

# What About The Rapists?

**An Abolitionist FAQ Series From Interrupting Criminalization**

**By Mariame Kaba & Eva Nagao**

# WE'LL HAVE SAFER AND MORE JUST COMMUNITIES WITHOUT POLICE & PRISONS.

This is an essential contention of prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition. Safety is the ability to bring, be, and move through the world as your full self. Prisons and policing are obstacles to true safety. The people who most understand this truth are survivors of sexual violence. How do we know?

## **MOST VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE DON'T REPORT THEIR ASSAULTS TO POLICE.**

This fact should be the start of every conversation about responses to sexual violence.

If as Melanie Brazzell theorizes, safety is "a toolkit to be deployed," then abolitionists want to increase the number of tools that are salutary and get rid of the tools that don't actually serve us.

We want more safety for everyone.

Yet when we tell people that we want to abolish policing and prisons, they invariably ask..."what about the rapists?"

PIC abolitionists don't demand police and prison abolition in spite of "the rapists." We demand abolition because the current system produces and reinforces sexual violence while using survivors to justify its existence.

A system should be judged based on what it actually does rather than on what it claims to be. PIC abolitionists aren't trying to fix a system which is not designed to produce safety for all of us. We're trying to supplant it with solutions that actually promote wellness, healing, and safety.

People ask "what about the rapists" because it is ingrained in us from a young age that police and prisons protect us from the worst imaginable people, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Fear of "the rapists" is weaponized as a justification for maintaining and reinforcing a system that creates significant violence for many people while focusing very little time on addressing sexual violence for those who are harmed.

**"WHEN SOMETHING CAN'T BE FIXED THEN THE QUESTION IS WHAT CAN WE BUILD INSTEAD?"**

**MARIAME KABA**

So, yes, "what about the rapists?"

What are we currently doing to keep people safe? What are we currently doing to support people who have been harmed? What are we currently doing to prevent people from harming again?

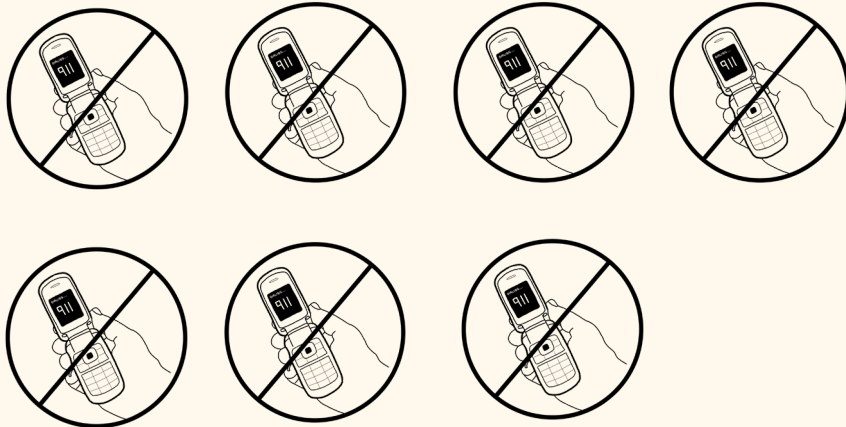


# INTERRUPTING CRIMINALIZATION

2021

# 70% OF SURVIVORS CHOOSE NOT TO REPORT THEIR SEXUAL ASSAULT TO POLICE.

Any response to violence that begins with "rethinking" policing begins with a full 70% of survivors excluded.



In a 2015 survey, the National Domestic Violence Hotline found that 80% of survivors are afraid to call the police, 30% of survivors felt less safe after calling the police, and 24% of survivors who called the police were arrested or threatened with arrest.

# 80% OF SURVIVORS **KNOW** THEIR RAPISTS.

In our current reality, the rapists are our friends, our family, our neighbors, classmates, and co-workers - or the police themselves. For those reasons, and so many others, survivors rarely choose to, or indeed do, call the police.

