Between Securitisation and Unsafety: A Scaled Analysis of Policing and Structural Vulnerabilisation on the EU Hotspot Samos

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) hotspot system bases itself on securitisation strategies, surrounded by discursive humanitarian promises. In September 2021, the EU opened its first Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) on the Aegean hotspot island of Samos. The EU pledged that the vast securitisation infrastructure, including a police station, would provide safety to asylum seekers. Based on psycho-geographical counter-mappings of forced camp residents (*n* = 26) and semi-structured interviews with human rights defenders (*n* = 5), this article investigates the relations between policing, security, safety and vulnerability on different geographical scales. These scales include the border regime, the hotspot island and the camp. The counter-mappings show how the CCAC renders asylum-seeking people more vulnerable, with their safety being played off against border security. Testimonies of police violence and racism indicate that the intentionality of harm reaches a necropolitical dimension beyond the safety–security nexus. Therefore, we call for reflection on the colonial legacy of border policing and its decolonisation.

Keywords: European migration policy; hotspot island; police; security; vulnerability; necropolitics.

Introduction

Remote places and island contexts present unique characteristics for both the police and the policed. Cases of police brutality are often linked to a widespread impunity that creates feelings of helplessness, fear and despair for the policed (Forde, 2023; Ruddell, 2022; Ruddell & Jones, 2020). Nevertheless, within the criminological subdisciplines of police studies and island studies, critical perspectives on policing in island contexts are commonly ignored[1] (Lithopoulos & Ruddell, 2011; Ruddell & Jones, 2020; Souhami, 2020). Therefore, this article takes a different approach, drawing on the work of Wallace and Neptune-Figaro (2023). It stresses the importance of developing theory emerging from specific locations to gain new perspectives, challenge the status quo on modern policing and foster a sensibility toward the decolonisation of criminology, criminal justice and policing in island contexts.

What role do state institutions—in this case, the police—play in transforming and reproducing modern societies? In which geographies and spaces does policing take place and who is policed? What official narratives are assigned to the police and the policed, and what deviations arise when we view them from the margins? Asking these questions, this article situates itself in the newly emerging subdiscipline of *border criminology* that responds to the transformation of the judicial and criminological systems in the era of post-migrant modernity (Bosworth, 2017; Bosworth et al., 2016). It enters the "carceral-police continuum" (Massaro & Boyce, 2021) and analyses the police as an institution of state executive power. This analysis is based on the perspectives and lived experiences of asylum-seeking people in the *de facto* detention of the European Union (EU) hotspot camps on the Greek island of Samos.

Where exactly does this policing take place? This contribution analyses policing from the scale of a particular place (the newly built hotspot camp) to the scale of the island and towards the scale of the surrounding sea border of the European border regime. In September 2021, the EU opened the first of five Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) in the Aegean Sea. Samos's CCAC not only represents a particular hotspot island situation but also serves as a blueprint for the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The reformed CEAS declares migrant containment at the external borders of the EU in future CCACs as obligatory. The CCAC is a highly securitised environment (Manek, 2021) which operates within the legal EU framework, administered by the Greek Ministry for Migration and executed by the island's authorities. Aside from the key role of the police, a private company monitors security aspects of the camps. With this multiplication of actors, police practices on the EU hotspot islands take place in what can be described as a "blurred sovereignty," especially in the case of the European border regime (Van der Woude, 2020).

During the transition from the old hotspot camp, a "Reception and Identification Centre" (RIC), the European commission promoted the CCAC with extensive humanitarian discourses of safety (e.g., EU Debates, 2020). However, its opening revealed excessive securitisation practices and remotely located carceral architecture and infrastructure, characteristic of unlawful *de facto* detention.

Migration studies seldom build on a nuanced differentiation between safety and security (Pachocka & Visvizi, 2018), sometimes even using the two concepts synonymously. However, we argue that a differentiated understanding of safety versus security provides a clearer picture of the contexts, qualities and consequences of policing practices. Therefore, we borrow the common distinction used in technology studies (e.g., Penzenstadler et al., 2014): safety describes the protection of human vulnerability from harm caused by technologies. Security refers to the protection of technological infrastructure from human actions. Our contribution echoes feminist critique that the conceptualisation of security politics fundamentally concerns state security and not human safety or well-being (Åse & Wendt, 2021).

Vulnerability is attributed to asylum seekers by development actors and in psychological paradigms as an individual trait. However, feminist political theory explains vulnerability as an existential characteristic of human life that is distributed across the stratification of social groups (e.g., Butler et al., 2016; Madhok, 2014). Accordingly, this contribution examines the role of policing between the securitisation of the hotspot approach and the humanitarian discourse of safety and vulnerability. Does it contribute to safety or to further vulnerabilisation of a social group already catalogued in the vulnerable social position of asylum-seeking forced residents in the CCAC?

Methodologically, we work with a novel approach: a psycho-geographical counter-mapping (Manek et al., 2023) that aims to make visible spatial control and its challenges (Dalton & Mason-Deese, 2012). This approach allows a unique examination of the policing of vulnerability in the island's securitisation landscape. Twenty-six counter-mappings examine the extent to which policing on Samos contributes to the promise of security and safety on and across the different geographical scales and at the intimate individual level. Following the grounded theory-led analysis, the evaluation highlights that the police on Samos act as an institution of securitisation but in opposition to their narrative role of establishing safety. We argue that, despite the promise of securing overall safety on Samos and within the CCAC, the police and private security company play a crucial role in producing unsafety for asylum seekers on Samos. This contributes to further structural vulnerabilisation.

Extensive testimonies note the racist dimension of incidents of police brutality, and racism in everyday policing practices on Samos and within the CCAC. Accordingly, we recognise the need to further investigate the racialisation of asylum-seeking people and examine colonial legacies of contemporary control practices (Mehta & Aliverti, 2023). Within the territorial boundaries of states, encounters with the police as an executive force in particular, create a postcolonial experience of the border (Seigel, 2017; Waseem, 2024). Therefore, we eventually discuss the necessity of abolitionist approaches to create spaces where the universalist claim of the right to safety could become a reality.

