

Abolition Corner: Justice Practices and Possibilities Outside of Incarceration

In *Intro to Abolition*, we discussed what abolition is. Abolition is a political vision, philosophy, life practice, and culture shift to create a world where everyone has access to a fully lived and dignified life. It's an organizing strategy for a world without prisons, police and surveillance: a world without prisons as solutions to social problems. We discussed turning our systems, society, and ourselves away from Punitive Justice to Transformative Justice practices, but what does that look like? What does abolition really look like? All of these topics could be their own 2-pagers (there are many books written on each) but our goal is to introduce the general frameworks. **Let's explore some possibilities abolitionists turn to outside of incarceration and how— unlike our current system— these practices center and bring justice to survivors.**

What Does Abolition Look Like?

Abolition can be understood as a dual effort of dismantling and building on two different levels— the state and the community level. This means the dual effort takes place in “the state” meaning local, state and federal governments, corporations and all the other institutions they affect. It also takes place on the “community” level, meaning ourselves as individuals, our cultures, and societal influences that affect how we move through and show up in the world, through our own communities and relationships.

On the state level, we dismantle systems that do not aim to promote wellbeing and in fact cause many harms, while building systems that do promote wellbeing for everybody. On the community level, we grow out of harmful conditioning and build a culture of healing, community accountability, and wellness. This reduces harm in the first place and when harm does occur, there are tools to respond in a way that actually generates progress and healing instead of more harm. We will use this framework of thinking about abolition on the state and the community levels to introduce what abolition looks like in practice. Although it should be noted: there are many intersections between these two levels and this framework can be an oversimplification of abolition.

Abolition on the State and Institutional Level

Our current system of “justice and safety” punitively punishes an individual for an individual instance, rather than addressing root causes and all the factors that contribute to harm in order to prevent harm from happening again. This is called punitive or retributive justice. Abolition understands instead that “The hard truth (hard because there's no quick fix) is that long-term injustice creates most evil behavior” (*We Will Not Cancel Us*, adrienne maree brown) That's not to say there is not individual responsibility or accountability in abolition, but rather an understanding that addressing the sources that lead people to cause harm is crucial to reducing it. Specifically, addressing systems inundated with oppression and discrimination that inherently create conditions of not having sufficient resources or opportunity. Let's get to the root.

One of the first steps in addressing root causes of harm and preventing harm is by meeting the basic needs of everyone. This means eliminating

poverty, systemic inequalities, and discrimination. For example, systemic resources may include: Universal Healthcare and community care centered in disability justice, Universal Basic Income and economic justice for all in an open access economy, accessible and anti-capitalist housing, nutritious and stable foods, human centered migration without criminalization, climate justice, and community/self access to opportunities for growth. **These resources are alternatives to incarceration.**

Currently, these resources are commonly seen as things that should either be earned, or considered a “social welfare” for those who are perceived as having failed, even when it was the system failing them. It's necessary to deeply shift our mindsets away from this idea of resources being earned, and to understand that meeting the basic needs of everyone through systemic resources is the right of all people. Each person has a right to these resources by virtue of being human and our laws must reflect that. As the saying goes: The safest communities don't have the most cops - they have the most resources.

And importantly, we must center equity and intersectional perspectives in creating and implementing these systems to ensure systemic inequality or discrimination is not reformed and does not survive under or within these systems. Note: see *Intro to Abolition* for more on the importance of intersectionality. We do not want “a replication of the criminal justice system, which prioritizes retribution over recovery from violence. Criminal justice is interested in assigning blame and executing punishment” but we must challenge the notion that punishment is inherent to justice (*Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, edited by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Ejeris Dixon).

Abolition on the Community Level

As much as abolition is focused on decarceration and meeting basic needs of everyone, we also need an internal revolution within each of us. It is about identifying and rooting out the ways anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, classism, ableism, and patriarchy have inundated, perpetrated, and conditioned our institutions, our communities, and most importantly, ourselves. As it's said, as critical books and projects have echoed: “The revolution starts at home.”

Once we understand how a lot of our cultural conditioning and norms contribute to harm and crime, we can see the need for a culture shift to productively reduce harm. White supremacy and specifically Anti-Indigenous racism, Anti-Black racism, crimmigration, ableism, patriarchy and all forms of oppression produce harm and prevent tools to effectively address harm. Rooting out all the interwoven “isms” and manifestations of oppression will substantially prevent harm from happening in the first place. For example, Rooting our Rape Culture will address patriarchal violence against women and everyone disproportionately affected by sexual assault.

