

Carceral Logic | Executive Summary

“The way that requirements are heaped onto parents is consistent with the current punitive model for social services, in which everything comes down to personal responsibility. Instead of addressing parents’ lack of resources, for example, it’s assumed that the problem lies with some ‘pathology’ of the parent.” – Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law in *Prison by Any Other Name*

Carceral logic is the system of thinking that makes punitive systems possible. Built on the fear that there are a [“terrible few” who have the pathology to cause harm to others](#), carceral logic draws absolutes: these “terrible few” are inherently “dangerous,” all others are “innocents,” and the innocents must be protected from the dangerous. Carceral logic responds to the presumed inevitability of danger in the same way – to keep “the innocent” safe, an authority must intervene to prevent the “terrible few” from enacting harm. Instead of thinking critically about what it means to co-create safety, carceral logic tells us that the only way we can be safe is by entrusting the state to punish those who have caused harm.

From their first contact with the family policing system, parents are constructed as a safety threat. When a family is reported to a family policing agency, both a child’s safety and a parent’s fitness are assessed. Whether a situation is deemed unsafe or a parent is deemed unfit, it’s assumed that the problem lies with some ‘pathology’ of the parent. The standards of assessment and the overall history of pathologizing parents are rife with bias and racism. Additionally, the standards for what constitutes abuse or neglect are vague, leaving much room for biases to creep into the subjective process of deeming a child unsafe.

When parents are deemed unfit or children are deemed unsafe, the family policing system’s interventions rely on the threat of removal of children and focus on altering the parent’s approach to childrearing through various treatment options, as opposed to providing supports that ameliorate the material realities that may have led to their contact with the system. The harmful outcome of this “personal responsibility” component of carceral logic is manifold – it overemphasizes parents’ responsibility, ensnares families in an ongoing period of surveillance and scrutiny, and does little to create safety.

Increasingly, social services are adopting the logics of the Prison Nation and progressively building a relationship with the carceral state...and thus, punitive and social services can become indistinguishable. – Beth E. Ritchie and Kayla Martensen in *“Resisting Carcerality, Embracing Abolition: Implications for Feminist Social Work Practice”*

By understanding carceral logic as the bedrock of family policing, we tie our work to broader movements to abolish carcerality in all its forms. We support movements to dismantle the structures that create harm, including racial capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, White supremacy, patriarchy, ageism, adultism, and anti-Blackness; movements to divest from surveillance and policing (including family policing and border militarism); and movements to invest in families and communities through reparations, social services, and wealth redistribution. We fight to live in a world where we have reclaimed our definitions of safety and understand that safety for children and families is a state of being that we, as united communities, co-create.