Policing Migration in the Reality of the Hotspot Island

> *Hotspots of what? For the EU, hotspots of crime and conflict. Hotspots for what?*
> *For the exercise of the new European powers of war and police.*
> (Neocleous & Kastrinou, 2016, p. 9)

Islands are spaces of political contestation over sovereignty that constitute complex structures of power, territoriality and governance (Baldacchino & Milne, 2006; Hepburn, 2012; Mountz, 2013, p. 201; Mountz & Loyd, 2014). Mountz (2013, p. 836) describes them as "sites of territorial control and conflict of all kinds, where imperial, colonial, and military might are expressed and resisted, and state sovereignty undertakes projects less likely to happen on mainland territory". Thus, we see

islands as key sites for analysing various struggles over sovereignty and its enforcement: "Islands are places where state control over territory intersects with the international law of the sea, international human rights obligations, and intra- and interregional conflicts. On islands, the materiality of human mobility encounters geographical imaginations of control" (Mountz & Loyd, 2014, p. 36). One of these political struggles concerns the governance of migration, involving a constant reconfiguration of sovereignty in times of crisis. This is evident in the establishment of the CCAC on the Greek hotspot island of Samos.

The *European Agenda on Migration* (European Commission, 2015) and the introduction of the "hotspot approach" through the 2016 EU–Turkey deal established Samos as one of the five "hotspot areas" at Europe's external borders. In the aftermath of the so-called "migration crisis," the EU hotspot areas became exceptional zones in terms of governance, jurisdiction and infrastructure enforcement. The term has long been part of the EU lexicon, initially used in the early 2000s to designate critical zones for crime and natural disasters, and later for migration (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020). However, conceptual unclarity prevails, according to Papoutsi et al. (2019, p. 2200): "there is to date no universally acknowledged definition of what actually constitutes such an 'approach' – let alone what constitutes a 'hotspot' in the first place." As Heyer (2022) argues, this uncertain contour creates grey areas at the intersection of ambiguous policy and their discretionary implementation. Accordingly, we assert that this situation produces ambiguity regarding the legal mandates and practice of the executive forces.

The introduction of the *European Agenda on Migration* also marked the start of joint efforts by the European Asylum Support Office, Frontex, Europol and the EU Agency for Judicial Cooperation to "manage" rising migration numbers (De Vita & Abeln, 2023; Neocleous & Kastrinou, 2016). Hotspots are insufficiently defined and often ambiguously described by the EU itself (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020). With the implementation of the EU–Turkey deal, the hotspot approach obliged migrants to wait in camps—referring primarily to the older RICs and more recently to the CCACs—for the outcome of their asylum applications (Monroy, 2021). The systematic shift from open camps to confinement exemplifies the (im)balance between humanitarian efforts and strict migration control (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020).

Mountz and Loyd 2014 (p. 32) see "detention as an infrastructure of normalized crisis [of sovereignty]" and draw attention to the state's inability to control and constrain human mobility. Within the hotspot islands and with the subsequent emerging detention centres, contestations over, and fragmentation of, sovereignty become most evident (Mountz & Loyd, 2014). Officially, the Greek military is responsible for the overall security of the hotspot areas, which are jointly managed by the Greek military, the Greek police, special police units, Frontex and Europol (Neocleous & Kastrinou, 2016). However, the management of migration and borders on hotspot islands transcends national control and fragments state sovereignty. It operates through a collaboration of public and private actors and national, international and supranational elements as a new form of multilateral migration management (Neocleous & Kastrionou, 2016). The multiplication of actors becomes especially visible at the scale of the detention centres, where the provision of care and control is largely transferred to non-governmental, humanitarian and international organisations.

Daily Policing on Samos and in the CCAC

When the EU–Turkey deal failed politically and practically (McEwen, 2017; Özalp, 2021), Greek hotspots quickly turned into mass confinement areas that held people in an extended limbo. Moreover, this led to an "entirely avoidable and predictable politically motivated humanitarian crisis ... with devastating consequences for the people trapped there" (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2021). As a political and supposedly humanitarian solution, the first highly secured CCAC opened its gates on Samos in 2021. In the CCACs, the fragmentation of sovereignties is particularly evident. The legal mandate and powers of state actors within the CCAC, as well as their responsibilities, are governed by the national asylum legislation, especially Greece's International Protection Act (IPA) of 2019, which defines the various actors' responsibilities (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024).[2]

Legally, the hotspot regulations remain in place. This renders the joint actors of the military, the Greek police, special police units, Frontex and Europol responsible for the overall security of the hotspot area at the scale of the island. On the scale of the camp, the management (maintenance, technical works, repairs, cleaning and security) of the CCACs was transferred to private companies (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022). The police are responsible for guarding the external perimeter of the hotspot facilities and identifying and verifying the nationality of new arrivals. Under the IPA, the registration of applications for international protection, the delivery of decisions and other procedural documents and the registration of appeals can also be carried out by the police (De Vita & Abeln, 2023; Greek Council for Refugees, 2021). The powers of the police in the actual implementation of these remain unclear as the IPA only defines the responsibilities of the police in asylum procedures. The Hellenic Republic Ministry of Migration and Asylum (2021) identifies the police as an active security actor within the CCAC. However, the available information does little to clarify decision-making procedures or accountability mechanisms. The IPA does not present details about law enforcement strategies or the legal frameworks governing police authority.

In daily practice, the police interfere with operations inside and outside the hotspot camp(s), supposedly to maintain overall control and security of the hotspot island (De Vita & Abeln, 2023; Greek Council for Refugees, 2021; Neocleous & Kastrinou, 2016). At the same time, the police *and* the private security company, G4S, share the practical implementation of security management within the CCAC (De Vita & Abeln, 2023; Greek Council for Refugees & Oxfam International, 2022; Hellenic Republic Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2021).

Since its opening in September 2021, human rights reports have emphasised the inhumane conditions in Samos's CCAC, including violence by police forces against camp residents. The Hellenic League for Human Rights, I Have Rights and the Human Rights Legal Project (2023) highlight the lack of accountability within Greek law enforcement agencies, together with systemic inequalities. These inequalities include gender-based violence, arbitrary detention and law enforcement practices based on the brutal use of force. The report highlights that the EU has failed to fulfill its commitment to re-establish and uphold security in the designated hotspot islands (I Have Rights & the Human Rights Legal Project, 2023). Psarakis (2023) emphasises that police attacks vary and declares that the violent situation is an "open secret" between the camp services and the Director. A previous study (Manek, 2025) concluded that the CCAC forms a torturing environment that is the weaponisation of, for example, the architecture, infrastructure and treatment of detained people in carceral spaces against their psychological, physical and social integrity. In other words, a torturing environment like the CCAC intentionally produces a state of injury that renders the detained people especially vulnerable.

