Introduction to Special Issue of British Journal of Community Justice

Abolitionism and Community Justice – an uneasy alliance?

Kathryn Chadwick, Margaret S. Malloch and Martha O'Carroll

Introduction

There is a rising interest in penal abolitionism internationally. In the United States of Ameria, longstanding calls for radical alternatives to the criminal legal system gained significant momentum with the killing of George Floyd, connecting with Black Lives Matter activism and calls to defund the police. In the United Kingdom, alongside a long tradition of penal reform, an abolitionist pulse has underpinned the work of critical criminologists and many community activists. As a theoretical position, this approach has attracted increasing attention within the mainstream of criminology and criminal justice studies, and there has been a growth in scholarly and academic engagement with the ideas of abolitionist theory and practice, for example, in the work of Coyle and Scott (eds) (2021) Scott (2018 and 2020) and UK based activist collectives such as Cradle Community (2021).

Abolitionism, both as a theoretical framework and a social movement, is rooted in resistance, including the work of women of colour feminism in the US (Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie 2022), prison resistance and the prisoner rights movement in the UK and Europe (Sim and Ryan, 2007, Ryan and Ward, 2015, Ruggiero, 2010) and the fight against racialised carceral practices of slavery, colonialism and incarceration (James, 2005, Davis, 2011). Engaging in abolitionist work requires challenging the structures of racial, gender and class inequality that underpin carceral power. For this reason, abolitionist scholarship is often directly connected to its grassroots and community-led formations which are in themselves forms of community justice. Abolitionism then is not just theory and scholarship but is about leveraging power and taking action (Coyle and Schept 2017, Scott, 2018).

Visions of penal abolition vary, as does the potential means for working towards this. Indeed, a range of perspectives exist that reflect on different aspects of governance, resource allocation and engagement with state power, particularly in relation to how

'crime' and 'punishment' are defined. However, the long-standing vision of most abolitionists is the goal of reducing, replacing, or eliminating prisons and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment. This vision extends beyond penal issues to other areas of public policy and includes calls for the dismantling of borders, immigrant detention, policing and state surveillance.

Despite claims of ongoing and permanent 'crisis' in prisons across the UK, and the expansion of various community justice provisions, there appears to be no real likelihood of prison numbers decreasing substantially in the near future. Instead, figures for England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2024), Northern Ireland and Scotland (Scottish Government, 2024) show continued increases in the prison populations and trajectories thereof. In many other countries, imprisonment rates are at record levels and continue to rise. The latest global population figures suggest more than 10.99 million people are held in carceral institutions worldwide (Fair and Walmsley, 2024).

While much attention has, therefore, focused on prisons, and to some extent policing, the role of 'communities' and 'community justice' is crucial in any moves towards transformative justice. Given the attention that the British Journal of Community Justice gives to publishing groundbreaking and lively articles which stimulate policy and practice reflections around community justice, this special issue aims to attract discussion and debate that will engage with the community justice implications of abolitionism. How might we, as academics, practitioners and activists, 'do' justice differently, and how might we engage 'community justice' in this process?

The papers that follow consider abolitionism in theory, policy and practice and engage with concepts of 'community' and the forms of community 'justice' that might be possible as alternatives to the expanding penal estate. Alternatives to the current penal system require reflections on the reallocation of funds and resources and alternative ways of ensuring safety and security for people. The practical and theoretical implications of re-envisioning the status quo are necessary requirements to secure change; communities are crucial to any radical developments.

In abolitionist theory, community is a central concept. As Ruggiero (2010) states, community is the cornerstone of abolitionism, preceding any legal or institutional intervention. Across abolitionist texts and approaches there is a focus on building and fostering the type of community needed for abolitionism: the 1976 *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists* discusses the importance of developing empowered and caring communities in order to dismantle the prison. More recently Brown and Schept (2017) outline "non-carceral communities" as necessary to counter carceral practices across all parts of society; and Scott (2018) proffers "intentional and therapeutic communities" as the non-punitive alternative. Practices of transformative justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha and Dixon 2020– reviewed in this issue), community accountability (Kaba 2021, Cradle community 2021) and mutual aid (Dean Spade 2020) all focus on building and centring community and are grounded in abolitionist movements.

