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# Police Reform as Counterinsurgency

HOW REFORMIST APPROACHES TO POLICE VIOLENCE EXPAND POLICE POWER  
AND LEGITIMATE THE NEXT PHASE OF DOMESTIC WARFARE

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By **Dylan Rodríguez**

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## The Logic of “Reform”

**R**eform is best understood as a logic rather than an outcome: an approach to institutional change that sustains existing social, economic, political, and/or legal systems, including but not limited to policing, two-party electoral politics, heteronormativity, criminal justice, and corporate destruction of the natural world.



To reform a system is to adjust isolated aspects of its operation in order to protect that system from total collapse, whether by internal or external forces. Such adjustments usually rest on the fundamental assumption that these systems must remain intact—even as they consistently produce asymmetrical misery, suffering, premature death, and violent life conditions for people and places targeted by anti-Black criminalization, white supremacist police profiling, gendered racist displacement, and colonial occupation.

While modern policing has emerged through the institutionalized violence of anti-Black apartheid and the long genocidal legacies of chattel slavery and frontier warfare, contemporary efforts at “police reform” nonetheless suggest that policing can be magically transformed into a non-anti-Black, non-racial-colonial (“racist”) system. As the story goes, this white magic is to be performed by way of piecemeal changes in police administration, protocols, “officer accountability,” training, and personnel recruitment.

The #8CantWait<sup>1</sup> campaign, widely publicized<sup>2</sup> on social media by the nonprofit organization We the Protestors and its Campaign Zero effort during the early days of the June 2020 global rebellion against anti-Black police violence, exemplifies the foundational fraudulence of this magical ambition. Premised on the untenable, poorly researched,<sup>3</sup> and dangerous notion that adoption of its eight improved “use of force” policies will result in police killing “72 percent fewer people,”<sup>4</sup> the #8CantWait agenda attracted immediate and widespread support<sup>5</sup> from celebrities and elected officials, including Oprah Winfrey, Julián Castro, and Ariana Grande. Such endorsements are inseparable from the political logic of the nonprofit industrial complex:<sup>6</sup> The infrastructure of liberal philanthropy commodifies simplistic narratives of reform into tidy sound/text bites that are easily repeated, retweeted, and reposted by public-facing people and organizations. This dynamic not only



insults the intelligence of those engaged in serious, collectively accountable forms of struggle against state violence—it also glorifies clout-seeking laziness as a substitute for actual (abolitionist) activism. One of many glaring problems with #8CantWait—which advocates de-escalation, “warning before shooting,” banning chokeholds, and installation of a “use of force continuum”—is that many of its proposed policy reforms were incorporated by the most homicidally anti-Black police departments in the United States (including the notorious Chicago PD) well prior to the state-sanctioned killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many others. Against all historical evidence, #8CantWait attempts to convince those questioning and rebelling against a violent, misery-making system that policing is reformable— that it can be modified and refurbished to protect and serve the very same places, communities, and bodies it has historically surveilled, patrolled, intimidated, and eviscerated.

As Project NIA director and abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba wrote in a June *New York Times* editorial,<sup>7</sup> “There is not a single era in United States history in which the police were not a force of violence against Black people.” A recent amicus brief<sup>8</sup> in *Harvard Civil Rights–Civil Liberties Law Review* echoes Black radical feminist and abolitionist<sup>9</sup> analyses like those of Kaba, Rachel Herzing,<sup>10</sup> Alisa Bierria,<sup>11</sup> Sarah Haley,<sup>12</sup> Beth Richie,<sup>13</sup> and Ruth Wilson Gilmore<sup>14</sup> by considering how #8CantWait amounts to a liberal reaction to and attempted appropriation of an emerging global mass movement that radically confronts the foundational, gendered, anti-Black logics of modern policing. The brief suggests that “Campaign Zero’s decision to move forward with a middle-of-the-road proposal, just as abolitionist organizers have begun to garner increased public support in their demands to defund and abolish the police, is questionable.” It is vital to ask why such reform campaigns consistently emerge with special intensity in historical moments of widespread



(Black) revolt against normalized systems of state power and undeclared domestic war. The 2020 global rebellions against anti-Black policing, acceleration of abolitionist and proto-abolitionist organizing, and spread of Black feminist and queer radicalisms in our midst are, as the late Cedric Robinson<sup>15</sup> might say, a brilliant, messy, beautiful totality that seeks to overthrow conditions of terror. These conditions are both deeply historical and acutely present, encompassing the deadly forces of criminalization, housing and food insecurity, incarceration, targeted environmental toxification, sexual violence, and cultural demonization. Yet, reform movements tend to simultaneously obscure and reproduce normalized conditions of terror by deferring and/or repressing militant collective confrontation with the historical foundations of gendered anti-Black and racial-colonial state violence. Put another way, if the foundation of such violence is policing itself, rather than isolated acts of “police brutality,” or criminal justice rather than the scandal of “mass incarceration,” then reform is merely another way of telling the targets of such asymmetrical domestic warfare that they must continue to tolerate the intolerable.

What might it mean, in moments of widespread rebellion against normalized conditions of terror, to conceptualize reform campaigns like #8CantWait as a liberal-progressive counterinsurgency?<sup>16</sup> How do such reformist counterinsurgencies serve to undermine, discredit, or otherwise disrupt oppressed, freedom-seeking (Black, Indigenous, incarcerated, colonized) peoples’ growing struggles for abolitionist, anti-colonial, decolonizing, and/or revolutionary transformations of existing social, political, and economic systems.



## “Reformism”

Reformism<sup>17</sup>—the ideological and political position that fixates on reform as the primary if not exclusive engine of social change/justice—is another name for this soft form of counterinsurgency. Reformism defers, avoids, and even criminalizes peoples’ efforts to catalyze fundamental change to an existing order, often through dogmatic and simplistic mandates of “nonviolence,” incrementalism, and compliance.

Moreover, reformism sees the law as the only legitimate form of protest, collective cultural/political expression, and/or direct intervention on systemically violent conditions. (It is worth noting that the interpretation of violent vs. nonviolent acts requires discussion and debate, particularly in response to oxymoronic notions of “property violence” that rarely account for gendered anti-Black and racial-colonial state violence.) Reformism limits the horizon of political possibility to what is seen as achievable within the limits of existing institutional structures (electoral politics, racial capitalism, heteronormativity, formal citizenship, established forms of government and state authority, etc.).

While abolitionist, revolutionary, and radical forms of collective analysis and movement frequently create irreconcilable confrontation with oppressive institutions and systems, reformism seeks to preserve social, political, and economic orders by modifying isolated aspects of their operation. A peculiar assertion animates contemporary forms of this liberal-progressive counterinsurgency: that the long historical, systemic, institutionally reproduced asymmetries of violence produced by existing systems are the unfortunate consequences of fixable “inequities,” “disparities,” “(unconscious or implicit) biases,” corruptions, and/or inefficiencies. In this sense, reformism presumes that equality/equity/parity are



achievable—and desirable—within existing systems. The reformist counterinsurgency pivots on a fervent belief that the spirit of progress, national improvement, and patriotic belief will prevail over a fundamentally violent order. In practice, this belief approximates a form of dogmatic liberal faith—a kind of pseudo-religion. Thus, increased “diversity” in personnel and bureaucratic infrastructure, shifts in the legal and policy apparatus, and individualized “anti-bias trainings”<sup>18</sup> ascend as some of the principal methods for alleviating state violence. There is yet another layer of fatal assumption that structures the reformist position: that those targeted for misery, displacement, and premature death under the existing social order must tolerate continued suffering while waiting for the reformist “fix” to take hold.

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## Abolition

An abolitionist analysis and collective praxis, on the other hand, offers an urgent rebuttal to the bad-faith incrementalism of the reformist position. Two parts of the spreading abolitionist response are worth emphasizing: First, that the internal logic of the existing social, political, and economic order (following Sylvia Wynter,<sup>19</sup> let us call this “Civilization”<sup>20</sup>) amounts to a long historical war on specific peoples and places. Second, that the transformation of such an order not only requires its upheaval, but also must be guided by the liberation, collective health, and self-determination of African-descended peoples, Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples, and other peoples and places targeted by the long history of Civilizational war.<sup>21</sup> Consid-



ering the anti-Black, genocidal, and proto-genocidal<sup>22</sup> logic of racial capitalism, the (US) nation-state, white supremacy, and settler-colonial<sup>23</sup> domination, reformism is not merely inadequate to the task of abolishing anti-Black, racial-colonial warfare; it is central to Civilization's expansion, sophistication, and deadliness.