# SURVIVORS DON'T CALL 911 BECAUSE

- fear of retaliation
- fear of arrests
- fear of incarceration
- fear they will not be believed
- fear they will not be respected
- fear of immigration
- fear of child protective services
- loss of income
- loss of housing
- loss of benefits
- intoxication
- drug use
- it hasn't helped before
- they've been hurt by police
- they've been harassed by police
- they've been raped by police
- they are disabled
- they're a sex worker
- they're a gang member
- they don't speak English
- they are houseless
- they're LGBTQ
- they're gender nonconforming
- they didn't say no
- they didn't fight "hard enough"
- time has passed
- they don't want to do a rape kit
- they don't want to testify
- they don't want people to know
- they have a criminal record
- they are on probation
- they fear police sexual violence
- they fear someone will get shot
- they fear someone will die...



**In her book “Until We Reckon,” Danielle Sered paints a picture of the current system that is very helpful.**

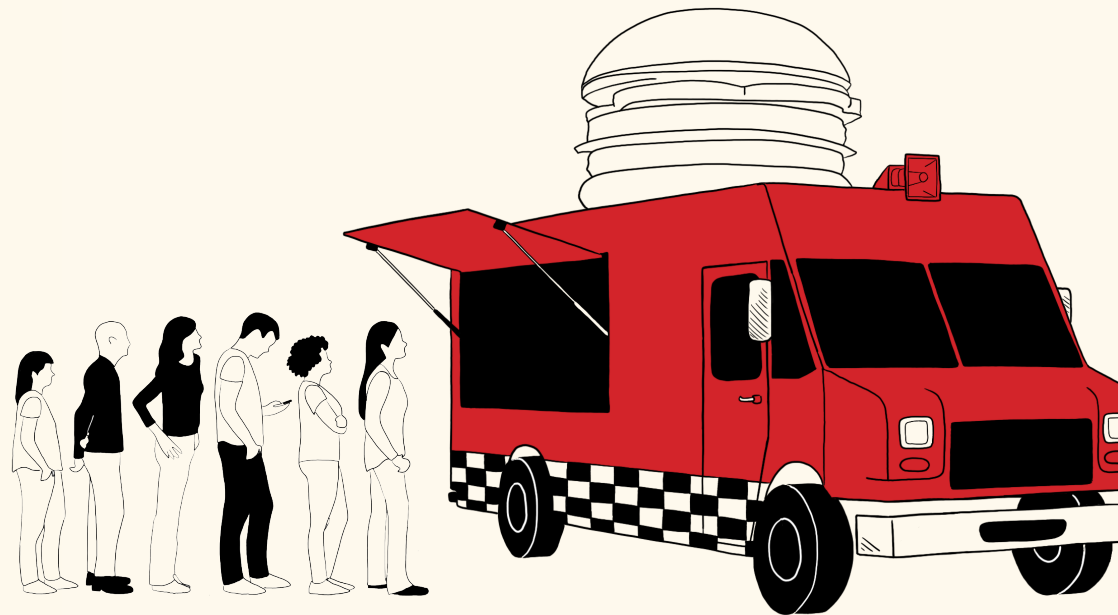
“Imagine there is a hamburger stand in the middle of the desert that sells really bad burgers. There is nothing for two hundred miles in any direction. You pull up to it and you see an extremely long line. If you concluded, based on that line, that you had just come across the most delicious burgers in America, you would be missing something.