Vulnerability and Vulnerabilisation

> *Refugeehood is a 'vulnerability contest'.*
> (Turner, 2019, p. 1)

The public discourse speaks of people on the move as a vulnerable population, highlighting particular vulnerabilities of subgroups, such as women and children. At the same time, vulnerability screenings are cornerstones of humanitarian bordering practices (Mendola & Pera, 2022). They go hand in hand with a paternalistic humanitarian trauma discourse. As Mezzadra (2020, p. 4) observes, "The world of humanitarianism is populated by victims (or 'excluded'), and what is incited and mobilized is a compassion that should lead 'us' to benevolently take care of 'them' – the helpless victims." These intersecting discourses and practices neglect that every human subject is essentially vulnerable, if banned from different forms of protection, such as infrastructure, rights, economic safety or healthy social relationships (Butler, 2016).

We argue in this paper that vulnerability is neither an identity category nor a person's trait—as Western psychology paradigms implicate (Charmaz, 2020)—but relates to the possible exposure to physical or emotional attacks. We use the term "vulnerabilisation" (Govrin, 2022) to designate a purposeful exposition of particular social groups to harm. This adds another characteristic of what vulnerabilisation means. Its intersectional nature—connected to racialised, gendered and class-based tropes—is reminiscent of the colonial practice of targeting the racialised body as a mode of oppression, and of structural vulnerabilisation (Baldacchino & Milne, 2006; Hepburn, 2012; Mountz, 2013; Mountz & Loyd, 2014).

The vulnerabilisation of people on the move is based in an active exclusion from existing safety systems (e.g., of a legal and material nature, essential infrastructure, basic rights, economic safety, healthy social relationships; Bustamante, 2002; Esposito et al., 2020; Pérez-Sales et al., 2023) together with harmful state practices (Bhatia et al., 2020). These include the proliferation of border violence (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). The topography of violent bordering mechanisms entraps migrants in a spiral of vulnerabilisation and human insecurity (Dehm, 2020; Trevino-Rangel, 2021). This spiral relies on the conditionalities of criminalisation, detainability and deportability (De Genova, 2010; De Genova & Roy, 2020). The construction of deadly migration routes culminates in the necropolitical production of a state of injury (Mbembe, 2016)[3]. A purposefully calibrated "politics of injury" is designed to control racialised groups through debilitation (Davies et al., 2024, p. 1), including confinement sites that amount to "torturing environments" (e.g., Manek, 2025; Manek et al., 2022; Pérez-Sales et al., 2022; Puar, 2027).

The intentional attack on the integrity of people on the move is bound to the post-9/11 securitisation paradigm that posits illegalised migrants as a threat to national security (Angulo-Pasel, 2023; Pugh, 2018). Dowler et al. (2014) explain that, due to the inextricable entanglement of intimate and global security, marginalised populations experience the burdens and fears of securitisation disproportionately. In a research field like forced migration, security and confinement, researchers should therefore critically engage with and unpack institutional narratives, while maintaining sensitivity to different forms of intersectional violence (Canning, 2020; Esposito et al., 2020; Esposito & Bosworth, 2024). For research on policing in confinement sites and remote places, this poses a conflict: Research must be sensitive to possible vulnerabilities, while also striving not to reproduce the figure of the "vulnerable refugee" (Anderson et al., 2009).

Including geographical features into the analysis, the location of a site has an additional importance for creating vulnerability. In island contexts, their detachedness from the mainland is one factor for vulnerability. In the case of Samos, the CCAC has been built in a specific remote location in the middle of the mountainous island, leading to a long walk to the closest city, the island's capital of Vathy. In the specific context of Samos, we aim to research the policing of vulnerability and safety cautiously, enquiring how policing interferes with feelings of safety versus existing and newly emerging structures of vulnerability.

Method

Researching migration-related carceral spaces presents diverse practical and ethical challenges. These include the inaccessibility of an opaque and vulnerability-producing institution, the prevailing violence, injustice, asymmetries in the field of migration-related detention, the quick changes of the detention institution and the variety of possible participants. Considering these challenges, we drew on a new psycho-geographical counter-mapping methodology that is explained extensively elsewhere (see Manek et al., 2023).

As a part of the critical cartographical and aesthetic turn (Moze & Spiegel, 2022), counter-mapping highlights the power of map-making in geographic knowledge production and criticises the colonial history of map-making (Weizman, 2017). Inspired by feminist critical cartography and forensic spatial analysis, counter-mapping seeks to make visible and comprehend spatial control and its challenges (Dalton & Mason-Deese, 2012). Counter-mappings have become a frequently used tool in critical investigations of migration and migration-related detention research (Campos-Delgado, 2018; Gill et al., 2018; Lo Presti, 2019; Musiol, 2020; Tazzioli, 2023). Due to the involvement of built environments, social spaces and psychological effects on different scales, counter-mapping is a means of interdisciplinary connection. The (counter-)forensic character of map-making is particularly useful in social justice research, in the documentation of harm and for holding states accountable (Lo Presti, 2019; Mountz, 2013; Weizman, 2017). It is a social process of emancipation with a clear subject-oriented perspective, in this case, of those who forcibly experienced the hotspot system (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2013; Jung, 2014; Maillet et al., 2017). Therefore and in general, counter-mappings may include the scales of the everyday, the body and the emotional. And it may include to link these scales with forensic means (Lo Presti, 2019; Pérez-Sales & Petersen, 2023; Weizman, 2017) and the recognition of transnational migration regimes (Conlon et al., 2017).