Abolitionist approaches call for the foregrounding of 'community' in addressing social harm and responding to the harms caused by carceral and punitive systems. They challenge the taken-for-grantedness of the concept of 'crime' and focus on the importance of community self-determination and reclaiming power from the state. The vision of 'abolitionism' is thus a vision of transformation. And while the abolition of the carceral state may remain a vision of utopia, the process of transformation undoubtedly requires measures aimed at building community and redefining what is meant by 'community justice' – where the enactment of justice is prioritised over processes of punishment. This can provide many opportunities for engagement in theory and practice on route to a different social vision.

It is evident that, in many ways, community justice is an ambiguous space in terms of defining both 'community' and 'justice'. Frequently, 'justice' is replaced by terminology such as 'punishment', 'payback' or 'sentence'. While different in impact to a custodial sentence, punishment in the community can also contribute to long-term harms that can be significant and enduring. People often struggle to establish or rebuild lives after punishment; those who are persistently criminalised are excluded from many areas of social life. The economic and social inequality that characterises harm and punishment is evident (Carlen and Franca, 2020).

A different approach is one that considers the relationship between structural injustice and criminal 'justice' processes in terms of the focus and operation of law enforcement institutions. The violence and punitivity associated with structural injustice extend beyond the criminal legal system. For example, the withdrawal of state welfare is used to sanction supposed infractions of the benefit regime while people seeking refuge are often left without recourse to public funds.

In this special issue, we reflect on how existing visions of community, as they feature in community justice and abolitionism, might overlap and ask how they can be brought together. The papers in this special issue explore some of the different ways that communities are, or must be, involved in moves towards securing and indeed defining, 'justice', and abolitionism.

The urgency of change

While there have been many innovative efforts to establish 'alternatives' to imprisonment, as many authors have argued, these initiatives all too often end up expanding the reach of the carceral state and extending the supervision and monitoring of many sectors of the population. Indeed, with the location of the prison as central to most global systems of punishment, these community forms of supervision and surveillance often feed into the penal complex through high levels of recall to prison.

Community justice interventions can often become part of an expanding surveillance and monitoring apparatus by and for, state institutions. Well-intentioned reforms can have the longer-term effect of legitimising or sustaining the carceral status quo. Similarly, attempts at reducing prison populations have often been limited, or rendered ineffective, by the absence of appropriate community justice networks or interventions. This has often been noted in relation to attempts across UK jurisdictions to reduce the number of women in prison; where short-term funding for community justice services and a 'fragmented' community justice landscape (Commission for Women Offenders, 2012) has hindered any radical steps towards decarceration, despite efforts to restructure and reform the female prison estate. Similarly, initiatives intended to avoid the use of custody for young people in conflict

with the law, have often been under-utilised, or become part of a net-widening of punitive and surveillance measures due to a perceived lack of confidence in the 'robustness' of non-custodial interventions. Thus, community justice, while clearly having the potential to support moves towards a decarceral, abolitionist space, have in practice, become an addition to, and enhancement of, the prison and carceral state.

For those working in the field of 'community justice', cuts affecting third sector and non-statutory service providers, economic hardships and reductions in resources, undoubtedly affect those providing services. Within this environment, innovative approaches to community justice and provisions aimed at enhancing measures that support rather than punish and/or monitor, are hard to sustain. Others have noted the 'penal drift' that has come to characterise the practices of many voluntary sector provisions (McGuire et al., 2019).

Thus, despite the increasing interest in abolitionist theory and practice, most prison populations have not decreased and the extent to which calls to abolish the prison are directly engaged with efforts to strengthen and support communities are varied. This becomes particularly evident when debates surrounding responses to gender-based violence are foregrounded – how, for example, can transformative justice, retain the symbolic power of legislation to address harms to women and children or to challenge gender-based violence?

Abolitionism is the journey towards the goal as much as its realisation. Abolitionist scholarship and activism is concerned with the many different steps that can be taken towards this horizon of abolition. Rather than one abolitionist alternative, Angela Davis (2003: 107) describes a "constellation of alternative strategies and institutions" necessary for abolishing the prison, in which she includes strategies for decriminalisation and decarceration. In this conception of abolitionism as a journey there are two processes at work simultaneously: the dismantling of the current system and the building of the alternative. This is described by Lamble (2021: 148) as the "double work" of engaging in strategies that reduce the power and reliance on the criminal legal system while also building the skills, knowledge and resources for alternative systems.

