

Abolitionist Social Work **FREE**

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Summary

Abolitionist social work is a theoretical framework and political project within the field of social work and an extension of the project of carceral abolitionism more broadly. Abolitionists seek to abolish punishment, prisons, police, and other carceral systems because they view these as being inherently destructive systems. Abolitionists argue that these carceral systems cause physiological, cognitive, economic, and political harms for incarcerated people, their families, and their communities; reinforce White supremacy; disproportionately burden the poor and marginalized; and fail to produce justice and healing after social harms have occurred. In their place, abolitionists want to create material conditions, institutions, and forms of community that facilitate emancipation and human flourishing and consequently render prisons, police, and other carceral systems obsolete. Abolitionist social workers advance this project in multiple ways, including critiquing the ways that social work and social workers are complicit in supporting or reinforcing carceral systems, challenging the expansion of carceral systems and carceral logics into social service domains, dismantling punitive and carceral institutions and methods of responding to social harms, implementing nonpunitive and noncarceral institutions and methods of responding to social harms, and strengthening the ability of communities to design and implement their own responses to social conflict and harm in the place of carceral institutions. As a theoretical framework, abolitionist social work draws from and extends the work of other critical frameworks and discourses, including anticarceral social work, feminist social work, dis/ability critical race studies, and transformative justice.

Keywords: abolition, abolitionist social work, anticarceral social work, carceral systems, police, prisons, anticarceral feminism, racial capitalism, transformative justice

Subjects: Criminal Justice, Ethics and Values, Policy and Advocacy, Social Justice and Human Rights, Social Work Profession

Definition

Abolitionist social work is a theoretical framework and political project attempting to further the goals of abolitionism more broadly, but specifically within social work as a field and through social workers as practitioners. Critical Resistance, arguably the most influential abolitionist organization in the United States, defines abolition as “the creation of genuinely safe, healthy communities that respond to harm without relying on prisons and punishment” (Critical Resistance, n.d.). The social and political transformations implied in this definition, however, are substantial and complex, as are the implications for social work.

Defining Abolitionism

Abolitionists seek to abolish punishment, prisons, police, and other carceral systems because they view these systems as being inherently destructive (Jacobs et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2020; Richie & Martensen, 2020). Although the specific details may vary across different contexts, abolitionists argue that carceral systems are destructive because of the physiological, cognitive, economic, and political harms they produce for incarcerated people, their families, and their communities (R. Gilmore, 2007; Maher, 2021); the racial disproportionality of police violence, incarceration, and other carceral systems and the contribution of these systems to White supremacy (A. Davis, 2003; Kaba, 2020; McDowell & Fernandez, 2018; D. Roberts, 2022); the disproportionately harmful impacts of police and prison systems on the poor and the marginalized (Akbar, 2020); the failure of carceral systems to effectively and equitably protect people's health, safety, and well-being (INCITE!, 2006; Law, 2015); and the failure of carceral and punitive systems to produce justice or healing after transgressions have occurred (McLeod, 2018; Morris, 2000). Abolitionists argue that these harmful outcomes are not accidental but, rather, occur because contemporary carceral systems were built for the subjugation and control of marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed groups and to maintain an inequitable and racially stratified social order that has been premised on that subjugation (Moten & Harney, 2004; Saleh-Hanna, 2015). Black feminist abolitionist Saleh-Hanna (2015) argues that "the relationships between colonial slavery and criminal justice violence are inevitable and unavoidable" (para. 60), while Coyle and Schept (2018) similarly conclude that "White supremacy, settler colonialism and racial capitalism are inextricable from the origins, logics and practices of 'criminal justice' [itself]" (p. 320).

Modern prison and police abolitionism's origins are rooted in the transnational struggle to abolish the institution of slavery, especially the forms of chattel slavery imposed across the Atlantic world by European colonizers (Blackburn, 1988; D. Davis, 2006; Sinha, 2016). The speeches and writings of figures in the United States such as Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, and William Lloyd Garrison, as well as the examples of active resistance offered by figures such as Harriet Tubman, Nate Turner, and John Brown, provided abolitionism with its foundational ideas and a vocabulary for understanding how to fight against several forms of oppression (Fernandez, 2019; Olson, 2009). Their zealous refusal to tolerate or negotiate with slavery, even at the cost of being written off by mainstream political discourses of their time, was one of their defining characteristics (Fernandez, 2019; Olson, 2009).

