

HOW
TO
ABOLISH
PRISONS

LESSONS FROM THE MOVEMENT
AGAINST IMPRISONMENT

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STUDY GUIDE

WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

How to Abolish Prisons: Lessons from the Movement against Imprisonment attempts to describe how people in Canada and the United States are working together to eliminate the use of imprisonment. While commonly misunderstood as a far fetched idea, prison abolition is a set of practices including organizing, policy and legal advocacy, service, art and culture, and solidarity with imprisoned people used in the active attempt to eliminate the harms of imprisonment and establish new ways of relating to ourselves, each other, and the natural world. This book is not a guide book, but rather a snapshot of this movement as it existed from about 2015-2019. Finally, this book attempts to put prison abolitionist organizing within the broader context of the movement for prison industrial complex abolition.

How to Abolish Prisons first introduces basic ideas about prison abolition, describes the contemporary contexts for prison abolition organizing in the US and Canada, and provides an overview of the book's structure. The book then goes on to explain some of the objectives organizers are trying to advance by working for prison abolition, followed by a description of five of the key ways organizers have structured their work (anti-expansion, prisoner solidarity, arts and cultural work, and policy and legal advocacy). Next, the book discusses tactics organizers are employing to meet their objectives and the various ways that organizers structure themselves to do their work. The book then digs into contradictions, challenges, and tensions that emerge in fights for prison abolition. The book rounds out by examining what has been gained through prison abolitionist organizing and by making a call for people to join the movement to abolish the prison industrial complex.

This guide is written with the hope that it will help both general audiences and people already organizing for prison abolition use the book better. While the questions are broken down across those two groups, we encourage you to use any prompts that you find useful for your purposes.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is for anyone who is interested in thinking about putting prison abolitionist ideas into practice. We hope that there are useful insights for people who are brand new to the issues, those who are just getting involved in grassroots organizing for prison abolition, and seasoned prison abolitionists alike. While *How to Abolish Prisons* does not provide step-by-step details about how to eliminate the use of imprisonment, it does offer insights from people who have been putting prison abolitionist politics into practice for years. Even if these insights are not new to you, maybe they will resonate or affirm your own experience. Perhaps they will offer a different perspective on shared problems or challenges.

- ▶ What is prison abolition? What is its relationship to prison industrial complex or penal abolition? To the abolition of policing?
 - ▶ Why is organizing so important to advancing these politics?
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BIG IDEAS

Prison abolition

Prison abolition is the praxis of eliminating the uses of imprisonment while creating lasting alternatives to punishment and establishing new ways of addressing harm.

General audience questions:

- ▶ What questions do you have about what it means to abolish imprisonment?
- ▶ How did you use the information in *How to Abolish Prisons* to answer your questions? What's still left to learn?

Questions for organizers:

- ▶ How do you describe prison abolition praxis to your members, allies, and broader communities?
- ▶ What challenges do you face in discussing prison abolition politics with all the groups of people listed above?

Organizing

In its most basic form organizing is the shared activity of people with a common goal who work together to develop and implement plans to meet that goal. As the term is used in *How to Abolish Prisons*, organizing is done by people attempting to dismantle this repressive system. These people agree on strategies and tactics to use to try to shift the balance of power away from the repressive systems and toward the people impacted by them. Chapters 3-6 lay out organizing approaches, strategies, tactics, organizational forms, and challenges associated with some prison abolition organizing. Overall, the book makes the point that organizing is the *practice* of prison abolitionist politics and is essential for any abolitionist gains to be made.

General audience questions:

- ▶ How do the five organizing approaches outlined in the book illustrate different pathways for arriving at the shared goal of prison abolition? What are their differences? What are their similarities?
- ▶ How does each pathway foreground the leadership of currently and formerly imprisoned people and their loved ones?
- ▶ What organizing strategies are elevated in the book? How do they work together? How do they potentially compete with or contradict each other?

- ▶ How do groups' tactical and strategic approaches influence how they structure their work? What are some of the opportunities and challenges offered by different formations?
- ▶ What are some of the primary challenges and contradictions found in organizing for prison abolition? How are organizers addressing those challenges and contradictions?

Questions for organizers:

- ▶ Do you use any (or all) of the five organizing approaches outlined in the book? If so, how do you see it moving you closer to the goal of prison abolition?
- ▶ Do you use the approaches in connection with each other or interchangeably? If so, how do you make decisions about when to use which approach? How do these decisions relate to your organizing goals?
- ▶ How has your group or organization decided about the best geographic scale for its work (local, regional, national, international, etc.)? How do these decisions relate to your organizing goals?

Organizations and movements

Following on the discussion of organizations and movements in *How to Abolish Prisons*, the questions of who plays what roles and how work is structured are answered differently by different groups with different organizing approaches. The book examines the range of structures, arrangements, and formations prison abolitionist groups use to meet their goals.

General audience questions:

- ▶ What are some of the ways groups profiled in *How to Abolish Prisons* divide up labor and responsibilities? How do those decisions seem to be informed by the groups' goals and organizing approaches?
- ▶ How do approaches to incorporating imprisoned people vary across groups?
- ▶ What are some of the different ways groups adapt to involve people with varying levels of time and energy to give? What are some of the challenges of involving people with different needs/abilities/willingness to be involved?
- ▶ What are some of the ways that organizations and groups navigate interpersonal conflicts in line with their political principles?
- ▶ How are organizations and groups setting themselves up to both meet immediate campaign goals and preparing for the long-term horizon of abolitionist politics?