To address the potential for, and challenges of, abolitionist approaches as they engage with community justice, the following papers focus on the key aspects of abolitionism, both as a movement and an analytical framework. They reflect, to varying degrees, on explorations of what abolitionism means for community justice. Abolitionism seeks to remove prison, and wider punitive practices and carceral logics, from society; it is therefore concerned with alternatives to prevailing and established systems of criminalisation, imprisonment and punishment. This raises important and profound questions: How else might we prevent and respond to harm? How else can we foster safety and justice? As community justice is often proffered as an alternative mode of justice, to what extent might community justice hold these abolitionist alternatives? What strategies does community justice offer for dismantling the current system, and what alternatives does it present for building an abolitionist future?

Community justice and the penal imagination

The papers in this special issue explore the implications of combining abolitionism and community justice perspectives, highlighting the value and challenges of looking beyond the existing system, imagining alternatives and critical reflection on reforms.

As with abolitionist approaches more generally, the authors in this special issue look beyond the current provision and existing institutions of the criminal justice system. Abolitionist approaches challenge the use of criminal justice and penal institutions as a response to harms and social problems, questioning the capacity of those institutions to resolve the crises faced in prisons, courts and policing. An abolitionist approach implores us to develop strategies that unravel, and alternatives that stretch beyond, the remit and logic of the current system. So, can forms of community justice within current systems still offer routes to decarceration? Many abolitionist perspectives dispute not just the role of the prison or criminal justice agencies but the role of the state in proffering a real alternative. For abolitionism concerned with the broader structures of carceral power, it is not sufficient to merely move punitive practices away from the prison or the police. Can any state sponsored strategy for community justice withstand this abolitionist critique?

Authors in this special issue contend that the harms and injustices of criminal justice interventions, disinvestment in communities and increasingly punitive welfare systems, serve to maintain an unjust and unequal social order. Deena Hayden and Phil Scraton in this issue provide a compelling case for penal abolition broadly, and specifically in the case of children and young people. Their research, framed within the context of Human Rights legislation, alongside analyses of critical findings from recent inquiries, documents the persistent failure of prisons, drawing on recent and contemporary injustices concerning youth custody.

Becky Clarke and Zara Manoehoetoe writing of their collective work bringing women and girls together to envision different ways of organising community spaces, sharing, and challenging injustice, argue that their 'collective anger' focuses on the harms and injustices of policing and punishment and the failure of state institutions to protect women and girls. In their exploration of the dominance of carceral safety within the context of the increasing use of incarceration in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Grace Gordon discusses how the use of carceral logics, those belief systems and ideologies about how we punish, serve to uphold the carceral state and the 'criminal punishment system'. Gordon's paper highlights the tensions, contradictions, and challenges to government perceptions of fear and safety and how these carceral logics increase punitiveness in the control, surveillance and incarceration of excluded and othered groups.

Other authors in the issue challenge us to think beyond the prison, to alternative forms of incarceration. In calling for prison and border abolition, Aila Spathopoulou's powerful account of the use of carceral ships historically and in the current moment highlights the gendered and racialised criminalisation of people moving globally and the state's persistence in separation, segregation and creating division. Ti Lamusse's paper calls for a reconceptualization of Restorative Justice under the title 'abolitionist justice'. The author contends that Restorative Justice in Aotearoa, New Zealand, as a meaningful alternative to prison, has failed and has simply been used as an add-on to the existing formal systems of incarceration. The paper raises poignant questions about what justice might look like in a post-prison world.

In looking beyond the parameters of existing institutions, an abolitionist approach also invites us to explore the meaning and possibilities of justice and safety beyond the fixed and present remit of the criminal justice system. Abolitionism introduces and necessitates a speculative, exploratory and utopian approach to thinking about reform and alternatives. How can community justice look beyond the parameters of existing systems? How can we create spaces in community justice for utopian abolitionist imagining?

The papers in this special issue also help us to envision how we can create the spaces necessary for this abolitionist imagining. For example, Clarke and Manoehoetoe argue for the need to experiment with transformative and radical approaches, asking whether community and grassroots spaces with abolitionist principles could contribute to transformative justice for women and girls. Gordon (this issue) also calls for transformative change as how we punish both inside and outside penal institutions has led to increased mass incarceration and carceral logic related directly to public safety. They contend however, that safety is interpreted differently, with many groups and communities reporting 'unsafety' within the carceral state. Gordon calls us to move beyond dominant carceral approaches as the only legitimate means to achieve safety, to examine non punitive approaches and re-imagine care-based strategies that are potentially community based. Can we envisage care-based approaches to achieve safety through mechanisms that are non-punitive and don't rely on the criminal punishment system? Lamusse (this issue), claims that Restorative Justice as an alternative to prison must rediscover abolitionist roots. The paper addresses and points to practical and radical change in policy shifting away from state centred approaches to punishment.

