

No Justice, No Resilience: Prison Abolition As Disaster Mitigation in an Era of Climate Change

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ABSTRACT

Disasters are becoming more frequent and destructive while the consequences for incarcerated persons have grown increasingly visible. Simultaneously, scholars, individuals, and communities are grappling with police brutality and systemic anti-Black racism in the criminal legal system by engaging with the concept of abolition. In this article we demonstrate that these issues are not disconnected and argue that the abolition of the prison industrial complex (PIC) would mitigate the impacts of disasters for incarcerated persons and their communities. Incarceration undermines individual and collective resilience needed to recover from disasters, whereas carceral infrastructure facilitates disaster harm to incarcerated persons and their communities. Incarceration itself mirrors the harm and destruction of a disaster. Abolition of the PIC would not only prevent harm from incarceration, but also systems of accountability put in place by communities as suggested by abolitionists would contribute to the resilience of individuals and communities. By examining these connections, we provide a framework for considerations of abolition in an era of reckoning with anti-Blackness, the violence of the criminal legal system, and climate change, and suggest further investment of research in these areas.

Keywords: disaster, abolition, prison labor, emergency management, vulnerability, racism

INTRODUCTION

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WITH RECENT HIGHLY VISIBLE INSTANCES of state-sanctioned violence in the form of police brutality, increasing attention on anti-Black racism within the criminal legal system in the United States, and worldwide support of the Black Lives Matter movement, scholars and community members are increasingly engaging with the concept of abolition with regard to the continuum of state violence. At the same time, hazards and disaster scholars, practitioners, and community members are looking to the current and future impacts of climate change while working to bring attention to disasters as not “natural” but in fact reflections of vulnerability and oppression. The two issues have been studied by their respective fields but are rarely examined in connection with one another.

In this article, we examine systemic anti-Black racism and violence in the context of both the prison industrial

complex (PIC) and disasters to argue that abolition of the PIC is necessary to mitigate the harms of the carceral state and environmental injustice for Black communities. Anti-Blackness shapes mass incarceration and resilience to disasters, creating and exacerbating disasters for individuals who are incarcerated *and* their communities. Furthermore, we argue that alternative practices of community-led accountability, like that of transformative justice, are viable mechanisms to achieve a world without prisons, and thus contribute to the individual and collective resilience of all individuals and communities.

LEGACIES OF ANTI-BLACKNESS IN THE UNITED STATES

The PIC

According to the abolitionist organization *Critical Resistance*, the “prison industrial complex” refers to “the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems.”¹ Anti-Black racism, or anti-Blackness, asserts that Black people are subhuman. Many scholars who study anti-Blackness locate the origins of anti-Blackness in chattel slavery and argue that the logic of enslaving Black people continues to shape the current economic, political, environmental, and spatial realities of Black individuals and communities.² Although the PIC has its roots in anti-Blackness, one aspect, namely incarceration, is central to the maintenance of this system.

The history of the carceral state is based largely on political concerns about controlling Black life in the United States and is predicated upon systems of anti-Black dehumanization. Black communities were among the first targeted for the testing of new methods of surveillance and policing.³ Black family life has been pathologized and targeted for state intervention and incarceration, with particular impacts on Black women.⁴

The United States is the world’s leader in rates of incarceration with 698 per 100,000 residents locked up and 1 in 40 adults under some form of correctional supervision.⁵

The phenomenon by which the number of incarcerated persons in the United States has grown by >500% over the past 40 years has been referred to as “mass incarceration.”⁶ However, as abolitionist scholars such as Daniel Rodriguez have observed, the term mass incarceration is a misnomer.⁷ Incarcerated persons are excised from different communities at drastically different rates. Incarcerated persons are disproportionately representative of the most marginalized communities, particularly racial and ethnic minorities,⁸ with Black individuals most excessively represented under carceral control.

In many ways, the state’s operation of enslaving Black people simply continued through the targeted arrest and imprisonment of Black people. The codification of the 13th amendment exemplifies this; it states, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”⁹ Thus, the origins of prisons and prison labor are rooted in anti-Blackness. In legal, geographic, and political terms, this entails the confinement of Black people, the exploitation of their labor, and the ongoing precariousness of Black life long after the effects of incarceration ripple across all communities.