Questions for organizers:

- ▶ How does your organization or group divide up labor and responsibilities? How do you make decisions about who does what? How do those decisions impact your collective ability to meet your goals?
- ▶ What methods and tools does your group or organization use to incorporate currently imprisoned people in your work? Are the methods outlined in the book similar or different from what your group or organization does? What else could you be doing to increase participation by imprisoned people? How does your work benefit from imprisoned people's participation?
- ▶ What are some methods your group or organization uses to accommodate the needs of people with different levels of time and energy to contribute to your work? What methods do you use to make your work accessible?
- ▶ How does your group or organization approach addressing interpersonal conflicts and harm that come up? How do you leverage prison industrial complex abolitionist politics to address conflicts and harm? What does your organization or group still need to develop/build/learn to be able to navigate interpersonal challenges?
- ▶ How is your group or organization balance responding to immediate issues or short-term campaign goals with moving toward the horizon of prison abolition over the long-term?

Contradictions and tensions

No set of politics is without contradictions and tensions. Skilled organizers do not attempt to shy away from these challenges, to ignore or bury them. Instead, they attempt to make contradictions and tensions instructive—shining a light on what must be managed more skillfully, resolved, overcome, or accepted for one's politics to advance. Prison abolitionists must face the same dynamics. *How to Abolish Prisons* includes some of the highlights organizers we interviewed elevated.

General audience questions:

- ▶ Which contradictions, tensions, or challenges stuck out to you? Why? What are some ways organizers are addressing them?
- ▶ Why might prison abolitionists face different pressures than other organizers to present fully developed plans to remedy difficulties? What do you think about that pressure?
- ▶ How are organizers addressing the challenge of remaking society without a set of institutions, policies, and practices that many see as essential?

Questions for organizers:

- ▶ What are the primary contradictions you experience in your organizing? Tensions? Challenges? How does your organization or group go about addressing them?
- ▶ What impacts have political contradictions, tensions, and conflicts played in your ability to meet your organizing goals? How do you apply your politics to these difficulties?
- ▶ How does your group or organization navigate avoiding co-optation? When your ideas, tactics, strategies, or messages get co-opted, how do you react? What methods or tools (if any) has your organization used to avoid co-optation?
- ▶ Does your group have experience holding a political line around prison abolition, while attempting to avoid becoming too rigid or purist? If so, how have you managed that balance?
- ▶ What methods and tools does your organization use to sustain its work for the long-term? What challenges do you face in keeping people engaged and committed to the work?

Winning

Although imprisonment has not yet been eliminated, prison abolitionist organizers make interim gains that clear a path for even more gains in the future. As we note in *How to Abolish Prisons*, the scholar Thomas Mathiesen reminds us that refusal (of saying, “no!”) may lead to turning points. While we do not want to claim false victories or inflate our outcomes, recognizing wins big and small can build morale, illuminate future winning strategies and tactics, and build momentum.

General audience questions:

- ▶ What signs make you think that a campaign is winning?
- ▶ What do you think about the fact that organizers interviewed identified things like bringing new people into the movement, sustaining organizations and movements over time, and narrative change, as victories in addition to things like stopping new jails and prisons and getting people out of cages?

Questions for organizers:

- ▶ What signs tell you that you’re winning? How did you determine those were the right signs?
- ▶ What would you identify as your biggest victory? What makes it the biggest? How long did it take to win? Who was involved? What are the long(er)-term impacts of having won?
- ▶ Some people in movements are challenging the idea that winning is important. Is it important for your group to win? Why or why not?

YOU'VE READ THE BOOK, NOW WHAT?

We hope *How to Abolish Prisons* has given you some insights into organizing for prison abolition. We encourage you to keep learning and to put what you learn to work in service of the movement against imprisonment.

KEEP LEARNING:

Rachel's suggestions for continued learning about abolition in the United States:

[Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter](#) – Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton (eds.)

[Police: A Field Guide](#) – David Correia and Tyler Wall

[Critical Resistance Abolition Organizing Toolkit](#)

[Are Prisons Obsolete](#) – Angela Y. Davis

[INCITE!-Critical Resistance Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex](#)

[We Do This 'Til We Free Us](#) – Mariame Kaba, *et al*

[Up the Ridge](#) – Nick Szuberla and Amelia Kirby

[Captive Genders](#) – Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith (eds.)

[All Our Trials](#) – Emily Thuma

[Transform Harm](#)

Justin's suggestions for continued learning on abolition in Canada:

No Longer Barred from Prison: Social Injustice in Canada – Claire Culhane

[Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada](#) – Rodney Diverlus, Sandy Hudson and Syrus Marcus Ware

[Abolitionist Intimacies](#) – El Jones

[Policing Black Lives: State Violence from Slavery to the Present](#) – Robyn Maynard

[Thunder in my Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks](#) – Patricia Monture-Angus

Stories of Transformative Justice – Ruth Morris

[Abortion to Abolition: Reproductive Health and Justice in Canada](#) – Martha Paynter

Eating Bitterness: A Vision Beyond Prison Walls – Art Solomon

[Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism](#) - Harsha Walia

[Insurgent Love: Abolition and Domestic Homicide](#) – Ardath Whynacht



GET INVOLVED:

Using the hashtag **#HowToAbolishPrisons**, tell us how you are dismantling and building alternatives to imprisonment.