Abolitionism subsequently developed along different pathways in different national contexts (see Coyle & Scott, 2021). Abolitionist social work, however, has been especially influenced by the pathway that emerged in the United States emphasizing the interconnectedness of carceral systems with racial capitalism, and so this strand is emphasized through most of the remainder of this article (see Brock-Petroshius et al., 2022; Jacobs et al., 2021; Kim & Kanuha, 2022; Leotti, 2022; Teasley et al., 2022). Abolitionist theorizing was further developed during and after the African American civil rights movement, especially by revolutionary thinkers in the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party. Black Power abolitionists such as Angela Davis and George Jackson provided an analytical bridge between historical abolitionist critiques of slavery and contemporary abolitionist critiques of police, prisons, and other carceral institutions (A.

Davis, 2003, 2011; Jackson, 1994). These critics of carcerality argued that slavery, police, and prisons are all apparatuses of racial and class repression that—especially in settler colonial empires such as the United States—have functioned to keep the “internal colonies” of poor and oppressed Black, Indigenous, and People of Color under control (Allen, 2005; Brown & Schept, 2017). In this sense, many abolitionists identify a continuity of struggle shared by those who fought against slavery in the 19th century and those fighting against carceral systems in the 21st century (Calathes, 2017; K. Gilmore, 2000; Heiner, 2007).

Contemporary abolitionists have continued the theoretical work of the Black Power movement abolitionists, further developing abolitionism as both a conceptual framework and a practical tool for understanding and challenging the many interlocking systems and conditions of carcerality, violence, and oppression that pervade social life (Brown & Schept, 2017, p. 446; Cullors, 2018; R. Gilmore, 2007; Kaba, 2020, 2021). Consequently, abolitionists have increasingly analyzed domains beyond police and prisons, including schooling and education (Love, 2019; Meiners, 2011); poverty, class, and economics (Schept, 2015); health (Loyd, 2014); disability (Ben-Moshe, 2020); mental illness (Beckett & Herbert, 2009); gender (Kim, 2018, 2020; Richie, 2012; Richie & Martensen, 2020); sexuality (McDonald, 2015); families, children, and family policing (R. Gilmore, 2007; Meiners, 2011; Rios, 2011; D. Roberts, 2009); and migration (Gill, 2016, Walia, 2013).

Although the abolitionist concept of “abolition” is nominally concerned with the negation or elimination of institutions or conditions that are seen as destructive and harmful, such as prisons, police, or international borders, this negation is itself premised on a positive vision of social transformation (Felber, 2020). At heart, Moten and Harney (2004) argue, abolitionism is a project designed to lay “the foundation of a new society” (p. 114). Critical criminologist Fernandez (2019) clarifies this perspective by observing that abolitionism is

steeped in emancipatory politics aiming to destroy the structural conditions that produce subjugation, while building a more democratic and just world. Thus, we see that abolition goes beyond calling for the removal of the undesirable. Instead, it is a strategy that seeks to eliminate key institutions that produce subjugation, or at the very least, to identify institutions, which, if eliminated, would make it difficult to continue with exploitation. (p. 326)

Abolitionists challenge and attempt to destroy oppressive systems and conditions because doing so is a good in itself. They seek to generate moments of “ruptural change” through struggle in order to disrupt and dismantle institutions and conditions of oppression (Fernandez, 2019, p. 326). The larger strategic purpose of this negation, however, is to create new institutions and conditions that can instead facilitate emancipation. This conception of social transformation should not be understood as linear or as calling simply for negation first, followed by creation. Instead, creation and negation are seen as going hand in hand in order to render oppressive systems “obsolete” (A. Davis, 2003) and in essence to bring about “the abolition of a [form of] society that could have prisons” or any other mechanism of subjugation (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 114).

Defining Abolitionist Social Work

At its core, abolitionist social work is the theoretical and practical attempt to put abolitionism into practice within social work and by social workers. This simple definition can be deceptive, however, because what it actually means to implement abolitionism has radical implications for the character of social work and the task of social workers.

In the United States especially, abolitionist social work has grown and developed alongside and as part of growing, widespread critiques of the criminal legal system as a whole, and police and prisons in particular. The systemically racist distribution of police violence, rates and length of incarceration, and lifelong social, economic, and political obstacles imposed following encounters with the criminal legal system are not new (Alexander, 2020; American Public Health Association, 2018; Bobo & Thompson, 2006; Edwards et al., 2019; Hinton, 2016; Lipsitz, 2016; Ritchie, 2017; Vitale, 2017), but no longer are they marginalized discourses (Reny & Newman, 2021; Taylor, 2016). They have been thrust into the public spotlight by organizers following their exposure of the police killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and George Floyd, among many others (Nguyen et al., 2021; Ritchie, 2017; Taylor, 2016). Abolitionist social workers, alongside critical criminologists and anticarceral social work scholars, have argued that the primary function of these legal institutions is not the benign protection of the public but, rather, the management of subordinated and marginalized populations and the enforcement of a stratified social order through the use and threat of violence (Jacobs et al., 2021). In the United States, this order has been composed of malleable but mutually reinforcing structures of oppression, including class domination, racism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and others (Ben-Moshe, 2020; A. Davis, 2003; R. Gilmore, 2007; Richie & Martensen, 2020; Saleh-Hanna, 2015).