Psycho-geographical counter-mappings of forced camp residents ($n = 26$) and semi-structured interviews with human rights actors ($n = 5$) took place between late summer 2021 and spring 2023. These built the empirical ground for this investigation. As noted above, different counter-mapping approaches portray different scales and topographies. We used a psycho-geographical counter-mapping method starting at the psychological level. This method was based on lived experiences and the smallest human geographical scale, considered especially by feminist geographers—the body, the emotions and the everyday (e.g., Lo Presti, 2019; Nagar et al., 2002). It provided a scaled analysis of the police as central in the context of Samos as a hotspot island in the EU's border regime (for distinction between the scales, see *Figure 1*). This proposed counter-mapping produced a map of the detention environment as a primary tool, with emotions and physiological sensations assigned to specific locations (Manek et al., 2023; Manek & Fernández de la Reguera Ahedo, 2022; see *Figure 2*).
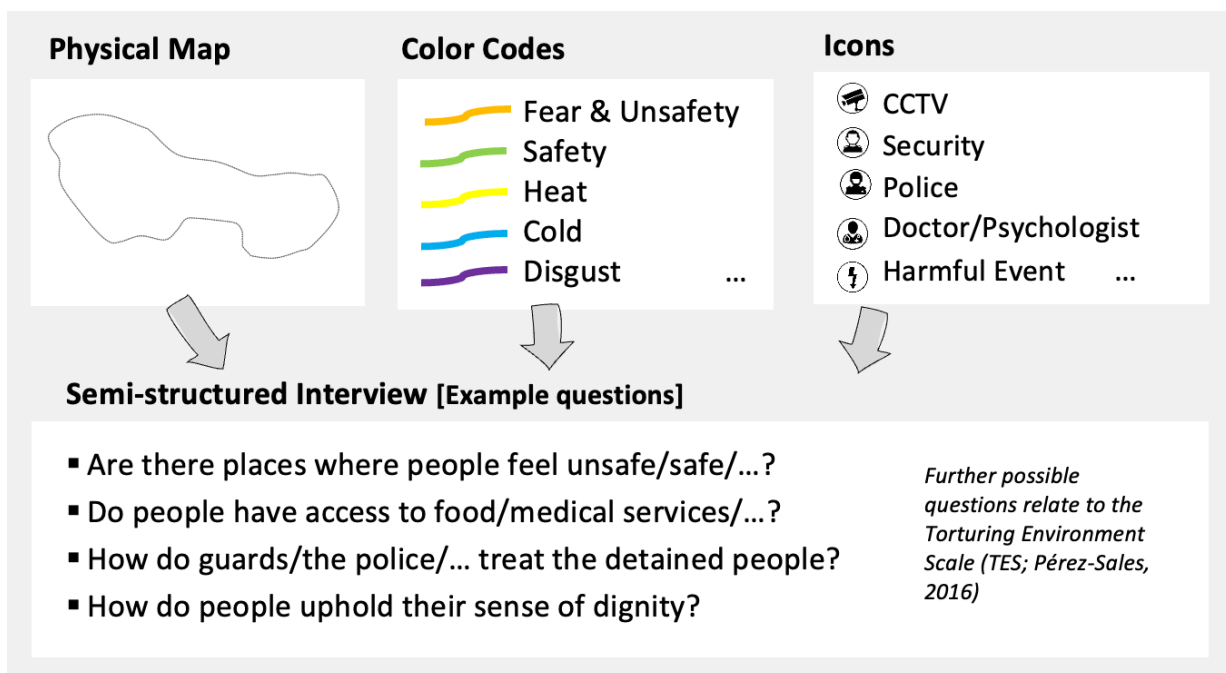
Figure 1

Geographical Scales of Policing People on the Move on the EU Hotspot Island, Samos (Manek, 2025; CC BY-NC 4.0)

Figure 2

Methodological Components of the Psycho-geographical Counter-mapping (Manek, 2025; CC BY-NC 4.0)

Using the counter-mapping framework, a semi-structured interview was developed, based on the Torturing Environment Scale (TES; Pérez-Sales, 2016). This semi-structured interview asked prominently about (feelings of) safety and unsafety, well-being and attacks on basic physiological and human functions. It concentrated particularly on the scale of the hotspot camp but oscillated towards the scale of the island and the border regime. The counter-mappings took place in spaces considered safe by the participants, especially spaces of civil society organisations.

The analysis employed an exploratory grounded theory framework (Creamer, 2021; Guetterman et al., 2019), condensing the qualitative material through three sequential coding processes. This process merged into an analytic framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) of 97 inductively emerging code categories, which we validated via intercoder reliability[4] (ICR; see e.g., Díaz et al., 2023; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). We calculated Pearson correlations based on the respective code frequencies across the 26 counter-mappings with asylum-seeking participants. Table 1 highlights significant correlations,[5] as quantitative indicators of crucial code relationships connected to the code categories of the security actors (e.g., the police and the private security company, G4S), which we analysed thoroughly in the qualitative data. Finally, visual joint displays (McCrudden et al., 2021) emerged from the analysis. These integrated the visual data of the maps (e.g., colour codes and icons), the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews and quantitative information. The following section explains the results on policing on the hotspot island of Samos, scale by scale.

Table 1

Medians, Interquartile Ranges and Spearman Correlations with Confidence Intervals

Code Category	M	IQR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Police	5	2.75–6							
Security Guards	2	0–3	-						
Border Regime	1	0–3	.484** [.13, 1]	-					
Criminalisation	0	0–1	.341* [.00, 1]	-	.403* [.07, 1]				
Intimidation & Punishment	1	0–1.25	.340* [.00, .1]	.433* [.11, 1]	-	-			
Body Search, Physical Control & Fingerprinting	1	1–2	-	.594** [.32, 1]	-	-	-		
Omission	0	0–1	.371* [.39, .1]	-	-	.373* [.39, 1]	.349* [.01, 1]	-	
Racism	1	0–1.25	.286+ [-.06, 1]	-	-	-	-	-	.259+ [-.05, 1]

Notes. M and IQR are used to represent median and interquartile range, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation.
+$p < .1$, one-tailed.
*$p < .05$, one-tailed.
**$p < 0.01$, one-tailed.

