

What is Abolition?

Critical Resistance

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Critical Resistance’s mission is to end the prison industrial complex (PIC). The PIC is a system that uses policing, courts, and imprisonment to “solve” problems. We don’t agree that we need the PIC to keep us safe. Instead, we work to build safe and healthy communities that do not depend on prisons and punishment.

Who Were the First Abolitionists?

We take the name “abolitionist” purposefully from those who called for the abolition of slavery in the 1800’s. Abolitionists believed that slavery could not be fixed or reformed. It needed to be abolished. As PIC abolitionists today, we also do not believe that reforms can make the PIC just or effective. Our goal is not to improve the system; it is to shrink the system into non-existence.

What About Public Safety?

We all want safe communities. The question is how do we build safe communities? Is it by locking up and policing more and more people? Or is it by dealing with the causes of the harm that is called “crime” in our communities?

Even the worst kinds of harm do not happen without a reason. Putting people in cages does not solve any of the problems that lead to harm, like harmful drug use, poverty, violence, or mental illness. By separating people from their home communities, and isolating them in abusive and violent environments, these problems can even get worse. We take seriously the harms that happen between people. We believe that in order to reduce harm we must change the social and economic conditions in which those harms take place.

For example, providing drug users with health care and harm reduction strategies instead of locking them in cages helps reduce the harm that drug use might cause. When public funding is directed into policing and prisons, budget cuts for social programs, including women’s shelters, welfare and public housing are the side effect. These cutbacks leave women less able to escape violent relationships. Focusing more energy on creating safe and stable conditions instead of policing and imprisonment reduces harm.

Studies have shown that states with more prisons and prisoners do not have lower crime rates than other states. The PIC claims to be about safety and order. In reality, the PIC makes the lives of most people – especially the poor and people of color – less safe and more disordered. For example, poor people and people of color are often targeted by the cops based on the way they look. And even in instances where people call the cops to solve problems, the cops are often more disruptive than the original problem. We cannot build strong communities when people are constantly being taken out of them.

What are the Alternatives?

We do not have all the answers. But, we do know that people in other parts of the world rely on prisons and police far less than the U.S. does, and suffer from far less harm. We also know that communities where people have housing, food, education and jobs have the lowest crime rates. The best way to reduce harm is by building safe, healthy communities where people have their basic needs met.

What Can I Do Today?

Today, there are small steps that will move us toward abolition, such as:

- Instead of supporting construction of a new prison to make the horrible conditions that most prisoners live in a little better, we can push for alternatives that reduce the number of people locked in cages.
- Instead of calling the police everytime there is a conflict in our neighborhoods, we can establish community forums and mediation practices to deal with harm and conflict.
- We can build safer and healthy communities by working to eliminate barriers to housing and jobs faced by people coming home from prison to help them stay out of the system.

Abolition is a Realistic Vision

The PIC did not always exist. The modern day prison is only about 200 years old. Even today there are places where people rely on each other instead of police, courts, and cages.

It has taken over 200 years to build up the PIC. We can't expect to take apart such a complicated system in a short time. The first slavery abolitionists began working decades before they won the abolition of slavery. Our struggle is a long one. Believing we can abolish the PIC is the first step.

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