

## Reform or abolish prisons?

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### Abstract

This brief article describes the emerging debate as to whether we should reform or abolish prisons. Australian Prison Reform Journal's position is for the middle course of doing both.

### Reform or abolish prisons?

As Mazurek, Piché and Schept note, there is a tension between prison abolitionists who wish to see a revolutionary end to prisons and prison reformers who wish to improve prisons. A middle group may wish to see a virtual end to prisons but are pragmatic in recognising that this will not happen immediately, so regard reforms as crucial in the meantime (Mazurek et al., 2020, p. 260).

The middle balance can be attacked on both flanks. Reformers may argue that prisons are necessary and that all we need to do is make various improvements to the system (such as greening them or expanding privatization). Pure abolitionists may argue that such interim reforms are legitimizing the exercise of penal power and violence (Mazurek et al., 2020, pp. 260, 261). Moves to 'green' new and existing prisons may be an example. At its worst, the token actions of prison builders and authorities to green prisons (such as using the mulch from thousands of felled trees on garden beds within the prison walls) is merely 'greenwashing' that perpetuates the prison-industrial complex (Tanton et al., 2021, p. 11). Jewkes and Moran acknowledge that much can be done to green prisons, but argue that such green discourses are largely symbolic because they support mass imprisonment: 'it may be the penal complex, rather than the environment, which is being sustained' (2015, p. 451). Jewkes and Moran point out that the literature on the greening of corrections rarely

posits that the best way to green prisons is to reduce the number incarcerated. Initiatives like 'green-collar training' of prisoners or packing them in recycled shipping containers can make the public positive towards expanding incarceration, and 'green prisoners' can save the prison money and be more easily controlled (Jewell Bohlinger, 2020, pp. 1128-1133), but the overcrowding, violence, lack of rehabilitation, alienation and recidivism remain. Prisoners are perhaps the best judges of genuine greening, being highly cynical about self-serving initiatives but appreciative about genuine work in the garden, for example, work that develops skills and knowledge that will be useful upon release (Jewell Bohlinger, 2020, pp. 1122, 1131-1132).

In 1945, a group of fifty former prisoners met in Philadelphia to discuss 'prison problems.' They debated whether to advocate prison reform or prison abolition. Later that year, they recommended various prison reforms and proposed calling their organization 'Prison Abolition Through Reform' (Felber 2020). Australian Prison Reform Journal adopts the same stance as these early abolitionists, where 'reform' is to be understood as a combination of prison reform, societal reform, rehabilitation opportunities for prisoners and reintegration opportunities for releasees. This journal recognizes that right now we have people held in unhygienic, criminogenic prisons, with unmet health, safety and rehabilitation needs, being strip searched and held in solitary confinement. We cannot wait until all prisons have been closed. Urgent prison reforms are immediately required, far in advance of prison abolition. At the same time justice reinvestment, throughcare and other initiatives are required to address the root causes of disadvantage, crime and reoffending. Such initiatives can provide the opportunities and support needed to reverse the downward spiral towards prison, thereby reducing the need for police, prisons, child protection authorities, criminal courts and invasive State surveillance.

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