

Abolitionist Social Work Toolkit

The purpose of this webpage is to serve as a repository for information and resources on abolitionist social work. It is a collective project with contributions from many different autonomous social service worker groups and individuals.

Introduction to abolition: what does that mean?

["Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind" by Rachel Kushner](#)

NYTimes article featuring long-time abolition activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore

[Towards the horizon of abolition: A conversation with Mariame Kaba](#)

A transcribed interview with abolitionist organizer and activist Mariame Kaba.

[Why Arguments Against Abolition Inevitably Fail by Angela Y. Davis](#)

"This article is part of [Abolition for the People](#), a series brought to you by a partnership between Kaepernick Publishing and [LEVEL](#), a Medium publication for and about the lives of Black and Brown men."

["What is Abolition?" by Critical Resistance](#)

A short pamphlet detailing the basics of prison abolition, alternatives to policing, and action steps.

[Justice in America Podcast, Episode 20: Mariame Kaba and Abolition](#)

A podcast interview with abolitionist organizer and activist Mariame Kaba.

["Reformist vs. Abolitionist Steps in Policing" by Critical Resistance](#)

A chart detailing the differences between reformist reforms and abolitionist reforms in policing.

[Decarcerating Care — IDHA](#)

A resource provided by the Institute for the Development of Human Arts which includes a large list of resources for decarcerating mental health care

["What is Abolition, And Why Do We Need It?" by Reina Sultan and Micah Herskind](#)

Vogue article detailing the basics of abolition, alternatives to policing, and why police reform doesn't work.

[An Indigenous Abolitionist Study Guide](#)

A guided curriculum developed by people with direct experience with the carceral system.

["Can't Imagine a World Without Police? Start Here" by Katie Way](#)

Vice article covering the basics of abolitionist alternatives to policing, including community accountability, restorative justice and transformative justice.

Why social service workers are fighting for abolition

[“How I Became a Police Abolitionist” by Derecka Purnell](#)

The Atlantic article about how “when people dismiss abolitionists for not caring about victims or safety, they tend to forget that we are those victims, those survivors of violence.”

[“Trading Cops for Social Workers Isn’t the Solution to Police Violence” by Cameron Rasmussen and Kirk “Jae” James](#)

TruthOut article about how social work must focus on “ending state violence, while supporting life affirming relationships, practices and organizations.”

[“We Don’t Need Cops to Become Social Workers: We Need Peer Support + Community Response Networks” by Stefanie Lyn Kaufman-Mthimkhulu](#)

Article about how “social workers are operating under the same racist and violent structures that are utilized to incarcerate, institutionalize, and strip freedoms away from Black and brown Americans” and abolitionist alternatives.

[“Social Workers are Rejecting Calls for Them to Replace Police” by Mia Sato](#)

The Appeal article featuring social workers who are rejecting collaboration with police and radically rethinking the profession.

[“Why Social Workers Cannot Work With Police” by Lori James-Townes](#)

Slate article which explains why social workers cannot effectively and ethically work with police.

["We Have Already Stopped Calling the Cops" by Aviva Stahl](#)

Bustle article detailing "what we can learn about police abolition from domestic violence activists."

["7 Reasons Why Mental Health Advocates Should Fight Prison and Jail Expansion" by CURB](#)

A short factsheet.

How social service workers can get involved

Imagining Alternatives

[#8toAbolition](#)

An abolitionist campaign that was originally formed in response to the reformist #8CantWait campaign. The website has resources regarding "abolitionist vision and transformation," including practical changes we can make towards abolition now.

["Ten Lessons for Creating Safety Without Police" by Tasha Amezcua, Ejeris Dixon, and Che J. Rene Long](#)

Truthout article that shares lessons learned by three organizers working to collectively create safety using community-based strategies.

["Six Ideas for a Cop-Free World" by José Martín](#)

Rolling Stone article that describes “practicable, real-world alternatives to the modern police system.”