Environmental injustice

Environmental justice and disaster scholars have found that the same trends of anti-Blackness in the carceral state apply to environmental harms. Globally, as Pellow and others have articulated in cases ranging from Black people, indigenous societies, and Palestinian communities, systems of racial, ethnic, religious, and class domination through infrastructures of surveillance and containment tend to cluster criminalized subjects in environmentally precarious settings.¹⁰ The same populations targeted by the PIC, predominately Black communities, are subjected to disproportionately high rates of environmental harm, particularly disasters.¹¹

⁶Nazgol Ghandnoosh. “U.S. Prison Decline: Insufficient to Undo Mass Incarceration.” *The Sentencing Project*, 2020. <<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/u-s-prison-decline-insufficient-undo-mass-incarceration>> (Last accessed on April 28, 2021).

⁷Dylan Rodriguez. “‘Mass Incarceration’ as Misnomer.” *The Abolitionist*, 2016. <<https://abolitionistpaper.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/the-abolitionist-issue-26.pdf>> (Last accessed on May 8, 2021).

⁸Ryan Lualaba-Hollon and Daniel Cooper. *The War on Neighborhoods: Policing, Prison, and Punishment in a Divided City*. (Beacon Press, 2018).

⁹U.S. Const. amend. XIII.

¹⁰David Naguib Pellow. *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017); Elijah Baker, Cambria Wilson, Fabiana Lake, and David Pellow. *Environmental Justice Struggles in Prisons and Jails around the World: The 2020 Annual Report of the Prison Environmental Justice Project*. (2020).

¹¹Jayajit Chakraborty, Timothy W. Collins, and Sara E. Grineski. “Exploring the Environmental Justice Implications of Hurricane Harvey Flooding in Greater Houston, Texas.” *American Journal of Public Health* 109 (2019): 244–250.

¹Critical Resistance. “Our Communities, Our Solutions: An Organizer’s Toolkit for Developing Campaigns to Abolish Policing.” October 2020. <http://criticalresistance.org/cr_abolish-policing-toolkit_2020> (Last accessed on May 11, 2021).

²Peter James Hudson and Katherine McKittrick. “The Geographies of Blackness and Anti-Blackness: An Interview with Katherine McKittrick.” *The CLR James Journal* 20 (2014): 233–240.

³Garrett Felber. *Those Who Know Don’t Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State*. (UNC Press Books, 2019).

⁴Bruce Western and Christopher Wildeman. “The Black Family and Mass Incarceration.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 221–242.

⁵Laura M. Maruschak and Todd D. Minton. “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2017–2018.” *US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics*, 2020; Peter Wagner and Wendy Sawyer. “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, 2020. <<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>> (Last accessed on May 8, 2021).

Anti-Blackness determines the conditions of our communities, from who lives in floodplains to who lives in prison. Anti-Black practices such as Jim Crow laws, redlining, and racial covenants restricted where Black individuals could buy property and where Black communities could exist. The legacy of these practices remain.¹² Black communities are more exposed to hazardous air pollution and environmental conditions.¹³ Black people are more likely to be living in floodplains.¹⁴ Black communities disproportionately bear the brunt of losses from flooding hazards.¹⁵ In essence, communities feel disaster impacts in racialized terms. Anti-Blackness shapes communities' exposure to environmental hazards and disasters.

The production of hazardous carceral geographies

The term “mass incarceration” has been co-opted by criminal justice reformists who argue that the issue with incarceration is that it has grown too large, too expensive, and entangled too large of a portion of Americans. However, it is not just that the United States incarcerates an enormous amount of people, although that is certainly part of the issue, but that incarceration itself creates harm for individuals and communities.¹⁶ Prisons are enormous institutions that house several hundred to several thousand persons. The need for large tracts of cheap land led to prisons being built in rural areas and often with little concern for the presence of environmental and technological hazards.

A history of building correctional facilities on or near Superfund or toxic waste sites has led to exposure to environmental hazards such as toxic coal waste, radioactive waste, pesticides, and insecticides.¹⁷ Incarcerated persons in toxic correctional facilities have reported or experienced adverse symptoms such as skin irritation, gastrointestinal, neurological, and respiratory problems that are consistent with exposure to environmental hazards.¹⁸

Chronic health conditions including asthma and other respiratory illnesses may be exacerbated by issues such as poor environmental ventilation, unsanitary conditions, and the geographic location of correctional facilities.¹⁹ The production of these hazardous carceral geographies thus create harm for the individuals who are incarcerated within carceral institutions, and perpetuate legacies of environmental injustice fueled by anti-Blackness.

