

ACTIVISM **JAILS AND PRISONS** **MASS INCARCERATION**

What Is Prison Abolition?

The movement that is trying to think beyond prisons as a tool to solve society's problems.

By John Washington

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Inmates on the Gwinnett County, Georgia, work crew cut grass off Highway 124. (AP Photo / Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Johnny Crawford)

It's difficult to fully capture the negative repercussions of keeping millions of people—overwhelmingly black, brown, or poor—in jail, prison, or under some form of “correctional supervision.” How do you calculate, for example, the impact on families and communities across our country when almost half of all black adult women in America have a

family member locked up? Or that at least 80,000 people are, at any given time, resigned to some form of solitary confinement? Or that the aggregate cost of total

incarceration in the United States (including costs borne by the families of those incarcerated, lost wages, and health impacts) is, by some estimates, about \$1 trillion a year? A trillion dollars, the break-up of families, the destruction of lives, and little to show in the way of rehabilitative effects—and yet this system is just a part of life?

The long-lasting impact of our incarceration complex is, it seems, receiving increased mainstream attention. The cause of criminal-justice reform has been taken up by everyone from liberal champion Van Jones to the arch-conservative Koch brothers. A Republican-co-sponsored bill that would bring long-overdue changes to conditions inside prisons even passed the House this spring. Inmates staging work strikes and protests, including a major strike being planned for this August, have also brought increased scrutiny to the plight of those consigned to life behind bars. But what if softening the jagged corners of prison life, or even reforming the whole system, is not enough?

For a hundred years, at least since Emma Goldman quoted Dostoyevsky to call prison hell on earth, a variety of community groups and prisoner activists have been working not only to reform the prison-industrial complex, but to dismantle it entirely. Now, as critiques of the inherent racism and classism—and transcendent harm—of our criminal-justice system have gained attention, a growing collection of activists and writers have not only been working to

humanize the cages, and not only to *tear down* the cages, but to build a more equitable society in which we don't need to rely on cages at all. This is the prison-abolition movement.

WHO ARE THE PRISON ABOLITIONISTS?

The prison-abolition movement is a loose collection of people and groups who, in many different ways, are calling for deep, structural reforms to how we handle and even think about crime in our country. There are de facto figureheads (such as Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the most famous contemporary abolitionists) and organizations (such as Critical Resistance, INCITE!, the Movement for Black Lives, the National Lawyers Guild, and Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee—all of which, if not explicitly abolitionist, at least engage in abolitionist ethics), and there are converging or at least overlapping political ideologies (anarchist, socialist, libertarian), but there is no structured organizing group or coalition. Masai Ehehosi, a co-founder of Critical Resistance and longtime member of the New Afrikan Independence Movement, pointed me to the overlap between organizations promoting civil rights and abolitionists: “We want freedom” can just as easily be applied to ending Jim Crow or the New Jim Crow, to unlocking iron shackles or swinging open prison doors.

The “movement” thus operates with affinity groups, with various organizations working in prisoner support, prisoner advocacy, political advocacy, or community education. “And when something big happens,” as Azzurra Crispino, prison labor activist and co-founder of Prison Abolition and Prisoner Support, explained to me, “we all show up as a coalition, and we don't interfere” with each other's work.

Abolitionists believe that incarceration, in any form, harms society more than it helps. As Angela Davis argues, prisons are an obsolete institution because they exacerbate societal harms instead of fixing them. "Are we willing to relegate ever larger numbers of people from racially oppressed communities to an isolated existence marked by authoritarian regimes, violence, disease, and technologies of seclusion that produce severe mental instability?" Davis has written. Even if we were to greatly diminish the current prison population, even if we were to cut it in half but keep the prison complex intact, we would still be consigning millions of people to isolation and violence—and that's a form of inhumanity that abolitionists can't abide. Moreover, Davis contends, mass imprisonment "reproduce[s] the very conditions that lead people to prison."

Abolitionists don't stop at the prison walls, however: They aim to reshape our society as a whole. We are not doing nearly enough to address the root causes of poverty, addiction, homelessness, and mental-health crises, abolitionists contend, and criminalizing poverty through harsh fines and debt regulation; criminalizing addiction through drug laws; criminalizing homelessness by conducting sweeps of people sleeping in parks; and criminalizing mental illness by turning prisons into de facto psychiatric hospitals is all treating the symptom instead of the disease. This is one of the key differences between reform and abolitionism: The former deals with pain management and the latter with the actual source of the pain.

Abolitionists, therefore, share an idea—a vision—more than a structure: a future in which vital needs like housing, education, and health care, are met, allowing people to live safe and fulfilled lives—without the need for prisons.

THE ABOLITIONIST ROADMAP

The three pillars of abolitionism—or the “Attrition Model” as the Prison Research Education Action Project called it in their 1976 pamphlet, “Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists”—are: moratorium, decarceration, and excarceration.