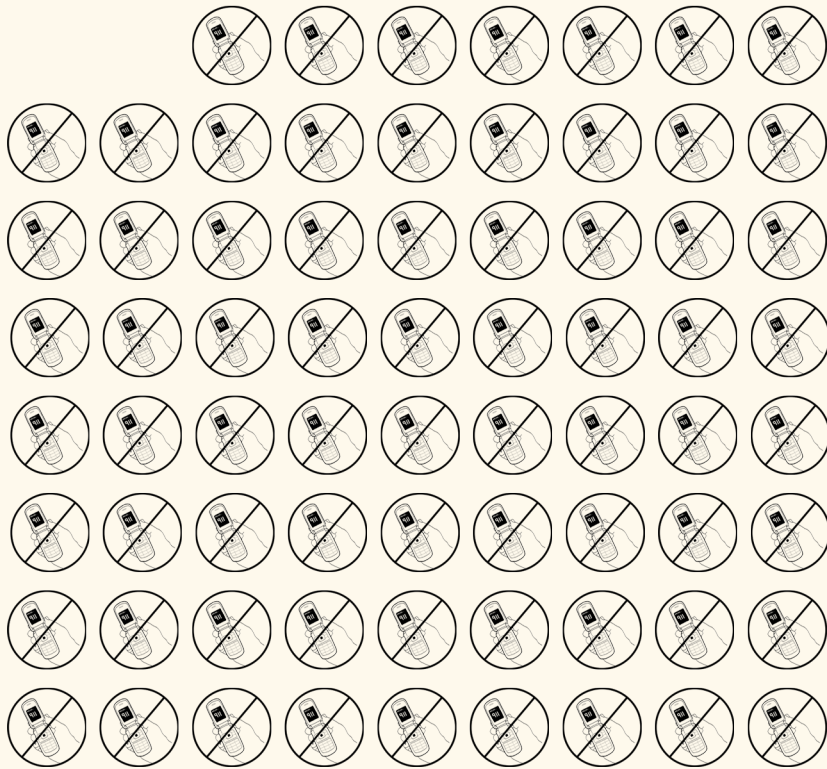
In this country we have offered survivors nothing but that bad hamburger stand in the middle of nowhere. We have offered only two choices: something or nothing, bad burgers or nothing for miles. And when some survivors have chosen something, we have used it to promote the hamburger stand, we have claimed they loved what we gave them, that they wanted more. We have done that never having asked them why they chose it, never having asked them how they felt later, and never having asked them what they would have liked instead. It is not hard to understand why so many people are in that line for burgers. We have all done it.

When we have been hungry enough, whether because of need or circumstance, we have eaten food that we know will not nourish us, food we do not want or like, food that would make us feel sick later, food we had sworn we would not eat anymore, food we would

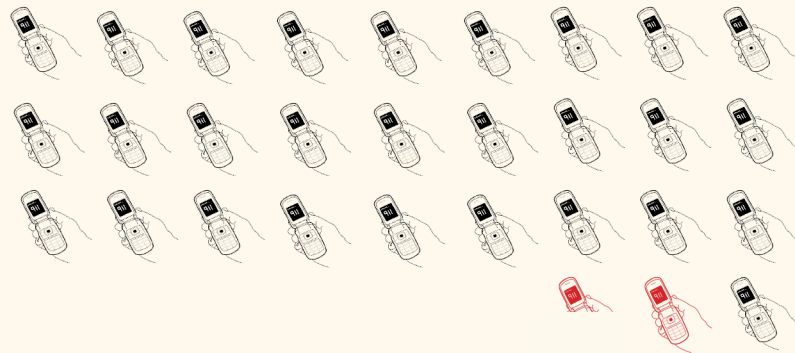
never choose if there were other options— because we are too hungry to eat nothing at all. The fact that we ate it should not be used as evidence that it was good food. I believe we owe it to victims to offer them something better than a nasty burger. I believe that if there were a chicken spot and a veggie spot and a pizza spot and a taco spot alongside that burger stand, the line for burgers would be dramatically shorter and more people would be well fed. I believe that what people choose when they have only one option is no predictor of what they will choose when they have others.

There is another thing you would see, standing in that long line at the hamburger stand, if you looked off to your left. You would see a long line of people driving by—people who knew there was nothing else for two hundred miles, people who were as dizzy with hunger as you were, people whose mouths were watering but who could not bear the thought of eating that food because they knew how bad it would be for them and that in the end it would be worse than nothing. Those people are the majority of victims who do not even call the police in the first place, and we owe them exactly as much as we owe the people in line for those awful burgers.”





For the few survivors who make a report to the police (less than 30%), almost none of the reports lead to an arrest (5%).



Fewer (3%) will lead to a conviction, and even less (2.4%) lead to incarceration — which just moves sexual violence behind prison walls. It doesn't stop it. This is not a system flaw, it's system design.