INCARCERATION AND UNNATURAL DISASTERS

Disasters are in fact not “natural” but are products of policy decisions and the vulnerability of marginalized and oppressed people and places.²⁰ This can be acutely observed in the context of disasters and incarceration as the deleterious effects of disasters are both made possible and amplified by carceral institutions. Prisons operate as their own “little towns” that keep them largely invisible to the public, but also isolated from resources in times of disaster.

Housing such large numbers of people makes taking protective actions extremely difficult if not impossible. Notions of punishment dictate the withholding of resources allocated and given to incarcerated individuals; scholars show that time and time again, incarcerated individuals are left to fend for themselves in disasters while prison staff and administrators often either do the bare minimum or nothing at all.²¹

One of the most controversial issues concerning prisons and disasters is the consistent refusal of state governments to evacuate incarcerated people even as surrounding community members are told to evacuate due to the presence of a hazard. There are countless examples of this across contemporary prison history. During Hurricane Harvey in August of 2016, people incarcerated at the Stiles Unit in

¹²Douglas S. Massey, and Jonathan Tannen. “Suburbanization and Segregation in the United States: 1970–2010.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41 (2018): 1594–1611.

¹³Michael Ash and James K. Boyce. “Racial Disparities in Pollution Exposure and Employment at US Industrial Facilities.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 115 (2018): 10636–10641.

¹⁴Chakraborty *et al.* (2019). *Op. cit.*

¹⁵Kevin T. Smiley. “Social Inequalities in Flooding Inside and Outside of Floodplains During Hurricane Harvey.” *Environmental Research Letters* 15 (2020): 0940b3.

¹⁶Rodriguez. (2016). *Op. cit.*

¹⁷Elizabeth A. Bradshaw. “Tombstone Towns and Toxic Prisons: Prison Ecology and the Necessity of an Anti-Prison Environmental Movement.” *Critical Criminology* 26 (2018): 407–422; Maggie Leon-Corwin, Jericho R. McElroy, Michelle L. Estes, Jon Lewis, Michael A. Long. “Polluting Our Prisons? An Examination of Oklahoma Prison Locations and Toxic Releases, 2011–2017.” *Punishment & Society* 22 (2020): 413–438; Kelsey D. Russell. “Cruel and Unusual Construction: The Eight Amendment as a Limit on Building Prisons on Toxic Waste Sites Comments.” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 165 (2017): [i]-784.

¹⁸Bradshaw. (2018). *Op. cit.*; Leon-Corwin *et al.* (2020). *Op. cit.*; Russell. (2017). *Op. cit.*; Baker *et al.* (2020). *Op. cit.*

¹⁹Meghan A. Novisky, Chelsey S. Narvey, and Daniel C. Semenza. “Institutional Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in American Prisons.” *Victims and Offenders* 15 (2020): 1244–1261; Meghan A. Novisky and Robert L. Peralta. “Gladiator School: Returning Citizens’ Experiences with Secondary Violence Exposure in Prison.” *Victims and Offenders* 15 (2020): 594–618; Paul L. Simpson and Tony G. Butler. “Covid-19, Prison Crowding, and Release Policies.” *BMJ* 369 (2020): m1551; Baker *et al.* (2020). *Op. cit.*

²⁰Ksenia Chmutina and Jason von Meding. “A Dilemma of Language: ‘Natural Disasters’ in Academic Literature.” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* 10 (2019): 283–292.

²¹Yolanda Martinez and Anna Flagg. *Puerto Rico Puts Its Prisons Near Flood Zones*. (The Marshall Project, 2017). <<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2017/09/21/puerto-rico-puts-its-prisons-in-flood-zones>> (Last accessed on May 8, 2021); William Omorogieva. “Prison Preparedness and Legal Obligations to Protect Prisoners During Natural Disasters.” (2018); Melissa A. Savilonis. *Prisons and Disasters*. (Northeastern University, 2013); Gabe Stern. *Report Details Inconsistent Procedures in NY Prison during COVID-19 Outbreak*. (The Daily Orange, 2020). <<http://dailyorange.com/2020/09/report-details-inconsistent-procedures-ny-prison-covid-19-outbreak>> (Last accessed on May 8, 2021); Sarah S. Vance. “Justice after Disaster—What Hurricane Katrina Did to the Justice System in New Orleans Keynote Address.” *Howard Law Journal* 51 (2008): 621–650.

Beaumont, Texas, experienced gravely dehumanizing conditions. Although many state prisons were evacuated, 3000 people inside the Stiles Unit were caught in the storm.²²

Men reported inadequate meals and water supply, and all water sources were shut off. The toilets could not flush and many overflowed, and the two porta-potties per cell block of 450 people were seldom granted access to the individuals incarcerated by the guards. One man reported flooding in his cell up to his knees. Similarly, in 2008, Hurricane Ike caused major food and water shortages and poor sanitation conditions in the Galveston County Jail.

