciplining of penal space seen as a fiendish new twist of dominating power, a tone then replicated by the *Groupe d’information des prisons* (GIP), co-founded by Foucault and seemingly hostile to any attempt at reforming the French prison system as it stood (Elden, 2017, pp. 129–39).⁷ That said, less “abolitionist” and more “reformist” dimensions of Foucault’s activism can be identified, since “[i]n reality, Foucault’s radicality did not prevent him from supporting concrete reforms ... He notably envisioned legal remedies, such as stronger rights and alternatives to incarceration, from public service to forms of probation” (Jouet, 2022, p. 212). He even spoke of “better prisons,” and of how the issue was not so much “abolition” or even creating new “model prisons,” but rather a broader ambition of fostering social spaces in which the desperate “marginalisation” of so many human groups, prisoners included, could be remedied (Jouet, 2022, p. 213). In passing, we might note that our own perspective – underpinning the drift of our vision, reasoning and “penal politics” occurring within this paper – broadly equates with this description of Foucault’s decarceral stance.

It might be contended that such a stance, an abolitionism open to reform, echoes that adopted by the HLPR. More widely, there are flickers throughout our sources of a sensibility that, peering beyond retrenchment or reworking, was briefly open to reducing the scale and reach of penalty under the press of pandemic. There were fleeting voices, if muted, prepared to ask if UK society really needs prisons at all – given their risky presence in the socio-demographic landscape – or whether, if not subject to complete abolition, they might be down-sized in certain respects or revised as more humane “communities” shared by prisoners and prison staff (thus softening the marginalisation of the former). To anticipate, though, such glimpses of something different, indeed of decarceration, have remained exactly that: glimpses, largely eclipsed by the other trajectories reported here.

5.1 | Reducing prisoner numbers: Releasing and not admitting

Early in the pandemic, proposals began to circulate about how reducing prisoner numbers would lessen the strain of overcrowding and free up physical space within which to enact socio-spatial distancing measures. The author of the briefing paper cited earlier, O’Moore, produced a second paper, tellingly stamped, unlike its counterpart, as “Official Sensitive,” in which prison overcrowding and *lack* of suitable space were centralised (O’Moore, 2020b). One remark here was about the dangers arising “[w]here isolation facilities are *overwhelmed* by numbers of cases/probable cases” (O’Moore, 2020b, p. 1, emphasis added). From the outset, anxiety was seemingly rife at the highest levels about prisons being “overwhelmed” due to the basic facts of British prisons: too full of prisoners, too short of space. While politically problematic, particularly for a Conservative administration “naturally” inclined to a punitive justice system necessitating substantial incarceration, an obvious solution would be to alter these facts: to render prisons emptier of prisoners and thereby spatially freed up. What might be adjudged a more radical agenda hence peeked out, one that, far from retrenching the carceral, might resist or at least reduce, de-intensify or de-escalate its grip.

The second O'Moore document thereby acknowledged that “[p]opulation management approaches” might “include reducing the total prisoner population during the pandemic period and/or selective release of the highly vulnerable prisoner population” (O'Moore, 2020b, p. 1). Recognising that “[t]he prison estate ... is currently operating at almost full operational capacity with significant levels of overcrowding, including doubling up in cells normally designed for single occupancy,” O'Moore was explicit that “[r]educing the prisoner population generally [would have] several potential benefits”: “creat[ing] ‘head room’ within each individual prison and across the whole estate to enable more effective isolation and cohorting capacity,” “reduc[ing] the need for movement into and across the prison estate,” permitting “enhanced care and biosecurity” for “shielders,” and “enabling single cell accommodation to be implemented as standard” (O'Moore, 2020b, pp. 2–3).

