



Abolitionist Futures Reading Group - Facilitation Guide

If you like this reading group, and want to find out more about how you can get involved in the fight for prison abolition, visit www.abolitionistfutures.com

General introduction:

When we selected the readings we were trying to find short, accessible and introductory readings that would help prompt informed discussion about abolition. They were chosen to offer a variety of perspectives and to cover some key concepts and themes.

We recognise that a fair number of the readings are from the US. This is in part due to the more established abolitionist organising there. However it is important to bear in mind that there are important differences in context, and we can't simply import US analysis or strategies to the UK & Ireland. The readings have been chosen to offer some starting points for discussion, including how lessons learned in other contexts might be useful in thinking about the UK & Ireland.

Recently there has been a huge uptake in interest in abolitionist ideas and we have seen abolition discussions enter more mainstream conversations. But it is also important to recognise that abolition has a long history and includes various strands and traditions. For example, contemporary abolitionist organising has been influenced by the radical black tradition, indigenous organising, marxist and anarchist ideas, queer and feminist traditions.

The number of readings vary per session but don't feel like you have to read or watch everything! Please feel free to pick as many or as few readings as you like depending on how much time people in your group have to read them or what you are particularly interested in.

Hopes and aims:

By the end of the four sessions you will have a good introduction to abolitionist ideas, but this is by no means an exhaustive list, and we are planning to follow up with more organising focused reading lists.

The readings have also been selected as community organising and movement building tools to help inform collective abolitionist strategy, practice, and movement-building.

Creating inclusive discussion spaces:

- Everyone will be approaching the reading groups from their own positions, and will have different life experiences. It is safe to assume that for every group gathering, at least one person will have first hand experience of interpersonal or structural harms or violence - they may or may not want to share this. It is important to remind the group of this at the beginning of the session and to encourage people to keep in mind that the issues being discussed are people's lived realities as well as points raised in articles and books. Let the group know that no one is under pressure to share their personal experience and that everyone can take breaks and leave the room whenever they need to.
- Before the session, try to contact people who plan to attend to check if they have any access or support needs for how the group runs. These might be things like people speaking loudly and clearly, regular breaks, for online sessions being able to contribute via the chat box rather than speaking through the mic etc. It's also a good idea to ask this question at the beginning of the session in case anyone hasn't had an opportunity to mention their needs in advance.
- People will be at different stages in their thinking and learning about the criminal justice system and abolition. It is important to meet people where they are at, and hold space for people to learn together and engage in a supportive way.
- We found that breaking up into smaller groups initially helped with more people contributing overall. So for example, before you discuss a reading or a topic in the larger group, it can be helpful to invite people to share their thoughts first in pairs or threes. Or inviting people to take a minute or two to reflect on a question before asking anyone to speak, can also be helpful for people who may need a moment to collect their thoughts before they feel confident to speak.
- Facilitators should also keep in mind that it is easy to get bogged down with what is wrong with the criminal justice system, and that is an important

starting point. But it is also helpful to focus the discussions on what change we want to make in wider society and how we want to make it. Part of the aim of the reading group is to provide a space for people to think creatively together about the pitfalls and potentials of different abolitionist strategies - and to develop nuanced understandings of how to grapple with the challenges and possibilities of abolitionist work.

- It can be nice to do a go around at the end of each session to give each person a chance to share something they've learnt from the readings/discussion or something they want to explore or think about more as a result of the readings/discussion.

Session One: Abolitionist responses to Covid 19

1. 'Ruth Wilson Gilmore on Covid-19, Decarceration, and Abolition: How should abolitionists respond to the coronavirus pandemic?'
Ruth Wilson Gilmore, in conversation with Naomi Murakawa for Haymarket Books (2020)

Available from:

<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/blogs/128-ruth-wilson-gilmore-on-covid-19-decarceration-and-abolition>

2. 'Three Reasons Advocates Must Move Beyond Demanding Release for "Nonviolent Offenders"'
Micah Herskind (2020)

Available from:

<https://medium.com/@micahherskind/three-reasons-advocates-must-move-beyond-demanding-release-for-nonviolent-offenders-2e76629e7d03>

3. 'The Lockdown: Arresting the Virus'
Oonagh Ryder and Carl Cattermole with Kevin Blowe and Becka Hudson (2020)

Available from: <https://novaramedia.com/2020/04/03/arresting-the-virus/>

4. 'Mutual Aid Incorporated'
Josie Sparrow in *New Socialist* (2020)

Available from: <https://newsocialist.org.uk/mutual-aid-incorporated/>

Why these readings?