To be fair, some rare reform campaigns seek immediate institutional adjustments that directly address the asymmetrical casualties of anti-Blackness and racial-colonial violence. Abolitionist approaches to reform,<sup>24</sup> for example, endorse short-term measures that defend the existence of vulnerable and oppressed people while allowing organizers, teachers, scholars, and other activists to build greater capacity to completely overturn and transform existing systemic arrangements. #8toAbolition,<sup>25</sup> the abolitionist response to #8CantWait, exemplifies such a program of immediate local reforms, which include defunding/redistributing police budgets, decriminalizing survival-focused economies and communities, decarceration of jails and prisons, and universal access to safe housing. Yet, the campaign nonetheless asserts that "the end goal of these reforms is not to create better, friendlier, or more community-oriented police or prisons. Instead, we hope to build toward a society without police or prisons, where communities are equipped to provide for their safety and wellbeing." Reform is, at best, a stopgap emergency tactic that abolitionists undertake with principled suspicion. The historical moment of the 2020 rebellions momentarily obliterates the reformist script and poses an ongoing challenge to the centrist pivoting signified by the Biden-Harris administration's patriotic restoration of respectable, dignified, "normal," anti-Black, colonial, white supremacist state power. While much of the 2020 US electoral discourse was funneled into a false (and frequently blurred) opposition between piecemeal police reform/defunding and varieties of pro-police nationalism, the contemporaneous proliferation of grassroots abolitionist, proto-abolitionist, and Black freedom/self-



defense organizing refuses to concede ground. Growing numbers of people, communities, and organizations are unapologetically, militantly rejecting the contemporary sociopolitical and economic order. This period is animated by widespread Black and Indigenous revolt, audacious visions of a future against/after Civilization, and a disciplined mass refusal to surrender to the intimidation of right-wing reactionaries and the open repression of the state. Proliferating grassroots activity, language, thought, and collective learning expose the brittle ideological claims of reformism, which wilt in the face of the surging art, movement, and poetry of abolition, revolution, reparation, and radical community that define periods like the summer of 2020. Readers of this and other contributions to *Abolition for the People* may already be engaged with such collectives, but if they are not, they can likely find ways to connect themselves with mutual aid, abolitionist, and other community accountable organizations with reasonably minimal effort.

Finally, at a time when the United States is reacting to this insurgent, self-liberating swell of humanity by openly moving toward a twenty-first-century version of white nationalist fascism, it is helpful to revisit the words of Black revolutionary writer, teacher, and organizer George Jackson, from his book *Blood in My Eye*:

“We will never have a complete definition of fascism, because it is in constant motion, showing a new face to fit any particular set of problems that arise to threaten the predominance of the traditionalist, capitalist ruling class. But if one were forced for the sake of clarity to define it in a word simple enough for all to understand, that word would be ‘reform.’<sup>26</sup>

Fatal and terrorizing state violence is not containable to isolated incidents. It draws from and actively expands a long Civilizational history that is based on the evisceration and negation of Black life; the occupation and destruction of Indigenous peoples and places; the criminalization of queer, trans, and disabled people;



the flourishing damage of state-sanctioned sexual violence; and the stubborn omnipresence of violent misogyny—which are the everyday order of things under the conditions of normalized (domestic) war.

Reform is at best a form of casualty management, while reformism is counterinsurgency against those who dare to envision, enact, and experiment with abolitionist forms of community, collective power, and futurity. Abolition, in this sense, is the righteous nemesis of reformism, as well as the militant, principled, historically grounded response to liberal counterinsurgency.

Abolition is not an outcome.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it is an everyday practice, a method of teaching, creating, thinking, and an insurgent (“fugitive”) community-building project that exposes the pitfalls of the reformist adventure. It demystifies reformism’s cheap magic and summons an embrace of the dynamic Black radical and revolutionary tradition that informs collective labors of freedom,<sup>28</sup> structures notions of justice and collective self-defense, and induces a political and ethical obligation to fight unapologetically, in whatever ways are available, effective, and historically accountable. Anything less is a concession to the logics of anti-Black and racial-colonial genocide.

## Reader’s Guide

- According to Dylan Rodríguez, what is reformism? How does it differ from reform? How is reform a form of counterinsurgency?
- What is the author’s criticism of #8CantWait? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
- What does the author mean by asymmetrical domestic warfare? Provide three to four examples from the author’s essay and provide three to four examples from your own observations.
- “Abolition is not an outcome,” the author argues. “Rather, it is an everyday practice, a method of teaching, creating, thinking, and an insurgent ('fugitive') community-building project that exposes the pitfalls of the reformist adventure.” Please provide three to four concrete examples of everyday abolitionist practice.



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# Three Traps of Police Reform

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By **Naomi Murakawa**

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**A**bolitionists are practiced in fielding questions asked with raised eyebrows and a hint of ridicule. *You want to build a better world—one that values people over profits and functions without police, prisons, and borders? Sounds utopian. How would that work?*

These are fair questions. But the parallel line of interrogation is rarely thrown at reformists. *You want to build better police and prisons? Sounds practical, meaning we can reform now because we have before. How has that worked out?*

Decades of reform have built an agile, deadly police force and the largest prison system in the world. This is not because previous generations slept on the job. The call to shrink, dismantle, or abolish police and prisons—not improve them—reverberates through the Civil Rights Congress and *We Charge Genocide*; through Bayard Rustin and the Journey of Reconciliation; through the Black Panthers and the Young Lords; through Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and queer liberation movements, to the creation of Critical Resistance in the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Today many are new to abolition, but abolition is not new. I say this to remember some simple



lessons. Abolitionist lineages run deep. The fight is long. And, finally, I say this to remember that—given that brilliant abolitionists are here and have been here—it would be foolish to underestimate the allure of reformism. Abolitionists are called dreamers, but it is the promise of reform that works as fantasy.

The first trap of reform is that *reform the police* usually means *reward the police*. As a supposed concession to the first wave of Black Lives Matter protests in 2014 through 2016, the Obama administration gave police a gift basket: \$43 million for body cameras. Body cameras have not delivered on early promises to reduce force and increase accountability, but they have expanded police surveillance powers, especially when equipped with facial-recognition software. As police patrolled Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, they captured images of protesters<sup>2</sup>—by using the very technology that elites promised would contain some of the police powers that had sparked the protests just a few years ago.

Even larger rewards for police departments come under the guise of feel-good cop-speak labels like “community policing,” “guardian policing,” or “procedurally just policing.”<sup>3</sup> After mass uprisings against policing in the mid-1960s, the Johnson administration created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration,<sup>4</sup> which dispensed \$10 billion mostly to local police, often in the name of improving racial fairness and police-community relations.

The more police brutalize and kill, the greater their budgets for training, hiring, and hardware. The Los Angeles Police Department exemplifies this cruel exchange rate, as Max Felker-Kantor documents in *Policing Los Angeles*.<sup>5</sup> Between January 1964 and July 1965—the eighteen months before the people of Watts rebelled—the LAPD killed sixty-four people. Despite the fact that twenty-seven of them were shot in the back, the police’s internal affairs department ruled that sixty-two of the sixty-four were justifiable homicides. During the Watts rebellion, the LAPD and the



National Guard killed another twenty-three Angelenos, most of whom were Black. Many concluded that the LAPD must be professionalized, given better training and equipment to “fight crime” without provoking protests that cost millions in property damage. As federal, state, and county budgets siphoned more into policing, LAPD chief Thomas Reddin did not sound like a leader chagrined, chastened by the onus of reform. He felt triumphant, lavished in loot. It was “The Year of the Cop,” he said of 1968, adding, “Everything you want, you get. And I say I want more, and I should be getting it.”<sup>6</sup>

The protests of 2020 have popularized key abolitionist demands to defund police<sup>7</sup> and abolish the prison industrial complex.<sup>8</sup> But federal elites have instead doubled down on rewarding police, particularly through the Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office), a 1994 Clinton administration creation that has already given \$14 billion to local police. In June 2020—as total unemployment reached 18 million people, one in five families was food insecure, and Black, Latino, and Indigenous mortality rates for coronavirus were as much as double those of whites—federal lawmakers prioritized hiring over three thousand more cops through the COPS Office, and President Biden promises to give another \$300 million to community-oriented policing.<sup>9</sup>

This history suggests that police, like banks, are too big to fail. When market crashes or mass protests stop business as usual, elites deliver a bailout—for the authors of the devastation, not the people they left broke and broken.

Policing is intrinsically predatory<sup>10</sup> and violent.<sup>11</sup> Police push millions of people into the carceral state, where racial disparity and other inequities rise through each circle of hell. Black people comprise 13 percent of the US population but roughly 30 percent of the arrested, 35 percent of the imprisoned, 42 percent of those on death row, and 56 percent of those serving life sentences.<sup>12</sup> Nearly half of people mur-



dered by police have disabilities. Sexual violence is a routine but invisible form<sup>13</sup> of police brutality used especially against LGBTQ youth, sex workers, undocumented women, and Black women and women of color. Here we see the second trap of reform: Because police *seem* lawless, reformers hope that new laws will rein in their power. But the premise is wrong. Policing is not law's absence; it is law's essence in a system of racial capitalism.<sup>14</sup> In this system, laws affirmatively protect the police's right to target the poor, to lie, and to kill.

Racism is not a contaminant that seeps into policing as if lawmakers left some loophole that dutiful reformers could close. Police saturate working-class, Black, and Brown neighborhoods with explicit legal permission. Courts validate endless police stops. Stopping someone for walking in a “high-crime area”? Perfectly legal.<sup>15</sup> Searching a car for drugs because the Black driver paused too long at a stop sign? Perfectly reasonable.<sup>16</sup> As police commonly joke about racial profiling, “It never happens—and it works.”<sup>17</sup>

Reformers try to enhance people's procedural rights as if arming individuals with legal protections might slow the churn of criminalization. But consider the crowning glory of the procedural rights revolution, the 1966 *Miranda v. Arizona* Supreme Court decision requiring cops to recite the speech that begins “You have the right to remain silent.” Outraged conservatives griped about liberal courts handcuffing the cops. But police simply adapted to a new protocol. After reading Miranda rights during an arrest, police secure incriminating statements in more than half of all interrogations—rates comparable to those pre-*Miranda*.<sup>18</sup> Police routinely use lies, intimidation, and confinement to coerce confessions, but simply saying the magic words became proof of professionalism. In short, *Miranda* offers good protection—for police, not the people they interrogate.