[“Police “Reforms” You Should Always Oppose” by Mariame Kaba](#)

Truthout article that describes police reforms to oppose and support, while continuing to fight for abolition

[Unladylike Podcast, Episode 94: How to Abolish Prisons Like a Feminist Part 1 of 2](#)

"Recent calls to defund police and abolish prisons have raised the question: But what about rapists? In part one of two episodes exploring that question, prison abolitionist Maya Schenwar presents the case for looking outside the criminal justice system for safety and connects the dots between abolition and feminism." This is a transcript of the podcast episode.

[Unladylike Podcast, Episode 95: How to Do #MeToo Without Prisons Part 2 of 2](#)

“Is it possible to combat sexual violence and support survivors without sending perpetrators to prison? Dr. Alissa Ackerman, a sex crimes policy expert and rape survivor, thinks so. In part two of two episodes reconsidering mainstream feminism's reliance on the criminal justice system, Dr. Ackerman outlines a powerful alternative to prison punishment called restorative justice and why she's living proof that it works.” This is a transcript of the podcast episode.

Toolkits

[Creative Interventions Toolkit](#)

A practical guide to stop interpersonal violence using community-based practices.

[TransformHarm.org](#)

A resource hub about ending violence with community-based practices.

[Mutual Aid 101](#)

A toolkit by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Mariame Kaba. “This toolkit includes step by step instructions for how you can build your own mutual aid network while staying safe from the spread of COVID-19.”

[What is Mutual Aid?](#)

Descriptions and resources for mutual aid by Big Door Brigade.

[Pods and Podmapping Worksheet by Mia Mingus for BATJC](#)

How to develop your pod, a group of “people in our lives that we would call on to support us with things such as our immediate and on-going safety, accountability and transformation of behaviors, or individual and collective healing and resiliency.”

[Resources for Addressing Harm, Accountability, and Healing by Critical Resistance](#)

A toolkit that links to various resources.

[Abolition: How We Keep Us Safe](#)

A zine by Abolition Action that shares “information, skills, and a collective vision of true public safety.”

[Interrupting Criminalization - Defund Police Toolkit](#)

A toolkit that shares information about the “strategy... to advance a long term vision of abolition of police through divestment from policing as a practice, dismantling policing institutions, and building community-based responses to harm, need, and conflict that do not rely on surveillance, policing and punishment.”

Current Examples of Alternatives

[The Harm Free Zone by Spirit House NC](#)

“The Harm Free Zone (HFZ) supports a community-centered vision that helps us repair the damage of racism, and the oppression of poor people of color by providing tools and trainings to both strengthen and develop our capacity to prevent, confront and transform harm. The Harm Free Zone emphasizes independent and self directing community autonomy as a necessary step towards creating shared collective accountability strategies and practice.” (Durham, NC)

[The Audre Lorde Project- Safe Outside the System Project \(SOS\)](#)

“The Safe OUTside the System (SOS) Collective is an anti-violence program led by and for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans, and Gender Non Conforming people of color. We are devoted to challenging hate and police violence by using community based strategies rather than relying on the police.” (Brooklyn, NY)

[Projet LETS](#)

“We build peer-led communities of support, education & advocacy for folks with lived experience of mental illness, trauma, Disability, and/or neurodivergence. We believe that principles of Disability Justice are key components to supporting collective healing and our human rights.” (Multiple U.S. chapters)

[Whitebird Clinic- CAHOOTS](#) **

“CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) provides mobile crisis intervention 24/7 in the Eugene-Springfield Metro area. CAHOOTS is dispatched through the Eugene police-fire-ambulance

communications center, and within the Springfield urban growth boundary, dispatched through the Springfield non-emergency number. Each team consists of a medic (either a nurse or an EMT) & a crisis worker (who has at least several years experience in the mental health field).” (Eugene, OR)

***Please note that CAHOOTS does note the potential to involve the police in some situations - “Any person who reports a crime in progress, violence, or a life-threatening emergency may receive a response from the police or emergency medical services instead of or in addition to CAHOOTS.”*

[Anti Police-Terror Project: MH First Sacramento](#)

