

The Politics of Prison Abolition:
An Organizer's Guide to Effective Abolition Research and Activism

by

Nathan Brandli

Dr. Joseph Richardson, Advisor

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Abstract

This thesis paper is an analysis of the politics of the prison abolition movement. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews with University of Maryland students and activists, I incorporate findings from these interviews to discuss common experiences and perspectives among participants regarding prison abolition, criminal justice reform, and the criminal justice system. In addition to the interviews other sources used for this thesis include: published interviews with public figures; literature reviews of prison abolition and anarchist writers; research journals and articles that discuss data and other evidence of our nation's historical relationship with the criminal justice system; slavery; policing; race; and recent news publications or human rights reports that provide relevant discussion for current political developments regarding criminal justice reform. By analyzing and synthesizing different ideas, events, data, and statements regarding prison abolition, criminal justice reform, and anarchism, I answer important research questions about the prison abolition movement. These questions include: What is the historical context for the development of both the penitentiary and this movement? What are its principles? What are common misperceptions about its definition or ideas? What principles and ideas distinguish it from criminal justice reform and how do they inform the application of its work? What does it share in common or solidarity with other political ideologies and movements? What is the political basis for the need of this movement and application of its work?

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Problem Statement

For many Americans criminal justice reform, including an end to mass incarceration, is becoming more of a “bi-partisan” issue than ever before in our nations’ political history. According to the *Huffington Post*, rhetoric about ending or addressing mass incarceration has been discussed by Martin O’Malley, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders during the Democrat’s presidential primary debates. These included some calls for perhaps genuine though limited measures such as the reclassification of marijuana as a less dangerous drug, the de-privatization of prisons, more effective national guidelines for police use of excessive force, and an end to racial profiling (Eisen and Chettiar, 2015). Of course the effects of years of concerted effort to bring attention to the need for criminal justice reform is being felt not just in the promises of presidential candidates but from President Barack Obama as well. According to the *New York Times* President Barack Obama recently announced a plan to ban solitary confinement for all juveniles held in Federal prisons (Shear, 2016). This is just approximately three months after an earlier action that the Justice Department took to release over six thousand federal inmates convicted of drug offenses who received harsh sentences since the war on drugs began in the 1980s. The inmates were freed as a result of a change in the US Sentencing Commission guidelines for drug offenses being applied retroactively, (i.e., the Fair Sentencing Act) , as well as an initiative to commute non-violent drug offense sentences (Drugs Minus 2) and reduce prison overcrowding (Horwitz, 2015). President Barack Obama has also focused on an initiative to grant clemency to many non-violent drug offenders during his presidency, resulting in the pardoning of eighty nine inmates by July 2015 (Horwitz & Eilperin, 2015). Last week President Barack Obama took further action on his clemency initiative by reducing sentences for 58 individuals convicted of drug offenses. This recent event now brings the total

number of prisoners whose sentences have been commuted by the president to 306 according to CNN (Liptak, 2016). On the other side of the spectrum, according to *The Hill*, the GOP has been “gravitating toward the criminal justice reform movement for some time”. Republican governors such as Rick Perry (Texas) and Chris Christie (New Jersey) have been at the forefront of advocating for criminal justice reform within the Republican Party. The movements’ effectiveness in influencing public discourse is so strong that people like Rick Perry have personally compared mass incarceration to segregation and claimed that the Republican Party has lost its moral legitimacy as the legacy of Abraham Lincoln’s party for ignoring the plight of African Americans (Easley, 2015). Many of the other current presidential candidates including Rand Paul, Jeb Bush, and Ted Cruz have been endorsed by a campaign called Right on Crime, formed several years ago by conservatives Newt Gingrich and Pat Nolan to address excessive punitive functions of criminal justice through a conservative framework (Keller, 2015). In fact, last year over six hundred political leaders attended the Bipartisan Summit on Criminal Justice Reform, a conference hosted by Newt Gingrich, Pat Nolan, Van Jones, and Donna Brazile and sponsored by both the ACLU and Koch Industries (Nolan 2015). According to a report published by Human Rights Watch in 2015 there are additional signs of criminal justice reforms expected in 2016-2017. These include a lawsuit over the bail system in San Francisco, an issue that has extremely severe consequences for the poorest in the U.S., as well as the recent abolishment of the death penalty in Connecticut by the state’s Supreme Court in August 2016 (Nicholson, 2016).

However, despite the political excitement over the bipartisan support for criminal justice reform, the current state of the criminal justice system remains abysmal. According to this same Human Rights Watch report there are 12 million Americans who enter and exit the jail system at the local level each year. There are “tens of thousands” of juveniles serving time in adult prisons

and jails, and fourteen states do not have a minimum age for trying youth as adults. There are an estimated 100,000 prisoners kept in solitary confinement in either the federal or state systems, and enormous racial disparities still exist within the criminal justice system as a whole (Nicholson, 2016). For example, in the juvenile justice system non-white youth only make up roughly thirty percent of the U.S. youth population account for almost sixty five percent of the total juvenile inmate population. (Ward, 2012).

With few meaningful examples of implemented reform at this time, and no sweeping or comprehensive legislation or initiatives to address systemic problems within the criminal justice system, what hope is there that a few policy changes can produce the powerful and necessary results that our nation needs? There are also very recent signs that the bipartisan alliance regarding criminal justice reform is in a fragile and dangerous state, or perhaps on shakier ground than the public has been led to believe. According to Ed Kilgore of the *New Yorker*, a “backlash” is growing against criminal justice reform among GOP members and he credits this to the success of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Particularly Republican Senators Tom Cotton (Arkansas) Jim Risch (Idaho) and David Perdue (Georgia) are leading opposition to an important senate bill that would ease federal sentencing on mandatory minimums (Kilgore, 2016). Of no small importance either is GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump who, despite being viewed as an outlier in the Republican Party, is having enormous success in being supported by a backlash to immigration that preys upon racial fears of a super crime wave (Sneed 2015). These are political signals that fear and “tough on crime” rhetoric may make a comeback within the GOP and push the Democratic Party in a similar direction as they have done in the past. In addition to these alarming circumstances, the fact still remains that the death penalty, solitary confinement, detention of juveniles as adults, overcrowding of facilities, a high

national incarceration rate, over-representation of marginalized groups, and police violence are just some of the many critical problems that need to be addressed regarding our “broken” system. Yet, there have been no signs of comprehensive efforts to tackle or even discuss these issues in national politics, particularly in the recent presidential debates.

Thus, is the system really broken? Or is the attempt to return to business as usual in criminal justice policies and practices part of the problem? If you carefully examine the analysis (or lack thereof) of many criminal justice reformers and the implications that can be drawn from their specific and often narrow political, policy, and institutional goals, this seems to be one way to frame the argument. For example the argument often goes that the war on drugs brought about mass incarceration, a system which is the primary cause of other issues like racial disparities in rates of arrest, prosecution and incarceration, privatized prison industries, overcrowding, and poor policing practices. With this analysis in mind the logic for many in the criminal justice reform and ending mass incarceration movements is that we simply need to decriminalize drugs, end imprisoning and policing for profit, and downsize prisons to a reasonable size in order to create a truly just criminal justice system. In a recent article by Ta-Nehisi Coates in the Atlantic entitled *50 Years after the Moynihan Report, The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, Coates cites some important historical research and data that sheds light on a very different way of thinking about the criminal justice system and the solutions that are needed to address some of its many problems, particularly the overrepresentation and criminalization of African Americans. Take for example the following passage:

“For African Americans, unfreedom is the historical norm. Enslavement lasted for nearly 250 years. The 150 years that followed have encompassed debt peonage, convict lease-labor, and mass incarceration—a period that overlapped with Jim Crow. This provides a telling geographic comparison. Under Jim Crow, Blacks in the South lived in a police state. Rates of incarceration were not that high—they didn’t need to be, because state social control of Blacks was nearly total. Then, as African Americans migrated north, a

police state grew up around them there, too. In the cities of the North, ‘European immigrants’ struggle’ for the credential of whiteness gave them the motive to oppress Blacks, writes Christopher Muller, a sociologist at Columbia who studies incarceration: ‘A central way European immigrants advanced politically in the years preceding the first Great Migration was by securing patronage positions in municipal services such as law enforcement.’ By 1900, the Black incarceration rate in the North was about 600 per 100,000—slightly lower than the national incarceration rate today. That early-20th-century rates of Black imprisonment were lower in the South than in the North reveals how the carceral state functions as a system of control. Jim Crow applied the control in the South. Mass incarceration did it in the North. After the civil-rights movement triumphed in the 1960s and toppled Jim Crow laws, the South adopted the tactics of the North, and its rates of imprisonment surged far past the North’s. Mass incarceration became the national model of social control. Indeed, while the Gray Wastes have expanded their population, their most significant characteristic remains unchanged: In 1900, the black-white incarceration disparity in the North was seven to one —roughly the same disparity that exists today on a national scale.” (Coates, 2015)

There are a few critical insights that we can garner from this data and findings. The first is that as pointed out by Coates the criminal justice system, including both policing and incarceration, has always played a dominant role in the socio-political control of African Americans post slavery. This is distinctly different from the typical narrative of scholars and activists who inform much of the contemporary criminal justice reform narrative. For example, despite providing historical context about convict leasing and the Black codes, author Michelle Alexander primarily constructs her arguments about the function of criminal justice as a system that eventually evolved for the purpose of disenfranchising/socio-politically controlling African Americans during the post Jim Crow era. (Alexander, 2011) In her book she describes this new phenomenon as mass incarceration and calls the system “The New Jim Crow” in reference to how the criminal justice system facilitates voter disenfranchisement and segregates some African Americans from the rest of society. In fact the term mass incarceration as used by Alexander may have come from the term mass imprisonment, an idea stated by David Garland in 2001 to describe “the nation’s unusually pervasive and unequally administered criminal justice system” from which Coates cites his evidence (Garland 2001). Secondly the fact that in the year 1900 the black to white

incarceration disparity was so high is an indicator of an important historical pattern; that regardless of whether overall incarceration rates are extremely high or low, the criminal justice system disproportionately targets and incarcerates black people in proportion to their white counterparts at roughly the same disproportionate rate throughout different historical periods after the end of slavery. In fact a seven to one ratio is slightly higher than the national average today of 5.6 to 1 in the age of mass incarceration (The Sentencing Project, 2013). Given these facts it's not difficult to see how proponents of criminal justice reform, including those who seek to end mass incarceration out of a concern for its racist function and disastrous impact upon communities of color, fall short in their recommendations to reform the system or end only mass incarceration given the historic function of the criminal justice system from slavery to present day.

According to *The History of Police*, the evolution of formal police departments in the South originates from the use of slave patrols as early as 1700 (South Carolina) and their formalization from voluntary community groups into the “first publicly funded police departments of the American South” (Reichel, 1988). Slave patrols consisted of a coalition between different classes of whites who benefited from the policing and protection of their own property or the patronage of slave owners. Their primary duties included searching slave lodgings, keeping slaves off of roads and breaking up meetings organized by slaves. By 1837 in Charleston, the Police Department had 100 officers whose primary responsibilities involved slave patrol duties. After the end of the civil war many different groups merged with slave patrols including former militias and the KKK to continue many of the practices of slave patrolling through the rapidly developing locally operated police departments (Reichel, 1988). The new duties of these local police departments included the enforcement of the Black Codes, a

series of laws passed by southern legislatures specifically criminalizing African American behavior and social status. These codes were used to jail or imprison African Americans in large numbers in the south, and re-enslave them under the convict lease system. In fact Angela Davis states that according to a study by Mary Ellen Curtin of Alabama prisoners examining the decades following emancipation, “before the four hundred thousand black slaves in that state were set free, ninety-nine percent of prisoners in Alabama’s penitentiaries were white. As a consequence of the shifts provoked by the institution of the Black Codes, within a short period of time, the overwhelming majority of Alabama’s convicts were Black” (Davis, 2003). This is yet another demographical shift in imprisonment similar to the one discussed earlier by Coates which provides strong evidence that the very birth of our nation’s modern criminal justice system has been and continues to be rooted in the enslavement and social control of African Americans.

In addition to the criminal justice systems’ historically racist function post slavery, there is another important issue that the criminal justice reform movement fails to address. Most criminal justice reform efforts and theories largely ignore the problem of violent crime and how to significantly fix the system given that the forty year period (1970s-present) of massive increases in incarceration has also filled our prisons and jails with many more violent offenders than in the past. For example although drug offenses supersede all other categories of crime for currently incarcerated federal inmates (46.5%), this is not the case in state prison or local jail populations (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2015). According to the U.S. Justice Department “inmates sentenced for violent offenses comprised 54% of the state prison population in 2012, the most recent year for which data were available”. This is significant because in 2013 state prisoners accounted for approximately 86.3% of the total U.S. prison population while federal inmates comprised the remaining 13.7% (Carson, 2014). And while overall imprisonment rates

have been on the decline since their peak in 2009, this has been caused largely by a decrease in federal incarceration rates, not state incarceration rates. In fact in the majority of states imprisonment rates are still on the rise, particularly with explosions in the incarceration of women replacing some male prisoners (Carson, 2014).

Since the 1970s a different political movement has been experiencing a great deal of momentum and development. This movement has taken root among the radical left, yet still remains designated to the margins despite its significant impact on pushing for criminal justice reforms. I am referring to the Prison Abolition Movement, which is also often interchangeably referred to as penal abolition or a movement to abolish the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). This movement consists of a set of political principles and a radical vision which is very different from criminal justice reform. Prison abolition can provide an alternative to the criminal justice reform movement by addressing the historical injustices of the system and the failure of prisons to produce any effective form of rehabilitation and deterrence.

Purpose Statement & Scope

The purpose of this paper is to serve as a tool for organizers and researchers of the prison abolition movement. Currently, there are few if any sources available that have comprehensively proposed and examined important questions regarding prison abolition. These questions focus on its history, ideas, principles, and affinities with other practices. There are sources such as organizations, political figures, and political writers that provide many fluid and flexible definitions of prison abolition or frameworks for what this work entails. However, with many competing definitions of what both prison abolition and criminal justice reform mean, any individual or group of people can easily make false assumptions about the definition and principles of the prison abolition movement. This paper serves as an easily accessible

introduction to prison abolition work. It seeks to dispel the myths surrounding prison abolition while providing organizers and academics with a comprehensive framework for either understanding or internalizing its principles. This will in turn help others to engage in research or political activism that further a better understanding of the movement and the pursuit of its ultimate goals. It should be noted that this paper does not seek to provide specific examples of alternative systems, institutions, or practices to imprisonment, punishment, or use of state violence and force through criminalization and policing. Though the practice of restorative justice is specifically discussed and analyzed, this is due to its individual relationship to the movement's principles and frequent reference by activists. Also not addressed in this study is the analysis of the different ways that the criminal justice system engages in violence, oppression, repression, exploitation, and discrimination which often results in destructive outcomes on public health, safety and well-being. These are both topics which are already well documented and analyzed (Davis, 1971), (James, 2005), (Drucker, 2011), (Alexander, 2011), & (Stanley & Smith, 2011). They fall outside the scope and general purpose of this paper and would likely need to be separate papers or included in an entire book rather than a single research paper. Though these subjects are discussed and cited at times because they are relevant to the context, analysis, and discussion of some of these research questions, they are not the questions that this paper attempts to answer. Thus, they were not included as questions in the semi structured qualitative interviews or as the primary focus of the literature review.

Historical Context

The Birth of the Penitentiary and Modern Incarceration

One of the biggest obstacles that prison abolition faces, like many alternatives that challenge a status quo system or widespread practice, is the assumption that the current system or practice is

a timeless and natural part of history and therefore a permanent aspect of society. In fact when trying to even imagine a world without prisons this is one of the first obstacles both prison abolitionists and skeptics of this idea face. In the context of the U.S., prisons have historically served as a dominant system of social control that was and still is intended to deter crime, punish those who violate social norms, and rehabilitate offenders. But prisons, as we know them, are relatively new to human history. In the book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis discusses the origins of the first penitentiaries and the influences of several philosophical movements and political events which drove the growth of prisons to become the dominant institution for both punishment and rehabilitation.

“The penitentiary as an institution that simultaneously punished and rehabilitated its inhabitants was a new system of punishment that first made its appearance in the United States around the time of the American Revolution. This new system was based on the replacement of capital and corporal punishment by incarceration. Imprisonment itself was new neither to the United States nor to the world, but until the creation of this new institution called the penitentiary, it served as a prelude to punishment. People who were to be subjected to some form of corporal punishment were detained in prison until the execution of the punishment. With the penitentiary, incarceration became the punishment itself. As is indicated in the designation “penitentiary,” imprisonment was regarded as rehabilitative and the penitentiary prison was devised to provide convicts with the conditions for reflecting on their crimes and, through penitence, for reshaping their habits and even their souls.” (Davis, 2003)

As Davis points out, although various forms of detention have been common place throughout history, until the 18th century facilities such as prisons and jails were used primarily as a temporary holding place to await trial and punishment. Other punishments, which were often far more horrible, primarily consisted of frequent corporal and/or capital punishment. Examples of common forms of corporal punishments included “the stocks and pillories, whippings, brandings, and amputations” (Davis, 2003). The ways in which the death penalty were frequently carried out could be horrendously inhumane as well. Practices such as being burned or buried alive, drawn and quartered, beheaded, or hung, sometimes after having undergone extensive tortures

beforehand, were common place. According to Davis (2003) the acceptance of such violent, inhumane, and primarily public punishment began to be severely undermined in Europe and the U.S. as a result of the enlightenment and the American/French revolutions. In the particular case of the U.S., the resistance to European colonial powers meant that the new nation desired to distance itself from the previously inherited forms of corporal and capital punishment, resulting in the increasing use of prisons after the revolution.