In Orleans Parish Prison after Hurricane Katrina, people were left without water, food, and ventilation for days, and in many cases, guards abandoned their post altogether.²³ In some cell blocks, contaminated water rose to chest level.²⁴ Repeatedly, incarcerated people are left to suffer. Not allowing for evacuation and not having proper supplies for incarcerated people are putting them in harm's way and compounding the effects of disaster. Time and time again, incarcerated people are treated as unworthy of protection.

Prisons are prime examples of vulnerable spaces housing vulnerable individuals. These health conditions are often exacerbated by factors including recidivism, duration of incarceration, inadequate access to health care, and exposure to environmental hazards and disasters.²⁵ The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has magnified the racial disparities and health care vulnerabilities that exist in the criminal legal system as seen with other hazards and disasters.

As of the beginning of 2021, there have been 354,725 COVID-19 cases and 2224 deaths among incarcerated persons.²⁶ Jail community cycling, or incarcerating then releasing people from a given zip code from Cook County Jail, was associated with 15.7% of all COVID-19 cases in Illinois in April 2020.²⁷ In this way, incarceration has helped fuel the pandemic's spread, as repeated prison transfers, poor ventilation, overcrowding, and close habitation make Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID-19 recommendations impractical to follow.²⁸

The status of incarcerated persons as slaves under the 13th amendment to the United States constitutions and the

risks produced by environmental harms, including disasters, has been described as "environmental slavery" to allow a deeper understanding of the intersections of environmental racism and enslavement.²⁹ The vulnerability of incarcerated people has been documented in disaster response and recovery operations, for example, to fight wildfires or clear debris after a disaster.³⁰ Although this form of prison labor is seen as redemptive, it is extremely exploitative.

One prominent example lies in the incarcerated firefighters in California whose lives are endangered to curb and suppress wildfires and save others from the impacts of this disaster. Roughly 30% of California's forest fire fighters are incarcerated people.³¹ They receive a brief 4-week training and are paid as little as two dollars an hour on the fire line.³² The state of California saves roughly \$80 million a year using incarcerated firefighters.³³ Studies of state-level emergency plans have found that the majority of U.S. states plan to use incarcerated workers for disaster labor effort.³⁴ Research has found that programs using incarcerated firefighters do not consistently track or measure the success of such programs in terms of rehabilitation or reducing the return of incarcerated persons to prison.³⁵

The use of disaster labor of incarcerated persons can also be seen in the COVID-19 pandemic where in many cases incarcerated persons are only able to access personal protective equipment manufactured in prison factories and only after the majority of the masks produced in the prisons have been distributed to free persons.³⁶ Although incarcerated people are not deemed worthy of protection themselves, they are still expected to protect others.

Organizers and activists from various groups have recognized the horrid treatment at every level of incarcerated people specifically during disaster response. The Campaign to Fight Toxic Prisons (FTP), an abolitionist organization focused on the intersection of incarceration, the environment, and liberation movements, has addressed this on several levels. One mission of FTP is to reduce the harm produced by such disasters. FTP attacks issues from

²²Nathalie Baptiste. "'We Didn't Have to Suffer like That': Inside a Texas Prison during Hurricane Harvey." *Mother Jones* (blog), 2017. <<https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2017/11/we-didnt-have-to-suffer-like-that-inside-a-texas-prison-during-hurricane-harvey>> (Last accessed on May 2, 2021).

²³ACLU. "Abandoned and Abused—Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina, ACLU, 2006 | Prison Legal News." 2006. <<https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/publications/aclu-abandoned-and-abused-katrina-prisoners-2006>> (Last accessed on May 11, 2021).

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Novitsky *et al.* (2020). *Op. cit.*; Simpson and Butler. (2020). *Op. cit.*

²⁶COVID Prison Project. "Home." COVID Prison Project, 2020. <<https://covidprisonproject.com>> (Last accessed on May 10, 2021).

²⁷Eric Reinhart and Daniel L. Chen. "Incarceration and Its Disseminations: COVID-19 Pandemic Lessons from Chicago's Cook County Jail." *Health Affairs* 39 (2020): 1412–1418.

²⁸Leola A. Abraham, Timothy C. Brown, and Shaun A. Thomas. "How COVID-19's Disruption of the U.S. Correctional System Provides an Opportunity for Decarceration." *American Journal of Criminal Justice* (2020): 1–13.

