



Abolitionist Futures Reading Group - Facilitation Guide

General introduction:

Recently we have seen a huge uptake in interest in abolitionist ideas as abolitionist discussions enter more mainstream conversations. More people are questioning whether prisons are the best response to harms in society and whether the police actually function to bring about a safer society. But how might we need to alter our thinking, practices and social institutions to build a world without prisons and policing?

Prison abolition has a long and diverse tradition of thinking and organising around these questions. Abolition has been influenced by the radical black tradition, indigenous organising, marxist and anarchist ideas, queer and feminist analysis. And at their most successful, abolitionist principles embed themselves within all political struggles: disability activism, housing and welfare campaigns, feminist organising, environmental justice, anti-war and anti-border struggles to name a few.

We have put together this reading list to introduce abolitionist ideas via short, accessible and introductory texts, podcasts and videos. We hope they spark informed discussions of abolitionist ideas to take to work places, campaign meetings, and conversations with friends and family.

The suggested reading list is not exhaustive and inevitably has many gaps and limitations. This is both because it is not possible to cover everything within six weeks, and because we wanted to include a variety of content.

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 significant differences in context, and we can't simply import US analysis or strategies to the UK. 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 situation.

The reading list:

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 or what your group is particularly interested in.

The reading list includes a set of 'core', 'second round' and 'further readings'. The 'core readings' are for people joining the reading group for the first time. The 'second round readings' are for people who have already read the 'core' readings and/or are joining the reading group a second time. For people who want even more, see the 'further readings' on the [full reading list](#).

Hopes and aims:

By the end of the six 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 another reading list, more focused on abolitionist organising.

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

If you are setting up your own reading group for the first time, check out our [step-by-step guidance for organising a reading group](#).

Role of facilitator:

The main role of the facilitator is to prompt conversation and help create an inclusive and welcoming space for everyone to participate. You do not need to be an expert in abolition to facilitate. A good facilitator is not there to 'give answers' but rather to pose questions, prompt discussion and guide conversation.

A good facilitator will also pay attention to the broader atmosphere / 'mood' of the group and gently hold and guide the space as needed. For example, if people seemed to be fatigued from one topic, the facilitator can suggest moving onto a different reading or topic. Or if a particular discussion feels heavy, sometimes it can be helpful to acknowledge the feelings in the room or invite people to take a minute to reflect or take a quick break.

If you are asked a question and you don't know the answer, that's okay! It's not your job to have all the answers. You can throw the question back to the full group and ask if anyone else has any thoughts about the question so you explore it together as a group.

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 and encouraging way.
- We found that breaking up into smaller groups initially helped with more people contributing overall. 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.
- We recommend doing a go around at the beginning of each session to give each person a chance to say their name, the pronouns they use, and 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. This is a good way of getting a sense of what topics people are most interested in and also helps set a tone from the beginning where everyone has a chance to speak. You can also repeat this at the end of the session - i.e. have a 'check out' go around to give a sense of closure at the end.
- We also suggest including accessibility needs in the go-around at the beginning of the session. Encourage everyone to share what people in the group could do to help them participate. If you're facilitating, it's useful to share something that people can do to make it easier for you to facilitate. For example, you could ask people to be careful not to speak over each other so you can hear them properly. This helps people feel comfortable to share their own needs and creates a set of ground rules between the group.
- Try to foster a space where everyone feels encouraged but not pressured to speak. If one or two people are dominating the conversation, as a facilitator do feel free to gently intervene - i.e. say 'I'd like to invite people who haven't spoken as much to do so'. Or you can pick up a thread that someone mentioned in the introductory go-around to shift the topic towards an issue that hasn't been covered, or to focus in more detail on something that needs deeper discussion.

Session one: Introduction to Abolition

Core Readings:

1. 'Introduction: Prison Reform or Prison Abolition?' in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis (2003)[12 pages]
2. *Critical Resistance*. (no date) What is Abolition? [1 page]
3. *Prison Research Education Action Project (1976)* 'Nine Perspectives for Prison Abolitionists', & 'Diminishing / Dismantling the Prison System,' from Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists. [2 pages + 5 pages].

Second Round Reading:

- Ryder, Oonagh. (2018) What does Justice Look like Without Prisons? Novaramedia.com [7 pages]
- Kuchner, Rachel (2019) Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore might change your mind. New York Times 17 April 2019. (9 pages)
- Begum, Hajera (2020) Rethinking Our Justice System: Abolition in the UK. Amaliah.com (5 pages)
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition. (2020) The Intercept Podcast. (Part 1: 54 min, Part 2: 31 min). Highly recommended.

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 Critical Resistance definitions of 'the prison industrial complex' and 'abolition' provide general frame for understanding what the broad target of abolition is and what abolition aims for.

The Prison Research Education Action Project readings, published in the 1970s, provide a useful reminder that abolition isn't new and encourages us to consider the history of movement ideas. These texts also invite us question what is similar and different between the 1970s and the current moment 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 these readings suggest the actual function of prison is?