Abolitionism also presents distinct approaches to the analysis of policy, interventions and alternatives. Much abolitionist theory and activism is concerned with deep critical analysis of 'reforms' (Mathiesen 2015, Gilmore 2007), distinguishing between those reforms which subordinate to the logic of the existing system and in/advertently reproduce and strengthen the system, and those reforms or abolitionist steps which work to dismantle the system. Ben-Moshe (2013: 87) describes the scope and ambition of the latter: "Non-reformist reforms imagine a different horizon

that should be realizable for the improvement of humanity and are not limited by a discussion of what is possible at present."

Such analysis points to the effects of reforms and interventions which widen and strengthen the penal system and reproduce carceral logics and responses to harm. Historically this has focused on prison reform and expansion, but there is growing critique of other parts of the penal system and wider punitive practices and carceral logics of policing, border controls and migrant detention, psychiatric care and mental health services and schools and education. Furthermore, scholarship drawing on abolitionist analysis has critiqued reforms framed as progressive and caring which reinforce or obscure their punitiveness, describing such interventions as 'carceral humanism' (Kilgore 2014) or punitive paternalism (Malloch and Crawford 2021).

Papers in this special issue, draw on abolitionist perspectives to highlight the limits and the harms of reform. Lamusse, for example, envisioning how Restorative Justice might contribute to an abolitionist system of justice in a post-prison world outlines the benefits and possible challenges of this approach. The author poses some interesting questions and challenges: Could or would new arrangements built on Restorative Justice be incorporated into formal processes of state power? Who would carry out Restorative Justice – the formal state system or communities? Who would fund Restorative Justice? Could formal systems work alongside 'existing communities of interest' such as schools, communities, churches, extended families?

Hayden and Scraton (this issue), reject the idea that formal systems and radical alternatives can work alongside each other. In carefully documenting the history of penal reform, they call for abolitionist rejection of liberal reform due to persistent failures: "'moral exclusion and moral indifference' trump 'moral inclusion'." To what extent are these radical alternatives being intentionally incorporated into state practices? Related to children and young people, current strategies which focus on alternatives, particularly decriminalisation and decarceration remain largely within state and not community settings. The authors argue, "diversionary responses intended to limit involvement in the formal criminal justice system remain unnecessarily restrictive and punitive."

Similarly, Clarke and Manoehoetoe (this issue) reject reformist strategies and policies that continue to fail and will never deliver justice for women and girls. They point to the conflict between community and the state, using the development of Women's Centres post Corston as an example, which despite their radical roots are increasingly reliant on the state, particularly for funding. In their conversation Zara, referring to national and local services is clear: "we are not looking to those spaces that are causing injustice for our justice."

These are powerful frames of analysis for community justice as an area rich with different meanings, formations and reforms. Community justice can refer to many different things from community-based sentences and punishment to all justice activities that include the community (Karp and Clear 2000), to community-led projects and processes and non-state modes of justice, traditional and indigenous forms of justice. The ambiguous and multifaceted meanings of community justice offer rich space to explore abolitionist strategies and alternatives but also, highlight the necessity of critical abolitionist analysis of the concepts they are based on and their reformist or abolitionist potential.

Given the many practices, interventions and projects that come under the remit of community justice, abolitionism is an important analytical tool for delineating strategies that can contribute to the eradication of, and those that risk further widening the net or reproducing, the same logics and harms. The role of community in resisting the harms and power of carceral institutions is explored through building collectives, connections and solidarity. For Clarke and Manoehoetoe (this issue), the development of the collective in Manchester "is a community, in defiant pursuit of justice." Their vision, action and commitment to co-working, collective engagement and fostering community spaces exploring justice for women and girls provides a necessary and exciting blueprint for others. The paper contributes to wider discussions of community focused and abolitionist organising - what this could look like, the need for experimentation, exploration and a reflective recognition of unfinished work. "Building new alliances and energy… as we resist and dream together…" is for them central to the ongoing development of an 'internationalist abolitionist feminism'. Natalie Avlonitis' book review (this issue) foregrounds the central role of community and grassroots organising in the key historic and present-

day struggles and resistance of the social movements documented in 'Abolition Revolution'.

