



# WHAT DOES A WORLD WITHOUT PRISONS LOOK LIKE?

A collective vision for a future where no one is caged

As an abolitionist organization, our ultimate goal is a world without prisons and without police. A world where harm is addressed without caging people and poverty, the principal condition that drives people to crime, doesn't exist. We envision a world where people are not guided by ideologies of hatred, power and control, but by those of mutual respect and collective care.

We cannot build this future by continuing to pour millions of dollars into shiny new prisons and jails. We cannot build this future by increasing the operating budget of the armed state agents who roam our communities with a license to kill. We cannot build this future under an exploitation-based economy.

So how do we build this future? It's a daunting question to confront, and no one of us has all the answers. You don't need to have all the answers. Start with a radical hope that together, we can figure it out. Start by practicing bold creativity and imagination without letting the barriers of the current world get in the way of conceptualizing a better one. Start by asking "what does a world without prisons look like?"

An unfortunate truth is that this world would bring about perhaps the best and worst of society. The best: a genuine effort to discover the causes that led to 'criminal' behaviors with a focus towards creating a healthy, productive population. The worst: extermination. This truth is an unfortunate one, because the current penal institution has become one that exiles members of the population for an alarmingly increasing amount of time. Out of sight, problem solved, in a very confusing and irrational sense. So considering the history of the institution alongside the 'with the wind' notions a population employs to justify incarceration, simply removing prisons is not so simple.

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In an ideal world many of the factors which lead to behaviors considered criminal are eliminated. For instance, in an environment where scarcity is nonexistent, the seed of wanting should, in theory, cease. Without what is viewed as being important/the best/etc. the notion that one must obtain x or y, or desire things determined out of reach becomes irrelevant. Candy bars do not become televisions. Five dollars out of their mother's purse to buy cigarettes to impress friends does not become an attempt to rob a bank to obtain financial stability or purchase drugs. Being taught to appreciate the qualities of self, without comparison to this or that, then becomes the natural acceptance of the intrinsic value of everyone.

A wide range of measures are implemented in various areas of life stages to begin to create the culture necessary for realizing this world without prisons. In considering the maxim "if you can't do the time, don't do the crime," this makes a mockery of every society which has ever incorporated a prison as a deterrent.

When has society decided to educate its citizens on the law, what is considered crime and the accompanying consequences for said crime before the crime has been committed? When has a society decided, instead of mandatory testing regarding former presidents, to require students to understand that when using a firearm or engaging with someone in any harmful form or manner they risk being locked away in a room away from home where they would have to re-live their current lifespan once, perhaps twice or more, before they are able to come out? No more riding bikes, or going fishing, or slumber parties or (fill in the blank). In my opinion, the formation of making crime and the penal institution a form of entertainment only glorifies and desensitizes it among the population. The degree of ignorance that exists is only one facet that needs to be

eliminated to create a prison-free society.

A world without prisons has ingrained within its societies a safe outlet for the taboos that have been transformed into 'criminal' behaviors. This requires an evaluation into what is considered safe and healthy. Then, for those so inclined to view things differently for whatever indwelt reasons, to not punish but discover how said ideas can be put to constructive uses. How often were the innovative icons of the past considered raving lunatics in their day? What is now seen as warped and twisted had not begun as such and without an environment that allows individuals to be comfortable expressing such thoughts without being ostracized would allow for proper redirection, if necessary. This then addresses the resulting chain of events that often contributes to acts perpetrated, allowing for the natural display of loving energy to exist amongst societies, as opposed to secrecy and denial.

To live in a world without prisons means to have eliminated the functionality of the institution with all it upholds and represents. A world that has addressed the underlying causes that result in the hurt, pain, or confusion that contributes to actions regarded as criminal. Thus, a world that does more for its population than cast them into a murky cesspool, remove them into a festering one for a time, only to return them under the title "rehabilitated." Otherwise, a world of blatant extermination over the slightest offense would occur with no prisons around to make a prolonged extermination possible.

- SHU-SHEW

Threat begets threat. A disagreement escalates when someone calls 911. The caller has taken things up a notch. It answers the question "what are you going to do about it?" with undue force. When the initial threat is bringing on the possibility of incarceration, what comes with that is the prospect of a loss of freedom, loss of dignity, loss of community and loss of opportunity. The only threat above that is the loss of life.

Why is that card so available?

A threat as ever present and as powerful as that of a 911 call, and thereby the threat of prison, holds enough potential energy to not only affect the person on the receiving end, but also that of the caller. Booker T. Washington said, "It is not possible for one man to hold another man down in the ditch without staying down there with him."

In a world without prisons, this threat would no longer exist. There would not be a mechanism that is so available and so simple which would push someone into a corner. There would be no caller and there would be no one being called on. The ditch of our own creation would be filled in.

