



GLOBAL
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Brain Health, Ageing & Dementia in Prisons

What we can learn and what we must do

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Stakeholder Discussion Forum on Ageing, Brain Health and
Cognitive Impairment in Irish Prisons | 27 May 2026

Atlantic Fellows

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What not to do

- Prisons are a microcosm of what not to do for brain health.
- If we can improve brain health in prisons, we can improve it anywhere.



Ageing prisons and ageing prisoners

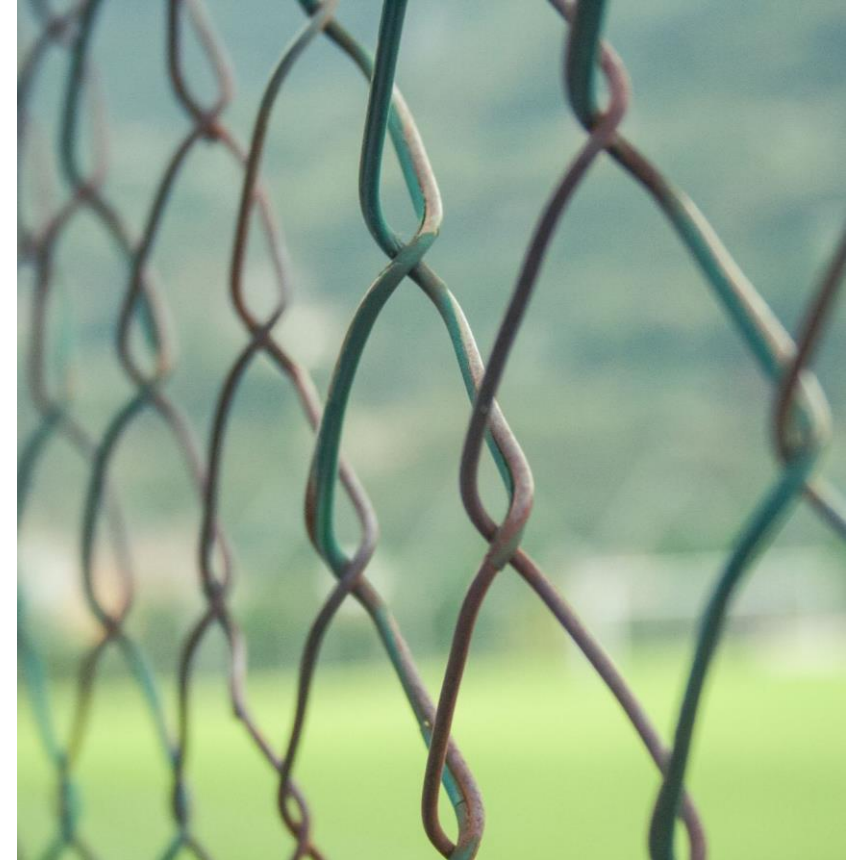
- Prison populations are ageing rapidly.
- In Ireland, 10% in custody in 2015 were over the age of 50.
- By 2023, this figure had increased to 18.2%.
- By 2030, 1/3 will be age 50 and over.

Sources: Global Prison Trends, 2025; Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2026



Prison environments are not friendly to your ageing brain or if you have cognitive impairment

- Poor design and accessibility.
- Risk of trauma.
- Damaging social and physical architecture.



Prisons accelerate ageing and brain ageing

- Every year in prison reduces your life expectancy by 2 years.
- People who are incarcerated die 20 years earlier.
- Poor baseline health and adversities, access, overcrowding.



Sources: Patterson, 2013; McLintock and Sheard, 2024.

Cognitive decline in prisons is rising because of a perfect storm of risk factors

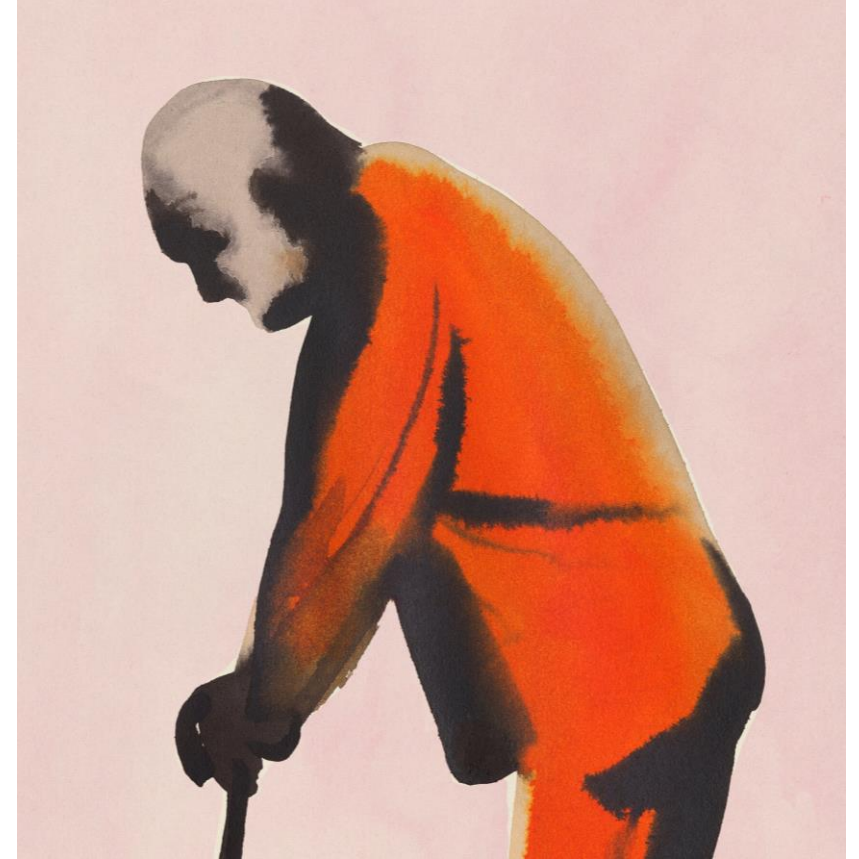
- Cognitive impairment in ageing prisoners is double that seen in community.
- Incarceration hits all the wrong notes in terms of risk factors for dementia, e.g. loneliness, isolation, TBI, education, cognitive and stimulating activities, exercise, smoking, drugs