These resources are very recent and show the beginnings of abolitionist responses to COVID-19 and its various accompanying crises. They consider the impact of coronavirus on the criminal justice system, on wider society and on abolitionist or broader social justice movements.

The first, a talk given by Ruth Gilmore Wilson, explores her conceptualisation of neoliberalism as 'organised abandonment' in relation to the COVID-19 crisis and what this tells us about the state. This video invites us to consider the ways in which punitive systems, institutions and relations have been privileged in order to bolster an exploitative economic system, at the expense of our collective health and happiness.

The article by Micah Herskind offers a response to the reformist calls to release 'low risk' prisoners to prevent deaths from coronavirus. This article challenges assumptions about risk, harm and effective campaigning strategies, suggesting that abolitionists must approach 'risk' as a structural problem rather than an individual one. The article helps us to apply the learning about 'non-reformist reforms' from session two to the current context.

The podcast episode 'Arresting the Virus' looks at the Coronavirus Bill, brought in by the government in late March, bolstering police powers and stripping back rights in social care and mental health care. The hosts and guests compare the delayed and chaotic measures to protect public health with the relatively fast paced move to broaden the scope of criminalisation, and asks what this tells us about the function of the criminal justice system.

The last reading by Josie Sparrow looks at the broader opportunities for reshaping our society presented by the COVID-19 crisis, as well as capitalist attempts to co-opt these and restrict our collective imagination. In particular, this article asks us to consider how we can reimagine 'care' through the proliferation of mutual aid, moving away from the capitalist restriction of care to the family and towards tending to human needs.

Questions to discuss

1. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes neoliberalism as 'organised abandonment', noting the increase in investment in criminal justice alongside the decrease in investment in healthcare systems in many countries. Do you think this frame is helpful for understanding the current situation in the UK & Ireland?
2. What are the problems with using mainstream definitions of risk and public safety when campaigning around prisons and the criminal justice system? Are there ways we can push for people to be released from prison without reinforcing the idea that 'risk' is part of an individual identity?
3. Is increased policing of the general public necessary or effective in order to prevent the spread of the virus? What could be the long-term effects of increased police presence in our day to day lives?
4. Josie Sparrow asks us to use the idea and experience of mutual aid to expand relationships and systems of care beyond the family. How could this affect the way we think about and deal with harm as a society? What could the proliferation of relations of collective care mean for the ways in which we prevent harm, handle conflict and hold ourselves accountable for how we treat each other?

Session Two: Introduction to Abolition

Readings:

1. 'Introduction: Prison Reform or Prison Abolition?' in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
Angela Davis (2003)
Available at:
<https://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Angela-Davis-Are-Prisons-Obsolete.pdf> [12 pages]
2. 'What is Abolition?'
Critical Resistance (no date)
Available at: <http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/> [1 page]

3. 'Nine Perspectives for Prison Abolitionists', and 'Diminishing / Dismantling the Prison System,' in *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists*. Prison Research Education Action Project (1976)

Available from:

https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/instead_of_prisons/nine_perspectives.shtml & https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/instead_of_prisons/chapter3.shtml [2 pages + 5 pages)

Why these readings?

The Davis reading is a key introductory text. It invites us to question why we take prison for granted and how that limits us in developing other ways of dealing with social problems.

The Prison Research Education Action Project reading, published in the 1970s, is a useful reminder that abolition isn't new and encourages us to consider the history of movement ideas. Arguably abolition seemed more on the horizon as a policy approach in the late 70s than it feels now, which also raises lots of questions about what is different now and what work needs to be done to challenge the taken-for-grantedness of the prison.

Questions to discuss:

1. Angela Davis invites us to question our assumptions about prison. What assumptions do you hold about prison?
2. What assumptions about the prison are regularly presented in the mainstream media/popular culture?
3. How does the prison system perpetuate and reinforce inequalities around race, class, gender, sexuality, ability?
4. Critical Resistance describes abolition 'as a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting

alternatives to punishment and imprisonment'. Why is the target of abolition bigger than just prisons?

5. The 'Nine Perspectives for Prison Abolitionists' was written in the seventies. Do you think they hold up for abolitionists today?
6. What do you think of the attrition model of abolition?
7. We are told that prisons are necessary to keep us safe, what do readings suggest the actual function of prison is?

We suggest picking two or three of these questions to focus on.