Reformers try to regulate police use of force, but regulations are also instructions. In the 1985 *Tennessee v. Garner* decision, for example, the Supreme Court held that Memphis police wrongfully killed Edward Garner, a Black child in the eighth grade. It was wrong to shoot the child in the back, the Court found; such violence was justifiable only *if* the cop feared deadly injury to bystanders or themselves. With this conditional clause, the Court gave police instructions on how to kill legally. Police learned the script, “I feared for my life.” If cops forget their lines, then internal investigators help them remember. After Chicago police killed a child—identified in a Department of Justice report only as an “unarmed teenager”—the police internal investigator steered the cop toward exoneration with this question: “You were in fear for your life, so you fired how many times?”<sup>19</sup>

Reform orbits around bad “incidents,” as if police *brutality* and police *profiling* are somehow discrete moments when police do something wrong. But brutality and racism are woven into policing. This becomes clear when we name the core police function: to use coercive power to preserve the status quo. And what is the status quo? Put simply by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it. Thus, criminalization and mass incarceration are class war . . . Police killings are the most dramatic events in a contemporary landscape thick with preventable, premature deaths.”<sup>20</sup> Police protect private property, enforce the color line, patrol the gender binary, and hold national borders for everyone except the corporations. No amount of reform can erase these core functions.

With each new video of cops brutalizing and killing, there are new expressions of horrified disbelief. Then come announcements of police non-indictment or exoneration, and more statements of disappointment and shock.



Here, in this sea of disbelief, we see the third trap of reform: perpetual reform exploits and feeds the fantasy that violence is a technical glitch of policing. Because reformers refuse abolition, they can only tinker with the style of police violence.

Chokehold bans, for example, prohibit a technique of killing but not the fact of killing. The bans are nonetheless hailed as victories, and New York City just celebrated its recent chokehold prohibition. But the New York Police Department prohibited chokeholds once before, in November 1993. It was hailed as a victory then, too. From 2006 to 2013, nearly 2,000 New Yorkers came forward with chokehold complaints. Just weeks after cops killed Eric Garner in 2014, the NYPD used the chokehold on Rosann Miller, a Black woman who was seven months pregnant, after they confronted her for barbecuing in front of her house.<sup>21</sup> The departmental ban was in full effect.

What trajectory of progress is this, to ban the chokehold—again—but allow police to kill with flashlights, vans, stun guns, handguns, and chokeholds by another name? An analogy can be made to death penalty reformers who replaced the noose with the electric chair and then replaced the electric chair with chemical cocktails. Reformers witnessed the horror of electrocutions that set heads aflame, and so they came up with a better way.

But better for whom? The technique of execution does not comfort the dead. It comforts the executioners—and all their supporters.

Chokehold bans are typical of a certain type of reform—reforms to the arsenal of police weaponry. In the words of one activist, the chokehold ban is “useless.” Such reforms are useful, however, if the goal of reform is to rescue police from a legitimacy crisis of their own making. Reform becomes an elegant solution: let one particular weapon or tactic absorb the blame, while policing goes on as usual. Same terror, different tools.



We have seen this before. For a textbook lesson in police reshuffling of weaponry, we can turn again to the Los Angeles Police Department. Between 1977 and 1982, Los Angeles police killed sixteen people with the chokehold; fourteen of the murder victims were Black.<sup>22</sup> LAPD Chief Daryl Gates defended the categorically “non-lethal” chokehold by blaming Black people for their peculiar “veins or arteries,” slower to open than those of “normal people.”<sup>23</sup> Facing lawsuits from Black Angelinos, in 1982 LAPD banned the “bar-arm” chokehold and restricted use of the carotid chokehold.<sup>24</sup>

Apparently it was the chokehold—and not the police—that killed Black people.

After the world watched LAPD beat Rodney King with fifty-six baton swings in 1991, Chief Gates commissioned a study to formally reintroduce the chokehold. Chokeholds would be less bone crushing and “more humane” than the baton, Gates suggested.<sup>25</sup> “After the video played that night,” said an LAPD Deputy Chief about the beating of Rodney King, cops “hardly ever used the baton. It was banished.” Some evidence suggests that the weapon did indeed cycle out of favor with LAPD, with a reported 741 baton “force incidents” in 1990 compared to “just” fifty-four in 2015.<sup>26</sup> The baton, Chief Gates said, had become a “symbol of police oppression.”<sup>27</sup>

Apparently it was the baton—and not the police—that got a bad reputation for brutalizing Black people.

Tasers then became a police favorite. In Los Angeles in 2015, with baton use at historic lows, LAPD used the Taser 519 times.<sup>28</sup>

In that same year across the US, police killed forty-eight people with Tasers. One was Natasha McKenna, a thirty-seven-year-old Black woman who, despite being handcuffed and leg-shackled, so overpowered six specially trained Emergency Response Team officers that they felt compelled to tase her four times. She stopped



breathing and died several days later. Before officers tased her to death, Natasha McKenna pleaded with them, saying, “You promised . . . you wouldn’t kill me.”<sup>29</sup>

And in the eyes of the law, police did *not* kill her. Tasers are technically non-lethal weapons. This designation holds regardless of the death toll, because “normal” bodies do not die when tased.

Apparently the problem is not that police use Tasers to terrorize and kill Black people. The problem is that too many Black people have “non-normal bodies.” They die when the appropriate response is to suffer.

Given the reformers’ tendency to blame the machinery, we should be able to predict what will follow from this latest round of chokehold bans. “By simply banning all chokeholds,” warns *Police 1* magazine, well-meaning people “are forcing officers to move to a higher level of physical control (strikes) or an intermediate weapon (chemical spray, baton, or Taser), which can be more harmful to the subject.”<sup>30</sup> Police have warned us. Ban the chokehold and suffer the consequences of more brutal weapons.

We pursue reform on the premise that the system is broken. But as Mariame Kaba tells us, the system isn’t broken but highly functioning just as the powers that be intended.<sup>31</sup> I agree and will add this: Police reform does not fail. It works—for the police.

## Reader’s Guide

- According to Naomi Murakawa, what are the three traps of reform? How does each trap reinforce the others? And why do these traps ultimately reward the police?
- How have police been “rewarded” since (and in response to) the 2020 protests? Provide three to four examples.
- What does the author mean by “Policing is not law’s absence; it is law’s essence in a system of racial capitalism”? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.



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# Change from the Roots

WHAT ABOLITION LOOKS LIKE, FROM THE PANTHERS TO THE PEOPLE

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By **Robin D. G. Kelley**

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*“What if Trayvon Martin was offered a ride home instead?”*

—Dream Defenders, “Defund Police and Rebuild Our Communities”

**T**he slogan “Defund the Police” has become a political lightning rod. To former President Donald Trump and his people, it is a terrorist plot hatched by socialists (read: Democrats) and thugs (read: Black people). President Joe Biden and most of his party stalwarts run from the idea, proposing instead to increase funding for law enforcement for better equipment and training. Abolition also has its share of critics on the left<sup>1</sup> who think it is utopian fantasy and a political dead end. All sides share two things in common: they believe police keep us safe, and they fundamentally misunderstand the demand to defund or abolish the police.



For Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other communities of color, especially the poor, women, and LGBTQ folx, the police are often a threat to safety and security—alongside a racist and sexist “criminal justice” system, inadequate income, housing, health care, and schools, and neighborhoods divested of services and subject to environmental and health hazards. They are more likely to live near toxic waste dumps, freeways, bus barns, and oil and gas production facilities, and lack access to healthy food, clean drinking water, and safe affordable housing, among other things. This is why abolition is necessary. Abolition works to dismantle systems that have caused harm, namely police and prisons, and reallocate funds to social and economic resources, and to develop new systems of community-controlled public safety and restorative justice. The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), a coalition made up of over 150 organizations, came up with such a plan to divest billions of dollars from prisons,<sup>2</sup> policing, and the Pentagon, and invest in education, universal health care, housing, living wage jobs, restorative justice, food justice, and green energy.

For example, since 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) gave over \$30 billion in direct grants to state and local law enforcement, and the Department of Defense’s (DOD) 1033 Program issued some \$7 billion worth of surplus military equipment to police departments as well as law enforcement units to select colleges and school districts. The federal government doles out billions with little oversight and no accountability, and no evidence that we are safer as a result of militarized policing. The M4BL policy platform proposes reallocating these funds to “long-term safety strategies such as education, community restorative justice, and employment programs.” The data is clear: Children in a Chicago study<sup>3</sup> who did not participate in preschool programs were 70 percent more likely to be arrested by age eighteen; in another study,<sup>4</sup> youth who participated in summer job programs in



Chicago saw a 43 percent decrease in arrests over a sixteen-month period. Shifting \$37 billion from policing to education and restorative justice initiatives will not only strengthen communities—it will make them safer.