Like abolitionism generally, abolitionist social work calls for the dismantling of carceral institutions as a necessary step toward the goal of the abolition of oppressive structures as such and for the creation of alternative conditions, policies, and institutions that would displace carceral institutions (Richie & Martensen, 2020). Of particular concern to abolitionist social workers is the steadily expanding reach of carceral institutions beyond even the traditional scope of police, courts, and prisons, into the social service domains of schools, substance use treatment, homelessness outreach, and mental health care provision—places where social workers are deeply involved and often working in conjunction with police and other carceral agents (Kim, 2020; Richie & Martensen, 2020). Abolitionist social work is concerned with identifying the ways in which social work and social workers are complicit in supporting or reinforcing carceral institutions, because complicity with these institutions entails complicity in maintaining the structures of oppression that depend on carceral institutions to persist (Bergen & Abji, 2020; Kim, 2020; Pollack, 2020). Feminist abolitionists Richie and Martensen (2020) exemplify this concern, arguing that any form of social work that makes itself amenable to or supportive of carceral systems is no longer providing “social” services. Instead, they argue that this form of social work delivers “carceral services” that serve to reinforce structures of oppression and help strengthen carceral systems, sometimes even granting them greater legitimacy by providing less overtly violent interventions (Richie & Martensen, 2020).

Social Work Complicity With Carceral Systems

The “carceral social work” criticized by abolitionists refers to any form of social work that

relies on logics of social control and White supremacy and that uses coercive and punitive practices to manage Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and poor communities. Carceral social work enacts these logics and practices in tandem with the penal arm of the state, condoning and in many cases collaborating or integrating with police, prosecutors, jails, prisons, juvenile and criminal courts.

(Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 39)

Engaging in carceral social work may be intentional, but it need not be. It is determined by the function and outcomes of the social work being done and its relationship to carceral systems and White supremacy (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Social Work’s Carceral History

Social work’s history is replete with examples of social workers functioning in concert with carceral systems to uphold, reinforce, and expand the control of marginalized and oppressed groups, both intentionally and unintentionally (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021). During the profession’s early years in the United States, social workers labored to “assimilate” immigrants from eastern and southeastern Europe, ostensibly helping to soften some of the most harmful impacts of rapidly industrializing capitalism, but in doing so still policing the boundaries of racial and ethnic belonging (Park & Kemp, 2006). Social workers’ complicity in and support of the practice of eugenics at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century are well documented, including luminaries in the field such as Jane Addams and Edith Abbott (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Kennedy, 2008). This support for eugenics contributed to the stigmatization and sterilization of gender nonconforming people, unmarried women, people with disabilities, people with real or perceived mental illnesses, and Black women (Seal, 2013). From the 1890s until the 1970s, social workers were also deeply involved in the boarding school movement, which was a genocidal effort to eradicate Indigenous cultures in the United States (Haag, 2013). As its founder Richard Henry Pratt said, the purpose of subjecting Indigenous children to the boarding schools was to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Curcio, 2006, p. 55). This movement systematically coerced Indigenous families into giving their children over to both private and government-run schools, whereupon they would be stripped of their Indigenous clothes, cultural practices, language, and often their lives (Adams, 1995). At the same time, social workers operating through child welfare agencies also facilitated the disproportionate removal of Indigenous children from their homes and tribes, and subsequent adoption by non-Native families (Thibeault & Spencer, 2019).

In more recent history, social workers have continued to be deeply involved with the child welfare system or, as its abolitionist critics refer to it, the “family regulation system” (Mack, 2021) or the “family policing system” (D. Roberts, 2021). As argued by Dorothy Roberts (2009, 2021, 2022), a prominent family policing system abolitionist, this system has a long history of surveilling, policing, and disproportionately separating poor and BIPOC families. The majority of cases in which Black children are removed from their families are not a result of physical or sexual abuse but, rather, a result of alleged “neglect” stemming from the sequelae of poverty: children left alone at home during work hours, limited food in the home, and multiple family members sharing bedrooms with children, to name a few (D. Roberts, 2009). The family policing system, abolitionists argue, systematically punishes the victims of oppressive structures while failing to address the root structural causes of material deprivation (Dettlaff et al., 2021; D. Roberts, 2009, 2021, 2022).

