

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Bringing abolition in: Addressing carceral logics in social science research

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**Abstract**

**Objective:** In this essay, we review and offer theoretical groundings and empirical approaches to the study of abolition.

**Methods:** We begin by demonstrating the ways police and prisons have been used to exploit and dominate marginalized people and argue that abolition offers a path to finding solutions to public safety and racial justice. We draw from black feminist and abolitionist political thought to show how abolition makes space to upend systems of power and domination and develop systems that address the root causes of violence.

**Results:** We assert that abolitionist research will not only focus on activists' calls for dismantling the police but will also recognize and engage with activists' proposals for reimagining public safety. We suggest that social scientists who study abolition, American uprisings, and policing must understand the differences between transformative changes based in abolitionist frameworks versus those that center mass incarceration as a societal given and, ultimately, further reproduce the status quo.

**Conclusion:** We conclude by suggesting that social scientists must question how researcher practices and universities uphold carceral logics and entrenched hierarchies, determining that abolitionist study will meaningfully engage with the distribution of power.

On May 25, 2020, police officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, a black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by kneeling on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. The murder was filmed and went viral on social media, prompting global protests. In the wake of the George Floyd protests, activists have called for the “defunding” or abolition of the police. These calls have been taken up, interpreted, and misinterpreted in national political discourse. Many in the news media have only recently turned their attention to these calls for the abolition of police and the prison industrial complex; however, these calls are certainly not new. Since the rise of mass incarceration in the United States, activists, organizers, and community members alike have demanded an end to systems of punishment as they stand due to the disproportionate arrest and imprisonment of African Americans and ongoing abuses by police, prisons, and the criminal justice system.

But what does it mean to study abolition as both theory and practice? How can social scientists engage with activists' and organizers' calls to end entrenched institutions of carceral punishment and surveillance?

We argue that social scientists can meaningfully engage with abolitionist political theories and campaigns by situating abolition as a longstanding goal in activist circles and especially in black feminist thought. Social scientists can develop a research praxis that interrogates the functions of policing and deploy academic methodologies and resources to advance the construction of alternative systems of safety.

## WHY ABOLITION?

*Abolition* is an enduring project, beginning with the international movement to end the African slave trade in Europe and the Americas. Today's abolitionists continue to target institutions that they recognize as rooted in frameworks of social, economic, and political domination and abuse. Abolition is an expansive and constructive movement, providing an opportunity for reimagining society. Abolition is both a theory and a practice, the kind of revolutionary change that comprises, as Gilmore (2007) writes, something "both short of and longer than a single cataclysmic event," a series of changes that would constitute a "break with the old order" (242). In this article, we embrace and acknowledge the innovative aspects of abolition toward the elimination of the carceral system, specifically prisons and police, and the creation of new modalities and relations in pursuit of justice.

The prison abolitionist movement arose most prominently among the black Left in the United States in the 1970s, particularly in response to the growth of mass incarceration of poor people and people of color, as well as the incarceration of black radical activists and political prisoners George Jackson and Angela Davis (Davis and Rodriguez 2000; Davis 2016). Since these early struggles, prisons in the United States developed into entrenched sites of ongoing punishment through their expansion, driven by "carceral logics," wherein punishment and retribution are emphasized over rehabilitation or societal solutions (Kaba and Meiners, 2014). These logics proliferated via politicians' growth of the carceral system, the "professionalization" of police and prisons, as well as the standardization of punishment (Murakawa 2014; Gottschalk 2006). Though the incarceration rate in the United States has begun to decline in recent years, the United States continues to disproportionately incarcerate its population in comparison with other nations.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that the carceral state as an institutional solution to a broad swath of social ills fails to address the root causes of harm and violence, and often serves to inflict more violence on vulnerable communities (Burch, 2013).

Race and class are consistent predictors of the likelihood of arrest and incarceration, and black, Latinx, and low-income people are disproportionately in contact with these systems. For example, black Americans are 5.9 times more likely and Latinxs 3.1 times more likely to be incarcerated compared to white Americans.<sup>2</sup> Incarceration, however, not only means losing one's bodily freedom and autonomy but also curtailing opportunities to participate as full citizens: for example, the loss of voting rights in some states (Weaver and Lerman 2010; Burch 2013; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Soss and Weaver 2017). Furthermore, carceral sanctions for the inability to pay fines or fees further serve to exacerbate the distribution of punitive measures in the United States, with low-income Americans bearing the brunt of these punishments. The 2015 Department of Justice investigation into the Ferguson Police Department makes clear the potentially abusive and exploitative nature of revenue-generating approaches to low-income communities. The report details how the Ferguson Police Department's practice of fines and fees for noncriminal offenses means that "minor offenses can generate crippling debts, result in jail time because of an inability to pay, and result in the loss of a driver's license, employment, or housing."<sup>3</sup> Policing and incarceration, therefore, represent an economic threat to low-income communities.