“Imprisonment was not employed as a principle mode of punishment until the eighteenth century in Europe and the nineteenth century in the United States. And European prison systems were instituted in Asia and Africa as an important component of colonial rule. In India, for example, the English prison system was introduced during the second half of the eighteenth century, when jails were established in the regions of Calcutta and Madras. In Europe, the penitentiary movement against capital and other corporal punishments reflected new intellectual tendencies associated with the Enlightenment, activist interventions by Protestant reformers, and structural transformations associated with the rise of industrial capitalism.” (Davis, 2003)

In this excerpt Davis points out the influence of colonialism upon globalizing what was once a new and previously uncommon or sometimes unknown system for preventing or dealing with social transgressions. She also emphasizes the influence that religious and philosophical ideas such as the Enlightenment and Protestantism had upon the push to develop an alternative to the brutal punishment once practiced by much of Europe. While it may seem crazy to think of prisons as a humane alternative to corporal and capital punishment, especially when we are discussing prison abolition and the search for its own alternatives to imprisonment, it is important to keep in mind that there were underlying assumptions about the nature of imprisonment that drove the emerging prison reform movement. Due to the influence of religious thinking, many prison advocates believed that complete social isolation would produce positive reforms in character and behavior. As the emphasis on man's (meaning wealthy white males) individual liberties became widespread as a result of the American and French revolutions, the

desire shifted to finding ways to reform criminals rather than infringe upon their rights to life and property. The prevailing thought was that by being removed entirely from the outside world and given due time to do little more than reflect, this reflection would turn inward and result in penitence. As Davis (2003) illuminates penitence is at the root of the word penitentiary, and influenced the growth of prison institutions which were meant to both put people in complete social isolation and engage only in physical work and self-reflection. As noted by Davis the rise of the prison system and the penitentiaries from which they came coincides with the rise of industrial capitalism. Prisons became a useful way to exploit labor under the guise that isolation and hard work had a reforming aspect to a person's character. This kind of situation that enabled the exploitation of free labor was far more profitable than punishments which would kill or disable what would otherwise be large amounts of potential workers with great regularity. However, issues such as punishment, rehabilitation, and labor, (and therefore prisons) have always been both gendered and racialized.

For example due to their legal position as property within a chattel slavery system and agrarian society, it was not economically viable for enslaved African Americans to be held in social isolation or forms of imprisonment for lengthy periods of time. African Americans were also believed to be inferior to whites and considered by law as 3/5ths of a person. This meant that they did not have the privilege of having their punishment being mitigated at all by the desire to reform their behavior since they were treated like animals and viewed as morally corrupt. Instead African Americans who were enslaved were punished at the full discretion of their enslavers, and free African Americans as well as those who were enslaved were more likely to face corporal or capital punishment when appearing before the courts as referenced by the frequent use of capital punishment against African American women (Baker, 2008). When

examining the ways in which punishment has always been gendered as well, there is a clear parallel between one's experiences based on gender and race. Davis (2003) describes how historically women were usually punished domestically by their fathers and particularly husbands. Even after cultural and political changes began taking place such as the notion of individual liberties and emphasis upon reforming criminals, because women did not have the same rights as men and a married woman was considered the property of her husband, incarceration as a form of punishment and rehabilitation was not the typical experience for women. Just as enslaved African Americans were usually at the complete mercy of their "masters", women in general were usually at the complete mercy of the "man of the house". Commenting upon the intersection of gender and race for African American women, Angela Davis states:

"It should also be kept in mind that until the abolition of slavery, the vast majority of black women were subject to regimes of punishment that differed significantly from those experienced by white women. As slaves, they were directly and often brutally disciplined for conduct considered perfectly normal in a context of freedom. Slave punishment was visibly gendered—special penalties, were, for example, reserved for pregnant women unable to reach the quotas that determined how long and how fast they should work. In the slave narratives of Moses Grandy, an especially brutal form of whipping is described in which the woman was required to lie on the ground with her stomach positioned in a hole, whose purpose was to safeguard the fetus." (Davis, 2003)

Not only were enslaved African American women punished for behavior which was not deemed transgressive by white women, they were also systematically sexually assaulted and violated by white male enslavers in addition to experiencing the specialized "regimes of punishment" and torture mentioned by Davis. And as Danielle McGuire (2010) demonstrates the practice of raping and sexually assaulting or exploiting African American women continued during both the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras via vigilante violence and the participation and acquiescence of the criminal justice system.

Lastly, prisons and our ideas about punishment and rehabilitation have also evolved based upon changing ideas about youth development. The Juvenile Justice system is actually a product of the 20th century and a result of the growing realization that children's brains are more malleable during their development, and thus their behavior could still be potentially reformed. The system was founded on the principle that children were not set in their ways and should be made into ideal citizens by sequestering them from the adult population and focusing more upon rehabilitation instead of punishment in the context of incarceration. Yet, just as race and gender oppression can intersect, so can age and race. Instead of benefitting from the growing emphasis upon rehabilitation in the juvenile justice system and more leniency regarding punishment, African American juveniles were excluded from this rehabilitative concept for a long time and were treated with a greater deal of punishment and minimal protection than their white counterparts. Because of the characterization of all African American people as child-like, and the false belief in their inherent inferiority of intelligence and morality, this meant that many scientists at the time claimed that a black person's capacity to develop neurologically was uniformly stunted and already determined since the onset of puberty (Ward 2012). Such misguided beliefs naturally led to the conclusion that the goal of rehabilitation need not apply to African American adolescents because its aim of reforming or redirecting a child's behavior and development into a responsible citizen could not be achieved (Ward 2012).

[The Development of Abolition Politics and Movements](#)

Movements, like ideas, are often shaped by multiple processes and countless individuals who may come to the same conclusions at a different time and space. This makes putting a date on the beginning of a movement, or attributing the birth of an idea and movement to a sole individual, virtually impossible. For example as the historian Danielle McGuire (2010) points out the Civil

Rights Movement did not begin with Rosa Parks spontaneously standing up on a bus. Nor was her ability to take a stand an act of isolated, uncalculated, spontaneous, or uncharacteristic defiance. For several decades the NAACP and the courageous men and women, including a very radical and dedicated Rosa Parks, who investigated and organized against cases of sexual assault and lynching laid the groundwork for the sustainable organizing around civil rights that was to come (McGuire, 2010). Their work also contributed to the development of ideas that would aid in the desired goal of effective civil rights legislation and enforcement that provided a solution for the daily violence and horrors that African Americans experienced as a part of Jim Crow. The Civil Rights Movement is an example of how there is usually a lot left unsaid or undiscovered regarding the historical details and meaningful contributions of countless individuals to the development of a movement's ideology and praxis. Therefore it is worth looking at a few different interpretations of history in addition to the key events through which we attempt to imagine it.

“Most people are quite surprised to hear that the prison abolition movement also has a long history—one that dates back to the historical appearance of the prison as the main form of punishment” (Davis, 2003). According to Angela Davis, since the birth of the penitentiary there has always been resistance to it through the voices of critics and opponents who perceived the harms and injustices of the system. These voices of conscience have always wished to see the penitentiary ended, or fundamentally opposed the idea that the emerging penitentiary system of imprisonment as a form of punishment and rehabilitation was progressive and effective. Other historians such as Levinson (2002) claim that the development of ideas such as prison and penal abolition are a result of an organic process in which each evolutionary step forward in thinking was built upon previous changes. Based upon this way of thinking, the prison abolition

movement is a result of earlier reform movements that slowly expanded their demands and goals to address more injustices and problems with prisons, all the while becoming increasingly disillusioned with the institution and the criminal justice system as a whole. This step by step process which gradually built upon itself caused those who initially desired to reform the system to give up on the endeavor and instead seek to abolish the institution entirely. And likewise as prison abolition took root other abolitionists expanded upon those ideas in turn to encompass all forms of punishment, leading in turn to the idea of penal abolition (Levinson, 2002). Levinson (2002) notes that among the multiple terminologies developed in relation to prison reform and abolition, Angela Davis was primarily responsible for coining the term Prison Industrial Complex. This is further verified when Angela Davis states: “Because of the extent to which prison building and operation began to attract vast amounts of capital—from the construction industry to food and health care provision—in a way that recalled the emergence of the military industrial complex, we began to refer to a “prison industrial complex.” (Davis, 2003). However despite her personal success and the collective success of Critical Resistance in popularizing the term, Angela Davis attributes the first use of this term to the activist and scholar Mike Davis, who was the first to write about the growth of a prison economy in California (Davis, 2016).

Regarding important historical events that are worth noting for the development of the prison abolition movement, Angela Davis and other political prisoners, such as George Jackson, are often at the center of what most people consider to be the birth of the modern prison abolition movement. As a result of COINTELPRO, a surveillance, espionage, and warfare program used by the FBI to disrupt and eliminate civil rights organizing and black radicals, many members of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense were imprisoned along with other activists fighting for racial equality, class liberation, and/or an end to the Vietnam War. During their time in prison,

and as a result of their experiences as political prisoners who often politicized other prisoners, activists such as Angela Davis began to see the criminal justice system as little more than a tool for suppressing political dissent. For example while Angela Davis was awaiting trial in prison she wrote:

“There is a distinct and qualitative difference between one breaking a law for one’s own individual self-interest and violating it in the interests of a class or a people whose oppression is expressed either directly or indirectly through that particular law. The former might be called a criminal (though in many instances he is a victim), but the latter, as a reformist or revolutionary, is interested in universal social change. Captured, he or she is a political prisoner.” (James, 1998)

After creating a framework for defining who is a political prisoner, Davis expands upon this definition in the same writing by stating:

“Prisoners—especially blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans—are increasingly advancing the proposition that they are *political* prisoners. They contend that they are political prisoners in the sense that they are largely the victims of an oppressive politico-economic order, swiftly becoming conscious of the causes underlying their victimization. The *Folsom Prisoner’s Manifest of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform* attests to a lucid understanding of the structures of oppression within the prison—structures which contradict even the avowed function of the penal institution. (James, 1998)

This analysis along with the growing firsthand realization of how terrible prisons were, became a foundation for the desire to abolish prisons, especially when combined with the realization that most poor people of color are actually political prisoners. In addition to the influence of social movements in the 60s and 70s and the circumstances of the resulting repression and expansion of the prison system, there are a few other important historical events in the 20th and 21st centuries which have helped to move the prison abolition movement forward. In an interview with *Democracy Now* Angela Davis identifies the Attica rebellion of prisoners in 1971 as a huge catalyst for the proliferation and consideration of prison abolition as an alternative to incarceration (Gonzalez & Goodman 2014). The importance of the Attica rebellions impact upon political developments regarding abolition as well as public support for criminal justice reform is

further underscored by the fact that she also mentions it in her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Davis (2003) states that “According to Eddie Ellis, who spent twenty five years in prisons and is currently a well-known leader of the anti-prison movement, ‘As a result of Attica, college programs came into the prisons.’ In the Aftermath of the 1971 prisoner rebellion at Attica and the government-sponsored massacre, public opinion began to favor prison reform”.

In Levinson’s (2002) work in the *Encyclopedia of crime and punishment*, he references a document called *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists* as a major development in the prison abolition movement. The handbook was published by the Prison Research Education Action Project (PREAP) in 1976 and was authored by a plethora of writers and researchers. This guide is an example of the organic accumulation of knowledge and experience laid claim to by many who had been fighting for reforming prisons without much success and had grown disillusioned with reform and aware of the institutions history and true purposes. Another one of the most important contemporary developments in the prison abolition movement has been the founding of an organization known as Critical Resistance in 2000. Once again Angela Davis, as well as dozens of other activists, was involved in this organizations founding and has continued to be one of the leading public voices of the cause for prison abolition. According to Rose Braz “Critical Resistance (CR) played a key role in re-invigorating what was a fairly dormant movement around prison issues. Moreover, CR pushed the debate and discussion from one that was very focused on reform to one that includes abolition as both a strategy and an end goal” (The CR10 Publications Collective, 2008). The founding of Critical Resistance was the product of a series of conferences meant to bring together people from all over the world in order to discuss anti-prison organizing and strategy. As Dylan Rodriguez says:

“I was a tiny part of the eighteen-month process of conceptualizing and organizing the first conference and strategy session at Berkeley in September 1998. . . . The first

meeting of Critical Resistance was only a faint indication of what was to come. The initial ambition was to attract 400 people to a conference and movement building session that would push—or, really, explode—the existing liberal and service-oriented frameworks through which organizations and individuals were essentially trying to manage, survive, and negotiate the prison industrial complex. The eventual turnout of 3,000-plus people at the first Critical Resistance conference and strategy session massively exceeded our wildest expectations and hopes, and I think it was no accident given that the tone and tenor of so many people at that 1998 event indicated that we were living in a moment of historical emergency that required new languages, new knowledges, new political labors.” (The CR10 Publications Collective, 2008)

The enormous and unexpected success of the first Critical Resistance conference demonstrates how the organizers of this event, and its subsequent transformation into an actual organization, were able to create the space and network for addressing important questions and topics related to prison abolition and criminal justice reform. Since its founding Critical Resistance has been an important step forward in unifying and coordinating resistance to the prison industrial complex. It has also helped to share experiences and perspectives across borders and cultures by bringing international activists together. This can and will help facilitate the international struggle for abolition that is very necessary for confronting the prison industrial complex, and its twin the military industrial complex, whose relationship will be discussed further in the paper.

Defining Prison Abolition

So what exactly is prison abolition? The term prison abolition can easily sound provocative to anyone who is unfamiliar with the concept and frequently leads to assumptions, misperceptions, and stereotypes about the ideas and people it represents. According to Angela Davis “within the prison reform movement, prison abolitionists are often viewed with mystery and skepticism and considered utopian” (Potier, 2003). She also states that “In most circles prison abolition is simply unthinkable and implausible. Prison abolitionists are dismissed as utopians and idealists whose ideas are at best unrealistic and impracticable, and at worst, mystifying and foolish. This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of

sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families. The prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it.” (Davis, 2003). However despite the skepticism that many may feel towards the idea of abolishing prisons, prison abolitionists actually use very scientific and concrete terms to define the goals and means by which they can achieve abolition. They also use some visionary terms in order to identify the vast differences between the current system and the new institutions that they seek to build. However there are a few problems when it comes to providing a concrete definition for prison abolition which this section will seek to address. The first thing that should be discussed, which does not really constitute an issue but rather an important note on terminology, is that prison abolitionists use other terms such as the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) interchangeably with prison abolition. So when a source such as Critical Resistance is discussing abolishing or “dismantling” the PIC they are identifying with the exact same movement and values as prison abolition. Likewise when a person or source is discussing or identifying with prison abolition, they are usually using a term that encompasses abolishing, dismantling, and resisting far more than just prisons but rather the criminal justice system as a whole. While this somewhat interchangeable terminology does not present a problem in and of itself for defining prison abolition, it can become an issue for those who do not understand prison abolition and speaks to the need to further clarify its definition given that prison abolition encompasses more than just a focus on the prison system. Though one could make the argument that prison abolition is somehow a separate movement from prison industrial complex/criminal justice system abolition, (which Levinson does regarding penal abolition) I believe that the use of multiple terms is a sign of growth and consensus building rather than a point of departure between movements. In a movement that is non-hierarchical and mostly decentralized, it makes

sense that the language would change over time due to evolutions in analysis and strategy, but not be equally distributed across every organization or the local and national environments in which they operate. And not all organizations within the prison abolition movement, including what one author refers to as differing “activist and academic arms”, agree on the alternatives that they seek to implement. However there is still great overlap between the many specific versions of slightly different ideologies like prison and penal abolition (Ben-Moshe, 2011).

