

# No Justice, No Peace: Abolish the Police

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“Law enforcement in the US was designed to subjugate Black people & enforce white supremacy. We must abolish policing as we currently understand it, divest from policing, and invest in a vision of community safety that works for everyone.”  
– Movement For Black Lives, 17 December 2020<sup>1</sup>

A young Black woman stands in front of an enormous crowd at Barclay's Center on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, NY. “No justice!” she roars into a microphone hooked up to a large amplifier on wheels. “No Peace!” the crowd responds, fists in the air. “Abolish!” she calls next, “The Police!” the crowd answers. It is early summer 2020 and I'm at a Black Lives Matter protest after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade at the hands of police. I've been to many such protests. I've heard the demand to abolish the police before. I believe in this demand myself. But we've always been rebuffed, even by our closest allies, as idealistic and unrealistic, our ideas impossible. Abolishing police may seem like a truly radical call to action in that it demands us to reimagine everything. But when the ravages of COVID-19 laid bare the dysfunctions of our systems and left individuals with nowhere to go and nothing to do, this demand gained significant traction.<sup>2</sup> As Precious Fondren explains, “In 2020 ‘defund the police’ and ‘abolish the police’ became mainstream political terms. Notable prison abolitionist

Ruth Wilson Gilmore was profiled by The New York Times. To combat media coverage that was insisting the Black Lives Matter protesters were demanding police reform, Mariame Kaba wrote plainly for The Times that protesters are, indeed, calling for abolition of police.”<sup>3</sup> This essay sets out to define “abolition” to demonstrate the ways it is practical and not idealistic and to argue for abolition now.

Activist and author Arundhati Roy argues that the pandemic is a portal. What's on the other side is new and different and we have to decide what from the old era we want to bring with us. She says, “What is this thing that has happened to us? It's a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus...We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred...or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”<sup>4</sup> Abolition requires radical imagination, and COVID-19 and its associated lockdowns and closures, left many more people than any other time in history to do this reimagining work. More, the uprisings around the world over systemic racism and police violence indicate that no matter how decentralized, varied, and problematic those issues and their solutions may be, many people

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1 “The Movement for Black Lives,” M4BL, accessed December 18, 2020, <https://m4bl.org/>.

2 The city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, where George Floyd was killed, for example, voted to defund \$8M from their police department, all but dismantling it. See Jenny Gross, “Minneapolis City Council Votes to Remove \$8 Million From Police Budget,” The New York Times [The New York Times, December 10, 2020], <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/10/us/minneapolis-police-funding.html>.

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3 Precious Fondren, “Students Demand Abolition Coursework from Colleges and Universities,” Progressive.org, February 4, 2021, <https://progressive.org/dispatches/students-abolition-coursework-fondren-210204/>. See full op-ed: Mariame Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police,” The New York Times [The New York Times, June 12, 2020], <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>. Implied here is that up until this political moment, The Times is a liberal, mainstream periodical that is reformist, at best.

4 Arundhati Roy, “Arundhati Roy: ‘The Pandemic Is a Portal!’” Financial Times, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

do not want to carry them into the post-COVID era.

The coronavirus pandemic, then, has had a significant impact on the discourses surrounding the defunding and abolishing of the police. As explained by abolitionist Angela Y. Davis, “the conjuncture created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the recognition of the systemic racism...has been rendered visible under these conditions because of the disproportionate deaths in Black and Latinx communities.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, folks were radicalized not by the murder of George Floyd, but the murder of George Floyd and others in the midst of the deeply racialized pandemic already ravaging communities of colour in the US.<sup>6</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore adds, the pandemic “unsettle[d] all of the uneasy relations between and among people who experience abandonment and those whose job it is to control the effects of that abandonment,”<sup>7</sup> highlighting the ways in which rupture and want enhanced calls to abolish the police.<sup>8</sup>

would allow for the dismantling of prisons, policing, and surveillance, and the creation of new institutions that actually work to keep us safe and are not fundamentally oppressive.”<sup>9</sup>

Let’s parse that a bit.

It’s long term. No one is suggesting we close police stations until we have the institutions in place to create community health and safety in ways that do not include police. The emphasis on community care would, according to abolitionists, radically reduce “crime” because needs would be met and behaviors currently classified as crimes to police communities of colour would not be. They want to build a society where we don’t investigate and restrain one another as a first or last resort.

Moreover, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, there’s been a shift in recent years where more and more

## All of this is to say that abolition is not merely the elimination of something, but rather, the founding of a new society.

### WHAT IS ABOLITION?

Mariame Kaba defines abolition as “a long-term project and a practice around creating the conditions that

5 “Uprising & Abolition: Angela Davis on Movement Building, ‘Defund the Police’ & Where We Go from Here,” *Democracy Now!*, accessed December 18, 2020, [https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/12/angela\\_davis\\_historic\\_moment](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/12/angela_davis_historic_moment).