²⁹Sacoby Wilson. "Environmental Justice and Health Disparities: Passion, Partnerships, and Progress." Presentation at University of California, Santa Barbara, May; David N. Pellow. "Political Prisoners and Environmental Justice." (2018): 1–20.

³⁰J. Carlee Purdum and Michelle A. Meyer. "Prisoner Labor Throughout the Life Cycle of Disasters." *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 11 (2020): 296–319.

³¹Julia Lurie. "30 Percent of California's Forest Firefighters Are Prisoners." *Mother Jones* (blog), 2015. <<https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2015/08/40-percent-californias-fires-are-fought-prison-inmates>> (Last accessed on April 29, 2021).

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Purdum and Meyer. (2020). *Op. cit.*

³⁵J. Carlee Purdum. "States are Putting Prisoners to Work Manufacturing Coronavirus Supplies." *The Conversation*, 2020. <<https://theconversation.com/states-are-putting-prisoners-to-work-manufacturing-coronavirus-supplies-135290>> (Last accessed on April 20, 2020).

³⁶David Brand. "New York State Will Give All Inmates Face Masks as COVID-19 Death Toll Rises." *Queens Daily Eagle*, 2020. <<https://queenseagle.com/all/new-york-state-will-give-all-inmates-face-masks-as-covid-19-death-toll-rises>> (Last accessed on May 9, 2021); Rachel Ellis. "Prison Labor in a Pandemic." *Contexts* 19 (2020): 90–91.

multiple fronts, from urging for evacuations, demanding relief aid, and supplying monetary help to incarcerated people impacted by natural disasters such as hurricanes.

Incarceration and disaster resilience in Black communities

The disproportionate impact of disasters and incarceration on Black communities reflects but also reinforces the disruption of resilience, a concept understood by disaster scholars to reflect the capacity of people and communities to “survive, adapt to, and recover from loss and disruption.”³⁷ Resilience as a concept is difficult to define but is a particularly valuable concept because it “brings together normally separate perspectives, people, professions and practices and creates a space for dialogue.”³⁸

Bringing together the literature of both disasters and incarceration demonstrates how incarceration erodes the resilience of individuals and entire communities. Resilience to disasters for individuals requires a variety of resources that having been incarcerated makes extremely challenging to obtain, especially for Black people, such as job security, wealth, stable access to safe housing, and social capital to name a few.

Previous research has established that Black people are disproportionately harmed by disasters. Research has shown Black people are more likely to be laid off, experience longer bouts of unemployment, and are less likely to see employment recovery after a disaster.³⁹ Black people, particularly women, are more likely to experience long-term housing instability after a hazard event.⁴⁰ In some cases, disaster survivors are stigmatized in their new homes.⁴¹ Incarceration contributes to these issues in several ways. Incarceration negatively impacts the long-term employment prospects, income, and wealth.⁴² Criminal records more widely impact Black people more than non-Black people, especially in terms of accessing employment.⁴³ Encounters with the criminal justice system produce lasting Black housing insecurity.⁴⁴

Incarceration also disrupts social capital both at the individual and community levels. Social capital represents a type of social infrastructure wherein resources are dispersed through a network of social relationships. Incarceration removes individuals from their networks of social relationships that has rippling effects on individuals and their communities. As individuals are removed, communal relationships are disrupted, leading to broad destabilization throughout entire communities.⁴⁵ The disruption of social capital also erodes the resilience of communities to disasters.⁴⁶ Social capital networks facilitate access to resources in disasters such as information, aid, financial resources, childcare, and psychological support.⁴⁷

Without fully understanding and addressing the root causes of disaster inequities, including incarceration, mitigation measures will fail to adequately protect the lives and livelihoods of Black communities, especially as climate change increases the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Anti-Blackness in disasters cannot be eroded without the dissolution of the anti-Black carceral state.

Abolition, power, and hazard mitigation

Social isolation, grounded in notions of punishment, is in direct opposition to what is necessary for efficient recovery in a hazard situation. Unlike those in the “free world,” incarcerated people cannot draw on their social capital or social networks during a disaster. Several attempts have been made to describe these conditions of punishment and domination. The framework of necropolitics describes how political and social power can be wielded to ultimately decide who lives or dies, usually in the form of state action.⁴⁸

During disaster, as explained by Clyde Woods’ documentation of the history that produced the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, the state engages in “planned abandonment” and determines a threshold of risk or death before government intervention.⁴⁹ In the context of rising fascism, racism, and nationalism, unequal treatment grows, where some privileged citizens receive protection,

³⁷Lori Peek. “Children and Disasters: Understanding Vulnerability, Developing Capacities, and Promoting Resilience—An Introduction.” *Children, Youth and Environments* 18 (2008): 20.