One of the more concrete problems with defining prison abolition is that the ideology is part of a movement made up of sometimes slightly differing ideas and branches which means there are different ways of stating commonly held views. Therefore we must examine more directly what grassroots prison abolition organizations have to say about this issue through their mission statements and the definitions that they provide within their resources in order to construct a fluid definition. The first source that I will examine is from Organization of Prison Abolitionists (OPA), a student group at the University of Maryland that I founded in the summer of 2015. This organization was founded as a result of the need to address important criminal justice reforms that could potentially take place on campus and work to undermine the authority and power of the criminal justice system in our community. Other names for this organization were considered including Students Against Mass Incarceration (SAMI). However due to the desire to encourage the development of radical principles and more militant resistance to the entire criminal justice system, OPA was chosen instead. Additionally I did not want to limit the organization’s membership and the issues we addressed solely to students or the university community. I wanted to allow the potential for a grassroots community struggle to develop against any police departments, jails, prisons, corporations, or other institutions that impacted our geographical area while including anyone in the College Park or Prince George’s County areas

who are equally affected by this system. The Black Lives Matter movement and particularly the rebellion in my home city of Baltimore over the murder of Freddie Gray served as a catalyst for helping me to realize more personally and politically the connections between all types of criminal justice oppression and the direness of the situation at hand. It also motivated me to step up and address these issues in my own community after over a year of fruitless discussion with some of my peers about forming a group such as SAMI to address our university's connection to mass incarceration. Though I had an extremely limited understanding of prison abolition at the time, I intuitively realized that an abolition organization had a much stronger opposition to the criminal justice system and more potential for considering and acting upon a broader range of ideas and activism than a reform or anti mass incarceration group. By beginning with my own organization's definition I can contrast my initial perceptions and impression of prison abolition with that of more authoritative sources that I did not have an exposure to at the time. Then in the conclusion of this paper I can present a revised definition of prison abolition that draws upon these sources as well as the organic experiences and conclusions gained from organizing with and interviewing other members of OPA between its founding and the present. According to Organization of Prison Abolitionists' 2015 brochure:

“Prison Abolition seeks to abolish imprisonment as a significant or major response to criminal acts and behavior. Wherever and whenever possible, it seeks to explore and implement alternative responses to crime that do not involve locking people away in cages for long periods of time or denying someone part of their basic freedom and autonomy. Prison Abolition does not rule out the possible necessity of detaining or holding those who pose a genuine threat to a communities' safety, but Prison Abolition always seeks to address the **root causes of crime** rather than having a criminal justice system that is focused on reactionary measures like punishment.” (Brandli, 2015)

From the onset this initial definition of prison abolition that was written at the very beginning of the organization's founding uses terminology that partly limits the understanding of prison abolition to prisons rather than discussing the impact of policing, surveillance, or the criminal

justice system as a whole. This definition is constructed primarily through a visionary lens rather than with a clear understanding and identification of the movement's principles. This is indicated by the fact that reference is made to prison abolition's goal of abolishing imprisonment as a significant response to crime rather than correctly stating its desire to abolish the entire system and practice of imprisonment. Because I was beginning to understand and identify with the vision of prison abolition but lacked a concrete knowledge of its principles, my own vision was limited in the process. However due to the partial understanding of this vision, the definition does identify the emphasis upon building alternative institutions to replace those which make the system and practice of imprisonment seem universal and necessary. This definition also places its strongest emphasis upon addressing the root causes of crime which appears bolded in this paper just the way it was originally formatted in the brochure. By presenting the addressing of root causes as a goal of prison abolition, this definition provides a strong example for suggesting solutions to the dilemma of imprisonment and punishment rather than remaining purely speculative. This emphasis on addressing root causes, as well as the objectives in founding this organization, were influenced partly by exposure to the ideas of Ella Baker. In the biography *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, Ella Baker defines the term radical as "getting to the root cause" of an issue". She states:

"In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system". (Ransby, 2003)

This framework of using radical philosophy to understand and grasp the root cause of an issue is particularly useful for prison abolitionists. This is because in order to "face the system" as Ella Baker says and effectively struggle against it, abolitionists need to understand the root causes of

crime so that they can build alternatives and expose how the criminal justice system fails to address (or even contributes to) many of the root causes of crime.

A second organizational source that provides a useful definition of prison abolition comes from a self-identified UK prison abolition and anarchist group called Empty Cages Collective.

According to Empty Cages Collective, the word abolition can be defined as a noun which means “the action of abolishing a system, practice, or institution”. They also state that:

“It may seem difficult – almost impossible – to imagine a world without prisons. Despite their relatively short existence within human history, prisons have become ingrained in our understanding of justice. It is taken for granted by most that the response to crime is incarceration. Those who call for the end of prisons, the abolition of the prison-industrial-complex, are often called utopian, crazy or worse. Such is the influence of the prison system that to challenge it is seen as absurd. As abolitionists we want just that – to bring an end to the prison system and reduce the harm caused by the prison-industrial-complex. It is not as easy as simply tearing down the walls and emptying the cages though. Prisons are part of a wider social problem caused by inequality and oppression. Prison abolition involves creating alternatives to the punitive justice system that addresses the root causes of crime and challenging the oppressive forces present in society. Prison abolition can be seen as both the process of challenging institutional oppression and the long-term goal of dismantling the prison-industrial-complex entirely.” (Empty Cages Collective)

This definition provides a partial critique of the history of prisons and their impact upon making prisons seem normative and permanent while making the idea that they be abolished seem far-fetched, crazy, or impossible. This is an identification of a common misperception that outsiders have towards abolition which will be discussed in further detail later. Empty Cages Collective more clearly defines prison abolition in comparison to OPA as bringing an end to the prison system permanently and “reducing the harm caused by the prison-industrial-complex.” This quotation marked statement is very important because it incorporates a broader range of the suffering and injustice caused by the criminal justice system, yet is ambiguous enough to be potentially interpreted as leaving out the abolition of state policing and surveillance of communities. This organization’s definition does a good job of emphasizing that, in addition to

addressing the root causes of crime as a precondition for abolishing prisons, these causes of crime and the system that has been built to contain them are merely symptoms of inequality and oppression. Therefore “challenging institutional oppression” and ending inequality are at the radical root of replacing the prison system. Additionally this definition states that “prison abolition can be seen as both a process and a goal”. I would argue that the words process and a goal are synonymous with principles and a vision. In this case a goal is a type of vision where you both imagine and make clear how you want the world to be different (in this case as a contradiction to the current status quo). A process is the means by which one can attain a goal and the fulfillment of the vision that it entails. Whatever process is chosen, the methods used are ultimately based on a set of principles that either explicitly guide the possibilities by which this can logically take place or are discovered organically as one learns from the success and failure of using different tactics.

Now contrast these findings and the two previous definitions with the language used by Critical Resistance. In addressing the question of what defines prison abolition, Critical Resistance provides the following answer:

PIC abolition is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment. From where we are now, sometimes we can't really imagine what abolition is going to look like. Abolition isn't just about getting rid of buildings full of cages. It's also about undoing the society we live in because the PIC both feeds on and maintains oppression and inequalities through punishment, violence, and [the control of] millions of people. Because the PIC is not an isolated system, abolition is a broad strategy. An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives. Abolition is both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal. (Critical Resistance)

Critical Resistance uses PIC abolition in place of the term prison abolition to identify more directly the “goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance” entirely. They also

explicitly use the words “political vision” to describe the type of movement that guides their goal of achieving abolition. Through the use of words that define abolition as a “strategy” and “practical organizing tool”, Critical Resistance is identifying that the movement has a set of principles as well as a vision which guide it. Strategies are more nuanced methods that are based upon general principles which dictate what to do and what not to do. But they also apply these same principles while taking into consideration the unique circumstances and context which may shape what specific actions should be taken. Just like the two previous definitions examined, Critical Resistance mentions that prison abolition seeks to build “alternatives to punishment and imprisonment”. This is simply another way of stating the goal of creating alternative institutions or practices. Critical Resistance also identifies the role that oppression and inequality play by theorizing that the system perpetuates forms of oppression and inequality by “feeding” off of the symptoms such as crime that these root causes have produced. Lastly this definition draws a parallel to the Empty Cage Collective definition when it corrects the misperception that prison/PIC abolition is a goal and ideology that is limited to the idea of immediately tearing down prisons and releasing every prisoner from their cage without addressing the context and circumstances in which people live. Interestingly they mention that the strategy of PIC abolition includes “taking small steps” towards this goal. This statement identifies the fact that prison abolition intersects with many criminal justice reforms and that these reforms are sometimes a part of the toolbox that abolitionists must draw from to fulfill their vision.

Let us briefly examine some further definitions of prison abolition, for instance some of the perspectives on prison abolition that Prison Justice Canada provides on their website. Firstly they identify and define abolition as a long term goal. Secondly that any justice system should account for both the victim and perpetrators needs and wants instead of simply looking for

someone to label and punish as a criminal, thereby identifying prison abolitionist in association with restorative justice models. Thirdly they define crime as being “mainly a consequence of the structure of society” and hint at a definition of prison abolition that once again includes addressing root causes by stating that they advocate for “greater resources and greater services for all people” (Prison Justice Canada). One question that arises after surveying these definitions and comparing their similarities is what are the specific root causes of crime? Even if one buys the idea that all reasons for committing a crime are merely symptoms of a broader pattern of oppression and inequality, it is necessary to understand the specific manifestations of these patterns which shape the boundaries of people’s lived experiences. Perhaps not all causes or motivations for committing a crime are directly connected to these circumstances in the first place, but are merely further exacerbated by such conditions. So what are examples of these so called root causes, and how do advocates of prison abolition define them? According to a website called *Prison Abolition Movement*, the root causes of crime can be defined broadly as powerlessness and inequality, harkening back to the nearly identical idea that crime is caused broadly speaking by oppression and inequality. Based upon their programs and specific work towards “the eventual elimination of the PIC” one can surmise that they identify homelessness, joblessness, untreated mental health problems, and lack of safe spaces and education for youth as examples of specific manifestations of the root causes of crime (Prison Abolition Movement).

Though scholarly sources are limited for directly defining prison abolition as a concept or practice, there is one highly useful source entitled *The Politics of Prison Abolition* by Thomas Mathiesen. The author, a Scandinavian sociologist with an enormous amount of personal experience in organizing with prisoners and outsiders against prison administrations, indirectly constructs a definition of prison abolition through terms that describe the process of abolition.

Mathiesen describes abolition as an alternative and states that the alternative lies in “the unfinished”. He describes the alternative as a message that is both “foreign” and “suggested” rather than “integrated” or “fully formed”. It is foreign because it uses completely different terms and values than the current system and is suggested because the consequences of the alternative to the establishment that it seeks to present are not clarified. Because the alternative is both suggested and foreign this makes it a competing contradiction, but there are always forces trying to undermine the message that seek to pull it towards a competing agreement or a non-competing contradiction by causing its message to become either integrated or fully formed (but not both). Mathiesen states that abolition “runs like a thread” through questions such as how an alternative can be mobilized and how its growth can be maintained instead of becoming finished and therefore fixed. By linking abolition to the language of alternatives and discussing abolition within the specific context of anti-prison organizing throughout his book, Mathiesen presents a definition of prison abolition through interchangeable terms as an unfinished alternative, a competing contradiction, or a message that is both foreign and suggested. Mathiesen gives an example of an alternative (the competing contradiction that is a foreign and suggested message) by discussing the concept of love.

“Love is an unfinished relationship. In its state of being unfinished, love is boundless. We do not know where it will lead us, we do not know where it will stop; in these ways it is without boundaries. It ceases, is finished, when it is tried out and when its boundaries are clarified and determined—finally drawn. It represents an alternative to ‘the existing state of things’: to existence in resigned loneliness or in routinized marriage.”

Love is one example of an alternative according to Mathiesen because of the fact that it is not a fully formed and integrated idea. Yet what the author is expressing in his theorization of abolition can also be expressed in revolutionary terms by drawing the connection between these ideas and defining abolition as a revolutionary movement. David Graeber, a prominent social

and economic anthropologist and anarchist, defines a revolution in very similar terms to how Mathiesen discusses abolition.

Normally, when you challenge the conventional wisdom—that the current economic and political system is the only possible one—the first reaction you are likely to get is a demand for a detailed architectural blueprint of how an alternative system would work, down to the nature of its financial instruments, energy supplies, and policies of sewer maintenance. Next, you are likely to be asked for a detailed program of how this system will be brought into existence. Historically, this is ridiculous. When has social change ever happened according to someone's blueprint? It's not as if a small circle of visionaries in Renaissance Florence conceived of something they called "capitalism," figured out the details of how the stock exchange and factories would someday work, and then put in place a program to bring their visions into reality. (Graeber, 2013)

David Graeber's observations regarding the nature of revolutions and changes in political or economic circumstances provide wisdom for how to conceptualize the vision of prison abolition and its eventual fulfillment. In fact the reaction that Graeber describes regarding revolutions and challenges to "the conventional wisdom" is exactly what abolitionists constantly experience when advocating for prison abolition. Although the question "if not prisons then what" is an important and valid response that needs to be partially addressed, a lot of the time people are seeking a "detailed architectural blueprint" that precisely outlines all of the support systems and alternative practices that will be necessary to both prevent and respond to crime. And when they realize that abolitionists do not intend or are unable to provide such a blueprint, they dismiss the idea as naïve, impossible, or inconceivable. These connections between the experiences of different ideas that fundamentally challenge conventional wisdom (the status quo) provide a useful framework for also identifying and defining prison abolition as a revolutionary ideology and movement.

The Principles of Prison Abolition

As discussed earlier in an examination of the definition of prison abolition, this movement is based upon both a critically guided vision and set of principles for defining the goals of prison abolition and developing the strategies used to achieve them. But while definitions of prison abolition make clear the relationship of both of these elements, they are limited to primarily describing the vision of abolition rather than clearly identifying many of the specific principles by which it operates. Without knowledge of the movement's principles, abolitionists and other activists who engage in or learn about this work are likely to have a limited vision of what abolition can achieve. They are also in danger of falling into the deadly trap of co-option, or using tactics which subvert abolition's goals and reinforce the Prison Industrial Complex. Each of these principles are critical for guiding any element of political and educational work that an abolitionist may engage in and should be taken special note of by organizers. The following are examples of prison abolition principles that I have identified through my exhaustive review of the literature. They are not completely comprehensive nor official representations of principles. Instead, just as the definition of prison abolition was constructed from multiple sources, they are examples of important ideas that I have identified as being common within prison abolition work and writing. They may be helpful to examine so that abolitionists who are new to these ideas and work can learn from the lessons and experiences of others.

Anti-Imperialism

Anti-imperialism as a basic tenant of prison abolition is critically important because according to David Gilbert of Critical Resistance, the Prison Industrial Complex is really just a “system within a system” or a “girder” holding up the walls of a much larger “house of horrors” known as imperialism (Gilbert, 2008). Without strong opposition to imperialism, Gilbert argues, we have

no chance of abolishing the Prison Industrial Complex. In the essay *A System within the System: The Prison Industrial Complex and Imperialism*, Gilbert (2008) identifies imperialism's true purpose as the relentless quest for profits around the globe. This purpose, he argues, means imperialism is easily identifiable by its natural outcome, the grotesque polarization of wealth. The Prison Industrial Complex is then used domestically as a tool to wage war on the nation state's own populace by crushing opposition to wealth disparities at home and military atrocities abroad. Part of the PIC system's effectiveness has relied primarily upon the ability to perpetrate violence by the state upon those who oppose imperialism or constitute the domestic victims of imperialism (such as internally colonized African Americans).

Other examples of prison abolition scholars making the connection between imperialism and the Prison Industrial Complex are fairly common, underscoring the importance of this analysis for abolition politics. In *Militarizing the Police: Officer Jon Burge, Torture, and War in the Urban Jungle*, Julilly Kohler-Hausmann (2011) examines the relationship between waging war abroad in Vietnam and the transfer of militarized tactics and ideas to construct much of urban black America as a hostile enemy and potential warzone immediately following this period. Kohler-Hausmann (2011) describes in disturbing detail the case study of Jon Burge, a lieutenant in the Chicago Police Department who engaged in the practice of torturing suspects from 1972-1991 along with other officers at the Chicago Police Department's headquarters in Area Two. Every single one of Burge's victims were African Americans except for one person, and testimonies from victims proved that he tortured over one hundred individuals. One example that Kohler-Hausmann (2011) describes in detail is the interrogation of Andrew Wilson for the alleged murder of two Chicago police officers during a massive man hunt for the killers. Wilson was tortured using a variety of methods including beatings, suffocation, burnings via a radiator,

and electrocution before finally offering a forced confession. Jon Burge led the police department's raids on the African American community in which the officers had been killed, rounding up suspects and witnesses and resulting in "forty complaints of police brutality within the first week of the search and eighteen calls reporting excessive force". Burge also used methods of coercion including Russian roulette, mock executions, and forcing captives to strip in order to inflict fear upon his victims without leaving any evidence of abuse. But in many cases methods of physical torture were applied with such brutality and pain that victims were beaten on their genitals or shocked in areas such as the scrotum, penis, anus, fingers, or ears with a cattle prod" (Kohler-Hausmann, 2011).

Hausmann (2011) emphasizes how torture is a weapon of warfare rather than intelligence gathering, and that the true purpose of torture is to spread fear and normalize or maintain the power to punish and control a community. The idea that torture's purpose is to exact critical information is merely a justification for the practice in which the victim becomes the one who is guilty for finally offering a forced confession, thus "flipping the morality of torture upside down". For example evidence to support the author's theory on the nature of torture is revealed by testimony from the sister of one of the officers that participated in the practice of torture with Jon Burge. She testifies to the conversations she overheard between her brother and Burge in which they bragged about being able to make anyone confess to anything and relished in their overt hatred of African Americans and the desire to "give them hell" whenever they managed to have them in their custody. Most of the victims of Burge and his conspirators were innocent of any of the crimes they were accused of, indicating the lack of motive that police would have for torturing their victims if their primary purpose were to extract information.