A Scaling of Hotspot Policing: From the Border Regime to the Island to the City to the Camp

The central concern of the counter-mapping was the participants' feelings of safety and unsafety. However, each participant referred vividly to policing practices, meaning the code category "police" was the only one assigned in 100% of cases. When examining the scale of the border regime, the qualitative results indicated a change in policing patterns and highlighted the entry of a multiplicity of security actors. These were either connected to the local Hellenic police, the Greek coast guard or supranational actors, especially Frontex:

> In 2015, there was like a sort of collaboration between local community that was going on to support people and the border police. … That changed. The coast guards got more and more focused on criminalizing people. … It was shocking to see more pushbacks and all this Frontex theme came up. I remember that one day the two German boats arrived here. That was totally strange in this most eastern part of Greece, somewhere next to the Turkish border. (Mr T., human rights defender, spring 2023)

On the broader scale of the border regime, police forces formed a network of deterrence that included pushbacks—the illegal and often violent forcing back of people across a border they have already crossed—and potentially lethal boat incidents. Figure 3 shows how people perceived unsafety across the island. The local police were responsible for a chain of harmful incidents and, awaiting landings on Samos, were responsible for further pushbacks and criminalisation, such as accusations of human trafficking.

Figure 3

Unsafety and Policing at the Island Scale (Manek, 2025; CC BY-NC 4.0)
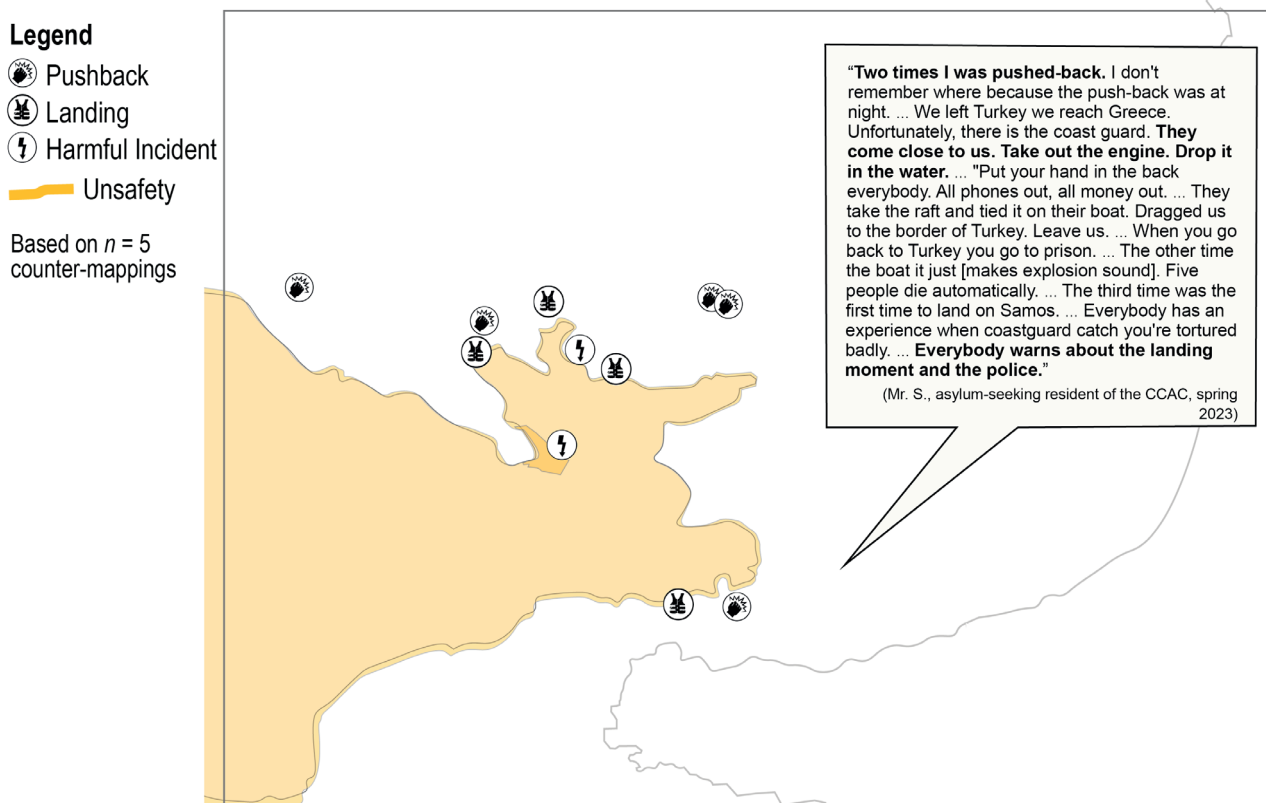
Participants highlighted multiple abuses occurring once they had landed, as part of policing practices at both the island scale and the city scale. Police officers restricted movement on the island by harassing asylum-seeking people they encountered anywhere other than in the hotspot camps or their surroundings. One participant remembered such a situation, even in the public sphere of the island's capital of Vathy:

> After the new government came in November 2019, the police immediately start to be so racist and they start to hit everyone, trying to make problem with you, even when you are just walking in the street. They were saying to you they will hit you. They would tease you, even humiliate you, just because you are walking in the streets. (Mr D., asylum-seeking resident of the CCAC, spring 2023)

In the counter-mapping situation, talking about policing often seemed difficult. Participants had to differentiate between the police actor in charge of the camp's—and supposedly people's—security, while explaining the feeling of fear and unsafety provoked by policing practices:

> I mean there are no places safe and other places not safe. … It depends. I mean it's not like here is safe and here is not. … If you have a fight with someone I mean. So, you are not safe in all the camp. … I mean here is the police. But sometimes you are not safe from the police. I mean this is not safe island. Everyone knows this. Because sometimes, and even the lawyers tell us this I mean human right, legal protection. Sometimes the police arrested people with no reason. Inside the city. And they take you to the prison in the police station. And they will not let you get a translator. And they will take your phone so you cannot call the lawyer. … Even the lawyers told us if we know that someone is coming to this island, we should not show that. Because we will be in risk of the police accusing us [of human trafficking]. … That's why all the island it's not safe. (Mr H., asylum-seeking resident of the CCAC, spring 2023)

Before policing commenced at the CCAC on Samos in September 2021, the police had problems controlling the situation in the informal settlements surrounding the old hotspot camp, the RIC in Vathy. The CCAC was meant to address the problems of the old RIC in terms of shelter and safety. On the discursive level, the CCAC promised autonomy. However, the situation around the RIC was uncontrollable, with protests emerging publicly. Thus, constructing the CCAC followed a contrary aim of securitisation. This manifested in the CCAC's architecture, infrastructure, the role of police and the private security company, G4S, and the narrations of lived experiences in the psycho-geographical counter-mappings.