Abolition is neither new nor hopelessly utopian. On the contrary, after over a half century of “reforms,” police and prisons continue to enact irreparable harm to vulnerable populations. None of the police reforms currently proposed are new: civilian review boards, better training, altering use of force policy, more Tasers, more transparency, diversifying the force<sup>5</sup> (especially by hiring more Black cops),<sup>6</sup> residency requirements (officers must live in the city where they work), better data to flag patterns of misconduct, body cams, and banning chokeholds. These reforms have not stopped the wanton killing and beating of civilians or made communities that are consistently policed any safer. Before George Floyd’s execution in Minneapolis, the city’s police department was a poster child of reform. Minneapolis’s diverse force was well-trained in mental health crisis intervention,<sup>7</sup> implicit bias, de-escalation,<sup>8</sup> and praised for being exceptionally compassionate.<sup>9</sup>

A decade of unrelenting police violence followed by non-indictments has inspired new movements to embrace abolitionist principles. Those organizations include: #BlackLivesMatter, Dream Defenders, Black Youth Project 100, We Charge Genocide, BOLD (Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity), Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, Dignity and Power Now, Ella’s Daughters, Assata’s Daughters, Black Feminist Future, Know Your Rights Camp, Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle, and the #LetUsBreathe Collective, to name just a few. Before Black Lives Matter became a hashtag, Oakland’s Black Organizing Project<sup>10</sup> and the Community Rights Campaign<sup>11</sup> in Los Angeles were fighting to demilitarize schools, decriminalize tardiness and truancy, and abolish school police. In Ferguson, Missouri, in the wake of Michael Brown’s death, Black youth in Hands Up United,<sup>12</sup> Lost Voices, and



Millennial Activists United gave us a model of a sustained revolt dedicated to police abolition that inspired a group of anarchists to publish a pamphlet “A World Without Police”<sup>13</sup> and launch a companion website.<sup>14</sup>

Abolishing the police is not the brainchild of some extreme left-wing think tank but a product of grassroots social movements fighting police violence and racially biased laws while simultaneously trying to make their own communities safer. We have been taught that fear of rising crime and urban rebellions ensured Richard Nixon’s election in 1968 because he promised to restore “law and order.” But the wave of urban rebellions were responses to *police violence*, exacerbated by the violence of disinvestment, segregation, and poverty.

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was formed in 1966 in Oakland, California, precisely to monitor police violence, to create community-based models of public safety, and to provide for the social needs of Black communities where the state failed. Panthers around the country patrolled the streets, held know-your-rights workshops, exposed the names of brutal cops, and in various places provided free medical care, free clothing and groceries, free breakfast and lunch programs, liberation schools for children,<sup>15</sup> food banks, community gardens, drug rehab centers, ambulance services, and housing cooperatives. These efforts at mutual aid were deemed so dangerous to national security that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover dubbed the Panthers as “the greatest threat to internal security of the country.” BPP members, along with other liberation movement activists, sought to reimagine criminal justice at the Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia in 1970. They proposed reorganizing the police<sup>16</sup> as “a rotating volunteer nonprofessional body coordinated by the Police Control Board from a (weekly) list of volunteers from each community section.” Board members would be elected, its policies approved by popular vote, and “community rehabilitation



programs” would replace jails and prisons. However, through systematic raids on Panther headquarters,<sup>17</sup> surveillance, agent provocateurs, targeted assassinations, and harassment, the police and FBI<sup>18</sup> actually created a dangerous and insecure environment. The assassinations of Fred Hampton, head of the Illinois chapter of the BPP, and Mark Clark,<sup>19</sup> leader of the Peoria chapter, on December 4, 1969, are the best known examples of the government’s war on the Panthers.

Today’s vision of abolition, rooted in anti-prison movements, can be traced to the long 1990s (roughly 1989–2003), to opposition to Bush- and Clinton-era neoliberalism, the war on drugs, the war on terror, prison expansion, the movement to free political prisoners, police violence, anti-Black and anti-immigrant racism, Islamophobia, and violence against women of color and the LGBTQ community. That vision is present in movements like Mothers ROC (Reclaiming Our Children), the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the National Jericho Movement, Prison Activist Resource Center, the Prison Moratorium Project, Critical Resistance, All of Us or None, Labor/Community Strategy Center, Project South, Southerners on New Ground (SONG), INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Sista 2 Sista, the Los Angeles Community Action Network, the Praxis Project, Safe OUTside the System (SOS), Project NIA, FIERCE (Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment), Queers for Economic Justice, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC), and UBUNTU!, to name only a few.

The founders and forces behind many of these movements were key theorists of abolition, community organizers, survivors of gender-based violence, formerly incarcerated, and scholar-activists whose writings—even if not promoting an abolitionist agenda—profoundly shaped the current generation of activists. The current



movement is unimaginable without the writings of my colleagues and compatriots who have also contributed to this project, as well many others.

It is not an accident that gender-based violence (physical, sexual, and psychological violence directed at women, girls, femmes, and queer and gender-nonconforming people meant to subjugate and maintain gender inequalities) emerged as a key abolitionist issue. Women of color as well as queer and trans folx are simultaneously criminalized and rendered disposable. It is not enough to say the names of those killed by police but also the tens of thousands whose deaths, disappearances, and abuse go unresolved. Legal scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, co-founder of the African American Policy Forum, launched #SayHerName<sup>20</sup> not only to draw attention to Black women killed by police but to expose how the state and the law make them more vulnerable to other forms of violence by failing to ensure adequate income, affordable housing, effective protections from domestic violence, and persistent race and gender discrimination. Economic precarity, social marginalization, and criminalization render them more susceptible to harm. Police not only enact harm through direct violence in the course of their daily operations—arresting, beating, intimidating, threatening those deemed “suspicious”—but as perpetrators of sexual assault on and off duty. The CATO Institute revealed that sexual misconduct was the highest category of complaints filed against police,<sup>21</sup> second only to excessive use of force. These connections were on display when Oklahoma City police officer Daniel Holtzclaw<sup>22</sup> was charged in August 2014 for sexually assaulting at least eight Black women during traffic stops while on duty.

The criminal justice system is simply incapable of addressing gender-based and intimate violence. Carceral feminists<sup>23</sup> believe that police, prosecution, and prison are the best way to address gender and sexual violence; abolition feminists<sup>24</sup> argue that locking perpetrators up in cages reinforces violent behavior and never



addresses the problem of gender-based violence and its survivors. Instead, the carceral state criminalizes and locks up women, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people in jails, prisons, and detention centers where they are frequently subjected to gendered violence.

In 2001, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance<sup>25</sup> issued a statement calling for “strategies and analyses that address both state and interpersonal violence, particularly violence against women,” and the development of safe, community-based responses to violence independent of the criminal justice system and accountable to survivors of sexual and domestic violence. Following the police killing of two teenaged women of color in 2000, the Brooklyn-based collective Sista 2 Sista<sup>26</sup> created “Sistas Liberated Ground” as an alternative to calling the police to deal with gendered violence. To protect Sistas Liberated Ground, women were trained in self-defense and conflict resolution. Through street performances, video screenings, discussions, and direct interventions they dealt with violence as a community issue. As a result, they succeeded in making their community safer without police. In 2008, INCITE! published a 117-page tool kit<sup>27</sup> offering an array of strategies and resources designed to reduce violence and build caring communities without police. The abolition of police and prisons is not only possible—it is necessary if we are serious about preserving Black life, reducing trauma, creating safer communities, and investing municipal funds in social needs rather than settling wrongful death and excessive force cases. But it will not happen without a political struggle. Because, truth be told, the role of police in the US was never to keep our communities safe, but to protect property and its owners, to function as an occupying force in America’s impoverished ghettos, barrios, and reservations, to use coercive force to oversee “criminalized” populations. And as protesters know firsthand, police are the first line of defense against strikes,



demonstrations, and dissident social movements. Abolitionists know it's not enough just to win the argument, and that abolition is not an event but a process, a struggle. Abolitionists expose the system's oppressive character while also fighting to ultimately end state and interpersonal violence, end policing, end mass spying and the surveillance state, create structures of accountability, demilitarize law enforcement, end solitary confinement, the death penalty, cash bail, resist police and prison expansion, roll back punitive measures, and find ways to interrupt violence and create safety so the police would not have to be called.

### Resources:

- #BlackLivesMatter:<https://blacklivesmatter.com>
- Dream Defenders:<https://dreamdefenders.org>
- Black Youth Project 100:<https://byp100.org>
- We Charge Genocide:<https://wechargegenocide.org>
- BOLD (Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity):<https://boldorganizing.org>
- Million Hoodies Movement for Justice:<https://olbios.org/the-million-hoodies-movement-for-justice>
- Dignity and Power Now:<https://dignityandpowernow.org>
- Ella's Daughters:<https://ellasdaughters.blogspot.com>
- Assata's Daughters:<https://assatasdaughters.org>
- Black Feminist Future:<https://blackfeministfuture.org/our-vision>
- Know Your Rights Camp:<https://knowyourrightscamp.com>
- Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle:<https://lbsbaltimore.com>
- The #LetUsBreathe Collective:<https://letusbreathecollective.com>
- Malcolm X Grassroots Movement:<https://facebook.com/MXGMnational>
- National Jericho Movement:<https://thejerichomovement.com>
- Prison Activist Resource Center:<https://prisonactivist.org>
- Prison Moratorium Project:<https://nomoreprisons.org>
- Critical Resistance:<https://criticalresistance.org>
- All of Us or None:<https://prisonerswithchildren.org/about-aouon>
- Labor/Community Strategy Center:<https://fightforthesoulofthecities.com>



- Project South, Southerners on New Ground (SONG):<https://southernersonnewground.org>
- INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence:<https://incite-national.org>
- Sista 2 Sista:<https://facebook.com/sista2sistaempowerment>
- Los Angeles Community Action Network:<https://cangress.org>
- The Praxis Project:<https://thepraxisproject.org>
- Safe OUTside the System (SOS):<https://alp.org/programs/sos>
- Project NIA:<https://project-nia.org/tools-for-action>
- FIERCE (Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment):<https://getthehealthyheights.org/service/fierce-fabulous-independent-educated-radicals-community-empowerment>
- Queens for Economic Justice:<https://facebook.com/Q4EJ.org>
- Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP):<https://srlp.org>
- Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC):<https://batjc.wordpress.com>
- UBUNTU!:<https://iambecauseweare.wordpress.com>
- Abolitionist Futures:<https://abolitionistfutures.com/full-reading-list>
- The African American Intellectual Society (AAIHS):<https://aaihs.org/prison-abolition-syllabus-2-0>
- Radical History Review:<https://radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/reading-towards-abolition-a-reading-list-on-policing-rebellion-and-the-criminalization-of-blackness>

## Reader's Guide

- Robin D. G. Kelley writes that “abolition is neither new nor hopelessly utopian” and that “abolition works to dismantle systems that have caused harm, namely police and prisons, and reallocate funds to social and economic resources, and to develop new systems of community-controlled public safety and restorative justice.” Provide an example of a program/practice/policy in your community that is based on 1) reallocating funds to social and economic resources, 2) developing new systems of community-controlled public safety, and 3) restorative justice.
- What is carceral feminism and how does it stand at cross-purposes with abolition?
- The author references over twenty-five organizations that currently embrace abolitionist principles and support the larger movement toward abolition. Identify one you're interested in researching and report your findings. Which organization did you choose? What did you learn?
- The author argues that the gender-based violence movement is integral to the abolitionist movement. Why do you think there is a connection between the two?