"In fact, on many occasions, police were aware that the person in custody had no direct knowledge of the events; in such cases, police rehearsed the specifics of the crime with

the suspect before forcing him to make a confession. While the police hid their practices from the press and mainstream society, they encouraged their victims to share their experience with their neighbors; on one occasion, they drove an obviously beaten man around the streets, as if to broadcast their violence and their immunity from reprisals. These highly public acts were not directed against specific criminals; rather, they were intended to transmit a message to entire communities about state authority—private torture was therefore made public, with the bodies of beaten suspects functioning as warnings of the violence these Chicago police would use in their struggle to control neighborhoods.” (Kohler-Hausmann, 2011)

While this may be a single case study that primarily highlights the nature of torture as a form of warfare against communities, Kohler-Hausmann (2011) makes the initially stated connection between the practice of waging war on foreign soil and the transfer of these attitudes, objectives, and tactics of imperial war to policing at home. She states that “Vietnam War-era Americans came to imagine cities as urban jungles wherein public safety must be guarded not merely by traditional police forces but by militarized and increasingly vigilante-inspired urban assault forces.” She draws the connection between Jon Burge’s experiences in the Vietnam War as a military police officer who was responsible for guarding, transporting, and processing prisoners of war, and the experiences, mentality, and knowledge of instruments of torture that he likely would have transferred to his role as a police lieutenant. For example the practice of using the Tucker telephone, an instrument of torture designed to electrocute a victim without leaving physical evidence, was utilized by Burge to torture Anthony Holmes in 1973. This device was actually invented by a prison doctor in Arkansas and first tested on prisoners before being developed and used systematically by military forces in Vietnam. Use of this technology disappeared before surfacing for the first time years after Jon Burge initially joined the Chicago police force. Kohler-Hausmann (2011) also places this story in the context of a growth in the acceptance of vigilante violence and state imposed law and order as a backlash to the success of the civil rights, anti-war, and black power movements that had swept the nation and created

enormous social and political changes. According to Kohler-Hausmann (2011) because of the failure to sustain or win the Vietnam War due to both foreign and domestic resistance, the state apparatus and military industrial complex turned their attention to the home front and source of political unrest that had been successful in undermining their domination abroad.

“These arrangements were further institutionalized in 1968, when the U.S. Congress passed the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, which, among other things, initiated a massive transfer of expertise and technology from the military to local law enforcement agencies. . . . The Safe Streets Act also created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), which was intended to strengthen ties between local police and the federal government, thus enabling an influx of federal dollars into local police departments, funding primarily training and new technological gadgetry for surveillance and crime control. These federal subsidies to states helped police departments to retool their arsenals by gaining access to military hardware—including helicopters, movement sensors, and armored troop carriers—that were not previously deemed appropriate for domestic uses. . . . These developments were driven in part by military contractors’ intent on expanding into domestic markets. Recognizing the opportunities presented by the new stream of LEAA funding, manufacturers such as Dupont, Motorola, and Kodak rushed to develop new commodities for police departments.” (Kohler-Hausmann, 2011)

This final passage reflects the connections between both the prison and military industrial complex as they have become more intertwined economically as a result of policy changes that responded to a shift in political climate. Throughout her essay Kohler-Hausmann (2011) vividly describes to the reader the literal connections between imperialism and the criminal justice system. She makes this reality clear by discussing how U.S. involvement in military conflict contributes to the development of criminal justice system operations domestically. The system of imperialism expands and strengthens the Prison Industrial Complex by redirecting much of the violence and conflict that has been generated from imperial war to what is often a less exploited domestic market for punishment and oppression. And when resistance to imperial policy within a nation state that is responsible for warfare and undermining human security threatens to challenge this imperial hegemony, the nation state responds by utilizing prisons and policing for

the purpose of political repression, thereby directly linking the struggle against imperialism and prisons. As Hausmann points out the end result is often the give and take transfer of military and policing/incarceration technologies and tactics between the two systems, including weapons, training, vehicles, instruments and methods of torture, and crowd control devices or agents (Kohler-Hausman, 2011).

Resistance to Gender Violence from the Criminal Justice System

An important principle of prison abolition is the strategy of opposing gender violence in all of its varying and oppressive forms. This includes confronting and resisting the impulse to rely upon the criminal justice system as a solution for solving gender violence issues such as domestic violence. But this means that abolitionists are required to walk a fine line between acknowledging and resisting the ways in which the criminal justice system perpetuates gender violence while also seriously considering the need for protection for victims of crimes such as rape and abuse. In response to these circumstance in 2001 “a group primarily consisting of women of color from Critical Resistance and INCITE!” sat down and created *The Critical Resistance Incite! Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex*. This statement recognized the need for abolitionists to clarify their stance on gender violence, center the concern for creating safety within the community for victims of sexual violence, and resist the anti-violence movement’s tendency for relying on policing and imprisonment to keep victims safe. This statement was important because around the time of Critical Resistance’s founding, the anti-violence movement had become heavily engaged with policing and imprisonment in the name of protecting survivors of rape and abuse, and there was a need for the two movements to come together and construct a united analysis and share resources. The statement’s beginning reads:

“We call social justice movements to develop strategies and analysis that address both state and interpersonal violence, particularly violence against women. Currently, activists/movements that address state violence (such as anti-prison, anti-police brutality groups) often work in isolation from activists/movements that address domestic and sexual violence. The result is that women of color, who suffer disproportionately from both state and interpersonal violence, have become marginalized within these movements. It is critical that we develop responses to gender violence that do not depend on a sexist, racist, classists, and homophobic criminal justice system. It is also important that we develop strategies that challenge the criminal justice system and that also provide safety for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. To live violence-free lives, we must develop holistic strategies for addressing violence that speak to the intersection of all forms of oppression.” (Critical Resistance & Incite!)

The statement also discusses more specifically some of the ways in which the prison industrial complex perpetuates gender violence or is an ineffective response to preventing it. For example it makes reference to the idea that prisons enforce a gender binary and type of conformity which results in specific and extreme cases of violence that are perpetrated against transgender and gender non-conforming people. This is a fact that is discussed in detail by Lori Girshick in the book *Captive Genders* through a questionnaire and interview study that they conducted. Girshick (2011) discusses how prisons enforce rigid male and female gender identities by classifying prisoners based purely upon their genitalia and punishing those who transgress the gender norms that they have been assigned by the prison system. They also mention that the prison is a setting which hyper sexualizes and subordinates women and femininity and reinforces the dominant gender roles in society through the acquiescence and participation of correctional officers in sexual violence within the prison system. These gender roles construct masculinity as violent, dominating, competitive, and suppressive of ones emotions and femininity as “passive, emotional, weak, submissive, and dependent” (Girshick, 2011). The incite statement also outlines in detail how the criminalization driven response to gender violence against women has actually negatively impacted women in many ways and only managed to “deter some acts of violence in the short term”. Instead criminalization efforts and police involvement has resulted in

“numerous incidents where police officers called to domestic incidents have arrested the woman who is being battered. Many undocumented women have reported cases of sexual and domestic violence, only to find themselves deported. A tough law-and-order agenda also leads to long punitive sentences for women convicted of killing their batterers”. But the incite statement also recognizes the failures of anti-prison organizers to address the issue of violence against women in communities and organize around the forms of state violence that are faced by LGBTTI communities. In another section of the outline the statement says “the various alternatives to incarceration that have been developed by anti-prison activists have generally failed to provide sufficient mechanisms for safety and accountability for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. These alternatives often rely on a romanticized notion of communities, which have yet to demonstrate their commitment and ability to keep women and children safe, or seriously address the sexism and homophobia that is deeply embedded within them.” As this excerpt shows Incite & Critical Resistance’s statement also acknowledges the need to prioritize the development of safe alternatives for women to be protected from relationship, domestic, and community based forms of violence.

According to both Joy James and Angela Davis the issues regarding anti violence work and its dependence upon criminalization and state intervention as a solution goes back to the days when feminism struggled to incorporate intersectionality into its analyses. “Nowhere were the intersections of race and gender so volatile as in the anti-rape movement within the women’s liberation movement, which in the late sixties or early seventies tended to represent rape only as a gender issue of male dominance of females, ignoring the impact of race and class on state prosecution and ‘protection.’ As Davos notes, the black community bore the brunt of white women’s demands for more police and longer prison sentences.” (James, 1998). This statement

is reminiscent of a chapter from the book *Women Race & Class*, one of Angela Davis' later writings that is one of her strongest works on intersectional oppression. In the chapter, which is entitled Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist, Davis identifies the extremely problematic and prevalent tendency for white women in the contemporary anti-rape movement at the time (1980s) to perpetuate the myth of the black male rapist and ignore the experiences of black women. Davis notes that historically African American women have been raped and sexually assaulted with great frequency by the police (a heavily documented topic we've already discussed from Danielle McGuire's work), and that this practice was still continuing as evidenced by the gang rape of a seventeen year old girl by ten police officers in Chicago in 1974 (Davis, 1981). The reality is that gender violence can impact anyone but often affects women, people of color, and non-gender/heteronormative identities with the greatest frequency and intensity. These earlier writings by Angela Davis and observations by Joy James further highlight the need for prison abolitionists to resist all forms of gender violence from the criminal justice system.

Opposition to Reforms that Strengthen the Prison Industrial Complex

An important principle of prison abolition is that criminal justice reforms or other types of work to address prisoner's needs and transform the system must not simultaneously further strengthen and reinforce the Prison Industrial Complex. Strengthening and reinforcing this system can be theorized in a variety of ways and in practice mean the application of multiple circumstances that lead to negative outcomes. This includes expanding the systems control over the administration of various services such as mental health even if it improves the conditions under which the system administers them. It can include using an analytical framework, language, or performance of actions which facilitate the goals of the system and thereby reinforce the justification and need

for this system. It can include the circumvention of institutional reforms or alternative practices which would otherwise give more agency to prisoners, but instead ignores prisoner's needs and desires at the cost of pursuing criminal justice administrator's goals and increasing their power or basis for authority. And it can even include supporting reforms that are merely disguised as reforms yet in practice lead to the growth of the entire system, such as building more prisons and incarcerating more people.

As an example let's return to the writings of Thomas Mathiesen (1974) in *The Politics of Abolition*. As a founder and participant in the Norwegian organization KROM (The Norwegian Association for Penal Reform), Mathiesen describes its organizational beginnings as it grew out of a Scandinavian movement to improve the situation of prison inmates. The Norwegian KROM split off from a group that originally included prison practitioners who unsurprisingly maintained a far less critical view of the prison system and penal/correctional policy in comparison to their academic counterparts (lawyers, sociologists, and criminologists). In describing another organization that formed first in Sweden called KRUM, Mathiesen provides an early example of a reform that strengthens the prison system.

“However, around 1970 the participants in KRUM gained a deeper understanding of the issues of legal security associated with the treatment ideology in the penal system, and the activities of the organization became more clearly ‘defensive’: instead of working for treatment alternatives, the participants geared their activities to the problem of avoiding the establishment of new systems of control—hidden for example under the treatment philosophy. . . . For example the committee’s proposal to abolish isolation as a means of punishment. They point out that an abolition of isolation as *punishment* does not imply an abolition of *isolation*, and that after the abolition of isolation as punishment, isolation may be carried out under conditions characterized by an even smaller degree of legal security.” (Mathiesen, 1974)

In this passage Mathiesen acknowledges that from the start, KRUM had to remain critical of their attempts to reform prison conditions. By not fighting for the abolition of isolation as a whole, they risked engaging in tweaking the system in a way that could potentially establish

“new systems of control”. The reference to the treatment philosophy and the perception that it is commonly applied in a way which masks the strengthening of the prison system is very relevant for several reasons. First, Mathiesen (1974) discusses perspectives on treatment in a later chapter of the book by also recognizing that treatment alternatives which push the emphasis from punishment to rehabilitation within the confines of the criminal justice system still support the criminalization of mental illness and diseases like alcoholism and drug addiction while ignoring the greater issues of social justice and provision of services and human rights for those living in poverty. The reference to treatment is also important because Mathiesen is touching upon an important realization when it comes to incarceration. He is challenging one of the fundamental notions that the prison system has been built upon which was discussed earlier in the historical context section. Incarceration is not rehabilitative, and by doing little more than advocating for a change in focus of incarceration from punishment to rehabilitation, reformers are engaged in the same practices that helped to rationalize, popularize, and expand the prison system in the first place. In essence, these kinds of reforms and ideological approaches to changing prisons only help to sustain or strengthen them. Mathiesen (1974) also discusses another important example of prison reform that is dangerous for abolitionists to engage in or support. This example revolves around the construction of new prisons to replace aging structures or abusive and neglectful facilities/environments. Mathiesen discusses the challenge of presenting a negative type of politics, or as he calls it being a “no-organization”, rather than primarily advocating in positivist terms. The challenge is that “the authorities are interested in maintaining such a limited perspective, because it makes also the prisoners attitude conservative. The thought of abolishing (parts of) the prison system—without other, similar arrangements in place—appears ominous from this perspective.” (Mathiesen, 1974). This means that when abolitionists or other advocates

push for an end to one form of punishment, incarceration, or control, the authorities who run the system (because of their desire to maintain the status quo) expect that an alternative practice or institution, though slightly different in name and form, should take its immediate place and fulfill the same fundamental purpose of punishing, incarcerating, and controlling “offenders”. For example Mathiesen writes:

“In the first place, the need for a defensive policy became apparent after the termination of the struggle against the detention [center]. I mentioned above that in the budgetary proposals of the Ministry of Justice for 1971 it was stated that the planning of the detention [center] would ‘be suspended’. The *Complete* sentences in question, however, read like this. . . ‘The pressing need for an appropriate—and more up to date—closed unit for juvenile offenders has led the Ministry to accelerate this project, and to give it priority ahead of projects which have earlier been given a high ranking. In the present situation, this project will be given priority ahead of other prison projects for juvenile offenders’.”

The abysmal conditions of aging prison facilities, often accompanied by poorly run and abusive environments, is a real crisis facing many states. But Mathiesen’s discussion of the dilemma of building new prisons or detention facilities, which will often be bigger and require more prisoners, is important because this ultimately leads to more incarceration rather than de-incarceration and abolishment. Building more prisons, even when an aging facility is shut down in the process, continues the financial incentives that fuel the Prison Industrial Complex and can often lead to a greater amount of people being incarcerated and more public support for prisons. Consider the case of *Kids for Cash*, a documentary about the corruption of a judge from Wilkes-Barre Pennsylvania who sent approximately 3,000 kids to a juvenile prison and took a bribe from a private prison contractor. The contractor was responsible for building a new juvenile detention center to replace an aging one that needed to be shut down, and used their connection to the Luzerne County judge to assure that their new prison would be filled by enough juveniles (Timmons, 2013). This is an example of a situation where constructing a new facility, rather than

actually abolishing the practice of juvenile imprisonment in the county, led to increasing numbers of juveniles who were put behind bars for extremely petty misbehaviors or crimes.

In some situations the criminal justice system attempts to label their actions as a type of reform or rehabilitation while building more prisons, creating new systems or institutions of incarceration, or imposing additional forms of criminalization. These are not actually reforms, in any meaningful sense of the word, but rather increase the scale, jurisdiction, or powers of incarceration under the guise of rehabilitation or reform. Without being on the lookout for these situations, outside forces such as criminal justice reform advocates and even abolitionists can be tricked into supporting or allowing these changes to take place when they take the language of their adversaries at face value. Take for example the experiences of Vanessa Huang who served as the campaign and communications director for Justice Now, a prison abolition organization founded in 2000 and based in Oakland California (Walters 2003). Huang (2011) describes Justice Now's experience in the realm of public policy and advocacy as their organization battled through legislative sessions to push back against a movement to expand prisons and criminalization.

“The specific proposal our pushback targeted was California's proposal for a near 40 percent expansion of California's women's prison system in the shape of a new system of mini prisons—‘Female Rehabilitative Community Correctional Centers’ (FRCCCs)—throughout the Central Valley and beyond. Originally packaged as part of a portfolio of so-called reentry facilities in what would later become the single-largest prison construction package to pass in US history, according to the *New York Times*, California's FRCCCs and a broader “Female Offender Reform Master Plan” were not unique.” (Huang, 2011)

The language that the California prison system used to push prison expansion is telling. By framing the proposal in the language of rehabilitation or re-entry and using words like community and corrections rather than state or prison, the prison system is trying to ride the rising tide of the reform movement along with the growing values and emphasis upon

community based alternatives and rehabilitation over punishment. The fact that the prison system feels the need to adopt this language in place of terms such as “law and order or punishment” shows the success of organizations like Justice Now and the impact that a wide political spectrum of activists seeking to address criminal injustice are having on the state apparatus. Yet the moment a system (such as the criminal justice system or the state apparatus) actually begins to be substantially influenced by any movement that seeks to subvert its power or change the circumstances under which it operates, that system will try to co-opt the movement. This is because pretending to work with a movement and merging the system’s goals and practices with that of its adversaries until the two are essentially indistinguishable is a much more effective and less risky approach than responding with further aggression and state sanctioned violence. The latter tactic often gives more clarity to the injustices of the system, and sparks more resistance from those who are rebelling against or directly impacted by the oppression of that system. Under some circumstances the system can get away with and benefit from increased use of force and repression. But without a large mass of critical support from the rest of the public this will ultimately back fire. However the former tactic usually works as the more effective response to initial challenges from a movement or other types of adversaries. Co-opting at least some of the values, ideas, and members of a movement strengthens the system’s legitimacy rather than potentially undermining it. Take for example the following passage:

“These policy proposals were part of a coordinated and growing movement pushing prison expansion in new form: ‘gender responsiveness.’ The state changing shape in this way enabled white cisgender liberal feminists, the face of this policy trend, to blend with policy speak for ‘good for women’ while colluding with the state’s ever-growing need to manage more and more communities exploited and broken by empire. ‘Gender responsiveness’ enabled policymakers and criminologist academics to present as so-called feminist while continuing to play and stay in the policy game by keeping a ‘tough on crime’ card amid a shifting political landscape, where our movements have labored to sound the voice of premature death from communities of resistance in prisons such that they could no longer ignore it. Notably, proposals for ‘gender responsive prisons

administered and staffed by prison guards were dressed in language of ‘community-based alternatives’ and ‘closer to home’, speaking back to longstanding desire from families and communities surviving the break of imprisonment for our loved ones to return home.” (Huang, 2011)

Huang echoes the idea that the prison system is responding to the hard work of movements that are laboring to uplift the voice of communities that have been devastated by prisons. Their hard work is paying off, but the system responds by adopting their emphasis on gender oppression and repurposing these ideas to serve as a coded attempt at further expanding gender oppression in the form of additional prison beds rather than halting or reversing this practice. They seek to exploit not only the language and ideas of those who advocate for a change in the prison system’s treatment of women and gender variant persons, but also prey upon the vulnerability of “families and communities” who are desperate for any kind of change that will allow their loved ones to be freed. Huang (2011) continues on to explain how Justice Now managed to convince a few key legislators who had originally sponsored or supported the bill to change their mind and withdraw support. But most of the organization’s former policymaking allies were either bought off or fooled by the rhetoric and dismissed their concerns because of heavy lobbying by the prison and labor lobbies. After being isolated from many of their allies, Huang, their partner, and other activists “were unexpectedly targeted, harassed, and beaten by police at a protest.” Huang and their comrades were arrested, received felony and misdemeanor charges which included “terrorist enhancements”, and were detained at a very high bail. Though the initial strategy of co-opting some of the movement’s allies was successful, and perhaps arguably made it easier to use methods like intimidation and violence, Huang (2011) describes how this cruel treatment motivated them even more.