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

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

Core Readings:

1. Berger, Dan and Mariame Kaba and David Stein (2017). 'What Abolitionists do,' *Jacobinmag.com* [5 pages]
2. Naomi Murakawa & #BlackLivesMatter (2015) Liberals, Guns and the Roots of the U.S. Prison Explosion (2015). [Video] *The Laura Flanders Show*. *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. Ben-Moshe, L. (2013) The Tension Between Abolition and Reform. In: Nagel, M. E. and Nocella, A. J. (eds.) *The End of Prisons: Reflections from the Decarceration Movement*. Amsterdam: Value Inquiry Book Series, pp.83-92.
4. Kaba, Mariame (2014) 'Police "Reforms" You Should Always Oppose' *Truth-Out*. [1 page].
5. Critical Resistance (2020) Reformist Reforms vs Abolitionist Steps in Policing [Abolitionist Reforms Chart] [1 page]

Second Round Readings:

- Carlen, Pat (2012) Against Rehabilitation: For Reparative Justice. A transcript of the 2012 Eve Saville lecture given by Professor Pat Carlen on 6 November 2012. [10 pages]
- Sudbury, Julia. (2009) Reform or abolition? Using popular mobilisations to dismantle the 'prison-industrial complex' *Criminal Justice Matters* 77 (1), pp.26 - 28. [3 pages]
- Moore, John (2016) Prisons cannot be places of rehabilitation. Comment piece. [3 pages]
- Chitseko, Sara (2020) Abolition not Reformation. *4Frontproject.org* (2 pages)

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 growth and instead explains how well intentioned 'liberal' reforms have often led to prison expansion and entrenchment.

The chapter by Liat Ben-Moshe 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 by Mariame Kaba and Critical Resistance 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 three: Feminist, queer, anti-racist approaches to abolition

Core Readings:

1. Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2008) Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex [3 pages]
2. Sudbury, Julia (2006) 'Rethinking Antiviolence Strategies: Lessons from the Black Women's Movement in Britain' in *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* p. 13-24. Available from [12 pages]
3. Richie, Beth. (2014) 'How Anti-Violence Activism Taught Me to Become a Prison Abolitionist' FeministWire.org. [2 pages]
4. Bassichis, Morgan and Alexander Lee and Dean Spade. (2011) 'Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got'. In: *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, Oakland: AK Press, p.15-19 & 33-37. [10 pages]
5. Fekete, Liz (2020) 'Fault lines in the fight against racism and antisemitism' Institute of Race Relations (7 pages)

Second Round Readings:

- Spade, Dean & Reina Gossett (2014) No one is Disposable: Everyday Practices of Abolition [videos]
- Ryder, Oonagh and Mo Mansfield (2018) "Just Paint the Walls Pink": Gender, Prison and Carceral Feminism. Lockdown podcast. [Suggest listening to part]
- Caradonna, Lydia (2020) I don't want my rapists to go to prison [content note: descriptions of rape]

Why these readings?

The questions 'what about the rapists?' and 'what about the murders?' are often 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 street, 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 UK context, now?
3. Why does Julia Sudbury (now Julia Chinyere Oparah) argue for a rethinking of anti-violence strategies? What broader changes would be needed to enact the kinds of strategies?
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 four: Transformative justice and abolition

Core Readings:

1. Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (2014) 'Transformative Justice and Community Accountability' [1 page]
2. Aorta Collective (2013) 'Punitive, Restorative & Transformative Justice: The basics' [2 pages]
3. Chrysalis Collective (2011) Beautiful, Difficult, Powerful: Ending Sexual Assault Through Transformative Justice. In: Chen, C.-I., Dulani, J. and Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (eds.) *The Revolution Starts At Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, pp.188-205. [18 pages]
4. GenerationFive (2017) 'Community Response and Accountability' & 'Transformation of Community and Social Conditions that Create and Perpetuate Violence' in Ending Child Sexual Abuse: A Transformative Justice Handbook, p. 56-61. [6 pages]
5. Mariame Kaba and Victoria Law (2019) 'Transformative Justice in an era of mass criminalization' on *The Activist Files* (podcast) (56 minutes)

Second Round Readings:

- Jashnani, Gaurav and RJ Maccani and Alan Greig (2011) What does it feel like when change finally comes? Male Supremacy, Accountability & Transformative Justice. In: Chen, C.-I., Dulani, J. and Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (eds.) *The Revolution Starts At Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, pp.216-234. [22 pages]
- Simmons, Aisha Shahida (2019) Love WITH Accountability: Digging Up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse. AK Press [ebook \$1.99] [excerpt to be posted shortly]
- Dixon, Ejeris and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020) Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement. AK Press.[ebook \$1.99][excerpt to be posted shortly]

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' reading provides an example 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.

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.