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# Casting Off the Shadows of Slavery

LESSONS FROM THE FIRST ABOLITION MOVEMENT

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By **Mumia Abu-Jamal**

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**I**n 1981, veteran Black Panther Party member and award-winning radio journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal was wrongfully sentenced to death by a “hanging judge” for the killing of a white police officer in Philadelphia. In 2000, Amnesty International found that the case “was irredeemably tainted by politics and race and failed to meet international fair trial standards.” Mumia forms part of the generation of Black radicals on whom the state tested law-and-order propaganda and lockdown in the ’60s—a prelude to the carceral repression it would deploy against poor Black and Brown urban communities in the 1980s and 1990s. On death row, Mumia became a writer of great literary power, and we are pleased to present his piece as part of this collection.



When one thinks of the term “abolition,” there is a tendency to see it as a threat emerging from the left. Another perspective understands, however, that abolition is a natural response to a situation that has become untenable.

What condition lay before the nation in its founding days? Slavery: human bondage, which sat like an incubus upon the new nation’s foundation and transformed its stated aims and ideals into lies. After some reflection, perhaps, we will see that the notion of abolition has deep historical roots.

Consider summer, 1776, when delegates from the Continental Congress gathered in a sweltering room in Philadelphia. These men, some of the country’s intellectual elite, were scientists, writers, doctors, and thinkers, yet their claims of the new nation’s ideals were thick with contradiction. They wrote and adopted a document that said, among other things, the following:

“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it.”

These words emerge from the Declaration of Independence, adopted July 4, 1776, and celebrated throughout the US annually on Independence Day today.

When people came together in the nineteenth century to oppose the expanding chattel slave system, they were called abolitionists. Among both the rulers and the press, such people were regarded as oddballs at best and nuts at worst. Despite present popular opinion, slavery was the air that people breathed. The nation was so deeply and openly negrophobic and racist that the idea of a multiracial group opposed to slavery was considered both aberrant and abhorrent.



Furthermore, the document, signed by such luminaries as Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Dr. Benjamin Rush, and John Adams, included platitudes like “all men are created equal” while dark men, propertyless white men, and all women were neither able to vote nor receive votes for posts of political power. Indigenous people were seen as part of a distant “wilderness” and not part of the nation that was being contemplated.

In October 1859, white abolitionist leader John Brown, joined by a multiracial group of twenty-one men, raided the US Armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), in an attempt to arm African captives in neighboring plantations and across the South so they could strike out for freedom. Such an attempt had to face fierce logistical challenges, given the communications needed to gain the ear and trust of a largely illiterate and deeply repressed enslaved community, constantly subjected to white armed militia surveillance.

Abraham Lincoln, one of the most admired presidents in history, would describe the raid and the raiders as little better than lunatics and regicides, less than a year after the attack failed. In February, 1860,<sup>1</sup> Lincoln spoke before a crowd at New York’s Cooper Institute (now known as Cooper Union) to distance himself and his party (Republicans) from the Harpers Ferry raid. Lincoln told his audience that Brown wasn’t a Republican, and that Republicans had nothing to do with the raid. Indeed, Lincoln assured his northern audience that neither he nor his party supported abolition. And, truth be told, this is far from a remarkable perspective, for the fact of chattel slavery was one deeply normalized in American experience and history.

Indeed, abolition was the exception, not the rule.

What this means, of course, is that abolitionists were truly remarkable people who saw beyond the present into a time not yet born. Spurred often by religious



convictions, abolitionists supported attacks against the slave system, which they saw as an unnecessary evil.

In 1858, a year before the Harpers Ferry raid, Lincoln opined that slavery would last for at least 100 more years—or at least until 1958 or the 1960s. It is important to note that Lincoln's prognostication was meant to appease the slavocracy. It was not an assessment of the counterrevolutionary dynamic that would detonate *after* the war.

Despite this observation, what that means to us writing from the twenty-first century is that people we now regard as successful African American leaders and entrepreneurs like Oprah Winfrey, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, Muhammad Ali, Dr. Maya Angelou, Debbie Allen, Toni Morrison, Malcolm X, Bessie Smith, Maxine Waters, Alex Haley, Lerone Bennett Jr., Hank Aaron, and, yes, even Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, would have been born into captivity if Lincoln's opinion had prevailed.

Abolitionists brought forth another vision, and hence, another future. Harpers Ferry, Virginia, was a step in the fateful march to war that, after earth-shaking sacrifice, led to the abolition of slavery. Thus, abolition was not a skip in the park. It is a deep, committed movement of social transformation that seeks to bring down institutions that needlessly inflict pain upon the People.

Prison abolitionists are today's freedom dreamers who seek to expand the experience of liberty for all. Close analyses of their proposals make good sense. They want to build a society in which social problems are solved not by police and prison guards but by medical and mental health specialists, social workers, domestic violence experts, educators, and community-based organizers and problem solvers charged with addressing crises in the communities where they live. Because they



are radicals, they seek solutions that address the root causes of social problems. They posit that if we build society anew to meet the human needs of education, health care, housing, meaningful and well-remunerated employment, and community togetherness and cohesion, many of the challenges historically oppressed and exploited communities face today will dissipate.

Abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown forged a new America, one unimaginable to earlier generations. They saw further than their contemporaries, and even warned them of problems threatening from the periphery.

In May 1865, a month after the Confederacy surrendered to Union forces, Douglass delivered a potent warning for his fellow abolitionists about the counterrevolutionary threats that emerged from the ruins of the Civil War:

“Slavery has been fruitful in giving itself names. It has been called ‘the peculiar institution,’ ‘the social system,’ and the ‘impediment’. . . It has been called by a great many names, and it will call itself by yet another name; and you and I and all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth next.”<sup>2</sup>

Douglass’s warning about the mutability of that old racist snake was not heeded. The dreams and short-lived achievements of Reconstruction—land redistribution for the descendants of enslaved Africans as reparations for slavery, greater representation in local government, greater access to education, health care, and the franchise, and greater control over the conditions of their labor on the part of the “freedmen”—were drowned in a sea of terror and blood.

Abolitionists tried to make the nation live up to its promises of equal justice, of freedom, and the rights enshrined in the Reconstruction Amendments set forth in



the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, which were designed to enshrine and protect the rights of Black citizens.

The Reconstruction Era marked the brief period of Black postwar freedom until the US Supreme Court overturned the 1875 Civil Rights Act and the federal government removed the Union army from southern territory in 1877. In that era, white supremacists waged a terror war against Black people and maintained it for the better part of a century, until the emergence and rise of the Civil Rights Movement, first in the era of World War II, and then again during the 1950s and 1960s. The lessons of the noble antislavery Abolition Movement are before us. The lessons to struggle and struggle, from generation to generation, until the People are finally free, and that “old snake” has no more masks behind which to hide.

The 13th Amendment ensured the continuation of slavery by another name—in the guise of the carceral state. Today, prisons are the third-largest employer<sup>3</sup> in the nation according to sociologist Loïc Wacquant—and Black people are, once again, its currency. The consequences of this barbarity are suffered in incalculable ways by the disproportionately Black American and Latino people housed in these cages and their families. Ironically, the consequences are also suffered by the managers and employees of this gargantuan apparatus, who ostensibly benefit from it. The daily duties of the foot soldiers of the prison industrial complex are to control and contain, with repressive violence, other human beings—those at the bottom of society. Not surprisingly, higher incidences of suicide, domestic violence, and substance abuse are reported among prison guards and police officers.

In the final analysis, can a country that professes to be the land of the free, but which holds 25 percent of the world’s prisoners and only 4 percent of the world’s population, truly reflect its promise of happiness and democracy?



Although we have drawn from the text of the Declaration of Independence to cite “the Right of the People . . . to abolish” unjust systems that threaten the Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness of the People, that right doesn’t arise from the document. It comes from the hearts, minds, and urgings of the People—the living People who today breathe the air that sustains us all. Is that not the same energy that calls us to support today’s abolition movement, that works to tear down the system that deprives millions of people—entombed in prison cells and solitary confinement and in this prison house of nations—of their Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness? Like the revolutionary struggles of 1776 and 1860 and those of 1917 and 1959, among others, today’s abolitionist movement dares to dream up the world anew to replace carceral repression with compassionate practices and structures that meet basic social and economic needs, so that we might flourish individually and collectively as humanity in an ecologically protected planet.

We need not historicize questions, nor cast them into the hoary days of the past. They live within us, in our hopes, our dreams, our visions of a world free of such repressive systems that are but the shadows of slavery. Abolition now!



