

Frameworks for Freedom: Abolition Work During COVID-19, in Mi'kma'ki

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## **Land Acknowledgment**

This work took place in Mi'kma'ki, the unceded territories of the Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqey, and Peskotomuhkati Peoples. These sovereign nations hold inherent rights as the original peoples of these lands, where we each carry collective obligations under the Peace and Friendship Treaties. Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 recognizes and affirms Aboriginal and Treaty rights in Canada.

I also acknowledge that African Nova Scotians are a distinct people whose histories, legacies, and contributions have enriched Mi'kma'ki, currently known as Nova Scotia, for over 400 years.

## Abstract

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This thesis examines abolitionist responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on decarceration efforts, responses to intersecting crises, and the development of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Grounded in abolition feminist theory and using autoethnography as methodology, I explore the intersections of abolitionist praxis, the non-profit sector, and the transformative possibilities of building care-based systems rooted in restorative justice, transformative justice, and liberatory harm reduction. Through creative methods, including zine-making and art, this project documents the challenges and potential of abolitionist work amidst unprecedented societal upheaval. The pandemic disrupted every facet of society, exposing deep systemic inequities while offering glimpses of transformative possibilities. In carceral systems, public health risks prompted some decarceration efforts but were paired with heightened punitive measures, highlighting contradictions in crisis-driven reform. These actions revealed that decarceration is both feasible and necessary but also exposed the limitations of temporary, reactionary responses rather than proactive, systemic transformation. My findings reveal significant tensions within abolitionist movements and organizations, including the challenges of cancel culture, moral injury from navigating multiple intersecting crises, and the structural flaws of the non-profit sector, which alone cannot achieve systemic change. This work underscores the importance of resolving internal conflicts within movements without replicating harm, fostering meaningful collaboration, and embracing the radical possibilities of abolitionist frameworks. This thesis situates the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical juncture—a moment that demonstrates both the urgent need for abolitionist advocacy and the limitations of crisis-driven change. Through personal narrative, reflexive analysis, and creative expression, this research contributes to abolitionist knowledge and calls for sustained activism and justice-building grounded in equity, care, and systemic transformation.

Keywords: Prison Abolition, COVID-19 pandemic, decarceration, homelessness, abolition feminist theory, autoethnography, state violence, community-based alternatives.

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant and unprecedented threat to prisons and other congregate living spaces, where overcrowding, poor ventilation, and limited access to sanitation created ideal conditions for the rapid and lethal spread of infectious diseases (Cloud et al., 2020).

In response, many jurisdictions faced immense pressure to mitigate these risks, prompting the rapid mobilization of resources and, in some cases, systemic adaptations on a scale never seen before. Among these measures, mass decarceration emerged as a critical public health strategy, intersecting with the already dire housing and homelessness crisis. In Nova Scotia, this urgency spurred a coordinated response that brought together community organizations, government agencies, and nonprofit sectors. By fostering collaboration and breaking down traditional silos, these efforts demanded a need for supports and services for individuals navigating the carceral system during one of the most significant global health crises of modern history.

This thesis examines three key areas of abolitionist work during this period. First, it explores the urgent decarceration efforts in Nova Scotia, where nearly 50% of provincial prisoners were released as a public health measure (East Coast Prison Justice Society, 2022). Second, it critically reflects on the August 18th police actions, where the convergence of the housing crisis and state violence sparked further abolitionist organizing and mutual aid initiatives. Lastly, it investigates the ongoing efforts to build long-term, life-sustaining supports grounded in abolitionist frameworks such as transformative justice, restorative justice, and liberatory harm reduction. These frameworks aim to address harm while prioritizing community healing and systemic transformation.

Through autoethnography as my primary methodology and zine-making and art as my methods of expression, this thesis documents both the opportunities and challenges that arose during the

pandemic for abolitionist praxis in Mi'kma'ki. The results of this work reveal critical tensions within abolitionist organizations and movements. While the pandemic created a moment of possibility, the lack of systemic change meant that many of these efforts were temporary and unsustainable. Internal conflicts within movements, including struggles to address power dynamics and interpersonal harm, diverted energy away from dismantling oppressive systems and toward fighting one another. Additionally, the moral injury experienced by frontline workers and organizers—who bore witness to the devastating systemic failures of the pandemic—was compounded by inadequate resources. The expectation that organizations serve as spaces of healing for their staff and volunteers further strained these movements, limiting their ability to mobilize fully and effectively support those most affected by systemic harm.

In this thesis, I reflect on these challenges and possibilities, documenting the work, tensions, and lessons of abolitionist responses during a time of crisis. By engaging critically with these experiences, this project contributes to abolitionist knowledge and underscores the need for sustained, systemic transformation rooted in equity, care, and community healing.

Autoethnography allows for a deeply personal exploration of social phenomena by merging individual narrative with broader cultural and political contexts (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Through this approach, I document my experiences and reflections as a nonprofit director actively involved in the work that is being examined. My work is presented through a creative lens—utilizing poetry, art, and reflective prose—which I pair with feminist abolitionist research, tools, and resources to provide a nuanced account of the transformative work unfolding on the frontlines of crisis.

As an abolition feminist, I found myself compelled to dive deep into this work when the pandemic triggered what Sara Ahmed (2020) describes as a “feminist snap.” According to

Ahmed, the feminist snap is a critical moment when the accumulated pressures of systemic injustice compel individuals to act decisively, breaking free from complacency. For me, the COVID-19 crisis presented such a moment: while many nonprofit organizations retreated into a mode of limited-service provision, I chose to do the opposite. I leveraged my experience and the resources at my disposal as a nonprofit leader to transform theory into practice and to implement the strategies and teachings that I had long embraced as an abolition feminist. This was not simply a matter of professional duty—it was an urgent call to do what I believed was right, to provide basic human rights, to seize this unprecedented moment, and to articulate a vision of justice that is both transformative and liberatory.

My work is deeply grounded in abolition feminist theory, a framework developed by Black feminist scholars that interrogates the intrinsic violence of state systems and the punitive structures that harm marginalized communities. As articulated by Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie (2022), abolition feminist mobilizations emerge from the cumulative labor and critical analyses of past struggles. This body of work challenges the status quo by exposing how punitive systems, far from rehabilitating individuals, often exacerbate cycles of marginalization and violence. By engaging with these theoretical frameworks, my project seeks to honor the labor of Black and Indigenous women, gender diverse people, and those with lived experience in systems of punishment and control. It is with deep respect for these foundational contributions that I endeavor to extend abolitionist praxis within Mi'kma'ki.

The methodological choice to use zine and art as a primary mode of knowledge production is both a personal and political one. Within the interdisciplinary field of Women and Gender Studies, students are increasingly permitted—and even encouraged—to employ creative methodologies that break from traditional academic norms. Throughout my undergraduate

studies, I frequently used creative media as a means of sharing information in ways that are accessible and grounded in community praxis. In this project, I have chosen to produce a public zine on abolition work during COVID-19. This zine serves as an accessible repository of information, chronicling my personal journey and the broader abolitionist work taking place in Mi'kma'ki. Unlike conventional academic theses that are often confined to scholarly discourse, my zine is designed to reach a broader audience. It will be disseminated digitally through social media channels and in print form via community organizations, jails, libraries, coffee shops, and bookstores. My hope is that this creative approach will not only document but also build upon abolition tools and resources available to grassroots activists and community members.

In examining the carceral system itself, it is evident that it is rife with violence and systemic injustice. Extensive research highlights the over-policing and over-incarceration of Black and Indigenous people in Canada, with Indigenous women facing particularly harsh outcomes—a pattern that echoes findings in both Canadian studies and Black feminist abolition research (Crenshaw, 1991; Mauer & King, 2007; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The criminal justice system, with its punitive focus on retribution rather than rehabilitation, perpetuates cycles of marginalization. As Angela Davis (2003) argues, the punitive nature of this system often serves to make social problems disappear by criminalizing the most vulnerable, rather than addressing their root causes. This reliance on retributive justice not only fails to reduce harm but also inflicts deep and lasting damage on communities already subjected to structural inequities—a critique that resonates with both Canadian scholarship and Black feminist abolitionist thought (Davis, Dent, Meiners, & Richie, 2022).

Yet, the work of abolition is not without its challenges. The nonprofit sector, often seen as the community champion in times of crisis, is not immune to its own internal conflicts and

limitations. Mutual aid work, though crucial, is frequently undervalued, and internal organizational challenges—such as a reliance on cancel culture and the difficulties inherent in applying frameworks like transformative justice, restorative justice, and liberatory harm reduction—can impede progress. Moreover, while the COVID-19 crisis sparked significant systemic interventions, many of these changes were ephemeral. As society reverts to pre-pandemic norms, many of the temporary supports and services have been scaled back or discontinued, leaving behind a landscape where conditions may be even more challenging than before.

Compounding these structural challenges is the profound sense of grief and loss that many frontline workers and community members experience—a grief that often leads to moral injury. The expectation that workplaces serve as safe spaces or centers for healing is frequently unmet, as these environments are seldom resourced adequately to bear such burdens. This moral injury, coupled with the lack of sufficient supports, underscores the urgent need for more robust and enduring systemic changes across the non-profit sector.

This thesis, then, is not merely an academic exploration but a call to action—a reflective yet critically engaged narrative that situates personal experience within broader socio-political transformations. Through this autoethnographic account, I aim to contribute to ongoing dialogues about prison abolition and feminist praxis. By documenting the transformative and sometimes tumultuous work of responding to the pandemic through an abolitionist lens, I hope to offer insights and strategies that will inform future efforts to dismantle oppressive systems and build just, equitable communities in Mi'kma'ki and beyond.

### **Positionality as a Researcher**

Positionality is a key concept in feminist scholarship because it recognizes that knowledge is socially situated and shaped by the researcher's own social location, including their race, gender, class, and other intersecting identities (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991). It challenges the notion of objectivity in research, emphasizing that researchers bring their own perspectives and biases to their work, which influence the framing, methods, and outcomes of their studies. By critically reflecting on their positionality, researchers can address power dynamics, engage in ethical practices, and produce research that is accountable and socially transformative (Smith, 1999; Pillow, 2003).

As a researcher, I approach this work from a position of both privilege and complexity, shaped by my role as a leader in a nonprofit organization and my experiences working closely with women, gender-diverse individuals, and girls both inside and outside of prisons and jails. My positionality is deeply intertwined with my social location as a white, cisgender, able-bodied settler in Mi'kma'ki, occupying a leadership role that inherently carries power and influence within the nonprofit sector. While this role has allowed me to advocate for systemic change and mobilize resources to support marginalized individuals, it also places me in a position of authority that comes with inherent power imbalances, particularly in the context of prison abolition work.

The power dynamics in this work are complex. As someone who has worked directly with criminalized and incarcerated individuals, I recognize that my ability to engage with this population is mediated by my organizational role and privilege, which grants me access to spaces and conversations that are often closed to the very people whose experiences are central to this work. My leadership position enables me to advocate on behalf of others, but it also risks

reinforcing hierarchical structures that abolitionist frameworks seek to dismantle. The work I do—though deeply informed by the lived experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals—remains shaped by my own perspective as someone who has not directly experienced incarceration.

In speaking about prison abolition, it is vital for me to acknowledge that this work is not about me; it is about the women, gender-diverse individuals, and girls whose lives are most affected by the carceral system. Their voices, experiences, and expertise must remain at the center of this work. My role as a researcher and nonprofit leader is to amplify these voices, support their self-determination, and help dismantle the systems that perpetuate their oppression. Yet, I am acutely aware of the potential for my own positionality to obscure or overshadow the experiences of those I aim to support. This awareness requires ongoing reflexivity and accountability in how I approach this research and the relationships I build through it.

Prison abolition, at its core, seeks to address systemic inequities and the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and colonialism that criminalize and incarcerate marginalized populations. While I have worked to support incarcerated individuals through advocacy, harm reduction, and building community-based alternatives, this work is inherently shaped by the privileges and limitations of my position. As abolitionist frameworks emphasize, true liberation cannot come from hierarchical or saviorist approaches but must emerge from the lived experiences, collective action, and leadership of those directly impacted by the carceral system.

This research is deeply personal and political. It is informed by my interactions with individuals navigating incarceration, my critical reflections on the nonprofit sector's role in systemic change, and my commitment to feminist and abolitionist principles. Recognizing the power I hold in this work, I aim to use my positionality responsibly: to uplift the narratives of those most impacted,

to critique the systems I work within, and to remain accountable to the communities I serve. Ultimately, this work is about creating the conditions for liberation, where those directly impacted by incarceration are not only heard but lead the way in building a world without prisons.

While research on decarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nova Scotia exists, little has been written from the perspective of an active abolitionist in a leadership role within a community organization. This autoethnography situates my lived experiences at the heart of the analysis, positioning me as both the researcher and the researched. Prison abolition work is neither linear nor prescriptive; it is emergent, painful, transformative, and unequivocally vital. My aim is to contribute to the broader body of abolitionist knowledge by unpacking the complexities of this work, sharing personal reflections, and making this deeply critical praxis accessible.

As one small part of a larger composition of abolitionist struggles and successes, I feel both compelled and profoundly grateful to dedicate my thesis to this work. It is an opportunity to document my stumbling's and successes, to reflect on the lessons and tensions I have encountered, and to contribute to the growing conversation on abolition as a practice of care, justice, and collective liberation.

## Literature Review

### The Carceral Landscape

#### *Description of the Carceral Landscape in Canada*

The term "carceral landscape" refers to the physical, social, and systemic structures that sustain and perpetuate incarceration, surveillance, and punitive justice. It encompasses not only prisons and jails but also the broader network of policies, practices, and institutions that regulate and control marginalized populations, often exacerbating social inequities (Gilmore, 2007). This concept highlights the ways in which carceral systems intersect with housing, healthcare, education, and other sectors, creating a pervasive system of control and oppression. The carceral landscape in Canada is marked by systemic inequities, racial disparities, and an enduring reliance on punitive approaches to justice. Canada's correctional system encompasses federal prisons for those serving sentences longer than two years, provincial jails for shorter sentences or individuals on remand (pre-trial incarceration), and community supervision programs, such as bail, probation or parole. Despite its smaller scale compared to countries like the United States, Canada's carceral system exhibits patterns of harm, violence, and over-incarceration that disproportionately affect marginalized populations, particularly Indigenous and Black communities. Indigenous individuals represent approximately 5% of the Canadian adult population but account for 32% of the federal prison population, with Indigenous women comprising 50% of federally incarcerated women (Public Safety Canada, 2023). Similarly, Black individuals constitute about 3.5% of the Canadian population yet make up 9.2% of the total incarcerated population (Canadian Lawyer Magazine, 2021).

Indigenous people are starkly overrepresented in the Canadian prison system. Though comprising approximately 5% of Canada's population, Indigenous individuals represent over

30% of the federal prison population (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022). The situation is even more severe for Indigenous women, who account for nearly half of federally incarcerated females (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2020). This overrepresentation is tied to the ongoing impacts of colonialism, including intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, poverty, and inadequate access to housing, healthcare, and education. Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to intersecting oppressions, which subject them to both gendered and racialized violence within and outside carceral spaces.

Black Canadians are similarly overrepresented in the carceral system, making up a disproportionate percentage of those incarcerated despite being less than 4% of the national population (Maynard, 2017). The systemic criminalization of Black communities is closely linked to racial profiling, over-policing, and discriminatory sentencing practices. Robyn Maynard (2017) argues that the policing of Black lives is a continuation of state violence rooted in Canada's colonial and slave-holding past, perpetuated through contemporary carceral practices.

The Canadian carceral system is also shaped by its treatment of women and gender diverse individuals. Women face unique challenges in the system, including higher rates of solitary confinement, inadequate access to gender-specific healthcare, and a lack of programs designed to address the root causes of their criminalization, such as domestic violence and poverty (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2020). Additionally, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals often experience discrimination, harassment, and violence within correctional facilities, compounded by inadequate institutional policies to ensure their safety and dignity (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022).

Canada's carceral system relies heavily on punitive justice, emphasizing incarceration as the primary response to crime. This approach has been critiqued for its failure to address the root causes of criminal behavior, such as poverty, addiction, mental illness, and systemic marginalization. Angela Davis (2003) and other abolitionist scholars have argued that punitive systems perpetuate cycles of harm, disproportionately targeting marginalized populations while doing little to prevent recidivism or promote community safety.

Canadian prisons have been sites of significant institutional violence, including preventable deaths in custody, frequent use of solitary confinement, overcrowding, and inadequate mental health supports (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022). High-profile cases, such as the death of Ashley Smith in 2007, highlight the carceral system's failures to provide humane treatment and meaningful rehabilitative opportunities for incarcerated individuals.

The carceral system in Canada intersects deeply with the housing and homelessness crises. Many individuals leaving prison face significant barriers to securing stable housing, which increases their vulnerability to re-incarceration. Likewise, criminalization often targets unhoused individuals, creating a cyclical relationship between homelessness and incarceration (Maynard, 2017). This dynamic disproportionately affects Indigenous and racialized communities, reflecting broader structural inequities.

The carceral landscape in Canada is a reflection of deep-rooted systemic oppression, colonial histories, and contemporary social inequities. While advocacy efforts have highlighted these issues, substantial challenges remain in transforming the system to prioritize community care, restorative justice, and abolitionist frameworks. Scholars such as Robyn Maynard (2017) and initiatives like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) have called for fundamental

shifts in justice policy and practice to address the harm perpetuated by the carceral state. Without such changes, Canada's reliance on punitive systems will continue to marginalize and harm the very populations it claims to protect.

According to a report by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association "the number of people awaiting trial in provincial prisons across the country has quadrupled since the 1980s" (Berger, N.M, & Deshman, 2024). A broken bail system, which is characterized by long adjournments and delays, onerous court conditions and inequities for those who lack strong support systems and adequate housing have led to high remand rates throughout the country, and Nova Scotia is no exception. This has resulted in overcrowded jails filled with people who have not yet been convicted or who are serving short sentences for failing to appear in court or breaching onerous and unnecessary court orders (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2024).

Pre-trial detention, or remand, poses a significant challenge nationwide for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous defendants. As much as 60% of admissions to provincial or territorial jails consist of individuals awaiting trial, while roughly 40% are individuals already serving sentences (Clark, 2019). Indigenous women are overrepresented in remand admissions to a greater extent than their male counterparts. In 2019-20, Indigenous females represented 23% of female admissions to remand in Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia Department of Justice, 2021). One significant factor contributing to this discrepancy is the increased likelihood of Indigenous defendants being refused bail (*R. v. Gladue*, 1999). Rogin argues that "the principles articulated by the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. v. Gladue* and re-iterated in *R. v. Ipeelee* are being interpreted and implemented at the bail phase in a manner that exacerbates, rather than ameliorates the systemic failures of the criminal justice system in its dealings with Indigenous people.

## *Bail*

*“Our criminal legal system is premised on the presumption of innocence and the right to reasonable bail – yet increasing numbers of people are serving time before they have been found guilty” (Berger, N.M, & Deshman, 2024).*

The bail system in Canada has historically been guided by the principle of restraint, emphasizing the least intrusive measures necessary to manage individuals charged with an offense while they await trial. This principle is explicitly codified in Section 493.1 of the Criminal Code, which mandates restraint in the use of pretrial detention, and further emphasized through amendments to Section 515 aimed at prioritizing detention as a last resort and addressing the overuse of cash bail (Criminal Code, R.S.C., 1985). These amendments emerged in response to case law critiquing inconsistent application of bail provisions across Canadian courts, highlighting a failure to adhere to the principle of restraint and the systemic overuse of custodial measures.

Despite these legislative changes and guidance from the Supreme Court of Canada, the Canadian bail system remains deeply flawed. Problems such as persistent high remand rates demonstrate that efforts to reform bail have largely been superficial, targeting specific issues rather than addressing the systemic roots of the problem (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2024). The risk-averse and "tough-on-crime" approach to bail has entrenched these issues further, resulting in steadily rising remand rates. According to Statistics Canada, in the 2018/2019 fiscal year, there were 70% more adults held in remand on an average day than in sentenced custody, with remand populations consistently outpacing sentenced custody since 2004/2005 (Statistics Canada, 2020). In Nova Scotia, this issue is particularly stark; adults in remand accounted for 71% of those in custody on a given day, with the remand population increasing by 10% from the previous year.

Efforts to reform the bail system have repeatedly fallen short because they have focused on incremental adjustments rather than systemic change. These surface-level reforms have failed to address the root causes of high remand rates, such as risk-averse decision-making and a punitive approach to crime. While small improvements may be possible within the current system, meaningful change requires a comprehensive overhaul. Such an overhaul must prioritize the presumption of innocence, the right to reasonable bail, and the protection of vulnerable individuals from the harmful conditions of pretrial detention in Canadian correctional institutions.

The challenges with Canada's bail system demand a fundamental shift in thinking, moving away from punitive practices toward a framework that respects human rights and systemic equity. Without addressing these root issues, the system will continue to fail those it claims to serve, particularly marginalized populations disproportionately impacted by pretrial detention.

### *The Carceral Landscape in Nova Scotia*

Prior to the 1970's, there existed county jails in 18 counties throughout Nova Scotia, in addition to the Halifax City Prison, located in the North End of Halifax overlooking Africville, a village founded when enslaved Africans built the city of Halifax. The city prison accommodated 10 cells for women, accommodating up to 20 women with double bunking. The women in the prison would be transferred from the Halifax County jail, which was located behind the Halifax courthouse on Spring Garden Road, once they were sentenced. None of the facilities provided programming or supports (Nova Scotia Solicitor General , 1992). According to historical archives, “the prison got the petty criminals, the minor violators of the law such as drunkards, prostitutes, thieves, ruffians and those in violations of the Liquor Control Act, as well as people

that were incapable of taking care of themselves” (Edwards, 2020). In October 1933, eight females were incarcerated there, three of which were sentenced under the Nova Scotia Liquor Control Act (Edwards, 2020).

In 2001, the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Centre was opened. This facility, located in the Burnside Industrial Park in Nova Scotia was a \$58.9 million dollar institution constructed to ‘house’ 272 male and female offenders. According to information found on the jail’s website, “The facility configuration has three separate living units; the North Unit consisting of seven 16-cell day rooms for male offenders; the West Unit consisting of seven 16-cell day rooms for male offenders; and the East Unit consisting of four 12-cell day rooms for female offenders. The offender population is made up of provincially sentenced, remanded, parole suspensions, immigration violations, and newly sentenced federal offenders” (Nova Scotia Provincial Government, 2022). Presently, the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility is the largest provincial jail in Nova Scotia, with a capacity of 370 (322 male, 48 female). Youth are imprisoned at Nova Scotia Youth Centre, which opened in 1988 and incarcerates up to 85 youth of all genders, both sentenced and remanded. While the rates of youth incarceration have decreased in Nova Scotia over the last number of years, which can in part be attributed to the Youth Criminal Justice Act, which encouraged more community-based options for sentencing of teenagers.

Nova Scotia expansions in the criminal justice system developed from ideas and practices emerging in the American colonies, the United States, and in Britain (Thomson, 1986). Policing, punishment, and control were, and continue to be racist and violent (Hannah-Moffat 1991, 1995, 2000, 2001; Jones 2016, 2022; Maynard 2017; Pate 2005, 2006, 2008; Paynter 2019, 2020; Piche; 2015, 2010; Wortley, 2019). As Angela Davis has articulated “Prisons do not disappear

social problems, the disappear human beings. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages” (Davis A. , 2022).

*The Criminalization of Women and Gender Diverse People in Canada*

In 2015 there were about 600 women in Federal prisons and roughly 6,000 others in Provincial prisons (Statistics Canada, 2020). In Canada, structural inequality operates through intersecting systems to make some more vulnerable to criminalization and imprisonment. According to one report, “82% of women in prison are jailed as a result of behaviour related to attempts to cope with poverty, histories of abuse, and addiction and mental health issues that commonly arise from trauma” (Pate, 2018). The literature on pathways to crime connects women’s criminalization to experiences of victimization (DeHart & Lynch M., 2012). The continuum of victimization-criminalization places women's criminal actions within the framework of their individual experiences of violence and being victimized. A variety of coping mechanisms in response to victimization, or routes that lead to criminality, can propel women further along this continuum, thereby elevating their likelihood of engaging in criminal activities.

Myers and Sangster indicated that “between 1939 and 1943 the number of girls appearing annually in Canadian courts increased by 45%, and over the decade the numbers incarcerated swelled too” (2001, p. 671). Alarming, the fastest growing prison population in Canada is Indigenous women (Zinger, 2023). While Black Canadians make up just 3% of the population, they are also dramatically over-represented in the prison system—increasing by 90% between 2003 and 2013 (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2014). A 2016 report revealed that in Nova Scotia, between 2014-2015 “about 16% of youth sentenced to a youth correctional facility were African Nova Scotian and 12% were Indigenous” (Jones, 2016).

*History of Criminalizing Women and Girls in Nova Scotia*

Between 1926 and 1972, courts in Nova Scotia could sentence women to the Interprovincial Home for Women, commonly known as Coverdale. This institution, located in Moncton, New Brunswick, served as a correctional facility for women from the Maritime provinces during that period (Public Safety Canada, n.d.). The Home was founded by the Anglican, United Baptist, Presbyterian, and United Churches and was located across the river from Moncton in Riverview, NB, on Coverdale Road. It served as a minimum-security correctional facility for women 16 and older from the Maritime Provinces who were sentenced to terms of less than three years.

Educational and rehabilitative programs were provided to the women and during its time, it served as a pioneering venture in working with women in the criminal justice system (Coverdale Centre for Women, 2015). This venture can be understood in the context of a broader prison reform movement in the time leading up to the Civil War and immediately after, “where female inmates were subjected to the vilest conditions behind bars—no individualized care, no cells, no rehabilitation, and sexual abuse” (Young, 2006).

Strenuous and often successful efforts were made to establish an entirely new type of prison, the women's reformatory, in which women would receive care more appropriate to their "feminine" nature. The Coverdale home offered 32 beds and while it operated, committals from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were constant. In 1972, the facility closed. The 1992 report titled *Blueprint For Change*, states that the “closure of the facility came as a result of a comprehensive review of the Home by a consultation committee...a report critical of the operation of the institution, prepared for the Board of Governors of the Home and funded by the Solicitor General, Canada” (Nova Scotia Solicitor General , 1992). The Riverview History Project, however, told a different narrative, noting that there was increasing pressure from unsupportive

elected officials in the area, that did not want the Home to be there, and the organization was eventually forced to sell the land to the government, for new development projects that were up and coming (Riverview History Project, 2000).

According to Myers and Sangster, “reform schools for girls, since their introduction in the latter part of the nineteenth century, have been experiments in transforming wayward girls, judged incorrigible, truant, and especially, sexually promiscuous into ‘proper’ young women” (2001, p. 669). While disaggregated data for the young women sent to the Coverdale Home is not readily available, up until World War 2, archives indicate that girls in the Montreal and Ontario reformatory schools were white, French or Irish Canadian with Indigenous girls beginning to alter the racial representation post war (Myers & Sangster, 2001). In documenting the patterns of resistance that girls sentenced to reformatories engaged in, Myers and Sangster illuminate the ways in which social relations of gender, race and class constructed the criminal legal system and the criminalization of girls and women.

The Halifax Correctional Center opened in 1969, replacing the Halifax City Prison and Halifax County Jail. The Center contained a women’s unit with 20 beds and was designed for women on remand (pre-trial custody) and those who were sentenced by the Halifax courts (Nova Scotia Solicitor General , 1992). A study was then commissioned by the Halifax/Dartmouth Metropolitan Authority, which highlighted the insufferable conditions of county jails, making recommendations that all incarcerated women in Nova Scotia should be detained at the Halifax Correctional Center, which ultimately expanded to 24 beds after this recommendation was conceded and county jails transitioned to only places for temporary police lock ups. Notably, this 1969 report also highlighted the necessity to utilize community-based alternatives to

incarceration, as to keep women in their homes and in community, closely connected to resources.

Attempts were made in the mid-seventies to develop residential programming in the City of Halifax for incarcerated women as an alternative to the Halifax Correctional Centre.

“Unfortunately, money was not made available to implement the program” (Nova Scotia Solicitor General , 1992, p. 9). Another report, authored in the late 1970’s by the Nova Scotia and New Brunswick governments recommended enhancing partnerships with community organizations who had relevant programs that could be delivered to the prisoners, as well as training for correctional staff that would “foster acceptability of volunteer groups within the institutions” (Nova Scotia Solicitor General , 1992, p. 10). Additionally, this report highlighted that efforts to develop residential alternatives to incarceration should be reinvigorated and explicitly opposed the construction of new provincial and federal facilities for women.

In 1991, the Honourable Joel R. Matheson, Q.C. selected a committee titled the Solicitor General’s Special Committee on Provincially Incarcerated Women. The work of this committee became what is now known as *Blueprint for Change*. The report identified the underlying issues that impacted the lives of incarcerated women in the province, including violence and victimization, addictions, and mental illness, while also acknowledging gaps in available supports with employability, motherhood and physical health and fitness. The report published a range of recommendations, which included gender informed and available healthcare services, visits, and connections to children for mothers, and among other items, a strengthening of reintegrative supports, inclusive of housing (Nova Scotia. Solicitor General's Special Committee on Provincially Incarcerated Women, 1992).

An incarcerated woman who was consulted as part of the 1992 Blueprint for Change report stated in the opening few pages of the report “I don’t think anyone with a drug problem, or an alcohol problem should be put in an institution. They should be able to do their time in a detox centre. At least that way they are given a chance to get the help they need. People deserve a chance, but they don’t get that chance in jail...Most of the people I know have been in jail have gone back. It really doesn’t help locking them in a cell and not working with them” (Nova Scotia Solicitor General , 1992, p. 21). Even following the advice of this study, and subsequent ones over the past three-plus decades, the support and resources provided to women and girls who have been criminalized and imprisoned in Nova Scotia remain largely unaltered, and the funding provided to community organizations providing alternatives to incarceration are not properly funded.

#### The Criminalization of Indigenous Peoples in Canada

*Indeed, every day of the 35 years that I have had the opportunity and the privilege to walk in but, most importantly, to be able to walk out of prisons, I'm painfully reminded of the impact of colonization on our indigenous peoples (The Honorable Senator Kim Pate, 2016)*

Before the arrival of European explorers and settlers in the 11th century, the original peoples of North America had established complex and diverse societies characterized by their own intricate kinship networks and governance structures on the lands now known as Canada (Dickason & Newbigging, 2015). "Indigenous peoples" and their descendants possessed unique ceremonies and belief systems that were deeply intertwined with their cultural identities and worldviews. Central to their way of life was an extensive body of knowledge, passed down through countless generations, which emphasized a sustainable and symbiotic relationship with the natural world (Government of Canada, 2024). This profound connection to the land was not only vital for their physical sustenance but also formed a core part of their spiritual and

community life, reflecting a holistic understanding of environmental stewardship and interdependence. In Indigenous communities, children were highly valued and placed “at the heart of a belief system closely aligned with the natural world” (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 57).

Beginning in the 1820s, colonial settlers started “encouraging First Nations to abandon their traditional lifestyles and to adopt more agricultural and sedentary ways of life” (Government of Canada, 2017). Colonization resulted in significant changes to the social structures, cultures, economies, and environments of the colonized area. Since first contact with Indigenous peoples and lands in Canada, settlers established control over the land, and asserted cultural dominance by imposing their culture, language, religion, and social norms on Indigenous peoples. They took over the resources of the lands, implemented political control through policies, laws, and governance structures, and created social hierarchies that placed Indigenous peoples at the bottom (Ferro, 1994).

During colonization, treaties between Indigenous peoples and European settlers were formal agreements intended to establish the terms of relationships, land use, and resource sharing. Indigenous societies believed they were establishing a nation-to-nation relationship when signing Treaties. From their perspective, Treaties were about sharing land, not surrendering it. Indigenous signatories anticipated that the Treaties would increase in value over time as the relationships between parties developed. However, this was not the viewpoint of the government. Historically, Canadian governments and courts have viewed Treaties as agreements of land surrender rather than partnerships for coexistence and mutual benefit (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). Presently, Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in a variety of modern-day institutions. As stated by Rand (2011, p.56) “Attempts to ‘civilize’ Aboriginal peoples through

cultural assimilation may have instead resulted in intergenerational institutionalization among many Aboriginal peoples in Canada”. Volume five of The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission explains “Despite genuine reform efforts, the dramatic overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in foster care, and among the sick, the injured, and the imprisoned continues to grow” (2015, p. 6).

James S. Frideres (1998) outlines seven key components of colonization affecting Indigenous peoples: encroachment and displacement from their lands, economic exploitation of their resources, cultural suppression, political domination, social disintegration, psychological impacts such as loss of identity and trauma, and legal marginalization through discriminatory laws. These aspects illustrate the comprehensive and enduring effects of colonization on Indigenous communities. Indigenous Canadians are “more likely to live in poverty, more likely to be in ill health and die sooner, more likely to have their children taken from them, and more likely to be imprisoned than other Canadians” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2008).

### *Residential Schools*

Throughout history, a range of legislations and initiatives have been implemented by Canadian colonizers to absorb Indigenous Peoples into the settler society (e.g., Bagot Commission 1842 to 1844; British North America Acts of 1867; Act for the gradual enfranchisement of Indians of 1869; Indian Acts of 1876 and 1880; Davin Report, 1879; Indian Advancement Act of 1884). Between 1870 and 1996, the Canadian government, in partnership with Christian Churches, forcibly removed more than 150,000 Indigenous children from their families and communities to assimilate Indigenous children into white society (Miller, 2012). In 1920, the deputy minister of Indian Affairs predicted that within a hundred years, the efforts of these schools would result in

the disappearance of Indigenous people as a distinct cultural group in Canada (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Through the residential school system, Indigenous children were subjected to every kind of abuse imaginable, including physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

The first residential school in Canada opened in Brantford in 1831 and the last federally operated residential school to close was in Saskatchewan, which shut its doors in 1996. In Nova Scotia, the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School was the only residential school. It opened in 1930 and operated until it closed in 1967. On June 11, 2008, the Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, acknowledged the inter-generational damage caused by Residential Schools and offered an apology (Government of Canada, 2008). The apology reads, in part:

*“The Government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities. Many were inadequately fed, clothed, and housed. All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents, and communities. First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools. Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home” (Government of Canada, 2008).*

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed in 2008 following legal action from former students at the schools. The Canadian Government invested \$72 million dollars into the work of the commission. Their final report outlines the history and legacy of the schools and maps a pathway towards reconciliation. It explains “Braided hair (which often had spiritual significance) was cut, homemade traditional clothing was exchanged for a school uniform, Aboriginal names were replaced with Euro-Canadian ones (and a number), and the freedom of life in their own communities was foregone for the regimen of an institution in which every activity from morning to night was scheduled. Males and females, and siblings, were separated,

and, with some exceptions, parental visits were discouraged and controlled” (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. Preface).

Many Indigenous families were coerced into sending their children to residential schools under the threat of imprisonment. Parents who refused to comply faced severe legal consequences, including the possibility of jail time. These residential schools functioned as a form of incarceration for the children, who were forcibly removed from their homes and subjected to harsh conditions. The conditions in these residential schools were often more brutal and dehumanizing than those found in modern-day prisons, reflecting the systemic efforts to eradicate Indigenous culture and identity. A survivor shared “I heard my dad talking to my mom there, and he was kind of crying, but he was talking in Cree now. He said that “It’s either residential school for my boys, or I go to jail.” He said that in Cree. So, I overheard him. So, I said the next morning, we all got up, and I said, “Well, I’m going to residential school,” ’cause I didn’t want my dad to go to jail” (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 14).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that over 3,213 children died at Residential Schools. The deaths are attributed to diseases like tuberculosis coupled with poor health care, deplorable living conditions and inadequate nutrition, neglect and abuse, and accidents from hazardous labour tasks that combined to create a lethal environment for Indigenous children. In 2021 the discovery of unmarked mass graves at several former Residential School sites brought widespread shock and devastation to the country. As one article explains, “over a span of nearly two months, more than 1,300 unmarked graves have been discovered at the sites of four former

residential schools across Canada – a fraction of the more than 130 schools once funded by the federal government” (Cecco, 2021).