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<sup>1</sup> "Trends in U.S. Corrections." 2020. *The Sentencing Project*. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Trends-in-US-Corrections.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> "Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System." 2018. *The Sentencing Project*. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/>.

<sup>3</sup> Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department. 2015. United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson\\_police\\_department\\_report.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf).

Scholars demonstrate that the prison industrial complex is laden with sexism and misogynoir,<sup>4</sup> which can be seen through the abuse of black women, trans, and gender nonconforming people in police custody and prisons (Richie 2012; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Ritchie, 2017; Jackson 2019). Black women, in particular, are at a heightened risk for gender-based violence in their communities. However, as Richie (2012) discusses, black women are also likely to experience violence at the hands of the state both through contact and neglect when in need of protection. Stuart and Benezra (2018) further suggest that the street-level criminalization of black people causes young black men to engage in performances of gender and sexuality (passivity, heterosexuality) that will prevent them from being stopped and frisked by police. Stuart and Benezra argue that this forecloses nonheteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality by young black men in these communities. By naming the particular risks for violence faced by women, trans, queer, and gender nonconforming black people at the hands of police, the failures of the carceral state to provide safety to those in need become even more apparent.

Davis (2003) explains how the prison is widely “taken for granted” and considered “inevitable” because of an assumption that societies must have a place to punish or rehabilitate those who commit crimes (9). Given the ongoing abuses of the carceral system, however, scholarly approaches must not take the carceral state as a given and must fully recognize the scope and deeply rooted problems of policing. This means interrogating the very foundation upon which police and prisons function and pushing beyond evaluations of reform or attitudes and experiences with the police state. Approaches that are mindful of the *durability* of the carceral system and its harms will push beyond the “benefits” of police and prison reforms. Rather, scholars should ask bigger questions about what constitutes public safety and the myriad ways members of the public and marginalized communities are seeking and establishing alternatives. Black feminism provides an important roadmap to today’s abolitionist movements in its naming of marginal positionality and difference as a vantage point from which to critique power (Hooks, 1984; Lorde, 2007). Those on the margins of society are most intimately familiar with the harms inflicted by the carceral system, as well as all modes of social, political, and economic violence. Moreover, it is the ethos of black feminists that those who are most vulnerable to harm must be centered in the solutions to that harm (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Of central concern within black feminist theory and abolition praxes is the notion that all human beings deserve care and safety (Combahee River Collective, [1977] 1981). It follows, then, that a recognition of the particular struggles and needs of those on the margins undergird calls for strategies for safety.

## ABOLITION AS PRAXIS: MOVEMENTS AS MODELS

In 1997, with the leadership of abolitionist activists including Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the organization Critical Resistance emerged to fight the prison industrial complex and “challenge the structure of criminal justice” (Davis and Rodriguez, 2000). On the Critical Resistance website, the organization calls for “lasting alternatives” to the prison industrial complex. In addition, Davis asserts the necessity of redefining crime, creating safety alternatives, and figuring new modes of addressing harm in communities (Davis, 2003). Building on legacies of prison and police abolitionism and black feminism, a new generation of activists have called for the abolition of the police. In their 2016 Vision for Black Lives Policy platform, activists from the Movement for Black Lives call for divestment from police and prisons and investment in black communities.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the platform proposes the redirection of federal, state, and local funding for the military and police to “education, local restorative justice services, and employment programs.” The platform calls for decriminalization, universal healthcare, and reparations.

This “invest-divest” strategy echoes decarceration strategies proposed by Davis (2003) and other black feminist abolitionists like Mariame Kaba, calling for more holistic approaches that “reduce state violence

<sup>4</sup> “Misogynoir” is defined by Moya Bailey and Trudy (@thetrudz) (2008) as anti-black, racist misogyny.

<sup>5</sup> “INVEST-DIVEST,” 2016. Movement for Black Lives. <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/invest-divest/>.

and maximize people's collective well-being" (Berger, Kaba, and Stein, 2017). The assertion is that black communities, in particular, have been under-resourced and over-policed, resulting in both more harm, as well as persistent arrest, harassment, and incarceration. This claim is based on the disproportionate funds allocated to police and prisons, compared to public resources that promote safety like education, public welfare, and healthcare including mental health resources. Abolitionists claim that investment in these resources, at the level of investment in punitive measures and policing, could more effectively address the root causes of harm and intercommunity violence. These strategies seek to address precarity—hunger, poverty, underemployment—as well as patriarchy, heterosexism, and gender-based violence. Although policing and imprisonment have been the strategy to reduce harms, activists are calling for solutions that do not rely on police or increase their power. These are “nonreformist reforms” that seek change outside of systems that produce harm (Berger, Kaba, and Stein, 2017; Gilmore, 2007).