³⁸Hugh Deeming, Maureen Fordham, Christian Kuhlicke, Lydia Pedoth, Stefan Schneiderbauer, Cheney Shreve (Eds.). *Framing Community Disaster Resilience*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

³⁹Lisa K. Zottarelli. “Post-Hurricane Katrina Employment Recovery: The Interaction of Race and Place.” *Social Science Quarterly* 89 (2008): 592–607.

⁴⁰James R. Elliott and Junia Howell. “Beyond Disasters: A Longitudinal Analysis of Natural Hazards’ Unequal Impacts on Residential Instability.” *Social Forces* 95 (2017): 1181–1207.

⁴¹Jennifer Tobin-Gurley, Lori Peek, and Jennifer Loomis. “Displaced Single Mothers in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: Resource Needs and Resource Acquisition.” *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 28 (2019): 170–206.

⁴²Alan J. Auerbach, David Card, and John M. Quigley. *Public Policy and the Income Distribution*. (Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

⁴³Devah Pager, Bruce Western, and Naomi Sugie. “Sequencing Disadvantage: Barriers to Employment Facing Young Black and White Men with Criminal Records.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 623 (2009): 195–213.

⁴⁴Amanda Geller and Marah A. Curtis. “A Sort of Homecoming: Incarceration and the Housing Security of Urban Men.” *Social Science Research* 40 (2011): 1196–1213.

⁴⁵Todd R. Clear. *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse*. (Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁶Daniel P. Aldrich and Michelle A. Meyer. “Social Capital and Community Resilience.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (2015): 254–269.

⁴⁷James R. Elliott, Timothy J. Haney, and Petrice Sams-Abiodun. “Limits to Social Capital: Comparing Network Assistance in Two New Orleans Neighbors Devastated by Hurricane Katrina.” *Sociological Quarterly* 51 (2010): 624–648; Jeanne Hurlbert, Valerie Haines, and John Beggs. “Core Networks and Tie Activation: What Kinds of Routine Networks Allocated Resources in Nonroutine Situations?” *American Sociological Review* 65 (2000): 598–618; K. Kaniasty and F.H. Norris. “A Test of the Social Support Deterioration Model in the Context of Natural Disaster.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 64 (1993): 395–408.

⁴⁸Achille Mbembe. *Necropolitics*. (Duke University Press, 2019).

⁴⁹Clyde Woods. *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans*. (University of Georgia Press, 2017).

opportunity, and resources that contribute to vitality. This concept is demonstrated in the clear divide between how incarcerated and free world citizens are treated. Especially in times of disaster, incarcerated people are treated as subhuman and are placed in death's way.

In these contexts, marginalized and racialized people receive punishment and violence from a state that wields necropolitical power during disaster. Many incarcerated individuals come from communities directly impacted by systems of oppression, which erode their social capital and social networks before their incarceration, and ultimately serve as gateways to incarceration.⁵⁰ This produces a compounded social vulnerability for incarcerated people. Theories of punishment cannot coexist with concepts of recovery and resilience. Thus, abolition provides insight into how to tangibly reduce harm.

APPLYING AN ABOLITIONIST FRAMEWORK

Defining abolition

Abolition is defined as “a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.” Abolition not only represents the dismantling of infrastructures of punishment, incarceration, and surveillance but also the building of infrastructures of care, support, and harm reduction. As a strategy, abolition involves the creation of economic social cultural support that renders crime increasingly unnecessary and reduces instances of harm.⁵¹ Angela Davis perhaps put it most concisely when discussing what is required for such a project:

“In order to imagine a world without prisons, or at least a social landscape no longer dominated by the prison, a new popular vocabulary will have to replace the current language, which articulates crime and punishment in such a way that we cannot think about a society without crime except as a society in which all the criminals are imprisoned. Thus, one of the first challenges is to be able to talk about the many ways in which punishment is linked to poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other modes of dominance.”⁵²

This project is furthered by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, whose critical text *Golden Gulag* evaluates prison impacts alongside the intention of crime reduction. She also specifies the impact of carceral geographies on the policies and practices instituted by the prison system. On another end of the study, Mariame Kaba articulates finer points of abolitionist community building after prisons are eliminated. Rather than solely focusing on the harms

committed by the prison system, Kaba shifts the focus to a community-centered approach to harm. “We should redirect the billions that now go to police departments toward providing health care, housing, education and good jobs. If we did this, there would be less need for the police in the first place.”⁵³