The effects of Residential Schools have been damaging to Indigenous culture and communities (Bombay, A., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H., 2014; Miller, J.R, 1996; Fournier, S., & Crey, E., 1997; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). According to the theory of historic trauma, “these experiences have become imbedded, verbally and non-verbally, in the shared memories of Aboriginal communities and are major contributors to normalizing dysfunctional behaviours including violence, direct and indirect suicide and substance abuse” (Manitowabi & Moeke-Pickering, 2010, p. 17). Over a century of cultural genocide is evident in the educational, income, and health disparities between Indigenous people and other Canadians which has translated into shorter lifespans, family violence, alcoholism, and suicidal behaviour. The high rates of child apprehension by welfare agencies, as well as the disproportionate imprisonment and victimization of Indigenous people, are also part of the enduring consequences of residential school policies (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2008).

### *Child Welfare*

Indigenous children are disproportionately represented within child welfare systems across Canada. As of 2021, 53.8% of children in foster care were Indigenous, while accounting for only 7.7% of the total child population (Government of Canada, 2024). Because the majority of children in care are Indigenous, the child welfare system is described as the new version of residential schools. According to Stefanick & Tait, “Canada's child welfare system is both a product and contributor to the institutions and policies that reinforce intergenerational poverty, a key determinant of removing children from their families” (2024, p. 174). An extensive body of

research consistently shows that Indigenous children in the child welfare system go on to experience serious social and health harms including elevated rates of substance use, homelessness, incarceration, underemployment, and unplanned pregnancies (Trocmé & Blackstock, 2004; Barth & Green, 2006; Courtney, Dworsky et al, 2011).

Long before the last residential school closed, the Canadian government, via the child welfare system, began actively removing Indigenous children from their families and communities. According to Blackstock (2003), there were three times the numbers of Indigenous children in care, than there were at the height of residential schools in the 1940's. Section 88 of the Indian Act, which was added in 1951, "cleared the way for provincial and territorial laws to be applied to First Nations people living on reserve" (National Collaborating Centre For Aboriginal Health, 2017, p. 2). Instead of providing support to Indigenous communities and their children, the provincial governments simply took them from their homes. Between 1951 and 1991, somewhere between 11,000 and 20,000 Indigenous children were placed with non-Indigenous families where they were severed from their cultural traditions and traditional languages. This practice, termed the "Sixties Scoop" (Johnston, 1983), has had profound and lasting impacts on Indigenous peoples.

Survivors of the Sixties Scoop, and advocacy groups, initiated legal actions against the Canadian government, arguing that they failed to protect Indigenous children, violating their rights by placing them in non-Indigenous environments. In 2017, an Ontario Justice of the Superior Court affirmed the Government's failure to protect the identities of Indigenous children who were taken into the child welfare system. In his ruling, the judge asserted that "the uncontroverted evidence of the plaintiffs' experts is that the loss of identity left the children fundamentally

disoriented with reduced ability to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. The loss... resulted in psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, unemployment, violence, and numerous suicides” (The National Sixties Scoop Healing Foundation of Canada, 2023). The subsequent settlement agreement with and for survivors of the Sixties Scoop amounted to \$800 million dollars.

Additionally, in 2007, a human rights complaint was lodged against the Canadian Government by First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations. The complaint alleged that Canada discriminated against Indigenous children by failing to provide equitable funding to children living on-reserve, which contributed to their ongoing overrepresentation in the child welfare system (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2014). It took several years for the case to be heard due to the Canadian government making multiple attempts to have the case dismissed, breaching the law on 3 different occasions, and costing taxpayers millions of dollars. However, in January of 2016 “the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal substantiated the complaint and ordered the Canadian Government to cease its discriminatory conduct” (Blackstock, 2016). The 2016 ruling by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ordered the Canadian government to cease discriminatory funding practices for First Nations child welfare services, fully implement Jordan's Principle, and provide compensation to affected children and families (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada et al. v. Attorney General of Canada, 2016).

Growing up, Indigenous children in Canada are four times more likely to be hungry than non-Indigenous children and live 40 percent below the poverty line (Chambers & Burnett, 2017). Poverty, inadequate housing, and substance misuse are the primary contributors to neglect among Indigenous children (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). These risks are not likely to

be addressed by parents without social investments directed at poverty reduction and housing solutions. Jordan's Principle is a principle that "ensures there is substantive equality and that there are no gaps in publicly-funded health, social and education programs, services and supports for First Nations children" Since 2016, the Government has committed \$3.5 billion toward meeting the needs of First Nations children through Jordan's Principle. Jordan's Principle, named after Jordan River Anderson, was a five-year-old Indigenous boy who was born in 1999 with complex medical needs and spent his entire life in the hospital due to a jurisdictional dispute between the federal and provincial governments over who should pay for his at-home care. Jordan died in 2005 without ever having lived in a family home. In 2007, the House of Commons of Canada unanimously passed Jordan's Principle, which stipulates that when a jurisdictional dispute arises over the provision of services to a First Nations child, the government department of first contact must pay for the service and resolve the payment issue later.

Settler colonialism, which is defined as a system of oppression rooted in genocide and colonialism, aimed at displacing a nation's population (often Indigenous people) and replacing it with a new settler population, is based on a power structure maintained by settlers that suppresses Indigenous peoples' rights and cultures, erasing them and substituting them with their own (Cornell Law School, 2022). As argued by Roxburgh and Sinclair, settler colonialism "is not only produced and reproduced by child welfare legislation and policies but also by the individuals who populate these systems and the broader society whose apathy and stigmatized beliefs against Indigenous peoples and children in care permit ongoing violence and oppression" (2023, p. 18). Rollo (2018) also argues that the belief in Indigenous inferiority is essential to justify the "dispossession of lands, removal of children," and ongoing assimilation of Indigenous

peoples (p. 74). The idea that non-Indigenous social workers are authorized to intervene in the lives of Indigenous, colonized families reinforces the notion that settlers have a moral obligation to bring Indigenous peoples into modernity and save them from their own "savage childhood" (Rollo, 2018, p. 78).

Throughout history, Indigenous children have been taken away from their cultural environment and placed into various institutions, from Residential Schools to foster care, group homes, and corrections. These actions are always rationalized by claiming they are done with "good intentions" and purportedly aim to "benefit" Indigenous peoples "for their own good" (Leeuw, 2013). The Canadian Government has developed a strategy in conjunction with Indigenous communities aimed to reduce the number of Indigenous children in care. *The Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children, youth, and families* was implemented into law in 2020, and was the result of 65 engagement sessions, with nearly 2,000 participants. According to the Act, Indigenous groups with their own legislation can either exercise jurisdiction under the act or continue working with delegated agencies, which must adhere to minimum standards for child and family services. Existing agencies will remain operational, and prior agreements will stay valid unless altered by the parties. Additionally, treaties and self-government agreements regarding child and family services take precedence over the Act in case of conflict (Indigenous Services Canada, 2024).

The over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system is another manifestation of deep-rooted issues (Castellano, Archibald, & DeGagne, 2008). Indigenous youth face alarmingly high rates of suicide compared to the general population, hundreds of Indigenous communities in Canada do not have reliable access to safe drinking water, a

fundamental human right, and remote and isolated communities often lack the necessary medical facilities and healthcare professionals, resulting in limited access to essential services. Addressing these complex and interconnected challenges requires a holistic approach that goes beyond law reform. This must include substantial investments in infrastructure, health services, education, and community development, as well as a commitment to respecting and upholding the rights and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007; First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2019).

### *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women*

Homicide ranks as the third most common cause of mortality among Indigenous women. Roughly 4 in 5 Indigenous women in Canada experience violence (ICNA Council for Social Justice, 2024), and Indigenous women are twice as likely than non-Indigenous women to experience violence. According to a 2011 statistic, “58 percent of the Indigenous women who suffered violence at the hands of their spouse sustained an injury, and almost half reported that they had been sexually assaulted, beaten, choked, or threatened with a gun or knife” (Government of Canada, 2024). Indigenous women also face a murder rate that is 10 times the national average— three times that of non-Indigenous women (ICNA Council for Social Justice, 2024). A national inquiry revealed that “persistent and deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses are the root cause behind Canada’s staggering rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people” (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

In 2004, Amnesty International released a report examining “the role of discrimination in acts of violence carried out against Indigenous women in Canadian towns and cities” (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 13). The report highlights two significant policies: the disenfranchisement of Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men and the forced removal of children to residential schools. These policies have had deep, lasting impacts on social tensions within Indigenous communities and have contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous women in Canadian society. Penny Mitchell (2017) explains that the requirement for proof of parentage, the loss of status for Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men, and the denial of status to their children have all contributed to the current poverty and inequality faced by Indigenous women. The Indian Act's regulations specifically intensified the colonial experience for women by imposing additional restrictive policies exclusively on them.

Amnesty International produced a subsequent report on violence against Indigenous women in Canada in 2009. This document details how the inequalities in living conditions and access to government services forced many Indigenous women into vulnerable situations, such as overcrowded housing and sex work, which significantly increases their risk of violence. These same inequalities have also prevented many Indigenous women from accessing necessary services and support, like emergency shelters, to escape violence. Additionally, they illuminated how some men specifically target Indigenous women for extreme acts of violence, possibly motivated by racism or the belief that societal indifference towards Indigenous women's safety will allow them to evade justice. This impunity fosters a climate where such violence is perceived as normal and acceptable, discouraging women from seeking justice as they know they are unlikely to receive it (Amnesty International, 2009).

In 2010, the Native Women's Association of Canada created a database of missing and murdered Indigenous women, collecting information on 582 cases. Of these cases, 67 percent were murder cases and 20 percent of cases were missing women or girls. Alarming, at the time of the data collection, almost half of the murder cases remained unsolved (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010). In 2014, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) released their own report, which examined data from more than 300 police forces (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2015). They found that there were 164 missing and 1,017 murdered Indigenous women and girls.

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) was formed in 2016. The National Inquiry's Final Report (2019) identified ongoing and intentional violations of human and Indigenous rights as the root cause of high violence rates against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people in Canada. The two-volume report calls for significant legal and social reforms to address the crisis affecting Indigenous communities. It includes the testimonies of over 2,380 individuals, including family members, survivors, experts, and Knowledge Keepers, collected over two years. The report issues 231 Calls for Justice aimed at governments, institutions, service providers, industries, and all Canadians. It highlights multigenerational trauma, poverty, insecure housing, and barriers to education, employment, healthcare, and cultural support as factors contributing to the violence. Additionally, colonial and patriarchal policies that marginalized women and displaced them from traditional roles are noted as exacerbating their vulnerability (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

### *Mass Incarceration*

Indigenous women constitute the fastest-growing segment of the prison population, representing arguably the most disturbing trend in the country's criminal justice system. Indigenous people in Canada are incarcerated at a significantly higher rate than non-Indigenous people (Robinson, Small, Chen, & Irving, 2023). In 2023, the Office of the Correctional Investigator revealed that the proportion of Indigenous over-representation has risen from 23% to 32% of the total incarcerated population, accounting for 4,200 Indigenous individuals. Furthermore, Indigenous women now constitute half of all female prisoners in Canadian penitentiaries. This surge in imprisonment can be directly attributed to the persistent and systemic oppression Indigenous women face, a legacy of colonialism perpetuated by the state (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2023).

The state of Indigenous over-representation in Canadian prisons has been well documented since the 1970's (Treasury Board Secretariat, 1975; National Conference on Native Peoples and the Criminal Justice System, 1975; Task Force on Aboriginal Peoples in Federal Corrections, 1988; Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, 1991; Law Reform Commission of Canada, 1991; Corrections and Conditional Release Act, 1992; *R. v. Gladue* 1999). The issue of Indigenous over-representation in Canadian prisons was also a significant focus of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, established on August 26, 1991. This Commission was tasked with exploring the evolving relationship between Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis), the Canadian government, and Canadian society. The Commission's findings indicated a systemic failure of the justice system in its dealings with Indigenous peoples, highlighted by the increasing over-representation of Indigenous individuals in Canadian prisons (Royan Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Additional research corroborated these findings,

showing persistent over-representation at every level of Canada's justice system. To address these issues, there was an emphasis on increasing recognition and understanding of Indigenous community issues and cultural traditions through various recommendations produced by the Commissions in their final report—the majority of which were never fully implemented (Doerr, 2006).

Both the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and the later released Correctional Service Canada's strategic plan for Aboriginals in corrections (2006), included significant action items such as fully utilizing the 1992 Corrections and Conditional Release Act to address the inequalities faced by Indigenous people in the criminal justice system. The Act provides for special provisions (Sections 81 and 84), which are intended to ameliorate overrepresentation of Indigenous people in federal penitentiaries and address long-standing differential outcomes for Indigenous offenders (Correctional Service Canada, 2006).

A 2012 report by the Office of the Correctional Investigator titled *Spirit Matters: Aboriginal People and the Correctional Conditional Release Act* investigated progress on the use of the Act. At the time of the report, it was noted that Indigenous offenders served disproportionately more of their sentence, were under-represented in community supervision populations, and over-represented in maximum security institutions. They were more likely to return to prison on revocation of parole and were excessively involved in “institutional security incidents, use of force interventions, segregation placements and self-injurious behaviour” (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2012). The investigation indicated that Correctional Services Canada “chose to abandon its commitment to create new Section 81 agreements and facilities at the very same time as it was receiving additional government funding to do precisely that” (Office of the

Correctional Investigator , 2012, p. 13). Correctional Investigator Ivan Zinger released the annual report in 2023, ringing alarm bells on the over-representation of Indigenous people in prisons. In light of the decades long promises to redress this issue, that has since worsened, Zinger reveals that “the steady and unabated increase in the disproportionate representation of Indigenous peoples under federal sentence is nothing short of a national travesty and remains one of Canada’s most pressing human rights challenges” (Zinger, 2023, p. 64).

In this report, Dr. Zinger expressed grave concern, stating: "The Indigenization of Canada's correctional population is deeply troubling. Across various metrics of correctional performance — including time served before release, placement in maximum-security facilities, use of force incidents, rates of recidivism and revocation, instances of suicide and self-harm, and placement in restrictive confinement units — the correctional system appears to perpetuate conditions of disadvantage and discrimination against Indigenous individuals" (Zinger, 2023).

The systemic shortcomings are notably evident in the cumulative adverse treatment Indigenous women face within the criminal justice framework. As outlined by Carol Muree Martin and Harsha Walia in their 2019 analysis, “Indigenous women in the prison system are subject to a cascade of increasing discriminations. They typically spend a greater portion of their sentence incarcerated before being granted initial release and have a higher propensity to be held until their mandatory release date or the expiry of their warrant. They are often inappropriately placed in high-security facilities and are not sufficiently represented in community supervision initiatives or Healing Lodges. Moreover, these women are more frequently subjected to isolation; they encounter significant barriers in accessing prison programs that are both rehabilitative and culturally pertinent; they are habitually excluded from programs designed to maintain the

mother-child bond; they are at an increased risk of reincarceration upon parole revocation, and they are disproportionately branded as ‘dangerous offenders’ or labeled as difficult to manage due to their resistance to the penitentiary system” (p. 23).

According to the Native Women’s Council, “reports indicate that 97% of federally incarcerated Indigenous women were diagnosed with a mental health disorder and 92% were found to have moderate to high substance abuse needs” (Native Women's Association Canada, 2024) “In many ways, the residential school experience lies at the root of the current overincarceration of Aboriginal people. Traumatized by their school experiences, succumbed to addictions, and found themselves among the disproportionate number of Aboriginal people who come into conflict with the law” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 8).

On behalf of the Government of Canada, the RCMP: ensured the forced relocations of Indigenous communities; removed children from their families and communities to place them in residential schools; enforced laws that prohibited traditional spirituality and ceremonies; enforced the Indian Act governance structures, including the pass system, at the behest of Indian agents; facilitated the apprehension of children during the Sixties Scoop; and enforced other discriminatory and oppressive legislation and policies.

The Canadian criminal justice system fails to provide justice for Indigenous people, especially missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. Gladue reports have limited value when the infrastructure and resources for alternatives to incarceration, such as community-based rehabilitation and healing-focused services, are not available in the community to support sentencing options. One of Zinger’s recommendations contained within the report calls on the government to develop and implement a national Indigenous decarceration strategy

(2023). He also points out the relevant Truth and Reconciliation calls to action that have yet to be implemented. As he explains “among the plethora of unresolved calls to action and justice aimed at reducing Indigenous over-representation in the federal corrections system, some remain particularly pertinent” (Zinger, 2023) . (TRC Recommendation #30 calls upon federal, provincial, and territorial governments to commit to eliminating the over-representation of Indigenous people in custody over the next decade. TRC Recommendation #35 calls upon the federal government to eliminate barriers to the creation of additional Indigenous healing lodges within the federal correctional system. TRC Recommendation #37 calls upon the federal government to provide more supports for Indigenous programming in halfway houses and parole services. TRC Recommendation #42 calls upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to commit to the recognition and implementation of Indigenous justice systems). The Native Women’s Association of Canada has also issued a demand for the Canadian Government to “act upon all 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, with particular attention paid to Calls 30-38” (Native Women's Association Canada, 2024).

In addition to federal prisons, Indigenous women are over-represented in provincial jails across the country. Provincial jails serve as remand centers, where individuals who are charged but not convicted await their court matters, and those sentenced to under two years serve their sentences here. Indigenous women’s representation in provincial jails in 2020/2021 was 15.4 times higher than non-Indigenous women (Statistics Canada, 2023). Between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, over 28,000 Indigenous adults were held in provincial correctional facilities in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. This figure represents 3% of the Indigenous adult population in these provinces. In contrast, less than 1% of the non-Indigenous adult population

faced incarceration during the same period, making the rate of Indigenous incarceration more than 8.2 times higher than that of non-Indigenous adults (Statistics Canada, 2023).

There are five pathways that criminalize Indigenous women, including poverty, violence, sex trade, mental illness, and addiction (Quinn, 2007). According to Currie & Focus Consultants (2004), 75% of women in provincial prisons are sentenced for administrative crimes or fraud, possession of stolen property, and theft. These pathways are inherently linked to the primary structures of colonialism, racism, and sexism, which continue to oppress Indigenous women in Canada. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has issued calls for "immediate and transformative change to Canada's criminal justice system, including the prioritization of community-based alternatives for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people to help them heal and rehabilitate" (Native Women's Association Canada, 2024). There are countless criminal justice reforms that have aimed to stop the over-incarceration of Indigenous women. These strategies are insufficient because the conditions of their lives are contoured by legacies of trauma and neglect (Balfour, 2013).

#### The Criminalization of Black Lives in Canada

*The Province of Nova Scotia polity was built on racist laws, policy, and practices, including slavery and segregation, that structured and continue to limit access to power, opportunities, and resources based on race (Williams, 2013, p. 420).*

Anti-Black Racism refers to the systemic policies and practices embedded within Canadian institutions, like the justice system, which perpetuate and reflect discrimination, stereotypes, prejudice, and biases against individuals of Black-African descent. The concept of Anti-Black Racism was first articulated by a professor of Social Work at Ryerson University, Dr. Akua Benjamin. It emphasizes the distinct and pervasive nature of systemic racism that affects Black Canadians, underpinned by the historical and contemporary impacts of slavery and colonization on people of Black-African descent in Canada. This framework underscores the

unique challenges faced by this group, differentiating it from broader discussions of racism (Black Health Alliance, 2019).

There is a robust body of work on criminalization and social control, which examines how societies define and respond to crime, and how certain individuals, behaviours, and groups are transformed into crime and criminals through laws and regulations. This situates particular behaviours to legal penalties while also influencing social perceptions to characterize these groups as dangerous or deviant (Durkheim, 1895; Foucault, 1975; Lemert, 1951; Marx, 1848; Cohen, 1972; Garland, 1972). Furthermore, critical intellectual work by Black women, known as Black Feminist Thought, has meticulously examined the systemic nature of anti-Black racism and its relationship to processes of criminalization (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991).

There are multiple ways in which anti-Black racism shapes the experiences of Black individuals in the criminal justice system. The impacts of slavery, colonialism and segregation have formed systemic discrimination which manifests itself in practices like racial profiling, over-policing Black people and Black communities, and the over-incarceration of Black populations (Davis A. , 2003). Black people also face specific stereotyping as aggressive or deviant, which can lead to disproportionate policing and sentencing. Furthermore, structural violence, or the way in which social structures harm or disadvantage people, ensures inequitable access to resources, political power, education, healthcare, and legal resources for Black people (Maynard, 2017). There exist pervasive myths in society, which perpetuate unjust association between Blackness and criminality. These myths around criminality, aggression, resilience to suffering perpetuates racial profiling, disproportionate police stops, searches, and higher incarceration rates for Black individuals (Maynard, 2017).

### *Historical Context*

Anti-Black racism is imbedded in Canadian history (Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System, 1995; James, 2010; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018; Canadian Heritage, 2019; Nova Scotia, 2019; Wortley, 2019). Through colonialism, slavery, segregation, and anti-immigration practices, slavery has existed for more than 200 years across what is now colonially known as Canada (Maynard, 2017). This has created and perpetuated structural, systemic, institutional, and individual forms of racism which have a “negative impact on the collective Black experience, and by extension, on Canadian society as a whole” (Department of Justice Canada, 2022). As noted in Robyn Maynard’s book *Policing Black Lives, State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*, “since the abolition of slavery, Black Canadians have been relegated to extreme poverty and have been subject to discrimination in wages, education, housing and social services” (2017, p.77). Maynard’s book is amongst a growing and expansive collective of writing on the Black experience in relation to the criminal justice system in Canada. As El Jones articulates in her book, *Abolition Intimacies*, “Black incarceration in Canada, discourse around it and Canada’s history of anti-Blackness continues to be largely hidden” (Jones, 2022).

### *Slavery*

Slavery was established in Quebec, by the French, through a royal mandate issued by Louis XIV in 1689 and abolished in the British Empire in 1833. As Cooper details, “the enslavement of Black people in Canada was part of the larger process of the Transatlantic Slave Trade which ripped upwards of twenty-five million people from the shores of Africa to the New World” (Cooper, *Slavery in Canada*, 2020). The earliest record of African slaves in New France, which consisted of five colonies that covered a vast terrain of North America, is the sale of a boy from either Madagascar or Guinea (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2020). Over 2 centuries,

thousands of men, women and children of African descent were violently taken into British North America as enslaved peoples, “forced to change their names, abandon their faiths, reject their cultures, and stop speaking their native tongues” (Government of Canada, 2022). Devoid of basic rights and freedoms, enslaved peoples in Canada were subjected to barbaric treatment. Enslaved women for example, were stripped of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights and subjected to extreme forms of sexual exploitation, abuse, violence, and murder.

Nova Scotia was the site of the largest population of enslaved people in Canada. Black people brought to Nova Scotia between 1749 and 1782 were slaves of English or American settlers (Province of Nova Scotia, 2023). There were about 400 enslaved people living in Halifax in 1750, when the total population of the city was roughly 3,000 (Nova Scotia Archives). By the 1790s, approximately 1,200 to 2,000 enslaved Black people lived in the Maritime provinces. Ile Royal, now known as Cape Breton Island, was a French colony from 1713 to 1763 and at least 216 individuals were enslaved there, with more than 90 per cent of the enslaved people being Black, reflecting “the colony's close trade links with the French West Indie” (Donovan, 1995).

Captain Thomas Bloss of the Royal Navy was the amongst the largest slaveowner in the history of Nova Scotia, bringing 16 enslaved people to the region (Whitfield, 2010). The belief by white people, that the place of Black people was to be enslaved, was prevalent throughout Nova Scotia. As is revealed in Nova Scotia Archives, “these negative attitudes became sorely exposed following the large influx of Loyalist refugees, both white and black, at the end of the American War of Independence in 1783” (Nova Scotia Government , 2023). Ultimately, as Maynard writes, “slavery had accomplished more than an economic subjugation, it had created particular meanings of what it means to be Black—meanings that were attached to Black peoples’ bodies” (Maynard, 2017, p. 31). The enslavement of Black people created an early

racial hierarchy, normalizing their dehumanization and establishing racial stereotypes (Trudel, 2009).

### *Prison Pipelines*

For over four centuries, Nova Scotia has been a home to people of African descent. Spanning through four significant waves of migration, the province has witnessed the establishment of over 50 historic African Nova Scotian communities. Yet, this integral aspect of Nova Scotia's history often remains untold, despite the profound contributions of African Nova Scotians to the collective narrative of the province (International Decade for People of African Descent, 2019). As Maynard writes, “while slavery was officially abolished almost two centuries ago, Canada’s legacy of exerting control over Black bodies was reconsolidated, perhaps most strongly, in the criminal justice system” (Maynard, 2017, p. 83). In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander also articulates the ways in which racial subjugation operates through the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010). This manifests in the surveillance, criminalization, policing and imprisonment of Black bodies and ensuing violence that is inflicted on Black lives and Black communities.

There are several examples that demonstrate how systemic racism contributes to the criminalization of Black people in Canada. Racism is prevalent in the public education system, manifesting in what has been branded the school to prison pipeline (Kim et al, 2010; Nocella & Parmer, 2014; Varner et al, 2017; Warren, 2021). This is characterized by disciplinary policies and patterns of socialization utilized within school settings to differentially target racialized students away from educational success, and towards incarceration (Swaine & Nobit, 2011). This pipeline can include negative messages that students hear, resources to help support their success being withheld, and police presence in the school which produces and enflames a host of issues that limit and harm Black students.

As explained by Swaine & Nobit, a tough on crime culture within schools that criminalizes students' actions, and is disproportionately used against racialized students, restricts further educational opportunities (2011). A 1994 report of the Black Learners Advisory Committee on Education illuminated issues that disadvantaged Black learners in the Nova Scotia education system were subjected to, including the under-representation of Black teachers, significant anti-racist policy deficits, issues with equity and access to higher education and a lack of culturally competent curriculum (BLAC, 1994). As Zellars notes in her 2017 dissertation, "the history of public schooling discrimination, coinciding with Black migration, best illuminates Canada's tradition of anti-Black violence historically" (2017, p. 8).

Racism in the police force is another source of the criminalization of Black people. This is done through racial profiling, which refers to "racial disparities with respect to police stop and search activities (sometimes referred to street checks or carding), increased police patrols in racial minority neighbourhoods and undercover activities or sting operations that selectively target particular racial or ethnic groups" (Wortley, 2019, p. 8). When examined through a criminological, sociological, social-psychological, and legal lens, the implications of racially biased policing on racialized communities are significant and well documented. They include serious harm to the health and wellness of racialized individuals and communities, an overrepresentation of racialized people in the criminal justice system and generally, an immense mistrust of policing (Wortley, 2019). In 2019, the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission tasked Dr. Scot Wortley to lead an investigation into the correlation between racism and the practice of street checks by police in the Halifax area. The report synthesizes the findings from this investigation, analyzing over a decade's worth of collected statistical data. Dr. Wortley confirmed what Black Nova Scotian's had already long identified, which was that Black people

are over-represented in police street check data and are 6 times more likely to be stopped by police (2019).

Black individuals in Canada, particularly in Nova Scotia, are significantly overrepresented in the criminal justice system, “as both victims and people accused or convicted of crime”

(Government of Canada, 2022). Black prisoners in Canada make up 8.6 percent of the prison population, while only accounting for only 3.5 percent of the Canadian population. Additionally, Black people in Canada are 36% more likely to receive a long-term custodial sentence of two years or more than their white counterparts (Government of Canada, 2022).

African Nova Scotians represent 3% of the province’s population, but 10 per cent of admissions to sentenced custody and nearly 15 per cent of admissions to remand in provincial correctional facilities (Nova Scotia Government, 2023), and between 2014 and 2015, roughly 16 % of youth sentenced to a youth prison were African Nova Scotian (Luck, 2016). El Jones traces some of the root causes to issues such as “lack of jobs, educational opportunities and proper housing” (Luck, 2016).

In 2020, the Premier of Nova Scotia issued a public apology on behalf of the Nova Scotia government for the systemic racism that pervades the justice system. Mr. McNeil proclaimed:

Our system of justice has failed members of our Black and Indigenous communities. This system is supposed to keep all Nova Scotians safe, but because of the colour of your skin, many of you live in fear. Today, I say: enough. I see you; I hear you, I believe you and I am sorry. On behalf of my ministers, my caucus, our government, we are sorry racist institutions have failed you, your families and your ancestors. I can’t take away your pain or bring back the opportunities and lives lost. But I am showing up today to try to work with all of you to find a new approach to public safety. (McNeil, 2020).

## 2SLGBTQ+ Communities and Systemic Inequality

*“2SLGBTQ+ young people are overrepresented in detention and correctional facilities as a result of their higher rates of homelessness and involvement with survival street-based economies, and due to discrimination within the criminal justice system.”* (Ontario Association of Childrens Aid Societies, 2022)

In Canada, 2SLGBTQ+ persons face inescapable forms of routine discrimination, and pervasive risks to their physical safety and well-being, for which they find little redress, if any, in the legal system. Following the decriminalization of same sex activity in Canada through Bill C-150 in 1969 (Prober, 1970), the criminal justice system was weaponized against 2SLGBTQ+ people and those destabilizing gender and sexual norms. Subsequent Bills addressed the shortcomings of C-150, however, “the morality provisions in the Criminal Code were based on 19th century ideas about what was ‘indecent,’ ‘obscene,’ or ‘deviant’, as such, these continue to form the basis of many sections of the Code and must be repealed” (Gentile, Hooper, Kinsman, & Maynard, 2018).

In Canada, existing research on 2SLGBTQ+ individuals indicates that they experience stigma and discrimination across their life spans, and are targets of sexual and physical assault, harassment and hate crimes (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2008). The 2SLGBTQ+ communities vulnerable to discrimination, marginalization and criminalization are overwhelmingly Indigenous, Black or racialized, migrants, sex-workers, HIV positive and low-income individuals. As stated by Listen Chen, unsurprisingly, these are the communities who are also left out of gay rights movements, which “center the interests and experiences of white, cis, middle class or middle class-aspiring, gay men” (2015). Discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, which emerge in adverse behaviors on the basis of sexual orientations and

gender identities that are non-heterosexual or heteronormative, produce significant societal disadvantages for 2SLGBTQ+ persons (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals in Canada, largely because of significant gaps and omissions in the ways in which data is collected through the Canadian Census. According to Statistics Canada, there is very limited statistical information about the transgender community—including the non-binary population, with most of the data stemming “from academic studies conducted in specific fields (e.g., health) and they cannot be easily disaggregated by sociodemographic characteristics or geographic areas” (Statistics Canada , 2020). These gaps make claims of 2SLGBTQ+ overrepresentation in the justice system challenging to quantify. The absence of research and data on this subject does not indicate lack of a problem but signals the need for analysis and quantitative study.

As explained in a report release in July of 2020, “according to the results of the 2019 Census Test, the estimated percentage of the transgender population, including non-binary individuals, is 0.35%, which seems realistic, given results from other sources (both national and international)” (Statistics Canada , 2020). The 2021 Census, they explain, included questions pertaining to gender and sexuality in order to be more inclusive of trans and non-binary populations, with the dissemination process being intentional about maintaining “the confidentiality of the answers provided by Canadians” (Statistics Canada , 2020). Although 2SLGBTQ+ people are afforded protections under both the Canadian Human Rights Act of 1977 and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982 (Canadian Human Rights Commission , 2021), 2SLGBTQ+ people face widespread discrimination in Canada. One Nova Scotia based study on 2SLGBTQ+ health cautioned that “previous research has demonstrated that 2SLGBTQ+ populations experience higher rates of homelessness, social exclusion, and

other negative determinants of health compared to their heterosexual, cisgender, age-matched peers” (Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016). In 2020, Police chiefs of Canada made a formal apology – “for the decades of oppression and opposition towards homosexuality and 2SLGBTQ+ rights within the 1960s through to today across Canada” (Chidley-Hill, 2020). During the apology, the police acknowledged that despite the decriminalization of homosexuality by the federal government, they continued to criminalize 2SLGBTQ+ people.

At a 2017 town hall meeting, Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau was asked about the treatment of transgender people in the prison system (The Office of the Prime Minister , 2017). Teresa Windsor, the trans woman who asked the question of Mr. Trudeau, was assured that the human rights of trans people in Canada would remain a priority for the Liberal government. This inquiry was aligned with Bill C-16, which, among other things, amended the Canadian Human Rights Act by adding “gender identity or expression” as prohibited grounds of discrimination.

As Trudeau promised, in December of 2017, Corrections Services Canada (CSC) rolled out new policy guidelines which stated that “CSC has a duty to accommodate based on gender identity or expression, regardless of the person’s anatomy (i.e., sex) or the gender marker on identification documents” (Canada, 2017). This means that transgender prisoners can *choose* whether they want to be incarcerated on a women’s unit or men’s unit, unless significant safety concerns exist, which are at the discretion of the correctional facility. In Nova Scotia, the provincial Department of Corrections pre-emptively instituted their own policies, in anticipation

of Bill C-16, which as of January 16, 2017, allows for provincial prisoners to choose where to be incarcerated within the facility they are detained at, based on their gender identity.<sup>1</sup>

These policy changes within prisons and jails, although important, reflect a reformist logic, which entails changing existing practices to make the system a better one. The focus over the past several decades in Canada, has been on advancing legal protections and human rights for 2SLGBTQ+ people. We should be compelled, however, to go beyond public policy change and legal reform for 2SLGBTQ+ persons and critically examine both the causes and consequences of their involvement in the criminal justice system. As Angela Davis cautions, “a major challenge of [the prison abolition] movement is to do the work that will create more humane, habitable environments for people in prison without bolstering the permanence of the prison system” (Davis, 2003, p52). While the advocacy of those behind the policy changes within Correctional Services Canada (CSC) and other provincial jails are intrinsically credible, it should also signify the need for interrogation of the causes and consequences of the criminalization of 2SLGBTQ+ people that relies on an abolition framework.

In British Columbia, the Justice Institute of BC, and Trans Alliance Society have collectively produced extensive work leading the advocacy efforts in Canada pertaining to the rights of trans people in prison and creating extensive resources for their communities that identify key issues that impact 2SLGBTQ+ people in the criminal justice context in their province (Goldberg, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Nova Scotia Department of Justice Correctional Services Policy and Procedures obtained – policy is dated January 16, 2017, and revised on May 19, 2017. Obtained from Jill McCarthy, Manager, Policy & Program Services Correctional Services Nova Scotia Department of Justice.

According to a Canadian award-winning article on ‘Transwomen and the Prison Industrial Complex’, “[imprisonment] often leads to the termination of hormone therapy treatments, limited access to transition surgery, abuse (physical and emotional) by guards and other inmates, and sexual violence by both guards and inmates” (Masikini, 2016). In the United States, more research on this topic has been produced. A 2015 report by Black & Pink using data collected from 1118 American LGBTQ+ prisoners found that “only 21% of respondents are allowed access to underwear and cosmetic needs that match their gender... Of those who report having been sexually assaulted by a prisoner, 76% also report that prison staff intentionally placed them in situations where they would be at high risk of sexually assault from another prisoner. Most respondents experienced discrimination and verbal harassment by prison staff and more than a third were physically assaulted by prison staff” (Lydon et al. 5).

Robyn Maynard (2017) provides the chilling reminder that “though there no specific studies on the conditions faced by Black trans women in Canadian prisons, the existence of both racist and transphobic treatment at the hands of Correctional Services Canada makes plain the reality that Black trans women are in a position of heightened marginalization in relative to other prisoners” (Maynard, p. 154). The need for a dedicated focus on 2SLGBTQ+ prisoners is made abundantly clear in her essays which documents nearly four hundred years of state-sanctioned surveillance, criminalization, and punishment of Black lives in Canada. Maynard critically analyzes the intersections of gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, class, and race and elucidates the ways in which “multiple forms of marginalization” impact Black trans people (2017; p. 81). What Maynard also draws upon, is the homophobia and transphobia that permeates services and structurally excludes 2SLGBTQ+ from accessing vitally important social supports. The 519, A Toronto based charity that provides a variety of services and supports to the 2SLGBTQ+

community in the city released a statement in October 2020 following the death of a trans woman while in custody of the Toronto Police. The statement indicates that the woman was misgendered in police reports. They go on to say “The 519 will continue our commitment to holding organizations, agencies, and institutions publicly accountable – investigations and reviews must be honest and transparent to members of the public” (519, 2020).