“MH First Sacramento, a project of Anti Police-Terror Project, is a cutting-edge new model for non-police response to mental health crisis. The goal of MH First is to respond to mental health crises including, but not limited to, psychiatric emergencies, substance use support, and domestic violence situations that require victim extraction.” (Sacramento, CA)

[Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective](#)

“The Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC) is a community group based out of Oakland, CA working to build and support transformative justice responses to child sexual abuse... Our work consists of securing safety and intervening in current violence, while also building long term spaces of accountability and strategies for healing and resilience for all survivors, bystanders, and those who have caused harm.” (Oakland, CA)

[Fireweed Collective](#)

“Fireweed Collective offers mental health education and mutual aid through a Healing Justice lens. We help support the emotional wellness of all people, and center the needs of those most marginalized by our society.”

[The Abolition and Disability Justice Coalition](#)

An organization that provides resources on alternatives to policing rooted in disability justice. “We are abolitionist psychiatric survivors, people with disabilities, and their accomplices. We believe in and work toward the liberation of all.”

How the National Association of Social Workers can support abolition

Acknowledge the demands of Kim Young

Following the [NASW's tweet](#) supporting *Executive Order on Safe Policing for Safe Communities* and after announcing its support for [social workers cooperating with the police](#) in an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal*, clinical social worker [Kim Young](#) wrote a [sample letter](#) to the NASW demanding they take accountability for complying with oppressive systems. From the letter:

*"We have an obligation to end white supremacy, supporting this Executive Order counters the core of who we are as social workers. **I demand that the NASW rescind support of the Executive Order, acknowledge the role social work plays in upholding systems of oppression and publicly commit to deconstructing racist systems.**"*

The NASW Instagram account blocked Young after she publicly criticized the institution demanding meaningful change and accountability, and only unblocked her after other social workers contacted the NASW. This is a perplexing response to demands from within the field for true reckoning and committed action.

Acknowledge the demands of Social Service Workers United-Chicago

On August 26th [a petition was sent](#) by Social Service Workers United-Chicago to the National Association of Social Workers demanding they take meaningful action to support abolition and address the white supremacist roots of social work. Although over 1,700 people signed on to support SSWU-Chicago, as of September 25th 2020 the NASW has yet to respond to the following demands:

Our Demands

1. *From [Kim Young's letter](#): "I demand the NASW rescind support of the Executive Order, acknowledge the role social work plays in upholding systems of oppression and publicly commit to deconstructing racist systems."*
2. *The NASW endorses the [#8ToAbolition](#) movement*
3. *The NASW endorses student demands to remove law enforcement officers from K-12 schools and for colleges and universities to divest from campus police*
4. *The NASW commits to making social work training more accessible to marginalized people who are frequently already doing social work but are barred from many social work jobs due to an emphasis on requiring "professional" credentials.*
5. *At minimum, this means a clear plan to make BSW and MSW programs more affordable and accessible to underrepresented and marginalized students, including supporting Cost of Living Adjustments for graduate student workers, demanding more scholarships and grants for social work students, and requiring agencies to pay interns by not later than the start of the 2023–2024 school year.*
6. *However, the NASW should consider how to look beyond the field of higher education for solutions to make jobs in the profession more accessible. [Esq. Apprentice](#) provides an excellent framework for how social work can consider avenues of training outside of higher education in their program that "provide[s] low-income women of color with the tools needed to complete California's legal apprenticeship program and become attorneys".*
7. *The NASW commits to integrating anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices and racial-socioeconomic perspectives into any training or evaluation offered. These practices and perspectives should reflect the wide diversity of thought and tactics BIPOC communities have used to fight racism and oppression and should not rely on any one book or training.*
8. *The NASW makes necessary changes to the Code of Ethics to ensure free criticism and dissent in the field*
9. *The NASW condemns involuntary hospitalizations for mental health treatment, court-ordered drug treatment, and state-mandated participation in programs affiliated with child welfare services and provides a clear plan to completely abolish these coercive programs*
10. *The NASW publishes clear guidelines on outside programs offering CEUs, and prohibits CEUs affiliated with programs that violate the Code of Ethics, including the proposed ICE Citizens Academy.*