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# Ending the War on Black Women

BUILDING A WORLD WHERE BREONNA TAYLOR COULD LIVE

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By **Andrea J. Ritchie**

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**T**he outcry in response to Breonna Taylor's murder by the Louisville Metropolitan Police Department is indisputably unprecedented—I have never, in my two and a half decades of organizing to end police violence against Black women, queer and trans people, seen billboards,<sup>1</sup> mainstream magazine issues,<sup>2</sup> celebrities, or an entire basketball season<sup>3</sup> dedicated to demanding justice on behalf of a Black woman killed by police. Police violence against Black women is, at least to some degree, indeed invisible no more.<sup>4</sup>

The thing is, visibility is only the starting point, not the endgame.

The goal is a world where Breonna Taylor would still be with us. A world where Black women aren't the group most likely to be killed by police when unarmed,<sup>5</sup> the women most likely to experience arrest or use of force during a traffic stop,<sup>6</sup> the fastest-growing arrest, prison, and jail populations.<sup>7</sup> The goal is a world where cops like Daniel Holtzclaw don't target Black women, queer and trans people for sexual



violence.<sup>8</sup> The goal is a world where Black women, queer and trans people don't face the highest levels of domestic, sexual, and community violence<sup>9</sup> alongside Native women and Two Spirit people.

Black women, queer and trans people's experiences of policing and safety teach us that abolition is the path that leads us there.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, overwhelmingly, the primary call of the chorus demanding #JusticeforBreonna is for arrests and prosecutions of the cops who killed her. And, as shown by the state's decision not to indict anyone for her murder, accountability won't come from the system that sent them to her door.

As Mariame Kaba and I wrote in July 2020 for *Essence*, "We want far more than what the system that killed Breonna Taylor can offer—because the system that killed her is not set up to provide justice for her family and loved ones. Families and communities deserve more than heartbreak over and over again each time the system declines to hold itself accountable."<sup>11</sup>

Beyond leading to dead ends, calls for prosecutions legitimize the criminal punishment system by promoting the idea that it can do justice in individual cases, including against cops, a premise that directly undermines our wholesale challenges to its legitimacy on the grounds that it systematically defines justice as killing, maiming, raping, caging, and deporting Black people. As longtime abolitionists Rachel Herzing and Isaac Ontiveros taught me:<sup>12</sup>

If we apply the same logic to the state that we do to ourselves, however, the same questions remain: How does putting an agent of the state in a cage hold the state accountable? How does prosecuting an agent of the state highlight the systemic nature of repression and genocide of Black communities and not simply exceptionalise this situation as the result of one bad cop? Appealing to the same system that engineers and executes repression and genocide of poor people, youth, queer com-



munities, and communities of color for remedies only strengthens that system's hold over us.

Calls for police prosecutions offer an illusion of justice while reinforcing the *status quo*. That's why they garner widespread support among people invested in upholding it. Arresting individual cops leaves the conditions that make their violence possible unchanged, and injustices multiply in the absence of effective accountability.

Of course, I share deep and fierce outrage at the blatant unfairness of a system that refuses to sanction an officer for killing a Black woman in her home but will imprison a man for life for attempted theft of lawn shears,<sup>13</sup> lay charges on a pregnant Black woman that could put her in prison for three years simply for voting while on probation,<sup>14</sup> or incarcerate Black women and queer and trans people for decades for defending themselves when society won't.<sup>15</sup> But doubling down on trying to make a violent system "work for us" comes at tremendous costs—of fueling the system, and of what we could be doing instead.

Abolition—dismantling systems of surveillance, policing, and punishment rather than trying to "fix" them—invites us to stop investing our faith, time, energy, and resources into seeking justice from a system that has consistently failed to recognize harm against Black women, queer and trans people—and has consistently perpetrated, and then justified it.

Imagine what would be possible if all the energy and resources directed toward demanding arrests and prosecutions of the officers who killed Breonna Taylor were instead focused on making a world where she would still be here. As Kaba, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, powerfully put it, "People are tweeting every day about Breonna Taylor, about her death and what are they saying? When are you going to arrest these people, when are they going to prison?"



People don't put the question as when are we going to dismantle that police department?" What if, instead of acting from a futile hope of justice from the system that killed her, we sought broader and more lasting accountability by working to #DefundPolice<sup>16</sup> and build community-based safety strategies<sup>17</sup> that prioritizes the safety of Black women like Breonna—and hundreds of others killed<sup>18</sup> by police or state-sanctioned violence?

What if we committed our energies instead to creating a world where we don't entrust the safety of Black women and trans and gender-nonconforming people to institutions that report that nobody was injured<sup>19</sup> in a home invasion that left Breonna bleeding to death, or to people who describe the events of that night as "legal, moral, and ethical."<sup>20</sup> A world where the police department that killed her is no longer looting resources from the health care system<sup>21</sup> she was proud to be an essential part of<sup>22</sup> while violating and killing people who demand justice in her name. In other words, a world without police.

What if the national days of action, billboards, sports team tributes, and celebrity statements, instead of demanding prosecutions that won't get us there, called for an end to the "war on drugs"—which is really a thinly veiled war on Black and Brown communities like Breonna's. That would bring us closer to a world where women like Breonna Taylor, Tarika Wilson,<sup>23</sup> Kathryn Johnston,<sup>24</sup> and Alberta Spruill<sup>25</sup> would no longer be continuing casualties of militarized police drug raids, a world where women like Frankie Ann Perkins would no longer be choked to death by police in broad daylight—like George Floyd—on the suspicion that they swallowed drugs, a world where Shelly Treasure Hilliard<sup>26</sup> wouldn't have been killed after police disclosed her identity to a dealer she helped them arrest. A world where we invest in strategies around drug use and sales that save lives instead of taking them—like voluntary, accessible, and universally available harm-reduction pro-



grams that don't mobilize the threat of punishment, but instead offer support in all the forms it is needed, for as long as it is needed.

What if our outrage at Breonna's murder extended to demanding a world where officers like Brett Hankison aren't empowered by their position<sup>27</sup> to engage in sexual harassment and assault, whether in the context of the war on drugs, traffic stops, and "broken windows"<sup>28</sup> policing like Holtzclaw, or under the pretext of offering assistance,<sup>29</sup> like Hankison. A world where women like Charnesia Corley aren't subjected to state-sanctioned rape<sup>30</sup> through an eleven-minute forcible body cavity search in full public view because an officer claimed to have caught a whiff of marijuana during a traffic stop for rolling through a stop sign on the way to the store to pick up medicine for her grandmother. Where Black women can travel safely without fear that they will be strip-searched, their breasts groped, or their genitals probed when they land.<sup>31</sup>

What if our indignation at the state's failure to hold the officers who killed Breonna Taylor accountable led to demands—like those enshrined in the Movement for Black Lives' BREATHE Act,<sup>32</sup> launched in the wake of the summer 2020 uprisings to elevate the demands of the streets into federal legislation—to defund police<sup>33</sup> as a systemic form of accountability for what is in fact a systemic problem. Defunding police<sup>34</sup> offers more expansive and more effective accountability—ensuring that neither cops who kill, nor those who come after them, will be able to do harm in the future. It also points us toward a world where the \$100 billion we currently invest<sup>35</sup> in policing every year would be diverted to quality, affordable, accessible, sustainable, and affirming housing, public spaces, health care, education, jobs, and community-based violence prevention and intervention strategies.

The BREATHE Act also calls for accountability in the form of reparations<sup>36</sup> for survivors of police violence, families of people killed by police, and communities,



inviting us to apply the framework of the historic struggle for justice for survivors of police violence in Chicago<sup>37</sup> to current demands for accountability, and seek holistic repair of individual and collective harms of police violence. Beyond Chicago's victories, a reparations framework would provide for immediate cessation of harm through termination of all cops involved in perpetrating it, and non-repetition through termination of the policing that requires it.

What about violence against Black women, queer and trans people in a world without police? Our calculus when answering this question must include all forms of violence—recognizing that Black women, queer and trans people currently experience significant violence at the hands of police, and very little protection. Black women's safety requires us to build a world where Black women are not killed, violently arrested, sexually assaulted, or deported by police—or abandoned to be killed or harmed by someone else. A world where women like Aura Rosser,<sup>38</sup> Janisha Fonville,<sup>39</sup> and Kiwi Herring<sup>40</sup> aren't killed by police responding to calls for assistance, and where Mia Green,<sup>41</sup> a Black trans woman allegedly killed by a man she was in a relationship with, would still be with us. A world where survivors like Cassandra Jackson—a Black woman violently arrested, manhandled, handcuffed to a chair, placed in restraints, and incarcerated away from her children for days for simply expressing frustration that she was unable to obtain an order of protection against a man who was abusing her—aren't subjected to more violence from the very institutions looting resources from the things they desperately need to prevent, escape, and avoid violence.

What if our demands to protect, defend, and value Black women did not call for more policing and prosecutions, fueling a system we cannot and do not trust with our safety because it targets us? Over 40 percent of domestic violence survivors<sup>42</sup> and 75 percent of rape and sexual assault survivors<sup>43</sup> don't call the police.<sup>44</sup> For every



Black woman who reports her rape, at least fifteen do not.<sup>45</sup> Two-thirds of Black trans respondents to the US Transgender Survey said they would be uncomfortable asking for help from the police<sup>46</sup> if they needed it—in spite of epidemic levels of physical, sexual, and fatal violence targeting trans women. Both groups cite fears that they will not be believed, or will experience further violence and criminalization by cops. Almost a third of respondents to a national survey<sup>47</sup> of survivors, advocates and service providers reported that police used force and threatened to arrest or arrested survivors, noting that these tactics were disproportionately mobilized against Black women. None of this can be reformed away<sup>48</sup>—in fact, reforms attempted to date, like mandatory arrest policies requiring officers to arrest someone when they respond to domestic violence calls, have resulted in increased arrests of Black women<sup>49</sup> and girls<sup>50</sup> who are survivors, because the system operates through controlling narratives<sup>51</sup> that frame us as deserving of and contributing to violence against us, and unworthy of protection.