Spathopoulou's paper (this issue) makes a significant contribution to our understandings of 'Abolitionist Intimacies', where barge inhabitants and local populations create connections, friendships and community built on care and solidarity as a mechanism to challenge, resist and develop moments of activism. Abolitionist moments and connections, supporting and being there for one another serves to "resist carceral logics and violences." The Portland Friendship Group, in welcoming barge inhabitants refuse to 'abandon' and 'dehumanise', instead they "seek to challenge the racism and Islamophobia-infused narratives circulating". Like Clarke and Manoehoetoe, Spathopoulou reflects that abolitionist intimacy in community spaces is an "ongoing, incomplete journey with all its messiness, imperfections and contradictions, like all journey's we embark on together against injustice."

For Gordon (this issue), pre-requisites for care-based approaches to safety include resourcing and investing in communities, a localised approach prioritising wellbeing, and an acknowledgment that different approaches across communities will be required. Despite the overarching dominance of carceral safety logics, Gordon is optimistic that a utopian vision can be a reality, "just as they have been socially constructed and made, they can be unmade." Similar messages unite authors in this special issue (Clarke and Manoehoetoe; Spathopoulou; Hayden and Scraton), the need for more inclusive communities; the prioritisation of 'communal love', support, caring relationships, mutual support and well-being.

As we have argued above, one of the implications of foregrounding the role of communities in justice is that it questions and challenges the role of the state. This is a pertinent question for abolitionism and community justice: to what extent does the role of community challenge or necessitate the role of the state in providing justice or safety? In this special issue there are examples of resistance to the state, spaces and collectives developed apart from the state and explorations of how state and community approaches might be combined. Such a focus on community in abolitionism and community justice also requires reflection on how the concept of

community and communities are used and understood. What does community mean in different contexts? There is a risk of too vague an understanding or romanticising or simplifying the reality of communities. The papers in this special issue also draw out different aspects of the concept of 'community' such as friendship and solidarity, centring these relationships in forms of resistance, freedom and accountability. They also engage with some of the realities of communities that are complex, exclusionary and hold multiple perspectives including the challenges this poses for collectivity and accountability.

Emergent possibilities

So how might community justice offer a space for reforms that do not become central to state inflicted punishment, and which have the potential to offer a platform for longer-term goals towards less harmful interventions, capable of contributing to a transformative agenda?

This would require transformative change on two levels – firstly, considering the philosophical and political shift from state enforced punishment as a priority, to addressing social harms in the context of community (for example Malloch, 2020). Transformative in many ways, this would require a shift from a bureaucratic focus on the administration of punishment towards the building of a caring, concerned society where the provision of support was prioritised; particularly those harms caused by social and economic injustice.

Second, the practical steps to follow on from this would require community justice to rethink how engagement with 'community' and with 'justice' determines the responses of services and practitioners. How might 'community justice' operate to enhance the community and interact with justice in a way that is not determined by, and prioritises, punitive practices?

This requires reflections on funding allocations – taking into account the importance of participatory budgeting and considering abolitionist calls for the reallocation of funding – away from policing and prisons – towards communities. Clearly this requires a strong and engaged civil society.

Thus, abolition has potential as a vision and a theory of change potentially countering long-term state strategies of 'organised abandonment' (Gilmore, 2022). This has particular scope in parts of the country where the closure of industries, withdrawal of welfare services and supports are frequently replaced by the expansion of policing functions in criminal justice, education, housing and various different ways. This is also evident in the increasing expansion of criminalisation where we now see increasing numbers of activists and protestors drawn into the criminal justice system, alongside the continuing trends towards incarceration through displacement and migration. Increasingly, the role of the private sector is brought in to manage these developments. How might communities themselves lead the challenge?

What do we hope to achieve with this Special Issue?

The papers here are eclectic and pragmatic – we did not set out to produce a prescriptive roadmap for the transformation of community justice towards an abolitionist utopia. However, we do aspire to encourage reflection and engagement by community justice practitioners and BJCJ readers to explore the potential for transformative practice in their own area of work.

As the articles in this special issue explore, abolitionist principles adopt a perspective of connection, care and safety, the antithesis of the carceral, punitive state – what does this mean for community justice? How might these principles offer an alternative to the official discourse around community justice that prioritises 'punishment' and instead, offers reflections on justice and an abolitionist horizon, albeit a distant one.

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