Our sources charted initial, if hesitant, governmental moves to achieve such a reduction. *IT* reported in May 2020 on both PHE proposing reductions to stop “cell-sharing” and the Justice Secretary announcing an early release scheme for up to 4000 prisoners within two months of their “normal” release date, but added that to date fewer than 100 had actually been released (*IT*, 26/05/20). *IT* returned in June 2020 to the figure of 4000 – noting that it was supposed to include both men and women, and also citing a parallel early release scheme for 70 pregnant women and new mothers – but found that across the two schemes only 26 women had been released by mid-May (*IT*, 08/06/20). Unsurprisingly, the HLPR was enthusiastic about release schemes, and CEO Crook reflected on the advantages of “amnesty”:

[W]e should be looking to ease people who could be safely released back out into the community. None of this would require legislation, but it does require leadership and self-control by the courts ... This [amnesty] is primarily aimed at protecting staff, the officers, nurses, probation and administrative staff who are currently being asked to work in the most disgusting and dangerous conditions.

(HLPR, 18/03/20)

Worries were nonetheless stated about what might face “early release prisoners” during pandemic and wider societal lockdown, it arguably being harder under these circumstances for individuals with a “criminal record” to secure accommodation or employment (*IT*, 20/04/20). Indeed, inspectors apparently found that “prisoners on release” were not being sufficiently supported “through-the-gate” and even being released “homeless” (*IT*, 08/06/20), confirming the impression that British officialdom was less than enthusiastic about putting any heft or machinery behind such decarceral moves.

If one prong of reducing prisoner numbers was release schemes, the second was that “[w]e should be reducing the flow of people into the most stressed prisons” (HLPR, 18/03/2020), translating into calls for both reducing arrests on the streets and encouraging courts to avoid custodial sentencing. Again, it was the HLPR most obviously advocating here:

We have been speaking with police leaders up and down the country as part of our programmes of work to reduce the arrests of children and women ... Use of the criminal justice system to tackle societal problems such as homelessness, poverty and mental ill-health has become the norm. Now is the time for it to be scaled back in order to keep the police and the public safe and reduce all unnecessary contact.

(HLPR, 24/03/20)

This quote aligned with radical critiques of penal incarceration as a blunt catch-all response to wider social malaises, dependent on the primitive spatial tactics of removal, distancing and containing. Such a critique is familiar in the orbit of carceral geographies, particularly thanks to the critical deconstruction of the US “supermax Gulag” by Gilmore (2007). It remains obvious, however, that an approach of “scaling back” arrests and custodial sentencing has not sat easily with the UK government: it does not feature in the other, non-“Official Sensitive,” O'Moore briefing paper (O'Moore, 2002b) and has but a shadowy presence in our sources.

5.2 | New prisoner–staff relations?

In a different vein, there was a gesture under the press of COVID-19 at what might be framed less as a reduced “extent” (or “quantity”) of the carceral and more as a reduction in its “sense” (or “quality”). Flittering through our sources was indeed a hint of new solidarities emerging between prisoners and their custodians, meaning front-line prison staff, forged

in the face of ultimately *shared* vulnerabilities. If the usual nature of the carceral entails a stark binary between prisoners and staff, on most occasions between those without power and those able to exert power, then pandemic has caused some fuzzing of that binary, some “play” in the normal on-flow of power relations. One writer in *IT* thanked prisoners for their support, care and “patience” during the pandemic (*IT*, 02/08/20a), while another, reflecting on lower incidents of “concerted indiscipline,” speculated that this “finding may reflect comments from prisoners and staff that there has been a spirit of co-operation in many jails during the lockdown, with prisoners accepting that the restrictions are necessary on health grounds” (*IT*, 27/07/20):

Relationships between officers and prisoners have improved greatly at this time because many inmates understand that the regime restrictions brought in were necessary – not only to keep our NHS from being overwhelmed but, in a closed environment such as a prison, to preserve life and prevent illness from this invisible virus that knows no boundaries.