We can end this war on Black women.<sup>52</sup> But that victory will not be achieved through prosecutions or police reform. It requires us to invest in the things survivors need to prevent, avoid, escape, and transform conditions of violence.

Black Lives Matter Louisville’s demands for justice in Breonna Taylor’s name<sup>53</sup> have shifted over time to reflect these realities—from focusing on arrests of officers involved and elimination of no-knock warrants to tackling systemic forces of gentrification that contributed to Breonna’s killing, defunding the police department that took her life, and securing investments in institutions that would make her community safer<sup>54</sup> like ecosystems of health care workers, universally accessible and affordable housing, universal basic income, and community conflict resolution training. They mirror a similar evolution across the country in the context of the ongoing uprising against police violence in calls to #DefundPolice.<sup>55</sup>



The In Our Names Network, made up of over twenty organizations and individuals working to end police violence against Black women and girls and trans and gender-nonconforming people has followed a similar path, from demanding justice in individual cases of police violence to simultaneously working toward systemic responses that would have prevented them from happening in the first place. For instance, Every Black Girl, founded in the wake of the #AssaultatSpringValleyHigh,<sup>56</sup> is creating safety for Black girls in and out of the classroom, including fighting for #PoliceFreeSchools. Along with other network members, they will train Black youth as researchers to document sexual harassment and violence by cops stationed in and around schools to show that police presence in schools makes students less safe,<sup>57</sup> not more.

Oakland's Anti-Police Terror Project, which organized around police killings of Yvette Henderson<sup>58</sup> and Jessica Williams,<sup>59</sup> is building Black-led prevention and intervention responses to unmet mental health needs through the Mental Health First program that prioritize avoiding police involvement and psychiatric incarceration.<sup>60</sup> Programs like this could prevent up to half of police killings<sup>61</sup> of Black people who are—or are perceived to be—in a mental health crisis. Network member Maria Moore is fighting for justice on behalf of her sister Kayla Moore, a Black trans woman killed by police,<sup>62</sup> by working toward a twenty-four hour non-police mental health crisis response in Berkeley, California. Network members Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative (SNaPCo), Tamika Spellman<sup>63</sup> of HIPS, Monica Jones of the Outlaw Project, BYP100, and Black LGBTQIA+ Migrant Project are working to build safety for Black trans women—from police, migration-related, and community violence. Organizations like INCITE! teach us that expanding the lens through which we examine police violence and gender-based violence<sup>64</sup> to include Black women, and trans and gender-nonconforming people's experiences leads us



much more quickly to abolition. It helps us to see how policing Black women, queer and trans people whose labor is deemed essential, but whose lives and safety are not, is at the core of the criminal punishment system, whether we are targets of police or seeking protection. It also helps us see how other institutions offered as “alternatives” to police—like the family court and foster system, medical industrial complex,<sup>65</sup> and social services—can operate as “soft police,” controlling and criminalizing Black women and queer and trans people through denial of care, benefits, resources, and protection.

The Interrupting Criminalization initiative I cofounded with Mariame Kaba is identifying women and LGBTQ people’s points of contact with all forms of policing<sup>66</sup> so as to interrupt and eliminate them. We work collaboratively with groups across the country to document the criminalization of Black women and girls and trans and gender-nonconforming people, decriminalize, divert, decarcerate, divest, and dismantle, and dream a world without policing,<sup>67</sup> in which everything we need to be safe is universally and accessibly available. The goal is to reduce police contact and, as Kaba often puts it, to multiply the options available to survivors to access safety and transform harm.

That is what #SayHerName means to me: Not just making sure we know Breonna Taylor’s name, but understanding the forces that converged to kill her; divesting financially, ideologically, and emotionally from the systems that perpetrated and justify her death; and directing our energies toward building a world where Black women, queer and trans people are safe, in her name and in honor of her life. It means understanding that the value of our lives is not set by the amount of time a person does in a cage for hurting us, but by the ways in which we organize to keep each other safe. Kaba and Herzing teach us that the tools for abolition are in our hands,<sup>68</sup> and we can practice them every day, in every interaction, institution, and



imagining we engage in. We each have a role<sup>69</sup> in bringing us closer to a world where Breonna would still be with us—let’s put all of our collective energies into getting there.

## Resources

- Survived & Punished: <https://survivedandpunished.org>
- In Our Names Network: <https://inournamesnetwork.com>
- Every Black Girl Inc.: <https://facebook.com/EveryBlackGirl>
- Anti-Police Terror Project: <https://antipoliceterrorproject.org>
- Mental Health First: <https://antipoliceterrorproject.org/mental-health-first>
- Solutions Not Punishment: <https://snap4freedom.org/home>
- The Outlaw Project: <https://theoutlawproject.org>
- BYP100: <https://byp100.org>
- Black LGBTQIA + Migrant Project: <https://transgenderlawcenter.org/programs/blmp>
- INCITE!: <https://incite-national.org>
- Movement for Family Power: <https://movementforfamilypower.org>
- Transform Harm: <https://transformharm.org>
- Interrupting Criminalization: <https://interruptingcriminalization.com>
- One Million Experiments: <https://millionexperiments.com>
- Defund the Police: <https://defundpolice.org>
- M4BL: <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/end-the-war-black-women>, [m4bl.org/policy-platforms/end-the-war-trans](https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/end-the-war-trans), [m4bl.org/policy-platforms/end-the-war-black-health](https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/end-the-war-black-health)
- The Breathe Act: <https://breatheact.org>



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# What Is & What Could Be

THE POLICIES OF ABOLITION

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By **Dan Berger** *and* **David Stein**

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**T**he far-reaching vision of abolition is enacted daily in political struggles over spending priorities—a key measure of whose lives matter and how. Abolitionists have picked up the torch of twentieth-century Black labor radicals<sup>1</sup> and other racial and economic justice organizers who have insisted that public budgets have moral implications.

The call to defund the police is a deeply rooted strategy that to some entered the 2020 landscape as if from nowhere. Yet the demand has been shaped by more than five decades of organizing against police and prisons. It has been molded by what historian Barbara Ransby has described as movements filled with leaders:<sup>2</sup> from the 1960s-era freedom movement foot soldiers in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party, to activists like James Yaki Sayles<sup>3</sup> in the 1980s, to Ransby's own work building the Black Radical Congress<sup>4</sup> in the 1990s, to that of Eddie Ellis<sup>5</sup> and the New York-based Prison Moratorium



Project<sup>6</sup> in the 1990s and 2000s, to the ascent of the broader Movement for Black Lives and both the ephemeral and durable formations that have sprung up over the past six years since the Ferguson protests gripped the world’s attention. The uprisings in the summer of 2020—the largest sustained protest in US history—renewed these freedom dreams.

The call to defund is best understood as an effort to revoke the political and economic power of police—and of the larger criminal legal system it upholds. Indeed, before the protests against the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020 popularized the demand to defund the police, abolitionists around the country initiated campaigns for clemency<sup>7</sup> and to decarcerate jails, prisons, and detention centers due to COVID-19. These struggles could be found in prison, too. Incarcerated people have staged dozens of rebellions<sup>8</sup> against institutional medical neglect in the face of a deadly pandemic, building on ten years of labor and hunger strikes<sup>9</sup> inside US prisons.

While Republicans and Democrats may use different talking points, state spending demonstrates their shared commitment to preserving racist social control through police and prisons. Whether speaking the language of authoritarianism<sup>10</sup> or professionalism,<sup>11</sup> both Donald Trump and Joe Biden responded to the summer 2020 uprisings by pledging additional funding and support to police. That is why abolitionist campaigns to defund the police and decarcerate prisons are so transformative: they approach local and national budgets with necessary urgency as a venue in which the status quo can be either reinforced or remade. It is both a defensive posture and a visionary one. It’s a three-pronged strategy that the abolitionist organization Critical Resistance has summarized as Dismantle, Change, Build.

Abolitionists have long operated at this intersection of opposing what spoke the language of abolition. “The black South wants equality now,” Hampton Institute



professor J. Saunders Redding wrote in 1944. “The black South wants segregation laws abolished now.” By the 1960s, Black activists applied this abolitionist ethos to the police and prisons. Civil Rights activists hoisted signs during the 1963 March on Washington reading “We Demand: An End to Police Brutality Now!” SNCC militants filled Southern jails demanding “freedom now” not only from incarceration but from the racist system that produced it. And the Black Panther Party, which began in Oakland in 1966 and soon spread globally, inaugurated a novel abolitionist praxis.

Known for their bold armed patrols of police, the Black Panthers grounded their far-reaching vision in practical organizing through their “survival pending revolution programs.” These efforts notably included community schools and health clinics, and different chapters also had food and clothing giveaways, bus programs to help community members visit their incarcerated loved ones, and more. In *To Die for the People*, BPP co-founder Huey Newton wrote of these programs, “We recognized that in order to bring the people to the level of consciousness where they would seize the time, it would be necessary to serve their interests in survival by developing programs which would help them meet their daily needs.”

Resisting criminalization was a core, if underappreciated, constant of the twentieth-century Black freedom struggle. The government’s punitive response to the radical upsurge of the late 1960s expanded to a full-throated embrace of mass incarceration as a way to discipline Black and Latinx working-class communities in the 1970s. In response, several progressive national organizations—operating both independently and in tandem—tried to stop the government’s expanded criminalization and the construction of new prisons. Though they failed to stem the tide of get-tough policies, their thinking informs modern abolitionism.



