

Quakers for Abolition Network

by *Members of the Network*

Introducing Quakers for Abolition

by *Mackenzie Barton-Rowledge and Jed Walsh*

In late 2020, the two of us wrote an article for *Western Friend*, “Abolish the Police.” Through writing the piece, we realized we wanted to convene larger conversations among Friends who share an interest in police and prison abolition. Quaker abolitionists today face major pushback from their own Quaker meetings, and we hoped that by drawing abolitionist Friends together, we would support and strengthen our work.

In this context, the Quakers for Abolition Network is being born. We are a collection of Friends from at least five yearly meetings; we range in age from high school to our 80s; and we are disproportionately queer and trans. While AFSC and FCNL staff are participating in our network, it is a grassroots project without any formal connections to existing organizations. We are currently defining our mission statement, structure, and our methods for addressing White supremacy when it shows up in our work. At the same time, we are building relationships with each other as we go. Below, four Friends write about their approaches to abolition, lessons they have learned, and their visions for Quaker abolitionist efforts in the future

Mutual Aid and Abolition

by *Jeff Kisting*

I grew up in rural Iowa, where there was very little racial diversity and interactions with police and the court system were rare. About ten years ago, I was blessed to become involved with the Kheprw Institute, a Black youth mentoring and empowerment community. I’ll never forget how shocked I was when a Black mother broke down in tears, explaining how terrified she was every minute her children were away from home. It was obvious that every other person of color in the discussion knew exactly what she was talking about.

After retiring, I was led to connect with Des Moines Mutual Aid, a multiracial organization founded to support houseless people. For over a year, I’ve helped my friends fill and distribute boxes of donated food, maintain a bail fund to support those arrested agitating for change, and work for the abolition of police and prisons.

Since becoming aware of the biases in the police and criminal justice system, I am often frustrated in my

Quaker communities. In meetings across the Midwest, I see mainly White, aging Friends struggling to understand structural racism and the unjustness of our justice systems. And yet, White Friends can also be willing to listen to the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC).

I feel that the good work our meetings do in our local communities is actually a form of mutual aid. My goal is to help Friends see their work in that way, and to expand our work to include the abolition of police and prisons.

Abolition and Education

by *Fatema Jaffer*

“What should I do if a student does not comply with the dress code?” I asked my supervisor.

“That is an automatic referral,” she replied.

“Even if there’s only a tear in their jeans?” I continued.

“Yes – the kids know the rules, and the punishment.”

In 2019, I began my first year teaching sixth grade in Orlando, Florida. Any advice I received about managing a classroom, I automatically applied. However, the classroom referral policy never sat well with me.

After a semester of giving students referrals for every minor infraction – chewing gum in class, wearing sandals, tardiness – nothing had changed. The minor infractions continued, and suspensions made students miss class.

So, I abolished the classroom punishment system. Instead, I explained to my students why they had to abide by school rules, regardless of how pointless they might seem. In exchange, my students explained why they had broken the rules, even knowing they might get in trouble. After that, I no longer had to deal with infractions, my students were more engaged in class because they were not missing key lessons, and they had more opportunity to understand more of what they were learning.

The district policy on referrals was a gateway to the school-to-prison pipeline. Most of my students believed they would end up in jail after middle school. Through the Quaker Abolition Network and my own research, I have expanded my understanding of how prisons negatively affect various institutions and what alternative steps we can take to eradicate the barriers that disproportionately impact Black and brown people.

I am grateful for this community and look forward to continuing my abolition efforts in education and beyond.

On Quaker Roots

by *Elliotte Enochs*

Growing up attending Mountain View Friends Meeting in Denver, I heard about Quakers visiting prisons and Friends' efforts to abolish the death penalty in Colorado. The emphasis was always on the need to heal and build from harms done, rather than punishing those who have done wrong.

As I learned more about Quaker involvement in creating solitary confinement and the prison structures we see today, and about how the prison-industrial complex is an extension of slavery in the U.S., I felt led to advocate for abolition as a Quaker. The Quakers for Abolition Network showed me what other Friends are doing and thinking about these issues.

Recently, I have gotten involved with the Southern Colorado Black and Pink chapter, a group which connects queer and trans people outside of prison to queer and trans people inside of prison. Just a month into corresponding with my pen pal, I already feel very connected to them. As a Quaker, it has been important for me to connect with the dignity of someone who is in contact with the criminal justice system, and to form a friendship with them.

I believe that, moving forward, our Meetings need to reflect on how to welcome formerly incarcerated people while grappling with the harm, violence, and traumas that exist in our communities.

Abolition as a Quaker Practice

by *Megan Wilson*

My first abolitionist leading was to notice how discretionary law enforcement is – who's allowed to break the rules (wealthy, White) and who gets punished for every little thing (Black, poor, immigrant). It didn't seem right that anything punishable by a fine is essentially legal if you have enough money. At the same time, our society is failing to provide the resources that many communities need, then punish those communities for their poverty. Finally, there's the great contradiction of punishment: Why harm people to teach them not to harm people? Those were my first abolitionist leadings, before I had a term for them, just a persistent sense, "This isn't right."

Prison abolition, fundamentally, is about disrupting violence, strengthening our communities, and treating

everyone with the same basic dignity, even when they have caused harm. Abolitionist practices are an opportunity to get comfortable with discomfort and to put our principles into action.

While I support reforms that reduce the scope of the carceral system, such as the elimination of mandatory minimums and long-term solitary confinement, many reforms feel like a superficial rebranding. I believe that the system is fundamentally harmful. Reforms that make us feel good but don't challenge the underlying structure of social violence aren't reducing the harm – they are just hiding it better.

We hope to draw parallels between police and prison abolition and other long-term goals that are commonly held by Friends, such as the abolition of war. We can start by addressing harm in our homes, meetings, and communities. I hope Friends may take forward a sense of how, inspired by our collective visions and guided by our convictions, we can turn sentiment into practical steps toward a more just world. ♣

To join the Quakers for Abolition Network, email Jed Walsh ([jedwalsh9 \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:jedwalsh9@gmail.com)) or Mackenzie Barton-Rowledge ([mbartonrowledge \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:mbartonrowledge@gmail.com)).