Others, including Najma Sharif, Stephen Wilson, rapper and community-organizer Noname, and Devyn Eli Springer, advocate for abolition of police and prison rather than reform to the current systems for similar reasons, which, as Davis has articulated, fails to address the root of social problems, but rather addresses how populations feel about troublesome and morally indefensible outcomes of the PIC.⁵⁴

Proponents of critical environmental justice studies have posited that the inherent need to construct, maintain, and deepen “brutal hierarchies” within the U.S. prison system reflects its unsalvageable nature as a system of power.⁵⁵ Environmental justice scholars have also proposed that abolitionist theory must be relied upon to truly address racism and anti-Blackness in environmental harms.⁵⁶ An abolitionist lens highlights the way the prison system is inherently harmful in its treatment of incarcerated people as subhuman, a process that is further amplified in the context of disasters.

Prisons determine who receives protection and who is ultimately harmed in disasters. This harm ripples out into the communities from which incarcerated people have been removed, particularly harming Black people and communities. Although not being protected themselves, incarcerated people are exploited to provide labor during disasters. The study of David Pellow has highlighted how the organizing of incarcerated persons, who are slaves of the state, against the conditions of their confinement, and the exploitation of their labor, slaves rebellions.⁵⁷

A world without prisons

Abolitionists recognize prisons as mechanisms of structural anti-Black harm, unlike a structural functionalist might view prisons as regulators of social order and norms. Abolitionist theory is broad, yet the overall goal is a societal shift from punitive measures to rehabilitative measures. Proponents of abolition also often support decarceration efforts, divestment from prisons, abolition

⁵³Mariame Kaba. “Opinion | Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police.” *The New York Times*, June 12, 2020. [Section, Opinion]. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>> (Last accessed on May 10, 2021).

⁵⁴Najma Sharif and Stephen Wilson. “Noname on Dreaming of a World Without Prison Walls.” *Dazed*, September 15, 2020. <<https://www.dazeddigital.com/read-up-act-up-autumn-2020/article/50397/1/read-up-act-up-autumn-2020-noname-guest-edit-abolition>> (Last accessed on May 9, 2021).

⁵⁵Pellow. (2018). *Op. cit.*

⁵⁶L. Pulido and J. De Lara. “Reimagining ‘Justice’ in Environmental Justice: Radical Ecologies, Decolonial Thought, and the Black Radical Tradition.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1 (2018): 76–98.

⁵⁷Pellow. (2018). *Op. cit.*

⁵⁰Jennifer Bronson and E. Ann Carson. “Prisoners in 2017.” *US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics* 500 (2019): 400; Marc Mauer. “Addressing Racial Disparities in Incarceration.” *The Prison Journal* 91 (2011): 87S–101S; Bruce Western and Becky Pettit. “Incarceration & Social Inequality.” *Daedalus* 139 (2010): 8–19.

⁵¹Critical Resistance. (2020). *Op. cit.*

⁵²Angela Y. Davis and Dylan Rodriguez. “The Challenge of Prison Abolition: A Conversation.” *Social Justice* 27 (2000): 217.

of police and Immigrant and Customs and Enforcement, and moratoriums on the construction of new penal facilities. Although reformists think the system can be fixed, abolitionists recognize that the injustice of the legal system is inherent and intentionally produces harm.⁵⁸

In the context of hazard mitigation, abolition entails ending the use of forced prison labor, funding supports that eliminate recidivism, supporting individuals and communities in climate and environmental justice challenges, and exploring nonviolent alternatives to policing and dispute resolution. Abolition removes the onus of systemic violence from incarcerated persons, their families, and their communities. It goes beyond merely reducing harm, and offers an additive approach to safety, stability, and providing means for resilience for incarcerated people and their communities.

Although a world without prisons seems difficult to imagine, there are other options. Transformative justice provides us with one viable alternative to prisons. Transformative justice includes processes of community accountability to address harm. Transformative justice recognizes that many root causes of harm are systemic and it allows for accountability and healing without using damaging punitive measures that further the cycle of harm.