- COMMUNITY MEMBER

A world where everyone has... access to birth control and bodily autonomy, supportive and loving families and neighbors, access to high quality, affordable education with well paid staff, access to healthy and nutritious foods that are affordable, access to safe and affordable housing in the place people want to live their best lives, access to high quality, affordable healthcare staffed well by health professionals, access to high quality mental health care with care coordination (and sufficient and ample beds for higher need individuals), mental health navigators and access to well-paying jobs. That would probably help to start.

- JAMIE

**Editor's note:** What if the word "affordable" here was replaced with "accessible"? When we say we want something to be affordable, what we really mean is we want everyone to have access to it, regardless of their personal means. By reframing this we can start grappling with actual resources and not just the monetary values assigned to them under capitalism.

The topic of prison abolition can feel like we're talking about abolishing blue from the sky — like an enormous, unending, far-reaching, practically unbeginable task. Where do we even start to break down this system of oppression so deeply entrenched in society? How do we disentangle the safety and prosperity of our communities from the interests of government and private industry that seek to criminalize and incarcerate us to maximize their profits? How do I resist the cop inside my own mind that instinctively equates justice with punishment?

These questions and so many more are not abstract musings; they are the work, they are the struggle that we choose to engage with every day as abolitionists. We pose these questions today because we believe in a future where they are answered. As prison abolition activist and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore wrote, "Abolition is about abolishing the conditions under which prison became the solution to problems, rather than the buildings we call prisons." Gilmore reminds us that abolition is not simply eliminating systems of incarceration, punishment, and surveillance; abolition is about what we choose to build in their place.

The prison system we know today is the result of Enlightenment era humanistic reforms that did away with punishments like torture and public executions. The idea of keeping convicts alive and holding them in penitentiaries rather than killing them directly was itself a revolutionary reform of justice. The reform of mandatory minimum sentences replaced indeterminate sentencing, a measure put in place largely to quell the 'crimewave' fears of the U.S. public during the 1980s and '90s. Did these reforms end all wrongdoing? Did life finally become safe? Of course not. These reforms were never a true attempt to challenge the status quo belief in retributive justice, to end the individualization of societal problems, or to restore peace or safety to anyone involved in wrongdoing. Reforming the carceral state didn't end crime, it just shifted the punishment to seem more humane or tolerable, but the powerful remained in control, and the people involved in the wrongdoing, both the victim and perpetrator, remain without peace or safety restored, unwhole.

So where do we start with ending the cycle of incarceration? As abolitionists, we must start with ourselves. We must recognize that we are not inherently good or bad people, just like everybody else. That we are as likely to do harm to another as we are to be harmed, criminally or otherwise. That the circumstances of our lives, the systems under which we live, even the zipcode where we reside, determine an incredible amount about what our lives look like. That punishing others doesn't fix feelings of powerlessness or vulnerability. We start by taking accountability for our own actions and challenging the thoughts that lead us toward lashing out at or blaming others. We must speak up about abolition and speak out on behalf of others. And, when we're inevitably questioned about what to do with violent offenders, we must invite the asker to imagine with us instead, to think of a world where everyone's needs are met, where everyone has an opportunity, and everyone feels safe, no matter the cards that life dealt them.

- IOWA CITY LOCAL

Prisons are a symptom, eddies to a culture insisting people are either good or bad—a lesson we learn as children and one that saturates our media, politics, policies, and the ways we move through the world.

Prisons are places where we lock people away for their faults and imperfections.

**ABOLITION,** cont'd on back



Poetry

DOOR #1

BY SHU-SHEW

To obtain the reins  
Free range demands  
Guards  
Against lands vicious demands  
Fortified plans  
Counter labels and brands  
Well equipped  
Sifting gold from sand  
Pay close attention  
To subtle dimensions  
Held between lines  
Or flavored extensions  
Hesitated greeting  
Prevent need of retraction  
Line of defense  
Against reported infraction  
Freedoms maintained  
Outweigh  
Pleasure abundance  
Time reveals  
Which becomes encumbrance  
No amount of fuel  
Replaces as sustenance  
Surface deceived  
To consider comeuppance  
Wisdom born  
Learning develops  
Silence in space  
Choose to envelop  
Moderation bound  
Decisions compound  
Firm ground  
Solace found

Poetry

LOVE HURTS

BY HEATHER MICHELLE

Love it hurts,  
Heart is broken,  
Painful feelings,  
Words been spoken,  
Cry all night,  
Shout your name,  
Feeling my life,  
Never the same,  
Hurts down deep,  
Burns inside,  
Losing sleep,  
Want to die,  
Life it sucks,  
That is true,  
But life goes on,  
Without you,  
But even when,  
You hurt me so,  
My love for you,  
Will always grow,  
Though deep inside,  
I am feeling blue,  
I can't fight the pain,  
I got from you,  
Tears in my eyes,  
Heart still broken,  
The love we shared,  
Always my token,  
I'm sorry if I,  
Did something wrong,  
But without you,  
I don't belong,  
Yes, I hurt,  
And want to die,  
But instead,  
I lie here and cry,  
So do what it is,  
Whatever you do,  
But I want you to know,  
I still love you...