### Homelessness in Canada

Homelessness is a complex social issue that is prevalent throughout North America. The causes are multifaceted and can include the cost of living and housing affordability, violence and abuse, mental illness and addiction, unemployment and low wages, inadequate health supports, insecure housing, and systemic discrimination. According to the 2016 report titled “The State of Homelessness in Canada”, homelessness first developed in the 1980’s following a massive disinvestment in affordable housing, structural shifts in the economy and reduced spending on social supports” (Gaetz, Dej, Richter, & Redman, 2016). Annually, over 235,000 people in Canada experience homelessness, and on any given night roughly 35,000 individuals are considered homeless (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019). Current evidence underlines the distinct populations impacted by this issue which include Indigenous people (28-34%), women (27.5%) and youth (18%) (Gaetz et al; 2016).

As stated in the Canadian Definition of Homelessness, it is “the situation of an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect means and ability of acquiring it” (Gaetz, Dej, Richter, & Redman, 2016). The causes of homelessness reflect interactions between systemic failures, structural factors, and various individual contexts. Like most social issues, there are common misconceptions about the causes of homelessness, and associated stigma that exists across Canada. There are also different

circumstances that qualify someone as being homeless. These include being unsheltered, sometimes rereferred to as “sleeping rough”, residing in an emergency living situation such as a domestic violence or homeless shelter, being provisionally accommodated, or being at-risk of homelessness. The Canadian Observatory of Homelessness expands on the typologies to note that homelessness is not static, and people may continually move in and out of various types of homelessness with frequency. An individual who is unsheltered may be arrested and then incarcerated and later released to a homeless shelter. Each experience represents a different type of homelessness with a unique and complex set of circumstances and risk factors for each type.

Women, girls, and individuals of diverse gender identities face a significant shortage of housing that is safe, affordable, suitable, and accessible throughout various communities in Canada. The heightened housing difficulties encountered by women are connected to the distinct challenges they confront in their search for proper living conditions. Issues such as concealed homelessness, domestic violence, obligations related to childcare, and economic hardship all play a part in the obstacles women face in securing and sustaining housing that is both safe and affordable (Nemiroff, Aubry & Klodawsky, 2011; Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2009). A report by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights states that “violations of women’s right to housing are often a result of discriminatory laws, policies, customs and traditions in other areas which lead to deeply rooted inequalities between women and men in housing” (2012, p. 25).

### *Indigenous Homelessness*

In Canada, Indigenous people are 8 times more likely to be homeless than non-Indigenous people and represent 10%–80% of the total homeless population in large urban centres (Belanger, Awosoga, & Head, 2013). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which began in 2008 when the Canadian Government issued a formal apology for residential schools released its

final report in 2015, including 94 calls to action (Cochrane, Blidock, & Dyck). The Commission “spent six years travelling to all parts of Canada to hear from the Aboriginal people who had been taken from their families as children, forcibly if necessary, and placed for much of their childhoods in residential schools” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). To redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation there is a discernible acknowledgment of the over-representation of Indigenous peoples in rates of homelessness in the national homelessness strategies. An Advisory Committee on Homelessness produced a final report in 2018 noting that housing is a critical way to realize Indigenous rights through a housing program (Advisory Committee on Homelessness – Final Report, 2018). Furthermore, there exists a separate definition of homelessness for Indigenous peoples, which accounts for the impacts of colonialism and concedes that “racism and discrimination aimed at Indigenous peoples are firmly entrenched in Canadian Society” (Thistle, 2017). This definition states that Indigenous Homelessness in Canada is “a human condition that describes First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals, families or communities lacking stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means or ability to acquire such housing... Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews” (Thistle, 2017). This definition undoes the misconceptions around the causes of homelessness for Indigenous peoples, combatting stereotypes and assumptions that descend from stigma as opposed to evidence. For instance, Thistle describes what is known as “victim-blaming discourse” which unjustly correlated issues like mental illness and addictions as the causes of Indigenous homelessness, instead of situating these as manifestations of intergenerational trauma from colonialism.

A lack of housing, health services, employment opportunities and safe and well supported Indigenous communities are all contributing factors to Indigenous homelessness. This thorough, complex, and intentional unravelling of traditional social and cultural systems, known as cultural genocide, has created and prolonged, and continues to perpetuate, Indigenous homelessness in Canada (Menzies, 2007; The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

For those who hold privileged identities with access to wealth, health, and economic stability, and as with many social issues, there is a common belief that homelessness is a choice.

According to the Homeless Hub, however, “Homelessness is not a choice and there are many reasons why people experience homelessness, including the lack of structural supports for those experiencing poverty, job loss, and inadequate discharge planning for those leaving hospitals, correctional facilities and mental health facilities” (Homeless Hub, 2022). It is crucial to understand how and why homelessness manifests in different populations and communities, to implement solutions that are meaningful and beneficial. In addition to Indigenous homelessness, there is also a definition for chronic homelessness. Individuals who are considered chronically homeless are those who are experiencing homelessness and have either been homeless for at least 6 months in the year or “have recurrent experiences of homelessness over the past 3 years, with a cumulative duration of at least 18 months” (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019).

### *Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism, or the “deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3) has contributed to homelessness itself, as well as the public discourse around its causes. The notion that those experiencing homelessness have created their own ill-fated situations and can single-handedly pull themselves out of it by getting a job is grounded in neoliberal pedagogy, which has indoctrinated society to believe that individuals

must be self-reliant and solely responsible for their personal circumstances. What should be recognized as a failure of the state becomes a rhetoric of personal failure. The concept of public pedagogy “refers to a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain” (Giroux, 2010, p. 487). In addition to permeating public narratives around homelessness, which creates an “us vs them” mentality, pushing the issue to the margins and stigmatizing individuals experiencing homelessness within our societies, neoliberalism also hinders solutions. The downloading of responsibility from the state to the individual has resulted “in time-limited programs, divorced from community needs, with an ad hoc development of services” (Johnstone & Lee, 2017, p. 1443). By downloading responsibility onto underfunded community organizations with no mutual strategy or sustainability plan, the solutions fail to meaningfully address the root causes of poverty and homelessness and only provide band-aid solutions. An enormous amount of money and time is invested into homelessness each year in Canada; however, the rates of homelessness continue to rise.

#### *Point in Time Count*

Beginning in 2016, data collection efforts coordinated on a national scale have taken place. The data collection project is known as the Point in Time Count “PiT count” and provides a “unique community-wide view of homelessness that reaches beyond those who are accessing other homelessness services” (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019). The methodology of the PiT count is to “provide a one-day snapshot of homelessness in a community, including people experiencing homelessness in shelters, unsheltered locations, and transitional housing. They can also include people experiencing homelessness who are in health or correctional facilities or who are staying with others because they have no access to a permanent residence” (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019).

In 2018, a total of 61 distinct communities participated in the PiT count, depicting a picture of the state of homelessness in the nation. The count identified 32,005 individuals experiencing homelessness, which was disaggregated to show 36% women, 30% indigenous and 11% 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, furthermore 21% were in transitional facilities which includes jails (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2019). In 2018 in Drummondville Quebec, 1,091 individuals were staying in emergency accommodations and 238 were in jail or police custody. In Cape Breton during the same year, of the 115 individuals experiencing homelessness, 58 were in institutional care (addiction treatment, correctional facility, hospital) (Homeless Hub, 2022). On March 2, 2021, the Government of Canada announced the launch of *Everyone Counts 2021*, a nationally coordinated Point-in-Time Count. As outlined in the announcement made by the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Ahmed Hussen, the count would consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homelessness, while also providing unique measures to ensure health and safety and adherence to public health protocols. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, the count took place in April of 2022 and illuminated a significant increase in homelessness in the region. In addition to the PiT count, The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) is a case management and data collection tool that is used by service providers. HIFIS is a part of the National Homelessness Information Initiative which “seeks to strengthen national understanding of homelessness in Canada” (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022). Organizations that receive funding under the Reaching Home program are obligated to use the HIFIS system as it is a key method for data collection. The information collected is used to produce key reports on the state of homelessness in Canada, guide policy and programs and support each community to respond to its unique needs and trends in homelessness.

*Homelessness and COVID-19*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound consequences on the state of homelessness in Canada (Benfer, 2020; Grant, 2020; Karabanow, 2020). While immediate implications and subsequent consequences have been visible, the long-term effects have yet to be fully understood and will continue to be realized as rates of infection stabilize, and communities begin to reopen and shift into the recovery. Since the beginning of the pandemic, vulnerable populations have been identified as high-risk, as these specific groups of people are more likely to become severely ill. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “severe illness means that a person with COVID-19 may need hospitalization, intensive care, a ventilator to help them breathe or they may even die” (2022). Individuals at a higher risk for severe disease or outcomes from COVID-19 include older adults, pregnant people and those who are immunocompromised or living with a chronic medical condition (Government of Canada, 2022). Moreover, some settings and activities are associated with higher risk of transmission of the virus. This includes settings that are crowded and poorly ventilated. People experiencing homelessness often live in settings with little or no access to basic hygiene necessities or showering facilities or the ability to socially distance (Tsai & Wilson, 2020).

Many people experiencing homelessness have chronic mental and physical conditions (Tsai, L, & RA, 2019), participate in high rates of substance use and needle sharing (Maremmani, Bacciardi, Gehring, & al, 2017) and have often less access to health care (Hwang, Ueng, Chiu, & al, 2010), all of which could produce issues with identifying and responding to people experiencing homelessness who contract the COVID-19 virus. Also, people experiencing homelessness can be transient, moving between homeless shelters, institutions and places and must access a multitude of services in order to meet their basic needs; this could include soup

kitchens, food banks, trustee services, clothing banks, probation and parole services, community services and harm reduction and/or pharmacies.

According to two Nova Scotia based social work professors, “during the COVID-19 emergency response of ‘staying the blazes home’ in Nova Scotia, Canada, frontline social workers worked tirelessly ‘out of the home’ to secure safe dwellings for those on the street, living in shelters, and/or precariously housed” (Haorui & Karabanow, 2020). While the responses to the pandemic were diverse and unique across Canada, there were similarities that have been tracked throughout the nation. For example, the utilization of hotels, community centers and gymnasiums to operate temporary homeless shelters was a common method used to reduce the capacity of shelters and institutions and allow for social distancing. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, “Out of the Cold (OTC) Emergency Homeless Shelter, with other non-profit and government stakeholders, moved approximately 250 homeless guests into a hotel so that they too could be afforded the opportunity to stay home” (Grant, 2020; Haorui & Karabanow, 2020). In Montreal, Quebec one hotel was used to isolate 111 COVID-19 positive people experiencing homelessness while another provided 50 rooms to Indigenous people experiencing homelessness (The Canadian Press, 2021). In Toronto, Ontario “The COVID-19 pandemic required Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) to continuously adapt program delivery to support the wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness” (City of Toronto, 2022). The City of Toronto opened 27 temporary hotel shelter sites accommodating 3,200 individuals with 24/7 staffing and wrap around supports for residents (2022).

At the peak of the pandemic in Nova Scotia, a research study investigated ways to ensure that highly vulnerable groups are not left out in future health or environmental crises. As outlined by Karabanow et al, the study explored “the homeless sector, including those experiencing

homelessness and those working around housing and homelessness, such as shelter providers, health clinic workers, outreach personnel, housing advocates, staff from non-profits providing essential services to low- income households, public health workers, policy makers, and government representatives” (2021, p.2). As they illuminate in their analysis, the impact on the social support system in light of the pandemic was immense, as non-essential services were closed or altered significantly causing people experiencing homelessness to feel abandoned, exposed, isolated, and left behind (Karabanow, Doll, Leviten-Reid, Hughes, & Wu, 2021).

Without access to public places such as washrooms, restaurants, public libraries, buses and parks, people experiencing homelessness are cut off from their lifelines and their experiences become intensely aggravated, pushing them further into vulnerable situations. Participants from the Cape Breton region believed that they “fell through the cracks,” “didn’t receive supports,” and didn’t know “where they would sleep” (Karabanow, Doll, Leviten-Reid, Hughes, & Wu, 2021, p. 8).

While the participants highlighted the negative consequences that the pandemic had on their experiences of homelessness, the study noted positive outcomes that were significant. Some of these include increased collaboration among stakeholders and government partners, limited community spread early in the pandemic and improvements to living spaces. Metro Turning Point, a shelter for men operated by Shelter Nova Scotia in Halifax, was able to reduce their capacity to a safer and more manageable number while making upgrades to the infrastructure which created more dignified living space which are more conducive to public health and safety (Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2021). In conclusion, “the paper makes several recommendations, including the provision of phone lines for people experiencing domestic abuse, the creation of long-term, non-market housing and access to accurate health information about the pandemic” (Karabanow, Doll, Leviten-Reid, Hughes, & Wu, 2021, p. 28).

People experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic were inequitably impacted due to pre-existing vulnerabilities and living environments which contradict public health and safety requirements (Baral et al, 2021; Karabanow et al, 2021). For persons experiencing homelessness, rates of physical illness, mental health and addictions are higher and opportunities to comply with public health recommendations limited. According to the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2020, From Risk to Resilience: An equity approach to COVID-19 "in cities across Canada many shelter clients moved to encampments. Populations among this group, including single women, families, and newcomers to Canada were found to be increasingly more vulnerable" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020).

Over a third of Canadians have experienced homelessness or know someone who has, an issue that has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baral, et al., 2021). Encampments became more visible in cities like Toronto, Halifax, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Hamilton, particularly as COVID-19 prompted social distancing measures and the use of temporary housing solutions, such as hotels. Like many social issues, the pandemic not only highlighted the pre-existing challenges faced by the homeless population but also intensified them, making the need for comprehensive and long-term housing solutions more pressing than ever.

### *Homeless Encampments*

In April of 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing produced a *National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada*. As maintained by the authors, the purpose of the report is to "provide all levels of government with an understanding of their human rights obligations with respect to homeless encampments, highlighting what is and is not permissible under international human rights law. This Protocol outlines 8 broad human rights-

based Principles that must guide state action in response to homeless encampments of all kinds” (Farha & Schwan, 2020).

The city of Toronto spent nearly \$2M to clear 3 homeless encampments, displacing people living in the encampment through forcible removal, violence, and arrest (Rocca, 2021). In Halifax, police charged 24 people following a protest that took place in response to the forcible removal and eviction of people and their belongings from municipal land. Both of these incidences represent a police response to homelessness which is contrary to principal two of the *UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing* which calls on governments to engage encampment residents in the early stages of discussion “without using the threat of eviction procedures or police enforcement to coerce, intimidate, or harass” (Farha & Schwan, 2020). A human rights approach to homeless encampments recognizes that homelessness encampments reflect the Canadian governments’ failure to successfully implement the right to adequate housing. By clearing encampments through enforcement, city bylaws are “weaponized to attack people’s dignity and human rights, and the policing and surveillance of these spaces reveal patterns of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism and sexual and gender-based targeting” (Kramer, 2021).

#### Abolition in Canada in the Wake of COVID-19

*“This is an extraordinary moment. I have never experienced anything like the conditions we are currently experiencing, the conjuncture created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the recognition of the systemic racism that has been rendered visible under these conditions because of the disproportionate deaths in Black and Latinx communities. And this is a moment I don’t know whether I ever expected to experience” (Davis A. , Angela Davis on Abolition, Calls to Defund Police, Toppled Racist Statues & Voting in 2020 Election, 2020)*

In Canada, federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government have authority to declare a state of emergency. In 2020, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 13 provinces

and territories issued some type of emergency declaration. On March 22, 2020, Nova Scotia declared a provincial state of emergency to help contain the spread of COVID-19. The state of emergency gives the government broad powers to do whatever is necessary for the safety and protection of people living in the province (Nova Scotia, 2022). Some of the lockdown restrictions implemented throughout Canada included the tightening of borders, forced closures of non-essential businesses, self-isolation mandates, closure of public spaces and services including schools, daycares, and the delay of scheduled surgeries. At one point during the pandemic in Nova Scotia, gatherings were restricted to only those living in the same household (Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges across various sectors in the Canadian criminal justice system. In response to the pandemic, Canadian correctional institutions implemented significant measures to reduce their populations and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. From February to May 2020, the average daily count of adults in federal and provincial/territorial custody decreased by 19%, from 37,976 to 30,795. This substantial decline reflects the system's efforts to address the inherent risks posed by the pandemic, characterized by the close-proximity living conditions within correctional facilities, which are not conducive to social distancing. The pandemic has cast a stark light on the systemic issues inherent in the prison system that go against the tenets of public health and human dignity. The prison environment, characterized by its confined spaces and limited healthcare access, creates conditions where health risks are amplified, not just for those incarcerated, but for society at large. Overcrowding, inadequate ventilation, and subpar sanitation in prisons become potent symbols of a punitive system that fails to align with the community's broader health and safety goals. Additionally,

“incarceration often requires people to gather in close proximity, and may act as a source of infection, spreading infectious disease” (Dutheil, Bouillon, & Clinchamps, 2020).

The reduction in the custodial population was achieved through various strategies, including the temporary or early release of individuals considered low-risk, adjustments to parole and bail processes, and incredible efforts by community-based organizations. These measures were not just reactive but proactive, aiming to prevent the outbreak of the virus among a highly vulnerable population. By June 2020, however, the decrease in custodial numbers began to stabilize, indicating that the initial phase of rapid population reduction had ended as the system adapted to new health and safety protocols.

Public health became a central concern within correctional facilities. By October 2020, Correctional Service Canada (CSC) reported that 20% of the 1,821 federal inmates tested for COVID-19 were positive, a significant infection rate that underscores the virus's impact. The response included enhanced cleaning, hygiene practices, and the establishment of health guidelines in collaboration with health authorities. The pandemic also affected the dynamics between remanded and sentenced populations. While the overall sentenced population continued to decline, the remand population, which consists of individuals awaiting trial or sentencing, saw a slight increase by June 2020. This shift suggests ongoing challenges in the justice system's ability to process cases promptly during the pandemic, potentially leading to increases in the remand population despite overall declines.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on custodial populations varied by gender, reflecting different policy impacts or needs within the correctional system. Between February and May 2020, the female custodial population declined at nearly double the rate of the male population. However, by June, this trend reversed in some regions, with the female population increasing at a

faster pace. This fluctuation underscores the unique dynamics and challenges faced by women in the correctional system, potentially influenced by gender-specific policies or differing responses to the pandemic.

Youth custody also experienced significant changes during this time. Statistics Canada (2022) reported that "the annual average daily count of youth in custody decreased by more than one-quarter (-27%) in 2020/2021, the largest decline in almost two decades since the Youth Criminal Justice Act came into force." These statistics demonstrate the scale of the pandemic's impact on younger populations within the carceral system.

The pandemic forced the Canadian criminal justice system to implement substantial changes to manage health risks within correctional facilities. The data from February to June 2020 highlights both the system's rapid response to the crisis and its gradual adaptation to the evolving realities posed by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the deep-seated inequities embedded in Canada's carceral system, exposing the vulnerabilities of incarcerated populations and prompting calls for urgent reform. The pandemic amplified the need for abolitionist frameworks by illustrating the systemic failures of carceral institutions and the intersection of public health crises with incarceration. This essay explores abolitionist responses during the pandemic, focusing on decarceration, community-based alternatives, and the limitations of crisis-driven reforms in Canada.

The Urgency of Decarceration

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented threat to the health and safety of incarcerated individuals. Overcrowded conditions, poor ventilation, and limited access to healthcare created environments where the virus could spread rapidly (Cloud et al., 2020). In response, many jurisdictions implemented emergency decarceration measures, resulting in a significant reduction in custodial populations. For instance, Nova Scotia reduced its provincial prison population by nearly 50% as part of public health efforts (East Coast Prison Justice Society, 2022). These measures demonstrated that decarceration is both feasible and necessary, challenging long-held assumptions about the inevitability of incarceration. However, the decarceration efforts were temporary and unevenly implemented across provinces. While some regions took decisive action, others maintained high incarceration rates, particularly for marginalized groups such as Indigenous and Black individuals, who are disproportionately represented in Canada's prisons (Maynard, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2022). This inconsistency highlights the limitations of reactive measures that fail to address the structural causes of over-incarceration.

#### Intersecting Crises: Carceral Systems and Homelessness

The pandemic also revealed the intersection of carceral systems with other systemic issues, such as housing insecurity. The eviction crisis and lack of affordable housing disproportionately affected individuals released from custody, exacerbating their vulnerability to recidivism and systemic harm. Events such as the August 18, 2020, police attack on homeless encampments in Nova Scotia underscored the violence inherent in state responses to housing crises (East Coast Prison Justice Society, 2022). This convergence of state violence, homelessness, and incarceration highlighted the need for abolitionist approaches that prioritize community care and long-term solutions. Abolitionist responses during this time included the development of mutual

aid networks, housing supports, and harm reduction services. These initiatives emphasized the importance of addressing root causes of harm, such as poverty and systemic racism, rather than relying on punitive measures. Community-led responses demonstrated the transformative potential of abolitionist frameworks, even in the face of systemic resistance.

### Abolitionist Frameworks: Transformative and Restorative Justice

Abolitionist praxis during the pandemic was grounded in frameworks such as transformative justice, restorative justice, and liberatory harm reduction. These approaches reject the carceral logic of punishment and instead focus on healing, accountability, and community well-being (Davis et al., 2022). Transformative justice, for example, seeks to address the root causes of harm and create systems of care that prevent future harm. Restorative justice prioritizes repairing relationships and fostering understanding between individuals and communities. During the pandemic, these frameworks were put into practice through initiatives that sought to build community-based alternatives to incarceration. Examples include peer support programs, community housing initiatives, and harm reduction services that center the dignity and autonomy of marginalized individuals. These efforts not only provided immediate relief but also challenged the dominance of punitive systems, offering a glimpse of what abolitionist futures could look like.

### Limitations of Crisis-Driven Reforms

While the pandemic created a window for abolitionist praxis, it also exposed the limitations of crisis-driven reforms. The lack of systemic change meant that many decarceration and community support efforts were temporary and unsustainable. For instance, individuals released

from custody during the pandemic often faced inadequate reintegration supports, leading to heightened vulnerability to homelessness and re-incarceration (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2024). Internal tensions within abolitionist movements further hindered progress. Conflicts over priorities, resources, and strategies diverted energy away from systemic change and toward navigating interpersonal and organizational challenges. Additionally, the moral injury experienced by frontline workers and organizers, who bore witness to systemic failures, compounded the emotional toll of abolitionist work (East Coast Prison Justice Society, 2022). These challenges underscore the need for sustained efforts to build resilient and collaborative abolitionist movements.

#### The Path Forward: Toward Systemic Transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed both the possibilities and challenges of abolitionist work in Canada. While crisis-driven reforms demonstrated the feasibility of decarceration and the potential of community-based alternatives, they also highlighted the need for systemic transformation. Abolitionist movements must address internal tensions, build long-term infrastructure, and advocate for policies that dismantle carceral systems and invest in community care.

Abolition feminism provides a critical lens for this work, emphasizing the intersections of race, gender, and systemic oppression in carceral systems (Davis et al., 2022; Maynard, 2017). By centering the experiences and leadership of marginalized communities, abolitionist movements can challenge the root causes of harm and build more just and equitable systems. The pandemic served as a critical juncture, demonstrating both the urgency and the transformative potential of

abolitionist advocacy. Moving forward, the lessons learned from this period must inform sustained efforts to reimagine justice and community safety in Canada.

## Theoretical Framework

### Abolition Feminism

*“Abolition Feminism emerges as the fulcrum of many dissident, radical feminisms that are not relegated to theoretical realms but trek between the specific and the speculative”* (Bierria, Caruthers, & Lober, 2022).

A theoretical framework converges existing knowledges with the researchers’ lens and a methodological approach (Collins & Stockton, 2018). This thesis is constructed by my positionality, my subjectivity as an abolition feminist and non-profit organization director, and my reflexivity with existing scholarship that understands prisons as part of a repressive regime of population management and social control mechanisms –intimately linked to neoliberal globalization, racial capitalism, and white supremacist culture (Davis, 2003; Alexander, 2010; Gilmore, 2007; Maynard, 2017; Wang, 2018). Abolition feminism is rooted in gender, sexual, queer, indigenous and black liberation. This theoretical framework is supported by feminist scholars and leaders (Davis; Ritchie; Wilson; Dent; Kaba; Braz; Maynard; Alexander) and is meant to be accessible by “staying close to the everyday” (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed suggests that feminist theory is what we do when we live our lives in a feminist way. As I think about, write about, critique, and interrogate what prison abolition has looked like, I think as a feminist, write as a feminist, and critique and interrogate as a feminist.

In their book *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, Davis et al state that “abolition Feminism is a praxis—a politically informed practice—that demands intentional movement and insightful responses to the violence of systemic oppression” (2022, p. 23). Abolition feminism provides a critical theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms of control and the systemic suppression of women, trans, and gender non-conforming individuals within carceral systems. This framework interrogates the social, political, and economic structures that perpetuate the

criminalization and imprisonment of marginalized populations, highlighting the intersections of race, gender, class, and colonialism (Davis et al., 2022; Maynard, 2017). Abolition feminism not only critiques the carceral system but also advocates for dismantling it entirely, envisioning a society that prioritizes care, equity, and transformative justice.

At its core, prison abolition seeks to eliminate the carceral system by pursuing several interconnected goals: releasing incarcerated individuals from state custody, halting the construction of new prisons, preventing criminalization and incarceration, and fostering community-based alternatives to harm and accountability (Kaba, 2021; Gilmore, 2007). This framework emphasizes that incarceration does not solve social problems but instead exacerbates harm, perpetuating cycles of violence, poverty, and systemic inequality. Abolitionist praxis, as grounded in feminist and community-centered principles, focuses on building systems of care, support, and accountability that address the root causes of harm while prioritizing healing and collective liberation (Davis et al., 2022). Abolition feminism, then, insists that “abolition theories and practices are most compelling when they are also feminist, and conversely, a feminism that is also abolitionist is the most inclusive and persuasive version of feminism for these times” (Davis et al, 2022: pg. 2).

In the forward for *Abolition Feminism Volume 1*, Dean Spade acknowledges that abolitionists like Mariame Kaba, Andrea Ritchie, and Kimberle Crenshaw have always maintained that “if we do not center the experiences of Black women in our assessment of what is wrong, and in our efforts towards solutions, any attempted abolition work will be woefully inadequate and likely reproduce what it seeks to dismantle” (2022, p. 12). Additionally, if we focus only on closing prisons, we are destined to recreate the prison in another form. Abolitionist feminism demands that we *build* healthy and inclusive communities where gender, racial and economic justice are

central. Ruth Wilson Gilmore has pointed out, “abolition is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life affirming institutions” (Gilmore, Making and Unmaking Mass Incarceration Conference, 2019).

Abolition feminism dissociates from theories of punishment, politically popular retribution and deterrence, and historical and contemporary practices of racial capitalism (Calathes, 2017).

Gilmore (2007, p. 244) and Mbembe (2003, p. 39) both maintain that as an instrument of dominance, punishment is a principal characteristic of slavery and colonialist systems. Racial capitalism purports that race is a key tenant of capitalism because “capitalism needs race to exploit, and the promotion of racial animus has been a core practice of the dominant white elite class” (Calathes, 2017, p. 443). Slavery and colonization are central to capitalism and importantly, racial capitalism evolves and changes its forms of punishment. Robyn Maynard illustrates this in *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* as she documents anti-Blackness from slavery to segregation and the evolution of the dehumanization of Black life in Canada (2017).

El Jones has rigorously scrutinized systemic racism in relation to the Canadian criminal (in)justice system in her decades of activism on prison abolition. She has stated that “Black bodies are seen as more profitable behind bars than as free beings. It’s slavery’s afterlife. Instead of white/mainstream society working to exorcise its anti-Black racist undercurrents and overcurrent’s, it feels more comfortable excising Black people from society” (Jones, *New Residential Schools and Slavery’s Afterlife*, 2016). Likewise, from colonization, to residential schools, the 60’s scoop, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, the child-welfare crisis, and the over-incarceration of Indigenous people, in particular women “if you happen to be Indigenous, justice in Canada is not blind” (MacDonald, 2016).

Since the inception of prisons, there has existed vital organizing, research, resource development, and community building projects that both prisoners and their advocates have been undertaking throughout Canada (Maynard 2017; Sudbury 2008; Kilty 2008; Neve & Pate 2005; Backhouse 1991; Larsen & Piche 2007; Comack, E. 2012). In the United States, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Joy James, Michelle Alexander, Angela Davis, Mariame Kaba and others have theorized extensively about the relationship between prison and slavery and have maintained a resolve to find an alternative to the prison system which is intricately embedded in slavery, and which has been called *the prison industrial complex*. Davis posits that “the prison produces forms of racism based on the traces of slavery that can still be discovered within the contemporary criminal justice system” (Davis, 2009, p. 25).

Abolition Feminism “requires a critical and emancipatory analysis of oppressive power relations and forces, including those within feminist movements” (Dominquez, 2022, p. 210) and pursues the abolition of all forms of imprisonment and the construction of communities of connection, support, and care. Dominquez also draws on Gruber (2020, p. 17) to exhibit that “like other theories and practices of feminism, abolition feminism has been constructed by and in relation to the penal state” (2022, p. 213). It's crucial to view feminism not just as tackling gender-related issues, but as a methodological lens for comprehending the interconnected struggles and challenges across various identities and experiences. Abolition feminism diverges from carceral feminism, which believes that problems like violence against women can be adequately resolved through police intervention or incarceration (Davis A. , 2020).

Abolition feminism highlights the inherent contradictions in responding to immediate crises while striving for long-term systemic change. As Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie (2022) argue in *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, this tension is a hallmark of abolitionist work. It requires

navigating the dual realities of addressing urgent needs, such as housing, harm reduction, or safety for marginalized individuals, while simultaneously working to dismantle the oppressive systems that create those needs in the first place. Abolitionist praxis embraces this "both/and" framework, recognizing that transformative change is built not only through envisioning new systems but also through meeting the pressing demands of today.

This contradiction becomes especially evident in efforts to replace carceral systems with community-based tools like restorative and transformative justice. Restorative justice focuses on repairing harm through accountability, dialogue, and the rebuilding of relationships, while transformative justice seeks to address the root causes of harm and prevent future violence by dismantling systemic inequalities (Davis et al., 2022). These approaches offer meaningful alternatives to punitive systems, enabling communities to respond to harm without perpetuating cycles of violence or relying on state apparatuses that disproportionately target marginalized groups.

In practice, restorative and transformative justice challenge the carceral logic that equates punishment with accountability. They instead center care, healing, and collective responsibility. For instance, when addressing interpersonal harm within communities, these tools provide mechanisms to hold individuals accountable while fostering conditions for genuine repair and transformation. As Davis et al. (2022) explain, this approach "untethers accountability from punishment, envisioning pathways for healing that disrupt carceral logics and state violence" (p. 142). By using these frameworks, communities can resist the reliance on policing, prisons, and other carceral systems that often exacerbate harm rather than resolve it.

However, abolition feminism reminds us that these tools, while powerful, are not without their challenges. The work of implementing restorative and transformative justice practices requires

resources, capacity, and a cultural shift toward care and accountability. In abolitionist movements, these approaches often come into tension with the immediate needs of communities navigating systemic harm, where punitive responses may feel like the only available option. Balancing these tensions—meeting urgent needs while building long-term, life-sustaining alternatives—is at the core of abolitionist struggles.

As Davis et al. (2022) emphasize, the contradictions within abolitionist work are not limitations but generative spaces for collective action and innovation. They offer opportunities to experiment with and build the tools necessary to address harm without relying on the carceral system. By centering restorative and transformative justice, abolition feminism provides a pathway to navigate these contradictions, enabling communities to meet immediate needs while working toward systemic change rooted in care, equity, and collective liberation.

### Intersectionality

The 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective is foundational to intersectional feminism, which emphasizes that traditional feminist approaches mustn't overlook the unique experiences of women who face multiple layers of marginalization simultaneously. The authors of the statement addressed the interconnected forms of oppression experienced by Black women, critiquing societal biases related to race, sexuality, economics, and homophobia, setting forth a plan for organizing within Black feminist movements (The Combahee River Collective, 1978). Judith Butler, in "Gender Trouble" critiqued the feminist movements for their focus on the experiences of predominantly white, middle-class women, arguing that this narrow focus overlooks the varied and complex experiences of women of color, non-binary, and transgender individuals. Butler's work encouraged a broader, more inclusive approach to feminism that recognizes and addresses these diverse experiences, highlighting the importance of considering

multiple, intersecting identities when addressing issues of oppression and privilege (Butler, 1990). The term intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is a framework for understanding how multiple systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, classism, and ableism—intersect and shape people’s experiences. Crenshaw introduced this concept while analyzing how Black women’s experiences of discrimination were often erased in both feminist and antiracist legal frameworks, arguing that single-axis analyses fail to capture the complexity of structural inequality.

In her book "Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center," bell hooks uses the term "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to describe the interconnected systems of power that perpetuate oppression based on race, class, and gender. She defines this concept as a social system that prioritizes the dominance and control of white people, capitalist economic structures, and patriarchal gender norms. Hooks argues that these systems work together to maintain and reinforce each other, resulting in the marginalization and exploitation of those who do not fit into the dominant categories of race, class, and gender (hooks, 1984). In her renowned compilation of essays, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), Audre Lorde explores various themes and delivers several critiques, particularly directed at her white feminist peers. Notably, she famously articulated the notion that "the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house" in an essay bearing the same title. In this piece, Lorde challenges white feminist intellectuals to confront the oversimplified and detrimental perspectives through which they viewed women collectively. Audre Lorde’s compelling admonition serves as a poignant reminder for Black and other scholars of color endeavoring to leverage conventional social and behavioral sciences research to advance social justice and health equity within Black communities. Drawing upon Lorde's metaphorical language, I interpret the "master’s tools" as representative of traditional

theoretical and methodological approaches, while "dismantling the master's house" symbolizes addressing the intersecting structures and systems of oppression responsible for perpetuating inequities in society.

Intersectional feminism is a valuable framework for analyzing the carceral system and advocating for prison abolition, particularly because this system disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. As a tool, a method, and a theory, intersectionality is crucial for critiquing the criminal justice system and examining the laws, policies, and practices that perpetuate oppression and discrimination through racism, gender biases, and economic inequality. Intersectional feminism urges us to consider who benefits from existing systems and who suffers, especially those marginalized across multiple forms of identity and oppression. Moreover, it compels us to develop solutions that are holistic and inclusive, ensuring that no one is left behind. Our approaches must prioritize the needs of the most marginalized, aiming not merely to reform the system but to fundamentally transform it.

In *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie (2022) discuss the concept of *asking the other question*, a framework introduced by Mari Matsuda (1991). This approach encourages critical inquiry by considering multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. For example, when analyzing sexism, one must also ask, *Where is the racism?* or *Where is the classism?* (Davis et al., 2022). This methodology aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which highlights how overlapping systems of oppression—such as race, gender, and class—create unique experiences of marginalization. By *asking the other question*, abolitionist feminism ensures that analysis and activism remain attuned to the complexities of structural inequality rather than treating forms of oppression as isolated issues.

Prison abolitionists use intersectionality as both a theoretical lens and a practical tool to critique the carceral system and imagine alternatives. The prison-industrial complex disproportionately targets marginalized communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people, women, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, disabled people, and those experiencing poverty (Davis, 2003; Richie, 2012). Intersectionality helps abolitionists analyze how carceral violence is not just about race or gender alone but about how multiple forms of oppression work together to criminalize and control marginalized populations. For example, Beth Richie's (2012) concept of gender entrapment examines how Black women's survival strategies—shaped by histories of gendered violence, racism, and poverty—often lead to criminalization, rather than protection, under the law.

As a theory, intersectionality challenges reformist approaches that fail to address the root causes of criminalization, insisting on a structural analysis that accounts for race, gender, class, and other social hierarchies (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis et al., 2022). As a tool, it informs abolitionist strategies that center the most marginalized, ensuring that alternatives to policing and incarceration—such as transformative justice, community care, and housing-first approaches—are inclusive and effective. Abolitionist feminists emphasize that an intersectional approach is necessary to dismantle the entire system of criminalization, not just to improve existing institutions but to build new ways of addressing harm and ensuring community safety (Davis et al., 2022). By applying intersectionality to prison abolition, activists move beyond single-issue organizing and work toward collective liberation, ensuring that abolitionist strategies address the full spectrum of oppression that fuels the carceral system.