Abolitionist and anticarceral social workers have also used the concept of carceral social work to critique the potential harms perpetuated by social workers within prisons (O’Brien et al., 2020), with immigrant youth (Bergen & Abji, 2020), in refugee camps (Brankamp, 2022), and in many other domains. For abolitionist social workers, this legacy of complicity with carceral systems indicates that there is something within the field of social work that must be transformed first if it is going to play an emancipatory role in society or contribute to the larger abolitionist project (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Social Work Responses to the Harms of Carceral Systems

In response to the persistently harmful outcomes and publicly visible violence exhibited by carceral systems, there have been calls for the reform of policing and the criminal legal system from across the political spectrum (Akbar, 2020). Social workers have frequently been identified by policymakers and social workers themselves as a vehicle for supporting, training, replacing, or accompanying police in a variety of domains (Jacobs et al., 2021). Historically, the prevailing response of social work as a profession and social workers in the field has been to adopt two primary orientations—an “ameliorative” orientation and a “collaborative” orientation—both of which assume that police and social workers are essentially compatible in terms of the functions they fulfill but that social workers can make certain types of interventions that will improve the ability of police to fulfill their proper functions (see Patterson & Swan, 2019; A. Roberts, 1978).

Ameliorative Orientation

The ameliorative orientation calls for social workers to intervene in policing practices from the outside. Amelioration especially involves training or educating police to respond to a variety of social problems in ways that are less punitive or violent and are instead informed by relevant social services methods and approaches (Jacobs et al., 2021; A. Roberts, 1978). This commonly includes training in methods of de-escalation and conflict resolution, especially during cases of mental health crises (Lamb et al., 2002). It may also include training in trauma-informed or developmentally informed interventions (Lamb et al., 2002).

Collaborative Orientation

Rather than external ameliorative interventions on the practices of police, the collaborative orientation calls for the greater integration of social workers with police departments (Jacobs et al., 2021; Michaels & Treger, 1973; Patterson & Swan, 2019). This may look like social workers in social services departments or organizations collaborating with police departments in order to respond instead of or in conjunction with police officers to particular kinds of social problems, such as mental health crises, substance use crises, or domestic violence (Compton et al., 2014; Corcoran et al., 2001; Garrett, 2004; Morabito, 2007; Morabito et al., 2018). It may also look like social workers doing so while being directly housed within police departments (Jacobs et al., 2021; Patterson & Swan, 2019; A. Roberts, 1978).

Critical Responses

These two orientations have been hegemonic within the field of social work as well as in public discourse in the United States pertaining to police and criminal legal system reforms. In response to increasingly visible cases of police violence against poor Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, more critical voices have emerged, calling for a comprehensive transformation of the relationship between the field of social work and the criminal legal system (Jacobs et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2020). Abolitionist social work has been one of those critical voices. For abolitionist social workers, one lesson to take from the historical and current relationship between social work and carceral systems is that replacing police or prison systems with social workers will have limited benefits if social workers are themselves currently reinforcing carceral systems (Richie & Martensen, 2020). Instead, social work must be transformed before it is capable of contributing positively to the project of abolition (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Abolitionist Social Work Key Positions

Although substantial diversity and disagreement exist within the abolitionist social work framework, several unifying key positions are broadly shared.

Carceral Systems Are Destructive

Abolitionists in general argue that carceral systems, especially police and prisons, are essentially destructive of human flourishing (A. Davis, 2003). Rather than serve any necessary public protection functions as is commonly believed, these systems are considered by abolitionists to be vital mechanisms for the maintenance of capitalist class inequities, structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and border imperialism, and consequently for the control, oppression, and destruction of marginalized and subjugated populations (Coyle & Schept, 2018; Maher, 2021; Saleh-Hanna, 2015). Abolitionist social workers in particular emphasize that prisons, police, and other carceral systems produce substantial violence, trauma, and negative life outcomes,

particularly concentrated toward the marginalized populations that social workers are ostensibly obligated to assist and serve (O'Brien et al., 2020; Richie, 2012; D. Roberts, 2022; Winters & McLaughlin, 2020).

Non-abolitionist advocates of carceral reform commonly recognize that particular carceral systems may result in illegitimate violence, breed injustice, and serve destructive social control functions (Patel, 2016; Robinson, 2020). At minimum, however, they argue that there are some core, necessary functions carceral systems fulfill that justify their existence and that the focus of carceral critics should be on reducing or reforming the destructive manifestations of these systems while preserving the essential protective elements (McGlynn, 2022). Abolitionist social workers reject the idea that such an essential core exists in carceral systems and instead argue that carceral systems must ultimately be dismantled in their entirety (Brock-Petroshius et al., 2022). They further argue that the problems carceral systems ostensibly exist to manage should instead be managed through broader social, political, and economic transformations and the creation of new institutions that can respond to social problems in noncarceral and nonpunitive ways (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Carceral Systems Support Racial Capitalism