At the Scale of the Camp: Policing Asylum-seeking People in the CCAC

What is the nexus between security, safety and policing in the CCAC? As mentioned, the promise of increased "security-safety" was realised through the total securitisation of the new camp. Ironically, this resulted in feelings of fear and insecurity for the people detained within the camp, as highlighted in *Figure 4*.

Figure 4

Securitisation Infrastructure and Feelings of Unsafety: A Joint Display (Manek, 2025; CC BY-NC 4.0)
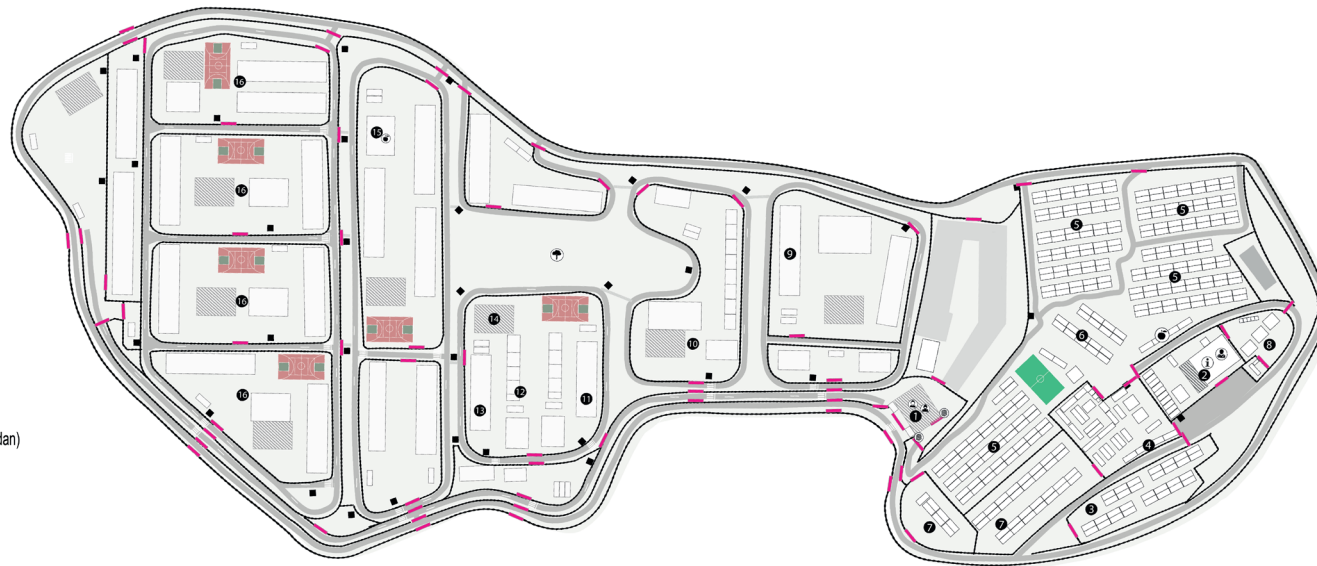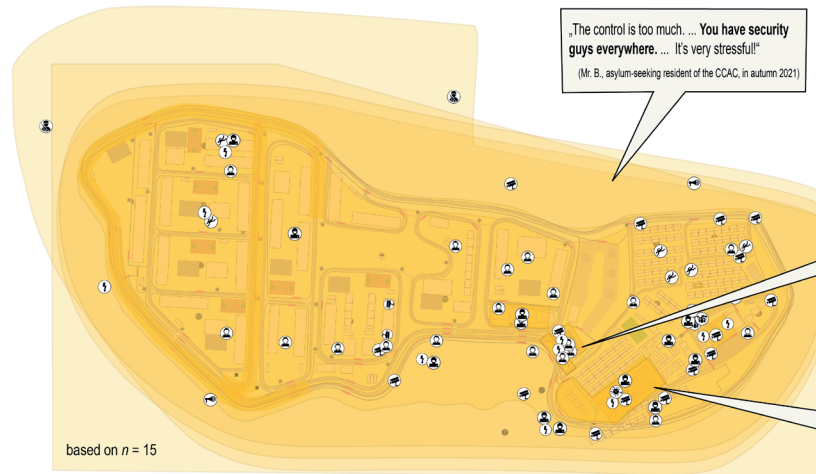

Icons & Colour Code
- Military
- Police
- Security Guards
- Fingerprinting
- CCTV
- Loudspeakers
- Harmful Incident
- Protest
- Suicide/Self-Harm
- Unsafety

Infrastructure
- Barbed Wire
- Streets
- Gates
- Security Posts
- Closed Container
- Roofed Construction
- Stairs

Places of the Camp
1. Entrance Gate
2. First Reception
3. Asylum Service
4. UNHCR
5. Living Containers
6. Store for Toiletries, etc.
7. Quarantine
8. Kindergarten
9. NGOs & Lower Police Section
10. Single Parents
11. Boys' Containers
12. School
13. Girls' Container
14. Laundry (closed)
15. Collective Kitchen (only Ramadan)
16. Pre-removal Detention Centre

„The control is too much. ... **You have security guys everywhere.** ... It's very stressful!"
(Mr. B., asylum-seeking resident of the CCAC, in autumn 2021)

„The police brought you from this main street. Then to the entrance gate. ... **Then [the security guards] do inside this forum inspection for male and female and they will make you move if you are hiding something in your genital organs.** And sometimes they beat us, because some of us didn't understand English. Like they say 'crouch' and you don't crouch and then they slap your face and sometimes... "
(Mr. A., asylum-seeking resident of the CCAC, spring 2023)

"**They beat me like hell in this quarantine container.** Because they have a list. In the morning, they count. ... In the morning, sometimes they knocked at the container. I was sleeping like this, they don't wake me up with that sound. They came in and shouted 'lie, lie, lie, keep doing like this.' **This is the worst part of it I always remember.** ... I never fight the police. I never bring anything illegal in the camp. ... I get depressed sometimes in the camp."
(Mr. S., asylum-seeking resident of the CCAC, spring 2023)

based on *n* = 15

0m   25m   50m

At the CCAC—supposedly a place that creates safety—both the police and the security guards—supposedly the institutions that ensure security—became accomplices in creating insecurity. The security infrastructure and the omnipresence of security and police in the CCAC created ambivalent feelings among the people living in the camp. On one hand, they recognised the creation of "security" via securitisation measures. On the other hand, it contributed to their drastic feelings of unsafety and criminalisation:

> In one way the camp is safe, because we have a lot of security and plenty fence [sic]. But for us, the humans, that are living in there, we are not … it's not our wish to be in the camp. Because it's over secured, there are times, that we feel threat. Because it seems as if we are criminals in the camp. (Mr J., asylum-seeking resident of the CCAC, spring 2023)

Figure 4 is an integration of the counter-mapping dimension of safety and unsafety. It shows the level of the infrastructure and architecture of the CCAC as a carceral space. The CCAC was surrounded by a triple-strand barbed wire fence, and body searches and fingerprinting were conducted at the central entrance gate. There were countless security guard posts, 24/7 CCTV surveillance and police and security patrols continued day and night. The police also operated a police station on the campsite beneath the CCAC's "pre-removal detention centre".

Within the CCAC, security tasks shared between the police and the private security guards created ambiguity regarding the responsibilities and tasks of security actors: Seemingly, it was the security guards who oversaw security routines. However, the police could intervene at any moment, including by making arrests in the CCAC and detaining people at the police headquarters in Vathy, where participants encountered physical and emotional abuse and harm amounting to torture.

The counter-mappings indicate that participants considered the whole camp to be mainly unsafe. Specific unsafety was related to particular places, for example, the entrance gate, the section containing the pre-removal detention centre or the temporary quarantine centre. Violence ranged from more "subtle" forms, such as the removal of everyday utensils, goods or food, to racist insults and cases of police brutality. Narrations related to the entrance gate ranged from excessive security controls to situations of blunt violence by security guards and/or police officers (see *Figure 4*). Testimonies revealed instances of police brutality[6] hidden behind the walls of the temporary quarantine zone.

Another component of policing beyond the use of violence was the act of omission in cases where detained people needed protection; for example, in fights with other forced residents. One incident that started as a hunger strike protest turned into a conflict between groups of camp residents. The police intervened only when the situation became out of control, and secured the camp's infrastructure rather than protecting the residents. In a counterinsurgency manner, this incident reveals the hotspot logic of control and containment:

> The Palestinians, after we launch this [peaceful] hunger strike, they stopped us and start fighting [with us]. The police, security guys, and camp administration didn't do anything. … They just secured the gates with a huge amount of police, and they did not care about anything that's going on, whether the Palestinians or Africans fighting, damaging ourselves. They don't care. Only the police allow them to protect their own buildings as well as their own materials. But then the Palestinians were more [in number] than the Blacks. Some of these guys are very crazy. They started taking the stones and throwing them against the Blacks. … A lot of people were injured. … The police came to protect the asylum, the camp that some of these properties will not be destroyed. So that's the reason why they came and intervene. … With the force they pushed the Blacks to go behind. … They used metal sticks and slap people. We, the Blacks, are forced to get into the container and stay there and locked up until the other day. (Mr P., asylum-seeking resident of the CCAC, spring 2023)

In multiple testimonies, participants described racist behaviour by the police. This contributed to a sense of unsafety, especially as racism often manifested itself in verbal abuse and sometimes physical violence. Although our results connect policing with a range of mental stress, racism seems especially relevant for feelings of fear and unsafety. Although many participants felt they had experienced racist discrimination, and although it seemingly manifested in everyday conflicts, racism itself was hard to grasp. At the CCAC, it also extended to populations considered especially vulnerable, such as unaccompanied minors:

> If you have an issue with white people in this camp, while you are in the minor [sic], if the police came here, they will not be soft with you, the Black. They will always be screaming at you, so you will not even know how to explain. You don't know how to start. They will not hit you, they will not, but the way shout at you, you must be afraid. Maybe sometimes you don't even want to talk in fact, because you know that whatever comes out of this, they will not be good with you. (Mr G., asylum-seeking resident of the CCAC, spring 2023)

Racism seemingly acted as a "sorting" mechanism, deciding, for instance, who had access to medical care or protection. In no single case did the police on Samos fulfill their protective function when the situation involved a racialised person.

[Pre]Summary: Unsafety-Security-Vulnerabilisation

Detailed analysis of the 26 counter-mappings highlights that the CCAC is not a safe place, nor is Samos a safe island. The role played by the police is crucial in this matter. The counter-mappings emphasise the police as a central agent in the island's regime of *de facto* detention and in the production of unsafety. While the securitisation logic of the hotspot is about migration control, in the daily routine of the camp, there is a violating component that goes beyond pure control. Violent interventions of intimidation and punishment, as well as practices of omission moderated by institutional racism, led to a high vulnerability— structural vulnerabilisation—of resident groups. Further reflections on racism as a broader paradigm of governing seem crucial and connect to scholarship on necropolitics in migration.

Policing on Samos, especially in the CCAC, is characterised by enormous brutality. This creates feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and despair among those affected, and is accompanied by the widespread impunity of the perpetrators (Human Rights Legal Project, 2024; International Rescue Committee & I Have Rights, 2023). The shattered sovereignty of the hotspot system's various actors creates the basis for impunity in which the violating conditions emerge. Between different actors, it is difficult to discern who commits which acts and who bears what responsibility.

Need for Reflection: On Policing, Racism and Necropolitics

> It is subsumed in the view that humans that are deemed inferior can be, and perhaps, must be, treated as though they are not entitled to basic human rights and human dignity. In this vein, police brutality is a continuation of the degradation of human dignity that occurred during colonization; a degradation that leaves individuals feeling distrustful and hopeless, and resentful of those in authority. (Forde, 2023, p. 92).