6 At the time of writing, for example, there are 6,819 COVID cases in the Bronx – made up predominantly of communities of colour – and only 4150 cases in affluent and predominantly white Manhattan. “Rates of COVID-19 cases in New York City as of January 24, 2021, by borough,” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1109817/coronavirus-cases-rates-by-borough-new-york-city/> (accessed January 24, 2021).

7 Intercepted, “Intercepted Podcast: Ruth Wilson Gilmore on Abolition,” *The Intercept*, June 10, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition/>.

8 Mariame Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, June 12, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>.

social roles are performed by police, like attending to mental health crises, and more and more institutions model police functions, like children and family administrations. In other words, more and more institutions are deputized to bring in cops during conflict, meanwhile the cops are taking over more and more duties previously left to other agencies. On one hand, the Department of Education having a SWAT Team evidences the above. On the other hand, it is only 10 years old, so rolling back that turn is not as radical as one might think.<sup>10</sup>

9 Intercepted, “Intercepted Podcast: There’s Something About Jared with Mariame Kaba,” *The Intercept*, May 31, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/05/31/intercepted-podcast-theres-something-about-jared/>, emphasis mine.

10 Intercepted, “Intercepted Podcast: Ruth Wilson Gilmore on Abolition,” *The Intercept*, June 10, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition/>.

## No Justice, No Peace: Abolish the Police

It's a project and it's a practice, which requires continual action. Each time a small community leads a restorative justice circle,<sup>11</sup> each time a community-based organization nonviolently fills a role usually occupied by police, each time someone uses an alternative to calling 9-1-1, and each time communities come together to work on mutual aid and decentralized care, it is a step towards abolition. So, it's a project and a practice that creates the conditions that would allow for the dismantling of all settler colonial enforcers of surveillance and immigration law, policing, and prisons one action at a time.<sup>12</sup>

And finally, new institutions that actually keep us safe and are not fundamentally oppressive can be seen in two ways. Looking to the past, it is essential to recognize that early American police evolved from slave catchers and militias organized to commit acts of violence against Native Americans as a way to "keep peace" in North America.<sup>13</sup> This history leads abolitionists to conclude that policing is a fundamentally racist institution no matter how many "good" individuals may join this institution hoping to make change from the inside. "[P]olicing in America," as Malaika Jabali writes for *The Guardian*, "cannot be reformed because it is designed for violence. The oppression is a feature, not a bug."<sup>14</sup> Angela Davis elaborates that mass incarceration is a mutation of the same cultural ideas that enabled the institutions of chattel slavery, lynching, and legalized segregation, which have all since been formally abolished.<sup>15</sup> The abolition of prisons and police has the capacity to end this deeply entrenched historical pattern. Conversely, looking to the future, abolitionists imagine institutions that actually keep us safe, such as a city hotline to access unarmed, but highly trained mental health professionals for issues such as homelessness, mental

health crises, and intimate partner conflict; a traffic service that watches out for and changes brake lights, taillights, and other mechanical infractions that have led to deadly traffic stops when an armed police officer is responsible for this social function; and/or institutions of community care such as mutual aid organizations so hungry people don't turn to "crime" to eat.

All of this is to say that abolition is not merely the elimination of something, but rather, the founding of a new society. Abolition is not the immediate tearing down of walls, it's a slow and meticulous process. It attends to direct, structural, and cultural violence.<sup>16</sup> It works towards positive peace.<sup>17</sup>

The key to understanding this argument is "invest-divest." What abolishing the police really means is reallocating resources away from reactionary, fundamentally oppressive, violent institutions and investing in preventative social institutions like education, healthcare, community support, and the like. For example, staggeringly, one set of police riot gear could provide 31 nurses with needed Personal Protective Equipment during COVID.<sup>18</sup> It's not that unimaginable to spend money on people instead of violence. But it is a tool of hegemony to label some things impossible.<sup>19</sup> As Mariame Kaba puts it, "As a society, we have been so indoctrinated with the idea that we solve problems by policing and caging people that many cannot imagine anything other than prisons and the police as solutions to violence and harm."<sup>20</sup> In

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11 Centre for Justice and Reconciliation, "What Is Restorative Justice?" 2020, <http://restorativejustice.org/restorative-justice/about-restorative-justice/tutorial-intro-to-restorative-justice/lesson-1-what-is-restorative-justice/>

12 American abolitionists link "protection" of settler colonial borders through immigration law and domestic surveillance to prisons and policing as one fundamentally oppressive system that cannot be reformed.

13 Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Colour*, (Cambridge: Harvard, 1999).

14 Jabali, Malaika, "If you're surprised by how the police are acting, you don't understand US history," *The Guardian*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/05/police-us-history-reform-violence-oppression>

15 Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2010).