“I woke to and grew empathy for the experience of chronic tire after break. I found new empathy for how mentors have labored to renew and reshape possibility and promise from this place, coaxing and feeding our movement body to grow new muscle. I located

my political development inside this movement body's longing to rebuild safety to return to the fierceness of vision and strategy that our communities and movements so urgently need to contain in order to dismantle the prison industrial complex. And I reconnected with the real body fear driving our fightback against California's threat to grow a new arm of its prison empire by way of so-called gender responsiveness. In this remember, I understood on the body level how the state's growing trend of specialized prisons is its reaction to the real power arising from communities of resistance, the real ways we've shaken up the conditions through the tremendous labor of so many to amplify the collective voice of more and more stolen and disappeared." (Huang, 2011)

From this experience Huang gained increased motivation, wisdom, and empathy in order to continue the work of dismantling the Prison Industrial Complex. Rather than causing them to give up, the repression only brought further awareness to the impact that their efforts have had on "shaking up the conditions" by which the system is forced to operate. Brute force is usually a last resort method that demonstrates the threat that the system is feeling as support begins to crumble from scrutiny and public pressure. But just as that use of force makes clear the genuine fears of the system, that system's repression connects more people to the "real body fears" that the system poses for everyone under its control. Huang's experiences and the outcome of those experiences speak to the need for prison abolitionists to avoid supporting or allowing so called reforms that in anyway reinforce the power, legitimacy, and scope of the criminal justice system. These reforms are merely an effort on the part of the system to push negative compromises or disguise their attempts to further their antithetical goals with the added intent of building their own legitimacy. Falling for the tactic of co-option is the most dangerous pitfall that activists can face because it is a common place and subversive tactic that ultimately results in enabling further repression. In reality repression is an unavoidable obstacle which every movement that attains a significant mobilization for change and undermines a system's authority must face. They have to learn how to survive repression rather than avoid it completely by caving to subversive tactics like co-opting.

Emphasis upon Restorative Justice Models and an Unrestricted Imagination

Angela Davis, who is an advocate of both prison abolition and restorative justice, often first points to this practice/model as her primary example of an alternative way of dealing with violent crime (Potier, 2003). For example in an interview with Dylan Rodriguez, Angela Davis references restorative (also known as reconciliatory) justice as an example of a more progressive response to crime that does not result in the social isolation of the offender. Like many others she emphasizes the role of the imagination and the need to free this imagination from the confines of assuming that prisons are permanent and the only possible way to respond to most crimes (Davis & Rodriguez, 2008). In fact restorative justice is a subject which frequently comes up among prison abolitionist writings and is referenced commonly as an example of a practical alternative to the current status quo justice system. This is because one of the prevailing critiques of the current criminal justice system from even those who are just interested in reforming it is that current practices do not take into consideration the desires of either the victim(s) or perpetrator(s). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime identifies restorative justice as a concept which gives just as much emphasis to the process as its outcome. They define the concept as “any process in which the victim and the offender, and, where appropriate, any other individuals or community members affected by a crime, participate together actively in the resolution of matters arising from the crime, generally with the help of a facilitator” (Dandurand & Griffiths, 2006). The handbook on restorative justice also describes many of the goals, qualities, and principles of this practice and the many kinds of programs that restorative justice has or could potentially produce. These goals include supporting the victim, repairing relationships damaged by crime, denouncing criminal behavior and reaffirming community values, identifying restorative and forward-looking outcomes, reducing recidivism, and

identifying the factors which lead to crime in the first place (Dandurand & Griffiths, 2006). In essence the emphasis of restorative justice is to restore in some capacity the relationship between the victim and offender (when possible and appropriate), provide greater closure and reconciliation, provide restitution and other types of solutions for those who have been negatively impacted, give agency and voice to the victim(s) and offender(s) in this process, and work to actually change and address the circumstances, behavior, and thinking that caused the crime. These ideas are ultimately very different from the dominant notion that punishment should be decided by a judge who is responsible for carrying out vengeance on behalf of the society as a whole.

But regardless of examples such as restorative justice as an alternative to imprisonment and punishment, it is important to keep in mind that prison abolition both emphasizes and truly requires an unrestricted imagination for the fulfillment of its vision and internalization of its principles. As discussed earlier by David Graeber (2013), rather than being open minded and actually exercising their own imaginations or placing any value and faith in human creativity and ingenuity, most people expect a blueprint that precisely defines the alternatives and outlines how they will all work in unison as a system. But things such as social policy, public institutions, and community practices, just like ever increasing developments in technology and other scientific fields, are meant to change and evolve through the pursuit of new knowledge and practices which are only in their formative stages. In fact this is precisely the danger for an ideology such as prison abolition if it were to provide or attempt to provide such a blueprint in full. Returning to Mathiesen's definition of prison abolition, his more abstract description of abolition is extremely helpful for understanding the importance of imagination. In addition to stating that abolition is essentially a competing contradiction or a foreign and suggested message, he

cautions his readers of the importance that it remain suggested. The moment the message becomes fully formed its boundaries are defined and it is no longer a competing alternative. Prison abolition requires us to strongly resist the urge to reproduce punishment and oppression in new forms and solidify alternatives that still closely resemble the old system. Rather than declaring the work of the alternative as finished and fixed through such a blue print, we must always provide room for the alternative message (and therefore its literal alternative practices) to continue to develop, grow, be reimagined, and be subjected to an ongoing creative and scientific process.

Solidarity with Other Movements

As discussed earlier prison abolition is an ideological movement that depends upon intersectional analysis and multifaceted justice work in order to achieve its goals. Because prison abolitionists emphasize the need to address the root causes of crime and claim that many of these root causes fall under the umbrella of oppression and inequality, it is only natural that abolitionists are in solidarity with other movements and that the modern prison abolition movement as a whole arose out of the midst of other liberation struggles. Rather than going into specific details about the ways in which abolition stands in solidarity with other struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, heteronormativity, capitalism, colonialism and all the many other struggles of the radical Left, I would like to draw special attention to this movement's affinity with anarchism. This is because, in philosophical or ideological terms, prison abolition has a great deal in common with anarchism related to its desire to abolish prisons and their shared critiques of the state. Other commonalities in both ideologies include their fundamental opposition to structures of authority and inequality, the nation state's use of power and physical force, the state's ability to monopolize power and judgement, and their shared vision of a free

society consisting of alternative institutions that emphasize participatory democracy. According to David Graeber:

“In a way anarchism is about acting as if you are already free. And I think if you wanna define anarchism I guess you could have a short version and a long version. The short version is simple. Anarchism is democracy without the government. Ya know most people love democracy and most people don’t like the government very much. Keep one and take away the other that’s anarchism. Anarchism is direct democracy would be another way to put that. Um I guess the longer version would be anarchism is a commitment to the idea that it would be possible to have a society based on principles of self-organization, voluntary association, and mutual aid.” (Rose, 2006)

Anarchism’s opposition to the state is one aspect of the ideology which places it under the category of the anti-authoritarian left (Tahrir International Collective Network). In many respects prison abolition is ideologically rooted in anarchism because it is a natural outcome of abolishing the state that anarchists must support or reckon with when considering the results of such a success. Just as prison abolitionists emphasize the importance of restorative justice and the problem of the state undermining reconciliation and restitution for all parties, anarchists lay claim to the idea that the state is an institution which is not necessary for self-governance and organization. Both ideologies question the legitimacy of the state as being the arbiter of justice acting on behalf of society between victims and perpetrators of social transgressions. This is because they both recognize that the state upholds class domination and many other forms of oppression, and prison abolitionists emphasize in particular the ways in which the prison is connected to these classist as well as racist histories. And though the prison abolition movement didn’t launch within the context of the U.S. until the early 70s and late 90s respectively, like other political ideologies there have been anarchists in the U.S. who spent time in prison for their beliefs in the past. These anarchists identified with prison abolition and contributed to the development of its politics. Take for example the following passage by Dachine Rainer and

Holley Cantine, two anarchist writers and activists who spent time in federal prison for being conscientious objectors during World War II.

“One might agree that it is wrong to imprison people for their ideas, and certainly wrong to imprison them in frame-ups, but might feel the need to put away the “aggressors against society.” What constitutes an aggression against society? Is it theft, murder, assault, rape, arson? But is there ever any more arson committed than in the bombing of a city; is there every any more assault and murder committed than in the course of war? Is there ever any more rape and looting than by occupying troops? Yet the perpetrators of these crimes are held to be guiltless or even heroic and the initiator of the crime of warfare is that same institution, the State, which passes judgement on the relatively piddling crimes of individuals. The numerous other crimes like counterfeiting and income tax evasion are punished by the State because they undermine its power. But who, conceding that the State is the Arch Criminal, would wish to conserve or increase its power? It might more logically be argued that failure to pay one’s income tax, considering the criminal purpose to which it is put, is an obligatory and virtuous act. We do not wish to imply that the cases of individual social aggression, like arson, theft, etcetera, do not constitute something of a problem, but it is patently absurd to hold that the Great Thief, the Great Arsonist is at all equipped to pass judgment on the lesser ones.” (James, 2005)

Rainer and Cantine’s critique of the guilt and hypocrisy of the state is extremely powerful. Their words undermine the assumption that the current justice system’s authority is well founded and absolute, or that this system of punishment that is inflicted by representatives of the state is the only way to carry out justice. This passage is an example of the kind of critical analysis that those who identify as both anarchist and prison abolitionists can provide, especially when faced with the reality of their own incarceration.

Summary: How is Abolition Different from Criminal Justice Reform?

After examining both the definition and principles of prison abolition it is clear that there are many concrete differences between abolition and reform. It is true that abolitionists engage in a wide variety of criminal justice reform strategies, campaigns, and movements in order to pursue goals such as de-incarceration, de-criminalization, harm reduction, and ending punishment through the challenge of practices like the death penalty and solitary confinement as just a few

examples. But although it is a misperception that being an abolitionist means picking either ending prisons and policing all together or reforming the criminal justice system, it is also a misperception that these two differing strategies and end goals are one and the same.

Abolitionists reject the prison system as a whole, and to varying degrees the other institutions that are a part of punishment and state sanctioned violence such as policing and government surveillance. Criminal justice reformers, particularly those who are focused on prison reform, do not recognize the need to end these institutions entirely. They cling to the belief that prisons and other forms of punishment and control can be made humane and especially harnessed for the purpose of rehabilitating offenders. Yet as we have learned this has always been the mentality that supported the growth and repurposing of prisons from its very beginning, and exactly the kind of ideological goals that were pushed by early prison reformers. Abolition also incorporates a greater range of social justice work and intersectionality into its analysis and strategies than reform. Abolitionists also try to think critically about and engage with the root causes of crime rather than only concerning themselves with de incarceration or making prisons and policing more humane and fair. Principles such as anti-imperialism, resistance to all forms of gender violence, and opposition to certain reforms makes them more wary and perceptive of the need to engage with this system of oppression on multiple fronts and avoid reinforcing its power, authority, and scope regarding the application of incarceration and policing. Ultimately, as suggested by their name, prison abolitionists and the varying sub ideologies or terminologies that they represent all want to put an end to the practice of imprisonment and incarceration entirely. This vision for a world without prisons and the demand that they be ended means that there will always be fundamental differences between those who engage in criminal justice reform for the sake of fixing what they perceive to be a broken system, and those who engage in reforming it

for the sole purpose of dismantling the entire structure because they recognize the falsifiable logic and oppression which the system was founded on and will always continue to perpetuate.

Methodology

For this study I interviewed a total of six individuals using a semi structured qualitative interviewing approach. Five of the participants were University of Maryland students and the additional participant was a social justice advocate named Jay. Jay advocates for an end to mass incarceration through motivational speaking and his emphasis on discussing and connecting members of his community to various forms of human and social capital. The University of Maryland students were all individuals who have an association with or direct involvement in Organization of Prison Abolitionists (OPA). This organization was founded by myself in September 2015 in order to educate the University of Maryland community about prison abolition politics and to fight for criminal justice reforms on campus. All five of the students, whether directly involved with the organization or not, have identified themselves as prison abolitionists and have a specific interest in or active experience with addressing the problems of the U.S. criminal justice system. The five students were asked the same questions using an interview guide consisting of nine questions (see Appendix A). For the interview with Jay the same process was used but a different set of questions for the interview guide replaced those of the student's interviews (see Appendix B). There was some overlap between the questions that were asked of the students and those that were asked of Jay, but most of the questions were very different. This was because Jay had almost no knowledge of prison abolition but much more knowledge of and personal experiences with the criminal justice system (he served time in federal prison and jail as a young adult), activism in reforming the system, and a personal understanding of the issues facing communities that are hyper policed and over represented in

the criminal justice system. Interviews were on average an hour long each and ranged from 45-90 minutes total. They were recorded using a free software called Audacity and transcribed as true verbatim. In order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of all participants, fake pseudonyms were used to replace all of the participant's names. The transcribed data was then coded using a grounded theory approach in which the general interview questions helped to identify key concepts and those concepts were coded and discussed based upon the frequency of their use by multiple participants.

Research Findings

Influence of Anarchism on Abolition Exposure and Politics

During the interview process anarchism was directly referenced by two of the six individuals as having an influence upon their exposure to the ideas of prison abolition. These two individuals, along with all of the other interviewees, also either discussed explicitly the impact that anarchism has had upon them or discussed anarchist and leftist ideas in reference to prison abolition and their own political experiences without identifying them directly. Danielle, a junior anthropology major who transferred from a small college in North Carolina two years ago, discusses how her involvement and participation with anarchism at her first school initially exposed her to prison abolition. When asked how she was introduced to the idea of prison abolition Danielle stated:

“I got into reading a lot of anarchist practice and theory my first year of college and I did an independent study group with some of my friends that was called Anarchist Thought. So we read a lot of anarchist theory and it was kind of like a book club. But through that we definitely read a lot about what is crime and what does crime mean. Like how should people be accountable to each other. A lot of the older theorists were not as much about—not like as explicitly about prison abolition but a lot of modern theorists are very much just like, ‘this is completely wrong’. So yeah that was it I guess that independent study I did my freshmen year.” (Danielle)

When asked if prison abolition is a common discussion that comes up frequently in radically left political circles at either of the colleges she has attended, Danielle responded positively by stating that within communities she has been a part of on campus (but not in general the University of Maryland community as a whole) prison abolition is “fairly common” and “comes up a fair amount”. She also stated that “in anarchist circles especially it’s very common”.

Danielle’s statements about anarchism serve as an example of the natural affinity between this theory and prison abolition. In the case of Danielle anarchism ended up being a stepping stone for learning about and eventually becoming involved with prison abolition due to the similarity of these ideas and common values that they share. Danielle later identifies more specifically the ways in which these ideas are connected when she states that her anarchist background is accompanied with “the idea that we’re not only abolishing prisons but we’re abolishing the state”. Danielle also mentions that prison abolition is “a logical step in dismantling power structures and state apparatuses in general”. This is a reference to the shared value of opposition to most forms of authority, the power of the state, and the application of state sanctioned structural or systemic violence. With the criminal justice system’s ability to police, imprison, and execute anyone who has made a transgression against society or challenged the political power of the state, ultimately without any input from the individuals or communities that have been impacted by a crime, it makes sense that prison abolition and anarchism are both two ideologies which oppose the state and simultaneously seek to abolish one of the strongest systems which support it.

Avery, a University of Maryland student who also transferred from another college, was the second interviewee to explicitly mention how their exposure to anarchism first introduced them to the idea of prison abolition. Avery states:

“I think I was in my sophomore year at University of South Florida and I found a zine on anarchy in the women’s studies department. It was on a desk and I remember reading through it and being like ‘woah’. It was called Anarchist Primer and the whole thing was like ‘do you think the world can be a whole lot nicer?’ It was all about labor and not hurting people who had been hurt and there was mention in there of the prison system and families being broken apart and it affecting generations. And I think that’s where probably the first time that the idea of prison abolition ever was in like that word that term prison abolition.” (Avery)

Avery’s description of the anarchist zine that they were exposed to is consistent with the emphasis on an alternative vision for society within the prison abolition movement and the value of compassion (“not hurting people who had been hurt”) over the criminal justice system’s values of retribution and punishment. In this example an anarchist publication is directly discussing prison abolition and using its ideas to examine a political problem and present a counter solution to that problem. Avery also mentions a moment later that the “decentralization” of ideas and communication was a part of zine culture and initially helped draw them to this form of counter culture.

