

SHOULD PRISONS BE ABOLISHED?

YES



KELSEY MOHAMED

Kelsey Mohamed is a member of Cradle Community, a grassroots group dedicated to building our skills to support each other through transformative justice responses to violence in our communities.

Prisons damage people and have always been used by the powerful to control the most marginalized. But when some criminals undoubtedly pose great danger to others, can society really do away with incarceration altogether? Kelsey Mohamed and Andrew Neilson go head to head.

Illustrations: Denise Nestor

KELSEY: Prison abolition is the radical goal that envisions a world without cages, using the principles of transformative justice to work towards a society built on care, mutual aid and community accountability. Since prisons were first introduced, they have been used to control and cage those marginalized by their class, race, gender and disabilities, and have protected the most powerful from being held accountable while silencing the rest of us.

Many who support abolition have come to the movement through experiencing violence – both within their communities and at the hands of the state. This violence can be physical and interpersonal, but can also be state-sanctioned neglect.

If we seek to reduce harm, we need to abolish our current system. A system of incarceration, no matter how much we try to reform it, does nothing to reduce the violence that marginalized people experience every day. An institution built on abusive power dynamics, fuelled by isolation and control, is ineffective in creating individual or societal change, and does nothing to provide the necessary

support for someone who has been harmed. We want to be accountable as individuals and a community and work together to transform the conditions that allow harm to be produced in the first place.

ANDREW: I agree that incarceration is a toxic force, which damages people, entrenches disadvantage and creates more crime and societal harm in the long run. Solutions do not lie within prisons or the criminal justice system, but in tackling the underlying causes of crime in the community.

Our society won't progress through imprisoning people, and in a nation like the United States where mass incarceration is the norm, huge intergenerational problems have been created by the jailing of millions of North Americans. Reducing harm is not achieved by writing people off. It can be achieved by nurturing everyone's potential and creating opportunities for people to contribute to their communities.

Prison abolitionism speaks to all of this and is therefore a valuable contribution to how we think

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ourselves out of current criminal justice practices. But we must be pragmatic about what can be achieved.

There are undeniably people who do commit serious and violent crimes, who cannot be safely managed in the community. We may be able to radically reduce our prison population, but there are sadly some individuals who will still be incarcerated for what they have done and what they may do to others.

KELSEY: Most people who have caused serious harm aren't currently in prison and never will be. The Grenfell Tower fire tragically took many working-class lives – the majority black and brown lives – yet nobody has been held accountable. If we look at incidences of sexual violence, we know it's powerful people – CEOs, workplace managers, artists, sports coaches and religious leaders – who are overwhelmingly protected and continue to cause harm. A person is labelled 'violent' because of who they are, not what they have done.

It is impossible to safely address serious harm in a violent institution. Someone who has perpetrated violence won't be incentivized to do better by being locked up and exposed to further violence, in places where prison officers sexually and physically assault people in their care. This dynamic will continue as long as the state is empowered to deny anyone their human rights. How can we be so concerned about people being hurt yet make an exception for those who receive a salary for it?

Many communities, unable to rely on the state, have worked to keep each other safe through community support and accountability for generations. Mutual aid and care have always existed outside of the carceral state.

ANDREW: I agree that harms which are termed 'crimes' by the state are in part the result of a political choice. The system is geared towards punishing poverty and disadvantage. As the French author Anatole France once remarked: 'The law, in its majestic equality, forbids

the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.'

There are certain serious violent harms by some individuals however – including murder and sexual violence – where the incapacitating function of incarceration will trump other considerations. This is not to ignore the failure of prisons to safely address serious harm, but to see incarceration as a necessary evil in some circumstances. Efforts should then be directed to reducing the use of imprisonment, which should be viewed as a 'last resort'.

At the same time, I recognize that abolitionism offers a powerful critique of the danger of some reform initiatives. Expanding community sentencing and 'alternatives to custody', for example, brought more people into the criminal justice system, rather than reduce the prison population as they were intended to do.

The context both reformers and abolitionists work in, however, is one of punitive populism. There is strong support among many voters for ever-longer prison sentences and a popular view that prisons are 'holiday camps', despite the fact that prisons in England and Wales face record levels of violence and self-injury behind bars.

KELSEY: The media and the government have fuelled a fear in the population that certainly must be reckoned with; unlearning carceral logic is a crucial part of building strong, supportive communities. However, to paraphrase Mariame Kaba of US non-profit *Survived and Punished*: we don't need a whole system designed around exceptional individuals. Most people in prison are not serial killers, yet those are the cases exploited to entrench punitive desires in the public, all the while ignoring the true agenda and impact of this system on the oppressed.

The reality is that most people experiencing domestic or sexual violence do not report it to the police and, if they do, are unsupported or retraumatized. Many black and

NO



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