The first step, *moratorium*, is simple: “Stop building cages,” is how Critical Resistance co-founder Rachel Herzog described it. According to a Congressional Research Service report, “the number of state and federal adult correction facilities rose from 1,277 in 1990 to 1,821 in 2005, a 43% increase.” Five hundred and forty-four new facilities in 15 years works out to about one new prison opening every 10 days. (Since the 1970s, there has been at least a 700 percent increase in the state prison populations.) Though prison construction has slowed since, new prisons are still being built, and immigration detention has seen yet another construction boom since Trump took office.

Abolitionists have had some success slowing the prison construction boom: Earlier this year in the town of Goshen, Indiana, residents successfully prevented a new private immigration-detention center, to be run by CoreCivic, from being built in their backyard. The basic thinking behind moratorium is that with fewer prison beds, there will be fewer people in prison.

A bit more complicated is the second step—*decarceration*—which involves finding ways to get people out of prison. According to abolitionists, a lot of people in prison right now languishing behind bars. In states that have legalized marijuana, for example, it's particularly cruel to still be keeping people in prison for possessing marijuana. The Drug Policy Alliance estimates that there have been about 350,000 arrests for marijuana in California in the past 10 years (medical marijuana, meanwhile, has been legal in that state for over two decades, and recreational use is now also legal), and a total of 1 million people have reviewable convictions. The New York Times also recently reported that, despite what seems like a national relaxation of arrests and convictions for marijuana use, black and Hispanic residents of some parts of New York City are arrested at a rate 15 times higher than that of white people—for the same "crime." Other decarceration strategies include creating review processes to reevaluate sentence terms, recognizing that many people are given long stints for petty crimes—especially under many states' three-strikes rules.

Excarceration strategies—the third abolitionist pillar—could potentially be the most transformative for society: These involve finding ways to divert people away from the prison-industrial complex in the first place. According to abolitionists, many of the reasons people end up coming into contact with law enforcement can be solved through more humane means. Decriminalizing mental-health episodes, fighting homelessness, or decriminalizing drug use are three clear ways to keep people from getting pipelined towards prison. And for abolitionists, we don't just stop at

decriminalization: Adequately funding mental-health treatment, providing housing for those in need, and offering adequate rehabilitation services for people with substance dependence are all critical. As author Alex Vitale told me, “Housing-first initiatives for homeless people—*that* is police reform.”

SHIFTING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT “CRIME”

“When we no longer call something a crime, we can define the phenomena differently, and we can respond to [it] differently,” Justin Piché, director of Carceral Studies Research Collective, at the University of Ottawa, told me. If a population stops thinking of vagrancy or sleeping on a park bench as *crimes*, and instead considers them problems with unemployment, inequality, and a paucity of mental-health services, we can stop hailing the cops so much. We need to open up the possibility to react to wrongdoing, injury, difference, and culturally ingrained prejudice without merely seeking to punish or enrage someone. “The moment you go to the state,” Crispino told me, “the conflict no longer is your conflict—the state appropriates it.”

“I approach [abolition] as a process,” Vitale said. “Show me a problem and I’ll show you a way to address that problem without policing.” Critical Resistance’s Ekehosi—who served 14 years in a Virginia prison as a political prisoner, in his view—emphasized the need for food co-ops, housing co-ops, and other means of offering people affordable and healthy means to live and survive—with the end goal of building community—so that we can deal with tensions in our own way and don’t need to rely on armed police and incarceration. “When you’re poor, and you don’t know when

your next meal is going to come, everything gets a lot harder," Ekehosi said. "It's not just about closing down prisons, but the whole complex."

ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION

But what about those acts of extreme violence—what to do with people who have committed rape or murder? How should such truly harmful transgressions be handled in a post-prison world? According to abolitionists, one solution may be a process called restorative justice.

Through restorative justice, offenders are expected, as Vitale describes, "to fully account for their behaviors in dialogue with the individual and communities affected by their actions.... They must then work with those parties to develop actions to try to repair the damage done as much as possible." The process is restorative because the goal is to restore the victim, their community, and the offender, to how they were before the transgression occurred. As Crispino put it to me, "People who commit violence are hurt by the violence they commit," and therefore need to be part of any process that seeks to find justice for that violence.

One step further than restorative justice is transformative justice. Crispino defined this concept as asking the offender what in their life has led them to commit the act, and what we all can do to change those conditions. Through either restorative or transformative justice, the systemic analysis takes the place of individual interrogation and punishment. These processes are hardly new: Abolitionists trace the roots of restorative justice back to a wide variety of indigenous and religious practices such as the Mohawk Nation of

Akwesasne band council in Canada, which has established a indigenous people's court according to Mohawk principles. As Bonni Cole, an indigenous prosecutor, explained, "It's not just looking at penalizing... that's old thinking—that's outside thinking." Likewise, the Jewish practice of Teshuva, or atonement, has been linked not only to punishing the offender but also to a holistic reparation of the relationship between offender and victim. Another Canadian indigenous people, the Mnjikaning, avoid the terms "offender" and "victim" altogether, focusing instead on the behavior of the individuals and how it impacts the community.