“Well I kind of got obsessed with zines at that point and then everything that I read with counter culture. Everything that I read was about social dynamics, power, whether or not people were abusing power, and how communication had to do with that. Like big mass communication, just the fact that the way we get our media is controlled on such a large scale. It’s even that mono culture thing that happens where it’s just one delivery system. And that’s part of why zines are so exciting because zines are these little independently made information things. Sometimes they’re personal sometimes they’re about how to do something. So the decentralization of things was part of the zine culture. And so decentralization of everything.” (Avery)

The value of decentralization and Avery’s critique of mass communication and mono culture is insightful. These ideas reflect anarchist principles of participatory democracy and opposition to permanent sources of authority and domination (Tahrir International Collective Network) (Rose, 2006). The fact that Avery learned about ideas and situations such as the abusing of power, social dynamics, and the highly singular control of media is in many ways the fruit of the decentralized and highly individualized form of communication which constitutes zines. In

addition to describing their exposure to prison abolition through anarchist sources and ideas, Avery provides some insights of their own that express fundamental anarchist values.

“We need to stop acting like just because there’s a rule about it that the rule is right. We need a lot more. . . I don’t want to say representation because there’s like no representation in government. It doesn’t actually represent us at all. There needs to be more humanity in our society in general. Not more government. Not more policy, not more legalities. . . . Again it’s just about not having people involved in the process. It’s about having these blanket things happen, and we live in this society right now that isn’t really engaged with itself.” (Avery)

Like many anarchists, Avery challenges the idea that laws as we presently understand them are just and should be followed even when they are wrong. More importantly they state that the government does not represent the people, a view that is commonly held by all anarchists because they believe in self-governance. Avery also points out that this is a consequence of people not being involved in the process of governance and not having society be engaged with itself. This is a further identification with the idea of self-governance and direct, participatory democracy which are important principles of anarchism. As mentioned before other participants brought up ideas and values which, despite not being referenced in relation to anarchism, are still highly reflective of aspects of this political ideology. For example Isiah, a sophomore marketing major at the University of Maryland, states:

“There’s always been some type of division between a ruling class that has the highest of the socio-economic hierarchy. And then there’s always been the other groups that have been subject to racism, oppression, basically anything you can think of to obstruct them from moving forward as a people has been placed in front of them. So the reason that prison abolition is necessary is because these marginalized groups are the ones that lack the opportunity. And when they lack the opportunity they are much more likely to end up in jail because of crime. They’re going to have to resort to crime, people have to make ends meet. Essentially at the end of the day people are gonna do what they need to do by any means necessary to survive.” (Isiah)

Isiah’s statement about a ruling class that sits at the top of a hierarchical social and economic order is an observation shared in common with both Marxism and anarchism. And by linking this

hierarchical order and its ruling class to the criminalization of marginalized groups at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, Isiah is partly recognizing the way in which the state serves the interest of political and economic elites. In a similar line of thought Ashley, a senior government & politics major and U.S. Latino studies minor, identifies the vision of prison abolition with ideas such as Marxism and other radical left ideologies by stating that whenever one reads the works of such writers and thinkers, a world without prisons is a part of their plan. She also states:

“The end goal for a lot of people who are really radical or really leftist or whatever is a revolution. That’s the end goal. People really hate talking about that but that’s the end goal. A revolution in the way we think, a revolution in the way we do things, a revolution in the way the world operates. An abolition of prisons would be that. Ya know, it would be a revolution.” (Ashley)

Ashley’s direct identification of prison abolition as a type of revolutionary change mirrors the ideas previously discussed about defining prison abolition as a revolutionary movement and the importance for abolitionists of having a free/unrestricted imagination. As Alyson points out abolition would be a revolution because of the way in which it would fundamentally change people’s thinking, thereby resulting in significant changes regarding behavior, practices, and structure. Since the goal for a lot of leftists (including anarchists) is a revolution, prison abolition and leftist political ideologies are directly connected to each other and mutually inform each other’s ideas. While discussing politics more broadly the other two interviewees, Jay and Aaron, make observations about political behavior in relation to their own beliefs and practices. Jay, a social justice advocate from Washington D.C. who speaks on mass incarceration and human/social/financial capital, states:

“I know I talk a lot about politics and how full of shit they are, but I feel like that’s the only way that we’re gonna be able to come out of this deficit that we’re in. Because we got to call a spade a spade. They’re not here to help us at all. They’re here to control us more than anything. So when they come into town and when they come into the wards, me personally, I really don’t pay them any attention. Because it’s just like, ‘what are you doing for our people?’ I’m doing more for my people than you are. We’re the ones

throwing Thanksgiving dinners in the hood. We're the ones that hand out Christmas presents. And yet, guess what, we're the ones who are criminals. Ya know what I'm saying? So it's like if you're not doing that then, what are [you] doing?" (Jay)

Jay's observation that the government can't be relied upon at all to help his own neighborhood and other communities that need resources in D.C. is a theme which was expressed multiple times during the interview. As Che points out the politicians are there solely for the purpose of exploiting votes, and the government apparatus is doing more controlling than it is assisting. Yet despite the lack of support from the government people like Jay are busy doing what they can to contribute to the success and stability of their communities. By taking it upon himself to do this work and organize the provision of some resources for his community, and by pointing out that this work has been more consistent and important than what the politicians have failed to contribute, Jay is expressing and practicing an important anarchist value. As David Graeber says in an interview with Charlie Rose, anarchists practice direct action and attempt to live as if they are already free. Rather than, for example, lobbying or protesting against a government for the provision of resources when they do not actually represent the people or respond to their needs, an anarchist's response would be to find a way to acquire and organize the resources for themselves in spite of what the government may try to do in order to stop it (Rose, 2006).

Aarron, a super senior and transfer student from UMBC majoring in psychology and minoring in biology, also provides a personal observation that is related to anarchism. When asked how prison abolition relates to his own life he stated:

"Two ways, one way is if I put myself in the position of many of the people who have been prisoners who unjustly get arrested and taken to jail. And so I put myself in that position and [think about] how I would feel. So with empathy in an empathetic way. And number two also being like I said [the] cultural aspect of me being Iranian American, me seeing the criminal justice system in Iran and seeing how atrocious it is even there. Hearing about many people on the streets just being arrested for even worse reasons than here. It's kind of just like this is an issue, why the whole notion of crime why do we have crime to begin with? Not [meaning] actual crime physically but our notion of crime, why

do we have this notion of crime? I understand ethically that there are good things, bad things, stuff like that. Not that I'm saying there shouldn't be rules, but the way we've done it today isn't fair." (Aarron)

During another part of the interview Aarron shares how the value of compassion is important in his own life. Here he demonstrates the personal importance of prison abolition's connection to this compassion and the ability it produces to empathize with others and picture himself in such a situation. As discussed earlier the questioning of the law and the basis for its authority, including who creates and enforces laws, is a key component of anarchism. According to Dachine Rainer and Holley Cantine the entire notion of crime and particularly the idea that the state should be responsible for arbitrating all interpersonal conflicts and crime is extremely questionable (James, 2005). Aarron states a similar idea using some of the same language and also adds that he doesn't mean "there shouldn't be rules" but that the current system isn't actually fair. Anarchism is an ideology that also emphasizes that the absence of the state and hierarchies does not mean there are not any rules, just like Aarron clarifies that questioning the notion of crime does not mean supporting the complete absence of rules.

Common Misperceptions about Prison Abolition

Throughout the interview process multiple respondents identified very similar or identical stereotypes, biases, and other types of misinformation when asked what kind of misperceptions other people have regarding prison abolition. The most frequently expressed misperception by respondents was a common reactionary response that abolitionists get when first mentioning the idea of abolishing prisons to someone who has never heard of the idea before and knows nothing about the movement. Take for example Ashley's response to the interview question "what do you think are examples of common misconceptions about prison abolition?"

"Well I think the number one misconception would be that murderers or rapists would be running wild on the streets [and] we'd have a purge type situation on our hands. That's

my number one complete bullshit [that] I hear. Yeah that's definitely the number one. Also I think feasibility. The impression that it's not feasible. Just like I was saying earlier people don't want to believe that's possible but people didn't think that gay marriage was possible twenty years ago. I think that another issue is the decriminalization of drugs. I think that prison abolition makes people uncomfortable because then they'd have to deal with all the issues of our society like drug addicts. And that's another issue I think that people have." (Ashley)

Ashley bluntly describes the kind of situation which most skeptics and new comers to prison abolition envision the moment they hear of someone advocating for this idea. The reference to a purge type situation (a popular movie from 2013 that preys upon wildly fictional ideas about crime and human nature) calls to mind the kind of assumptions that people have regarding anarchy and anarchism. Most popular discourses define a state of anarchy in negative terms and envision a world gone mad filled with even more violence, warfare, and cruelty than exists at present. Rather than understanding that anarchy means "without a ruler", and that anarchism is built upon the idea of complex order and the continued presence of rules, assumptions are made that a society could still exist without social controls, rules, or organization and that this would result in the escalation of primitive forms of violence (Tahrir International Collective Network). Prison abolition is subjected to a similar form of scrutiny whereby popular discourse and imagination assumes that the abolition of prisons entails no changes in social, economic, and political policy/structure or the implementation of alternatives. This in turn leads to the assumption that abolition would inevitably create a complete breakdown in social order because of a massive rise in crime and the absence of any consequences or controls. As Ashley notes people also frequently assume that prison abolition isn't feasible. This is probably partly due to the assumptions that they initially make, but also because they currently lack the ability to imagine a world without prisons and therefore don't want to believe it is possible since they

would be forced to reckon with important societal issues like drug addiction. Echoing the idea of a complete breakdown in social order Danielle states:

“I think a lot of people hear prison abolition and they just think you have all the same problems in society, but then all of a sudden you have people robbing each other and there’s no—it’s chaos and blah-blah-blah. But my understanding of it has always been very overarching—that’s not the right word. An entire system change where you maybe no longer have all the crimes that you would have had, and in general you don’t have society on such a large scale anymore. I would also say something that has kind of accompanied it [is that] prisons would naturally become obsolete. . . . People just assume that if you don’t have the police you go outside and get murdered and nothing happens. Like people just assume that we would continue to have no agency after we got rid of institutions that take away our agency. They think that if we got rid of prisons there would just be a bunch of crazed criminals running around robbing them and they would have nothing to protect them. When [actually] we have a lot of power to build our own social institutions and our own social capital in a way that would eliminate a lot of the reasons that people commit crime in the first place.” (Danielle)

As Danielle points out not only is there an assumption that prison abolition is premised upon ending prisons and other aspects of the “justice system” without any other changes, but people also assume that we would essentially be helpless to tackle the problems that such a situation could create without the help of the criminal justice system. This points to the lack of political will and efficacy that many people have regarding control over their own situations and environments. The belief that human beings have such little agency of their own and must depend entirely on the state for any semblance of social harmony and order or public safety reveals how effective the system is at creating a sense of political apathy and a lack of personal agency. But according to Danielle human beings do have an incredible amount of agency even if they aren’t always aware of it, especially when the “institutions” which have been working to limit agency are taken away. In addition to Ashley and Danielle’s statements about the most common misperception that abolitionists face, Aaron, Avery, and Isiah provide further examples of this and also focus in on an additional bias and stigma that abolition faces while highlighting the importance of compassion for overcoming it. For example Aaron states:

“When I tell people that I’m in OPA it’s like ‘oh so you want killers and stuff to go free?’ I’m like no it’s not like we’re trying to open up the prisons tomorrow and abolish all the prisons tomorrow. . . .The other one is the whole idea of ‘we need prisons blah-blah-blah.’ But going off that last question it’s like [not only is there] the misperception that we’re going to release all the prisoners tomorrow, but also looking at the prisoners themselves as pretty much inhuman no matter the crime.” (Aarron)

Aarron frequently is met with the same response and experience when having a conversation about prison abolition or OPA. The assumption is made that prison abolition is only advocating for the immediate release of all prisoners, and literally has no other philosophical analyses or support for nor ideas about social justice. He also identifies the fact that many people perceive all prisoners to be “inhuman”, meaning that they are viewed with no compassion or empathy and that their humanity is likely to go unrecognized and their human rights to be disrespected. Again, on a slightly different note, Avery echoes their experience with these assumptions:

“People think that I mean just take the prisons down. [But] really we need to go in and it needs to be a public project. It needs to be a community project and it needs to be a project that involves building compassion in communities. Because we don’t have humans lately that are educated in taking care of one another. We have people that are educated in taking care of whatever they’re supposed to be doing. But people aren’t really taught about kindness, and they aren’t taught about how important it is, and how important it is to be kind to people that you don’t know. And I mean I know that it’s hard to try to explain to people that we need to be nicer and we need to help people that are in prison, because they don’t see them and they assume that all these people are rapists. That’s one of the things they go to “oh a bunch of rapists and killers” and it’s like no a lot of them are in there cuz they had like no money and they were about to lose their power and electricity and it was the dead of winter so they stole a car.” (Avery)

Avery shares the value of compassion in common with Aarron and voices the concern that other human behaviors like kindness and empathy are not being taught and supported enough in our society. They provide one example (as well as several others not included in the passage) of how many prisoners, including those who have committed a violent or dangerous crime, have a lot of other circumstances factoring into their decision, which is why they are not simply a bad person or an evil killer. Avery reiterates the issues that Aarron encounters including the assumption that

abolitionists simply want to do something like “take down prisons” or “let killers go free”. But as they point out even though de-incarceration and taking down prisons is an extremely important goal for abolitionists, it is still only one part of the picture. The other part of the picture involves building the kind of compassion that is necessary to see all human beings as worthy of forgiveness, understanding, respect, and support, so that they can actually be provided with the resources and opportunities for a transformation in thinking and behavior. Isiah provides some further evidence of why many people are so quick to judge others and not extend compassion to prisoners and other people who are perceived as criminals.

“I think people are too focused on punishment. I think people think of punishment as the only way to get people to stop committing crimes. But if that were the case then we wouldn’t have such a high recidivism rate in the U.S. So there’s already that predetermined bias against prison abolition simply because—even down to the wording. Ya know you say prison abolition and it’s like people think you’re against criminal justice and things like that. So I think with that predetermined bias there’s often that misconception that prison abolition is too soft on crime, or prison abolition doesn’t really do anything other than get rid of the criminal justice system altogether.” (Isiah)

While Isiah’s perception that prison abolition isn’t against the criminal justice system may be partly incorrect, his point about people being too focused on punishment is very important.

Punishment is actually one of the four justifications (or tenants) for the use of incarceration in the criminal justice system. Along with values like retribution, rehabilitation, and control, punishment is used as a justification because of the belief in its specific effectiveness at deterring crime (Roberts, 2015). But as Isiah points out the evidence seems to indicate that punishment is not actually effective as a deterrent, and that often times like Avery stated people make a rational choice for engaging in crime because they have no other alternative. But punishment is a highly praised value in our society that is essentially commodified and reinforced by our criminal justice system. The belief that punishment is necessary, effective, and acceptable makes it difficult for most people to have the same compassion that they would for other human beings.

So when the average person hears about the idea of prison abolition, they reject it as being “too soft on crime” because they have already entirely rejected the humanity of a large group of people. As prison abolitionists it is important to fight against the idea that punishment is an effective or appropriate deterrence and especially the lack of compassion and humanity that it produces for people’s orientation towards prisoners. As Aaron says “my notion of justice is this idea of healing and balance and compassion”. He identifies the prison system as “archaic” and “gruesome”, stating that it is a huge issue that we “negate prisoners out of our society” and “banish” them to a jail cell. Valuing healing and compassion over punishment can be a potential starting point for the case of abolition, and it is certainly critical for correcting the bias and stigma of incarceration/criminality which so often denies a prisoner’s humanity.

