

Abolitionist Responses to Jail Expansion and Reform

Jails are inherently violent and destructive, and they are an integral part of the prison industrial complex. As resistance to this country's imprisonment system has grown, states and local jurisdictions have turned toward expanding their jail systems under the guise of making them seem more accommodating and service friendly. However, cosmetic improvements to jails will not undo the fundamentally oppressive function of jailing. Here are examples of some common reforms or proposals around jails that only uphold their legitimacy, and how we can respond.

Things to Oppose

Jail Construction for Overcrowding. We need to build more jail space because conditions are unsafe with the jail being so crowded with people.

Building New Jails to Close Old Ones. In order to better care for prisoners, we're going to be closing down an old jail with terrible conditions. In order to that, we need to build new, state of the art jails, and more facilities to move people to. (e.g. closing Rikers by opening up borough jails)

Mental Health Jails. A significant number of people in jail have mental health issues, so we want to pour resources to build more mental health jails.

Carceral Feminism. Our jails have been built without the specific needs of women and trans people in mind. We need to build new and improved facilities that take these needs into consideration.

Electronic Monitoring and "Alternatives" Tied to Police. We can reduce the number of people in jail by putting them on electronic ankle monitors and expanding law enforcement monitored support programs.

Things to Support

Reduce the Jail Population. Instead of wasting resources on more jail space to reduce crowding, we need to be investing in resources like diversion and reentry programs that reduce the jail population and help people get back into their communities. The best way to improve people's conditions is to get them released.

Shut Down Jails and Don't Replace Them. If we are building new jails as a way to close down jails that have been deemed "problematic," we are only perpetuating the fundamentally violent conditions of imprisonment. We should be closing jails by reducing the jail population and building up alternatives to imprisonment instead of extending the scope of the prison industrial complex.

Invest in Meaningful Health Care. Over 60% of people in jail experience mental health issues. Jails are not, and will never be, adequate places to offer care and support for people who have mental health issues. We need investments in community-based mental health resources that are not tied to law enforcement or any other system of criminalization. People in jail should be diverted to these resources instead of remaining in cages.

There is Nothing Feminist About Caging People. If the state cared about women, trans people, and gender non-conforming people, it would not develop new facilities to cage them. Trans women of color are among the most targeted, and women are commonly locked up for defending themselves against sexual assault and domestic violence.

Alternatives to the PIC must not replicate the PIC. Electronic monitors are surveillance technology that expand the imprisonment system into people's homes and into the lives of their loved ones. We must also advocate for programs that are not controlled or supervised by law enforcement wherever possible. We want to end jailing and the PIC, not expand them.