The overall contradictions within the euphemistic discourse of security disguise dysphemistic policing practices producing unsafety in a growing system of carceral humanitarianism (Campos-Delgado, 2023). Under completely surveilled conditions, the CCAC transforms violent neglect of the old camp's informal settlements (Davies et al., 2017) into systematic harm. Control practices by police and security forces seem to maintain stasis. Resistance to the dehumanising conditions, however, is met by excessive force, added to numerous cases of violence that seem to be utterly unrelated to the behaviour of the victims. The example of the CCAC shows that it is impossible to reform camps.[7] Shielded by the humanitarian discourse of dignity, the situation on Samos has gone from bad to worse. Contemporary policy strategies that target illegalised migration emerge as integral to the maintenance of social order and the preservation of dominant power structures through violence, surveillance and oppression (Eck, 2018; Müller, 2014). Within the context of the EU's hotspot regime, the emergence of securitised spaces of harm is not an accident but a purposeful policy decision.

In this carceral and humanitarian hotspot environment, Pallister-Wilkins (2021) highlights the racialised differential exclusion. This constitutes a gradual selective exclusion or inclusion from, for example, access to protection and rights, and the primacy of life in modern society. By looking more closely at the policing practices on Samos across different scales, the racialised distribution of harm—especially in the CCAC—resonates with Mbembe's (2016) framework of necropolitics as the contemporary (post)colonial mode of borders and governance (e.g., De Genova, 2013; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2003; Mose & Wriedt, 2015; Wilson et al., 2023). Many scholars emphasise racism as a central principle of sorting in the realm of the political-economic structure (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Ralph & Singhal, 2019), with deep entanglements from colonial times to modern capitalist society (Eck, 2018, p. 201).[8] Colonial law enforcement was established to uphold colonial economic interests and protect property rights. The colonial police asserted control over colonised territories and populations, maintained dominance and suppressed resistance among Indigenous populations (Banton, 2020). These dimensions reappear in contemporary policing practices of "migrantised" people, despite the geographical-territorial difference.

Therefore, Forde (2023) argues that it is essential to reflect on the colonial legacy police institutions carry today. While Grant and Terry (2012) describe "police brutality" as police officers using force for purposes other than lawful policing[9], Forde (2023) explains how persisting colonial notions of superiority and inferiority influence today's police brutality. Continuing postcolonial racism promotes harsh and inhumane treatment against racialised subjects that are constructed as "inferior" (Forde, 2023; Tedmanson, 2008). As long as the colonial notions of inferiority and superiority are ingrained in postcolonial Western hegemony, no police reform or training would turn it into an institution that protects racialised populations, instead of vulnerabilising them further (Boateng & Darko, 2016; Razack, 2020).

Drawing on the work of Wallace and Neptune-Figaro (2023), to argue for the decolonisation of criminology, criminal justice and policing in island contexts, we need to develop theory from specific locations. This will yield new and creative perspectives and critically challenge the status quo of modern policing. While critical race theory is, to a certain degree, an established

approach in civil rights law in the United States (Tomas De La Garza & Ono, 2016), European legal studies fail to recognise the construction of "race" as responsible for structural dehumanisation, exclusion, inequality and subordination (Salem & Thompson, 2016). Decolonial processes in the European police border regime have mainly been brought to light by affected groups like Black people, migrants and people of colour through their political organising and activism (Thompson, 2023).

Abolitionist scholars criticise the carceral state's reliance on punishment and surveillance, arguing that it perpetuates cycles of violence and does not address the root of problems like social inequality and injustice (Loick & Thompson, 2022). Exploring the limits of institutional decampment and reform policies, Brankamp (2022) highlights the production of intersectional vulnerabilities through state violence, prisons and policing practices. Abolitionism, which focuses on strengthening community work and belonging, could function as a decolonial transformation of the police institution, creating a new alternative concept. It operates within a framework that centres on healing, accountability and community-led solutions by shaping community values and de-individualising interpersonal violence to perceive it as a systematic, rather than individual, problem. Approaches for alternatives can already be seen in how marginalised people organise, educate and care for each other (Loick & Thompson, 2022; Thompson, 2018).

However, as the discourse on migration continues to shift to the extreme right and is accompanied and supported by increasingly racist policies, decolonial processes are once again under attack. This transformation makes it particularly important to point out postcolonial entanglements and power mechanisms and to call for their decolonisation.

The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free.
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[1] As research tends to focus affirmatively on police strategies and challenges faced by police officers in remote island situations (e.g., Rodgers & Asquith, 2022).

[2] Accordingly, several state actors and EU institutions are represented in the CCAC. E.g., the Reception and Identification Service, the Greek Asylum Service, the Hellenic Police, the European Asylum Agency, Frontex and the representatives of the Commission (De Vita & Abeln, 2023). The IPA's significant modification after the hotspot approach had led to emergency crises on the Greek islands was followed by severe criticism from international and national actors, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Greek Ombudsman, stating it further diminished protection for people seeking asylum (Amnesty International, 2022; European Asylum Support Office, 2020; Marzoochi & Meister, 2023).

[3] "Necropolitics" is essentially an inversion of the Foucauldian concept of biopower as the modern sovereign rule. Different from biopower, necropower focuses on the realm of suffering where life is *not* fostered but injured.

[4] ICR works as a marker for the plausibility, communicability and transparency of the coding process and the building of the explanatory theory on detention and subjectivation in the CCAC. The final coding system contains 97 codes related to the emerging core category of the necropolitical space. We obtained k = .87.

[5] We used highly to marginally significant correlations as quantitative markers. Given the huge range in the distribution of code categories in the data set, as well as the broad confidence intervals, we used the correlations merely as a first explorative marker upon which a qualitative analysis needed to elaborate.

[6] To such an extent that a local human rights organisation opened a case against the local police for violating the Anti-Torture Convention.

[7] Not solely for concrete, immediate (in)actions but also for the possible consequences they generally enable (Arendt, 2017[1951]).

[8] Further empirical research exploring the interconnectedness of race, space and political economy underpins that carceral technologies and other forms of state violence contribute to the accumulation of difference and the differentiation of value within the context of racial capitalism (Bird & Schmid, 2021; Massaro & Boyce, 2021; Robinson, 2000).

[9] Police brutality is a form of police corruption that is characterised by the officer's intent to harm a person beyond what is "necessary" to accomplish a legitimate law enforcement objective and must be distinguished from excessive use of force (Forde, 2023; Grant & Terry, 2012). An "excessive use of force" implies that a certain threshold of force is acceptable to fulfill a legitimate police objective and thus indicates a legitimate police monopoly on the use of force against disobedient subjects.