Impact of Incarceration upon Families & Transgenerational Trauma

During the interviews two subjects were discussed with frequency: transgenerational trauma from slavery and incarceration, and the impact that the criminal justice system has had on tearing apart families. These concepts were primarily discussed by Avery and Danielle, but also touched upon by Ashley and Jay as well. Both Avery and Ashley shared their family’s personal experiences with the criminal justice system while Jay provides a counter opinion to the assertions made by Avery and Danielle about transgenerational trauma. Avery first discusses the impact of incarceration upon families when they state:

“Honestly I think a lot of illegal work shouldn’t be illegal. A lot of things should be decriminalized. Because by criminalizing them you create more problems. You create more opportunities for people to lose the resources that they already were barely holding onto. You create more opportunities for people’s families to be broken apart, for other people who know someone else in their family is doing illegal work, for them to get hurt by the loss of that person. It doesn’t make sense.” (Avery)

As an abolitionist, Avery speaks to the important need for legalizing certain activities or forms of work such as sex work. One of the many negative consequences of criminalizing sex work, as well as controlled substances, is that families are “broken apart” through cyclical or permanent patterns of incarceration. This is especially true when these two issues (drug addiction and the criminalization of sex work) intersect. In other parts of the interview Avery shares their personal experience with this issue as someone who experienced the pain of seeing their mother incarcerated for sex work and drug addiction and as someone who has engaged in the same work. As Avery highlights children and other family members who are related and connected to the person incarcerated are “hurt by the loss of that person” and are affected by issues such as losing resources, social/emotional support, and income that the person was previously providing. While discussing the topic of how psychology used to define gayness in deviant and abnormal terms, Avery raised the topic of incarceration and its impact upon families:

“It was never what the person said they were experiencing. It’s always been about someone else having the power to determine what’s happening, while completely writing over the experience that’s being reported by the person who’s experiencing it. So even though we have thousands of people telling stories about [how] their families were messed up because they lost their parents, or their parents had to go to prison and then their brothers got into stuff because they didn’t have enough money so they had to work doing illegal things. And then they lost their brothers. And even though we have thousands of stories of other people, the politicians who go for that tough love and tough on crime thing get written over that. They get to rewrite that story.” (Avery)

Avery mentions that there are “thousands” of stories told by people who have experienced their families being broken up as well as other devastating consequences as a result of incarceration. As mentioned before the incarceration of family members creates both pain and difficulties, especially for children who have one or more parents that are incarcerated. This can contribute to an intergenerational pattern of trauma and instability that may lead to further imprisonment of additional family members. But unfortunately the plight of families whose loved ones are

imprisoned is often completely and utterly ignored by politicians and the media. The victim's story is "written over" as Avery says, but the family itself seems to be erased from the picture as well. Ashley also shares the impact that incarceration had on her family:

"It's really hard, it's really difficult [when] you're in the position where you're loved one is someone who is in and out of the criminal justice system. Where you feel like I have nowhere to turn. We can't afford one of these fancy addiction programs. We can't send them once again to AA meetings that don't work. How many times I saw my mom with absolutely no option but to call the police and to imprison her own child. It's terrible! And people don't want to do that. Obviously no parent wants to do that to their child, but they feel like they have no other avenue." (Ashley)

In other parts of the interview Ashley shares how some of her family members such as her father and brother have struggled with drug addiction during their lifetime, and that her brother was once put in solitary confinement simply for having drugs in his system. Ashley expresses the personal pain that it has caused her family and particularly her mother, and speaks to the need for alternatives to the criminal justice system's practice of arresting, charging, prosecuting and incarcerating a person whenever a problem is too difficult for parents to handle. Danielle also discussed transgenerational trauma and incarceration.

"Well I think what we're witnessing right now is modern day eugenics and population control of people of color and poor people in this country. Whether it be African Americans, Native Americans, or Latinos. But state sanctioned violence and imprisonment of these people is destroying communities and tearing apart families. And I think if not eugenics, it's definitely ethnocide. The state is perpetrating definite cultural genocide against people by disturbing their communities, taking away their opportunities, breaking up their families, [and] leaving them with really no social structure of their own to rely on." (Danielle)

Just like Avery and Ashley, Danielle also expresses the perception that imprisonment is tearing apart families. She asserts that in many regards this is actually an intentional objective that the state pursues through the use of other forms of structural violence in addition to incarceration. As we have already examined in previous parts of the paper, the criminal justice system has always been used for multiple purposes such as enslavement, social control, and political repression of

African Americans as well as many other groups. Her observation that African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos are being targeted for population control and ethnocide makes a lot of sense when considering the historical realities of genocide, enslavement, colonization, and citizenship exclusion that these three groups in particular have experienced. When asked to define eugenics for further clarification, Danielle stated:

“Eugenics is normally literally referred to as population control in terms of controlling genetic pools. Which I think there’s aspects of it in prisons and criminal justice because you’re removing people from society for so long. And also because if you think of epigenetics and the changes to our genetic code through the experiences in our lifetime. So things like transgenerational trauma. What does something like living in solitary confinement for forty years do to the reality of your future progeny and their generations beyond them? We’re changing the lived realities of people which reflects in your genetic code.” (Danielle)

In this statement Danielle connects the focus on incarceration and state sanctioned violence’s impact on disrupting communities and families to the transgenerational impact that these processes can have upon our genetics. Not only does incarceration cause emotional pain and physical hardship for the family and loved ones of its victims, but Danielle makes the argument that there are unseen biological consequences in addition to the social catastrophes that occur. Her observation gives further clarification and evidence to the idea that incarceration is being used as a form of eugenics when considering the disproportionate number of incarcerated people of color and the fact that it removes individuals from access to family care and continued reproduction. Avery also discusses in depth transgenerational trauma:

“It’s the invisible illness thing. It’s like—have you ever heard about post traumatic slave syndrome? Talking about people who went through the Jim Crow era, even if we don’t talk about people who went through slavery. If we just talk about people trying to get through the Jim Crow era where their family or neighbors houses were being bombed or shot up, or you know someone was getting dragged out in the middle of the night and hung on a tree. [There’s] PTSD that no one seems to want to admit could have been involved in that. Or we seem to have this idea that ‘ya know they probably got over it after a generation’. The idea that that PTSD couldn’t affect those families that could then affect those children that passes this intense PTSD on through generations. It’s an

invisible illness like a lot of mental health issues. But the fact that we don't treat mental health issues, especially since we're like "oh I didn't see it, I didn't notice anything wrong" means that we're just perpetuating it. (Avery)

As Avery points out PTSD is a form of circumstantially inflicted mental trauma that often goes untreated in our society, particularly because mental health issues in general are so poorly handled and their diagnoses and treatment is not given a priority. Referencing research by Dr. Joy DeGruy (2005), Avery asserts that variations of PTSD such as post traumatic slave syndrome or the experiences of racist terrorist violence during the Jim Crow era can be passed down through generations and affect more than the single victim who had the most direct/substantial experience with the trauma. Instead of ignoring invisible illnesses like PTSD simply because we can't see them, and pretending that the experiences of our parents are divorced from our own mental health, we need to recognize these factors and prioritize their diagnoses and treatment. Otherwise as Avery mentions we will continue to be "perpetuating it". Interestingly when Jay was interviewed and asked specific questions about topics like reparations, he provided a personal perspective that partly contradicts the points made by Danielle and Avery about transgenerational trauma. Jay states:

"I feel it would be unfair for me to say something on that behalf, because I wasn't the one [who] was getting whipped. I wasn't the one going through those obstacles. Slavery definitely was a part of African American history, slavery definitely was something my ancestors went through, but I didn't go through it as Che Bullock. I'm just going through more of a modern day slavery. Being incarcerated working for fifty cents a day to make desks. I just feel like that's a form of slavery. And I feel like if I did a crime, I did my time, I just wanna be looked at as equal just like everybody else." (Jay)

During the interview Jay resisted the desire to speak very much on issues related to slavery and reparations. At first Jay distanced himself from the idea of reparations and over emphasizing the impact of slavery, but later towards the end of the interview indicated his support for financial reparations in a certain context and especially for the need to have a national dialogue about

America's violent history. Although Jay's statement in this excerpt and a few other comments during the interview partly minimize the impact and relevance of past generational trauma upon his own life and circumstances, Jay does give significant weight to the idea that these traumas have continued throughout the generations for African Americans because the experiences of trauma and enslavement haven't actually ended.

Criminal Justice and Mental Health

During their interviews, three of the six respondents brought up the issue of criminal justice and mental health entirely on their own accord. Aaron, Danielle, and Avery all mentioned their exposure to learning about violence perpetrated by police and correctional officers against mentally ill persons either through witnessing it via news services or hearing about other people's experiences.

"Mental health itself is not a crime. But the criminal justice system, volunteering as an EMT before and also hearing it on the news all the time, the criminal justice system is not really fully educated about mental health [and] what it is. And as a person who [is] living with a few mental health disorders myself it's even more personal because sometimes I'll [think about] 'well what if I'm in that position?'" (Aaron)

Aaron shares that he has learned about the intersection of the criminal justice system and mental health through his own experience as an EMT and exposure to news sources. Through his statement about mental health not being a crime but recognizing that the criminal justice system remains very uneducated about what mental health is, Aaron points to the reality that the criminal justice system criminalizes mental illness (just like drugs) rather than recognizing either as a public health issue. He also acknowledges his own concerns and ability to empathize with how people suffering from mental illnesses are treated because he also struggles with a mental illness. Aaron further elaborates on the criminal justice system and mental illness:

"I was listening to NPR and they were talking about this one story about an individual was having a manic episode. Also known as bipolar disorder, he was having a manic

episode, a manic delusion about the world because he was out of his medications and he couldn't really take them. So he was of course having a manic episode and he tried to get himself to a hospital. And then when he was at the hospital the health care workers there weren't treating him the way he should have been treated. They weren't giving him the right medications, which again, there's [yet] another area of society that has a lot of issues that in a way works with the criminal justice system. Anyway what ended up happening was the police were called because his manic delusions were increasing and the police shot him. Where [as] if he was treated correctly, that and all the other stories I've heard in the news about people with health issues not being treated, if they had been treated correctly even by the police the person would not have died or been treated in that way. This person who got shot by the way didn't die but still he shouldn't have gotten shot at all." (Aarron)

In addition to the ignorance and violence of the police officer(s) that shot this man, the individual was failed by the health care workers who were supposed to help him. Clearly this passage indicates the lack of preventative measures in public health and criminal justice which helps to subvert institutions that provide for our well-being and instead funnels people into the criminal justice system or creates even worse situations like being shot or killed by the police. Aarron follows up on this story about the healthcare and criminal justice system's treatment of mental illness with another example that had even more serious consequences.

"There was another story I read where this person who had severe bi polar and severe depression was taking very strong drugs to balance the chemistry in his brain. Basically [he] was arrested and the police and the doctors in the jail decided not to give him the drugs to teach him a lesson. And the person was in solitary confinement and died as a result of it because he went through a horrible withdrawal and he died within one day. Because he needed the drugs and he couldn't get the drugs that he needed. Because the police and the criminal justice system [thought] 'oh we'll just teach him a lesson'."

(Aarron)

Both the doctors and police (or possibly correctional officers in this case) actively participated in denying the man his necessary medications. Their first mistake was probably putting the man in solitary confinement, a form of torture that produces nothing but negative results for its victims. Danielle elaborates:

“Yeah [causing] terrible mental health, it’s insane. My sister is a social worker and she works with people who are lower income and have mental health problems. And New York City doesn’t have enough facilities to house all the people who need help, so instead they just go to prison. And they have to be put in solitary confinement because they can’t live in the larger population. And it’s like is that help—what are you doing? You’re creating someone who when they’re released is less able to be a quote-unquote productive member of society or whatever people are supposed to be.” (Danielle)

This passage demonstrates not only the negative consequences of solitary confinement for mental health, but also the criminalization of mental illness and poverty. The complete lack of health services is so bad that people who are poor and experiencing mental health issues are subjected to incarceration and torture rather than treatment. The experiences of Danielle’s sister and the story referenced by Aaron are examples of how the criminal justice system poorly responds to mental health, particularly through the harmful use of solitary confinement, even when the situation doesn’t involve poor police conduct or an immediate mental health crisis. Avery also discusses an incident that is extremely similar to the story described by Aaron.

“I watched a video of a guy having a seizure in a prison cell before and the cops were just kinda uncomfortable with it and didn’t wanna deal with it. But at some point he was on the ground and then they go in and put him on a chair and they tie him up while he’s having a seizure because it bothers them that it’s on the floor. And they don’t really wanna deal with him and they haven’t called an ambulance. So he’s tied up in a chair having a seizure and then they’re kind of grossed out that he’s dribbling. So they put a face mask on him, and then this guy fucking dies. And they do that all the fucking time. People having withdrawals because they’ve been using some drugs for a long time and now they’re having withdrawals that cause actual heart attacks and seizures but they’re just grossed out by it so they just let that person die in a cell.” (Avery)

Although this example is not directly related to a mental health crisis or illness, it echoes the concerns about the behavior of police and the level of ignorance that many have regarding health issues for inmates. Based upon the information provided by Avery, the police/correctional officers either didn’t recognize or understand what was happening to this man, or cared so little about his well-being that they allowed him to die. This demonstrates how even though the

healthcare system often fails to provide good healthcare and allows the criminal justice system to take over, the criminal justice system is even less equipped to deal with physical and mental health problems even though this system has been increasingly tasked with the responsibility of handling issues like poverty and mental illness.

Distrust of Political System

Perhaps the most common theme in all the interviewees was the distrust of politicians and the political system. The type of distrust and the way in which it was expressed took several different forms. These include: expressing strong distrust towards politicians; de-emphasizing or undervaluing the electoral process; expressing mostly negative opinions about the political system's handling of criminal justice issues; and low expectations for meaningful criminal justice reform. All of the respondents were asked a specific question related to their perception of the recent political trend in which both democrats and republicans have begun to positively discuss criminal justice reform, the high costs of prisons, utilize rhetoric about ending mass incarceration, and fixing a "broken criminal justice system". Every single participant responded with some level of distrust towards politicians and the political system and some even brought up this theme on multiple occasions before or after the question was asked. For example Ashley stated:

"People really love Bernie Sanders ya know? And they believe that he can do anything and he will do anything. But I have a really hard time trusting that any politician who's talking about mass incarceration or reforming the criminal justice system is putting any weight behind that. Bernie has been in Congress for a long time and I think it goes beyond Democrat and Republican. I think that it has to be more like. . . . It has to be a political revolution and not the one that Bernie is talking about where you vote for Bernie and that's the political revolution. Democrats and Republicans can't solve this, we know that Congress can't solve this. They have so many interests in the prison industrial complex. They don't have any interest in fixing it, except to get votes. So I don't trust that at all." (Ashley)

For many students at Maryland, Bernie Sanders is the most popular and widely supported presidential candidate on campus, making Ashley's consideration of this candidate unsurprising. What may not be typical of her response is the distrust towards all politicians who "are talking about mass incarceration or reforming the criminal justice system" even if this includes a progressive candidate such as Sanders. Although there may be other reasons for this mistrust that go unstated, Ashley identifies the conflicting incentives for politicians to maintain the prison industrial complex and their primary motivation for receiving votes over other priorities as reasons. The statement that meaningful change regarding the criminal justice system has to take place through a political revolution and that the definition of this revolution does not include voting for the most viable politically left candidate is both interesting and consistent with other interviewer's responses. Consider the following statement by Danielle:

"Well for me really hearing, doesn't matter if it's a right or a leftist politician, speak on an issue where they're—you know something like this—where they're trying to appeal to people or specifically appeal to African American voters by talking about "lets end the war on drugs" and blah-blah-blah. Ya know and it's [someone] like Hilary Clinton. The Clinton administration, under Bill Clinton, supported the harshest drug sentencing laws and he was the worst president in the war on drugs. And to have her come out and be like "it's so wrong that". . . It's just bullshit. Ya know? And like they're never gonna—the truth is. . . it's just always bullshit. I mean I think we can give Bernie Sanders credit where credit is due, but I also think we can't just become completely blind to the reality of our political system in which Bernie Sanders is gonna [possibly] be less bad maybe than other people. But is it gonna be a revolution? (laughs) Come on! No it's gonna be electoral politics in the United States it's not gonna be a fucking revolution. So I guess it just makes me mad hearing them talk about things like that because I think that a lot of people really are fooled by political rhetoric and fooled by the idea that electoral politics are really gonna vastly change the system. And I think that people have a misguided idea that the state is more powerful than our neoliberal economy. And I don't think that's true." (Danielle)

Danielle also identifies the concern that politicians are merely responding to public pressure in order to receive votes. She mentions Hilary Clinton's double speak on this issue as a perfect example of how politicians devalued African Americans when making policy decisions in order

to be elected or stay in control, and are now using the opposite rhetoric to garner their support and votes. Danielle also discredits the electoral system and idea that voting for someone like Bernie Sanders can be considered a political revolution or will result in meaningful change for the criminal justice system. Her statement about the disbelief that state institutions and figures will heavily pursue changing this institution given the economic circumstances is echoed later when she says “but like who’s really in power, is it the candidate accepting donations or is it the multi-billion dollar corporation funneling money into think tanks.” This statement echoes Ashley’s idea that the financial incentives and motivations for maintaining the Prison Industrial Complex place the politicians and institutions that they represent at complete odds with the goal of transforming the criminal justice system or even “reforming” prisons. This concern about the financial motivations and reality of the political system is also voiced by Aaron when he says:

“Well I mean at a face value of course I agree with them, but at the same time learning [about] and experiencing politicians and how not so trustworthy they can be many times, it’s very easy to roll your eyes. Even though you agree with them, I’m sure that you’re telling me this but I’m [also] sure you’ve got a hand behind your back being paid by [whatever] prison industrial complex is paying you at the same time.” (Aaron)

As Aaron points out, even when he agrees completely with what a politician is saying, there is a major concern that they are going to do the opposite of what they proclaim because they are being paid out by corporate interests that represent (in this case) the Prison Industrial Complex. This concern about pay outs that conflict with the espoused goals and values of politicians is further discussed when he says:

“But compromise doesn’t mean you compromise a lot. You don’t need [just] 25% of what you said and [then only] do that. You do at least ya know at best eighty percent, sixty percent. Fifty percent would be the least because then that’s not even compromise that’s coming halfway. Compromising your position isn’t going halfway it’s going before halfway, it means bringing it down a notch. But saying ‘I’m gonna do this’ and then [you] just end up doing this, I can’t really trust that you’ve done what you said you were gonna do effectively. And also if [it’s] very easy to fall back on what you said and be influenced by different factors and different people and not stand to fight for what you

said, it shows a big lack of trust in politicians of both Democrats and Republicans. Even though I am supporting a Democrat. I'm supporting Bernie and he is the most trustworthy candidate I would say. But even him there's still a part of me that's like 'will you really do this?' Because I know everybody else who's talking isn't going to do this, that's why I don't trust them." (Aarron)

From Aarron's point of view politicians are constantly doing far too much compromising. Some compromise might be necessary, but this involves "bringing it down a notch" instead of meeting one's opposition halfway or selling out to the other side. Based on my friendship and experiences with Aarron, he is more than a casual supporter of Bernie Sanders and has been very vocal in supporting him and involved with campaigning through Terps for Bernie. Yet the distrust of the political system is strong enough for Aarron to still maintain a healthy level of skepticism towards the abilities and intentions of a progressive candidate like Sanders. This skepticism arises from the fact that Aarron perceives that politicians are usually only willing to fight half-heartedly due to either political constraints or corruption. Isiah provides a similar perspective about politics and money.