Abolitionists, especially in the United States, place a heavy emphasis on the role of carceral institutions in the maintenance of White supremacy as a component of capitalism (Jacobs et al., 2021; Maher, 2021; Saleh-Hanna, 2015). Drawing from the work of Cedric Robinson, this intertwined character of racial subjugation and class exploitation is a phenomenon often referred to as racial capitalism (Kelley, 2017). Modern police in the United States initially emerged from the slave catcher patrols and night watchmen who violently enforced a settler colonial *herrenvolk* democracy at the expense of both free and enslaved Black people, as well as Indigenous Americans (Brucato, 2014). The country's early police were largely wielded against new immigrant populations from Ireland and then eastern and southeastern Europe that were filling American cities, and whose status as White was in doubt (Ignatiev, 2012). Their modern incarnations as what Brucato (2014) refers to as "petty sovereigns" (p. 31) continue to disproportionately patrol, surveil, arrest, attack, and kill poorer communities of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color relative to Whites, as well as enforce and administer conditions of poverty and class inequality.

The compound effect of this legacy is the maintenance of a highly inequitable class society—racial capitalism—in which poverty and state repression, as well as wealth and power, are differentially distributed and experienced through the filter of race (Coyle & Schept, 2018; Kelley, 2017). Abolitionist social workers would agree with Stuart Hall's observation that "race is the modality in which class is lived" (Hall et al., 1978, p. 394).

Criminality Is Constructed

Abolitionists argue that criminality is a socially constructed category (Carrier & Piché, 2015; Richie & Martensen, 2020). This means that no action, characteristic, transgression, or person is inherently criminal but, rather, must be categorized and deemed to be so by authoritative and perception-shaping institutions and mechanisms of socialization, such as the law, mass media, or criminology as an academic discipline (Carrier & Piché, 2015; Hulsman, 1997). These constructions of crime are themselves consistently inflected and molded by larger systems of racism, patriarchy, misogyny, ableism, heterosexism, and classism (Ben-Moshe, 2018; Leotti, 2020, 2021; Russell & Carlton, 2013; Saleh-Hanna, 2015). Some abolitionists have pushed back against an excessive emphasis on the state's direct role in constructing criminality, re-emphasizing the reality of interpersonal harm independent of state designations, yet these abolitionist scholars have still argued forcefully for the importance of understanding criminalization as a process of social construction (Ilea, 2018).

In framing crime as a social construct, abolitionists argue that reducing the causality and responsibility of crime to individuals alone should be rejected; instead, "problematized situations," and ways that the harms of these situations can be prevented or mitigated, should be investigated (Carrier & Piché, 2015, para. 19; Hulsman, 1997), especially the larger structures of inequity and violence that engender such situations in the first place (Kim, 2021; Maher, 2021). Abolitionist social workers have argued that social workers are in central, often unique positions when interacting with criminalized populations to either reinforce existing processes of criminalization or disrupt them during processes such as risk assessment (Leotti, 2020), domestic violence interventions (Kim, 2013), evaluations of child neglect (D. Roberts, 2022), and others.

Reform in Itself Is Insufficient

Abolitionists are also consistently critical of calls for the reform of police, prisons, or the criminal legal system. Although this may seem incongruent or utopian, this position is informed by concern that some reforms ultimately result in a strengthening of those systems rather than their weakening and displacement (Bell, 2021; Kaba, 2014). A commonly held position in abolitionist writing invokes Andre Gorz's (1967) concept of "non-reformist reforms" to support certain kinds of reforms in the short term, namely those that contribute to a genuine reduction of the power of carceral systems and oppose other kinds of reforms that may strengthen, legitimize, or expand carceral systems (R. Gilmore, 2007). Abolishing solitary confinement, ending the death penalty, stopping electronic monitoring, or initiating a jobs and housing program for formerly incarcerated individuals are frequently identified examples of non-reformist reforms supported by abolitionists (Felber, 2020) because they are the kinds of reforms that "at the end of the day, unravel rather than widen the net of social control through criminalization" (R. Gilmore, 2007, p. 242). Examples of "reformist reforms" opposed by abolitionists that strengthen or expand the reach of carceral systems include the use of electronic monitoring in homes in lieu of imprisonment; building new prisons to address overcrowding; and building prison facilities to house specific groups, such as people with mental illnesses (Bell, 2021; Felber, 2020; Karakatsanis, 2018).