Introduction

### Prison Abolition Frameworks

Prison abolition is often dismissed as an unrealistic or utopian ideal. However, numerous real-world initiatives demonstrate that alternatives to incarceration are both possible and effective. Grounded in the work of abolitionist scholars and activists, this essay explores existing prison abolition projects and their impact. It also examines the Canadian context, where Indigenous-led justice initiatives and harm reduction approaches provide tangible examples of abolitionist principles in action.

Prison abolition is rooted in the understanding that prisons do not solve social harm but rather perpetuate systemic inequality. Angela Davis (2003) argues that prisons are instruments of racial, economic, and gender-based oppression, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Similarly, Beth Richie (2012) highlights how criminalized survivors of domestic and sexual violence, particularly Black and Indigenous women, experience incarceration as an extension of state violence. The prison abolition movement envisions a society where public safety is ensured through investments in housing, healthcare, education, and transformative justice rather than punitive measures (Davis et al., 2022).

### *Restorative and Transformative Justice Programs*

One of the most well-documented alternatives to incarceration is restorative justice, which prioritizes accountability and healing over punishment. Hollow Water First Nation's Community Holistic Circle Healing Program in Canada is an Indigenous-led justice initiative that addresses harm within communities without resorting to incarceration. Instead, it employs traditional healing practices, counseling, and community accountability circles to reintegrate individuals while centering survivor needs (Ross, 1996). Studies show that participants in such programs have significantly lower recidivism rates than those in the conventional justice system (Chartrand & Horn, 2016).

Abolitionist projects in the United States also demonstrate the effectiveness of restorative justice. Creative Interventions, for example, provides a toolkit for addressing violence outside the legal system, emphasizing survivor-led accountability and collective community safety (Creative Interventions, 2012). Similarly, Project NIA in Chicago works to end youth incarceration by implementing community-based conflict resolution strategies (Kaba, 2021). These initiatives prove that restorative and transformative justice approaches can replace carceral responses to harm.

#### *Community-Based Violence Prevention and Crisis Response*

Prison abolition also involves replacing punitive state interventions with community-led safety initiatives. CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) in Eugene, Oregon, is a non-police emergency response team that handles mental health crises, homelessness, and addiction-related distress. The program diverts thousands of 911 calls away from law enforcement, saving the city millions in costs while reducing violent police encounters (White Bird Clinic, 2020).

In Canada, Toronto's Gerstein Crisis Centre operates similarly, providing mental health crisis intervention without police involvement. Their model reduces the risk of criminalization for individuals experiencing mental health crises and ensures that responses are led by social workers rather than law enforcement (Gerstein Crisis Centre, 2018). MH First, operated by the Anti-Police Terror Project in California, also serves as an abolitionist alternative to police intervention in crisis situations (Ritchie & Kaba, 2020).

#### *Decriminalization and Decarceration Policies*

Decriminalization is another key component of prison abolition, as it reduces the number of people entering the carceral system in the first place. Portugal's drug decriminalization policy, implemented in 2001, has led to substantial declines in drug-related deaths, HIV infections, and

incarceration rates (Transform Drug Policy Foundation, 2021). This approach has inspired Canadian harm reduction efforts, such as British Columbia's pilot project to decriminalize small amounts of illicit drugs, aiming to reduce the criminalization of people who use drugs (Government of British Columbia, 2023).

Efforts to close prisons also demonstrate that abolitionist principles can be implemented on a systemic level. Norway's prison model, which emphasizes rehabilitation rather than punishment, results in one of the lowest recidivism rates globally (Pratt, 2008). Inspired by this model, Canadian jurisdictions have explored alternatives such as Section 718.2(e) of the Criminal Code, which encourages sentencing judges to consider restorative and non-carceral options, particularly for Indigenous offenders (Rudin, 2018).

### *Investing in Communities*

Prison abolitionists argue that the vast resources spent on policing and incarceration should be redirected toward social programs that prevent harm in the first place. Justice Reinvestment Initiatives in Australia and the United States have successfully shifted funding from prisons to community-based services for Indigenous and marginalized populations (McMahon & Carrington, 2021). In Canada, organizations such as Elizabeth Fry Societies and Coverdale Justice Society advocate for reinvesting in housing, employment, and healthcare rather than expanding carceral systems (Elizabeth Fry Society of Canada, 2020).

The myth that prison abolition is unattainable is debunked by real-world examples of non-carceral justice initiatives, successful decarceration policies, and community-based safety models. From Indigenous-led restorative justice programs in Canada to crisis response teams and decriminalization efforts worldwide, abolition is not just theoretical—it is already happening. By shifting resources away from incarceration and investing in community well-being, abolitionist strategies provide sustainable, effective solutions for addressing harm.

## Methodology

### Autoethnography

This project uses a qualitative autoethnographic approach that is retrospective, meaning I am reflecting upon events that have already taken place. In developing this research project, I was heavily influenced by feminist scholarship whereby researchers call into play their positionality, identity, and personal experiences to contribute to the analysis of topics of interest. What captured my imagination about autoethnography, is the notion that this methodology represents a shift from the position that “there is a single cultural perspective revealing an irrefutable set of truths; and through narrative, any scholar can achieve an understanding of personal experiences ‘beyond specific historical contexts or shifting relations of power and inequalities’ (Bell, 2000: 139). Moreover, autoethnography offers the opportunity to “examine self-experience in relation to life events and also situate experiences in cultural and institutional contexts” (Edwards, 2021). Hayano (1979) first coined the term autoethnography in reference to anthropological studies by individuals of their own culture. Today, it is known as a reflective practice that allows the researcher to use their own experience in understanding social phenomena. It is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Ellis, Adams & Bochner characterize autoethnography as a method that is “both a process and product” which analyzes personal experiences to understand broader cultural experiences (2010). Developing from postmodernism, scholars began to acknowledge diversity of lived experience stemming from gender, race, culture, (dis)ability, class, and other intersecting identities that construct one’s worldviews.

Autoethnography diverts from conventional ways of doing and thinking and concentrates instead on ways of “producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). As such, throughout this thesis, I will reflect upon the decarceration of individuals from a jail, designing and implementing services and supports through a non-profit organization, advocating for sustained change—while connecting and relating all of this to broader notions of prison abolition, community organizing and justice transformation.

According to Ellisa, Adams & Bochner (2010) “when researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (p.128). By using autoethnography, I will offer a single narrative about decarceration efforts and prison abolition theory that would otherwise be rendered absent from present and future decarceration and prison abolition works, and that is informed by and connected to broader scholarship and grassroots organizing. Autoethnographies use memoir as a starting point for investigating a specific culture connected to the author (Jones et.al.2016:23). It accepts “subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (Tyner-Mullings, 2021). By bringing my identity and lived experience as well as my personal experiences of prison abolition during the COVID-19 pandemic into conversation with relevant literature on prison abolition, I will illustrate facets of cultural experience and “make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ronai, 1992).

As both the researcher and the research's center of attention, it is critical to acknowledge both the widely accepted critiques of autoethnography as methodology, while also situating the research within my own social identities, positionality, and privilege(s). Autoethnography requires me to

be deliberately and systematically aware of the different positions that I occupy, and to continuously interrogate and observe these positions in the context of my research. One author articulates the fluid and relational qualities of social identity formation, observing that “all parts of our identities are shaped by socially constructed positions and memberships to which we belong” and which are “embedded in our society as a system” (Misawa, 2010, p. 26). In acknowledging positionality, I must also acknowledge intersecting social locations and complex power dynamics. Therefore, my methodology is also grounded in intersectionality, a concept arising out of Black feminist legal studies and critical race theories. According to Hill Collins “Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation” (2001, p. 18).

While there are advantages and opportunities with this research approach, there are also disadvantages and dangers that must be rigorously cogitated (Eriksson, 2010). Autoethnography has been greatly criticized from social science, post-structuralist, and aesthetic viewpoints, since gaining popularity in qualitative research methodologies over the past three decades and is considered unconventional compared to scientific methods (Atkinson 1997, Charmaz & Mitchell 1997, Coffey 1999, Holt 2003, Sparkes 2000). As one author states, “autobiographical and reflexive methods have long been viewed by many within the social science paradigms of positivism as unscientific, and at odds with objective, standardized forms of research” (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Furthermore, (Alvesson, 2003) points out that autoethnography can be perceived as “too inward looking” and in his autoethnographically situated works, Eriksson (2010) points to what has been called the “danger of narcissism” – “where the actual issue of the research is veiled and dominated by observations and discussions associated with the researchers own person” (pg.93).

Further critiques (Delamont, 2009) purport that autoethnography is characterized by self-obsession that is vulnerable to fabrications and reflects only the worldview of people in positions of power. Delamont further explains that autoethnography tarnishes the reputation of qualitative methods, as it does not study the social world or advance scientific discipline (Delamont, 2009). In response to these criticisms, (Poerwandari, 2021) explains that the method is “effective for researchers, especially from marginalized groups, to uncover phenomena that they have experienced or faced so that the issue can be recognized by the public” (p.314). In addition to this, research conducted through autoethnography can be understood as knowledge only held by that researcher and therefore, considered privileged—which can support a more in-depth understanding of phenomenon (Hamdan, 2012). Edwards purports that “Autoethnography is a highly regarded and widely used research methodology and practice whereby the researcher is deeply immersed in self-experience while observing, writing, journaling and reflecting” (2021, 20). The autoethnographic approach that I will use is retrospective, which is when the decision of the researcher to engage autoethnography occurs at a later date than the described events (Edwards, 2021). It wasn’t until the dust began to settle in September of 2022 that I felt compelled to shift the focus of my thesis to the events that had transpired over the prior two years.

The adoption of autoethnography in prison research is far from new; as discussed by Gariglio (2018) and Jewkes (2011), for instance, who examined using autoethnography in prison research with a focus on the role of the ethnographer’s emotions and research experience, which, according to her, “is too often neglected in mainstream publications”. Autoethnography has also been utilized to understand the multiple complex dimensions of culture and interpersonal dynamics in organizations (Edwards, 2021). Murphy (2018) for example, used this methodology

to explore The Role of Emotions and Transformational Leadership on Police Culture (Murphy, 2008). Furthermore, in writing about autoethnography, Adams and Holman Jones (2008) determined that “[s]uch work views identities as relational accomplishments: manifestations of selves that shift and change, that must be negotiated and cared for, and for which we are held personally, institutionally, and ethically responsible.” (p. 374). I write through the circumstances and identities in which I am situated in which include my role as executive director, the part the organization I lead played in decarceration efforts, the broader social issues that are prevalent in society, and my experiences as a woman, mother, student, and survivor. In conclusion, and as defined in the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, this project will encompass the following 5 targets: :1) Overcome traditional method and forms of inquiry; 2) support the importance of insider knowledge; 3) expose the vulnerability of the researcher; 4) be prescriptive and take side and; 5) disseminate knowledge outside of the university (Adams, Jones Holman, & Ellis, 2021).

## Methods

This thesis employs creative methods, including zine-making, poetry, and art, as tools to explore and document abolitionist work during the COVID-19 pandemic. These methods are deeply informed by an autoethnographic methodology, which integrates personal narrative with broader social, cultural, and political analysis (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Through the creation of a zine that incorporates art and poetry, this project seeks to make academic knowledge accessible to broader communities, prioritize grassroots knowledge production, and engage critically with abolitionist frameworks.

### Zine-Making as a Research Method

Zine-making is a method rooted in feminist, anti-capitalist, and decolonial traditions that challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge production. Zines, as self-published and often handmade publications, have historically served as platforms for marginalized voices to resist dominant narratives and share grassroots knowledge (Poletti, 2008; Chidgey, 2014). Within feminist research, zine-making is celebrated for its accessibility, creativity, and ability to foster critical engagement outside academic institutions.

As a research method, zine-making allows for the integration of multiple mediums, including text, visuals, and storytelling, to convey complex ideas and lived experiences (Leung, 2019).

This project uses zines to document abolitionist work in Mi'kma'ki during the pandemic, focusing on emergency decarceration, mutual aid efforts, and transformative justice practices. By creating a zine, this research resists the exclusivity of traditional academic outputs, instead producing a resource that is accessible to community members, grassroots organizers, and individuals directly impacted by carceral systems.

### Art-Making as a Creative Practice

Visual art is employed in this thesis to illustrate the emotional and systemic dimensions of abolitionist work. Art allows for the exploration of abstract concepts, such as liberation and harm reduction, in ways that disrupt traditional textual narratives. Feminist and arts-based researchers emphasize that art as a method enables researchers to connect with embodied and affective knowledge, fostering deeper understandings of systemic injustice and personal resilience (Leavy, 2015). The artworks included in the zine use imagery, symbolism, and abstraction to critique carceral systems while imagining alternative futures grounded in community care.

### Poetry as a Method of Resistance

Poetry plays a central role in this project as a method of documenting and reflecting on abolitionist praxis. As a creative method, poetry offers a powerful way to communicate the emotional realities of abolitionist work, including moments of grief, hope, and solidarity. Poetry disrupts the rigidity of academic language, allowing for a more visceral and emotive engagement with the material. Feminist researchers argue that poetry can serve as a form of resistance to dominant narratives, offering space for marginalized voices to be heard (Leavy, 2015). In this thesis, poetry is used to capture the complexity of the pandemic's impact on carceral systems and abolitionist efforts in Mi'kma'ki.

### Dissemination and Accessibility

In alignment with feminist and abolitionist principles, the dissemination strategy for this project prioritizes accessibility and community engagement. The completed zine will be made available both digitally and in print. The digital version will be distributed online through social media platforms, while print copies will be disseminated to community organizations, libraries, coffee

shops, and jails. This approach ensures that the zine reaches audiences who may not have access to academic scholarship, reinforcing the abolitionist commitment to grassroots knowledge sharing.

By integrating zine-making, art, and poetry into the research process, this project prioritizes creative and accessible methods that align with the values of feminist abolitionist praxis. These methods provide a platform for documenting the lived experiences and systemic critiques that emerged during the pandemic, fostering a deeper understanding of the intersections between personal narrative and collective liberation.

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**Zine**



# **FRAMEWORKS FOR FREEDOM**

**ABOLITION WORK DURING  
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**IN MĪ'KMA'KI**

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This zine was created in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

As a settler, I acknowledge that this land was never ceded and is governed by the Peace and Friendship Treaties signed between the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy peoples and settler governments. These treaties were founded on principles of mutual respect, coexistence, and shared stewardship of the land. Yet, settler governments have continually failed to honour these agreements, perpetuating harm, dispossession, and colonial violence against Indigenous communities.

Colonization is not a relic of the past; it is an ongoing injustice. The carceral systems abolition seeks to dismantle—prisons, policing, and surveillance—are deeply rooted in the theft of land, the destruction of Indigenous communities, and the violent policing of Indigenous peoples. Today, these systems continue to disproportionately harm Indigenous peoples, especially women, girls, and Two-Spirit individuals, criminalizing survival while denying justice and dignity.

Abolition demands that we confront settler-colonialism in all its forms and commit to meaningful solidarity with Indigenous communities. This includes learning from Indigenous knowledge and leadership, challenging systems that criminalize and oppress, and holding ourselves accountable for benefiting from stolen land. Liberation for all requires centering Indigenous sovereignty, resistance, and healing as vital to the fight for justice and freedom.



**FRAMEWORKS FOR FREEDOM: ABOLITION WORK DURING COVID-19, IN MI'KMA'KI**  
**BY**  
**ASH AVERY**  
**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO**  
**MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY, HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA**  
**IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR**  
**THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS**

**HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA**  
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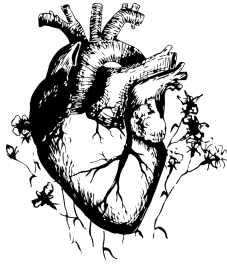
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## **FROM MY BLEEDING HEART**

This is a story about the last five years—years in which I have dedicated myself to abolition and transformative justice in our communities. It is an auto-ethnography of crisis work, a reflection on the sacrifices, the growth, the heartbreak, and the glimmers of hope I've experienced. It is an offering to anyone who walks this path, a tribute to the struggles and triumphs of abolitionist work, and a reminder that freedom is both elusive and within reach.

I am a settler living on the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaw people. I am an abolition feminist, a mother, student, and, for the past decade, a leader in the non-profit sector. My positionality gives me both immense privilege and significant power—power that is tied to my whiteness and the structural advantages I hold. It's a reality I navigate constantly: how to hold that power in ways that dismantle rather than reinforce harm.

Leadership has given me a seat at tables where decisions are made, resources are allocated, and policies are shaped. It's a position not afforded to everyone, and I am acutely aware of how the doors that opened for me were closed—or actively barred—for others. I benefit from systems built on colonization, theft, and violence, even as I work to challenge them. That tension—the power I hold and the harm it's built upon—follows me in every decision I make.

This zine is my offering, a tiny fleck in the vastness of abolition work. It is a fleeting guide, a reflection, and a reminder: that so much more is possible. That we must take care of each other. That we still don't have all the answers, or always know how to resolve conflict, or address harm when it infiltrates our movements. That freedom is possible. This is a tapestry of memory, knowledge, and verse, interwoven with the wisdom and work of abolitionists whose shoulders I gratefully stand on.

May these pages be a balm, a spark, a map.

Freedom isn't linear. It's not without cost. But it is always worth reaching for.



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# LOVE & ABOLITION

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To everyone I've had the privilege of working alongside in abolition work:

As I reflect on the journey we've shared, I am reminded that this work is not about any one organization or initiative—it is about the people whose lives and futures are entangled in the systems we are striving to dismantle. It is about the individuals we have served, supported, and fought for, and it is with deep reverence that I center them in this message.

To the women, girls, and gender-diverse people who have navigated systems that were never built to support them, who have experienced discrimination, homelessness, incarceration, addiction, and criminalization: I see you. I see your strength, your courage, and your humanity. I honour your resilience in the face of unimaginable challenges and your ability to find hope even when the world has failed you so profoundly.

We do this work because society has abandoned its responsibility to you. We do it because the systems meant to care for you have harmed you instead. Every life lost to state violence, every person criminalized for survival, every loved one taken too soon is a reminder that the work of abolition is urgent, necessary, and sacred. And we do this work alongside one another and together.

To those we have lost, I carry your stories in my heart. Your lives matter. Your dreams matter. The worlds we try to build are for you and because of you.

This work is heavy. It is often painful. But it is also rooted in love—love for the people we serve, love for the possibility of a better world, and love for each other as we fight together. In building services, creating spaces of care, and standing against harm, we are offering not just resistance, but a vision of something greater.

In solidarity and with gratitude



ABOLITION. FEMINISM. NOW. DAVIS, DENT, MEINERS, RITCHIE

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THE ROOTS OF TODAY'S REVOLUTION

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**FOUNDATIONS FOR FREEDOM: EXPLORING PRISON ABOLITION**

DAVIS

ANGELA T. DAVIS

WE DO THIS 'TIL WE FREE US MARIAM KABA

Saving Our Own Lives  
Shira Hassan  
A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction



ABORTION TO ABOLITION MARTHA PAYNTER



REHEARSALS FOR LIVING

MAYNARD SIMPSON



ROBYN MAYNARD POLICING BLACK LIVES



INSURGENT LOVE Abolition and Domestic Homicide

Ardath Whynacht



Abolitionist Intimacies EL JONES

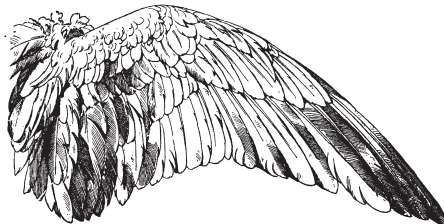


# PRISON ABOLITION

Prison abolition is concerned with getting rid of prisons by releasing imprisoned people, stopping the construction of new prisons, and preventing criminalization and incarceration in the first place. It understands prisons as part of a repressive regime of population management and social control mechanisms – intimately linked to neoliberal globalization, racial capitalism, and white supremacist culture. The vision of prison abolition is not just about dismantling prisons, but about reimagining and rebuilding communities based on principles of justice, equity, and collective well-being. It involves creating systems and structures that prioritize prevention, intervention, healing, and transformation, rather than punishment, vengeance, and isolation.

“Prisons do not disappear human beings, they disappear social problems. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages.”

Davis, A. Y. (2003). *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press



# JUSTICE BEYOND PUNISHMENT

The belief in prisons, police, and punishment is so deeply ingrained in our society that we rarely stop to question their existence. These systems are seen as natural, necessary, and even virtuous—a cornerstone of how we define safety and justice. Yet, when we pause to think critically, the flaws and contradictions in this narrative become impossible to ignore.

For me, this has always felt wrong. Long before I had the language of prison abolition, I knew that prisons were places of immense suffering. Prisons don't bring justice; they bring vindication. And for many, that vindication is enough. Society clings to a punitive model of "an eye for an eye," equating justice with retribution rather than restoration.

It's easy to call for punishment and retribution. It requires little thought or care to isolate someone, to lock them away, and to believe that the problem has been solved. But the harder, more courageous path is to think about accountability—how to hold people responsible for harm while keeping them connected to community and ensuring that the conditions for repair are created. Accountability is not about making someone's life harder, compounding their pain, or severing their ties to the world around them. It's about creating pathways for healing and transformation. But our systems make this nearly impossible. They make it so hard for people to ever do better, to heal, to thrive.

Rehabilitation is often held up as the redeeming feature of the criminal justice system, giving prisons a more palatable face. But when you look closely, rehabilitation is largely a myth. Prisons rarely make people better; they frequently make them worse. They are not environments conducive to healing but places that entrench despair, violence, and marginalization. I have seen this firsthand in my work alongside criminalized and incarcerated people. Programs meant to support rehabilitation are chronically underfunded and often outsourced to community organizations, and even these efforts are undermined by the oppressive, dehumanizing environment of prisons.

Prisons don't address the conditions that lead people there in the first place—poverty, racism, colonialism, homelessness, addiction, and trauma. When people leave prison, they are often thrust back into the same conditions that contributed to their incarceration, only now they carry the additional stigma of having been inside.

They are given impossible tasks: become a "productive" citizen, survive on poverty wages, meet strict conditions set by parole officers, probation officers, or other authorities. These demands rarely come with additional resources or support. The result? Many are set up to fail, cycling back into the system.

Inside prisons, the violence of the state is mirrored and magnified. Prisons are breeding grounds for conflict, harm, and systemic neglect. And yet, society continues to believe that people in prison deserve to be there. This belief ignores the reality of who ends up incarcerated—disproportionately survivors of violence, poor, Indigenous or Black people. There's a clear pattern of who is punished and who is protected. While marginalized people are funnelled into prisons, the privileged and powerful evade accountability, despite their corruption and harm.

When the illusion of rehabilitation is stripped away, what remains is a system designed not to heal, but to punish. Prisons do not exist to address harm, foster accountability, or confront the social, political, and economic conditions that lead to criminalization—they exist to exact retribution and maintain control.

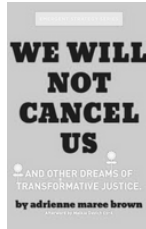
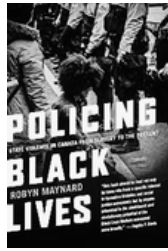
If you can recognize this, even in part, you might already have the makings of an abolitionist. Abolition is about nurturing that spark of awareness and letting it grow. It means peeling back the layers of conditioning we've experienced about justice—layers steeped in punishment, control, and state violence. It means asking the hard questions about why we continue to accept systems that so clearly fail to deliver safety or justice.

Prisons don't solve problems; they create them. They target marginalized communities, deepen systemic inequalities, and leave harm unaddressed. To embrace abolition is to embrace a deeper critique of our society's structures. It is about seeing the truth of our carceral systems and imagining something different, something better.



# Adrienne Maree Brown

Published in 2020 after adrienne wrote an essay called "Unthinkable Thoughts: Call Out Culture in the Age of Covid-19" which went viral. The book calls for discernment, care, transformative justice.



# Ruth Wilson Gilmore

*"Abolition requires that we change one thing: everything."*



# Robyn Maynard

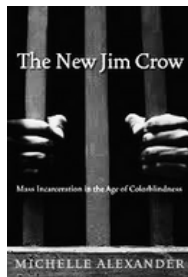
*"While slavery was abolished almost two centuries ago, Canada's legacy of exerting control over black bodies was reconsolidated perhaps most strongly, in the criminal justice system"*

# El Jones

*"Black bodies are seen as more profitable behind bars than as free beings. It's slavery's afterlife. Instead of white/mainstream society working to exorcise its anti-Black racist undercurrents and overcurrent's, it feels more comfortable excising Black people from society"*

# Andrea J. Ritchie

*"Contrary to assumptions that abolitionists don't care about safety, we care a great deal about it. We recognize that safety is a basic human need. We think, talk, and strategize about it constantly in order to bring more of us closer to it."*



# Michelle Alexander

*"In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind."*



*"We must reject all talk about policing and the overall criminal punishment system being 'broken' or 'not working.' By rhetorically constructing the criminal punishment system as 'broken,' reform is reaffirmed and abolition is painted as unrealistic and unworkable."*

# Mariame Kaba



# Angela Y. Davis

*"Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings."*

# WHY ABOLITION?

## **PRISONS DON'T SOLVE THE ROOT CAUSES OF HARM**

Incarceration fails to address the underlying issues—such as poverty, inequality, mental illness, and trauma—that often lead to harm in the first place.

## **PRISONS PERPETUATE RACISM AND INEQUALITY**

The carceral system disproportionately targets marginalized communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, and racialized people, reinforcing systemic racism and social inequity.

## **PRISONS ARE TOOLS OF OPPRESSION**

Rather than delivering justice, prisons are used to control and suppress marginalized populations, upholding systems of patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy.

## **VIOLENCE CANNOT BE STOPPED BY VIOLENCE**

The prison system relies on punishment and control—forms of state-sanctioned violence—rather than promoting accountability, healing, or long-term safety.

## **PRISONS CAUSE MORE HARM**

Incarceration frequently results in lasting harm—trauma, economic instability, and social exclusion—for individuals, families, and entire communities.

## **PRISONS DISAPPEAR PEOPLE, NOT PROBLEMS**

As Angela Davis reminds us, prisons don't solve social issues—they conceal them by isolating individuals without addressing the systemic conditions that led to harm.

## **COMMUNITIES CAN CREATE TRUE SAFETY**

Abolition prioritizes community-led safety through systems of care, mutual aid, and collective accountability—not through policing or confinement.

## **CARCERAL SYSTEMS DESTROY FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES**

The impact of incarceration extends far beyond the individual, disrupting families and dismantling communities through long-term emotional, social, and financial harm.

## **THE SYSTEM WASTES RESOURCES**

Billions are spent on policing and incarceration—resources that could be invested in education, housing, mental health, and social supports that actually prevent harm.

## **ABOLITION IS ABOUT BUILDING A BETTER WORLD**

Abolition is not only about dismantling harmful systems—it is a generative project that creates structures rooted in care, equity, and justice.

## **PRISONS FAIL TO PROVIDE ACCOUNTABILITY OR HEALING**

Survivors of harm rarely find healing through the prison system, and those who cause harm are seldom supported to take meaningful responsibility or change.

## **CARCERAL FEMINISM DOESN'T WORK**

Mainstream feminist responses that rely on policing or punitive legislation often harm the very communities they aim to protect—especially women of colour and trans people.

## **ABOLITION CREATES SPACE FOR TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE**

Abolition makes room for practices like restorative and transformative justice, which address harm by rebuilding trust, centering accountability, and preventing future violence.

## **THE SYSTEM IS FAILING—WE CAN DO BETTER**

The current reliance on punishment is ineffective, unsustainable, and unjust. Abolition offers a path toward systems that genuinely serve the needs of all people.

## **ABOLITION IS HOPE IN ACTION**

Abolition is not naïve—it is a radical act of hope. It insists that a more just, compassionate, and liberated world is both necessary and possible.

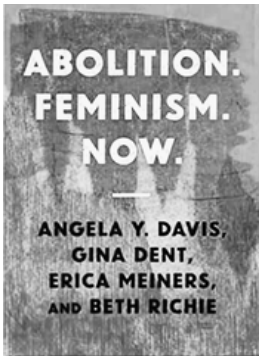
AN ABOLITIONIST FAQ SERIES  
FROM INTERRUPTING  
CRIMINALIZATION  
BY MARIAME KABA & EVA NAGAO

# ABOLITION FEMINISM

Abolition feminism is a transformative framework that combines critical feminist theory with abolitionist praxis.

Its themes include:

Intersectionality, Anti-Carceral Feminism, Community Accountability and Transformative Justice, Care and Mutual Aid, Addressing Structural Inequities, Critique of the Prison-Industrial Complex, Feminist Praxis and Leadership, Hope and Imagination for a Better Future.



**“BUILD MODELS TODAY THAT CAN REPRESENT HOW WE WANT TO LIVE IN THE FUTURE”**

Rooted in the lived experiences, scholarship, and activism of radical women of colour, the movement emerges from over a century and a half of justice struggles, shaped by the cross-fertilization of feminist, anti-racist, and abolitionist movements.

Abolition feminism views the carceral state as inherently violent and incompatible with feminist goals. It critiques mainstream feminism that relies on the criminal justice system to address harm, arguing that this approach often perpetuates harm against marginalized communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, and other women of colour, as well as queer and gender-diverse people.

Abolition feminism brings together feminist and abolitionist principles to imagine and create a world free from prisons, policing, and other forms of state violence. It recognizes that these systems are not only harmful but deeply rooted in racism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Rather than relying on punishment and incarceration, abolition feminism calls for building systems of care, accountability, and justice that address the root causes of harm and prioritize collective well-being.

**“ABOLITION FEMINISM IS A PRAXIS—A POLITICALLY INFORMED PRACTICE— THAT DEMANDS INTENTIONAL MOVEMENT AND INSIGHTFUL RESPONSES TO THE VIOLENCE OF SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION”**

Davis, A. Y., Dent, G., Meiners, E. R., & Richie, B. E. (2022). Abolition. Feminism. Now. Haymarket Books.

Abolition feminism advocates for transformative justice—community-based approaches that address harm, accountability, and healing without the use of prisons or police. It prioritizes prevention, support for survivors, and community accountability as tools for building safer and more equitable societies. Abolition feminism exists within a global context, and demonstrates how carceral systems are rooted in colonial histories and persist as tools of racial capitalism. It connects historical movements for abolition, feminism, and anti-colonialism to contemporary struggles.

Combahee River Collective Statement



# DEFINITIONS



## **INTERSECTIONALITY**

Coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, and how these intersections create overlapping systems of discrimination and disadvantage. It highlights the ways in which various forms of oppression are interconnected and shape experiences, in particular, the experiences of Black women.

## **DECARCERATION**

Decarceration is a movement and approach aimed at reducing the number of people incarcerated in prisons and jails. It advocates for shifting resources and policies away from mass incarceration and toward community-based alternatives, such as restorative justice, mental health services, substance use programs, and supportive housing.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE**

Transformative justice is a framework and practice that aims to address harm and violence within communities without relying on punitive measures such as incarceration. It focuses on healing and accountability, centering the needs of survivors, and addressing the root causes of harm through community-based interventions and support networks.

## **RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**

Restorative justice is a theory and practice of responding to harm and conflict that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by wrongdoing and restoring the peace between individuals and communities. It involves bringing together affected parties to dialogue, take responsibility, and collaboratively develop solutions that address the needs of all involved.

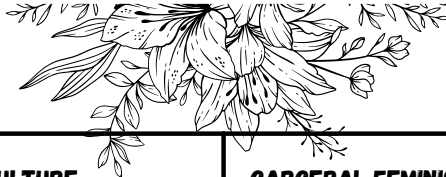
## **WHITE SUPREMACIST CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY**

A term coined by bell hooks, refers to the interconnected systems of oppression that uphold racial hierarchy, economic exploitation, and gender inequality to maintain dominance and social control.





# DEFINITIONS



## **WHITE SUPREMACIST CULTURE**

A system of values, beliefs, and practices that normalizes and privileges whiteness while marginalizing and oppressing people of colour. It is not limited to overt acts of racism but includes subtler dynamics like perfectionism, individualism, and the prioritization of "neutrality" over equity, as described by scholars like bell hooks and Tema Okun.

## **CARCERAL FEMINISM**

A feminist approach that relies on punitive systems like policing and incarceration to address gender-based violence. This framework is critiqued by abolitionist feminists for perpetuating harm against marginalized groups, particularly women of colour and transgender individuals, and for failing to address the root causes of violence.

## **LIBERATORY HARM REDUCTION**

A framework that addresses harm without judgment, punishment, or coercion, focusing on the root causes of systemic oppression. Unlike traditional harm reduction, which often centers individual behavior, liberatory harm reduction acknowledges the impact of systems like racism, colonialism, and capitalism. It prioritizes meeting people where they are while working to dismantle oppressive structures and build collective care.

## **HOUSING FIRST**

A homelessness intervention model that provides permanent, stable housing as the first step in addressing homelessness, without requiring individuals to meet certain conditions like sobriety or participation in treatment programs. This approach is rooted in the belief that housing is a human right and that individuals are better able to address other challenges, such as mental health or addiction, when they have a secure place to live.

## **REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE**

The right to have children, not have children, and to parent in safe and supportive communities. Rooted in the experiences of marginalized communities, it addresses the systemic barriers—like poverty, racism, incarceration, and inadequate healthcare—that limit reproductive autonomy. More than just access to abortion or contraception, reproductive justice is about creating the conditions where everyone can make informed choices about their bodies, families, and lives with dignity and freedom.



# ROOT CAUSES OF INCARCERATION

## Systemic Racism and Overrepresentation of Black & Indigenous Peoples:

**Indigenous** individuals constitute approximately 5% of Canada's population but represent about 30% of the incarcerated population (2025). This disparity is even more pronounced among Indigenous women, who are incarcerated at rates significantly higher than their non-Indigenous counterparts. **Black Canadians** face similar overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. Although Black people make up less than 4% of Canada's population, they represent a disproportionate share of those incarcerated. In Nova Scotia, with its long-standing Black population rooted across 52 historic Black communities, systemic discrimination has created barriers to employment, education, and equitable policing.

## Socio-Economic Disparities:

Poverty, limited access to education, and unemployment are closely linked to higher incarceration rates. Individuals facing these challenges are more likely to engage in activities that lead to criminal charges, often as a means of survival.

## Substance Use and Mental Health Issues:

Substance use and mental health conditions are often criminalized, with individuals funnelled into the justice system instead of being supported through accessible treatment and harm reduction programs. In Nova Scotia, as elsewhere, the justice system has become a default response to public health crises, prioritizing incarceration over meaningful care.

## Trauma and Abuse:

Many incarcerated individuals have experienced childhood abuse and trauma, which are closely linked to later criminalization. Addressing and preventing these root causes is crucial for meaningful rehabilitation and reducing recidivism. In Canada, studies reveal a significant correlation between traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) and criminalization, with nearly half of incarcerated individuals reporting a history of TBI. These injuries can result in cognitive impairments—such as impulsivity and poor judgment—which may increase vulnerability to criminalized behaviours.

## High Recidivism and the "Revolving Door" of the Criminal Justice System:

Canada's justice system creates a "revolving door" for many individuals, where incarceration becomes a cycle that is nearly impossible to escape.

## Surveillance and Conditions for Reoffending:

These conditions—such as curfews, restrictions on movement, and limits on who individuals can associate with—can be especially difficult to navigate for those without stable housing, income, or support systems. Minor infractions, like missing a check-in or failing to meet a curfew, can lead to re-arrest, even when no harm has occurred. Each breach results in a new criminal charge, often triggering a cascade of additional restrictions, harsher conditions, and deeper entrenchment in the criminal legal system.

## Systemic Barriers to Reintegration:

Released individuals face systemic barriers to reintegration, including difficulty securing housing, employment, and mental health supports. Without access to these essentials, the conditions that led to their initial incarceration often persist, creating a pathway back into custody.

