Common Question about Police and Prison Abolition and Responses[1]

Question	Response
What about the rapists?	Most sexual assault happens between people who know each other rather than the stranger serial rapist portrayed on TV. Most sexual assault is not reported, and most people who engage in it are not in prison, so ending prisons will not flood society with predators. Further, the power given to law enforcement agents, and the situations created by imprisoning people, produce high rates of sexual assault. Policing/prison is a source of sexual assault and not a solution. Because of the high rate of sexual violence in prisons, we are essentially sentencing people to judicial rape when we incarcerate them. Bottom line: there are some rapists in prison, more rapists outside of prison. The prison is not a way to stop rape, the prison *is* the rapist.
What about the murderers?	Most people murder people they know well, often as part of complex family and relationship violence dynamics. TV makes us think prisons are full of murderers who would go on killing sprees if released. That is an inaccurate portrayal of how violence most commonly happens, and who is in prison right now. What we know is the people who commit murders are actually the LEAST likely to do it again. They have the lowest recidivism rates. Prisons kill people through medical neglect and nutritional deprivation. Police murder people of color with impunity. Bottom line: Prisons and policing do not stop murder, the prisons and police *are* the murderers.
What about sociopaths?	TV shows popularly deploy the idea of "the sociopath"—a person incapable of feeling empathy—when representing serial murders. Disability justice analysis can help us think critically about how medical categories are deployed to create "monsters." Do such people exist? Do some groups get targeted for such diagnoses by the white male psychiatry establishment? Does containing some small

[1] Draft by Dean Spade, 2017. Many thanks to Mariame Kaba for giving feedback on this document.

	number of such people, if they exist, actually justify our gigantic racist prison and policing system? Have such people always existed, or does our society create trauma that produces them? If so, could we get to the root causes rather than maintaining a prison system in hopes of containing them, given all the damage that system does? Today, free, high quality mental health support is not available in the US, and prisons function as the largest mental health facilities in the country, yet utterly fail to deliver any effective mental health care. Bottom Line: We have to question TV portrayals of psychiatric illness, and focus on building community-based support for people with disabilities rather than putting people in cages.
What about the dangerous people?	TV cop shows make it seem like prisons are full of the serial killers, but prisons are full of people from vulnerable communities who were in desperate situations and engaged with drugs, property crimes or conflict with their friends, lovers or family. These people had a small impact, compared to CEO's, bankers, law enforcement agencies, corporate polluters and politicians whose actions shorten the lives of thousands or millions of people. Are the people in prison the "dangerous people"? Being in prison has less correlation to dangerousness and more to race, poverty, and disability. Bottom Line: People in prisons aren't the dangerous people, people running racist, anti-poor, Earth-destroying systems for profit are.
This is unrealistic. It won't happen.	The United States has the largest prison system that has ever existed on earth, and it is a very recent invention. The contemporary world and the history of humanity are filled with nothing but alternatives to this system. It is easy to believe that any system we have lived under and been fed propaganda about is permanent and essential, but human history shows that systems of state control are constantly collapsing and being invented and reinvented. It is actually unrealistic to believe

	that the current wildly harmful, resource-intensive aberrant, unpopular system of caging large numbers of humans will continue. Bottom Line: If it can be built, it can be dismantled.
What about public safety?	Safety derives from healthy relationships with other people. Prisons are focused on isolation and therefore on fostering violence rather than safety. People are safe when they have what they need, when they are not desperate, when they have spaces to heal from trauma, and when traumas are prevented. Bottom Line: We do need to build safety, and we can do that through making sure people have what they need and building connective relationships and communities, not cops and cages.