Sexual violence won't be solved by "reimagining" policing — the problem is policing itself.

Every single day, the majority of survivors choose not to engage with the criminal punishment system. Even if they did, the system could never address the number of sexual assaults that happen in the US (an assault every 68 seconds).

Meanwhile, every resource and bit of energy is focused on that system.

As police and prison abolitionists, we're saying that the 70% of people who are already outside of the system deserve more and better options.

Our focus is on:

**When people are harmed, what do we have available for them to address those harms?**

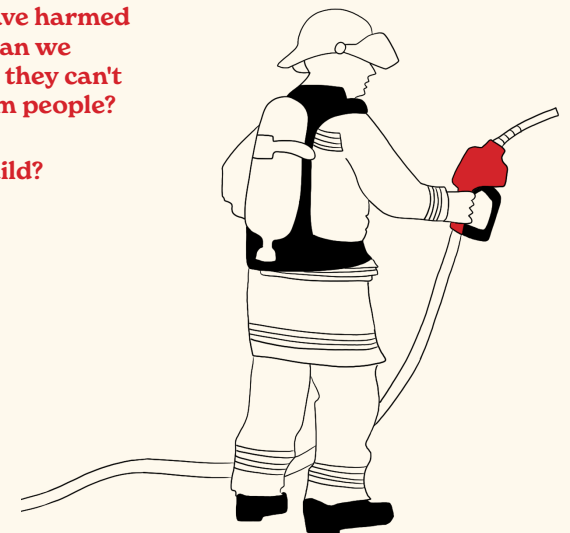
**When people have harmed someone, how can we respond so that they can't continue to harm people?**

**What can we build?**

The institutions that are supposedly set up to "respond to" these issues are inherently violent. As Dean Spade has written, prisons are serial rapists. And, we know that the second most common misconduct complaint against cops is sexual assault. PIC abolitionists are concerned with eradicating ALL forms of violence. This includes the concentrated and habitual violence of policing and prisons.

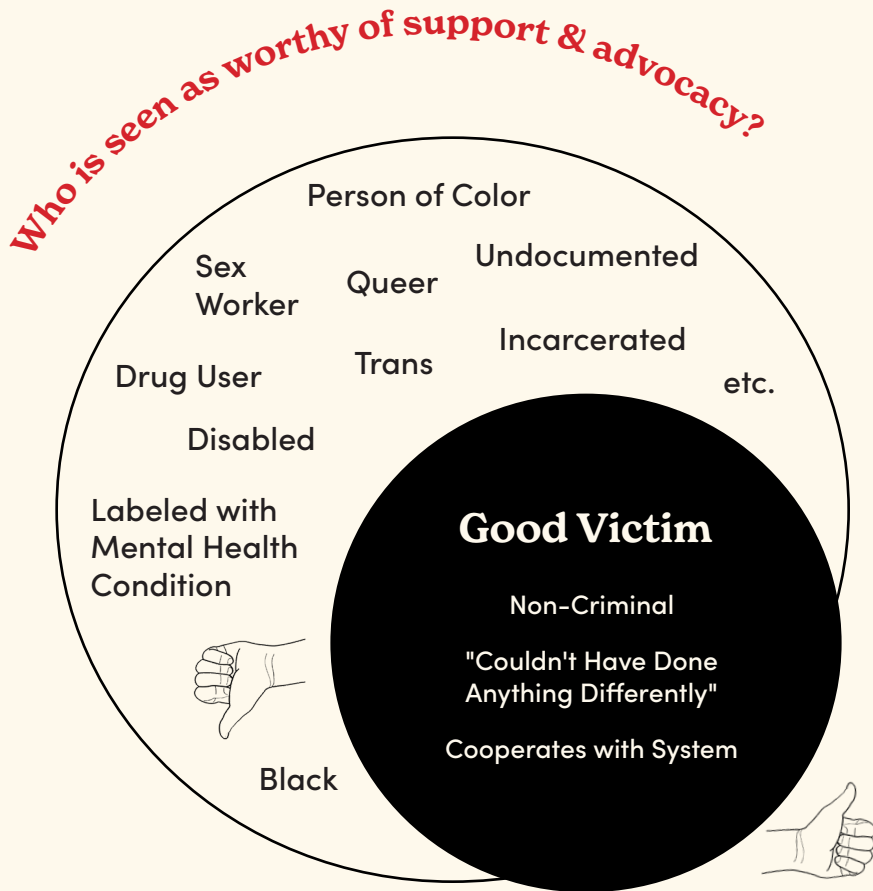
A 2015 report by The Buffalo News found that, over a 10 year period, an officer was caught in a case of sexual misconduct every five days on average. Every five days.

