I Am a Prison Abolitionist!

Jason Lydon

Prisons do not offer anything useful to society. On the contrary, prisons damage our communities, deprive us of real justice, and support economic exploitation and racial discrimination. The theory behind abolition has its roots in the U.S. movement to end slavery. Nineteenth century abolitionists did not believe slavery could be reformed. They believed it should be abolished. Prison abolitionists feel the same way about prisons.

Abolitionists are not suggesting that we will one day wake up in a magical land where there is no harm or violence. Abolitionists suggest that we need new systems of accountability that address the roots of harm and support those who are survivors of violence. This will make us all safer in the long-term.

Even in this better world, some people will still likely harm others. Prison abolitionists want the chance to create community-based solutions. We want to end the idea that some people are disposable and that cages and punishment are acceptable responses to those who do harm.

How do we work towards our goal? Abolitionists support the building of prisoner power, the nurturing of formerly incarcerated people, and the creation of new authentic systems for justice.

Moratorium on Prison Building

A popular organizing model is the attrition model. We work to “diminish the function and power of prisons in our society.”1 For example, we support a moratorium on the building of all new prisons, jails, and detention centers. The moratorium process forces the government and corporations to examine alternatives to incarcerating people.

Release 80% Now

While we fight for a moratorium on all expansion of the punishment industry, we also pursue decarceration. Decarceration is the struggle to get as many people as possible out of prison. A key strategy for decarceration is to advocate for a prisoner release timeline2 that might look something like this: First, 80% of all prisoners convicted of drug and property offenses should be released. Next, we should ensure the compassionate release of all prisoners with terminal diseases, all prisoners over the age of 65, all prisoners convicted of sex work, all prisoners convicted of killing or injuring their abusive partners, and all prisoners who have served ten years or more on a sentence.

The idea of this timeline isn’t to suggest that some prisoners are “good” while others are “bad.” Prison abolitionists do not believe that you can carve humanity into good and evil, and then lock away the evil ones. However, this idea that “bad” people deserve to be locked away is so strong in our society, it can be strategic to advocate for the 80% goal in the short-term while we work towards complete prison abolition in the long-term.

All of the individuals getting out of prison will need support. The resources that went into incarcerating them could be used to support them. According to a 2012 Vera Institute report, “the [annual] total per-inmate cost averaged $31,286.3 If the United States is able to spend that amount on incarcerating people every year, then it should be able to spend half that amount to care for people in their process of returning to society with money that should be given directly to community-based organizations, not state controlled programs.

Pursue Real Justice

The next step in the struggle for abolition is excarceralion, the act of not putting people in prison.
Prisons and Justice?

Prison abolitionists support a kind of justice that allows individuals who have caused harm to be authentically accountable for their actions rather than simply punished and locked away. Transformative Justice is an expansion from Restorative Justice (see p. 39). Restorative Justice seeks to repair the harm, but Transformative Justice requires a community process that gets at the roots of what allowed the harm to be caused in the first place.

Another key part of excarceration is decriminalization—not just of a little bit of marijuana, but of many other things the state has designated as criminal. For example, we could start by decriminalizing crimes without victims. We could abolish bail and pretrial detention. We could create community dispute and mediation centers, utilize fines and restitution, establish community probation, and create legislative standards and procedures for alternative sentencing. In the U.S., where one in 31 adults is either on probation, parole, or incarcerated, decriminalization would help to drastically reduce our prison population.

Abolition of the prison industrial complex can feel like a scary process. We have had prisons as our primary way to solve social problems for centuries now. But prisons create more problems than they solve. With dedication and community power, we could achieve the abolition of prisons and begin to realize the benefits of a transformative model of justice.

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Sources:
2. Ibid., 63
4. PREAP, Instead of Prisons, 63.

“What do we do about murderers?”

This is a common question for prison abolitionists. It suggests that it’s possible to identify the really “bad” people and lock them away, and then we’ll all be safer. But consider this fact: most murdered women are killed by someone they know. Yet few people are wondering what we should do about them! Do people focus their fear on murderers because it feels less scary to be scared of a stranger than it does to be scared of your own spouse or acquaintance?

The prison model has shaped our thinking and led us to imagine that we could be safe if all the “bad” people were locked away. Prison abolitionists challenge this idea. We don’t claim to have all the answers, but we do want communities to be able to ask important questions, such as:

1. What are the roots of violence and how can we address them?
2. What are the best ways to support survivors of violence?
3. If someone does cause harm, what could healing look like, and what will ensure that harm does not happen again?

Further Reading:
• Abolition Democracy, by Angela Y. Davis
• The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives & Contemporary Prison Writings, Joy James, ed.