Both of these poets are currently incarcerated. They wrote these poems from behind bars.

ABOLITION, cont'd

tions. We build them to contain those who harm so we can pretend to rehabilitate them; those who are mentally ill because we don't have treatment for them; those without homes because we don't have houses for them. We build prisons to hide, out of sight, the people we choose to discard rather than care for.

And then we build more. We rebuild them. We expand them. Prisons become an excuse not to construct — or even imagine — something better.

A world without prisons is a world that accepts each of us as a human with imperfection and responds with care, rather than exile. It is a world oriented toward healing and transformation and justice for those who cause harm and those who are hurt. It is a transformed world of peace that knows people are not simply good or bad. It is a world that knows each and every one of us needs healing, causes harm, and is worthy of care.

When I imagine what this kind of world might look like, I can't help but first think of what the lives of children would be like, and how generational patterns of trauma, abuse and survival are taught and learned through violence and force, through desperation, or through not knowing any other way — and are passed on and on and on. A world without prisons would certainly be a world in which it was impossible that any community would ever allow conditions in which children could be abused, tortured, raped, used as slaves or neglected. Changing these cycles would surely take generations of focused, collective effort toward learning what community truly means in terms of accountability, collective responsibility and collective coparenting. It would take dismantling systems that control children instead of care for them, and an end to children being unincluded from social participation, decision making and shaping collective values. I don't know how to imagine even the beginnings of this possibility without the de-commodification of what is needed to survive in this world — water, food, housing, clothing, education, healthcare, movement, communication, etc. A shift to ensuring that every person has what they need is far more than mere policy change, however. I think this would

require a massive shift in our collective belief systems about ownership, deservedness, human supremacy, white supremacy, adult supremacy, individualism and what we owe each other (not just human to human, but within our entire non-human ecosystem). Our systems of survival would become relational and interdependent. A world without prisons, in my imagination, centers on children having empowered, equitable social roles, leadership in shaping systems, and communities of accountability in which abuse, neglect and exploitation could never even have the ghost of a chance of occurring.

There is a man in my family on death row. I do not know how we are related, but we share the same surname, which we share with about 500 other people, and I have always been told anyone with my surname is my family. His name is Daniel. He has been on death row for 9,525 days. I have never written him. This is because I am a coward, and do not know what to say to the man who has been sentenced for longer than I have been alive. All I know about him is he is on death row, and he is on Wikipedia, and he is my family.

In a world without prisons, maybe I know him better. Maybe I never ac-

cidentally looked up his name. Maybe I don't know him at all. Maybe he's just another person out of the 500. He never enters the cycle of violence, he is just a loved person with his needs met. He doesn't hurt anyone then, maybe. Maybe he still does, but his victims get actual, restorative justice. Then he's just another face in the crowd. I wouldn't know him just passing on the street. In my dream world we pass on the street, and do not recognize each other, we do not see the similar nose and chin, before we carry on with our days, and both live long lives.

I'm sorry, Daniel,

In a world without prisons my imagination runs free. Children get to play outside without fear, communities meet the needs of all living beings, the sun shines bright, and faces smile. A world exists where atrocities are not happening all around us at all times. Our friends are not murdered in daylight in the middle of the street. We have collectively decided that it is our responsibility to make sure we all have what we need to survive and thrive. Animals no longer live their entire lives in cages under artificial light. Victims of harm have autonomy over what justice and reparations they need. No one needs to steal to eat, or squat to have shelter, or go into debt to receive life saving medical care. Drugs are not funneled into our communities by the government. Police do not beat up our neighbors for being poor. ICE does not kidnap our neighbors and kill our friends. A beautiful future exists, if we all fight for it.

DECLASSIFIEDS

you know somebody with

LONG COVID

is your health suddenly all fucked up?

brain fog

chronic fatigue

loss of smell and/or taste

coughing all the time

difficulty breathing

weakened immune system

erectile dysfunction

will those who bully you about masking pay your bills when you're too sick to work?

FREE MASKS

MASKS WORK

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Assistance getting abortion pills for a self-managed abortion or miscarriage

Assistance with out of state travel for abortion related medical care

Support and education for people choosing self-managed abortion

Free DIY HRT

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