Social Work Must Be Community-Centered

Abolitionist social workers argue that social workers should decenter themselves and their own institutional authority and work to “elevate community voices, community practices, and community problem solving” (Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 53). Active community involvement in designing and implementing responses to social conflict and harms is considered crucial for abolition to be possible, particularly as an antidote to both the individualistic pathologization of social problems and carceral methods of control and punishment (Brown & Schept, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2021). These responses may vary between communities, depending on local conditions and challenges, but abolitionists seek to implement different forms of transformative, restorative, and other noncarceral and nonpunitive forms of justice within the communities in which they work (Jacobs et al., 2021). For abolitionists,

incarceration and/or punishment are seen as a malign neglect of the interests and needs of victims and communities. Compensation, healing, growth, mediation, restoration, transformation, cosmopolitanism, hospitality, solidarity, care, empathy, accountability, responsibility, empowerment are the key notions governing alternative (and oftentimes conflicting) conceptions of justice used to negate the necessity of responding to various harms either by locking people up, or through any form of retributive, afflictive sanctions.

(Carrier & Piché, 2015, para. 24)

Although not a panacea for all ills, abolitionists argue that it is through the creation of distinct kinds of strong communities that police and other carceral systems can be made obsolete (Maher, 2021).

Abolition Requires Larger Transformations to Succeed

Abolitionist social workers alongside abolitionists more broadly argue that the abolition of carceral systems requires more than simply replacing these systems with alternative but commensurate institutions that can “fill the footprint of the prison” while being less destructive (A. Davis, 2003, p. 107). Instead, they argue that achieving abolition and making carceral systems obsolete will require broad social, economic, and political transformations (Jacobs et al., 2021). Achieving abolition will require a transformation of the material conditions in which people live, in terms of both the elimination of poverty, systemic racism, and other forms of structural violence and deprivation that contribute to different forms of harmful antisocial behavior and the concomitant rebuilding of community and the bonds and institutions that protect and sustain it (Maher, 2021). It will further require societies to fundamentally alter their relationship to “carceral logic,” to ideas of justice, and to punishment (Brown & Schept, 2017).

Social Workers Cannot Facilitate Emancipation Through Collaboration or Co-Optation

Abolitionist social workers argue that social workers cannot facilitate emancipation or the creation of conditions of human flourishing by collaborating with carceral systems. Although social work as a profession has had a history deeply intertwined with carceral systems, abolitionist social workers argue that social workers need to adopt an oppositional stance toward carceral systems or risk being co-opted into those systems and becoming a mere dispenser of carceral services (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018; Richie & Martensen, 2020). This categorically oppositional stance is a manifestation of the *zealous* or *fanatical* politics of abolitionism more generally (Olson, 2007, 2009). As Olson, (2007) argues, this fanaticism is not defined by irrationality but, rather, a steadfast refusal to compromise or negotiate in the face of injustice. It also requires a willingness to draw lines between friends and enemies in a field of struggle over an issue, and consequently a willingness to push people to pick a side in the fight for humanity and justice, even if it alienates people (Olson, 2009). This abolitionist approach to political struggles for justice transforms social workers from carceral service providers or well-intentioned interventionists for isolated individuals into agitators against the carceral state who “[resist] participation in structures of oppression as short-term reform compromises” and work for the strengthening and liberation of all oppressed communities and classes of people (Richie & Martensen, 2020, p. 15).

Abolition by Attrition

One of the most influential modern conceptions of abolitionist strategy is the “attrition model,” developed by the Prison Research Education Action Project (Knopp et al., 1976). This model proposes three primary steps for eliminating carceral institutions from society, targeting prisons in particular: moratorium, decarceration, and excarceration (Knopp et al., 1976). These steps are not strictly linear. The moratorium step involves halting all further construction or expansion of prisons and carceral institutions (Knopp et al., 1976). The decarceration step involves releasing people from prison through various means, such as retroactively decriminalizing offenses, instituting sentencing review boards, and creating alternative victim restitution systems within communities that can facilitate the social reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals (Knopp et al., 1976). The final step, excarceration, involves preventing people from being incarcerated in the first place, such as by decriminalizing as many existing offenses as possible (particularly “victimless crimes”), instituting alternative sentencing and restitution procedures, and creating community-based conflict resolution centers (Knopp et al., 1976). The goal of this model is to increasingly wrest more social domains from the control of carceral institutions, “[diminishing] their function and power . . . in our society” (Knopp et al., 1976, p. 62).

A more recent but similar model of praxis that runs throughout much contemporary abolitionist thinking and organizing, including for abolitionist social work, is the demand to “disband, disempower, and disarm” carceral institutions, especially those of police (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018, p. 375). This abolitionist chant was shouted by protesters in the 2014–2015 Ferguson uprising, and as McDowell and Fernandez (2018) explain, “Disbanding the police . . . is

the fanatical or uncompromising position, and disarmament and disempowerment comprise the primary means for achieving this goal” (p. 379). Disarmament requires the removal of guns and other tools of violence from police, whereas disempowerment involves the larger project of reducing the strength, authority, resources, and perceived legitimacy of police and other carceral systems by constraining them legally, cutting their resources, building alternative institutions, and challenging them through direct action (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018; Vitale, 2017).