When responding to the question "how do you feel or what do you think when you hear a lot of democrats and republicans talking about things like mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, a broken criminal justice system or the high costs of prisons?" he says "It gives me a sense of hope, but at the same time I know that it's also business as usual. . . They have the politicians basically on their payroll. They're gonna say what the prison corporations want them to say. Simply because in most cases people want that additional income." Isiah notes that corruption runs deep in politics and that the system is set up to give the people with money the most power and facilitate payout of the politicians, resulting in much of the compromise that Aarron discusses. Rather than discussing political corruption, compromise, economic incentives,

and distrust towards politicians, Avery brings the conversation back to the issue of how effective politicians are in the first place.

“I think about how they know that it’s fucked up but that they have to stay politically correct. And so they think that it’s good enough that they give a nod to it. And they’re afraid to do anything else about it. Because usually their elections ride on how conservative or how typical they are. And most of the time those conversations don’t—when they do talk about it they don’t talk about it with [any] context about community care or health care. They just talk about criminal stuff.” (Avery)

Avery’s point about political correctness and giving “a nod to it” is in reference to criminal justice reform. Even when pushing back slightly against the conservative tendencies (like emphasizing issues such as law and order or criminality) that often dictate elections, public figures are essentially only focused on debating the issue of how much punishment and incarceration is necessary or just. Here Avery discusses their views:

“I don’t think that they have any power at all. I don’t think the people in office, any office, have any power at all. I think that it’s a lot like hitch hikers guide to the galaxy [with] Zaphod Beeblebrox running for president of the universe. And president of the universe, president of anything, even president of your school, no matter what your title is you’re basically powerless because it’s basically just a show for everybody to watch. And what actually matters is what people do. Or what is actually physically done. Not just what number is sent somewhere [or] what number designating funds is sent somewhere. It’s about people actually going somewhere and doing something. Getting people to do that in groups, to do it together, and repeatedly do it and support each other through doing it.” (Avery)

The use of *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* as an analogy for how politics really works is a playful assertion by Avery of the silly amount of pretending that occurs when people believe that all the power and influence depends upon elected leaders. This idea is very similar to the earlier point made by Danielle that at the end of the day the issue is mainly about agency. According to Avery it is really about what people actually do, and whether or not the support for a political leader is strong enough to allow them to exercise their own authority and agenda. By bringing up

the mistaken belief that people have regarding the inherent power of political leaders, Avery provides yet another example of how the system manages to suppress people's agency.

There are people such as Jay who acknowledge the importance of exercising their own agency and harnessing it for the benefit of a community rather than self-interest. In fact out of all of the respondents Jay had the most to say about distrusting the political system. As someone who has been formerly incarcerated and now works as a social justice advocate and educator, Jay has firsthand experience with politicians and their treatment of his own community. From the start of the interview Jay personally emphasized the importance of not speaking too much about issues that he knows nothing about. According to him this is exactly the kind of thing politicians and other political actors do with great frequency. Worst of all, as he indicates in other parts of the interview, they do this without including the perspectives or enabling the decisions of those who have actually been impacted by incarceration. For example he says: "I feel like how can you talk on something you know nothing about. Ya understand what I'm saying? If you don't have that, if you haven't been locked up or been in certain situations where you've been contained as an adult, why would you speak on it?" The fact that such a situation usually plays out in politics is Jay's first concern, because by acting as if they can understand the nature of incarceration and its many issues without having experienced it themselves, politicians fail to address the real problems and leave out prisoners and their families. Jay also expresses a very strong level of distrust specifically towards politicians as well as the government. For example he says "I think they're responding to the public pressure, but like you said it's not genuine at all. . . . I think it's all about money. It's all about financial capital. They're gaining a lot more than what they're putting out. So nah they don't care. They don't care." Jay strongly asserts that for politicians it's all about the money, echoing the concerns of other participants regarding financial incentives for

the Prison Industrial Complex, corruption, and compromise. And in response to the main interview question about politics he states that from his perspective, politicians are really just responding to the public pressure and he doesn't believe that all the talk about criminal justice reform from either political party is really genuine. Jay states:

“I feel like politicians are full of shit. I feel like if you're not—if you stay at a level. Let's use an example. If you stay at a middle class level than we're gonna get middle class results. And the thing is that the government is supposed to be for the people. So if you're not trying to help the people, all the people, then what are you in the office for? What's the point of me sitting down having a conversation with you when all I know is that you're about the dollar. I feel like the government is doing a horrible job at helping the people. The people doesn't mean politics, people means. . . . people. It's very commonsense knowledge that I'm giving you. I feel like you just gotta do a better job, you really just gotta do a better job. I haven't really found one person in office that I was really supporting. I just feel like politics is full of shit, they full of shit.” (Jay)

This statement is an example of how Jay has perhaps some of the greatest distrust of the government, the people that run it and the political process that gets them elected. Referencing again the idea that politics is all about money and financial capital, Jay emphasizes that the government should be less concerned with politics and more concerned with the people. And perhaps part of the reason that they are not concerned with the people is because the actual governance excludes the lower class, just as prisoners and their families or other marginalized stakeholders are excluded from the policy processes regarding incarceration. Further emphasizing his distrust of politicians Jay states:

“Yeah they full of it. It's crazy because I've met a lot of politicians over the years, in the past two to three years, and they see the work that I'm doing in the community, and they always say 'well look here's my card email me. Or I'm gonna give you a call or [hit] me up on this day or this day'. And these are people of my own race. These are Black politicians. And they are very oblivious to our people. They never get back to me. They never send me that email back.” (Jay)

Jay's personal experience with politicians and the political process has shown him that at best what he can usually expect from them is a show of non-genuine interest and caring for the real

purpose of political exploitation and profit. At another point in the interview Jay further highlights this by also mentioning that the only time he sees politicians come through his community is when they come to the poorest wards in the District every couple of years for votes. They then leave and are never heard from again until it is time for another election. But while exploitation and apathy may be the best case scenario to expect from the political system, Jay mentions another expectation that is far worse.

“And once again I don’t feel like the government’s going to allow you to get to a certain potential. Because they don’t want anybody to [get in the way] of what they’re trying to do. I mean look at Dr. King they killed him, Malcom X they killed him, look at all these great people we’ve had that they killed. Ya understand what I’m saying? And I do also feel like [there’s] people in the community who are being black balled because they actually wanna help the community.” (Jay)

Jay identifies a potential outcome of the political apathy that the system has towards marginalized groups and communities and its resistance to changing the focus from politics to people. When met with a challenge that actually threatens the power of the government, it will respond with violence and repression. But according to Jay even simply trying to work for the betterment of the community, a lot of people get “black balled” and are met with a similar response that is meant to discourage their agency. For prison abolitionists, criminal justice reformers, and social justice advocates in general, it is warranted to have distrust towards the government, politicians, and the political system. Jay’s personal experiences and the points that he makes, along with all the other perspectives from interviewees about politics, are important for abolitionists to keep in mind when considering how to effectively change the status quo and prepare for obstacles such as government repression.

Conclusion: The Case for Prison Abolition

Prison abolition is an ideological movement full of important goals and endless possibilities. Most abolitionists emphasize the visionary goal of abolishing prisons and the need for creative and imaginative thinking that does not constrain the past and future possibilities based upon our current experiences with the prison system. Many also examine the principles and strategies that are fundamental for maintaining the radical vision of abolition and achieving the kind of concrete objectives that are necessary for deconstructing the Prison Industrial Complex and deinstitutionalizing incarceration and other forms of penal punishment. All abolitionists link their goals to the greater struggle for justice, and engage with many different forms of work that fight oppression and inequality. By defining abolition as a goal that is achievable by addressing root causes of crime and creating alternative institutions and practices, abolitionists recognize that their goal is not possible without engaging in the struggle for justice and achieving deeper transformations in society. But regardless of what skepticism one may have about the idea of abolishing prisons, it is important to begin by recognizing what all abolitionists strongly agree upon: prisons are obsolete and they have to go! As we have seen from examining just a fraction of the interviews with a handful of students, the criminal justice system and practice of incarceration are full of issues including discouraging political agency, tearing families apart, creating transgenerational trauma, facilitating eugenicist practices, exacerbating and responding poorly to the failures of our healthcare system (particularly to address mental health), and fueling political corruption and repression. But understanding that the prison system has always been rooted in class and racial oppression, enslavement, economic exploitation, and the repression of political dissent is the first step to realizing that prisons must be abolished.

In fact prisons are just one recent historical development in a lengthy chain of inhumane and ineffective punishment that continues to be carried out without compassion upon its victims, and these victims have usually been those who are the most powerless or dehumanized in society and thus undervalued as human beings. As Avery mentions “it’s usually marginalized people and marginalized classes of people, categorizations, especially sexual deviance, that end up going to prison. It’s never whatever the ideal of the society is, the nuclear family.” The penitentiary and prisons may have once been considered a radical change in business as usual and a major reform regarding punishment, but time and experience have taught us that prisons are a failure. They are a complete and utterly failed social experiment and, like the inhumane and cruel corporal and capital punishments which were commonly used before them, it is time for a change. Unlike the changes that took place between public humiliation, torture, and death vs the newly emerging prison system, the abolition of the old system must come from a fundamentally radical point of departure. And thankfully unlike the prison reformers before, prison and penal abolitionists have achieved this by departing completely from the idea that punishment is a just or effective deterrence and consequence for crime. Rather than seeking to develop new forms of retribution or punishment, abolitionists flip the conversation upside down by getting to the root cause and asking, how can we provide for people’s needs? How can we promote alternative formal and informal social controls and complex community organization? How can we end powerlessness and promote equality and agency within our various societies and communities? These questions cannot be answered by a system which in fact fuels powerlessness and inequality, creates social disorganization among families and communities, and punishes people for our structural failures to provide human rights and basic necessities for all human beings. From its very beginning until the present day the prison system has been a system built upon a foundation which does not

recognize the rights, liberties, humanity, or equality of all human beings. Instead it is a system that perpetuates the idea that these qualities of life and freedom are only reserved for a privileged few.

Towards a Visionary and Principled Revolution

Prison abolition is a revolutionary movement, and as Isiah says there is no time like the present to fight for it.

“The energy is here. The time is now. We’ve got to get people more aware of this issue in order to spread this across the country and bring it to the forefront of the political realm [and] of the philosophical realm. Ya know, the way of thinking as far as how people think of crime and poverty and other societal issues that are tied to it. I think college campuses is where it needs to be.” (Isiah)

Those who advocate for prison abolition must be prepared to maintain a vision of the future that is drastically different from our current system, and continue to present a message that is contradictory and foreign to the status quo yet suggested enough to still contain many endless possibilities. They must also be principled in their fight for important reforms when engaging with a struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex and other systems of oppression. But just as importantly prison abolitionists must understand what it means to be a revolutionary and to struggle for what is yet to come. As C.L. R. James states:

“A revolution is first and foremost a movement from the old to the new, and needs above all new words, new verse, new passwords—all the symbols in which ideas and feelings are made tangible. The mass creation and appropriation of what is needed is a revealing picture of a whole people on their journey into the modern world, sometimes pathetic, sometimes vastly comic, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, but always vibrant with the life that only a mass of ordinary people can give.” (Ransby, 2003)

We cannot become wrapped up in the same language and ideas as the current message, the current system, or the current status quo. Prison abolition like any revolutionary movement requires new languages and terminologies that will produce new ways of thinking. But it is not enough to simply adopt new language or new ways of thinking, and it is not enough to only learn

about the issues and become a prison abolitionist in a theoretical sense. There is no such thing as an academic revolutionary. All meaningful political work requires a melding of theory with practice to form collective and individual praxis. Being a prison abolitionist and a revolutionary means taking the time to engage directly with the experiences of suffering and oppression and actually organize against it. As Angela Davis says:

While theoretical work, intellectual work, is extremely important, the work of the activist will determine whether or not we will move to a new stage . . . everyone should learn how to become an activist on some level, in some way. Everyone who considers herself or himself a part of this overall progressive movement must establish some kind of organizational ties, and must definitely participate in one or more movements.” (James 1998)

Being a prison abolitionist and becoming involved in this movement means engaging in substantial forms of activism. It is this work that determines whether the ideas that we internalize and promote are made meaningful in the real world and everyday life. When we engage in such activism in the context of a movement with a clear vision and set of principles anything is possible, including enormous changes in the way that everyone thinks. This is ultimately what a revolution is about. As David Graeber says:

“Revolutions are thus planetary phenomena. But there is more. What they really do is transform basic assumptions about what politics is ultimately about. In the wake of a revolution, ideas that had been considered veritably lunatic fringe quickly become the accepted currency of debate. Before the French Revolution, the ideas that change is good, that government policy is the proper way to manage it, and that governments derive their authority from an entity called “the people” were considered the sorts of things one might hear from crackpots and demagogues, or at best a handful of freethinking intellectuals who spend their time debating in cafés. A generation later, even the stuffiest magistrates, priests, and headmasters had to at least pay lip service to these ideas. Before long, we had reached the situation we are in today: that it’s necessary to lay out the terms for anyone to even notice they are there. They’ve become common sense, the very grounds of political discussion.” (Graeber 2013)

As we move forward towards the goal of abolition it is important to keep these things in mind: that the changes we wish to see in the world start and end with changing people’s minds.

Therefore it is important to always continue to nurture our imaginations, remain dedicated to trying to change the world, and maintain a sense of optimism. “Optimism is an absolute necessity, even if it’s only optimism of the will as Gramsci said, and pessimism of the intellect. What has kept me going has been the development of new modes of community. I don’t know whether I would have survived had not movements survived, had not communities of resistance, communities of struggle.” (Davis, 2016). Where there is a will there is a way. Prisons can and will be abolished, as long as we maintain and nurture the political agency and the will to ultimately make them obsolete.

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Appendix A

1. How were you introduced to the idea of prison abolition?
 - How did you join the movement or become involved in this work?
2. What compelled you to get involved with this work or with OPA?
3. How would you describe your level of understanding regarding the politics of prison abolition? Do you think you have a fairly good knowledge of...
 - What it advocates?
 - Where it draws its analyses from?
 - What those analyses are?
 - What distinguishes it from criminal justice reform movements?
4. Define prison abolition in your own words.
5. What do you think are examples of common misconceptions about prison abolition?
 - Did you previously have any misconceptions of your own?
6. Why do you think prison abolition is necessary. . . .
 - In our society?
 - In a global context?
7. How do you feel or what do you think when you hear a lot of democrats and republicans talking about things like mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, a broken criminal justice system or the high costs of prisons?

- From your own perspective what do you think are some of the issues with mainstream criminal justice movements?
8. How does prison abolition relate to your own life?
- Your personal experiences with the criminal justice system
 - Your broader political beliefs
 - Your own philosophical/religious outlook or observations of society
9. Lastly, what do you think the movement can or should do in order to grow and to push its message from the margins to the attention of the public sphere?

Appendix B

1. Tell me a little bit more about yourself Jay, you've shared a lot of your life story but I'd like to hear more about the work you do as a motivational speaker and what kind of life style you are living now. Also please feel free to share anything else you'd like to note about your life, your experiences, your interests, or your personality.
2. Have you ever heard of the concept of prison abolition?
 - What do you think of when you hear about it? Like what do you think it is and what does it make you think about?
3. What do you think is one of the most damaging aspects of the criminal justice system for African Americans?
 - For communities?
 - For families?
 - For individuals?
4. Have you ever had negative encounters or experiences with UMPD before?
5. How do you feel or what do you think when you hear a lot of democrats and republicans talking about things like mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, a broken criminal justice system or the high costs of prisons?
 - Do you think they care?
 - How do you feel about ACLU and the Coke brothers working together

6. From your own perspective what do you think are some of the issues with mainstream criminal justice movements?
 - Do you think most of the people who care about the issues understand just how bad the situation or system is? Are there any major disconnects between those who advocate for change from the outside versus the lived experience of incarceration?
7. You've mentioned before that the most important thing to remember when helping someone out through social capital is to be genuine and have the heart for it. But what do people look like when they aren't genuine? Have you ever seen people come into your community and offer negative forms of social capital or pretend as though they have your best interest in mind when they really don't?
8. What do you believe to be the root causes of crime in our society? Both broadly speaking as well as in the context of your own community?
9. Taking into account what you've seen and experienced in your lifetime, do you believe that violence is inherent in human nature or a learned behavior?
10. What can we do to address these root causes of crime and what can we do to address violence?
11. If African American communities and/or individuals were to receive reparations for slavery (or any other exploitation/oppression) what form would it take and how would you like to see that money and those resources used?