## The Entrapment of Surveillance:

Surveillance mechanisms like police databases, community reporting, and electronic monitoring further criminalize formerly incarcerated individuals, ensuring they remain entangled in the system. This entrenchment mirrors a modern form of social control that extends the carceral state beyond prison walls.



## KEY ISSUES OF CRIMINALIZATION IN NOVA SCOTIA

In Nova Scotia, as across Canada, the carceral system disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, perpetuating harm and inequality. While systemic oppression manifests in numerous ways, several key issues highlight the intersections of race, gender, poverty, and identity in criminalization and incarceration. These issues reflect how the carceral state fails to address the root causes of harm and instead punishes people for survival and identity.

### QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE IN PRISONS: THE GENDER BINARY AND ITS HARMS

Bill C-16, passed in 2017, was heralded as a critical step forward for protecting the rights of trans people, including those within the prison system. The bill enshrines protections for gender identity and expression in Canadian law, theoretically ensuring that trans people are treated with dignity and respect. However, in practice, the implementation of these protections is inconsistent and left to the discretion of correctional institutions and staff. This discretion leads to significant harm for trans individuals incarcerated in Canada, including those in Nova Scotia.

Even when trans individuals are housed in facilities that align with their gender identity, they often face additional discrimination, such as denial of access to gender-affirming healthcare, isolation under the guise of "protection," and harassment from both staff and other prisoners.

[CLICK HERE](#)

### **BILL C-16: AN ACT TO AMEND THE CANADIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACT AND THE CRIMINAL CODE**

### **COMING OUT OF CONCRETE CLOSETS: A REPORT ON BLACK & PINK'S NATIONAL LGBTQ PRISONER SURVEY**



### MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS (MMIWG)

The crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) is a national tragedy that reflects the deep-rooted impacts of colonialism, systemic racism, and gendered violence in Canada. In Nova Scotia, as in other provinces, Indigenous women are disproportionately targeted by violence and are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. The justice system criminalizes Indigenous women at epic proportions—while Indigenous women make up only 4% of the Canadian population, they represent nearly 50% of the female federal prison population (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2020). These staggering rates reflect systemic failures that criminalize poverty, trauma, and survival while failing to protect Indigenous women from violence.

This overrepresentation in the carceral system highlights the intersecting forms of discrimination Indigenous women face, including the ongoing impacts of colonial policies such as the Indian Act, residential schools, and the Sixties Scoop. These historical injustices have left Indigenous women disproportionately vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, and violence, all of which increase their likelihood of interaction with the justice system.

Yet, despite their hypervisibility in the carceral system, Indigenous women remain largely invisible when it comes to protection and justice. They are not only criminalized but also disproportionately victimized by gender-based violence, going missing or being murdered at rates far higher than other populations. The National Inquiry into MMIWG revealed the systemic failures of policing, justice, and social service systems to adequately respond to or prevent this violence. However, despite the Inquiry's findings and Calls for Justice, little progress has been made to address the roots of this violence or to protect Indigenous women from harm.

[CLICK HERE](#)

### **TEN YEARS SINCE SPIRIT MATTERS: A ROADMAP FOR THE REFORM OF INDIGENOUS CORRECTIONS IN CANADA**

### **RECLAIMING POWER AND PLACE: THE FINAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS**

### **TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA: CALLS TO ACTION**

### **STOLEN SISTERS: DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN CANADA**

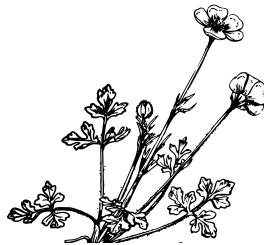
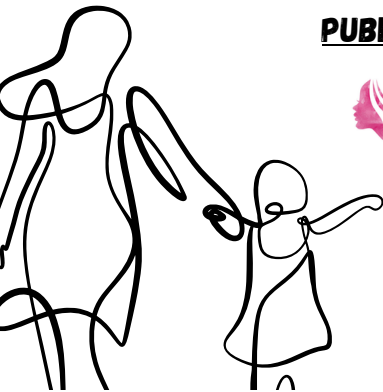
## **MATERNAL HEALTH, CRIMINALIZATION, AND INCARCERATION**

Maternal health intersects profoundly with criminalization, poverty, and systemic inequities, creating devastating outcomes for mothers and their children. In Nova Scotia and across Canada, the justice system often punishes women not just for their actions but for their social circumstances, perpetuating cycles of harm. These injustices are particularly stark when it comes to maternal health, as poverty, child protection interventions, and the realities of giving birth and parenting while incarcerated collide.

For women living in poverty, the intersections of criminalization and child protection systems create a vicious cycle. Mothers who are struggling to meet their families' basic needs often face surveillance and intervention from child protection agencies. These interventions are disproportionately directed at racialized and Indigenous mothers, reflecting systemic biases and assumptions about parenting. For example:

The carceral system compounds these harms by physically separating mothers from their children. Incarcerated mothers are often forced to relinquish custody of their children, disrupting family bonds and causing long-term emotional and psychological harm to both the mother and the child. For babies and young children, the removal from their mother can have devastating developmental and attachment consequences.

## **WELLNESS WITHIN PUBLICATIONS**



## **STREET CHECKS AND ANTI- BLACK RACISM IN NOVA SCOTIA**



The practice of street checks in Nova Scotia is another stark example of systemic racism within the justice system. Black people in Halifax were six times more likely to be stopped and questioned by police than white people, as revealed in the Wortley Report (2019)\*. While street checks have since been banned, their impact lingers, with Black communities continuing to face over-policing, surveillance, and criminalization.

Incarceration rates for Black individuals in Nova Scotia remain disproportionately high, reflecting the legacy of anti-Black racism and systemic discrimination in the province. African Nova Scotians, many of whom are descendants of enslaved peoples, face barriers in education, employment, and housing that increase their vulnerability to criminalization. The abolition of street checks has not addressed the broader structures of systemic racism within policing and the justice system, which continue to disproportionately harm Black communities.

## **\*HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA STREET CHECKS REPORT**

## Restorative Justice/ Approach

A restorative approach is a framework for addressing harm that prioritizes accountability, healing, and the repair of relationships, rather than punishment. Rooted in principles of dialogue, mutual understanding, and collective accountability, a restorative approach creates space for those impacted by harm—including the person who caused it and the person(s) harmed—to come together to address the harm, its effects, and how it might be repaired. It emphasizes healing and reintegration over exclusion and isolation.

Restorative approaches are not new; they are deeply rooted in Indigenous traditions that center relational accountability, community balance, and collective responsibility. Indigenous justice practices prioritize healing and the restoration of harmony, recognizing that harm impacts not only individuals but the entire community.

Restorative justice focuses on three core principles:

1. **Repairing Harm:** The primary goal is to address the harm caused by an action or behavior and to meet the needs of those affected.
2. **Involving All Stakeholders:** Restorative practices prioritize the voices and participation of everyone impacted by harm, including the harmed, the person who caused harm, and the broader community.
3. **Fostering Accountability:** Accountability in a restorative framework involves acknowledging harm, taking steps to repair it, and committing to behavioral change to prevent future harm.

Here are the key restorative justice questions often used in restorative practices to guide dialogue and foster accountability, healing, and understanding:

For the Person Who Caused Harm:

1. What happened?
2. What were you thinking at the time?
3. What have you thought about since?
4. Who has been affected by what you did, and how?
5. What do you think you need to do to make things right?

For the Person Who Was Harmed:

1. What happened?
2. What were your thoughts at the time and since?
3. How has this affected you?
4. What has been the hardest part for you?
5. What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

For the Community (or Witnesses/Affected Parties):

1. What happened from your perspective?
2. How has this incident affected you and/or the community?
3. What do you think needs to happen to address the harm?
4. What can we do as a community to support healing and accountability?

A restorative approach has the potential to humanize justice, center relationships, and repair harm in meaningful ways. However, its integration into existing systems must be approached critically, with an awareness of its limitations.



# Transformative Justice



## KEY CONCEPTS

Transformative Justice (TJ) is a framework and set of practices rooted in community-based responses to harm, violence, and injustice, aiming to address the root causes of harm rather than relying on punitive systems like the criminal justice system. It seeks to transform the conditions that perpetuate violence and oppression, emphasizing healing, accountability, and systemic change.

From an intersectional feminist lens, transformative justice recognizes how systems of oppression—patriarchy, racism, classism, ableism, and others—intersect to create the conditions that lead to violence and harm. Feminist scholars like bell hooks, Andrea Smith, and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence have highlighted how the state often fails to protect marginalized communities from violence, and in many cases, is itself a source of violence.

Transformative justice is critical in envisioning a world without prisons and policing, offering practical methods for addressing harm that foster true healing and societal transformation. It shifts the focus from punishment to healing and from individual blame to systemic change. By recognizing that harm often arises from broader social injustices, TJ invites communities to collectively dismantle oppressive systems and build more just, equitable ways of relating to one another.

Addressing Root Causes: TJ seeks to uncover the structural and systemic causes of harm, such as poverty, racism, and historical trauma, rather than focusing solely on individual actions.

Community Accountability: Unlike traditional justice systems that isolate harm to individual perpetrators, TJ involves entire communities in processes of accountability, healing, and prevention.

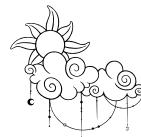
Survivor-Centered: TJ prioritizes the needs and voices of survivors, ensuring that they have agency in deciding what accountability and healing look like.

Non-Punitive Approaches: TJ rejects punishment as a means of justice. Instead, it emphasizes repair, restitution, and transformation for both those who have caused harm and those affected by it.

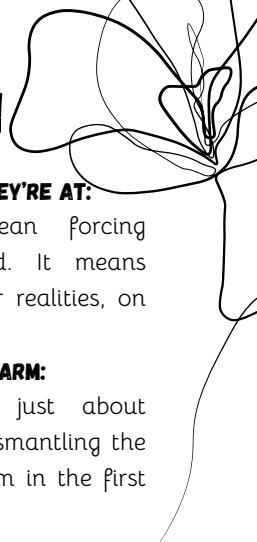
Building Alternatives to the State: Since the state is often complicit in perpetuating violence (through policing, prisons, and colonial systems), TJ encourages the development of community-led structures for safety and justice.

**“RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IS NOT ENOUGH IF WE DO NOT TRANSFORM THE CONDITIONS THAT CAUSE HARM. WE MUST BUILD NEW WAYS OF RELATING TO EACH OTHER AND OUR COMMUNITIES THAT DO NOT RELY ON PUNISHMENT.”**

**MARIAME KABA, ‘WE DO THIS ‘TIL WE FREE US’**



# LIBERATORY HARM REDUCTION



Liberatory harm reduction is more than a strategy—it's a way of being. It challenges us to center care, agency, and dignity in our responses to harm. It reminds us that survival is a revolutionary act and that the wisdom of those most impacted by harm is essential to creating meaningful solutions.

It recognizes that harm doesn't exist in a vacuum, it's shaped by systems of oppression like racism, colonialism, capitalism, and the carceral state. Liberation requires addressing these root causes while honoring the resilience and resourcefulness of those navigating harm every day.

## **KEY PRINCIPLES OF LIBERATORY HARM REDUCTION INCLUDE:**

### **CENTERING LIVED EXPERIENCE:**

The people most impacted by harm are the experts in their own lives. Their voices, leadership, and knowledge are essential to any solution.

### **PRACTICING NON-JUDGMENT:**

People have the right to make choices about their bodies, their safety, and their survival without fear of judgment or punishment.

### **MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY'RE AT:**

Liberation doesn't mean forcing people to fit a mold. It means supporting them in their realities, on their terms.

### **ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL HARM:**

Harm reduction isn't just about individuals; it's about dismantling the systems that create harm in the first place.

### **BUILDING COMMUNITY:**

Healing happens in connection, not isolation. Liberatory harm reduction prioritizes collective care and mutual aid.

**SHIRA HASSAN'S WORK REMINDS US THAT HARM REDUCTION IS ABOUT US SAVING OUR OWN LIVES, NOT WAITING FOR SYSTEMS TO SAVE US. IT'S ABOUT CREATING SAFETY ON OUR OWN TERMS AND REFUSING TO BE SHAMED OR STIGMATIZED FOR HOW WE SURVIVE. IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS, NOT RULES; CARE, NOT CONTROL.**

Every act of  
care is a step  
toward  
liberation.

Hassan, S. (2021). *Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction*. Haymarket Books.

**BOOK LAUNCH VIDEO**

# ✧ **SEX WORK, HUMAN TRAFFICKING & MIGRANT WORKERS: ABOLITIONIST REFLECTIONS** ✧

## **RESISTING CARCERAL “RESCUE” THROUGH ABOLITIONIST SOLIDARITY**

The criminalization of sex work, migration, and poverty is deeply tied to the systems abolition seeks to dismantle. These intersecting forms of state violence disproportionately impact racialized, migrant, and low-income communities—especially women, trans, and gender-diverse people.

The dominant narrative conflating sex work with human trafficking erases the voices of sex workers and justifies expanded policing, surveillance, and immigration enforcement in the name of “rescue.” This narrative harms those it claims to protect, leading to raids, detention, and deportation rather than safety, autonomy, or justice.



“We are not passive victims. We are workers, mothers, daughters, and community members. We need rights, not rescue.” — Butterfly

### **ABOLITION SAYS:**

- Sex work is work. Criminalizing sex work makes it more dangerous and isolates workers from support.
- Human trafficking must be understood through the lens of labour exploitation, border violence, and capitalism, not morality or carceral rescue.
- Migrant workers, whether in domestic labour, agriculture, or sex work, deserve labour rights, status, and safety—not surveillance or criminalization.

### **COMMUNITY RESISTANCE:**

Butterfly: Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network is a grassroots organization led by and for migrant sex workers. Their work resists criminalization and advocates for:

- Access to status and safe working conditions
- Decriminalization of sex work
- End to police raids, racial profiling, and detention
- Policy rooted in human rights, not carceral rescue

Their presence in cities like Toronto and Winnipeg has been vital in exposing the violence of anti-trafficking policing and centering migrant voices in policy conversations.

# ABOLITION FRAMEWORKS

Abolition is not just about dismantling harmful systems like prisons and policing—it's about building the frameworks and alternatives that allow communities to thrive without them.



## COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

**What It Is:** Processes to address harm without relying on punishment or the carceral system.

### Key Elements:

- Centring the needs of survivors while holding those who caused harm accountable in non-punitive ways.
- Building community-led practices to interrupt cycles of violence.
- Prioritizing healing, restitution, and transformation over retribution.

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE

**What It Is:** A system that redistributes resources equitably and provides for basic needs.

### Key Elements:

- Universal basic income or living wages.
- Reparations for Indigenous and Black communities harmed by colonization and systemic racism.
- Worker cooperatives and community-controlled economies.



## EDUCATION AND YOUTH SUPPORT

**What It Is:** Equitable education systems that empower rather than criminalize.

### Key Elements:

- Abolishing school resource officers and ending the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Culturally responsive and trauma-informed education.
- Programs that nurture creativity, critical thinking, and self-determination.

## HOUSING JUSTICE

**What It Is:** Safe, stable, and affordable housing for everyone.

### Key Elements:

- Housing-first models that prioritize housing without preconditions.
- Ending evictions, criminalization of homelessness, and housing discrimination.
- Community-led housing cooperatives and mutual aid networks to support housing access.

## HEALTH AND HARM REDUCTION

**What It Is:** Accessible, non-judgmental care for physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

### Key Elements:

- Universal healthcare that includes mental health services.
- Harm reduction approaches (e.g., safe supply, supervised consumption sites).
- Community-based crisis response teams that replace police in health emergencies.



## MUTUAL AID AND COLLECTIVE CARE

**What It Is:** Systems where communities meet each other's needs without relying on state institutions.

### Key Elements:

- Grassroots mutual aid networks that redistribute resources and labor.
- Collective child care, elder care, and community kitchens.
- Emphasizing interdependence and care as core values.

## SEX WORKER JUSTICE

**What It Is:** Affirming the rights, safety, and dignity of sex workers by removing criminalization and building community-led systems of support.

### Key Elements:

- Decriminalizing sex work and rejecting carceral "rescue" models.
- Ending laws that punish people for consensual sex work, including clients, third parties, and advertising—so sex workers can work safely and access support without fear.
- Supporting peer-led, community-based organizations.
- Funding and resourcing sex worker collectives and support networks that are led by those with lived experience—not by police or non-profits speaking over them.
- Protecting migrant sex workers from surveillance, raids, and deportation.

## ABOLITIONIST MEDIA AND CULTURAL WORK

**What It Is:** Shaping narratives that challenge carceral logic and reimagine justice.

### Key Elements:

- Art, storytelling, and media that visualize a world without prisons and policing.
- Challenging dominant narratives that equate safety with punishment.
- Creating platforms for marginalized voices to lead these conversations.

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

**What It Is:** Addressing environmental harms through community-led solutions that prioritize land, health, and equity—while rejecting carceral and corporate control.

### Key Elements:

- Prioritizing clean air, water, and land in underserved communities.
- Centring Black, Indigenous, migrant, and low-income communities in environmental policies, especially where harms have been concentrated by design.
- Supporting sustainable, community-led agriculture and green spaces.
- Investing in urban gardens, Indigenous land stewardship, food sovereignty, and local environmental initiatives that reflect cultural and community knowledge.
- Holding governments and corporations accountable for environmental degradation.
- Shifting power away from polluters and toward communities. Demanding policies that stop environmental racism and resource extraction on stolen land.



## DECOLONIZATION AND INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY

**What It Is:** Centering Indigenous ways of life and addressing the harms of colonialism.

### Key Elements:

- Land back movements and returning stolen lands to Indigenous peoples.
- Centering Indigenous knowledge and leadership in justice practices.
- Dismantling settler-colonial structures that perpetuate harm.

## RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

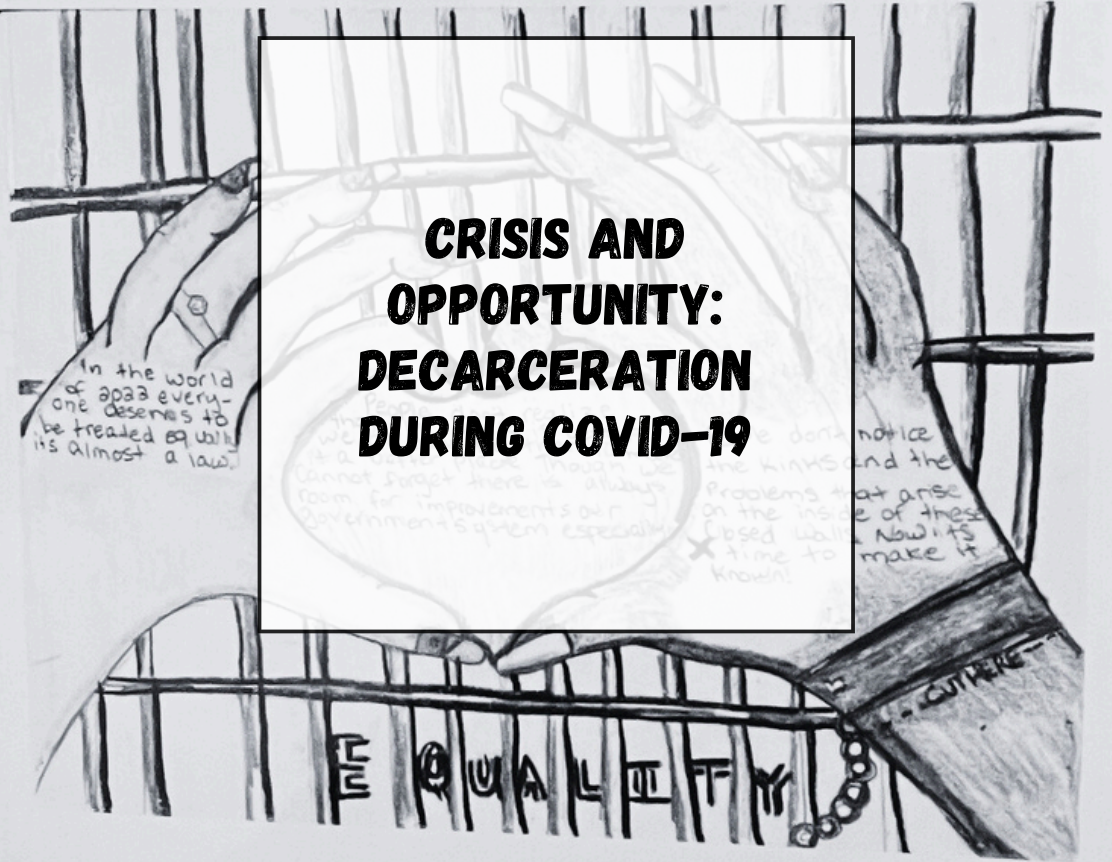
**What It Is:** Methods for resolving conflict and repairing harm through dialogue and community engagement.

### Key Elements:

- Circles, mediations, and practices rooted in Indigenous traditions.
- Prioritizing accountability and healing for all parties involved.
- Teaching restorative practices as part of community education.



# Journal of Prisoners on Prisons



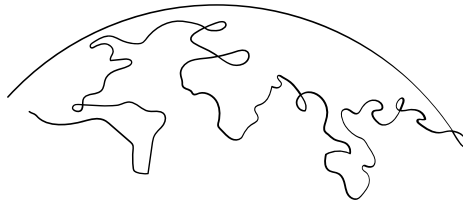
**CRISIS AND  
OPPORTUNITY:  
DECARCERATION  
DURING COVID-19**

In the world  
of 2022 every-  
one deserves to  
be treated eq wll  
its almost a law.

Cannot forget there is always  
room for improvements our  
government system especially

notice  
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THE QUALITY



## **MARCH 2020: THE WORLD CHANGED**

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Four days later, on March 15, Nova Scotia reported its first presumptive case. By March 22, the province declared a state of emergency, shutting down schools, businesses, and public spaces. Life as we knew it came to an abrupt standstill.

The pandemic was a stark and global public health crisis that laid bare the inequities embedded in our systems. Fragile structures meant to support housing, healthcare, income, and justice were exposed, and their vulnerabilities became impossible to ignore. These gaps widened, leaving the most marginalized without essential support. Lockdowns and closures exacerbated existing challenges in Nova Scotia, where the housing crisis intensified, shelters constrained by public health measures turned people away, and addiction services were severely limited or paused altogether. People released from jail had no safe place to go. Time and again, the safety nets meant to protect people failed, compounding the harm.

As COVID-19 swept across Canada, jails and prisons emerged as high-risk environments for the spread of the virus. Overcrowded facilities, inadequate healthcare, and close confinement made physical distancing nearly impossible, creating a perfect storm for outbreaks. In Nova Scotia, advocates, health officials, and policymakers recognized the urgent need to reduce the jail population to protect both incarcerated individuals and correctional staff. Beyond the immediate health risks, the pandemic also underscored broader systemic injustices within the carceral system. The overrepresentation of Indigenous and Black individuals in provincial jails, coupled with the criminalization of poverty, substance use, and mental health issues, made decarceration a critical step toward addressing these inequities.

This interconnected cascade of crises became a call to action—a turning point in the commitment to addressing systemic failures and advocating for justice. Nova Scotia responded with significant steps toward decarceration, driven by strategic partnerships, targeted advocacy, and community-led initiatives. These efforts were fueled not only by the urgent health risks of incarceration but also by a growing recognition of the need for meaningful support for individuals re-entering society amidst the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic.



## **ADVOCACY IN TIMES OF CRISIS**

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, several organizations in Nova Scotia and across Canada advocated for the release of incarcerated individuals to mitigate the virus's spread within correctional facilities.

### **In Nova Scotia:**

The East Coast Prison Justice Society (ECPJS) called for the reduction of jail populations and the protection of prisoners' human rights during the pandemic.

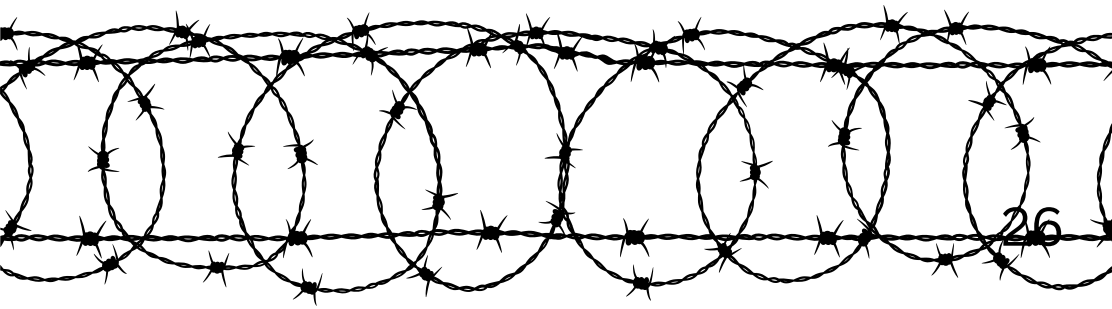
Wellness Within, a reproductive justice and prison abolition organization, highlighted concerns about the impact of increased restrictions on inmates and advocated for the release of some inmates to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks.

### **Across Canada:**

The Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs (UBCIC), along with other rights groups, called for the immediate release of prisoners to stop the dangerous spread of COVID-19 in correctional facilities.

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA), in partnership with other organizations, launched the Prison Pandemic Papers to document the impact of COVID-19 in jails and advocated for the protection of incarcerated individuals.

These are just some of the organizations that emphasized the heightened risk of COVID-19 outbreaks in crowded and confined prison settings and urged authorities to take immediate action to protect the health and rights of incarcerated individuals.



## **DECARCERATION IN NOVA SCOTIA DURING COVID-19:**

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated systemic inequalities across the globe, none more so than within carceral systems. In Nova Scotia, the pandemic forced an unprecedented shift in criminal justice practices, resulting in the decarceration of nearly half of the provincial jail population. This achievement was not merely a pragmatic response to a public health crisis but also a moment of reckoning, challenging long-held assumptions about incarceration and public safety.

Nova Scotia's decarceration efforts focused on two key strategies: reducing the inflow of individuals into the system and expediting the release of those already incarcerated.

### **REDUCING INFLOWS:**

Courts began prioritizing alternatives to custody, such as bail or conditional sentences, to reduce pretrial detention. Police forces were also encouraged to issue summons instead of making arrests for nonviolent offenses. This shift not only alleviated pressure on the jails but also disrupted the punitive default of incarceration for minor infractions.

### **EXPEDITED RELEASES:**

Provincial officials worked collaboratively with justice advocates to release individuals nearing the end of their sentences or those considered low-risk. Early release initiatives were supported by temporary measures, such as community supervision and electronic monitoring.

These actions collectively reduced the provincial jail population by almost 50%, a historic and remarkable achievement that highlighted the feasibility of large-scale decarceration.

While the decarceration effort was a step forward, it also revealed systemic gaps that require urgent attention. Many individuals released during the pandemic faced significant challenges, including housing instability, lack of access to healthcare, and insufficient community support. For marginalized populations—particularly Black and Indigenous people—these challenges were compounded by systemic racism and discrimination.

Additionally, the temporary nature of these measures raised concerns about sustainability. As the pandemic waned, incarceration rates began to climb again, highlighting the need for permanent policy changes to maintain progress.

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE FRONTLINES: FEMINIST PRAXIS AND LEADERSHIP

I was on the frontlines of these efforts in Nova Scotia, participating in cross-sector working groups that brought together stakeholders from across silos. These collaborative efforts were the backbone of the decarceration success. A key element of this work was the presence of strong female leadership, which came from across the judiciary, community organizations, the legal profession, and advocates. Women made this work happen. From community activist groups, to community advocates and organizations, to media coverage, the decarceration work was highly gendered.

Abolitionist scholar Joy James discusses the concept of the “captive maternal,” which refers to the people—often women—who bear the emotional and physical burden of caregiving within oppressive systems.

This leadership was not only crucial in Nova Scotia’s decarceration efforts but also reflected the broader feminist principles at the heart of abolitionist work. Feminism within abolition is about more than equality; it’s about dismantling systems of domination, control, and exploitation that disproportionately harm women, gender-diverse individuals, and other marginalized groups. Feminist abolitionists emphasize care, compassion, and collective action—values that were essential in responding to the pandemic’s intersectional crises.

Women’s leadership in abolition aligns with historical struggles led by women and gender-diverse individuals who have long been at the forefront of movements for systemic change. From Angela Davis’s foundational work on prison abolition to Mariame Kaba’s emphasis on transformative justice, feminist thinkers and leaders have consistently challenged carceral logics and proposed radical alternatives rooted in care and community.

In Nova Scotia, this feminist approach translated into concrete actions: collaborative decision-making, centering the needs of those most impacted, and challenging the punitive, siloed structures that define the carceral system. This work required not only courage but also persistence in the face of systemic resistance.



Feminist leadership in abolition reinforces the understanding that decarceration is not just a practical response to crises like COVID-19; it is a transformative practice that seeks to dismantle the very structures that uphold inequality and violence.

Feminist abolition connects the local struggles of decarceration to the global movement for justice, rooted in a vision of community care, mutual aid, and the belief in the inherent dignity of all people.

**THE REDUCTION OF NEARLY  
50% OF THE PROVINCIAL  
JAIL POPULATION PROVED  
THAT BOLD CHANGE IS  
ACHIEVABLE**

# Clearing out the jails

In an extraordinary effort to avoid a COVID-19 outbreak, many prisoners were released this weekend.



BY EL JONES

MARCH 24, 2020

This weekend, something extraordinary happened in a Dartmouth provincial courtroom.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic, [advocates](#) have publicly called for the province to address the danger of the virus spreading in provincial jails.

Over the weekend, Chief Judge [Pamela Williams](#) met that call, in a scene that lawyers, community service providers and advocates have described as unprecedented.

Justice Williams kept one courtroom open over the weekend to process consent releases from all over the province. In a consent release, both the crown and defence agree to the release, and to the conditions of that release.

The lawyers appeared by phone, and people in the institutions appeared by video.

Courts do not normally hear matters from other jurisdictions, nor are the courts usually open on the weekend. Both measures allowed cases to be quickly processed to release people to the community and reduce the burden on the jails.

Attendees estimate around 20 people were able to be released.

## Unprecedented co-operation

Lawyer Hanna Garson, who was representing clients over Saturday and Sunday, says lawyers were pushed beyond their normal practice. She recounts scenes of co-operation not only between lawyers who are usually on opposing sides, but between social workers, community service providers, and advocates as people scrambled to find housing and social supports for people being released.

For people who could get out quickly...who were eligible for legal aid but had gone to a private lawyer, Legal Aid really stepped up [for people they weren't representing] and just decided to get as many of those people out as they could.

It's an emergency situation, and the system to figure out to house these people immediately didn't exist. What I found really interesting is that everyone had to rely on each other to get people housing, and it really showed that those networks [of advocates and community providers] are way more important than previously believed.

Jones, E. (2020, March 27). Clearing out the jails. Halifax Examiner. <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/uncategorized/clearing-out-the-jails/>

**"WE REFUSE TO ACKNOWLEDGE JAIL AS A SUITABLE OR SAFE HOUSING OPTION, ESPECIALLY DURING A PANDEMIC, AND HAVE WORKED TIRELESSLY TO ENSURE THAT THE LACK OF AN ADDRESS IS NOT A BARRIER TO RELEASE."**

**-ASH AVERY**



## ADVOCATED THROUGH MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT

- Wrote to government officials to push for decarceration.
- Took meetings with government leaders to call for multi-sector collaboration.
- Engaged with media to raise public awareness through interviews and op-eds.

## CREATED BAIL RELEASE PLANS

- Collaborated with lawyers, corrections workers, and community organizations and developed bail plans to satisfy release and support reintegration.

## SECURED HOUSING SOLUTIONS

- Created collaborative program with relevant community organizations to support decarceration efforts.
- Negotiated local hotel agreements to operate temporary shelters for people upon release.
- Involved individuals with lived experience to provide harm reduction and peer supports and services.
- Rapid recruitment of staff.
- Developed operating policies and protocols.
- Trained staff on trauma-informed care, harm reduction, and community support.

# COMMUNITY DECARCERATION ACTIONS

## MOBILIZED RESOURCES

- Coordinated donations of clothing, food, and hygiene supplies from other organizations.
- Partnered with Community Health for primary health care.
- Ensured access to medications and prescriptions for those released.

## COMMUNITY BAIL PROGRAMS

- Created community-based alternatives to incarceration aka bail programs.

## 24/7 SUPPORT

- Established around-the-clock wrap-around support systems to assist individuals post-release.

✓ Housing and Shelter: Establish emergency shelters and transitional programs to provide safe spaces for individuals being released.

✓ Transportation: Arrange transportation to ensure individuals can safely travel to their destinations upon release.

✓ Medical Care: Collaborate with healthcare providers to ensure continuity of prescriptions and access to necessary medical care, including harm reduction and mental health support.

✓ Basic Needs: Provide food, clothing, hygiene items, important phone numbers, phone, money, clothing, and harm reduction supplies.

## DECARCERATION ESSENTIALS

# Media release: Emergency housing project launched for people exiting jail during COVID-19

By Nova Scotia Advocate - May 13, 2020

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Media release: Emergency housing project launched for people exiting jail during COVID-19  
By Nova Scotia Advocate  
- May 13, 2020

**Three community-based organizations serving criminalized people in Nova Scotia have developed and launched a pilot housing project to support people exiting jail during the global pandemic Covid-19.**

(HALIFAX) May 12, 2020 – A collaborative interagency supportive housing project has been established by the John Howard Society of Nova Scotia, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia and Coverdale Courtwork Society to safely house up to 20 people exiting jail during the provincial state of emergency. JEC, a name which reflects the first letters of each organization, exists to support persons exiting jail who are experiencing homelessness and works to ensure a positive release and successful reintegration for these individuals by designing comprehensive interventions based on a continuity of care.

This project is utilizing two hotel spaces which allow for social distancing and self-isolation and is resourced and staffed by a dynamic team comprised of social workers, counsellors, lawyers and expert community workers that provide onsite support and wrap around services which respond to the immediate and long-term needs of clients.

The Provincial Court, under the leadership of Chief Justice Williams, sat through the entire March 21st weekend and on Easter Monday, and heard every non-contested bail application brought forward by Crown and Defense.

Chief Justice Williams supported bail plans for over 100 accused within the first few days of the state of emergency. In the first weekend alone more than 40 prisoners were released on bail. Chief Justice Williams heard all these matters remotely and the lawyers worked closely with community supports to develop release plans to help prisoners to re-integrate into the community. Of those individuals being released, some had immune disorders, some were elderly, and some had very severe asthma. Unfortunately, we do not currently have processes or systems to support these individuals being released and we have relied on under-resourced and under-funded community organizations to do the bulk of the supportive emergency re- entry work.

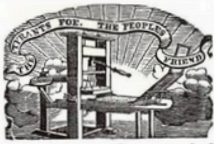
Thus, these urgent releases to community, despite being innovative and exciting, have also shone a light on the significant gaps in resources and programs within our communities to adequately address the needs of this growing population of re-integrating prisoners. As such, three community organizations that serve people involved in the criminal justice system in Nova Scotia came together and developed a comprehensive project proposal that would aim to safely house and support up to 20 men, women, trans and non-binary individuals. This project has since been funded by the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia (AHANS) through Reaching Home, a Federal homelessness fund aimed at resourcing community housing projects.



## Rest in Power, Robert Devet

Robert Devet of the Nova Scotia Advocate was a community hero who shed light on decarceration and abolition work during COVID-19. His dedication to justice and amplifying marginalized voices made a lasting impact.

Nova Scotia Advocate. (2020, May 13). Media release: Emergency housing project launched for people exiting jail during COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://nsadvocate.org/2020/05/13/media-release-emergency-housing-project-launched-for-people-exiting-jail-during-covid-19/>



The Nova Scotia Advocate The Tyrant's Foe, the People's Friend



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FEATURED UNCATEGORISED

## Successful program offering emergency housing for people released from jail may end because of lack of provincial support

By Sara Tessier - June 23, 2020

Twitter Facebook Google+ LinkedIn Pinterest Email

"The program has successfully assisted 33 people, without any recidivism to date. Housing has been found for 27 people, who therefore can continue to meet the conditions of their release. However, the agencies have yet to find housing for the remaining clients. The provincial Justice Department has so far not stepped up to assist with the cost of housing these clients, people who were released from jail because of compromised immune systems or the simple fact that they had no fixed address to be released to. Now because of the lack of funding, these clients face returning to the very jail they were released from for no other reason than that they are being left homeless.