After Black Marxist scholar and abolitionist Angela Davis was acquitted of federal charges<sup>12</sup> in 1972, her defense committee transformed into a broader effort to stem the tide of criminalization. Among its priorities, the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (NAARPR) protested “repressive legislation” and “police crimes,” both of which were abetted by massive funding grants enabled through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and the Nixon administration’s open hostility to communities of color and the left.

The NAARPR was one of several national coalitions to contest this increasingly repressive turn under the Nixon administration. As historian Elizabeth Hinton has shown in her book *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, Nixon and Bureau of Prison officials hoped to increase federal prison capacity by 20 percent between 1972 and 1982. This project entailed both making existing prisons bigger and building new prisons. By the end of the decade, Hinton reports, 500,000 Americans were incarcerated across federal and local jurisdictions—“reflecting an increase of more than 25 percent, or an additional 120,000 incarcerated men and women.” The National Moratorium on Prison Construction (NMPC),<sup>13</sup> however, had gathered faith-based and secular progressives to challenge the federal government’s plan to construct additional prisons in the 1970s. One of the most colorful efforts in this era, the Stop the Olympic Prison (STOP) campaign, worked to block turning the 1980 Olympic village living quarters for athletes into a prison.<sup>14</sup> The US Olympic Committee sued STOP for its poster,<sup>15</sup> which featured the Olympic rings locked in a cage. A judge sided with NMPC on 1st Amendment grounds, though the prison was ultimately built.

These and similar campaigns sought not only to stop new construction but to support currently incarcerated people, who continued to publish newspapers, form labor unions, support defense campaigns, and otherwise organize against their



captivity. And while they could not stop the onslaught of repression that sacrificed millions of people to police and prisons, groups like the Southern Coalition on Jails and Prisons<sup>16</sup> and the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown,<sup>17</sup> formed in the 1970s and 1980s, helped seed new abolitionist efforts in the 1990s and 2000s that began to have greater success.

While the federal government set the tone, the biggest changes were evident at the state level. California was instructive:<sup>18</sup> From 1980 to 2000, the state witnessed a nearly 500 percent rise in its prison population, complete with a two-decade prison building spree that saw twenty-three new prisons open. At its height, the California prison system held 160,000 people—well over half the entire country’s prison population in 1970. To stem that tide, organizations and coalitions like Critical Resistance, California Prison Moratorium Project, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Justice Now, Californians United for a Responsible Budget, and the Prison Activist Resource Center thwarted plans to open additional facilities in the state. More recently, these and other organizations have stopped jail expansion and pressured the governor to grant several large-scale clemencies. Together, these and other organizations comprising Californians United for a Responsible Budget have helped ensure that more than 140,000 new prison and jail beds were never built. As a result of this organizing, including the emergency clemency campaigns in response to the pandemic, the state’s prison population<sup>20</sup> has dropped below 100,000 people for the first time in thirty years.

The upheaval and crackdown of the 2020 protests prompts the question of the last half-century and earlier: What type of protest movements could be built if communities were freed from the violence of policing and incarceration? Contests over budget priorities are about what the state can be and should be. Many abolitionists<sup>21</sup> root this work in W. E. B. Du Bois’s classic analysis of abolition democracy<sup>22</sup>



—the political struggle led by formerly enslaved people in the wake of the Civil War to construct new institutions while also eradicating violent ones. A similar fight is underway today, where currently and formerly incarcerated people and their allies work to change the world by abolishing the prison-industrial complex. Scholar-activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore has similarly stressed that “abolition is a theory of change, it’s a theory of social life. It’s about making things.”<sup>23</sup>

Abolition is and has always been a slate of affirmative demands for the world we need. The struggles to defund the police and decarcerate prisons are wholly intertwined with other efforts to transform society. Medicare for All, a job guarantee, and a homes guarantee are battles for a humane and ecologically just budget, as are efforts to release aging people in prison and close detention centers. The Green New Deal<sup>24</sup> is or could be an abolitionist project; the Red New Deal<sup>25</sup> certainly is. While many of those policy goals can only be fully achieved at the federal level,<sup>26</sup> that spirit animates local and state battles, which is where most spending on police and prisons takes place. For example, while federal spending on prisons accounts for about 10 percent of all prison spending,<sup>27</sup> only the federal government<sup>28</sup> can thoroughly cushion against economic recessions and depressions.

But with the jackboots of local police off the necks of activists across the country, movements against austerity will have greater chances to flourish. Combating inequality will still be an uphill climb, particularly as municipalities try to co-opt or dilute abolitionist demands by affirming that “Black Lives Matter” while continuing or even expanding the funding for local police, sheriffs, and jails. By reducing the number of police and prisons—by eliminating the state’s capacity for repression—the defund struggles work to enlarge broader movement capacity. Abolitionists remain resolute on the larger goal of freedom.



From the civil rights movement to Occupy Wall Street, criminalization has been a key tactic to undermine protest and roll back or exclude access to<sup>29</sup> public housing, education, and other social provisions offered by the government. Neoliberal<sup>30</sup> austerity was imposed via a police officer's pistol and the bars of prison cells. In response, abolitionists pursue what anthropologist Hannah Appel has called "reparative public goods"<sup>31</sup> like housing, education, and health care for all. Entering the realm of public policy, abolition rejects the political obstinacy and technocratic fixes<sup>32</sup> that have seen many major cities actually increase their funding<sup>33</sup> for police departments this year, and most states continue to use conviction status to deny voting rights to most currently and formerly incarcerated people. According to the Sentencing Project, one out of every forty-four adults is disenfranchised by the carceral system—just one of many ways that policing and imprisonment constrain political participation.<sup>34</sup>

Police and prisons uphold the world that is. Abolition fights for the world that should be. Abolition unites struggles across time and space. Abolitionist causes like ending cash bail, decarcerating and closing prisons, freeing elderly and vulnerable incarcerated people, providing humanitarian aid to migrants, decriminalizing sex work, halting evictions, supporting incarcerated survivors of domestic violence, blocking deportations, expanding health care—these reforms have revolutionary implications,<sup>35</sup> which is why they have been resisted so bitterly. When united together, they form a comprehensive agenda. It is a platform to eliminate austerity and create what Black radical scholars Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Paul Gilroy have discussed as a universal future for humanity.<sup>36</sup> These practices are both the abolitionist horizon and its route.<sup>37</sup>



## Resources:

- Chicago Community Bond Fund:<https://chicagobond.org>
- Decarcerate PA:<https://decarceratepa.info>
- RAPP:<https://rappcampaign.com>
- No More Deaths:<https://nomoredeaths.org/about-no-more-deaths>
- DecrimNY:<https://decrimny.org>
- Survived & Punished:<https://survivedandpunished.org>
- Mijente:<https://mijente.net>
- California Prison Moratorium Project, Bay View:<https://freedomarchives.org/tag/committee-to-end-the-marion-lockdown>
- California Coalition for People in Women's Prisons:<https://womenprisoners.org>
- Californians United for a Responsible Budget:<https://curbprisonspending.org>
- Prison Activist Resource Center:<https://prisonactivist.org>
- Movement for Black Lives:<https://m4bl.org>
- Critical Resistance:<https://criticalresistance.org>
- National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression:<https://naarpr.org>
- Justice Now:<https://prisonactivist.org/resources/justice-now>
- Medicare for All:<https://medicare4all.org>
- Jobs for All:<https://jobquaranteenow.org>
- Homes Guarantee:<https://homesguarantee.com>

## Reader's Guide

- Dan Berger and David Stein reference several abolitionist campaigns over the last forty years. Please list one and describe why it is important.
- The authors cite W. E. B. Du Bois's analysis of abolition democracy. What is abolition democracy and how does it relate to the abolition of prisons and policing?
- "The struggles to defund the police and decarcerate prisons are wholly intertwined with other efforts to transform society," write the authors. Please list three additional contemporary abolitionist demands on the policy level beyond the abolition of prisons and policing.



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# The Journey Continues

SO YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT BECOMING AN ABOLITIONIST

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By **Mariame Kaba**

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**T**oday, 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 (PIC) 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”—PIC abolition is a vision of a restructured society<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> “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.” PIC 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<sup>3</sup> 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?<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> on crime rates. Research<sup>6</sup> and common sense suggest that economic precarity is correlated with higher crime rates. Moreover, crime and harm are not synonymous. All that is criminalized<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup> has emerged in the past two decades to offer a different vision for ending violence and transforming our 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 PIC 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,<sup>9</sup> 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 Rural Workers Movement<sup>10</sup> (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<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> The PIC 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.

### Reader's Guide

- Mariame Kaba writes, "Prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition is a political vision, a structural analysis of oppression, and a practical organizing strategy." Why is such a framework integral to the political project of abolition?
- The author writes that over the past two decades "a Black, Indigenous, and people of color survivor-led transformative justice movement has emerged . . . to offer a different vision for ending violence and transforming our communities." Please describe some features of transformative justice. Describe the relationship of transformative justice to abolition.
- The author explains that abolition does not center the question: "Does this mean that I can never call the cops if my life is in serious danger?" But it instead asks: "Why do we have no other well-resourced options?" Have you asked yourself and others the latter question? What has come up? And how have you addressed your responses or others' responses?
- The author writes that abolition means to "creatively consider how we can grow, build, and try other avenues to reduce harm." What are some strategies that you have employed to do these things? What have been some of the challenges and successes?