In the short term, one goal of prison abolition is immediate decarceration, or the reducing of the size and scope of prisons. Today's jails and prisons are largely overcrowded, an issue that has recently gained more visibility due to the viral COVID-19 pandemic and are unable to adhere to proper precautions to contain a viral pandemic such as social distancing.⁵⁹ Many health experts and abolitionists alike argue for the reduction of prison populations during the COVID-19 pandemic to decrease exposure to the virus.⁶⁰

The average age in prison has increased in recent decades as a result of courts giving longer sentences.⁶¹ Many elderly incarcerated people with pre-existing medical conditions are at extreme risk for contracting and suffering from COVID-19. Exposing seniors to COVID-19 is a disaster and public health crisis. Prison populations can be reduced through shortening sentences, expediting trials, and placing fewer people into jail.

Other strategies include the investment in the community-based resources and community self-governance that promote alternatives to incarcerations including community-based public safety approaches such as violence prevention and intervention programs, skills-based education on bystander intervention, consent

and boundaries, and health relationships.⁶² In this way, abolition not only represents the mitigation of harm itself but also an investment in community resilience. Overall, decarceration not only benefits system-involved people but the larger community as well and contributes to individual and collective resilience as alternatives promote the investment of resources directly into the community and work to replace a system that produces harm.

CONCLUSION

The impact of climate change in the United States and around the world grows more visible and devastating with each passing year. The burden of climate change impacts, including increases in the frequency and intensity of disasters, continues to fall on Black communities and other marginalized and oppressed populations. The PIC continues to target and harm the same communities during these increasing impacts, yet the relationship between the PIC and disasters is often overlooked.

In the context of violence and harm from both disaster impacts (which are in no way natural) and the PIC, the abolition perspective challenges us to imagine and create a world in which communities have what they need to survive and thrive without depending on systems of punishment that produce further harm. The abolitionist vision calls for ending the PIC by, "challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe" and instead to understand that "things like food, housing, and freedom are what create healthy, stable neighborhoods and communities."⁶³

The relationship between incarceration and disaster is twofold: prisons create and exacerbate disaster. Prisons create disasters by negatively impacting incarcerated people and communities. Incarcerated people experience social isolation, forced labor, and abuse inside facilities. Inside prison, people are exposed to traumatic events from violence and death to the daily motions of strip searches and physical confinement. Furthermore, clear health disparities exist within prison. Incarcerated people are at greater risk for many different diseases while they simultaneously have less access to quality health care. The environment of prison in itself is a disaster that causes harm.

Furthermore, the conditions of prison exacerbate the impacts of disaster. Incarcerated people's safety, wellness, and needs are often overlooked and neglected during times of disaster; they are stripped of their autonomy to protect themselves within the confines of a cell. In some instances, incarcerated people are enlisted to provide disaster response. Incarcerated people can be legally enslaved by the state, under the 13th amendment, without receiving adequate protection themselves.

⁵⁸Mariame Kaba. *We Do This Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. (Haymarket Books, 2021).

⁵⁹Laura Hawks, Steffie Woolhandler, and Danny McCormick. "COVID-19 in Prisons and Jails in the United States." *JAMA Internal Medicine* 180 (2020): 1041–1042.

⁶⁰Hawks et al. (2020). *Op. cit.*; Noel Vest, Oshea Johnson, Kathryn Nowotny, Lauren Brinkley-Rubinstein. "Prison Population Reductions and COVID-19: A Latent Profile Analysis Synthesizing Recent Evidence from the Texas State Prison System." *Journal of Urban Health* 98 (2021): 53–58.

⁶¹Hawks et al. (2020). *Op. cit.*

⁶²8toAbolition. "8 to Abolition: Abolitionist Policy Changes to Demand from Your City Officials." 2020. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edbf321b6026b073fef97d4/t/5ee0817c955eaa484011b8fe/1591771519433/8toAbolition_V2.pdf> (Last accessed on April 29, 2021).

⁶³Critical Resistance. (2020). *Op. cit.*

Anti-Blackness, rooted in slavery, fuels environmental racism and incarceration; anti-Blackness simultaneously motivates poor environmental conditions and over policing in Black neighborhoods. Moreover, the motivation and history of prisons lie in the state's attempt to control and suppress Black Americans.

Given the harm, abuse, and disruption of resilience perpetuated by incarceration, we recommend abolition as a form of mitigation. We must work toward immediate decarceration, divestment from prisons, and an end to incarceration. Relying instead on transformative justice and other alternative strategies allows for accountability. This abolitionist shift from punitive measures to rehabilitative restorative measures would help prevent disaster and harm from repeating itself over and over again. The topic of prison abolition should be of interest to anyone involved in disasters and hazard mitigation, public health, and environmental justice.

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