

**Kilgore, J. (2022) *Understanding E-carceration: Electronic Monitoring, the Surveillance State, and the Future of Mass Incarceration*. The New Press.**

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In *Understanding E-carceration*, James Kilgore, a former prisoner, anti-prison activist and founder of the *Challenging E-Carceration* project within the Chicago-based *MediaJustice*, offers us a compelling, comprehensive and detailed exploration of the new dynamics of punitive justice. Through meticulously woven research on Electronic Monitoring (EM) underpinned by diverse historical, empirical and autobiographical accounts, the book demonstrates how new technologies of incarceration, which Kilgore calls “techno-cells” (p.10), have changed the paradigm of carcerality and its spatial configurations. Celebrated as a humanist alternative to imprisonment, EM, Kilgore shows, punishes not only individuals but also families and communities by bringing prisons into people’s homes and encroaching on domestic and communal spaces. The book is significant primarily in contesting the alleged benefits of EM and other apparatuses of “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2018), shedding light on their direct relation to profit-maximising neoliberal agendas and the erosion of democratic institutions. What renders it even more momentous is its exploration of how the scope of e-carceration, defined as “the application of a network of punitive technologies to social problems [...] through confinement, tracking, and recording a range of movements, activities, and even bodily functions” (p.17), is not only limited to the punishment of people with criminal records or those on probation, parole or pre-trial. Its breadth reaches the restriction and monitoring of, for instance, alcohol use, intimate partner conflict, immigrant mobility, the behavior of young people and any act that might be considered aberrant in the life of a person whose data is captured, databased, tracked, and controlled by the state or private entities. Deploying EM as only one component of the larger machine of policing makes the book widely relevant and urgent. Further, although Kilgore primarily examines these issues in the U.S. context, the statistics, problems and risks he identifies have global relevance in an era of expanding criminal justice systems worldwide.

The book presents its arguments in three interlocking parts. The first part introduces the concept of e-carceration and the technologies of EM, uncovering the motivations, science and politics behind their use. The second part delves deeper into the histories of, and sites where these e-carceration apparatuses have been tested, implemented and legitimised.

After these two engrossing opening sections, which depict rather bleak and inequitable carceral futures for all regardless of one's criminal record, the final part engages with theories and practices of penal abolitionism, envisioning alternative futures.

To expand, in the first part, the author delivers a comprehensive discussion of e-carceration. This enhanced version of conventional punishment, along with its various instruments, from EM and CCTV cameras to biometric recognition technologies, further profiles, tracks and administers bodies, almost reducing them to mere data points. This is achieved not only through risk assessment and prediction systems that evaluate a person's employability, credit scores, crime risk, and digitised identifiers (e.g., bodily fluids, DNA, heartbeats, voice cadence, etc.) but also through location tracking capacities and other omnipotent auto-surveillance devices from smartphones to smart homes, which already permeate our everyday lives. Here, through tracing the history of tracking in the U.S back to settler colonialism and its ongoing echoes in social stratification, Kilgore explores how e-carceration is particularly dehumanising for racialised and impoverished groups who are "disproportionately Black, Latinx, Indigenous, undocumented, disabled, and LGBTQ+" (p.30) and constantly at risk of being profiled, targeted and criminalised.

After developing an expansive view of e-carceration, Kilgore shifts focus to EM specifically, which emerged as an attempt to implement "mild and positive punishment" for minor offences and to whitewash the flaws of penal institutions – something that Kilgore calls "carceral humanism" (p.21). The use of EM, it is argued, has grown due to three interlocking factors: the arrival of GPS technology in the late 1990s; the co-opted critique of mass incarceration in the 2010s, which saw the potential of e-carceration to create future revenue streams amid the push to eliminate cash bail and address overcrowding issues; and finally, the COVID-19 pandemic of the 2020s. The remainder of the section is particularly critical for staunch advocates of EM, as it demonstrates the extent to which the proliferation of EM afflicts bodies physically, mentally and financially by trapping them in Catch-22 situations, in which the very people who are expected to be reintegrated into society are those whose access to employment, housing and social life is physically and financially restricted. It also shows how, through exclusion zones, designation of high-crime areas and bans on living outdoors, EM has reconfigured urban space and the right to the city, exacerbating urban discrimination especially, once again, for marginalised communities.

This argument is further developed in the second part of the book, which broadens its focus beyond EM to explore the broader spatio-political conditions of e-carceration evident in immigration politics, pandemic management and 'open-air prisons'. This section is particularly interdisciplinary, crossing boundaries between border studies, carceral geography and technoscience. It highlights the reality that borders, detention centres and prisons today are not merely physical spaces but dynamic, hybrid and data-based sites of technological experimentation. Kilgore covers here a multitude of policing methods, the

corporate network of companies that profits from e-carceration and technological specifications for advanced surveillance systems, ranging from unmanned aircraft and seismic sensors to laser-enhanced cameras that identify motion, largely developed in response to the cross-border flow of bodies. What is also examined is how such military interventions in immigration and detention have become omnipresent, especially in the Global North, and how they have been intensified by Big Data and EM. These technologies imprint, collect and control a great number of corporeal and social details of the targeted body, from biometric traits to family relationships, phone records, personal addresses and immigration history, not only as a governing technique, but also for profit, selling this information to data brokering firms, for example. Ensuring that this narrative is not solely a binary perpetrator-victim story, Kilgore also discusses resistance to this “macro data management project” (p. 108) stressing the importance of historian Simone Browne’s (2015, p.128) call to develop a “critical biometric consciousness”, which would enable people to recognise that they are the rightful owners of any data stemming from their bodies and should have control over what is done with this data (p.112).