11. ***The NASW condemns law enforcement agencies perpetuating harm through their use of agency grants at social service agencies. Many agencies receive funds from departments of Juvenile Justice, or the Office of Refugee Resettlement (which reports to ICE), and stipulations of funding mean that social workers are required to report to or otherwise collaborate with law enforcement, creating an ethical dilemma for social workers that does not need to exist.***

Acknowledge the demands of Lauren Abrams and Alan Detlaff

On June 22nd 2020 [Laura S. Abrams](#) and [Alan J. Dettlaff](#) wrote [an open letter](#) to the NASW calling for them to embrace abolition and abolitionist social workers. The letter was signed by over 1,100 supporters, which led to [another letter](#) to the NASW reiterating the following demands:

1. ***Publicly endorse the national [Black Lives Matter Petition](#) to defund the police and reinvest “in our communities and the resources to ensure Black people not only survive, but thrive.”***
2. ***Craft a position statement on the divestment and reinvestment of law enforcement budgets that excludes the expansion of law enforcement and instead supports community-driven alternatives to public safety.***
3. ***Call for public comment among the members of NASW and allied organizations to add a racial justice ethic to our current code. Cultural competency will not address anti-Blackness and institutional racism, and it is time to change course.***
4. ***Take seriously calls for abolition in our profession by hosting a public conversation with those who are working to completely transform harmful institutions, such as child welfare and policing.***
5. ***Recognize social work’s historical role in perpetuating anti-Blackness and regulating the lives of Black, Brown and Indigenous families, such that any further expansion of our role in policing will compromise our already tenuous relationship with these communities.***

Support the demands of the American Public Health Association

On October 24th 2020, the [American Public Health Association formally adopted a statement](#) at their annual conference calling for steps to be taken "towards the abolition of carceral systems and building in their stead just and equitable structures that advance the public's health." The statement was endorsed by over 30 organizations, and it lays out extensive rationale and evidence-based strategies for abolishing carceral systems and investing in preventative strategies. The APHA urges federal, state, tribal, territorial, and municipal governments and agencies to:

1. ***Immediately and urgently reduce the number of people incarcerated in jails, prisons, and detention centers, regardless of conviction, especially in light of pressing concerns related to COVID-19 transmission;***
2. ***Immediately and urgently develop, implement, and support existing community-based programming interventions, including by using emergency funding, to address the medical and social needs of people who have been harmed by the criminal legal system, including those transitioning from incarceration, particularly those being released in response to COVID-19;***
3. ***Re-allocate funding from the construction of new jails and prisons to the societal determinants of health, including affordable, quality, and accessible housing, healthcare, employment, education, and transportation;***
4. ***Remove policies and practices that restrict access to stable employment and housing for formerly incarcerated people, including immediately investing in housing for quarantine purposes after release from carceral settings;***
5. ***Meet patient rights requirements to be in the least restrictive environment for care, by redirecting funding and referrals from jails, prisons, and involuntary and/or court-mandated inpatient psychiatric institutions to inclusive, community-based living and support programs for people with mental illness and substance use disorder;***
6. ***End the practice of cash bail and pretrial incarceration;***
7. ***Develop, implement, and support non-carceral measures to ensure accountability, safety, and well-being (e.g., programs based in restorative and transformative justice);***
8. ***Decriminalize activities shaped by the experience of marginalization, like substance use and possession, houselessness, and sex work;***

9. ***Restore voting rights for all formerly or currently incarcerated people to ensure their basic democratic right to participate in elections.***

Further, APHA urges that Congress, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to:

1. ***Fund research on the effectiveness of alternatives to incarceration (e.g. transformative justice);***
2. ***Fund research on policy determinants of exposure to the carceral system, with a particular focus on policies that disproportionately target marginalized communities;***
3. ***Put forth a set of recommendations that will decrease the population within carceral settings based on the principles of human rights and health justice.***

Lastly, APHA calls on state and local health departments to:

1. ***Provide accurate, timely, and publicly available data on incarcerated and released populations at the state and facility-level, as well as COVID-19 testing, positive and resolved cases, and mortality.***
2. ***Advocate for and support decarceration and defunding of all carceral facilities and systems.***

Resources for further learning

YouTube

[Uprising & Abolition: Angela Davis on Movement Building, “Defund the Police” & Where We Go from Here](#)

A Youtube video of Democracy Now’s Amy Goodman interviewing activist and scholar Angela Davis on abolition. A transcript of the full interview is available [here](#).