When looking at it from a cost perspective, the provincial Justice Department would be spending twice the money to house these people in jail then it would to help fund a program that not only has proven to be a successful model in reintegrating these clients, but also provides a solution to the overpopulation in an already exhausted judicial system."

Tessier, S. (2020, June 23). Successful program offering emergency housing for people released from jail may end because of lack of provincial support. Nova Scotia Advocate



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## “VULNERABLE WOMEN IN NOVA SCOTIA ENDING UP ON THE STREETS OR BEHIND BARS”

“Because of a lack of housing, women are released to sit in 24-hour fast food restaurants, return to abusive homes and sleep outside. Others are seen as a public safety risk because of their homelessness and denied release. Because of court backlogs due to COVID-19, it could be months before their matters are heard. These women are the most neglected, most forgotten, most stigmatized, and most marginalized in our communities. Even the federal definition of homelessness, that governs the provision of supports for homeless individuals, doesn't recognize jail as a period of “homelessness,” thereby further limiting access to resources for this population. Without resources for housing and community support, it's no wonder that as we move into the second wave of the pandemic, jails are again filling up.”

Avery, A., & Halpern, E. (2020, November 26). Vulnerable women in Nova Scotia ending up on the streets or behind bars. The Chronicle Herald.

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In our society, it has become alarmingly normalized for vital community programs—housing supports, addiction services, mental health care, and food security initiatives—to face chronic underfunding or outright cuts.

These programs, which provide essential lifelines to marginalized populations, are often seen as expendable, their loss met with little more than a shrug. Yet the mere suggestion of defunding the police sparks outrage and widespread resistance, as though public safety hinges solely on the presence of armed enforcement. This stark double standard reflects deeply ingrained societal values that prioritize punishment over prevention, and control over care. It begs the question:

why do we tolerate the erosion of the very services that address the root causes of harm, while fiercely defending systems that often perpetuate it?

# A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

The collaborative approach in response to the COVID-19 pandemic brought abolitionist principles to life, addressing immediate health and safety concerns while laying the groundwork for long-term systemic change. Across the justice system and beyond, sectors that had historically operated in silos came together with a shared purpose.

Police partnered with community agencies to find alternatives to arrest and incarceration, while corrections & police coordinated to drastically reduce admissions and prioritize health.

Courts adapted swiftly to pandemic realities, with judges embracing community-based solutions and limiting remand to avoid exacerbating harm in isolation.

Lawyers, advocates, community networks, and government departments worked in tandem, leveraging their collective expertise to reimagine justice in real-time.

The media and advocates also played a critical role, amplifying voices and advancing urgent reforms.

This unprecedented collaboration reshaped the justice system into one that functioned with remarkable creativity, flexibility, and humanity. For the first time, systems and communities worked in alignment, driven by the urgency of a health crisis.

Abolitionists provided the vision, advocacy, and strategic guidance to make these changes possible, pushing for solutions rooted in care, dignity, and equity.

Together, Nova Scotia demonstrated that the structures abolitionists dream of building—those centered on support, not punishment—are within reach. Under the immense pressure of the pandemic, the justice system reimaged its role, achieving record-breaking decarceration and fostering connections between individuals and their communities.

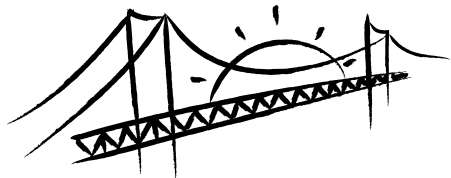
Despite the progress made, there was an over-reliance on supervision and surveillance as a solution to decarceration. Community organizations, who are underfunded and overstretched, were pressured into taking on roles traditionally filled by the carceral system. This expanded supervision into the community in harmful ways, creating new forms of control rather than dismantling the structures of punishment. This leaned more toward harm reduction, than transformation.

Adequate services and non-police responses to mental health crises and emergencies were still glaringly absent, highlighting the limitations of reforms implemented in haste. These deep-rooted issues could not be resolved overnight, and the temporary measures often felt like a patchwork rather than a meaningful shift toward systemic equity.

Funding for decarceration work within communities was precarious, tied to short-term initiatives rather than sustained investment. This lack of stability left critical programs vulnerable and limited their long-term impact.

While leadership during this period was remarkable, it was not enshrined in law or policy, making the progress fragile and short-lived. Once the immediate crisis waned, systems reverted to old patterns, undoing many of the gains made during the pandemic.

The stark realities of overdose deaths, suicides, and the ongoing harms caused by homelessness and incarceration underscored the limits of what was achieved. Countless tragic deaths both within and outside of jail serve as a sobering reminder that without comprehensive systemic change, the cycle of harm will persist, and marginalized communities will continue to bear the brunt of a system unwilling to fully embrace transformation.



## OPENING CONTEXT

During the early stages of COVID-19, the justice system in Nova Scotia, like many across Canada, began releasing people from custody on consent—meaning the courts, legal advocates, and prosecutors all agreed that keeping people incarcerated posed unnecessary health risks. While this decision was made with the intent of reducing the spread of COVID-19 within jails, it exposed a much deeper problem: the justice system had become the default housing, mental health, and social safety net for many individuals.

## THE CRISIS UNFOLDS

With jails functioning as de facto homeless shelters and mental health facilities, releasing people into the community without adequate support systems meant that many were left homeless, vulnerable, and without the care they needed, amidst a global health crisis. The root cause wasn't just the lack of preparation for their release—it was the long-standing failure of housing, mental health, and social support systems that had left jails as the last catch-all when society fails to provide basic human rights.

## COMMUNITY STEPS IN

In response to this crisis, community organizations, grassroots groups, and local advocates mobilized quickly. They provided emergency housing, mental health support, and basic needs for those released from custody. Mutual aid networks sprang up, offering everything from meals to temporary shelter solutions. This was transformative, as it showed that communities could create alternative, non-carceral responses to support vulnerable populations in the wake of systemic failures.

# RELEASED BUT ABANDONED

## GOVERNMENT REFUSAL

However, while the community rose to the occasion, the government refused to fund or endorse these efforts. Despite the clear need for coordinated, systemic intervention, the burden remained on community organizations—already stretched thin by the pandemic's broader impacts. This revealed the government's motives - which clearly did not reflect the needs and rights of criminalized and incarcerated people.

## THE SECOND WAVE & TURNING TIDES

It wasn't until the second wave of the pandemic that the government began to recognize the vulnerability of these populations and the essential role community organizations were playing. Agencies that had been ignored or underfunded were finally acknowledged as key partners, but this recognition came late and insufficiently, leaving lasting gaps in support.

## CONCLUSION

This sequence of events highlights how the justice system's role as a safety net for societal failures became glaringly obvious during the pandemic. The community's response demonstrated the potential for abolitionist frameworks that rely on care and support, not punishment, but it also exposed how reluctant the government can be to invest in non-carceral, community-led solutions until the crisis becomes unavoidable.

## **TEMPORARY FREEDOM, LASTING INJUSTICE: DECARCERATION WITHOUT SYSTEM CHANGE**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the fragility and inequity embedded in our justice systems. In Nova Scotia, as in many other places, the justice system's decision to release individuals from custody during the early stages of the pandemic appeared, at first glance, to be a compassionate and necessary public health response. Decarceration was framed as an ethical imperative, a way to reduce the spread of the virus in overcrowded, unsanitary prisons. However, this sudden pivot towards releasing individuals without corresponding systemic reforms exposed a deeper, more troubling reality: freedom, for many, was temporary. Without addressing the longstanding issues of systemic racism, poverty, trauma, and inadequate social supports, the justice system's response during COVID-19 served more to protect itself than to genuinely support those most impacted by incarceration.

Abolitionist feminist thinkers like Mariame Kaba and Angela Y. Davis have long argued that prisons function as a repository for society's failures—housing instability, mental health crises, substance use, and poverty are criminalized rather than addressed through meaningful social policy. As Davis articulates in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, the prison system is deeply intertwined with racial capitalism and structural inequalities that disproportionately target marginalized communities.

The pandemic did not create these conditions; it merely magnified them. When the justice system began releasing people from custody, it became evident that the very structures that had funneled individuals into prisons—lack of affordable housing, inadequate mental health services, systemic racism—remained unchanged.

Many of those released from custody were thrust into homelessness or precarious living situations, highlighting the role prisons had come to play as de facto shelters and mental health facilities. This dynamic was not unique to Nova Scotia. Across Canada and globally, prisons had become the last catchment area for individuals failed by every other social system. The releases during COVID-19 revealed how deeply entrenched this reliance on incarceration had become. The system's response was, in many ways, self-serving—reducing prison populations to mitigate public health risks within the institutions themselves, while ignoring the broader social risks imposed on those released into unstable environments.

Community organizations and grassroots movements, already stretched thin by the demands of the pandemic, mobilized rapidly to fill the void left by the state. This community response was not just an act of charity; it was a form of resistance against the state's neglect and an embodiment of abolitionist principles. As Kaba asserts in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, "Hope is a discipline," and communities practiced this discipline by working towards harm reduction and envisioning alternatives to carceral systems, even amidst crisis.



The limitations of these community-led efforts were stark. The systemic problems that led to mass incarceration—poverty, racism, colonialism, and trauma—cannot be cured overnight by grassroots organizations, no matter how committed. The best communities could do was engage in harm reduction, providing immediate support while pushing for long-term systemic change. The pandemic illuminated the gap between what communities can achieve independently and what is required from governmental systems to create sustainable, transformative change.

The government's delayed and inadequate response further underscored this divide. Initially, there was a refusal to fund or support the community organizations stepping up to meet the needs of those released. It wasn't until the second wave of the pandemic, when the vulnerabilities of this population became impossible to ignore, that some governmental support was extended. This belated recognition did little to address the root causes of incarceration or the structural inequalities that had long been ignored.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the justice system's response to it, offers a crucial case study in the limitations of decarceration without systemic change. Temporary freedom, without the infrastructure to support it, is not true liberation. It is a stopgap measure that shifts the burden from the state to communities, from institutions to individuals. As abolitionist feminists have long argued, true justice requires not only the dismantling of oppressive systems but the building of new ones that prioritize care, support, and equity.

In reflecting on this period, we must recognize that the justice system's actions during COVID-19 were not a step towards abolition, but a temporary reprieve that left the underlying structures of oppression intact. The work of building a better world—one that does not rely on prisons as a solution to social problems—continues. It is a task that demands not only community resilience but systemic accountability and transformation.

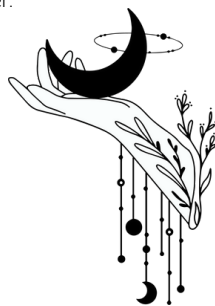
Deeply collaborative efforts across all justice system and community sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic were nothing short of extraordinary. The leadership that brought these initiatives to life—bridging divides between prosecutors, police, and community organizations—should not be diminished. These actions were groundbreaking and should never be forgotten, nor should they be in vain. Together, we saw a collective system that was solutions-focused, working to minimize incarceration and criminalization. Prosecutors were flexible, police were connected to communities, and justice was approached with humanity and urgency. It was empowering, exciting, and for a moment, felt like the possibility for real change.

At the provincial level, the approach to decarceration was vastly different from that of the federal system, where the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) did the opposite. Instead of considering releases, CSC implemented strict lockdowns, refusing even basic measures to reduce harm. Though this zine is not focused on federal corrections, this stark contrast is worth exploring and unpacking further. What stood out in the provincial efforts was how quickly the system adapted to minimize harm. It was proof that when there is willpower, change can happen.

However, as the crisis eased, the collaborative efforts and meaningful changes that seemed possible began to dissipate. The justice system gravitated toward reforms centered on efficiency and technology. Prosecutors, police, and committees that had been engaged in transformative work ultimately shifted their focus to projects like virtual court proceedings and ankle monitoring—solutions that serve the system's convenience rather than dismantling its harms. Research on carceral systems highlights this obsession with technology, which is often framed as progress but rarely addresses the root causes of injustice. As the crisis subsided, the appetite for deeper change diminished, leaving efficiency and technology as the enduring legacy.

Now, four years later, I've watched as those early collaborative efforts failed to create lasting change. In fact, conditions have worsened. Provincial jails are overcrowded. Trans prisoners continue to face discrimination and call out, pleading for humanity. Mothers remain separated from their children, and pregnant women are still transferred to hospitals only to have their newborns taken by child protection services as they are returned to jail. Overdose deaths upon release from jails continue. People are released into homelessness, fuelling the revolving door of incarceration.

Meanwhile, justice officials sit in endless meetings, their egos and power making a mockery of what justice should be. They talk of progress, of change—but nothing changes. These systems perpetuate the very harm they claim to address. It has made me sick to watch the promises of collaboration, innovation, and community-based solutions collapse under the weight of bureaucracy and self-preservation. The justice system's failure to sustain anything meaningful from those early efforts is a stark reminder of how entrenched it is in preserving its own power.



# DEAR CITY

# ↓ COUNCIL



If you shut down the encampments, others will arise out of necessity.

**AUGUST 18TH:**

**MUTUAL AID,  
RESISTANCE, AND  
STATE VIOLENCE**

- Stop Criminalizing Homelessness.
- Stop stigmatizing and scapegoating unhoused people.
- Stop Poor Bashing. Address Systemic Classism.
- Prohibit the forced evictions of encampments.
- Refuse to help or fund <sup>RLMP</sup>HRP evictions & ticketing.
- Protect the Human Rights of unhoused people.

There is no housing. Shelters are full. New shelters won't meet all of our needs or capacities.

No one wants to live like this. But more & more have to.

# Report calls for public apology in 'disastrous' 2021 Halifax encampment evictions

Report issued Friday recommends Halifax Regional Police revise policies

 **Celina Aalders** · CBC News · Posted: Sep 02, 2024 6:00 AM ADT | Last Updated: September 2, 2024



A highly anticipated report looking into the way evictions were carried out at a Halifax encampment in 2021 offered 37 recommendations for Halifax police, the police board and the city, calling it "a day of chaos for all those involved."  
Last spring, the [Board of Police Commissioners announced it had hired a Toronto-based law firm](#) to conduct an external review of events that unfolded on [Aug. 18, 2021](#), at the Halifax Memorial Library encampment.  
The [116-page report](#), released Friday, was critical of the way Halifax Regional Police and the Halifax Regional Municipality handled the evictions, as well as the civilian-led protest that ensued as a result.

Some of the report's recommendations include:

- HRP and HRM should issue a public apology for its "flaws in decision-making" that led to the evictions.
- The police board and HRP should commit to a human rights-based approach to addressing the needs of homeless people.
- The police board and HRP should review and revise its use-of-force and pepper-spray policies.
- The police board, HRP and HRM should acknowledge the distinct relationship that Indigenous peoples have with the land, and their right to live on that land.
- Many other procedural changes regarding the way HRP conducts and plans its operations, including the police board adopting a more assertive approach to police oversight and accountability.
- The police board, HRP and HRM should provide a public update on the implementation of these recommendations by June 1, 2025.



# SAFER PROTESTING

individuals' rights to protest and engage in picketing are both legal and safeguarded under sections 2(b) and 2(c) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

- Wear comfortable attire and shoes
- Bring snacks and water in reusable containers
- Avoid carrying illegal substances or weapons
- Write important #'s on your arm.
- Stick with a group for safety
- Carry essential medication
- Recognize that certain individuals may face increased risks and use discretion accordingly

it is legal for members of the public to take video or photographs in public spaces.



**"AM I FREE TO GO?"  
OR "AM I BEING  
ARRESTED OR  
DETAINED?"**

## **DO NOT RESIST A SEARCH OR STRUGGLE DURING A SEARCH**

Police can detain you if they suspect your connection to a crime, without formally arresting you. Once detained, you cannot leave.

Ask for a lawyer. Once arrested, you have a right to speak to legal counsel, and the police must advise you of this right as soon as possible. You might want to say something like: "I'd prefer not to answer any questions until I speak to my lawyer."

ADAPTED FROM: 'Know Your Rights Guide to Protesting' - [www.ccla.org](http://www.ccla.org) 'Interacting with Police' - [www.rabble.ca](http://www.rabble.ca) 'Know Your Rights An Activist's Guide to the Law' - [www.campusactivism.org](http://www.campusactivism.org) 'Protesting: Your Rights and the Law' - [www.constitutional.fndiaw.ca](http://www.constitutional.fndiaw.ca) 'A Legal Guide For Activists' - [www.movementdefence.org](http://www.movementdefence.org)

Do NOT lie or provide false documents to police

The housing and homelessness crisis in Nova Scotia, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, reveals deep parallels with the carceral logics that abolition feminists critique. Decades of disinvestment in affordable housing, coupled with policies that prioritize market-driven solutions over human dignity, created a system incapable of addressing the escalating crisis. This failure is not just one of neglect but a deliberate outcome of policy choices rooted in white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism—choices that criminalize poverty rather than address its root causes.

## **ENCAMPMENTS AS SITES OF RESISTANCE AND CARCERAL CONTROL**

Encampments and mutual aid efforts during the pandemic became symbols of both resistance and repression. As the state failed to meet even the most basic needs for housing, individuals and communities organized themselves, creating encampments as makeshift solutions to an untenable crisis. These spaces, though imperfect, were expressions of mutual aid and survival—small acts of collective care that challenged the state's neglect.

Rather than support these efforts, the state responded with violence and destruction. Encampments were raided, shelters torn down, and people criminalized for simply surviving on public land. The logic was clear: control over care, punishment over support. By dismantling these encampments, the state reinforced its unwillingness to address the systemic inequities that produce homelessness in the first place, perpetuating cycles of harm and displacement.



## **THE ROLE OF MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY CARE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Mutual aid efforts became lifelines for communities abandoned by the state. Volunteers and community members filled the gaps, distributing food, providing temporary shelter, and advocating for systemic change. These efforts were more than acts of charity—they were political interventions, grounded in the belief that care is a collective responsibility. Mutual aid demonstrated what abolitionist praxis looks like in real time: people coming together to build systems of support that do not rely on punishment or exclusion.

## **TRANSFORMING THE CRISIS**

The housing and homelessness crisis is a microcosm of the larger systems abolition seeks to dismantle. The pandemic revealed that the state's priorities remain aligned with control and punishment, even in the face of profound human suffering. But it also revealed the power of community, the necessity of mutual aid, and the possibility of transformative alternatives.

In imagining an abolitionist future, housing must be at the center. Housing and poverty are root causes of incarceration. Let's say it one more time for the people in the back...

Encampments and mutual aid are not the problem—the system that necessitates them is.



# 2020 HOUSING CRISIS

## STATE RESPONSE



## COMMUNITY RESPONSE

**Police Violence:** Deployed police to forcibly remove individuals from encampments, often using physical force, pepper spray, and arrests to suppress resistance.

**Destruction of Encampments:** Tearing down encampments where unhoused people sought refuge, leaving individuals without shelter or security.

**Disruption of Mutual Aid Efforts:** Raiding and dismantling mutual aid shelters and stations providing essential supplies to unhoused individuals.

**Property Destruction:** Using tools like chainsaws to destroy crisis shelters and tents built by unhoused individuals or their supporters.

**Arrests and Criminalization:** Arresting unhoused individuals, mutual aid organizers, and protesters under charges ranging from trespassing to obstruction.

**Discarding Belongings:** Throwing away personal belongings, including tents, clothing, medication, and identification, further destabilizing those already experiencing homelessness.

**Sweeps and Evictions:** Coordinating large-scale encampment sweeps with little to no notice, often displacing individuals without offering viable alternatives.

**Inadequate Shelter Options:** Offering temporary shelter spaces that fail to meet the needs of individuals, often overcrowded, unsafe, or inaccessible for women, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, and those with pets or belongings.

**Surveillance:** Increasing surveillance of unhoused individuals, encampments, and mutual aid efforts, further criminalizing people experiencing homelessness.

**Policy Neglect:** Failing to invest in affordable housing or long-term solutions, choosing instead to enforce punitive measures against the unhoused population.

**Media Campaigns:** Framing unhoused people and encampments as "public safety concerns," fueling stigma and division within communities.

**Mutual Aid Shelters:** Built and distributed crisis shelters, providing temporary refuge for unhoused individuals.

**Protests and Direct Action:** Organized protests, marches, and sit-ins to resist encampment evictions and advocate for housing rights.

**People's Parks:** Established spaces of mutual aid and solidarity, like People's Park, where unhoused individuals could receive food, shelter, advocacy, and support.

**Food and Meal Distribution:** Provided hot meals, groceries, and water to unhoused individuals through grassroots organizations and community kitchens.

**Legal Support:** Mobilized legal advocates to provide free advice, represent unhoused individuals in court, and challenge the legality of police actions and evictions.

**Emergency Supplies:** Distributed tents, sleeping bags, clothing, hygiene kits, and other essential items to unhoused individuals, often through mutual aid networks.

**Outreach and Advocacy:** Connected unhoused individuals with resources for healthcare, mental health services, addiction support, and housing navigation.

**Storytelling and Media:** Amplified the voices of unhoused individuals through social media campaigns and public testimonies to counter stigma and state narratives.

**Fundraising and Resource Sharing:** Crowdfunded resources to directly support individuals facing homelessness, ensuring access to temporary housing, legal aid, and transportation.

**Advocacy for Policy Change:** Pressured governments to invest in affordable housing, end encampment evictions, and reallocate police funding to social supports.



# NOT IN MY BACKYARD

August 18th was a breaking point. The mass eviction of homeless encampments across Halifax—people thrown out of tents, police in riot gear, tear gas in the air—was a moment of crisis that laid bare the fractures in our communities. It was violent. It was unnecessary. It was the state responding to visible poverty in the only way it knows how—by making it disappear.

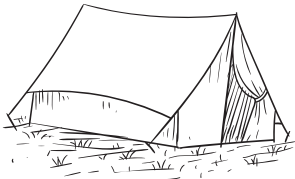
In the days and weeks that followed, as we tried to find people safe places to go, as we set up emergency supports, as we advocated for housing that could actually work, the backlash started rolling in. And not just from the people openly calling for mass arrests and police crackdowns. That kind of opposition was predictable, expected even. It was the quieter resistance that hit harder.

On one side was the rage against encampments—the people who wanted police to clear tents, no matter where they were. They flooded city council meetings, made calls demanding sweeps, called for stronger bylaws to criminalize the survival strategies of unhoused people.

Then there were the covert NIMBYs, the ones who claimed to support solutions—but only if they didn't have to see them. These were the people who said:

- "I care about homelessness, I really do. But an encampment in my neighborhood is not a long-term solution."
- "I support Housing First, but not it's impacts on homeowners."
- "We need community-based services, but this isn't the right place for it."

They were the ones who said they believed in alternatives to incarceration, that people shouldn't be jailed for poverty, addiction, or mental illness—but when we tried to build the very housing and supports needed to keep people out of jail, they pushed back just as hard as those who wanted encampments cleared.



I was building services and responding to crisis at the same time. That meant seeing NIMBYism everywhere—not just in public parks, but in the backlash against supportive housing, crisis stabilization programs, and transitional housing. It was a constant cycle:

- Encampments must go.
- Housing projects must exist but should not be built "here".
- People must be removed, but only if we don't have to take responsibility for where they go.

The contradiction was exhausting.

What August 18th showed me—what the months afterward continued to confirm—was that many people are fine with homelessness as long as it remains invisible. They don't mind if people are sleeping in stairwells or alleyways, as long as they don't have to walk past a tent on their way to work. They don't mind supporting charities that provide food, but the idea of their tax dollars funding permanent housing is too much.

The mass evictions didn't solve anything—they just moved people, created more trauma, and forced us into an emergency response mode that was completely unsustainable. And every effort to create longer-term solutions was met with the same resistance.

- Noise complaints against transitional housing.
- Zoning battles over harm reduction services.
- Constant calls to police whenever residents of supportive housing programs dared to exist outside.

For weeks, I was putting out fires, trying to find safe places for people while also trying to build the very systems that should have already been there. At the same time that police were evicting people from public spaces, community members were working just as hard to prevent them from moving into permanent housing.

Many people have internalized punitive responses as the primary or "correct" way to address harm. This is evident in everyday calls for eviction, exclusion, or severe punishment when someone causes harm, even in community spaces designed to be alternatives to incarceration. Media narratives, political rhetoric, and cultural norms often glorify "justice" as synonymous with punishment, reinforcing the belief that accountability must involve suffering.

### WHO GETS TO BUILD COMMUNITY?

August 18th didn't just reveal the failures of the system—it revealed who actually has power in shaping communities. The loudest voices weren't the ones calling for more housing, more supports, or better solutions. They were the ones demanding distance from the problem.

It didn't matter how much research we had, how many studies showed that supportive housing works, that harm reduction saves lives, that people are safer when they are housed. The resistance was always framed as rational concerns about community impact, property values, or safety. And when those tactics didn't work, people weaponized every tool available—filing bylaw complaints, stalling applications, calling the police, calling landlords, doing everything they could to disrupt, delay, or shut down housing projects before they ever began.

### BEYOND NIMBY: WHAT NOW?

The truth is, proximity does not equal solidarity. Living in the same neighborhood doesn't mean sharing the same values. The people who called the police every day weren't interested in being part of a community that included everyone—they wanted a curated version of community, one that didn't challenge their assumptions, their comfort, or their power.

For every person who wanted encampments gone, there were others showing up with food and supplies.

For every person who fought against housing, there were others fighting to keep people housed.

For every police call, there was a neighbor standing in front of someone's tent saying, "They're not going anywhere."

The battle against NIMBYism isn't just about policies or bylaws—it's about who gets to decide what communities look like. And the people I stood alongside, the ones still fighting to create real alternatives, they are the ones proving that community isn't about exclusion—it's about who we are willing to fight for.

So the real question isn't "How do we make homelessness less visible?"

It's

"Who do we refuse to let disappear?"

The link between abolition, COVID-19 decarceration efforts, and the events of August 18th is stark. As many people were released from jails during the pandemic, they often had nowhere to go and ended up in encampments, a visible and devastating reminder of the revolving door of criminalization. Those living in encampments, many of whom faced poverty, mental health struggles, and addictions, were in turn criminalized and surveilled by police, further perpetuating cycles of harm.

We expected the city and province to respond to the encampment and homelessness crisis with a crisis-level humanitarian response—cots, food, resources, and immediate aid. Instead, officials repeatedly showed up empty-handed, their inaction speaking volumes about whose lives are deemed worth saving. If this had been a different crisis—one that did not primarily affect poor, marginalized people—we might have seen the kind of urgent resource mobilization Nova Scotia provided during the wildfires. But when it comes to people who are homeless or struggling with mental health and addictions, the response has been punitive, not restorative, highlighting the structural violence embedded in our systems.

In the years following August 18th, there has been notable progress. The city has made efforts to adopt a more empathetic approach, providing targeted resources and supporting designated encampments, while the province has funded various housing initiatives, including tiny home communities, aimed at addressing a spectrum of needs. These measures are important and have helped many people, and the progress made should not be diminished. However, it is critical to acknowledge that this approach was not intuitive—it was the result of sustained community resistance and advocacy that compelled governments at all levels to respond in ways that are less punitive and more humane. It is also important to note that this type of progress can be undone at any point, with shifting priorities and/or power.

Significant gaps remain. Affordable housing continues to be a pressing issue in Nova Scotia, with many still unable to access safe and stable homes. Moreover, while housing programs have made strides, the justice system has shown little improvement. It continues to prioritize its own efficiency, failing to address the systemic harms it perpetuates or to engage meaningfully in transformative change. The work is far from over.

# DEFUND THE POLICE



Halifax's exploration of defunding the police is exemplified by the work of the Defunding the Police Subcommittee and its comprehensive report titled *Defunding the Police: Defining the Way Forward for HRM*, published in January 2022. This report emerged from growing demands for accountability and systemic change in response to police violence, systemic racism, and the failure of punitive systems to address social harms.

The report outlines a pathway for reallocating funds from police budgets into community-based resources that prioritize prevention, care, and equity. It defines "defunding" as a process of rethinking and reshaping the concept of public safety by transitioning responsibilities from police to alternative services better equipped to address social issues such as homelessness, mental health crises, and substance use. Recommendations include redirecting investments into affordable housing, mental health supports, harm reduction programs, and youth services—all of which align with abolitionist frameworks and abolition feminism.

*Abolition Feminism Now* (Davis, Dent, Meiners, & Richie, 2022) provides a critical lens to understand the importance of such efforts. Abolition feminism critiques the carceral logic that equates safety with policing and punishment, emphasizing instead the need for community-based solutions rooted in care and justice. It argues that policing and incarceration perpetuate harm by disproportionately targeting marginalized populations—particularly Black, Indigenous, and gender-diverse communities—while failing to address the structural conditions that give rise to harm, such as poverty, colonialism, and systemic racism.

In Halifax, the August 18, 2020, police dismantling of homeless encampments underscored the urgency of these reforms. The violent eviction of unhoused individuals, many of whom were supported by mutual aid networks, highlighted the failures of police-centric responses to social crises. The subcommittee's report explicitly recognizes these failures, advocating for a shift away from criminalizing poverty and toward building systems of care that prioritize housing, healthcare, and social support.

Through an abolition feminist lens, the *Defunding the Police* report represents a critical step toward dismantling systems of state violence and imagining alternative frameworks for public safety. The report's call to invest in community resources echoes abolition feminism's insistence on addressing the root causes of harm—inequality, systemic racism, and colonialism—through transformative, life-affirming practices. This approach moves beyond reform to envision a society where safety is not predicated on punishment but on care, equity, and collective well-being.

By grounding the conversation in local realities and abolitionist principles, Halifax's report on defunding the police offers a vital framework for systemic transformation that aligns with the goals of abolition feminism. It acknowledges that true safety comes not from more policing but from investments in the social systems that enable communities to thrive.

## **HALIFAX BOARD OF POLICE COMMISSIONERS. (2022). DEFUNDING THE POLICE: DEFINING THE WAY FORWARD FOR HRM.**



## AUGUST 18TH

In Halifax's core, as the day was born,  
Quiet streets stirred, under orders sworn.  
In predawn hush, on Mi'kma'ki land,  
The city's decree, with a heavy hand.

Tents and hopes on common ground laid,  
By law's sharp edge were swiftly prayed.  
Unceded, unsundered, the land watches on,  
As shelters were lost before the break of dawn.

Tents in parks, a silent plea,  
Homes of the homeless, as fragile as can be.  
City and law, in their stern command,  
Moved to erase those on the land.

Beside the old library, history stood still,  
Wooden structures, against the chill.  
Not just shelters, but stories untold,  
Of lives in margins, out in the cold.

Municipality workers, with tools in hand,  
Dismantled lives, like castles of sand.  
Stolen away, in safekeeping's guise,  
While hearts throbbed under Halifax skies.

Resistance stood, with a gaze that defies  
Facing the law, with fists in the sky  
Community gathered, a human chain,  
Linked in hope, unrestrained.

State violence speaks, words trying to bend,  
A standoff on a rooftop, a message to send.  
Hours ticked by the crowd swelled in size,  
Voices rose in a chorus, under open eyes

3 p.m. struck, orders were made,  
Handcuffs clicked, but spirits didn't fade.  
The crowd surged, bodies against might,  
In the dance of power, to defend what's right.

The mayor spoke of dignity, of humane ways,  
While the police donned riot gear, amidst the haze.  
A gradual approach, a two-month forewarn,  
But on this day, the city's veil was torn.

The city, the province, together they stand,  
Promising support, with an invisible hand.  
A true home's cure, they fail to address,  
In the shadow of state violence, they leave more with less



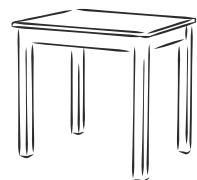
**BUILDING WHAT WE  
NEED: COMMUNITY  
BASED ALTERNATIVES**

## PRISON TABLES

A woman sits across from me  
A table between us  
Yet only her freedom idles between us  
Her emotions start to flow  
At first they are slow but as each  
memory  
Disparity  
Bruise and injustice surface  
The tears fall recklessly down her cheeks  
as she struggled to find her purpose  
She looks across the table and tells me  
that she feels  
Worthless..  
Her story, it will break your heart  
It is unique to her  
But it's the same story that I have heard  
Each time I sit, at this table  
She was a victim of gendered violence  
Racial profiling  
Discrimination  
She grew up surrounded by hate  
She is a survivor of rape  
She went to school hungry  
A child of poverty  
A baby girl born in to a life designed to  
place her at the back of the line so she  
Automatically become a minority  
And was never given priority.  
She is not the mistakes that she has  
made  
She is not her behaviour  
She is a prisoner in a jail that stretches  
far beyond the edges of this table  
This table represents the obstacles that  
she has to overcome  
But she has been locked up by a life that  
she can't escape from  
See they put her in general population  
Tucked away from civilization  
She did the time and now she must pay  
her debt back though  
Dead time.  
But who does the time for the crimes  
against her?  
Who feels the pain that she's had to  
endure? Is society prepared to disarm  
and undo the harm and give her the  
tools to succeed to conceive a life free  
from struggle and defeat?

Who is able to reconcile a world of  
betrayal and take back a past that she  
lays down on this table?  
This isn't a poem just about her and  
this prison, it is about the inequity of a  
society that we all have a right to be in  
I sit at this table and I know she is  
capable her spirit I breakable all of her  
hopes and dreams attainable  
She must be given the opportunity to  
heal from all the trauma that she has  
never been permitted to feel  
She is not just a bi product of a broken  
system  
She is not just a mental health  
condition  
A woman with an addiction  
She is a woman who longs to  
contribute to a society that has  
criminalized her and then stigmatized  
her  
Yet she is still willing and able to bring  
herself to this table  
She seizes every opportunity to fight  
for her life despite the fact that we  
have stripped her of her human rights  
The right to a fair chance  
To put her mistakes behind her and  
change her circumstance  
We could learn from her resiliency  
and her tireless efforts to preserve her  
dignity  
But we have put her in captivity and  
punished her for her "delinquency"  
When she's the ability to become a  
success story so I push down that  
table and stand up with her in  
solidarity.  
We must break down these tables  
Deconstruct systemic failures  
Stop handing out life sentences and  
Writing women off as menaces  
And take a closer look  
At the social determinants of these so  
called "criminal" occurrences.

-Ash Avery



# STRATEGY: CARE NOT COPS

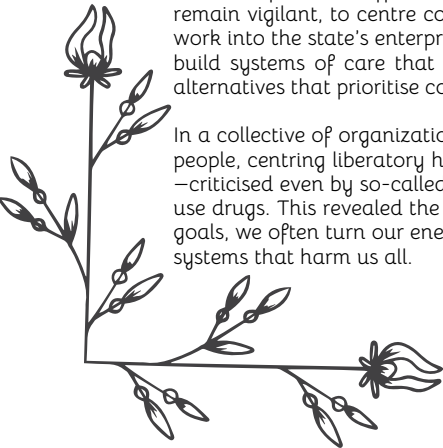
Abolition also demands that we answer to communities that want meaningful, affirming, and accessible services, including health care and housing, but not when these are annexed to punishment. Across the globe, abolitionist analysis and language emerged in a range of struggles in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Abolitionist campaigns against new jails or other forms of carceral expansion and criminal legal reform intersect with the material consequences of the state's abandonment of people with diverse needs. Delinking health care and mental health services—and so many other necessary flourishing life functions such as housing and education—from jailing and other facets of the carceral apparatus is crucial. This process of delinking represents an important principle of abolition, which is to challenge the migration of carcerality from brick-and-mortar jails and prisons to the places in everyday life where surveillance and punitive control dominate other aspects of the state's enterprise. Again, unsurprisingly, this careful work toward abolition—to parse punishment from authentic forms of care, to push back on how the state absorbs the language of community-based demands for affirmation and support and deftly translates these into coercion and repression—has always been the labor of feminists who oppose racial capitalism. As contemporary struggles around carceral expansion increasingly morph into fights about services, including health care and housing, abolition feminism guides us to organize boldly and carefully. How struggle unfolds matters. **RETRIEVED FROM**

**DAVIS, A. Y., DENT, G., MEINERS, E. R., & RICHIE, B. E. (2022). ABOLITION. FEMINISM. NOW. HAYMARKET BOOKS.**

On one hand, non-profit organizations can create space for the flourishing life functions that abolition feminism speaks of—housing, education, and healthcare untethered from punishment. On the other hand, working within the state's funding structures often feels like walking a tightrope. How do we challenge the migration of carcerality into social services when those services are funded by the very institutions responsible for systemic harm? How do we avoid becoming complicit in state violence while still providing care to those who need it most?