For many survivors, relying on police to keep us safe from rapists is like fighting fire with gasoline.



People asking, "what about the rapists?," often say that the question is rooted in their care for victims and survivors.

## But which survivors do people care about IN PRACTICE?



Abolitionists believe that everyone deserves care and concern. We have an expansive and inclusive view of survivorship. We also believe that the criminal punishment system is not synonymous with justice — even if this is what survivors have been told for generations. We know that protection promised by the state is never divorced from punishment, and that punishment is the glue that keeps patriarchy firmly in place.

As Patrick Blanchfield says, "police are in our minds as a solution rather than a problem." But abolitionists know that police are in fact a major problem and impede true safety.

The current systems leave many of us behind to pick up the pieces when terrible things happen, and we do. Piece by piece, step by step, brick by brick, dreamers and survivors are building a road to abolition.

### **PIC ABOLITION IS A SURVIVOR-LED PROJECT.**

As Andrea J. Ritchie explains, "Defunding police is a survivor-led anti-violence strategy that stops police from looting resources survivors need to prevent, avoid, escape, and heal from violence — and puts more money into violence prevention and interruption, and meeting survivors' needs."

Next time someone asks you, "what about the rapists?" when you bring up PIC abolition, ask:

- 1** What are you afraid is going to happen?
- 2** Are you concerned for your safety?
- 3** How are you currently keeping yourself safe?
- 4** In what ways do you interact with the criminal punishment system right now?
- 5** As a society, what are we currently doing to keep people safe? How do you think that's working?
- 6** How do we expand actual safety for all of us?

# References

Sexual Violence Statistics

[RAINN.org](#)

Police Sexual Violence Statistics

"Shrouded in Silence"  
c/o Interrupting Criminalization

'Crime Statistics'

"Cops Don't Stop Violence"

c/o Interrupting Criminalization

# Resources

## Websites

[Transform Harm](#)

[1 Million Experiments](#)

[Defund Police](#)

## Books

[We Do This Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice](#) by Mariame Kaba

[Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color](#) by Andrea J. Ritchie

[Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair](#) by Danielle Sered

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

## Zines & Fact Sheets

[Letter to the Anti-Rape Movement](#)

[Police Abolition: Messages When Facing Doubts](#)

[Will to Change \(preface\)](#) by bell hooks

[Defund & Domestic Violence Fact Sheet](#)

## Workbook

[Fumbling Towards Repair](#) by Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan

## Curricula & Reports

[Breaking the Silence/Shrouded in Silence: Police Sexual Violence](#)

[Creative Interventions Toolkit](#)

[Community Accountability For Survivors of Sexual Violence Toolkit](#)

[Against Punishment](#)

[Project Nia Abolitionist Toolbox Series \(Skill-building\)](#)

[Relinquishing Patriarchy List](#)

[Expanding Our Frame, Deepening Our Demands for Safety and Healing for Black Survivors of Sexual Violence](#)

## Workshops

[Transformative Justice Mixtape](#)

[Prison Industrial Complex Abolition 101](#)

"Remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones that you cannot live within."

Ruha Benjamin

## Videos

[Building Accountable Communities Video Series](#)

[Harm Reduction, Abolition and Social Work with Shira Hassan](#)

[Self-Accountability with Shannon Perez-Darby](#)

## Other

[Interrupting Criminalization](#)

[Project Nia](#)

[Survived and Punished](#)

[In Our Names Network](#)

Updated links can be found at [bit.ly/WATRresources](#)