[Decarcerating Care: Taking Policing out of Mental Health Crisis Response](#)

A panel hosted by the Institute for the Development of Human Arts that features "frontline organizers with a range of perspectives on how to maintain the safety and health of our communities in ways that are free from the police, rooted in survivors' experience, and designed to preserve the rights and autonomy of those in crisis. We will hear from panelists who have developed creative models across the country, both within and outside of the existing system. We seek to disrupt the notion that struggling community members are 'diseased' and 'disordered,' rather than in need of care and support. We will be asking the difficult questions about how to create community-based alternatives to cops in our neighborhoods and what it will take to lay the foundation for a new paradigm of engaging with what is called 'mental health crisis.'" A transcript of the event is available [here](#).

[SWCAREs: Social Work So White with Rachel Cargle](#)

"SWCAREs, whose mission is to dismantle white supremacy in social work education, was fortunate enough to be able to sit down with Rachel Cargle in May 2020. Facilitators, Sequoya Hayes and Sara Plummer, talk to Rachel about white supremacy in academia, the role of white womanhood in oppression, and how white saviorism harms the clients of social work practitioners." A transcript of the event is available [here](#).

["What Does It Mean to Be An Abolitionist in 2020?" AMC Panel by CR](#)

A panel hosted by Critical Resistance in which activists and organizers "discuss examples of prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition in practice now, bring context of abolitionist histories & framework, & discuss hard questions for abolition of the entire PIC." A transcript is not available for this event. There are ASL interpreters visible on screen interpreting.

[Abolition Can't Wait: A Teach in with #8toAbolition](#)

A panel discussion with #8toAbolition campaign organizers "about why abolishing the police and prisons can't wait." A transcript is not available for this event. There are ASL interpreters visible on screen interpreting.

["Breaking Down the Prison Industrial Complex" video series](#)

"Critical Resistance presents "Breaking Down the Prison Industrial Complex," a series of videos as part of our Profiles in Abolition initiative. The videos in the series explore the current state of the prison industrial complex (PIC) and how people are fighting back to resist and abolish it. As always, we feature abolition as a strategy to dismantle systems of harm and punishment in favor of systems that increase health, stability, and self-determination." This series features many prominent abolitionists, including Angela Davis, Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and many more. Transcription and ASL interpreting are not available for this video series.

[Foucault "Discipline and Punish" Chapter-by-Chapter Guide](#)

A Youtube video lecture series that follows "Discipline and Punish" by Michel Foucault. A transcript is not available for this video series.

Podcasts

[Justice in America Podcast, Episode 20: Mariame Kaba and Abolition](#)

A podcast interview with abolitionist organizer and activist Mariame Kaba. [Here is a link](#) for a transcript of this episode.

[Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition](#)

A two part Intercepted Podcast interview with abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (this link includes a transcript of the podcasts).

[Rebel Steps Podcast: Join the Abolitionist Movement \(with Mariame Kaba\)](#)

An interview with abolitionist Mariam Kaba about how to join the abolitionist movement (this link includes a transcript of the podcast).

[Decolonize Social Work Podcast](#)

A podcast hosted by two social workers which is “a conversation about social work, oppression, and liberation.” There are several episodes covering police violence, the child welfare system, and mutual aid. Full transcripts of episodes are available on each episode page.

[Unladylike Podcast, Episode 94: How to Abolish Prisons Like a Feminist Part 1 of 2](#)

“Recent calls to defund police and abolish prisons have raised the question: But what about rapists? In part one of two episodes exploring that question, prison abolitionist Maya Schenwar presents the case for looking outside the criminal justice system for safety and connects the dots between abolition and feminism.” [Here is a link](#) for a transcript of this episode.