Abolition feminism offers a critical lens to navigate these contradictions. It reminds us to remain vigilant, to centre community-based demands, and to resist the absorption of our work into the state's enterprise of surveillance and control. It challenges us to imagine and build systems of care that are not merely gentler extensions of carceral logic, but true alternatives that prioritise collective liberation.

In a collective of organizations working to build services for criminalised and incarcerated people, centring liberatory harm reduction often placed us at the bottom of the hierarchy—criticised even by so-called abolitionist organizations for offering housing to people who use drugs. This revealed the complex, fraught dynamics of the work, where despite shared goals, we often turn our energy toward critiquing one another rather than dismantling the systems that harm us all.



# BUILDING LIFE AFFIRMING INSTITUTIONS\*

Abolition is fundamentally about building—creating systems and structures that support human flourishing, address root causes of harm, and ensure that everyone has what they need to thrive. The idea isn't just to eliminate prisons and policing but to replace them with systems that make them obsolete.



This illustrates the spectrum of life-affirming institutions that abolitionists envision as essential to creating a just and equitable society. These interconnected systems—ranging from housing and healthcare to cultural programs and economic justice—highlight the multifaceted approach needed to dismantle carceral structures and build supportive, sustainable communities. By investing in these areas, we shift from reactive, punitive responses to proactive, transformative care that addresses the root causes of harm and fosters true collective well-being.



\*ANGELA Y. DAVIS USES THIS PHRASE TO DESCRIBE THE KINDS OF STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS THAT ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENTS SEEK TO CREATE AS ALTERNATIVES TO PRISONS AND OTHER CARCERAL INSTITUTIONS.

## **SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR CRIMINALIZED WOMEN & GENDER DIVERSE FOLKS**

In the face of a carceral system designed to punish rather than heal, we set out to build something different—something rooted in care, community, and the belief that no one belongs in a cage. Our journey began with the creation of a bail house as an alternative to incarceration, a space designed to house women in community rather than in cells, especially during the isolating and resource-deprived period of the pandemic.

We approached this work through a harm reduction lens, though not without challenges. While we aimed to create a supportive environment, we could not permit drug use within the house, which posed significant difficulties for many of the residents. This was a critical tension—our desire to reduce harm clashed with the constraints of house arrest conditions and the realities of state supervision. This tension reflected the broader struggle of building abolitionist frameworks within systems still steeped in carceral logic.

Despite these challenges, the house became more than just an alternative to jail—it became a small, vibrant community. We cooked meals together, ventured out to beaches and parks, and created opportunities for connection and joy. Taking women on house arrest into the community for productive, life-affirming experiences was a radical act in itself. It showed that even within restrictive conditions, we could foster environments of care and growth.



Parallel to this, the bail program became a key component of our work. I found myself regularly in court, taking the stand at bail hearings to advocate for the release of women into our care. While I primarily spoke about the services and programs we provided, I never missed the opportunity to highlight the harm caused by incarceration. During the pandemic, the contrast was stark: jails offered no programs, no support, and no safety. In this climate, we never lost a bail hearing. Judges repeatedly acknowledged that community-based support was far more productive than languishing in a cell.

Even prosecutors, often viewed as adversaries in the courtroom, began to consent to releases, recognizing the efficacy of our program. However, there was always a catch. Nine times out of ten, the Crown would require us to supervise participants, meaning we were obligated to call the police if any conditions were breached. This was the cost of our work—our participation in the state's surveillance apparatus. It was a compromise we couldn't ignore because our entire program was built on trust and relationships with the court system. To jeopardize that trust would risk the very existence of our program. It was a morally difficult position to be in, but we always let those we were working with to get released, lead the way.

**PRISONERS ARE OFTEN FORCED TO AGREE TO WHATEVER TERMS WILL SECURE THEIR RELEASE, NO MATTER HOW UNREASONABLE OR BURDENSOME, BECAUSE THE ALTERNATIVE IS CONTINUED INCARCERATION. TO CLAIM THAT THEY HAVE FULL AGENCY IN SUCH DECISIONS IGNORES THE COERCIVE NATURE OF THE CARCERAL SYSTEM. HOWEVER, IN OUR WORK, WE STRIVED TO PROVIDE IMPARTIAL SUPPORT—GIVING INDIVIDUALS ALL THE FACTS, EXPLAINING THEIR OPTIONS, AND ULTIMATELY RESPECTING THEIR DECISIONS. OUR ROLE WAS NEVER TO PUSH AN AGENDA, BUT TO HONOUR THEIR WISHES IN THE FACE OF A DEEPLY UNJUST SYSTEM.**





Defense lawyers were, for the most part, incredible allies in this work. They fought hard for their clients, pushing for less restrictive conditions and advocating for community-based alternatives. However, not all were as diligent. Some allowed overly onerous conditions to slip through—conditions that were almost impossible to meet and set women up for failure, leading to swift re-incarceration.

One of the most glaring gaps in the system was the lack of accessible mental health and substance use programs. Many women we worked with desperately wanted clinical based services, but programs were either too expensive, or they refused to admit individuals on court conditions. This lack of support created a revolving door, with women cycling in and out of jail because the services they needed simply didn't exist.

Recognizing this, we expanded our program into a permanent supported housing initiative. This new model combined bail support, court advocacy, stable housing, and wraparound services. It served both as an alternative to incarceration and as a reintegration home for women trapped in the cycle of poverty, racism, trauma, and addiction—the very conditions that fuel mass incarceration. This population, though small, consumes disproportionate resources within the justice system because of systemic failures to provide adequate support.

Our aspiration was to ground this work in **liberatory harm reduction, restorative justice, and a Housing First philosophies.** We wanted to create a space that was truly abolitionist in nature—not merely an extension of the criminal justice system under a different guise. But the tension remained: how do you build something rooted in abolition while still operating within the confines of the state? This is the paradox we grappled with, striving to resist "carceral creep" while navigating the realities of the systems we were embedded in.

### **CARCERAL CREEP**

Carceral creep refers to the gradual expansion of carceral logics, practices, and systems into areas of society that were not traditionally associated with punishment or incarceration. It describes how tools, technologies, and ideologies of control, surveillance, and punishment spread beyond the formal boundaries of the criminal justice system, infiltrating institutions such as education, healthcare, social services, and housing.

For example:

- The use of ankle monitors or electronic surveillance for people on probation or parole, even in non-criminal contexts.
- The criminalization of poverty through fines, penalties, and evictions, where housing or public spaces are policed.
- Schools adopting zero-tolerance policies, leading to the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Hospitals or social services involving police or security in mental health crises, effectively criminalizing health issues.

Carceral creep blurs the line between punishment and support, as systems ostensibly designed to care for or protect people increasingly adopt punitive measures. Abolitionists critique carceral creep because it perpetuates surveillance and control, further entrenching systems of harm and inequality instead of addressing root causes or fostering community care.

**A ZINE BY ABOLITION IN ACTION**



**ABOLITION: HOW WE KEEP US SAFE**

# CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS IN BUILDING LIFE-AFFIRMING INSTITUTIONS

## WHITE SUPREMACIST AND CAPITALIST DYNAMICS

Despite successes in creating life-affirming institutions, the non-profit sector often replicates white supremacist and capitalist dynamics, particularly through competition for limited resources and funding. This competition fosters a scarcity mindset, where organizations prioritize expansion to secure funding rather than focusing deeply on their core mission. The pressure to "do it all" often undermines meaningful collaboration and transformative justice, diverting energy away from collective impact and reinforcing the very systems of oppression the sector seeks to dismantle.

## SEPARATION OF CHARITY AND STATE

Another critical barrier was the reliance on state funding, which came with its own set of complications. Public donations for initiatives like harm reduction, bail, and community-based healthcare were insufficient, revealing a broader societal reluctance to support alternatives to the carceral systems. While state funding was necessary, it often came with stipulations and control mechanisms that restricted the ability to fully implement liberatory, harm-reduction approaches. To navigate this, partnerships were formed with government departments outside the justice system, such as health and housing. However, even these partnerships posed challenges, as the inherent contradictions of taking state funding—which is never sufficient to fully realize the vision—remained unresolved.

## REDEFINING SUCCESS

Multiple sources of funding bring multiple requirements for metrics and KPIs, which can be challenging in this work because the ultimate goals are not always about achieving the conventional outcomes funders expect, like permanent housing or employment. Progress looks different for everyone, especially when working with highly marginalized and vulnerable individuals. Success might mean that someone had access to food, or simply felt safe for a moment—outcomes that don't always align with what funders or society deem as measurable achievements.

## TENSIONS IN SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS

The challenges of delivering meaningful services and support in shared living spaces reveal significant tensions between the rights and needs of staff and those of clients. Balancing workers' rights to safety, support, and fair working conditions with residents' rights to access non-punitive, healing environments is complex, especially within a liberatory harm reduction and restorative framework. The coexistence of staff and clients in shared spaces often highlighted these conflicts, with the convergence of law, policy, and the realities of practice creating conditions that were not always conducive to meaningful healing. For this reason, congregate living environments are not ideal program models.

While the reliance on frontline workers, often with limited training, allowed organizations to provide essential harm reduction services, this approach exposed the limitations of the model. It is not to say that lives were not changed or that progress was not made—good things did happen, and harm was reduced—but the model often fell short of transformative change. This approach was what was possible given the resources and systemic constraints, offering an alternative to incarceration while still reinforcing the need to imagine and push for better.

The limitations of this model do not diminish its value but instead point to the need for ongoing reflection and adaptation. Harm reduction is a critical step forward, but to create systems that are truly liberatory, more skilled resources, supportive environments, and transformative frameworks must be prioritized to meet the needs of both staff and those they serve. It is a reminder that while progress is imperfect, it is still progress, and the work must continue to evolve.

## PROXIMITY IS NOT EXPERTISE

Proximity and intention do not equal expertise. Community organizations often have the closest relationships with those impacted and present themselves as experts, but proximity does not guarantee the necessary skills, training, or expertise. This narrative is misleading and, in many cases, harmful. On the flip side, services situated within government systems are not the answer either. The future of meaningful service delivery requires a balance—centering lived experience while ensuring services are informed by robust training, specialized skills, and an unwavering commitment to transformative change.

## CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS IN COMMUNITY CARE, NOT COPS

Lastly, adopting restorative and transformative justice practices proved challenging within institutional settings. These approaches require time, trust, and buy-in from all participants. For many, restorative practices felt like inaction or were perceived as insufficient responses to harm. If not facilitated carefully, these processes could cause further harm, especially when participants were not fully committed to the approach. Balancing the need for accountability with the principles of restorative justice was a delicate and often fraught process.

The barriers are not inherent flaws within these initiatives but are deeply rooted in systemic issues and structural inequalities. Drawing on the work of abolitionists and feminists, such as El Jones, Robyn Maynard, and Mariame Kaba, it becomes clear that the challenges faced by transformative projects stem from the enduring legacy of colonialism, racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, all of which are embedded in the state's institutions and practices.

El Jones consistently highlights how the carceral system is designed not to rehabilitate or support but to perpetuate cycles of marginalization, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities. The same systemic forces that sustain prisons and punitive structures also work against life-affirming institutions that seek to provide alternatives to incarceration, such as community-led housing, restorative justice programs, and support services for marginalized groups.

When these institutions struggle, it is not due to an inherent flaw in their mission or approach. Rather, it is because they are operating within a context that is hostile to their success. The state's historical and ongoing disinvestment in marginalized communities, coupled with bureaucratic obstacles, underfunding, and restrictive policies, creates significant barriers. As Mariame Kaba has noted, "We don't build life-affirming institutions in a vacuum. We're building within the rubble of what's been destroyed." This rubble includes not only the tangible destruction of communities through gentrification, environmental degradation, and economic exploitation but also the psychological and social harm inflicted by systemic oppression.

Angela Davis's work further emphasizes that the success of life-affirming institutions improves with more resources, more support, and greater investments. When communities are provided with adequate funding, autonomy, and the space to design and implement their own solutions, transformative change becomes possible. This is evident in models like Housing First, which have shown that stable housing and comprehensive support lead to better outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness. However, even successful models face resistance from systems invested in maintaining the status quo.

The state's role in these dynamics cannot be overlooked. Policies rooted in punitive logic, austerity measures, and neoliberal governance continue to prioritize surveillance, policing, and incarceration over social supports. Historical injustices, such as the displacement of Indigenous peoples, the enslavement of Black communities, and the systemic exclusion of women and gender-diverse individuals, are not relics of the past but ongoing realities that shape the present landscape.

To overcome these barriers, we must advocate for systemic shifts that prioritize community-led solutions and redistribute resources toward life-affirming institutions. This requires not only financial investment but also dismantling of the oppressive structures that hinder progress. As El Jones poignantly reminds us, "Our liberation is bound together." The success of life-affirming institutions is a collective responsibility, demanding solidarity, sustained advocacy, and a commitment to justice that challenges the very foundations of systemic oppression.



## **POWER, COMPETITION, AND CONTRADICTIONS: REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP**

I still remember, many years ago, walking into a room filled with over a hundred service providers, gathered under the direction of the government to create a sexual violence strategy. The task? Decide how critical resources would be allocated and which organizations would receive funding. What unfolded was less a collaborative effort and more a masterclass in non-profit logic—one that privileged competition over cooperation, self-preservation over systemic change. It was, in many ways, my crash course in understanding the contradictions of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC).

What I witnessed that day—and continued to experience throughout my career as a non-profit leader—was a sector deeply embedded in the very systems of oppression it often claims to dismantle. While non-profits do essential work, they also exist within a capitalist framework that incentivizes power hoarding, resource guarding, and gatekeeping. The abolitionist lens, as articulated by thinkers like Mariame Kaba (2021) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), challenges us to see beyond these structures, to recognize that transformative change cannot occur within systems designed to maintain themselves.

### **THE MYTH OF COLLABORATION IN NON-PROFIT SPACES**

One of the most glaring contradictions in the non-profit sector is the myth of collaboration. While the rhetoric often emphasizes partnership and collective impact, the reality is frequently marked by competition for scarce resources and power. Organizations, even those with similar missions, are pitted against each other in funding applications, grant opportunities, and government contracts. This competitive environment fosters a culture of mistrust and isolation, where sharing resources or aligning strategies can feel like a threat to organizational survival. I have been told by outsiders that Nova Scotia is particularly problematic in this area.

In feminist organizational theory, Joan Acker (1990) describes how hierarchical structures and capitalist logics infiltrate spaces supposedly dedicated to equity and justice. In my experience, while non-profits use the language of collaboration, and recognize its importance, when push comes to shove, everyone looks out for their own interests, thus decentering the needs of the communities being served. To truly serve the community, you have to be ok with not always being right, and with sharing power and making space for opinions other than your own.

This competition doesn't just stifle innovation—it actively prevents transformative work. Organizations become risk-averse, unwilling to challenge the status quo for fear of jeopardizing funding. The focus shifts from addressing root causes of social issues to contorting the organization to meet funding opportunities and related stipulations. This rarely result in lasting change. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) notes that abolitionist work requires us to think beyond these limitations, to imagine structures that don't rely on artificial scarcity but instead embrace collective care and resource sharing.

### **POWER AND CONTROL**

While community organizations are often seen as progressive spaces, the dynamics of power hoarding are prevalent, particularly among those in senior leadership roles in Nova Scotia. In many of the rooms I found myself in, it was women—often white women—who held significant control. These roles were not just about overseeing programs or managing budgets; they were about gatekeeping access to resources, shaping organizational narratives, and maintaining influence in the sector. I will never forget the time a senior leader in government, working in the women's sector, showed up at my office with overt threats over a social media post that I had made on my personal social media page, in support of labour action at a local women's shelter. This was merely an introduction to the ways in which power and control would show up in the work.

It became clear to me that in order to secure and maintain leadership positions, many women had to adopt the same authoritative and hierarchical behaviours traditionally associated with patriarchal structures. Sara Ahmed (2012) explores this phenomenon in her work on feminist organizations, highlighting how women in leadership are often complicit in reinforcing institutional power dynamics, even as they advocate for equity and justice externally.

# CONFLICT AND CONTRADICTION IN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE SPACES

I've witnessed firsthand how certain individuals, often women in positions of authority wield their social capital and institutional power in ways that gatekeep the very relational work they claim to support.

Instead of fostering environments where new voices are welcomed, these individuals often seek to control the narrative, maintain dominance and exclude perspectives that are not theirs. Their actions create barriers rather than bridges, stifling the growth and evolution of restorative practices. This is especially jarring because restorative justice is meant to be expansive, inclusive, and transformative—yet within these professional circles, the work can become rigid, hierarchical, and exclusionary.

The irony is sharp: in spaces that should model the values of support, empowerment, and shared leadership, there is often an undercurrent of competition, control, and gatekeeping. This tension is not just theoretical—it has real, tangible impacts. It limits opportunities for emerging practitioners, silences voices with less power or perceived expertise, and hinders the collective capacity to innovate and expand the work in meaningful ways.

This contradiction is painful to navigate, especially when the work is framed around ideals of healing and restoration. It's difficult to reconcile the dissonance between what restorative justice claims to be and how it sometimes manifests in practice. But acknowledging these conflicts is essential. It forces us to confront the ways in which power dynamics can infiltrate even the most well-intentioned spaces, and it challenges us to remain vigilant in holding ourselves and each other accountable to the values we espouse.

For restorative justice to truly live up to its promise, we must be willing to address these internal contradictions. This means actively resisting gatekeeping, making space for diverse voices and approaches, and prioritizing relational integrity over professional hierarchy. It means embodying the very principles we advocate for, even when it's uncomfortable or challenging. Only then can we begin to build restorative spaces that are genuinely inclusive, supportive, and transformative.

If you find yourself in a position of authority, ask: Are you creating space for others, or are you occupying all of it? Are you using your influence to uplift new voices, particularly those from marginalized communities, or are you reinforcing hierarchies that center your own expertise and control? Leadership in restorative justice isn't about gatekeeping knowledge or maintaining dominance—it's about fostering environments where collective wisdom thrives and where diverse approaches to justice are welcomed, not policed.

It's disheartening to witness individuals who speak the language of relational work while engaging in behaviours that undermine it—controlling narratives, sidelining differing perspectives, and using social capital to maintain their power.

This kind of performative leadership not only contradicts the core values of restorative justice but also causes real harm, perpetuating exclusion and limiting the transformative potential of the work.

So, to the women who hold these powerful positions: walk the walk. Reflect on how you wield your power. Be intentional about sharing space, stepping back when necessary, and supporting the leadership of those who are finding their way.

One of the hardest parts of this work is for me has been knowing there's so much urgent, transformative change to be done, yet somehow there's still space for people to tear each other down—often masked in professional language that sounds constructive but is, in reality, thinly veiled violence.

**“WHAT WE DO IS MORE  
IMPORTANT THAN WHAT WE  
SAY OR WHAT WE SAY WE  
BELIEVE. TO LIVE BY  
FEMINIST PRINCIPLES IN ANY  
CULTURE IS TO COMMIT TO A  
LIFE OF RESISTANCE—  
RESISTANCE TO INJUSTICE,  
TO DOMINATION, TO  
OPPRESSION.”  
BELL HOOKS**

## THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR AS A SELF-PERPETUATING SYSTEM

Another realization that has emerged during my time in non-profit leadership is how the sector often exists to sustain itself. Organizations become focused on growth for the sake of growth, expanding programs, increasing staff, and securing more funding—not necessarily to meet community needs, but to justify their continued existence.

This phenomenon aligns with the critiques laid out in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2007), which describes how non-profits can become complicit in maintaining the very systems they claim to oppose. The need to demonstrate effectiveness through metrics and measurable outcomes often leads to mission drift, where organizations align more closely with funder priorities than with the needs of the communities they serve.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this contradiction became even more apparent. Non-profits were thrust into the role of frontline responders, filling gaps left by inadequate government support. But the resources that flowed into the sector came with strings attached—funding was temporary, restrictive, and often dictated by political priorities rather than community needs. Organizations scrambled to adapt, but the focus remained on short-term fixes rather than long-term systemic change.

Finally, non-profits are inherently fragile and often lack long-term stability. Projects are frequently launched with enthusiasm, but when funding shifts or organizational priorities change, these initiatives can be abruptly dropped. This volatility not only disrupts the lives of those relying on these services but can also cause significant harm, as communities are left without consistent, dependable support.

Reflecting on my journey as a non-profit leader, I see both the necessity and the limitations of the sector. Non-profits provide critical support to communities, but they also operate within frameworks that can undermine transformative justice. The challenge is to recognize these contradictions and actively work to dismantle the structures that perpetuate harm, both within and outside of our organizations.

The non-profit sector is not the solution to systemic oppression, but it can be part of the process—if we are willing to fundamentally rethink how we operate, redistribute power, and prioritize community-led solutions.

Abolitionist work requires us to imagine a world beyond scarcity, beyond competition, and beyond gatekeeping. It is in this imagining that true liberation lies.



## DECIDING WHO DESERVES SUPPORT

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of non-profit work is the gatekeeping inherent in service provision. As leaders, we are often tasked with making decisions about who receives support and who doesn't. These decisions are rarely neutral; they are informed by funding restrictions, organizational policies, and broader societal biases.

The process of deciding who qualifies for services mirrors the carceral logics that abolitionist scholars critique. This manifests in eligibility criteria, behavioral requirements, and compliance checks that determine whether someone is "deserving" of support.

I've witnessed numerous instances where resources—such as shelter, gift cards, and other supports—were distributed inconsistently, often without a clear rationale. Frontline workers in organizations sometimes made decisions based on personal emotions or relationships, resulting in certain individuals receiving significantly more than others, not due to greater need but because of closer ties to staff. Conversely, I have seen services frequently withheld from others based on factors like substance use, reinforcing harmful biases and creating barriers for those most in need.

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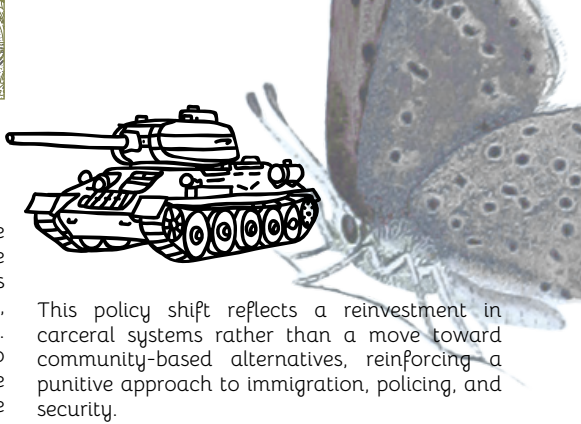
## THE POST-COVID REINVESTMENT IN POLICING AND SECURITY IN CANADA

Five years after the COVID-19 pandemic, the early momentum behind defunding the police and investing in community-led alternatives has largely stalled. In fact, rather than scaling back, policing budgets across Canada are expanding. Cities that once considered reallocating funds to social services are now investing in larger police forces, military-grade equipment, and new police headquarters.

A study analyzing police funding in 20 of Canada's largest cities revealed that, despite initial advocacy for defunding, budget increases have persisted. Some cities, such as Quebec City, have seen policing budgets increase by up to 26% since 2015, while other municipalities have made only symbolic cuts, such as Vancouver's 0.05% reduction in 2020 (University of Toronto Press, 2022). Instead of funding being reallocated to housing, mental health, or harm reduction programs, police forces are expanding, acquiring new surveillance technologies, and strengthening their presence in communities.

### BORDER SECURITY AND THE INFLUENCE OF U.S. POLICIES

The trend toward increased policing is not limited to municipal forces—it is now extending to border security. The Government of Canada has announced a \$1.3 billion investment in border security, which includes expanded surveillance, enhanced personnel, and technological upgrades to monitor irregular migration and drug trafficking (Government of Canada, 2025). While these measures are framed as necessary for public safety, they are also a direct response to pressure from the United States, where the new administration has made it clear that Canada must step up its border enforcement or face economic consequences (Reuters, 2024).



This policy shift reflects a reinvestment in carceral systems rather than a move toward community-based alternatives, reinforcing a punitive approach to immigration, policing, and security.

### LOSING MOMENTUM: THE WORDS OF EL JONES

During a recent conference, El Jones spoke about this shift, emphasizing how movements for abolition and police divestment have lost their political momentum. While the pandemic momentarily exposed the failures of policing—forcing conversations about decarceration, community-led crisis response, and public safety beyond law enforcement—governments have since doubled down on traditional carceral approaches. Jones warned that rather than seeing systemic change, we are witnessing an even greater expansion of policing powers, surveillance, and criminalization.

The early hopes of reimagining safety in ways that center care over control, housing over handcuffs, and support over surveillance have been replaced by more prisons, more police, and more border security infrastructure.

### CONCLUSION

What does it mean to move forward when we seem to be moving backward? What does abolition demand of us in a time when our governments are reinvesting in the very structures we fought to dismantle? The next steps require not just pushing against police expansion, but rebuilding momentum for alternatives that we know work—housing, harm reduction, crisis intervention, and community-based support. The fight isn't over, but the landscape has changed.

The question now is: how do we reclaim the ground we have lost?



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**CONFLICT,  
ACCOUNTABILITY, AND  
CANCEL CULTURE**

## **“SQUABBLING AND HIERARCHIES REPLICATE THE WORLD ACTIVISTS ARE TRYING TO CHANGE”**

We gather in circles,  
claiming we're different—  
not like them.

Not like the ones we fight,  
the systems we scream to dismantle.

But what's this?  
A side-eye in the meeting,  
gossip in the chat,  
a ladder built from egos  
instead of love.

Squabbling over crumbs,  
we forget the feast we're building.  
Pointing fingers with fists raised high,  
the fight turns inward,

and suddenly, the oppressors  
don't need to lift a finger.

We say we want abolition,  
but we can't abolish  
the need to be right.

We say we want freedom,  
but we lock ourselves  
inside the cages of pride.

We chant, Another world is possible!

But how do we build it  
when we bring the same tools  
that built this one?

Yet there is still time—  
to silence the squabbling with love,  
to tear down the hierarchies  
that live in our hearts,  
to unlearn the scripts  
we were handed.

Because justice is not a throne,  
and freedom cannot come  
from chains of our own making.

If we cannot hold love  
within the movement,  
how will we ever offer it  
to the world?

By. Ash Avery

# VOICES FROM THE MOVEMENT

Mia Mingus – Transformative Justice Activist

"Accountability is not punishment. Accountability is about growth, learning, and recognizing the harm we've caused while working to repair it."

adrienne marie brown – Author of Emergent Strategy

"Our movements themselves have to embody the futures we're trying to create."

adrienne marie brown

"When the response to mistakes, failures and misunderstandings is emotional, psychological, economic and physical punishment, we breed a culture of fear, secrecy and isolation."

Shira Hassan – Transformative Justice Organizer

"If we cancel everyone, who is left to do the work?"

Fania Davis – Restorative Justice Scholar and Activist

"Restorative justice is a justice that seeks not to punish, but to heal."

Howard Zehr – Pioneer of Restorative Justice

"The question guiding restorative justice is: Who has been harmed? What are their needs? Whose obligations are these?"

Audre Lorde – Poet and Activist

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

bell hooks – Feminist Theorist and Cultural Critic

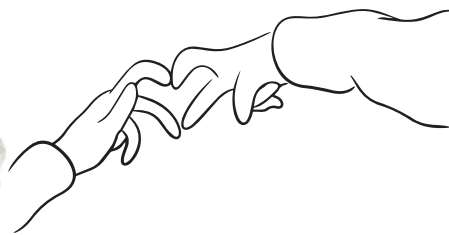
"For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?"

Ruth Wilson Gilmore – Abolitionist Scholar

"Abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions."

Danielle Sered – Director of Common Justice

"We have to resist the easy narratives of good and evil. Most harm is rooted in trauma, and most people who cause harm have been harmed."



## THE HARM OF CANCEL CULTURE IN JUSTICE WORK

Cancel and call-out culture within organizations and movements have become significant obstacles to the work we are trying to achieve. As we navigate the complex terrain of abolition feminism and social justice, it's clear that these dynamics are not just interpersonal issues—they reflect deeper systemic patterns that mirror the very structures we aim to dismantle. Drawing on the work of adrienne maree brown, particularly in *We Will Not Cancel Us*, and other abolitionist thinkers, we can begin to unpack the harm this culture causes and how it undermines our collective efforts.

Abolition feminism teaches us that people are not disposable, and our movements should be rooted in care, transformative justice, and accountability that fosters growth rather than punishment. Yet, the rush to publicly shame or "cancel" individuals for mistakes—even those working towards the same goals of liberation—creates an environment of fear and division. This culture fractures our communities, stifles dialogue, and often prioritizes performative outrage over meaningful engagement and learning.

adrienne maree brown's *We Will Not Cancel Us* highlights how the carceral logic of punishment has seeped into our organizing spaces. When we respond to harm with immediate ostracization rather than restorative approaches, we replicate the punitive systems we're fighting against. This doesn't mean ignoring harm or avoiding accountability, but it does mean shifting our focus from punishment to transformation. Accountability should be a process that allows for mistakes, dialogue, and repair, not a tool to ruin lives and careers.

Mariame Kaba reminds us that "hope is a discipline," emphasizing that building the world we want requires patience, compassion, and a belief in the capacity for change. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's work on abolitionist geographies further illustrates that dismantling oppressive systems involves creating spaces where people can grow and learn from their mistakes. We need to cultivate environments where harm can be addressed constructively, and individuals are supported in their journey towards accountability and growth.

The constant conflict, bickering, and canceling within our organizations and movements make this work incredibly hard. It drains our energy, diverts attention from our goals, and weakens our collective power. We need each other to achieve the systemic changes we're fighting for. Our liberation is interconnected, and we cannot afford to lose allies over missteps that could have been opportunities for deeper understanding and solidarity.

It's essential to hold space for complexity in our movements. People can cause harm and still contribute meaningfully to our work. This discomfort is part of the process of building more nuanced approaches to accountability that align with our values and vision for a just world. We must move away from a culture that seeks to ruin people's lives over mistakes and instead focus on building relationships that can withstand conflict and grow stronger through it.

Ultimately, the success of our movements depends on our ability to embody the transformative justice we envision for the world. By fostering a culture of dialogue, care, and mutual support, we can create spaces where everyone has the opportunity to learn, grow, and contribute to our collective liberation.

**"PEOPLE MESS UP. WE LIE, EXAGGERATE, BETRAY, HURT, AND ABANDON EACH OTHER. WHEN WE HEAR THAT THIS HAS HAPPENED, IT MAKES SENSE TO FEEL ANGER, PAIN, CONFUSION AND SADNESS. BUT TO MOVE IMMEDIATELY TO PUNISHMENT MEANS THAT WE STAY ON THE SURFACE OF WHAT HAS HAPPENED."**

**ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN**

**WHAT IS/ISN'T TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE**

[CLICK HERE](#)

# PRACTICING CARE AND ACCOUNTABILITY A GUIDE FOR WORKING TOGETHER

DO THIS	DON'T DO THIS
<p>Call in with care and curiosity: Approach missteps or disagreements as opportunities for learning and growth. Ask questions and invite dialogue.</p>	<p>Call out publicly without context or resolution: Shame individuals for their mistakes without offering a path for accountability or repair.</p>
<p>Focus on the bigger picture: Direct energy toward dismantling oppressive systems and building alternatives to harm. Keep the shared vision at the center.</p>	<p>Prioritize rigid adherence to ideals over shared growth: Critique others for not fully aligning with specific frameworks, dismissing their contributions or potential for learning.</p>
<p>Create restorative accountability: Use harm as a moment for transformation by fostering dialogue, accountability, and repair. Offer practical steps for rebuilding trust.</p>	<p>Exile or dismiss: Exclude people who make mistakes without giving them the chance to take accountability or learn.</p>
<p>Foster inclusion and learning: Make space for new participants by welcoming questions and encouraging their growth in understanding shared values.</p>	<p>Gatekeep participation: Expect people to enter spaces already aligned with all principles, creating barriers to engagement.</p>
<p>Collaborate and share resources: Work together across differences, recognizing that varied strategies strengthen the overall movement.</p>	<p>Compete or undermine: Critique other approaches unnecessarily or hoard resources and recognition out of fear of scarcity.</p>



# TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES TO CONFLICT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

## ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY BEFORE CONFLICT ARISES

**Create Community Agreements:** Develop shared values and expectations around communication, conflict resolution, and accountability. Agreements can outline how harm will be addressed when it inevitably arises.

**Normalize Conflict as Growth:** Conflict is natural in any community, especially in passionate movements. Emphasize that disagreements, when handled constructively, can strengthen relationships and sharpen political clarity.

**Build Skills in Conflict Transformation:** Offer training in nonviolent communication, active listening, and de-escalation. Empowering everyone with tools for addressing tension can prevent harm from festering.

## RESPONDING TO CONFLICT: TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

**Center the Needs of Those Harmed:**

Ask: What does the person who experienced harm need to feel safe, supported, and heard? This could include acknowledgment of harm, space for reflection, or material support.

**Facilitate Dialogue and Reflection:**

If safe and appropriate, bring together those involved in the conflict for a facilitated conversation. Use restorative circles or mediations that allow everyone to share their experiences, emotions, and perspectives.

**Hold Those Who Cause Harm Accountable**

**Without Punishment:**

Accountability is about recognizing harm, making amends, and committing to change. It isn't about punishment or exile. Ask: What does accountability look like in this situation? What steps can be taken to repair the harm?

## ADDRESSING HARM: A TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE PROCESS

**Assess the Situation:**

- o Who was harmed?
- o What kind of harm occurred (interpersonal, systemic, etc.)?
- o Is it safe for all parties to engage in a restorative process?

**Design a Process Tailored to the Situation:**

- o Some harms may require direct dialogue; others may need distance, individual reflection, or support for healing.
- o Involve neutral facilitators or mediators if necessary, especially for high-stakes conflicts.

**Support Both the Harmed and the Person Who Caused Harm:**

- o Offer resources and support to the harmed party for healing.
- o Provide pathways for those who caused harm to engage in meaningful accountability—this could be education, therapy, or concrete actions to repair the relationship.

**Collective Healing and Reintegration:**

- o After addressing harm, focus on healing as a community. This could involve restorative circles, shared projects, or rituals to mark the resolution of conflict.
- o If the person who caused harm remains in the community, consider what reintegration looks like. How do they continue contributing in ways that align with the group's values?





“TJ is community-based, but it is not enough to simply “not call the cops,” because many of our community responses to violence can be just as harmful as state responses, and can sometimes be more emotionally devastating due to the breaking and loss of relationship, family and community. Though state reform is important and useful to reduce harm, TJ focuses on community because we believe there is more possibility for transformation in our communities than the state.”

## **MIA MINGUS**



# ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENTS AND THE LIMITS OF OUR PRACTICE

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, abolitionist movements across the country faced unprecedented challenges—not only from the external systems of oppression we seek to dismantle, but from within our own ranks. At every stage of this work, I witnessed internal conflicts, call-outs, cancellations, and even doxxing—acts that mirror the punitive structures we claim to resist. These ruptures weren't isolated incidents; they reflected a deeper, more troubling pattern: our collective struggle to fully practice abolition in our organizing, relationships, and communities.

Abolition isn't just about tearing down prisons or defunding the police—it's about reimagining how we respond to harm, conflict, and accountability in ways that don't replicate carceral logic. But time and again, I've seen the very spaces dedicated to abolition revert to punitive instincts when faced with internal harm.

I've attended abolitionist events—organized by and for abolitionists—where, the moment someone causes discomfort or harm, the response is swift exclusion. There's no pause for reflection, no attempt to engage in restorative or transformative practices. Instead, we default to the same systems of banishment and punishment that we organize against.