Session Three: What's wrong with reform? What are non-reformist reforms?

Readings:

1. 'What Abolitionists Do' in *Jacobin Magazine*
Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba and David Stein (2017)

Available from:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/prison-abolition-reform-mass-incarceration> [5 pages]

2. 'Naomi Murakawa & #BlackLivesMatter: Liberals, Guns and the Roots of the U.S. Prison Explosion' on *The Laura Flanders Show*
2015

Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyHeroT6uv4> 0:28-14:25
[14 minutes]

*Note: For the purpose of the abolition versus reform discussion, the first 14 minutes are key, but if you have time, the first 21 minutes are recommended.

3. 'The Tension Between Abolition and Reform' in *The End of Prisons: Reflections from the Decarceration Movement*.
Liat Ben-Moshe (2013)

Available from:

http://www.academia.edu/3483590/The_tension_between_abolition_and_reform [11 pages] Note: If you can't download from the above link, try [this one](#).

4. 'Police "Reforms" You Should Always Oppose' in *Truth-Out*
Mariame Kaba (2014)

Available from:

<http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/27852-police-reforms-you-should-always-oppose> [1 page]

Why these readings?

The first piece 'What abolitionists do' was written to address the common assumption that abolitionists are overly idealist and impractical. It also explains the concept of 'non-reformist reforms' as a strategy for moving towards abolition.

The video with Naomi Murakawa challenges the assumption that conservatives have driven prison expansion and instead explains how well intentioned 'liberal' reforms have often led to prison expansion and entrenchment.

The Ben-Moshe piece was chosen as it teases out some of the tensions and nuances in figuring out where reform ends and abolition begins, by looking towards the example of the deinstitutionalization of disabled people as a place we can learn lessons from.

The last two pieces give practical examples of how to distinguish between reformist reforms and non-reformist reforms.

Questions to discuss:

1. What are some of the problems with traditional reforms identified in the readings?
2. Who tends to benefit from reforms and who doesn't?

3. The first piece (by Berger, Kaba and Stein) defines non-reformist reforms as 'those measures that reduce the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system's inability to solve the crises it creates'. How can we distinguish between a non reformist reform and a traditional reform?
4. Can you think of some examples of criminal justice reforms in recent years? Do you think these reforms have strengthened the criminal justice system or could any be characterised as non-reformist reforms?
5. Do you have any ideas for non-reformist reforms that abolitionists could campaign for? Once you have an idea, think about the potential risks of pushing for this reform.

We suggest picking two or three of these questions to focus on.

Session Four: Feminist, queer, anti-racist approaches to abolition

1. 'Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex' in *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*. Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2008)

Available from:

<https://incite-national.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/CR-INCITE-statement-2008discussion.pdf> [6 pages].

2. 'Rethinking Antiviolence Strategies: Lessons from the Black Women's Movement in Britain'
Julia Sudbury (2006)

Available from [12 pages]:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/ylo4injt4kok2dfy/Sudbury_rethinking_antiviolence_strategies.pdf?dl=0

3. 'How Anti-Violence Activism Taught Me to Become a Prison Abolitionist' in *Feminist Wire*
Beth Richie (2014)

Available from:

<http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/01/how-anti-violence-activism-taught-me-to-become-a-prison-abolitionist/> [2 pages]

4. 'Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got' in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee and Dean Spade (2011)

Available from:

<http://www.deanspade.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Building-an-Abolitionist-Trans-Queer-Movement-With-Everything-Weve-Got.pdf> [10 pages]

5. 'Fault lines in the fight against racism and antisemitism'
Liz Fekete (2020)

Available from:

<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/fault-lines-in-the-fight-against-racism-and-antisemitism>

Why these readings?

The questions, 'what about the rapists?' and, 'what about the murders?' are raised when abolition is being discussed. It is important to acknowledge these questions and not dismiss or shy away from them, as they usually come from a place of genuine concern. Questions of how to prevent and respond to violence are fundamental to abolitionist organising and practice.

It is also important to approach this session with extra sensitivity as people may find discussions around sexual/gender/racial violence particularly challenging or triggering, especially for those who have experienced trauma. It can be helpful to encourage participants to be mindful of their own needs and boundaries, as well as those of others, when approaching these topics.

Mainstream responses to gender-based violence and individual instances of racist violence often involve the criminal justice system, despite its known failings. People may have strong feelings and attachments to criminal justice responses to sexual/gender-based/racist violence. They may also have connections or alliances with organisations and advocates of a pro-criminal justice approach (e.g. calling for more police on the streets, longer sentences, new laws).