(POA, 01/05/20, p.11)

These points about enhanced solidarity and “no boundaries,” as well as repetition of the “overwhelmed” motif, hinted at a new biopolitical assemblage: one where previously adversarial human relations become “improved” within a specific “closed environment” whose usual boundaries collapse thanks to the “invisible virus.”

Our sources also reported a grounded dilution of normal carceral hostilities, and of possibilities for re-imagining prisoners through lenses that might challenge mainstream punitive leanings:

Our prisoners in Maghaberry were out on the landing, clapping the NHS but also paying tribute to the prison officers who are looking after their health and wellbeing.

(*IT*, 20/04/20)

An earlier *IT* article explored how the move into lockdown under lockdown had prompted an unexpected rise in acts of support for staff by prisoners. It admitted that fears of prison riots had risen after reports of deaths at Italian prisons following lockdown restrictions, but then narrated how signs, notes and pictures started to appear that actually *thanked* officers for putting their health on the line by continuing to work (Figure 2). The article quoted prisoners' messages of support, some feeling a strengthened connection to prison staff:

A handwritten letter from a prisoner at Nottingham ... ‘We as prisoners are sometimes very selfish and forget that behind the uniform there is a normal person who worry about their friends and family who risk getting COVID-19 every day they travel to work, but come in to work to look after us.’

(*IT*, 06/04/20a)

And at Dovegate one resident wrote: ‘You should all be commended and recognised for the respectful and professional way you all have contributed to the smooth as possible running of HMP Dovegate.’

(*IT*, 06/04/20a)

Increased solidarity in the early days of the pandemic was short-lived, however, and not a system-changing development. Despite there being a call for prisoners to be included in a consultation to reduce or end the lockdown in prisons, for instance, this call was rejected by the government (*IT*, 22/06/20). As the clapping for the NHS waned across the country, so did signs of solidarity within prisons.

6 | CONCLUSION

And let us be honest, I now live in a death trap.

... It's almost as if the coronavirus were specifically designed to kill off those locked away from society. I know this is not literally the case. But this is a virus that is airborne and most affects people in confined,



FIGURE 2 Thank you note to staff from prisoners (*IT*, 06/04/2020a).

overcrowded spaces. ... The way I am seeing it right now, this will go on until those of us imprisoned are all dead, or at the very least, until half of us have perished, leaving the other half to now-open single-man cells in which we can hide. ... So my friend, would you like to switch places? I bet your home does not seem so claustrophobic now, does it?

(Metcalf, 2020, n.p.)

Questioning the similarity – with which we began – between prison and wider community lockdown, Jerry Metcalf, long-term prisoner of a Michigan, US, correctional facility, notes the heightened threat posed by COVID-19 to prisoners in “confined, overcrowded spaces.” He even speculates about it as a biopolitical plot designed to kill off “the imprisoned,” referencing too the claustrophobia, loneliness and prisoners increasingly consigned to “single-man cells” where they “hide” from the disease. Metcalf’s perspective is undoubtedly positioned and partial,⁸ but it evokes something of what lockdown under lockdown feels like, the sense of being abandoned, even the intimation of a creeping “new normal.”

Our source-based engagement with the discursive terrain around COVID-19 in UK prisons during 2020 has disclosed the anatomy of a debate wherein fissures appeared between those seeing an opportunity to retrench the most primal features of a prison system – what those of Foucauldian and other critical persuasions regard as its punitive, disciplinary and controlling aspects, particularly as operationalised through multiple forms of spatial (en)closure – and those who saw it as an occasion to reduce penalty through downsizing of prison numbers or even a new era of less confrontational staff–prisoner relations. As we also reveal, there were those whose primary concern became to rework prison regimes under the press of pandemic, pursuing new biopolitical “population management strategies,” although the logics of such strategies, not least in demanding enhanced micro-spatial partitioning, have arguably pushed more in the direction of retrenchment than of reduction. Thus, while the UK government’s own health experts – let alone more abolitionist voices – have sometimes recommended reducing prisoner numbers, the government has evidently come to reject such a course of action (Aebi & Tiago, 2020) in favour of virus containment through extensive isolation (HMIP, 2021). Moreover, a *Daily Mail* article from June 2021, discussing anticipated shifts in UK penal policy associated with an impending government White Paper, quoted a MoJ source: “For the past year we’ve been able to see the effects of tighter lockdowns on male prisoners. While we’re not planning to introduce 23-hour lockdowns, we won’t be going back to the old system – it will be somewhere in between” (Ryan, 2021, n.p.). Paralleling claims explored earlier, notably about male prisoners apparently feeling safer through *not* associating with “dangerous offenders,” this article foresaw that new measures – enforcing segregation, formally reducing “association time” – would be applied to all “closed estate” (higher security male) prisons, if not to other categories (open prisons; ones for women and young offenders). The direction of travel, if true, is hence to be starkly retrenchionist.