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16 Direct violence can be traced to an individual perpetrator. Structural violence refers to violence built into structures and institutions. Cultural violence is the work to normalize and justify direct and structural violence. See Collaborative Social Change, "What We Do," [link](#)

17 Positive peace is more than an absence of violence, it's an absence of violence because of the presence of just structures, institutions, and cultures. More, positive peace moves past the absence of violence to also include collaboration for collective advancement or development. See Baljit Singh Grewal, *Johan Galtung: Positive and negative peace*, 2003, [http://www.activeforpeace.org/nofred/Positive\\_Negative\\_Peace.pdf](http://www.activeforpeace.org/nofred/Positive_Negative_Peace.pdf)

18 Marisa Casciano, "One Police Officer's Riot Gear Could've Bought PPE for 31 Nurses," *InStyle*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.instyle.com/news/major-cities-spend-millions-more-on-riot-gear-for-police-than-on-ppe-for-frontline-workers>.

19 Hegemony refers to the dominant culture that reinforces ideologies that justify the current hierarchies, norms, and inequalities in society. It refers to a ruling class' ideological and cultural control over the masses. It is a system that is largely consented to. But abolitionists are counterhegemonic agents in that they can imagine beyond the normalization of police that the hegemony puts forth across entertainment and news media.

20 Mariame Kaba, "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, June 12, 2020), <https://www>.

other words, it keeps the status quo protected to say an idea is fundamentally flawed and unimplementable. It's the hegemony's silencing and discrediting that categorizes the abolition of police as impossible, not the work it would actually take to build communities rooted in transformative justice practices instead of punitive ones.

## ABOLITION NOW!

Why is abolition considered such a radical notion? Angela Davis explains that at one time the abolition of chattel slavery was a completely radical idea, one that the global economy simply could not sustain nor imagine. While modern forms of slavery persist, after several generations of consistent effort, abolitionists then were able to eradicate enslavement as an institutionalized and legal widespread practice. Abolition was possible then and it is possible now, we just have to fight the powerful hegemonic framing that dictates that police are a permanent, necessary, universal feature of society.<sup>21</sup>

US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) was asked, "What does an America with defunded police look like to you?" She posted on Instagram in response:

The good news is that it actually doesn't take a ton of imagination.

It looks like a suburb. Affluent white communities already live in a world where they choose to fund youth, health, housing etc more than they fund police. These communities have lower crime rates not because they have more police, but bc they have more resources to support healthy society in a way that reduces crime.

When a teenager or preteen does something harmful in a suburb (I say teen bc this is often where lifelong carceral cycles begin for Black and Brown communities), White communities bend over backwards to find alternatives to incarceration for their loved ones to "protect their future," like community service or rehab or restorative measures. Why don't we treat Black and Brown people the same way? Why doesn't the criminal system care about Black

teens' futures the way they care for White teens' futures? Why doesn't the news use Black people's graduation or family photos in stories the way they do when they cover White people (eg Brock Turner) who commit harmful crimes? Affluent White suburbs also design their own lives so that they walk through the world without having much interruption or interaction with police at all aside from community events and speeding tickets (and many of these communities try to reduce those, too!)

Just starting THERE would be a dramatically and radically different world than what we are experiencing now.

To be sure, critiques abound, such as "...the affluent, white suburb is no model for abolition. To imagine it as such is to construct the suburb as an idyllic space in which white people make good political choices rather than to identify it as part of the design of racial capitalism and carcerality abolitionists seek to confront."<sup>22</sup> That is true and AOC is making a different point. She's saying there is something that looks a lot more like positive peace in America's suburbs than urban centres. She's saying there is structural violence in urban centres committed by white people and institutions against people of colour that doesn't exist against affluent white people in the suburbs. She's saying that in terms of the invest-divest strategy popular among abolitionists, suburbs look more like an abolitionist future, where there are few cops, community serves most social roles, folks prevent kids from getting caught up in the criminal system, schools are funded, health care is accessible to most, etc. She's saying crimes are most often needs-based and in reaction to structural violence and overpolicing.

So what if the Movement for Black Lives' demands were met? What if these suburban conditions were available to all and all of these functioning social systems operated everywhere, particularly in marginalized, low-income communities? What if positive peace was so stable police officers were barely or no longer needed? Think outside the box drawn for you by the hegemony. Mariame Kaba reminds, "a big part of the abolitionist project...is unleashing people's imaginations while getting concrete—so that we have to imagine while we build, always both."<sup>23</sup> Let's get to work.

nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html.

21 Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2010).

22 Tamara K. Nopper, "Abolition Is Not a Suburb," *The New Inquiry*, July 17, 2020, <https://thenewinquiry.com/abolition-is-not-a-suburb/>.

23 Mariame Kaba Organizer et al., "Towards the Horizon of Abolition: A Conversation with Mariame Kaba," *TheNextSystem.org*,

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