

THEORY ABOLITION

A political vision, a structural analysis of oppression, and a practical organizing strategy working towards a society that addresses harm without relying on prisons, police, military, or other violent systems.

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“LET’S BEGIN OUR ABOLITIONIST JOURNEY NOT WITH THE QUESTION, “WHAT DO WE HAVE NOW AND HOW CAN WE MAKE IT BETTER?” INSTEAD, LET’S ASK, “WHAT CAN WE IMAGINE FOR OURSELVES AND THE WORLD?” IF WE DO THAT, THEN BOUNDLESS POSSIBILITIES OF A MORE JUST WORLD AWAIT US.”

"Imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society." —Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* "Ultimately, abolition is a verb, a practice. It consists of the actions we take to build safety and to tear down harmful institutions. People do abolition every day when they connect to their community, learn how to take accountability, and foster communal responsibility for preventing and responding to harm. Abolition is within our reach; it’s up to us to build it." —Reiana Sultan and Micah Herskind

Today, more people are discussing and contemplating prison abolition than ever before. Decades of collective organizing have brought us to this moment: Some are newly aware that prisons, policing, and the criminal punishment system in general are racist, oppressive, and ineffective.

However, some might be wondering, is abolition too drastic? Can we really get rid of prisons and policing all together? The short answer: We can. We must. We are.

Prison industrial complex abolition is a political vision, a structural analysis of oppression, and a practical organizing strategy. While some people might think of abolition as primarily a negative project — “Let’s tear everything down tomorrow and hope for the best” —

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- Bring the issue home
- Follow the lead of the most impacted
- Hope is a muscle
- Make the invisible visible
- Reframe the issue

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- Anti-oppression

Prison industrial complex abolition is a vision of a restructured society in a world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more. Things that are foundational to our personal and community safety.

Every vision is also a map. As freedom fighter Kwame Ture taught us, "When you see people call themselves revolutionary always talking about destroying, destroying, destroying but never talking about building or creating, they're not revolutionary. They do not understand the first thing about revolution. It's creating." Prison industrial complex abolition is a positive project that focuses, in part, on building a society where it is possible to address harm without relying on structural forms of oppression or the violent systems that increase it.

Some people may ask, "Does this mean that I can never call the cops if my life is in serious danger?" Abolition does not center that question. Instead, abolition challenges us to ask, "Why do we have no other well-resourced options?" and pushes us to creatively consider how we can grow, build, and try other avenues to reduce harm. Repeated attempts to improve the sole option offered by the state, despite how consistently corrupt and injurious it has proven itself, will neither reduce nor address the harm that actually required the call. We need more and effective options for the greatest number of people.

An abolitionist journey ignites other questions capable of meaningful and transformative pathways: What work do prisons and policing actually do? Most people assume that incarceration helps to reduce violence and crime, thinking, "The criminal punishment system might be racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and unfair, but it at least keeps me safe from violence and crime."

Facts and history tell a different story: Increasing rates of incarceration have a minimal impact on crime rates. Research and common sense suggest that economic precarity is correlated with higher crime rates. Moreover, crime and harm are not synonymous. All that is criminalized isn't harmful, and all harm isn't necessarily criminalized. For example, wage theft by employers isn't generally criminalized, but it is definitely harmful.

Even if the criminal punishment system were free of racism, classism, sexism, and other isms, it would not be capable of effectively addressing harm. For example, if we want to reduce (or end) sexual and gendered violence, putting a few perpetrators in prison does little to stop the many other perpetrators. It does nothing to change a culture that makes this harm imaginable, to hold the individual perpetrator accountable, to support their transformation, or to meet the needs of the survivors.

A Black, Indigenous, and people of color survivor-led transformative justice movement has emerged in the past two decades to offer a different vision for ending violence and transforming our

- Capitalism
- Cultural hegemony
- Decolonization
- Intersectionality
- Postcolonialism

Methodologies

- Baraza
- Peel the onion
- Points of intervention
- Theory of change

TAGS

Capitalism, Colonialism, Direct action, Education, Human rights, Militarization, Movement building, Nonviolence, Racial justice, State violence, War and peace

communities.

A world without harm isn't possible and isn't what an abolitionist vision purports to achieve. Rather, abolitionist politics and practice contend that disposing of people, by locking them away in jails and prisons, does nothing significant to prevent, reduce, or transform harm in the aggregate. It rarely, if ever, encourages people to take accountability for their actions.

Instead, our adversarial court system discourages people from ever acknowledging, let alone taking responsibility, for the harm they have caused. At the same time, it allows us to avoid our own responsibilities to hold each other accountable, instead delegating it to a third party — one that has been built to hide away social and political failures. An abolitionist imagination takes us along a different path than if we try to simply replace the Prison industrial complex with similar structures.

None of us has all of the answers, or we would have ended oppression already. But if we keep building the world we want, trying new things, and learning from our mistakes, new possibilities emerge.

Here's how to begin.

First, when we set about trying to transform society, we must remember that we ourselves will also need to transform. Our imagination of what a different world can be is limited. We are deeply entangled in the very systems we are organizing to change. White supremacy, misogyny, ableism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia exist everywhere. We have all so thoroughly internalized these logics of oppression that if oppression were to end tomorrow, we would be likely to reproduce previous structures. Being intentionally in relation to one another, a part of a collective, helps to not only imagine new worlds but also to imagine ourselves differently. Join some of the many organizations, faith groups, and ad hoc collectives that are working to learn and unlearn — for example, what it feels like to actually be safe or those that are naming and challenging white supremacy and racial capitalism.

Second, we must imagine and experiment with new collective structures that enable us to take more principled action, such as embracing collective responsibility to resolve conflicts. We can learn lessons from revolutionary movements, like Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra), that have noted that when we create social structures that are less hierarchical and more transparent, we reduce violence and harms.

Third, we must simultaneously engage in strategies that reduce contact between people and the criminal legal system. Abolitionists regularly engage in organizing campaigns and mutual aid efforts that move us closer to our goals. We must remember that the goal is not to create a gentler prison and policing system because, as I

have noted, a gentler prison and policing system cannot adequately address harm. Instead, we want to divest from these systems as we create the world in which we want to live.

Fourth, as scholar and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes, building a different world requires that we not only change how we address harm, but that we change everything. The Prison industrial complex is linked in its logics and operation with all other systems — from how students are pushed out of schools when they don't perform as expected to how people with disabilities are excluded from our communities to the ways in which workers are treated as expendable in our capitalist system.

Changing everything might sound daunting, but it also means there are many places to start, infinite opportunities to collaborate, and endless imaginative interventions and experiments to create. Let's begin our abolitionist journey not with the question, "What do we have now and how can we make it better?" Instead, let's ask, "What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?" If we do that, then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us.

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"What is Prison Abolition?"

The Nation, 2018

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"The truth about abolition"

The Atlantic, 2016

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-truth-about-abolition/471483/>

"The emerging movement for police and prison abolition"

New Yorker, 2021

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-emerging-movement-for-police-and-prison-abolition>