Unsurprisingly, the PRT is “deeply suspicious” of what is coming and the claimed evidence basis, “especially when the press is being fed what appears to be advance notice of a policy decision to reduce the time prisoners will spend unlocked” (PRT, 2021b, n.p.). The fear is of returning to “the old system,” possibly even to less enlightened versions of that old system, a fear seemingly justified by the UK government now indicating that it is planning to double the number of prison spaces claimed as needed in 2019 (c.10,000 to now c.20,000: PRT, 2021d). On 24 March, 2021, the PRT marked a year since the original declaration of the UK’s COVID-19 lockdown, stating that “[a]t that time,” in March 2020, “few could have imagined that the dramatic restrictions, introduced to safeguard against the predicted widespread loss of life in prisons, would still be in place a year on” (PRT, 2021c, n.p.). While lockdown has eventually lifted outside, it has prevailed in prisons and so, at the time of writing, lockdown under lockdown is yet to abate. Such a condition, enacted because of “this extraordinary time” or “state of exception,” still remains, rendering prisons akin to Foucault’s Early Modern “plague town,” thoroughly retrenched if complexly reworked, but in no ways reduced.

With that claim, our paper has essentially completed its work, but – echoing the final paragraph in our introduction – we should return to the wider horizon of the COVID-19 pandemic and its creation of disparate “biological sub-citizens” differentially impacted by the contagion’s deleterious health impacts. In a paper influential for Sparke (2014, 2017), Fassin (2009) suggests that insufficient attention has been paid to the “let die” part of how Foucault characterises modernity’s biopolitical imperative,⁹ nor to how the original French version of this characterisation, from Foucault’s *History of sexuality* (Foucault, 1979), contains a phrase best (if awkwardly) translated as “to reject into death” (Fassin, 2009, p. 52). For Fassin, the challenge is to concretise what he terms the “bioinequalities” that beat down upon certain peoples and places, effectively “rejecting” the peoples concerned into or towards death through exposing them to all manner of health hazards while withholding resources that might otherwise enable them to survive (if not thrive). Under the press of COVID-19, prisoners inside and certain populations on the outside are indeed *both* starkly exposed, but we suppose that those who are forcibly crammed into carceral spaces – enduring lockdown under lockdown – are most obviously placed in harm’s way. There is a pernicious feedback loop, moreover, because the more that COVID-19 offers a pretext for reinforced carcerality – fortified around and within the prison walls, forestalling some of those permeabilities and mobilities recently emphasised by carceral geographers – the more risky to health, well-being and human flourishing the prisons become. A new variety of locked-up “biological sub-sub citizen,” or perhaps “biological *non*-citizen,” is arguably one key consequence – sadly evidenced by the fact that the death toll in prisons in England and Wales is now at its highest levels since records began, evidencing the “devastating impact that COVID-19 has had on people living and working in prisons and their families” (HLPR, 2022).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the internet and the sources are all listed in the Appendix document.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Further information on global developments in prisons under pandemic is provided by the Prison Insider initiative created by the founder of the International Observatory of Prisons (<https://www.prison-insider.com/articles/coronavirus-la-fievre-des-prisons>).