Sources: Miller et al., 2024.

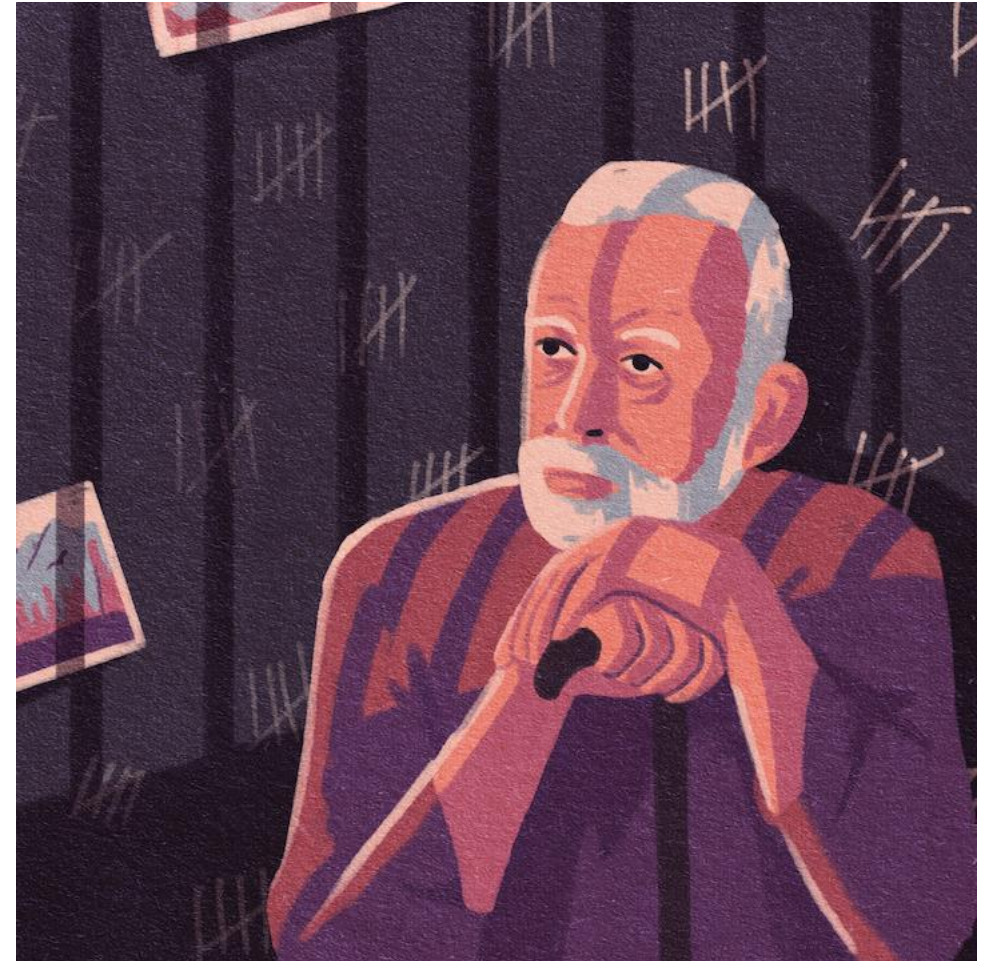
The rise of dementia in prisons is a hidden crisis

- Increasing numbers.
- Undetected and undiagnosed.
- Risk factors for incarceration are risk factors for dementia.
- Dementia and cognitive impairment increases risk of offending.



Why this matters to everyone

- Goes beyond prisons
- Stigma
- Inequities
- Social determinants of dementia



What we should do

- Opportunity for dialogue
- Transdisciplinary lens
- Future thinking
- Moral imagination





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Thank you

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