Equally importantly, we also develop community responses for when harm does occur. Our current system fails to serve survivors and victims of harm and

crime. To learn more about how our current system fails to serve survivors and usually causes more harm instead of providing any reparations, justice, or healing, read *Prisons Do Not Make Us Safer*. Instead of turning to systems that do not (& cannot) protect us, we turn to Transformative Justice (TJ) practices and community accountability. By turning to TJ practices, we are able to turn away from punitive punishment and productively address harm. We turn to healing rather than punishment or revenge. We embrace the belief that all people are worthy of dignity and nobody is disposable rather than the misconception that there are good and bad people or that justice is punishment.

As Mia Mingus explains, "Healing Justice and Transformative Justice are two sides of the same coin; they show us what's possible when we don't charge our care and wellness to the state and when we build our own capacity to respond to and transform harm."

Transformative Justice is a political framework and approach for responding to violence, harm, and abuse without relying on state systems like prisons and police. Instead, TJ goes all the way to the root of the problem and generates solutions and healing there, so that the conditions that create injustice are transformed (adrienne maree brown). As an abolitionist framework, TJ understands state systems like prisons, police, and ICE, are sites of enormous harm that enact the very forms of violence they claim to condemn - while positioning themselves as "protectors" to "protect and serve" or provide "safety and justice." In light of this understanding, TJ works to build alternatives to our systems and recognizes that we must transform the conditions which help create acts of violence or make them possible.

Where did TJ come from?

Transformative justice has been practiced for many years by Black women, Indigenous people, disabled people, sex workers who experience assault, survivors of violence, LGBTQ and other non-gender conforming folks before it was called transformative justice. "Just as the use of state violence against Black communities is not new, neither are the ideas of transformative justice or community accountability. These approaches often work to prevent violence, to intervene when harm is occurring, to hold people accountable, and to transform individuals and society to build safer communities" (Ejeris Dixon, *Building Community Safety: Practical Steps Toward Liberatory Transformation, Beyond Survival*). These and other marginalized people personally understood the need to create community based solutions to violence and harm, instead of turning to the state which consistently caused more violence and harm.

Restorative justice uses victim-centered and trauma-informed approaches to generate healing, accountability, and restores the conditions before

harm occurs. Transformative justice utilizes these strategies but goes further by addressing how the conditions culminating up to that specific instance of harm can also be causing harm—"how the original conditions were unjust" (*We Will Not Cancel Us*, adrienne maree brown). The individual, the harmful interpersonal relationships and/ or other socio-economic conditions of systemic harm, and the culture and power dynamics of the community are transformed rather than a process in which revenge retribution or punishment is enacted. Some examples are Safe OUTside the System (SOS) Collective of the Audre Lorde Project, Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, UBUNTU, Collective Justice, Black Youth Project 100, and INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans people of Color Against Violence.

Transformative Justice involves decolonizing our minds to shed our conditioning of punitive punishment and instead hold firmly in the belief that all people are worthy, nobody is disposable, everyone has the ability to grow and transform. And importantly, together we can radically transform the systems causing harm while addressing interpersonal harm. **Transformative justice is a personal, internal, and collective process of practicing the muscle of accountability. It is tangible action steps toward an abolitionist horizon. It is how we center survivors. It is community based solutions to harm that involve accountability and healing, addressing the conditions that led to harm, instead of punitive punishment.**

"What kind of culture, knowledge, and community services structures would we be able to create if we could nurture one another without our armor on, if we could draw out and develop the gifts in one another, if we could care for one another in concrete, meaningful ways, and could protect one another from systemic harms or forms of structural violence, even as were struggling to dismantle them?" - Nora Samaran

Additional Resources:

- [These short but informative youtube videos from the Barnard Center for Research on Women Transformative Justice Series](#)
- [Season 2, Episode 3: Abolition Serves Survivors](#), of our podcast Abolition is for Everybody. Available on all streaming platforms.
- [This resource hub from TransformHarm.org](#)

Abolition Corner's approach to these topics is guided by *Prisons Make Us Safer And 20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration* by Victoria Law and other sources gathered by [Initiate Justice's](#) Policy Analyst, Sarah Rigney. Written by Sarah Rigney. Edited by Michelle Cárdenas. Please request permission before reprinting.



Abolition Corner is a companion space to Initiate Justice's podcast, *Abolition is for Everybody*. This year, we will spend a few minutes in the beginning of each session demystifying a commonly upheld myth about incarceration before having a friendly, open conversation.

To RSVP and for more information: [InitiateJustice.org/AbolitionCorner](https://www.initiatejustice.org/abolitioncorner)