

# Abolition Corner: An Intro to Abolition

## What is Abolition to us?

Initiate Justice is redefining public safety through a lens of abolition. Abolition is not just a political vision. Abolition is a philosophy, life practice, and organizing strategy for a world without prisons, police and surveillance. A world without prisons as solutions to social problems. We don't know exactly what that looks like, because creating a world where everyone has access to a dignified and fully lived life has never been done for everybody before. This shows the importance of how this movement needs all of us, all our ideas and creativity, and our daily actions. Together, we dream, imagine, organize and build the world we deserve.

"Abolition requires that we change one thing, which is everything. Abolition is not absence, it is presence. What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities. So those who feel in their gut deep anxiety that abolition means knock it all down, scorch the earth and start something new, let that go. Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can... Abolition is about abolishing the conditions under which prison became the solution to problems, rather than abolishing the buildings we call prisons." –Ruth Wilson Gilmore

## Turning to Transformative and Restorative Justice

**Abolition doesn't yet have all the answers but that's not to say the answers don't already partially exist or can't be created. Instead, it shows the importance of learning. Learning how state systems actually cause more harm than good. Learning from people who came before us or who are currently creating community systems to meet needs.**

As an abolitionist framework, Transformative Justice understands that state systems like prisons, police, and ICE, are sites of enormous amounts of harm and violence. We work to build alternatives to systems which often position themselves as protectors, while simultaneously enacting the very forms of violence they claim to condemn (Mia Mingus).

We turn to Restorative and Transformative Justice and many other types of community care and accountability instead of harmful state systems. These are justice practices for responding to violence, harm, and abuse that go all the way to the root of the problem. They generate healing outside of harmful state systems. Instead of punishment, these approaches work so the conditions that create injustice are transformed (*We Will Not Cancel Us*, Adrienne Maree Brown). "Criminal justice is interested in assigning blame and executing punishment, while transformative justice challenges the notion that punishment is inherent to justice." (*Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Ejeris Dixon)

## Turning Away from Punitive Justice

The United States embraces what is called Punitive Justice (or retributive justice). Punitive justice causes us to focus on and blame people who cause harm during an individual instance and believe that justice is a revenge based punishment for that action. If you were raised in the United States, it's likely that you were also raised (through culture, media, etc.) to believe in punitive justice. Specifically, we are conditioned to operate from a "framework of personal responsibility: the idea that those deemed guilty are caught in the system due to their own moral failings. In order to be redeemed, guilty people must be punished [sometimes under the pretense of rehabilitation]—or at least confined, isolated, and separated from the rest of the world." (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

Our government and all institutions are structurally and culturally committed to the harmful and unproductive logic of punitive justice. We see this with the examples of prisons, fines, or even punishing children with suspension and detention. Although we know that "nobody enters into harm for the first time by committing it" (Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon*) our current approach does not provide any accountability, addresses the causes of harm, why that person perpetrated harm, or prevents future harm. As abolitionists we are working to eliminate punitive justice in our minds, hearts, and

institutions to build a truly safe world without surveillance, police, and prisons. We understand why “everything needs to change”—but the world we are trying to build isn’t as radical or unimaginable as it might appear on the surface (Ruth Wilson Gilmore).

As Mariame Kaba explained, there are groups of people who are living a type of abolition now. She asks us to think of affluent, white neighborhoods, where there are no cops to be found and everyone has the resources they need. There are no police in schools, no metal detectors. Everyone has full time, dignified employment. People own homes and are not struggling for healthcare, food, or opportunity. They have all the resources people say they want in a society that would be transformed enough to make it so they feel we don’t need surveillance, police, and prisons. “It’s not like we don’t know how to do this and it’s not like some populations don’t already benefit from not being criminalized when they cause harm... The question is, why for them and not for all of us or the rest of us?”

Imagination is necessary to some degree, but this illustrates what Gilmore said, the world we’re creating already exists in fragments, pieces, and possibilities.

## Abolition is Intersectional

However, this example also shows the need to have a Black, queer, disabled, feminist lens toward abolition—the need to understand the intersectional nature of oppression. Although the example illustrates how resources help make a community safe instead of surveillance, police, and prisons, it is not the abolition we are dreaming because there is still oppression causing violence and harm. What we mean is that abolition includes rooting out the harmful “isms” like racism, ableism, sexism, nationalism, colonialism, etc., not just addressing physical

cages. We need to embrace an intersectional lens to identify and address all forces of oppression. The people surviving under interwoven forms of oppression deserve to have safety and freedom. **An intersectional lens also allows us to see a clearer pathway to liberation because it is in their stories and our own “that we are better able to identify multiple streams of repression, resilience, and resistance”** (*Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, Charlene Carruthers).

“In understanding the interconnected nature of oppression, we realize the interconnected nature of liberation” (Aditi Mayer).

## So what is abolition?

**Abolition is a framework of understanding how our current systems do not prevent or respond to harm well, and in fact cause more harm, along with the commitment to build a better world from all of the wonderful possibilities that already exist.**

“Being a prison abolitionist is a life path, it’s a framework that we develop together through doing and learning. Sometimes people have a misconception that abolition is entirely about firing the cops and burning the prisons. It is actually about knowing that the current systems we have in place to address harm are causing additional harm. It is about realizing that we have a responsibility to align the ways we relate to each other with our values -from the most intimate relationship up to the larger systems like the criminal and immigration systems. Abolition is the visionary process of imagining and building the structures that we want to see replace the ones we are dismantling today..... but if we hope to build communities that are truly safe, we need to understand and transform the source of harm.” -Amanda Aguilar Shank

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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



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://InitiateJustice.org/AbolitionCorner)**