By emphasizing these strategic campaigns or the “invest-divest” strategy, we do not mean to suggest that there are no revolutionary aspects to abolition. Undergirding calls for police, and prison abolition is a liberatory demand for the end of all power relations that seek to dominate and exploit black people and oppressed people worldwide. As McQuade (2018) writes, “Abolition is a way of thinking about producing social order outside of the logic of capital and private property, state violence, and racialized subjectivity” (5). Drawing from a DuBoisian framework of “abolitionist democracy,” however, McQuade emphasizes that abolitionist praxis should be rooted in the “historical specificity of the present” incorporating both “disruptive direct action and incremental change” (4). Today's police and prison abolitionist activists and organizers draw upon both tactics to challenge current power relations and construct the world otherwise.

Yet while these deep connections to historical abolitionist framings and modern movements exist, a cursory search for the term “abolition” in the social science literature on crime, race, and policing in the United States yields few results. While the study and theorizing of abolition as a set of organizing principles to shape the American political system is well-established, the literature does not reflect such a tradition. Instead, abolition as a model of meaning-making comes primarily from nonacademic sources and thinkers. Young activists and organizers have taken up the mantle of abolition to birth frameworks and mechanisms for understanding abolition as more than mere theory but as both theory and practice (or praxis). One such model is the Black Queer Feminist Lens<sup>6</sup> as theorized by Charlene Carruthers, founding National Director of BYP100.<sup>7</sup> This model of social movement organizing and imagining “is an inspiration and liberatory politic that Black folks must take up for the sake of our collective liberation and acts on the basic notion that none of us will be free unless all of us are free” (Carruthers, 2018:10). Rather than framing abolition as a conceptual goal or objective, the BQF lens centers abolitionist principles on the fundamental structures of movement making. Moreover, it models for social scientists the types of the analytical lens through which organizers envision a more just world, a world that they strive to create through collaboration, collective action, and political protest.

A model of praxis does not just require engagement with movement builders and scholars of abolition. It also requires the implementation of a mode of study and engagement with the larger world based on dismantling the hold of white supremacist logics of knowledge production (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). In the following section, we explore approaches to centering the abolitionist praxis models of young social movement organizers within a research agenda in the social sciences.

## TOOLKIT FOR ABOLITION RESEARCH: EMPIRICAL APPROACHES

At its heart, police and prison abolition identify the power imbalances between the criminal punishment system and communities. Abolition evaluates ways to transfer economic and political power from police and prisons to the people. As such, conducting research that is divested from the carceral system presents

<sup>6</sup> Also referred to as the “BQF lens.”

<sup>7</sup> BYP100 is a social movement organization founded in 2013. It serves young black Americans between the ages of 18 and 35.

additional responsibilities, challenges, and opportunities for scholars. These vary depending on whether the research centers community-produced knowledge and goals, *or* appraisal of police and prison-centered rationales.

## Methodological approaches

Research that is community-centered or co-produced amplifies the lived experiences and collective knowledge of policed communities. These studies often use a variety of methodologies including ethnography, interviews, participant observation, or surveys. Because this research typically tries to shed light on the lived knowledge or existing strategies of policed or carceral communities, the research subjects are themselves the experts. From the standpoint of equitable distributions of power, a crucial challenge for researchers is to not only thank these community experts as sources of knowledge in a footnote but to make space for them as co-producers and beneficiaries of the research. Depending on the method of investigation, this could mean that activists or community members are elevated from study subjects to co-authors through participatory research design (Agid, 2018; Cahill, 2007). There are also a variety of means to ensure that the knowledge and time of community experts are not simply extracted but reinvested in the people, for example, through community training in participatory research skills, local talks on the research findings, or distributing book royalties to community funds. Not all community experts or co-authors may desire abolition, but what could make this work abolition-*furthering* will be the way that it redistributes knowledge, power, or resources to policed and carceral communities.<sup>8</sup>

Scholarship that uses police-produced or prison-centered data presents both unique opportunities and challenges for researchers. The opportunity is that such work can quantify the harms inflicted by the criminal punishment system. The challenge is that using or even accessing such data can incentivize researchers to orient their studies to conform to the entrenched rationales of policing and incarceration rather than more holistic conceptions of public health and flourishing. For example, many scholars have begun partnering with police departments in order to gain access to policing data because law enforcement has no legal obligation to regularly disclose their activities to the public. As part of these partnerships, academics are often required to refrain from publishing data that could paint the department in a negative light and to evaluate ways to make policing more effective at “fighting crime” or catching the “bad guys.” However, these sorts of compromising arrangements are largely unnecessary thanks to an ever-growing number of public or crowdsourced databases as well as Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests that can compel departments to release crucial data.