For abolitionist and other anticarceral social workers, as more social domains and spaces are removed from carceral control, they can be displaced by practices and institutions modeled on transformative and restorative justice, mutual aid, and other “life-affirming” interventions that support “the health, self-determination, and sustainability of all communities” (Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 38).

Abolitionist Social Work Key Debates

Although abolitionist social workers generally share the positions discussed in the section on “Abolitionist Social Work Key Positions,” there are points of internal disagreement and debate. Some of these points of disagreement mirror larger divisions among abolitionists broadly, whereas others are specific to the field of social work.

Liberal Versus Radical Abolitionism

Abolitionism is a political project that cuts across, sometimes uneasily, different traditional ideological boundaries, such as anarchism and Marxism (Carrier & Piché, 2015). One notable division is between what McDowell and Fernandez (2018) describe as liberal and radical tendencies within abolitionism. McDowell and Fernandez (2018) argue that the radical tendency in abolitionism is defined by four key components: (a) centering the racial structure in analyses of carceral systems, (b) seeking to dismantle racial capitalism as part of the project of dismantling criminal legal institutions, (c) practicing a “fanatical” politics that refuses compromise and compels moderates to choose sides (as described by Olson, 2007, 2009), and (d) pursuing a “dual-power” strategy that entails creating alternative institutions that can challenge and replace existing carceral systems (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018, p. 377). The liberal tendency within abolitionism, on the other hand, is focused more narrowly on reducing the power and reach of punitive criminal legal institutions and retributive responses to crime (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018).

According to Cohen (1988, cited in McDowell & Fernandez, 2018, p. 378), liberal abolitionists call for decarceration and the prevention of imprisonment, diversion away from criminal legal institutions, decategorization of labels and typologies of criminality, delegalization and the removal of the state from responses to social conflict and harm, and a deprofessionalization away from the power of experts within the criminal legal system. Although radical abolitionists may generally support these strategies, some abolitionists, such as Carrier and Piché (2015), have argued that many (although not all) advocates of the attrition model and other more reform-focused, academically criminological, and less overtly revolutionary approaches to abolitionism

could be better characterized as “penal minimalists” (para. 12). Both liberal and radical tendencies seek to shrink the power of the carceral state, but they diverge over the centrality of race and capitalism in analyses of carceral systems, the desirability of a zealous and uncompromising politics, and the necessity or desirability of building dual-power alternative institutions to the carceral state (Carrier & Piché, 2015; McDowell & Fernandez, 2018, p. 378; Saleh-Hanna, 2015). More recent work by American abolitionists in particular has offered a radical conception of abolitionism that views itself as part of a larger revolutionary project challenging the legacies of capitalism, colonialism, and slavery, as well as modern conceptions of representative democracy and the stabilities of binary gender constructs (Carrier & Piché, 2015, para. 13).

Attrition

Although the attrition model is broadly popular, it has also been subject to critique by abolitionists. Morris (1995), for instance, critiques the concepts of decarceration and excarceration as articulated by Knopp et al. (1976) as flawed and potentially counterproductive to abolitionist goals. Morris and others argue that without also implementing a model of transformative justice that alters the material conditions of social inequity, certain forms of decarceration could actually lead well-intentioned reformers to support the construction of newer, more “humane” carceral facilities to replace older decrepit and defunded ones (Morris, 1995; Piché, 2014). Similarly, James Kilgore and other abolitionist critics of the attrition model argue that these steps run the risk of having net-widening effects (bringing more people into contact and control of carceral systems), with some of the proposed alternatives to prisons—such as electronic ankle bracelets and other forms of electronic surveillance—expanding a carceral logic of surveillance and control into the communities of incarcerated people (Schenwar & Law, 2020; Weisburd, 2022). Others, such as Carrier and Piché (2015), argue that although commonly embraced by abolitionists, the attrition model represents more of a “minimalist agenda” attempting to radically reduce—but not necessarily eliminate—carceral systems (para. 12).

Relationship With Other Critical Social Work Frameworks

Given the expansiveness of the project of carceral abolition and the overlapping and interlocking nature of the varied structures of oppression abolitionist social workers are trying to challenge, it should be no surprise that they have drawn from and established generative connections with several other social work frameworks.