Session five: Abolitionist responses to Covid-19

Core Readings:

1. Adam Elliott Cooper & The Monitoring Group (2020) '[Covid-19 Lockdown - Policing the Police](#)' [Video 10min]
2. Gal-Dem (2020) '[The state will not save us, only we can save us](#)': a collective response to Covid-19. Gal-Dem.com [4 pages]
3. Micah Herskind (2020) '[Three Reasons Advocates Must Move Beyond Demanding Release for "Nonviolent Offenders"](#)' Medium.com [9 pages]
4. INQUEST/Women in Prison (2020) '[Covid-19 Letter](#)' Inquest.org.uk [2 pages]
5. Sparrow, Josie (2020) '[Mutual Aid Incorporated](#)' *New Socialist*. [12 pages]

Second Round Readings:

- '[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) [Video 1hr 37 minutes]
- '[The Lockdown: Arresting the Virus](#)' [Podcast 1 hour 18 minutes] Oonagh Ryder and Carl Cattermole with Kevin Blowe and Becka Hudson (2020)
- Afary, Frieda and Lara Al-Kateb (2020) '[What is holding back the formation of a global prison abolitionist movement to fight COVID-19 and capitalism?](#)' SpectreJournal.com

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 video by The Monitoring Group provided some key information about how to stay safe during the height of the lockdown in the UK. While the rules around lockdown have now changed, the video still provides useful information about what to do if the police approach you, undertake a stop and search or arrest you. It also provides a good example of efforts to help each other keep safe during the pandemic.

The open letter from migrant solidarity, anti-racist and abolitionist organisers, published in Gal-Dem asks us to look at the broader socio-economic roots of the pandemic's impacts. It challenges the idea that current moment is 'exceptional', alluding to the many ways in which the state refuses to protect life, and makes suggestions for collective care as a response to the pandemic.

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 letter from INQUEST and Women in Prison is an example of an attempt by UK organisations to put this abolitionist framing into practice.

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. 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?
2. Why has the government chosen to respond to a health crisis by increasing police powers? How does this reinforce, normalise and expand the role of the police?
3. Do you agree with the demands made in the Gal-Dem open letter? What would be required to enact these demands?
4. 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?
5. 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?

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

Session six: Black Lives Matter & defund the police

Core Readings:

1. Kaba, Mariame (2020) - Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police. New York Times 12 June 2020 (2 pages)
2. Samudzi, Zoé (2020) Stealing Away in America. Jewish Currents 10 June 2020. (8 pages)
3. History of the Establishment of the London Metropolitan Police. Drawn Out Thinking. (Illustration/Comic12 pages)
4. Paul Gilroy in conversation with Ruth Wilson Gilmore. 7th June 2020. (Podcast 42 minutes or transcript 7 pages)
5. Ritchie, Andrea & Mariame Kaba and Wood Ervin (2020) Defund the Police Toolkit. InterruptingCriminalisation.com (24 pages)

Second Round Readings:

- Critical Resistance (2020) Abolition of Policing Workshop CriticalResistance.org
- Maynard, Robyn (2017) Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to Present. Fernwood Press.
- Richie, B. (2012) Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence and America's Prison Nation. New York and London: New York University Press.

Why these readings?

These readings have been chosen to give context to the emergence of 'defund the police' as a key demand of the Black Lives Matter movement. They outline the importance of defunding the police as a non-reformist reform towards abolition.

The article by Mariame Kaba explores the racist history of policing and of police reform in the US, challenging the idea that policing has ever been rooted in safety for the general public, as well as the idea that the level of violence in our society is inevitable. Similarly, the comic on the history of the London Metropolitan Police links current racist policing practices to the origins of policing in the protection of wealth gained from colonial plunder.

Zoé Samudzi's interview with Vicky Osterweil looks at the narrative around 'looting' during uprisings, tracing the origins of the word and investigating the connections between private property, whiteness and policing.

In the conversation between Ruth Gilmore and Paul Gilroy, the two discuss the current Black Lives Matter mobilisation, the present context of COVID-19 and the unequal distribution of premature death, and what this may mean for the political development of this movement. The discussion underlines the importance of going beyond the criminal justice system in abolitionist thinking and practices, to understand the broader systems that distribute punishment and proximity to illness and death.

Questions to discuss

1. Why is defunding the police the specific demand being made by activists?
2. What challenges did you have in understanding the need to defund the police and how, if at all, did the materials help to address these?
3. Did Zoe Samudzi's article make you think differently about the politics of "looting"? How do you think "anti-looting" rhetoric has been used to discredit the Black Lives Matter movement?
4. Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Paul Gilroy discuss the 'distribution of vulnerability to premature death' as something that links together the killing of George Floyd, the racial disparities in Covid deaths and the impact of neoliberalism. What does this tell us about where and how we might need to target our energies for social change?
5. The Defund The Police Toolkit contains useful examples of how we can go about building a campaign but it has been designed for the US. What are some of the "alternatives" we can think about in the UK? What are some of our "pitfalls"?

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

For more information:
AbolitionistFutures.com