

Punishment | Executive Summary

“Abolition isn’t just about getting rid of buildings full of cages. It’s also about undoing the society we live in, because the PIC both feeds on and maintains oppression and inequalities through punishment, violence, and controls millions of people.” – Mariame Kaba & Shira Hassan in *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators. Project NIA and Just Practice*

Akin to the “criminal punishment system,” the “child welfare” or “family policing” system continues to be one of the most interconnected and embedded “punishment” systems within the carceral ecosystem, requiring the use of carceral logics and power to exert control over specific communities. Punishment has been defined by Mariame Kaba as “inflicting suffering on others in response to an experience of harm/violence/wrongdoing.” Kaba further defines “punitive/retributive justice” as a form of “justice” that “intervenes when someone has broken a rule rather than caused harm.” Our society has taken an orientation towards punishment, continuing cycles of violence that depend on carceral institutions for “remedies” rather than learning from and about non-punitive forms of accountability.

Within the family policing system, we see instances of pre-determined punishment that are attached to various “crimes,” “offenses,” or wrongdoings. These crimes and wrongdoings are influenced by definitions of maltreatment that were created by the state who decided what should be considered “harm” or “risk.” These standards have been influenced by the same norms and logics as the criminal punishment system, placing largely poor Black and Indigenous families under the gaze and subsequent control of the state.

To fully understand the role of the family policing system and its systemic destruction of Black families we must acknowledge its roots within the institution of slavery. Through the transatlantic slave trade, slavery began as one of the first institutionalized forms of family separation for Black children and families. Today, the state continues its attempts to exert control over parental autonomy by surveilling, monitoring, and removing Black children from their homes due to alleged cases of maltreatment. The system does not consider the emotional, psychological, and physical toll that separation has on Black families. When families face punishment through charges by the family policing system, they are expected to behave a certain way, follow certain guidelines, and adhere to a prescriptive retributive fix set by the state.

For the family policing system to uphold its facade as a “protection” system, it has had to criminalize or demonize certain individuals. This has often resulted in the criminalization and subsequent punishment of poor Black families, especially Black mothers. – Victoria Copeland, Brianna Harvey, and Joyce McMillan in *Unlearning Punishment: Family Policing Abolition as Liberatory Praxis*

Alternate ways of responding to interpersonal harm encourage active responses to repair relationships rather than relying on passive “justice-seeking” through punishment and punitive systems. We call for the abolition of all punishment systems, including family policing, so that we can move towards building and sustaining supportive trusting relational networks that will help our communities address incidents of child maltreatment. We believe there is work to be done, but the family policing system makes these pathways to transformative justice both inaccessible and unfeasible.