² We are aware of controversy accompanying Agamben’s own statements, appearing in blog form on his publisher’s website (Quadlibet) during early-2020, about COVID-19 lockdowns. Over-extending his critiques elsewhere of how state authorities smuggle in repressive socio-spatial measures under the cloak of “emergency,” he has expressed hostility to state-imposed lockdowns, even ones informed by expert biomedical sciences. He appears to dismiss COVID-19 as a “hoax” and to sympathise with “anti-vaxxers,” the latter disturbingly positioned as

equivalent to the Jews under Nazi persecutions, hence (unintentionally) aligning himself with Far-Right conspiratorialism. For discussion, see Bratton (2021a, 2021b), Caldwell (2020), Kotsko (2022), and Silva and Higuera (2020). Our view echoes van den Berge (2020, p. 5): “it seems advisable ... not to ascribe too much weight to Agamben’s assessment of the corona crisis as far as it concerns his medical expertise. With regard to the danger of exceptionalism becoming the rule rather than the exception, however, his critique deserves to be taken very seriously.”

- ³ “The carceral aspects of the state – or what we call simply the carceral state – is the state at its most coercive: cement and steel bars, cuffs, batons, and an arsenal of weapons held by police, parole officers, and prisons to maintain control over those members of society deemed most in need of containment” (Morrell, 2018, p. 51).
- ⁴ They were enrolled in internship work through the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow, during summer 2020. The internships were advertised for current and just-completed undergraduate students taking an Honours Geography degree; they were unpaid but rewarded with a book token; it was agreed at the outset exactly what work was required and that interns would be attributed co-authorship of any paper resulting from the project. Both Carlin (2020) and Fallon (2021) also wrote undergraduate dissertations in the subfield of carceral geographies.
- ⁵ We recognise that “retrenchment” often means “a curtailment of expenses,” in which capacity geographers and others have discussed how neoliberalism entails a “retrenchment” of state activities, notably welfare services, that rolls back what is provided and thereby cuts costs – as in the classic statement from Peck and Tickell (2002). But it can also mean “the act of consolidating one’s strength,” suggesting a deepening or intensifying of activities, and also, more narrowly but highly apposite for our purposes, “an interior fortification to reinforce external walls.” Definitions taken from: <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/retrenchment>.
- ⁶ One reviewer notes that these aspects of Foucault’s life-work could be instructive for carceral geographers as they negotiate the complex interpretative-analytical terrain between distanced critique of prisons, perhaps linked more-or-less explicitly to an abolitionist agenda, and engaged proposals for how prisons might be rendered more humane institutions.
- ⁷ *The Punitive society* lecture course (Foucault, 2015) reports some of the groundwork for *Discipline and punish*, but contains virtually nothing about “the Panopticon” and instead majors more on the fundamental spatial form of the prison per se (as this spatially segregated site of confinement for criminals being *punished* through periods of enforced unfreedom). Philo (2020) suggests that Foucault effectively shows how prisoners “doing time” were also “doing space.” Foucault’s hostility to prisons, with its abolitionist cast, is especially apparent here.
- ⁸ In the US context, moreover, the “structural violence” of the prison complex is also profoundly racialised, and the press of COVID-19 on that system has been felt particularly acutely by its Black detainees, their families and communities. A racial dimension is certainly not absent in the UK case, but its analysis lies beyond the scope of what we can accomplish here.
- ⁹ We might query whether this claim remains accurate, since – certainly within recent critical-geographical scholarship in the orbit of Foucault’s biopolitics (also nodding to Agamben and Mbembe) – the exploration of biopolitical geographies frequently focuses not on ‘making life’ but rather on the “letting die,” or indeed a more aggressive “making die,” of diverse demonised populations across diverse periods and places (e.g. Tyner, 2009).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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