Anticarceral Social Work

Anticarceral and abolitionist social work have extensively overlapping values, goals, strategies, and scholarship, and they are often used interchangeably as terms (Leotti, 2022; O’Brien et al., 2020; Richie & Martensen, 2020). As a result, the boundaries between them in their usage are often ambiguous. One possible distinction is that whereas abolitionist social work as a concept largely serves to conceptualize and position social work as part of a larger abolitionist project

(Brock-Petroshius et al., 2022), anticarceral social work as a concept is used both more *specifically* to distinguish a form of social work that is juxtaposed directly against carceral social work (and carceral feminism) and thus in opposition to collaboration with carceral institutions (Jacobs et al., 2021) and more *broadly* to capture an array of restorative, transformative, and abolitionist community-rooted alternatives to carceral systems that could guide social workers (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Feminist Social Work

Feminism generally and feminist social work in particular have played a highly influential role in the thinking of abolitionist social workers. As the abolition feminist authors of the work, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (A. Davis et al., 2022) argue, abolitionism has depended on feminism from its origins, both for its analyses and for its organizing strategies, and is “unimaginable without our radical, anticapitalist, antiracist, decolonial, queer feminism” (p. 12). One straightforward reason for this connection is that opposition to gendered oppression and violence in general is crucial for the abolitionist project (A. Davis et al., 2022). Specifically, however, abolitionist social workers have drawn substantial inspiration from critiques of “carceral feminism” (Bernstein, 2010), especially those critiques made by woman of color feminists, such as the INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans people of Color Against Violence organization (INCITE! 2006). Anticarceral feminists argue that carceral feminists are those who “[see] increased policing, prosecution, and imprisonment as the primary solution to violence against women” (Law, 2015, p. 2). According to these critics of carceral feminism, relying on the carceral state and punitive carceral solutions to violence conceptualizes violence too narrowly and ignores the ways that these institutions are embedded in racial capitalist forms of oppression, and thus help some women—particularly wealthier cis-het White women—while distributing inordinate violence against women of color, poor women, queer women, immigrant women, and transwomen (INCITE! 2006; Kim, 2018; Whalley & Hackett, 2017).

Abolitionist feminists have extensively analyzed examples of noncarceral responses to interpersonal violence, especially domestic and sexual violence, that have been theorized and implemented by feminist and feminist-inspired groups and communities (Bierria, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2021; Kelly, 2011; Kim, 2011, 2018, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha & Dixon, 2020; Polavarapu, 2019). These examples include critical analyses of cases and strategies for implementing restorative and transformative justice (Kim, 2018, 2021); dispute resolution and crisis intervention programs (Jacobs et al., 2021); and other community-based and noncarceral approaches to providing accountability, healing, and restitution for social harm.

Dis/ability Critical Race Studies

Recent abolitionist social work has also developed cross-connections with the field of disability studies, particularly dis/ability critical race studies (Annamma et al., 2021; Ben-Moshe, 2020; Steele, 2017). Research at this juncture commonly analyzes the ways in which disability and madness are criminalized and subject to carceral logics and systems, as well as the ways in which

this carcerality is resisted (Annamma et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2020; Steele, 2017). The work of Liat Ben-Moshe has been especially influential in building this connection, most significantly by developing an analysis of contemporary carceral systems in light of the history of psychiatric deinstitutionalization (Ben-Moshe, 2013, 2014, 2020; Ben-Moshe et al., 2021). Although the shuttering of psychiatric institutions resulted in a reduction of enclosed carceral spaces used to house and hide people with perceived mental illness, the lack of positive community support and the bureaucratization of the deinstitutionalization process often presented further obstacles to emancipation and flourishing for former patients (Ben-Moshe, 2020). Ben-Moshe (2020) frames deinstitutionalization as an incomplete and problematic but still useful case study of the successful abolition of a type of enclosed carceral space and highlights the potential pitfalls and strategies that may be useful for contemporary abolitionists.

Transformative Justice

Among alternatives to punitive and retributive models of justice, transformative justice has played a particularly influential role among abolitionists and abolitionist social workers (Brown, 2019; Cullors, 2018). Transformative justice largely emerged from radical woman of color feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations mobilizing for noncarceral responses to domestic and gender-based violence (Kim, 2021). Rather than rely on a criminal legal system that expands the violence faced by marginalized people, transformative justice models call for community-based responses to interpersonal harm that eschew punishment or retribution for their own sake, identify and seek to repair harms caused by individuals, and recognize the forms of structural violence and oppression in which individual actions occur (Kim, 2021). Ultimately, the transformative justice model calls for the radical transformation of those conditions of structural violence as part of a larger project of contesting violence in all of its forms (Kim, 2021).

Conclusion

Abolitionist social work is a still-marginal but growing framework within social work research, pedagogy, and practice. Its categorical opposition to carceral systems and critique of social work's relationship to them represent a substantial challenge to the identity and purpose of the field of social work; the task of social workers; and the social, economic, and political organization of societies at a global level. Despite these challenges, translating abolitionist goals into social work practice is likely to be a key area of focus for abolitionist social work scholarship in the future.

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