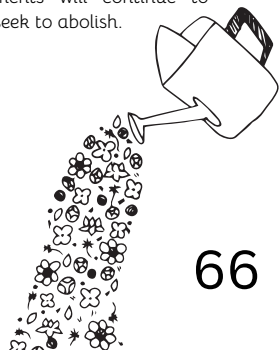
This contradiction shows up everywhere—in the work of scholars, grassroots activists, and community organizers alike. Theoretically, we know that abolition demands more than the absence of police and prisons. But when faced with real, messy conflict, our movements often falter. We haven't built the muscles for practicing abolition in our everyday interactions, especially when the stakes are high and emotions run deep.

COVID-19 intensified these dynamics. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing tensions within organizations and movements. As we shifted to digital organizing, conflicts that might have been addressed in person became amplified online, leading to a rise in public call-outs and cancellations. Doxxing—publicly sharing personal information to shame or intimidate—became a weapon, even within abolitionist circles. The irony of using such punitive tactics in spaces dedicated to dismantling punishment-based systems speaks volumes about the gaps between our values and our practices.

This isn't to say that harm and violence within organizations and movements should go unaddressed. Accountability is a cornerstone of abolitionist work. But accountability doesn't mean punishment—it means creating pathways for reflection, growth, and transformation. The problem is that many of our movements lack the tools, patience, and infrastructure to support this kind of accountability. We know how to call people out, but we haven't figured out how to call people in. We know how to exclude, but we struggle with how to repair.

These contradictions force us to confront uncomfortable truths. If we can't practice abolition in our own spaces, how can we expect to build a world without prisons and police? If our first response to harm is to cancel or exile, are we truly embodying the principles of transformative justice? Everytime I have reached the point of wanting to quit, walk away from the work altogether, it has been because of an internal conflict that could have went a different way, but instead went the way of retaliation, toxic gossip, call-outs and cancelling.

The work of abolition is as much about unlearning punitive instincts as it is about dismantling oppressive systems. It requires us to sit with discomfort, to navigate conflict with care, and to create communities capable of holding both harm and healing. Until we address these internal contradictions, our movements will continue to mirror the very systems we seek to abolish.



# GRIEF AND RAGE CAN FUEL A MOVEMENT, BUT ONLY COMMUNITY CARE CAN SUSTAIN IT

Loretta Ross has spent decades in movement spaces, organizing against racial violence, gender-based oppression, reproductive injustice, and carceral feminism. She is a pioneer in the rape crisis movement, a survivor, an educator, and a radical thinker who pushes us to move beyond reactionary politics and toward strategic, transformative change. Her work is deeply abolitionist—not just in the sense of opposing prisons, but in rejecting disposability as a response to harm.

Ross challenges the way cancel culture has been weaponized within activism, especially in progressive and abolitionist circles. She does not argue against accountability—far from it. What she critiques is how punishment has replaced transformation, how calling people out has replaced calling people in, and how movements have wasted energy tearing each other down rather than building power against systems.

Her work connects to abolitionist feminism, particularly the idea that accountability should be generative, not punitive. Many people in movement spaces have absorbed the logic of the carceral state even as they fight against it—viewing banishment, exile, and social death as the only meaningful responses to harm, instead of asking:

- What conditions created this harm?
- How do we shift those conditions so it doesn't keep happening?
- What does accountability look like outside of punitive systems?

**TRAUMA-INFORMED CONFLICT  
TRANSFORMATION FOR SOCIAL  
JUSTICE & SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

**A LOVING JUSTICE WORKBOOK**

**ANTI-OPPRESSION  
RESOURCE AND TRAINING  
ALLIANCE**

**NAVIGATING CONFLICT IN  
MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS**



**Loretta J. Ross**  
Activist. Public Intellectual.  
Professor. Welcome to working...  
lorettajross.com



# THE FAILURE OF DISPOSABILITY

Loretta Ross's critique of cancel culture resonates deeply with abolitionist thought. If abolition is about dismantling carceral logics, then why do so many activists default to punishment, exile, and social death when someone makes a mistake? If we believe prisons don't make us safer, why do we treat public shaming and banishment as the only way to address harm?

Abolitionist frameworks remind us that harm is not just about individual behavior—it is about structures, conditions, and the ways we have been shaped by oppression. That doesn't mean there is no accountability; it means accountability has to be connected to healing, repair, and transformation.

Ross's work reminds me that if abolition is to mean anything, it has to mean a rejection of disposability in all forms. It means calling people in whenever possible. It means understanding the difference between harm and discomfort, between ignorance and malice, between someone who can change and someone who is actively invested in causing harm. It means accepting that mistakes happen instead of fostering toxic environments where people are scared to make mistakes so they choose INACTION.

If we are serious about abolition, we need to be serious about how we treat each other. We need to be strategic. We need to focus on winning, not just punishing. Because we are not going to cancel our way to liberation.

At the heart of all these discussions is a simple truth: we need to be better at conflict. We need better skills for navigating hard conversations, for holding each other accountable without replicating harm, and for staying in the work without tearing each other apart. But beyond that, we also need to recognize that so many of us are carrying trauma—and without real support, that trauma doesn't just stay personal. It seeps into our organizing, our relationships, our decision-making. It spreads. It turns movements toxic. It creates cycles of harm instead of cycles of healing.

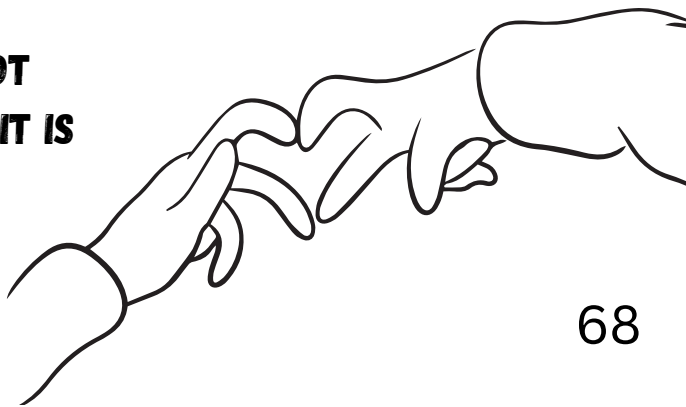
**A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO STOP  
INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE**

**CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS TOOLKIT**

**COLLECTIVE SELF-  
AWARENESS AND CONFLICT  
RESILIENCE**

**A CONFLICT WORKBOOK**

**“OUR GOAL IS NOT  
ENDING VIOLENCE. IT IS  
LIBERATION.”  
—BETH RICHIE**



# TEACHINGS FROM LORETTA ROSS

In nonprofit spaces, particularly on the frontlines of abolition work, the challenges often come from within. Loretta Ross names this dynamic so clearly in her work: organizations are self-destructing because of callout culture. She says, "We save the best bullets for ourselves," and I have seen this play out time and again in movements and community spaces over the past five years.

Ross names a hard truth that resonated deeply in my soul: human rights work attracts people whose rights have been violated—people who carry deep wounds and unresolved trauma. And while that lived experience can fuel passion and drive, it can also lead to toxic behaviors when that pain isn't addressed. We hire people who bring their trauma into the job, and then, instead of building collective power, the trauma bleeds into the organization, creating cycles of conflict, mistrust, and harm.

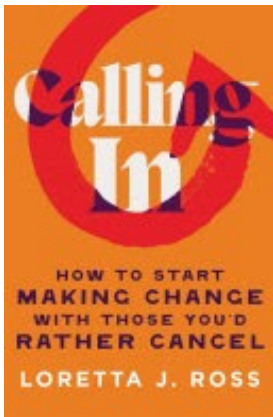
Ross reminds us that the purpose of the human rights movement is to end oppression, not to be someone's safe space. And yet, many nonprofit and activist spaces have become overburdened by the expectation that they will double as therapy spaces. We expect organizations to heal trauma, to be everything for everyone, when they are already stretched thin just trying to confront systems of oppression.

The reality is, many of our organizations are struggling. We don't know how to organize effectively, to harmonize our work, or to deal with conflict in ways that heal rather than harm. Power is too often seen as a throne to sit on, rather than a responsibility to serve. And as Ross notes, when these dynamics go unaddressed, they can tear organizations apart from the inside.

I felt this weight profoundly during the past five years. I worked so hard to carve out a space where I could hold power—not for personal gain, but to advance abolition in our communities. To implement services and supports for criminalized and incarcerated folks, to create meaningful alternatives to the systems that harm them. But the work wasn't just about fighting external systems like the justice system or government structures—it was also about navigating the toxic dynamics within nonprofit spaces that made the work even harder.

Ross's words, and the revelations in her infographic, gave me a framework to make sense of what I had been experiencing. She has redefined what I was carrying internally as failure. We need to learn how to deal with conflict, how to build trust, and how to create spaces where power serves the community rather than divides it. We need to name the harm, but also commit to moving beyond it.


Because if we want to end oppression, we have to start with ourselves. Movements can't survive if we save the best bullets for each other.



## Learn how to Call In — LORETTA J. ROSS

Loretta J. Ross and team teach how to use Calling In instead of joining the Cancel Culture. This i...

[lorettajross.com](http://lorettajross.com)



**CARRYING THE CARING  
WORK:  
BURNOUT, GRIEF,  
AND MORAL INJURY**

## MULTIPLE CRISES AND FRONTLINE WORKERS

The COVID-19 pandemic was not a singular crisis—it was a convergence of multiple, overlapping emergencies. In Nova Scotia, as across the world, frontline workers in healthcare, community organizations, corrections, and other essential sectors found themselves grappling with unprecedented challenges. The pandemic revealed the fragility of our systems, particularly when compounded by long-standing issues like inadequate mental health support, systemic inequality, and chronic underfunding.

Healthcare workers bore the brunt of the pandemic's physical toll. Overwhelmed hospitals, a lack of personal protective equipment in the early days, and the emotional weight of losing patients became daily realities. Physicians and nurses reported skyrocketing rates of burnout, moral injury, and vicarious trauma, often exacerbated by witnessing preventable suffering in a system stretched beyond capacity. The psychological toll was compounded by the fear of infecting their loved ones, leaving many workers isolated and emotionally depleted.

In corrections, the pandemic exposed the inhumane realities of incarceration. Prisons became breeding grounds for COVID-19, with inadequate healthcare and hygiene measures leading to outbreaks. For correctional officers, the crisis brought the dual stress of managing safety protocols while working in an environment already rife with violence and instability. For incarcerated individuals, the lack of access to adequate healthcare, compounded by restrictions on visits, only deepened the trauma.

Community organizations, particularly those addressing homelessness, criminalization, and gender-based violence, faced mounting pressures as demand for their services skyrocketed. Workers on the frontlines often found themselves navigating impossible choices, trying to meet urgent needs with limited resources. The lack of systemic support meant that frontline workers frequently absorbed the emotional toll of the crises they were addressing. Many were not just witnessing trauma but carrying it home, experiencing vicarious trauma and emotional exhaustion as they tried to support communities while facing their own struggles.

One of the most glaring failures during this period in Nova Scotia was the lack of mental health and crisis support. The province's mental health system was already under strain before the pandemic, but COVID-19 pushed it into deeper crisis. Emergency mental health services became inaccessible to many, with wait times for mental health care stretching into months or even years. The absence of timely interventions left frontline workers and those in crisis without adequate support, compounding feelings of hopelessness and isolation.

The mental health crisis during the pandemic was not only a direct result of the virus but also a consequence of long-standing systemic neglect. This neglect is particularly evident in rural Nova Scotia, where mental health services are even harder to access. Individuals in these areas faced heightened barriers to care, while community organizations struggled to fill the gaps left by government inaction.

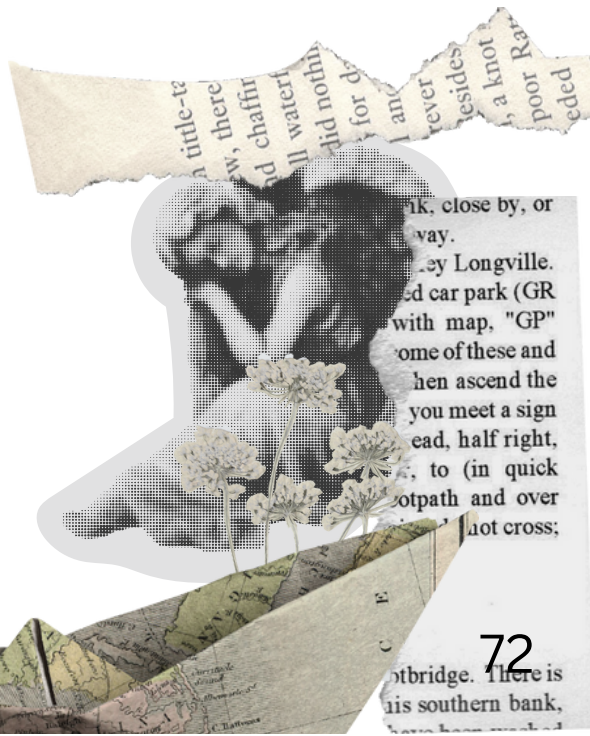
For many workers, the lack of organizational and systemic support during the pandemic had profound consequences. Without access to regular debriefing sessions, peer support, or adequate counseling, vicarious trauma became a defining feature of the frontline experience. In Nova Scotia, where crisis response services were already limited, the weight of multiple crises left workers feeling abandoned, overburdened, and emotionally spent.

The convergence of these crises created what experts call "cumulative stress," a phenomenon where multiple, compounding pressures erode mental and emotional resilience. This stress was not limited to individual workers—it rippled through entire organizations, creating toxic work environments, high turnover rates, and fractured teams. The inability to adequately address the mental health needs of workers weakened the very systems meant to support communities during times of crisis.

If the COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything, it is that the lack of structural investments in mental health, crisis response, and trauma-informed care is unsustainable. Without systemic change, frontline workers across sectors will continue to bear the brunt of these failures, at great personal cost. Addressing mental health in Nova Scotia—and across Canada—requires more than individual resilience; it requires building systems of care that prioritize mental health, provide robust crisis support, and offer trauma-informed practices for all workers.

The lessons from COVID-19 are clear: we cannot ask frontline workers to carry the burden of systemic failures alone. Whether in healthcare, corrections, or community organizations, there must be a commitment to holistic mental health support, vicarious trauma training, and meaningful investments in crisis services. Addressing these challenges is not just about avoiding burnout or turnover—it is about creating workplaces and systems that honor the humanity of those who show up to support others, even in the most trying times.

**"CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT SELF-INDULGENCE, IT IS SELF-PRESERVATION, AND THAT IS AN ACT OF POLITICAL WARFARE."  
— AUDRE LORDE (A BURST OF LIGHT: ESSAYS)**



# BURNOUT

Burnout wasn't a possibility in abolition work during the COVID-19 pandemic—it was inevitable. The kind of exhaustion we felt wasn't just about being overworked or stretched too thin, though that was part of it. It was a deeper, more insidious kind of fatigue, the kind that settles into your bones when you're fighting a system designed to break people, and realizing it's breaking you too.

Abolition work during the pandemic wasn't just exhausting because of the external pressures—it was also the loneliness of feeling like no one outside your circle really understood. People could applaud decarceration efforts from a distance, but they didn't see the aftermath—the sleepless nights, the impossible decisions, the grief when someone you fought for didn't make it. The communities we were trying to support were carrying the brunt of the pain, but we were absorbing it too, and there was no roadmap for how to process that kind of relentless trauma.

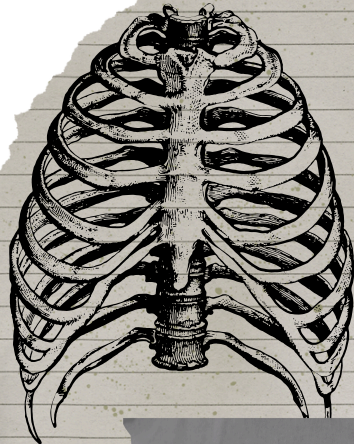
The stress, the scarcity, the urgency—it all created an environment where we were constantly in survival mode, and that kind of pace isn't sustainable. Burnout didn't just mean we were tired; it meant we were losing pieces of ourselves in the process. Compassion fatigue turned into numbness. Solidarity turned into resentment. The work that once felt like a calling started to feel like a trap.

If there's anything the pandemic taught us, it's that we can't sustain this work if we don't find ways to care for ourselves and each other. Burnout isn't a sign of weakness—it's a sign that the system is working exactly as it's designed to. It's meant to exhaust us, to make us give up. But even in the deepest exhaustion, there's a spark of resistance. And maybe that's what abolition is really about—not just dismantling systems of harm, but building systems of care that start with us, right here, in the middle of our burnout, refusing to let it define us.

The constant state of emergency made it difficult to prioritize rest or reflection, fueling burnout. Abolitionist frameworks push us to ask: How do we care for ourselves and each other while still meeting the urgent demands of the work?

Abolitionist researchers also point to how internal dynamics within movements can contribute to burnout. As I already shared, the pandemic exposed not just the failures of external systems but also the cracks within activist communities—issues like lateral violence, lack of accountability, and unsustainable expectations.

Abolitionist thinkers like Tricia Hersey of The Nap Ministry argue that rest is a form of resistance against systems that commodify and exploit our labor, especially in high-stakes, emotionally draining work like abolition. During COVID-19, the relentless pace of crisis response left little room for rest, but abolitionists insist that slowing down and caring for oneself and one's community is a radical, necessary act. Rest is not a retreat from the work but an essential part of sustaining it.



# MORAL INJURY

Working on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside countless others, felt like standing at the intersection of collapse. The weight of moral injury didn't come all at once—it seeped in, slow and suffocating, as the realities of our work crashed against the ideals we held. Abolition isn't just a political stance; it's a commitment to imagining and building a world without cages, without punishment, without state-sanctioned violence. But the pandemic laid bare how deeply entrenched these systems are, and how devastatingly inadequate our tools were to dismantle them in the face of a global health crisis.

When the pandemic hit, it amplified everything we already knew was broken. Mental health crises spiraled as isolation and fear gripped communities. Homelessness became an even more dangerous sentence, with shelters unable to meet public health requirements and people forced into the streets or crowded into unsafe spaces. The criminal legal system, already a machine of oppression, didn't slow down—it adapted, finding new ways to criminalize survival. Decarceration efforts, which we fought tooth and nail for, felt like hollow victories when people we helped release were dumped into a society that offered no safety net. We were unshackling people from one cage only to watch them stumble into another.

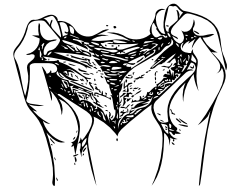
The pain of this work wasn't just witnessing these failures—it was feeling complicit in them. How do you reconcile fighting for someone's release from jail when you know there's no stable housing waiting for them? How do you advocate for decarceration when the systems outside are just as violent, just as indifferent? Every decision felt like choosing the lesser of two evils, but evil was always on the table. We weren't just fighting a virus—we were battling a system that thrived on the very vulnerabilities the pandemic exposed.

The moral injury came in waves. It was in the exhaustion of knowing we were plugging holes in a sinking ship. It was in the gut-wrenching moments when we had to work alongside police or correctional institutions, knowing they were part of the machinery of harm, just to secure the bare minimum for the people we served. It was in the quiet nights after another person we fought for slipped through the cracks—re-arrested, back on the streets, or worse. The system's dysfunction wasn't just theoretical; it was a daily assault on our hearts, our spirits, and our belief that real change was possible.

And the impacts didn't stop at the door of the people we served—they bled into us, too. The burnout wasn't just physical; it was soul-deep. Watching the people we care for get chewed up by a system we couldn't fully dismantle left scars. We carried the weight of unmet needs, of broken promises, of the crushing realization that sometimes, despite our best efforts, we were powerless. The agony wasn't just in what we saw—it was in what we became in the process. Detached. Numb. Angry. Haunted by the faces and stories we couldn't save from the wreckage.

This is messy, agonizing work. The moral injury we endured wasn't just a wound—it was a testament to how deeply we care, how fiercely we believe in a future where no one is disposable.

Very few of those that I worked alongside during those early pandemic days, are still doing this work. Not because they didn't care anymore, but because they had to choose between themselves or the work. The vicarious trauma, grief, loss, burnout, it takes an unbelievable toll. With adequate care, support, wages, time & resources, we could do so much better. While our society funnels millions of tax-payers dollars into policing, prisons & control, communities who show up with love and care, are marginalized.



## LOSS & DUTY

It struck me in the stomach  
Stole wind beneath my chest  
The call that shook me from my dream  
"I'm sorry, there's a death"

Bones that want to shatter  
A weeping souls plateau  
I can't accept this truth  
Is my duty's ebb and flow

I keep a cabinet of artifacts  
They try to bring me peace  
Fragments left behind  
Form a museum of grief

Could I have saved you  
Despite the problems of the world  
Contradict the harm  
Discover evils cure

Condolences echo far  
My comrades drown in sorrow  
Regrets go to the mothers  
For the ache with no tomorrow

Now the artifacts are mounting  
The flame it burns me down  
The calls are eternal  
The heartbreak shakes my ground

It's a daily war we're waging  
And I am only mortal  
The casualties of injustice  
Will always be immoral

Can I endure reality?  
If I stay in this work,  
Or walk away, selfishly  
Turn my back on this hurt

Ultimately, it's not lost on me,  
This debate is a cruel luxury.  
To sit and wonder, to contemplate,  
While others suffer a brutal fate.

I don't have to stay; I could leave,  
Trade this anguish for a chance to breathe.  
But no matter the path, the pain will tether,  
For this work and my soul are bound together.



# SUPPORTING EACH OTHER IN ABOLITION AND FRONTLINE COMMUNITY WORK

## REIMAGINE SUCCESS BEYOND PRODUCTIVITY

Capitalist systems equate worth with productivity, but abolition asks us to reimagine success beyond outputs and outcomes. Success can be sustaining relationships, fostering care, and nurturing community resilience.

- Practical Actions:
  - Redefine organizational goals to include well-being, relationships, and community impact—not just numbers or outcomes.
  - Encourage staff to set personal goals related to growth, healing, and joy.
  - Regularly reflect on how the process of the work aligns with abolitionist values, not just the end results.

## ACKNOWLEDGE AND PROCESS GRIEF TOGETHER

Abolitionist work is inherently tied to grief—grief for those harmed by the system, grief for the losses we experience in the work, and grief for the slow pace of change. Naming and processing that grief helps prevent it from festering into burnout.

- Practical Actions:
  - Hold grief circles or spaces dedicated to honoring losses in the community.
  - Use art, storytelling, or music as tools to process collective pain.
  - Make space for rituals of mourning alongside the work of resistance.

## CELEBRATE SMALL WINS AND JOY

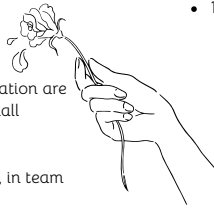
Abolitionist work can be heavy, but joy and celebration are essential forms of resistance. Recognizing even small victories helps maintain momentum and morale.

- Practical Actions:
  - Celebrate milestones, no matter how small, in team meetings.
  - Host community gatherings that center joy, art, and creativity.
  - Incorporate rituals of gratitude in organizational spaces to recognize each other's contributions.

## BUILD COMMUNITIES OF CARE, NOT MARTYRDOM

In abolitionist spaces, there's often an unspoken expectation to sacrifice personal well-being for the cause. But we cannot dismantle systems of harm while replicating harm within ourselves and our movements.

- Practical Actions:
  - Foster accountability partnerships where people check in on each other's well-being, not just productivity.
  - Prioritize collective care practices like community meals, peer counseling, or wellness days.
  - Incorporate emotional debriefs into regular meetings to acknowledge the emotional labor of the work.



## DECENTRALIZE LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING

Burnout often comes from concentrated responsibilities falling on a few individuals. Abolitionist organizing emphasizes horizontal leadership, where power and responsibilities are shared.

- Practical Actions:
  - Create rotating leadership roles to distribute tasks and decision-making.
  - Encourage collaborative decision-making processes, so no one feels isolated in making tough calls.
  - Ensure transparent communication so that everyone feels informed and involved.

## EMBED HEALING AND TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

Frontline work often involves direct exposure to trauma, whether it's witnessing harm or navigating systemic failures. Healing-centered and trauma-informed approaches help process this emotional weight.

- Practical Actions:
  - Offer free therapy or counseling sessions, and normalize accessing these services.
  - Create restorative circles for staff to process harm, conflict, or burnout collectively.
  - Incorporate body-centered practices like yoga, breathwork, or somatic healing into organizational spaces.

## SET BOUNDARIES AND RESIST URGENCY CULTURE

The sense of constant urgency in abolitionist and frontline work can be overwhelming. While the work is urgent, we can't let urgency dictate unsustainable practices.

- Practical Actions:
  - Set clear working hours and respect personal time.
  - Create organizational policies that prevent overworking, like capping hours or discouraging after-hours emails.
  - Regularly reassess workloads and redistribute tasks if someone is at capacity.

# MANIFESTO FOR A LIBERATED FUTURE

We are here to build.

We are not just dismantling systems of harm—we are building the world we deserve. We reject the idea that movements must be driven by anger alone. Abolition is an act of love, of creation, of resilience. It is rooted in care for each other, in a vision of a future where freedom is not just an aspiration but a lived reality.

**bell hooks** has taught us that love is a political act, that to love is to commit to the growth and liberation of ourselves and others. Abolition is rooted in love—not a passive, fleeting emotion, but an active choice to build systems of care and mutual respect. Without love, there can be no justice.

**El Jones** has reminded us that abolition is about imagination. It is about the belief that another world is possible. Her words call us to resist despair, to see beyond the walls of prisons and the structures of harm, and to create a future where care replaces punishment.

**Angela Davis** teaches us that abolition is not simply about the absence of prisons and police but the presence of systems that sustain life. It is about housing, education, healthcare, and the ability to live free from violence. It is about liberation in all its forms.

We Call In, Not Just Out.

**Loretta Ross** has shown us the power of calling in, of holding accountability with love and respect. We know that movements fracture when we save our best bullets for each other. We must resist the pull of callout culture, which punishes rather than transforms. Accountability is not punishment—it is care in action.

Calling in is about engaging with each other in love, challenging harm while making space for growth. It is about rejecting the disability that mirrors the carceral systems we fight against. If we want liberation, we must build it together.

Trauma Is Not the Foundation of Liberation.

**Mariame Kaba** teaches us that hope is a discipline. And yet, so much of our work is weighed down by unhealed trauma. Human rights work attracts people whose rights have been violated, and that lived experience is invaluable. But as Loretta Ross reminds us, movement spaces are not therapy spaces.

We owe it to ourselves and each other to heal. Unprocessed trauma, left unchecked, becomes a weapon. It can harm the very people we are fighting for. Liberation cannot grow from pain that is left to fester.

Power Is a Responsibility, Not a Throne.

**Assata Shakur** tells us that it is our duty to fight for freedom. But freedom cannot be built with hierarchies that mirror the systems we are dismantling. Power in abolition work is not a throne to sit on—it is a responsibility to serve.

Too often, we see power hoarded instead of shared. Leadership becomes a prize instead of a commitment to collective liberation. Angela Davis has shown us that true power comes from the people, from collaboration and solidarity. Leadership in this work is about lifting others, opening doors, and building systems that empower rather than control.

Conflict Is an Opportunity, Not a Death Sentence.

**Adrienne Maree Brown** has taught us that conflict is generative. It is an opportunity to learn, to grow, to deepen our understanding of each other. But it requires skills we have often neglected to cultivate—skills of listening, of holding space, of addressing harm without destroying relationships.

We must commit to navigating conflict with care, knowing that squabbling and hierarchies replicate the systems we are trying to change. We must build movements where conflict transforms rather than fractures.

We Honor the Resilient and the Fallen.

This manifesto is written in honour of those who have been lost to the systems we fight. To the women, girls, and gender-diverse folks criminalized and incarcerated, to those who are no longer here because the weight of oppression was too much to bear: we remember you.

**Mariame Kaba** reminds us to grieve and fight at the same time. To honor those we have lost by continuing the work. You deserved a world that valued you, and we will not stop until we build it.

We Believe in the World We Are Building.

This work is exhausting. It is thankless. It often feels impossible. But it is also everything.

As bell hooks taught us, love is the foundation of all transformative work.

As Angela Davis reminds us, freedom is a constant struggle.

As Mariame Kaba insists, hope is a discipline we must practice daily.

Abolition is about transforming the way we see each other, the way we hold each other, the way we love each other.

This is our offering to the community:

A promise to keep building, even when it feels like we are losing.

A commitment to honor the lessons of the past, the worlds we built during COVID-19, and the dreams of those who came before us.

A vision of a future where we are all free.

# WHAT I THOUGHT, WHAT I LEARNED...

I used to think that if we just gave people what they needed—food, housing, income, support—they'd stop being criminalized. I believed, with everything in me, that if we met people with care instead of punishment, if we paired those resources with a restorative and liberatory harm reduction approach, things would change.

People would stabilize. Heal. Be safe. Stay out of jail.

I thought love and resources would be enough.

But the truth was harder.

The trauma runs deeper than I knew. Survival strategies shaped by violence and scarcity don't disappear just because someone is housed. Addiction isn't linear. People stay entangled in street economies because they offer belonging, safety, money—sometimes more than our programs can. And the systems? They don't just step back when care steps in.

Even with food. Even with shelter. Even with love. People kept getting arrested.

## WE CANNOT OUT-CARE A VIOLENT SYSTEM



What this work has shown me—sometimes painfully—is that no amount of community care can undo what the state is still actively doing.

We built alternatives. We created housing, peer support, programs rooted in dignity and non-judgment. But we were doing it all inside a system still designed to surveil, punish, and abandon.

Housing doesn't keep you out of jail if you still live under laws that criminalize how you survive. Care doesn't keep you safe when the law doesn't recognize you as worthy of protection. Wraparound supports are not a shield against systemic harm.

I wanted transformative justice. But the conditions didn't allow it to take root. We weren't in community—we were in crisis. And crisis does not build the kind of trust and infrastructure that real transformation needs.

## EVEN IN PROGRAMS BUILT FOR FREEDOM, HARM CREPT IN

And maybe the hardest part? Even in programs built with abolitionist values—harm crept in. Staff re-criminalized residents. Policies meant to be trauma-informed became tools of control. People were judged. Punished. Shamed.

Not always out of malice. Sometimes out of fear. Sometimes exhaustion. Sometimes just not knowing what else to do.

It reminded me—again—that power is never neutral. That even people with good politics can reproduce harm if we don't stay accountable to the values we claim to hold. That training isn't the same as transformation.

We started with intention. But intention isn't enough.

## HOPE DOESN'T COME FROM PERFECTION—IT COMES FROM REFUSING TO GIVE UP



APPLYING RESTORATIVE AND LIBERATORY HARM REDUCTION FRAMEWORKS IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IS INHERENTLY CHALLENGING DUE TO THE DAILY CONFLICT BETWEEN PRIORITIZING CLIENTS' BEST INTERESTS AND OPERATING WITHIN ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES, STAFFING STRUCTURES, AND LEGAL CONSTRAINTS THAT OFTEN CANNOT FULLY REALIZE THESE PRINCIPLES. THIS CONTRADICTION IS PAINFUL, BUT NECESSARY.



WOMEN, PARTICULARLY FEMINISTS, WERE AT THE FOREFRONT OF THIS WORK, LEADING EFFORTS ACROSS MEDIA, ADVOCACY, GOVERNMENT, AND HEALTH ADVISORY ROLES. WHILE MEN WERE INVOLVED, IT WAS WOMEN WHO OVERWHELMINGLY STEPPED INTO KEY LEADERSHIP POSITIONS, DRIVING PROGRESS AND SHAPING THE RESPONSE.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVES TO HOMELESSNESS AND INCARCERATION, BUT THEIR EFFORTS ALSO REVEALED INHERENT FLAWS WITHIN THESE SYSTEMS. THESE INCLUDED THE PERVASIVE INFLUENCE OF WHITE SUPREMACIST AND CAPITALIST DYNAMICS, TENSIONS WITHIN SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS, AND THE PROBLEMATIC SEPARATION OF CHARITY AND STATE.

IT IS CRUCIAL TO NAME AND CONFRONT CANCEL CULTURE, WHICH OFTEN DIVERTS ENERGY AWAY FROM COLLECTIVE LIBERATION BY DIRECTING OUR "BEST BULLETS" AT EACH OTHER.



MANY BRING PERSONAL TRAUMA INTO THEIR WORK IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, LEADING TO DISCOMFORT WITH AUTHORITY AND VIEWING POWER AS A POSITION TO BE FEARED RATHER THAN A TOOL TO SERVE OTHERS.

THE CONDITIONS FOR DECARCERATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION WERE MADE POSSIBLE BY THE DISORIENTATION CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 CRISIS, ALONGSIDE AN INFLUX OF FUNDING AND A HEIGHTENED FOCUS ON SOLUTION-ORIENTED APPROACHES.



THE INCARCERATION AND CRIMINALIZATION CRISIS CONVERGED WITH THE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS CRISIS, REVEALING THE VIOLENCE OF THE STATE, THE SYSTEMIC NEGLECT OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED, AND THE UNDERLYING DESIRE TO ERASE INDIVIDUALS AFFECTED BY SYSTEMIC FAILURES.

RECOGNIZE THE MORAL INJURY, GRIEF, AND LOSS CAUSED BY CRISIS WORK AND ADVOCATE FOR ACCESSIBLE, COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES TO SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES.

## ABOLITION DURING COVID-19 IN M'IKMAKI



SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS MUST REFOCUS ON THEIR CORE PURPOSE: ENDING OPPRESSION, RATHER THAN PRIORITIZING PERSONAL SAFE SPACES.



ORGANIZATIONS AND MOVEMENTS ARE INCREASINGLY FRACTURING UNDER THE STRAIN OF UNRESOLVED CONFLICT, AS CALL-OUT CULTURE AMPLIFIES TENSIONS AND UNADDRESSED TRAUMA. TO SUSTAIN OUR WORK, WE MUST BETTER UTILIZE THE TRANSFORMATIVE TOOLS WE ADVOCATE FOR, CREATING SPACES FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND HEALING RATHER THAN PERPETUATING HARM.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RELIED ON FRONTLINE WORKERS TO LEAD CRITICAL HARM REDUCTION EFFORTS, PLACING THEM AT THE NEXUS OF SYSTEMIC FAILURES AND EXPOSING THEM TO PROFOUND MORAL INJURY. THESE WORKERS FACED THE CONTRADICTIONS OF PROVIDING URGENT CARE WITHIN SYSTEMS THAT PERPETUATE HARM, WITH NO ADEQUATE RESOURCES OR SPACES TO HEAL FROM THE EMOTIONAL AND ETHICAL TOLL OF THEIR WORK.

THE PASSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE CAN CREATE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS THAT COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS WILL ALSO SERVE AS HEALING SPACES, BUT ORGANIZATIONS AREN'T PREPARED OR RESOURCED FOR THIS.



## **CONCLUSION: EMBRACING VULNERABILITY AND COLLECTIVE LIBERATION**

# **A FIGHT WORTH FIGHTING**

“What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system. Transform yourself to transform the world.”

(Emergent Strategy:  
Shaping Change,  
Changing Worlds,  
2017)

These last few years have been as painful as they have been transformative. In a time when uncertainty reigned and every day brought new challenges, we chose a path of collective liberation—a path where nothing was off the table. Amid the despair, there was an undeniable thrill in being part of a movement that was solutions-focused and daring enough to put abolition frameworks into practice. We built tangible resources for our community, turning ideas into action, carceral into care, and hope into reality.

Yet, I cannot help but wish that the people who poured their hearts into this work had been more unified, that our collective efforts could have merged more seamlessly into a singular, unyielding force for change. The work was imperfect, fraught with the struggles inherent in any profound transformation, yet it was undeniably a life worth living. If given the chance, I would step into that chaos and purpose all over again.

Covid-19, as Sara Ahmed describes it—a feminist snap—forced us into a choice: to remain passive observers or to engage in bold, meaningful community action. I am eternally grateful to everyone who chose the latter. In the spirit of bell hooks, who reminds us that love is a transformative force, I honour your courage and commitment. I still have hope. As Mariame Kaba says, “hope is a discipline.” To all who choose to embrace hope, vulnerability, and collective liberation: hats off to you. No matter the outcome, your work, and the sacrifices that come with it, matter.



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