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“Is it possible to combat sexual violence and support survivors without sending perpetrators to prison? Dr. Alissa Ackerman, a sex crimes policy expert and rape survivor, thinks so. In part two of two episodes reconsidering mainstream feminism's reliance on the criminal justice system, Dr. Ackerman outlines a powerful alternative to prison punishment called restorative justice and why she's living proof that it works.” [Here is a link](#) for a transcript of this episode.

Books

[Are Prisons Obsolete? by Angela Y. Davis](#)

“With her characteristic brilliance, grace and radical audacity, Angela Y. Davis has put the case for the latest abolition movement in American life: the abolition of the prison. As she quite correctly notes, American life is replete with abolition movements, and when they were engaged in these struggles, their chances of success seemed almost unthinkable. For generations of Americans, the abolition of slavery was sheerest illusion. Similarly, the entrenched system of racial segregation seemed to last forever, and generations lived in the

midst of the practice, with few predicting its passage from custom. The brutal, exploitative (dare one say lucrative?) convict-lease system that succeeded formal slavery reaped millions to southern jurisdictions (and untold miseries for tens of thousands of men, and women). Few predicted its passing from the American penal landscape. Davis expertly argues how social movements transformed these social, political and cultural institutions, and made such practices untenable.

In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Professor Davis seeks to illustrate that the time for the prison is approaching an end. She argues forthrightly for “decarceration”, and argues for the transformation of the society as a whole.”

[Prison by Any Other Name: The Harmful Consequences of Popular Reforms by Maya Schwenar and Victoria Law](#)

”Activist journalists Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law reveal the way the kinder, gentler narrative of reform can obscure agendas of social control and challenge us to question the ways we replicate the status quo when pursuing change. A foreword by Michelle Alexander situates the book in the context of criminal justice reform conversations. Finally, the book offers a bolder vision for truly alternative justice practices.”

[Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement. Edited by Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha](#)

”Afraid to call 911, but not sure what to do instead? Here are strategies for accountability beyond the criminal justice system. Transformative justice seeks to solve the problem of violence at the grassroots level, without relying on punishment, incarceration, or policing. Community-based approaches to preventing crime and repairing its damage have existed for centuries. However, in the putative atmosphere of contemporary criminal justice systems, they are often marginalized and operate under the radar. *Beyond Survival* puts these strategies front and center as real alternatives to today’s failed models of confinement and “correction.” In this collection, a diverse group of authors focuses on concrete and practical forms of redress and accountability, assessing existing practices and marking paths forward. They use a variety of forms—from toolkits to personal essays—to delve deeply into the “how to” of transformative justice, providing alternatives to calling the police, ways to support people having mental health crises, stories of community-based murder investigations, and much more. At the same time, they document the history of this radical movement, creating space for long-time organizers to reflect on victories, struggles, mistakes, and transformations.”

[The End of Policing by Alex S. Vitale](#)

"This book attempts to spark public discussion by revealing the tainted origins of modern policing as a tool of social control. It shows how the expansion of police authority is inconsistent with community empowerment, social justice—even public safety. Drawing on groundbreaking research from across the world, and covering virtually every area in the increasingly broad range of police work, Alex Vitale demonstrates how law enforcement has come to exacerbate the very problems it is supposed to solve. In contrast, there are places where the robust implementation of policing alternatives—such as legalization, restorative justice, and harm reduction—has led to reductions in crime, spending, and injustice. The best solution to bad policing may be an end to policing."

[That's Revolting! Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation, Edited by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore](#)

"*That's Revolting!* is a queer intervention in the culture wars. It is both blueprint and call to action, bringing the post-identity politic of a new generation of queer visionaries to a wider audience. The anthology consists of personal histories, rants, interviews, conversations, activist struggles, practical advice and glamour. Contributors include early gay liberation rabble-rousers, counterculture demons, fringe artistes, renegade academics, the dispossessed, the obsessed and various other enemy combatants. In other words, *That's Revolting!* is a book by a bunch of freaks, fruits, perverts and whores who are dedicated to resisting homogenization, globalization and all the other evils of this ravaging world."