There is a growing body of empirical research that demonstrates the individual and societal-level harms that prisons and the police cause (Weaver and Lerman, 2014a, 2014b; Wakefield and Uggen, 2010). Some of this work is heavily critical of these coercive institutions and even discredits certain practices by demonstrating how their effects run counter to institutionally defined goals (Mummolo, 2018; Tyler, Jackson, and Mentovich, 2015; Vitale, 2017). However, even when done in the spirit of reducing harm or helping communities, research that relies on the purported goals and logic of police and prisons may inadvertently bolster or legitimize these institutions. For example, such critiques could provide a blueprint for helping prisons *accomplish* their stated goals, reinforcing incarceration as a societal given, and making these institutions more difficult to challenge on the basis of ongoing injuries. Given the empirical reality of domination and exploitation by the carceral system, researchers should attend to when and how criminal punishment practices violate the fundamentals of human rights, public health, and human flourishing rather than evaluating and potentially advancing practices based upon the goals of carceral institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on researcher positionality, see Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach (2009) and Milner (2007).

## Policy evaluation and experimentation

Policy evaluation is another area that presents pitfalls but also great opportunities for abolition work. The key is for researchers to evaluate policies that are abolitionist steps rather than what Critical Resistance calls “reformist reforms.” Abolitionist steps, also known as “nonreformist reforms,” are incremental changes that redistribute power by decreasing the funding, size, and scope of police and prisons as well as the hegemonic belief that these institutions increase safety. By contrast, reformist reforms are changes that seek to improve the image or efficiency of the police or prisons but do nothing to reduce their institutional power. These include many popular reforms like body cameras, implicit bias training, and diversity hiring. Some reformist reforms may actually reduce certain harms caused by police or inhumane treatment in prison, but they still support the extractive mission of these coercive institutions to siphon resources and cull “disposable” individuals out of the community.

By attending to and evaluating the outcomes of abolitionist steps rather than foregrounding reformist reforms, policy researchers would be able to decouple perceptions of police and prisons as endemic to public safety. For example, scholars could evaluate the steps laid out by the #8toAbolition movement such as the effect of police departments’ withdrawal from militarization programs or removing police from schools. With this information, abolition proponents could determine which policies are robust to circumvention by police and prisons. As the movement to defund and dismantle the police advances, there may be additional opportunities for researchers and communities to design and implement new policy interventions through a model of participatory design (Agid, 2018). As with qualitative community-based research, researchers have a responsibility to ensure that such policy interventions include the perspectives of vulnerable members of the affected communities, ideally as co-producers and co-sponsors. Fundamentally, abolitionist research is collaborative research as it must take place in the community with those most vulnerable to the effects of police contact and the carceral state.

## Funding freedom

Creating a future without prisons and police requires imagination, experimentation, and material resources. Many marginalized communities already possess the imagination and resolve to try out alternative visions of public health and security but lack the resources to realize these visions. We invite scholars to leverage their access to public and private grants, university assets, and personnel to dispatch funding and human capital for the use of these communities. Though universities and grant funders may shy away from explicit mention of police and prison abolition, their mission statements are surely aligned with the goal of imagining better social futures and ensuring public health and well-being. Academic funding can alter the material conditions of marginalized communities in the short term, but scholars and communities can use the well-documented effects of that financing and experimentation to demand sustainable, long-term public investment.

## CONCLUSION: ABOLITION IN ACADEMIC LIFE

The current political moment, like many preceding it, demands that scholars interested in understanding the effects of policing and the carceral state face the realities of the prison industrial complex, as well as the ways academic institutions are complicit in the perpetuation of carceral logics. Researchers must investigate the role of carcerality and mass criminalization of black, Brown, Indigenous, poor, queer, undocumented, disabled, and trans people in the United States and examine the role of universities in perpetuating these crises (Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock, 2011). Organizers and community activists continue to push universities to face their long histories of involvement in anti-blackness and the growth of the carceral state, whether through campus police or investments in the prison and military industrial complex.

Taking up an abolitionist agenda redounds to a commitment to challenge the ideologies and practices within our home institutions that result in the surveillance, over-policing, and incarceration of our most vulnerable community members and students. The university setting is also a fitting site to experiment with and enact the creative imagining of a community built on care. “Abolition is not just about closing the doors to violent institutions, but also about building up and recovering institutions and practices and relationships that nurture wholeness, self-determination, and transformation” (Bassichis, Lee, and Spade, 2011:42). We draw from Moten and Harney (2004), who exhort us to “steal from the university”; that is, reconstitute its resources, upend the divisions between the university and public, and disrupt the carceral logics therein. Abolition in the university will unfix entrenched hierarchies of power and authority, thereby opening space for equitable communication and well-being, not just within the Ivory Tower but also in the neighborhoods, towns, and cities with which the university is interdependent. Abolition in the university requires a commitment to the enduring project of redistributing power from institutions to the people.

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