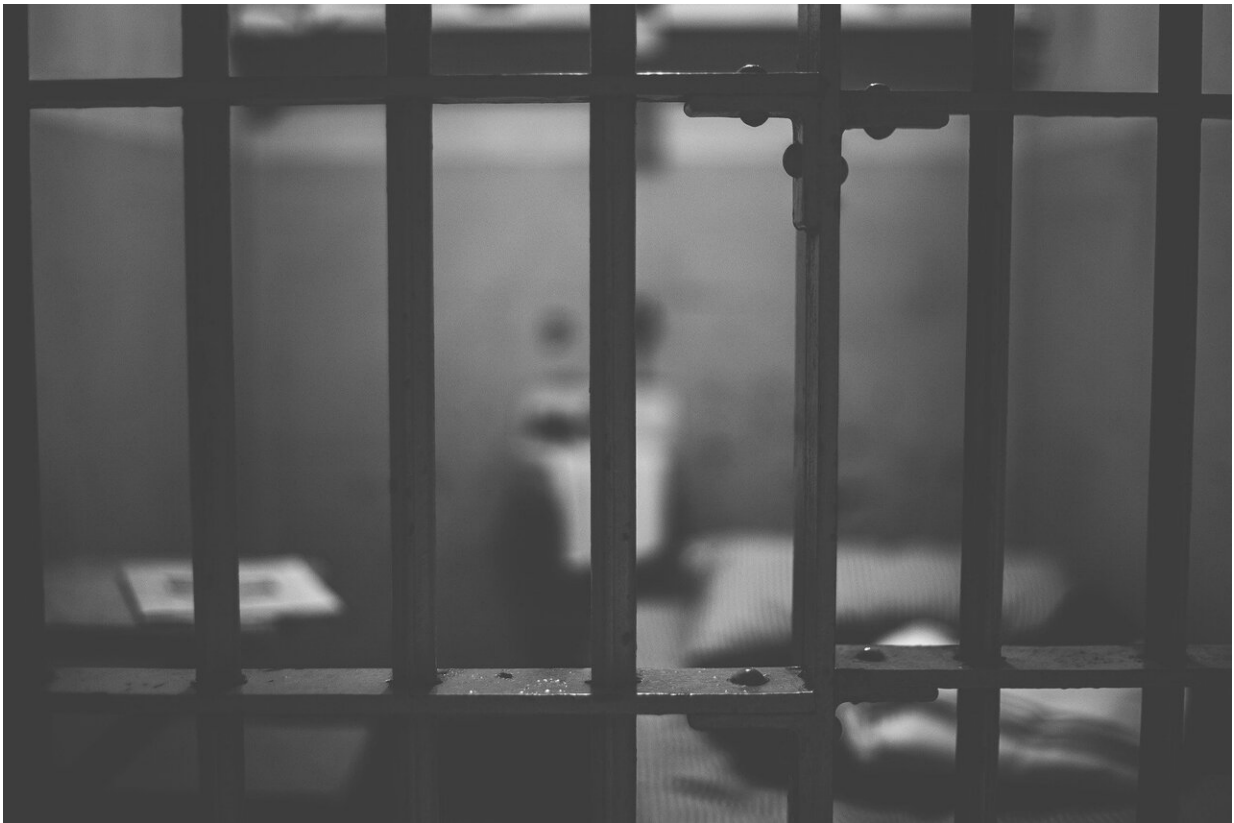


The problem with prison abolition? Misunderstanding it

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"Approximately one in 70 working people in the United States are employed by either the police or departments of corrections." In recent years, and in particular, in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter

protests of 2020, activists have focused renewed attention on the role of prisons in the United States.

Thinkers like Angela Davis have articulated the ways in which the prison-industrial complex serves the interest of an oppressive state by reinforcing race and class hierarchies and extracting value from its incarcerated population. But despite this surge of interest in its dissolution, the problems created by the prison system have not been resolved in any meaningful way.

A new paper in [Ethics](#), reviewing the 2022 book "The Idea of Prison Abolition" by Tommie Shelby, identifies some generative criticisms Shelby makes of the work of Angela Davis and other prison abolitionists.

Ultimately, however, "The Problem with Prisons" by Erin I. Kelly argues that Shelby misreads the intentions of the abolition movement, and that while the penal system still so widely permeates American society, causing real harm, quibbles with the efforts to overturn it are perhaps unproductive.

One of the more significant disagreements between Shelby and Davis, Kelly writes, is where they position the prison within a broader network of inequality. Where Shelby posits, according to Kelly, that the "injustice prisons represent largely occurs downstream, so to speak, from a wider set of social and political injustices," Davis and other abolition advocates argue that the penal system itself enacts and reproduces these injustices.

Shelby, furthermore, represents the abolitionist position as one that would not support incarceration under any circumstances. On the contrary, Kelly writes: abolitionists understand that "some criminal [law enforcement](#) is necessary and that incarceration may be warranted in

serious cases," but believe that this abstraction is marginal to the actual abuse being perpetrated by the [prison system](#).

Kelly goes on to outline these actual abuses. The article examines the ways in which mass incarceration structures U.S. society through an exacerbated fear of crime, the vilification of an underclass composed predominantly of Black, poor men, the ironclad defense of the police force and criminal prosecutors against accountability for their transgressions, and the hypocrisy of an overly harsh, disenfranchising penal system in a nation founded on the "aspiration to democracy." Through these strategies, Kelly writes, "the punishment system entrenches and reproduces white supremacy in the United States."

Shelby's book attempts to salvage incarceration as a tool of harm reduction and law enforcement, particularly when it may benefit poor urban neighborhoods affected by violent crime. Kelly understands this framing, but argues that the prison performs oppressive functions excessive of its protective role. In conclusion, Kelly suggests that prison reform, as opposed to abolition, is not enough to liberate society from punishment.

"Abolitionists," Kelly writes, "target the contribution the punishment system makes to the American racial caste system in order to force a deeper reckoning with entrenched socioeconomic inequality—" and "nothing short of the power of collective outrage has a chance of unsettling the alliance of interests behind carceral business as usual."

More information: Erin I. Kelly, *The Problem with Prisons*, *Ethics* (2024). [DOI: 10.1086/729714](https://doi.org/10.1086/729714)

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