Within this part, the chapter on the COVID-19 pandemic is striking, revealing how the reach of EM, technologies of e-carceration and “the array of geo-fences” (p.126) – virtual perimeters delineating tangible geographic areas that require people to have permission to enter or leave certain zones – expanded during the lockdowns. These have morphed into “a far more systematic mode of segregation on the basis of not only a person’s criminal background” but also their “health data collected for COVID-19 detection” (p.126). Kilgore illustrates how university campuses and cities became testing grounds for surveillance during this period, analysing how police reforms paradoxically led to investments in harsher apparatuses of electronic control and gentrification and further disenfranchisement of residents from marginalised racial and ethnic groups.

These considerations lead to Kilgore’s examination of a city whose carceral geography is among the most brutal in the world: Gaza. The city functions not only as an open-air prison (Chomsky 2012) but, more recently, as an open-air death chamber. At the time of writing, at least 35,287 Palestinian people have been killed in Gaza by Israeli armed forces since October 7, 2024. There are more than 78,204 people injured, over 8,000 missing, and, with more than half the city destroyed, thousands more starving to death (AJLabs 2024). This section in *Understanding E-Carceration* is particularly unsettling given the ongoing war, as it contextualises how the formation of Israel as a contemporary settler colonial state has governed, punished and dehumanised Palestinian bodies in Gaza for decades, employing cutting-edge technologies of e-carceration from geo-fences to amplified biometric tracking. As Kilgore aptly puts it, Gaza is the place that “has been testing the limits of what the minimum level of sustainability is before a total humanitarian catastrophe” (p.145). Although Kilgore concedes that such a level of military aggression does not take place as overtly in the U.S. today, he draws a historical (e.g., the enslavement of African people, the

genocidal warfare against Native Americans, xenophobic attacks on immigrants and mass criminalisation of people of colour) and infrastructural (e.g., the excess of security cameras and high-tech surveillance empires) parallelisms. Furthermore, catastrophes like these, along with similar predicaments and human rights violations worldwide, are perceived as yet another source of revenue for mostly U.S.-based multibillionaire philanthropists who continue to profit “from the populations that global capitalism had already impoverished” through social impact bonds (SIB) – or in other words, “doing good while doing well” (p.156). It is deeply disturbing to discover how corporate giants, from Google and Amazon to other security investors, amass wealth not only through investments in the criminal justice system but also through algorithmic manipulations that exacerbate the impoverishment of the poor and criminalised. Such realities prompt reconsideration of technologies such as blockchain, digital IDs, and the Internet of Things, all of which are likely to influence the future of surveillance and carcerality, intensifying the data trail and further jeopardising non-conforming bodies.

Despite these contemporary scenarios, we are not left without hope; rather, we are offered a forward-looking end, the one that requires presence and organising (Gilmore 2011). In the final and briefest part of the book, drawing from abolitionists including Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Beth Richie, and reflecting on his own experiences, Kilgore shifts focus to penal abolitionism: this entails not only abandoning prisons but also overturning surveillance technologies, corporate control, data mining, risk assessment and algorithm-based surveillance, as well as all forms of racism, white supremacy, racial capitalism and gender-based violence. Responding to those who seek an answer to the question “how,” Kilgore, as a grassroots activist himself, outlines a few key targets for action to combat the technologies of e-carceration and proposes several hands-on digital abolitionist activist strategies. These include educating communities on living without leaving data trails, raising awareness about the generation and use of data, and advocating for “the design of communication devices that give users absolute control” (p.188). Tactics such as “building grassroots tech power”, using “localized mesh networks” and promoting “net neutrality” are also put forward as crucial steps for abolitionists as ways to resist data extractivism and mass profiling at the community level (p.195).

Throughout the book, Kilgore consistently emphasises the scarcity of scientific data on EM, as well as the ambiguity and inconsistency in its regulations, despite a few recent measures such as recommendations by the Confederation of European Probation (CEP) in the EU. This book, thus, along with James Gacek’s *Portable Prisons* (2022) which addresses the same issue and was published in the same year with a different geographical focus, serves as a significant counterpoint to this lack of data. Combining overarching research with relatable examples and accessible language, *Understanding E-carceration* satisfies not only academics and activists but also a general audience with little prior knowledge of the issue. Anyone interested in the justice system stands to benefit from its approach to EM and the entire

network of “punitive and profit-extracting technologies” that are “not an alternative to incarceration but an alternative form of incarceration” (p. 198).

## References

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