Restorative justice is being tried out in some schools as well, with districts from Oakland to Denver adopting some restorative practices, which are already showing promise.

Even with instances of egregious abuse, as during Guatemala's long Civil War, restorative justice pushes as much for bringing the offenders to justice—including airing out the crimes through truth-and-reconciliation processes—as for reparations for the victims and their communities. And though the outcome of Guatemalan efforts has been mixed, the restorative-justice model has brought in traditionally ignored voices (promoting women and indigenous lawyers) and has at least spotlighted decades'-old institutional harms that might otherwise have been overlooked or forgotten in sweep-it-under-the-rug amnesty bills. Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification, as well, though slow and with wavering results—such as the nullification of a genocide conviction against the late war criminal Efraín Ríos Montt—has kept the harms of the conflict in the foreground—a key to healing.

It may be hard to imagine a victim of a violent transgression sitting down for a discussion with the perpetrator, but according to Vitale, there are many situations in which the victim or the victim's family has actually been more fulfilled by a restorative process, or feel they have attained greater justice through restorative-justice models. An obvious benefit of the restorative model is that it takes account not just of the singular event, but the structural problems surrounding and leading up to the offense.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

The practice of abolitionism, therefore, is about a lot more than the bars themselves. It's about addressing community tensions, understanding why people turn to the police, and trying to break the self-perpetuating cycle of violence and imprisonment. And yet, with such an idealistic-sounding goal—tearing down prison walls and restructuring society—it can be hard to fathom tangible first steps. Incarceration is so embedded in our society—even in our way of looking at the world—it may seem hard to even broach a conversation on abolition.

Herzing offered an approachable and practical first step: "Be curious." In an essay for *TruthOut*, Herzing sketched a loose guide to a "police-free future." The place to start, she suggested, was by being aware of your context, asking yourself, first, what role cops play in your life, and then moving on to who you could rely on in an emergency situation. If you are easily willing to rely on police intervention—ready to grab the phone and call the cops when you're scared, have been wronged, or merely see a black person taking a nap—you might consider why some people, instead of seeing cops as a source of safety or justice,

see them as a threat and a danger. The goal, step by step, is to build a team, a community, a whole network of resources to “increase people’s abilities to prevent, interrupt and repair harm and respond to crisis without law enforcement.”

Another practical step most of the abolitionists I spoke with is joining of a racial/economic-justice movement. The goal, as Vitale put it, is to work toward “building a new political narrative.” And building a new narrative means a lot of educating, sharing, communicating—something not effectively accomplished behind the existential windscreen of a laptop or smartphone.

None of this is going to happen without continuing to change broad cultural attitudes not only toward prisons but also toward people of color and what drives gaping economic inequalities. Notably, Critical Resistance’s “Abolitionist Toolkit” mainly consists of questions, workshop suggestions, and critical-thinking prompts. This seems to go along with the philosophical ethic of abolitionism—it’s not a hierarchical strategy with a single key or solution, but an alternative way of thinking about society. Herzing described the abolitionist ethic as “slow and steady.” The “Abolitionist Toolkit” explains that “abolitionist steps are about gaining ground in the constant effort to radically transform society. They are about chipping away at oppressive institutions rather than helping them live longer. They are about pushing critical consciousness, gaining more resources, building larger coalitions, and developing more skills for future campaigns. They are about making the ultimate goal of abolition possible.”

"I'm a prison abolitionist for my own liberation," Crispino told me. What abolitionism comes down to, she added, is the "recognition that no human being is disposable."

BUILDING A PRISONLESS FUTURE

In the 1960s and '70s, activists were able to "muse about a prisonless future," as Justin Piché put it. Today, with over 2 million men, women, and children in cages, that prisonless future may seem like a saccharine utopia. The practical difficulty in envisioning a less repressive future, however, hasn't stopped abolitionists from working towards it.

Five decades ago, Davis writes, she couldn't have imagined the prison population increasing nearly 10 times over, "not unless this country plunges into fascism." Though this is a frightening tacking of stock, given the historically unprecedented boom in incarceration—indeed, at least a 700 percent increase—it's also a liberating thought: If change is possible in one direction, it might be possible in the other.

It's revealing to consider periods in history where society seemed particularly blind to the future: periods in which our predecessors engaged in backwards or brutish conduct. In the mid-19th century, for some Americans abolishing slavery hardly seemed feasible. As late as 1856, as historian Matthew Karp has pointed out, some predicted as many as 100 million people would be enslaved in the United States by 1950. Abolitionists are trying to shake society from this ethical torpor and show us that, like slavery, locking humans in cages need not be inextricably woven into our society.

As Critical Resistance explains in its definition of abolition, “we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future.” The abolition of prisons is, in the end, a project of radical optimism and reconstruction. As a society, abolitionists contend—and it’s hard to argue the point—we can do a lot better.

John Washington John Washington is a writer and translator currently based in New York City.

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