People may be surprised to learn that many of the leading abolitionist organisers are those who are seeking specifically to address gender and sexual violence. The readings for this week highlight that work, particularly done by women of colour



and queer/trans people, and highlight the need to bring together an abolitionist and anti-violence frame.

Questions to discuss:

1. Why is it important to consider state and interpersonal violence together?
2. The INCITE! Critical Resistance statement was written in 2001 in the US context. How relevant is the statement to the & Ireland context, now?
3. Why does Julia Sudbury argue for a rethinking of anti-violence strategies? What broader changes would be needed to enact the kinds of strategies outlined by Julia Sudbury?
4. What are the problems with the way existing systems (e.g: policing, prisons, border security) respond to harm, particularly gender/sexual harm?
5. What are the risks in re-conceptualising racism as 'hate crime'? What approaches could be used to address racist violence without using police routes?
6. How could our society better support survivors of violence without inflicting harm or violence on others?
7. What lessons can be learned from the last reading 'Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got'?

We suggest picking two or three of these questions to focus on.

Session Five: Transformative justice and abolition

1. 'Transformative Justice and Community Accountability'
Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (2014)

Available from: <https://batjc.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/tj-ca-one-pager.pdf>

[1 page]

2. 'Punitive, Restorative and Transformative Justice: The Basics'
Aorta Collective (2013)

Available from:

<http://aorta.coop/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Destabilizing-Rape-Culture-and-Transformative-Justice.pdf> [2 pages]

3. Choose one case study from *The Revolution Starts At Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities* (2011).

EITHER:

'Beautiful, Difficult, Powerful: Ending Sexual Assault Through Transformative Justice' in *The Revolution Starts At Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*.

Chrysalis Collective

Available from:

<http://www.blackandpink.org/wp-content/uploads/Beautiful-Difficult-Powerful.pdf> [18 pages]

OR:

'What does it feel like when change finally comes? Male Supremacy, Accountability & Transformative Justice'

Gaurav Jashnani, RJ Maccani and Alan Greig (2011)

Available from:

<http://challengingmalesupremacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/What-Does-It-Feel-Like-When-Change-Finally-Comes.pdf> [22 pages]

4. 'Community Response and Accountability' and 'Transformation of Community and Social Conditions that Create and Perpetuate Violence' in *Ending Child Sexual Abuse: A Transformative Justice Handbook*

generationFIVE (2017)

Available at:

<http://www.generationfive.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Transformative-Justice-Handbook.pdf> [6 pages]

5. 'Transformative Justice in an era of mass criminalization' on *The Activist Files* (podcast)
Mariame Kaba and Victoria Law (2019)

Available from:

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/get-involved/tools-resources/podcasts/episode-1-2-transformative-justice-era-mass>

Why these readings?

Building on from the last session grappling with interpersonal violence, this session considers how a transformative justice approach can address harm, particularly sexual violence. Please approach these topics with the same sensitivity noted for session three, particularly as the readings address the problems of sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse.

The first two readings offer some definitions of transformative justice and explain how this approach differs both from conventional retributive justice and from restorative justice.

The 'case study' readings provide specific examples of what transformative justice can look like in practice and some of the challenges and possibilities that it presents.

The last reading is from generationFIVE, an organisation that seeks to end childhood sexual abuse in five generations. Recognising the inability of the criminal justice system to prevent childhood sexual abuse and its failure in meeting the needs of childhood sexual violence survivors, generationFIVE offers a more holistic approach for ending childhood sexual abuse.

Transformative Justice also starts from the premise that communities - whether they are family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours etc. - are better placed to recognise, respond to, and address violence. But this requires communities to build up their skills, capacity and knowledge to act.



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Questions to discuss:

1. What is the difference between restorative and transformative justice?
2. What do you think of the model of justice/accountability explored in the two case studies? What are their strengths and limitations?
3. As the case studies illustrate, alternative models are not perfect and involve their own challenges. Overall, do you think these models offer more potential than the conventional criminal justice system?
4. How would you define accountability – in theory and in practice?
5. What kind of tools and strategies do you use in your day to day life to prevent harm and to deal with conflict?
6. In our movements or communities, how can we prevent people from harming others, support people who have been harmed and hold people accountable for causing harm? Could these methods be scaled up?

We suggest picking two or three of these questions to focus on.