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# Prison Abolition

Welcome! Maybe you're new to prison abolition or you've heard a few things about it. No matter where you stand on prison abolition, we hope that this document will provide a space where you can explore what abolition means to you.

We won't try to offer you absolutes. Prison abolition is a complicated, multifaceted subject. Rather than present you with certainties, we seek here to offer resources that can help you in your journey with prison abolition.

This document is broken down into common questions about abolition. We'll provide answers from sources like Angela Davis, Critical Resistance, and the Marshall Project, and then link to those sources where you can go to explore those answers more in-depth on the way to finding your own views and definitions on what prison abolition is and means, and how we can go about achieving it.

## What prison abolition is not

Believing in prison abolition does not mean that you believe in letting everyone out of prison tomorrow. It also doesn't mean that you believe only in removing cages. Abolitionists do not look at prisons as singular problems, but seek to explore the larger societal issues that have led to prisons.

## What's typically meant by the term "prison abolition"?

In many cases, it means a belief in creating a more equitable society for all while dismantling the prison system.

Prisons are not an inevitable part of society. They are one part of our criminal justice system and society that are unequal and unjust. Incarceration is intertwined with other inequalities – in health, education, mental health, voting, public benefits, and more. By building a more just community we can eliminate prisons.

For this reason, abolishing prisons is not enough. There must be more fundamental changes to how we approach crime and punishment. Abolitionism means imagining an equitable, just world in which imprisonment does not exist and finding practical ways to bring about that eventuality.

To read more about prison abolition, go to [Critical Resistance](#) or read Angela Davis' *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

## Why is prison reform not enough?

In her essay *Why No Prisons?*, Julia C. Oparah explains several reasons reform will not work. First, prisons are tools of racist oppression. They do not protect us but perpetuate fears of a racialized "other."

Another obstacle to true reform is the prison industrial complex. This describes the monetized web of relationships between the government, prisons, and private corporations that provide services to prisons. When incarceration is a business, governments and private companies are incentivized to keep people locked up.

Finally, Critical Resistance points out that reforms too often have strengthened the prison industrial complex. In the 1970s, reformists sought to end indeterminate sentencing (i.e. two years to life) that kept people in prison indefinitely. However, determinate sentencing then led to mandatory minimums and three-strikes policies, which kept people once again in prison for lifetimes. This system is too entrenched, too violent, too undemocratic, and too unjust to be reformable.

## What would take the place of prisons?

Many abolitionists believe in two things: first, that by finding better ways to address social issues like education, food, and housing we can start to eliminate prisons. This means investing in institutions like schools, food, housing, and health care in ways that promote equality, justice, and freedom from harm.

In many states this reinvestment strategy has shown results. Under the [Justice Reinvestment Initiative](#), 35 states have reinvested criminal justice money into community-based services such as mental health and substance use treatment, transitional housing, reentry aid, and vocational/educational programs. The states that have implemented this initiative (which has been criticized for ignoring minority communities) have seen incarceration and recidivism rates drop.

Second, public safety should be a local, civilian responsibility. [The Marshall Project](#) gives an example from New York City, which reduced crime at the same time as it reduced arrests and incarceration. Nonprofits (rather than law enforcement) played a huge role in helping reduce violence and assisting formerly incarcerated people with reentry.

No one establishment will replace prisons. It will take many approaches and entities to build a world that is more just and less punitive. Angela Davis writes that abolitionists must envision a "continuum of alternatives" including revitalized education, free health care, and a justice system based on "reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance.

"The creation of new institutions that lay claim to the space now occupied by the prison can eventually start to crowd out the prison so that it would inhabit increasingly smaller areas of our social and psychic landscape."

## What about people who have committed violent crimes?

Ask yourself about the presumptions that go into this question. What makes an act violent? Why should we react differently to these acts than others? Why do we assume that the only appropriate response to harm is further harm?

The idea that prison keeps us safe is inaccurate and harmful. When someone commits an act of violence they cause a great deal of harm and pain. The solution should not be to cause more harm and pain by imprisoning them. [Ruth Wilson Gilmore says](#), "Where life is precious, life *is* precious." Life does not just mean those who were harmed but those who harmed as well.

Violent acts do not occur in bubbles - they are the results of individual and societal harms and injustices, according to Critical Resistance. Prisons are a part of this cycle of harm. Rather than keeping people safe, they hurt us all.

Instead of locking someone up, we should tailor responses to harm on a case-by-case basis, Critical Resistance states. Any response should adhere to principles of "fairness, equality, and humane treatment."

## What is transformative justice?

We exist now in a society driven by punitive justice, meaning the response to harm is punishment. Some advocates believe in restorative justice, which seeks to restore conditions back to where they were before harm was committed - maybe through an apology or community service, for example.

Transformative justice is a concept promoted by many (but not all) abolitionists. It argues that neither punitive nor restorative justice is enough, because they do not address the inequalities that led to the harm in the first place. Transformative justice means getting to the root of the problem and addressing it so that the harm committed is less likely to happen in the future.

If punitive justice bases itself on individual responsibility then transformative justice asks us to open our eyes further, to the collective responsibility each of us bears when violence occurs.

Recommended viewing: [What is Transformative Justice?](#)

## What can you do?

Defining your own views and positions on prison abolition is an important first step. But what comes next?

There are many ways that you can support abolitionist causes. While there is not a centralized abolitionist movement, organizations across the country are working to build a future without prisons. These groups have differing positions, strategies, and goals - you'll have to find which one aligns best with your own beliefs and values.

A good place to start is Critical Resistance, a national, grassroots organization that seeks to end the prison industrial complex. Subscribe to their [mailing list](#) for resources, events, and more.

Abolitionism means not just tearing down prisons, but building up equal societies. Look around your local community for organizations that work for equality in housing, health care, food security, etc. They may not be explicitly abolitionist, but they serve abolitionist ideals.

## What is the EJP's position on prison abolition?

Here is the EJP's official statement on prison abolition:

EJP would not exist but for the hard and painful reality that our society incarcerated individuals. EJP, through our programs and activities, seeks to mitigate the impacts of incarceration today and to create conditions that support the creation of more humane and just responses to harm and violence.

The fact that we do these things by necessarily engaging with a system that many (not all) EJP members find abhorrent creates a tension that runs through just about everything we do.

How do we ensure that EJP partners effectively with prison staff and administrators, creating smooth-running programs that become part of the day-to-day at Danville Correctional Center, without becoming part of the prison apparatus? How do we argue for expansion of higher education in prisons across the state, while at the same time insisting on the need to close prisons?

What does an abolitionist reentry guide look like? Or an abolitionist college-in-prison program? What would it look like for our host institution, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, to enact abolitionist values?

We are committed to continued interrogation of these and similar queries, in a spirit of inclusion and critical reflection.

## Prison Abolition Very Partial Resource List:

1. [The Marshall Project](#)
2. [Critical Resistance](#)
3. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* By Angela Davis.
4. [Julie Oparah](#)
5. [Transformative Justice](#)