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Against State Violence: Social Work and the Pursuit of Abolition

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ABSTRACT

The profession and discipline of social work is concerned with myriad issues related to human suffering and human flourishing, including issues of violence, racism, poverty and inequality. Yet, state violence, a term with varying meanings broadly referring to the ways in which governments enact violence on their people, remains at the margins of social work theory and practice. In recent years abolitionist politics and principles have been taken up by a growing number of social workers who have argued that the abolition of state violence should be core to what social work does. This article examines the relationship between social work and state violence, arguing that violence enacted on people by their government, in particular by carceral systems, should be a concern for the social work profession, and for social workers everywhere. The article concludes with an analysis and exploration of abolitionist strategies that social work can take up to abolish state violence.

Keywords

Abolition, state violence, social work, ethics.

RESUMO

A profissão e a disciplina do Serviço Social lidam com uma infinidade de questões relacionadas ao sofrimento e ao desenvolvimento humano, incluindo questões de violência, racismo, pobreza e desigualdade. No entanto, a violência estatal, um termo com significados variados que se refere amplamente às formas como os governos exercem violência sobre seu povo, permanece à margem da teoria e da prática do Serviço Social. Nos últimos anos, políticas e princípios abolicionistas têm sido adotados por um número crescente de assistentes sociais que defendem que a abolição da violência estatal deve ser o cerne do trabalho social. Este artigo examina a relação entre o serviço social e a violência estatal, argumentando que a violência exercida sobre as pessoas por seus governos, em particular pelos sistemas carcerários, deve ser uma preocupação da profissão de assistente social e de todos os assistentes sociais em todos os lugares. O artigo terminar analisando e explorando estratégias abolicionistas que o Serviço Social pode adotar para abolir a violência estatal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Abolição, violência estatal, Serviço Social, ética.

Introduction

The profession and discipline of social work is concerned with myriad issues related to human suffering and human flourishing, including issues of violence, racism, poverty and inequality (NASW, n.d.). Yet, state violence, a term with varying meanings broadly referring to the ways in which governments enact violence on their people, remains at the margins of social work theory and practice. This remains true despite the fact that state violence causes great harm to many people, in particular those who are already marginalized including racially minoritized people, LGTBQ+ people, people who are undocumented, who are poor, houseless, and struggling with addiction and mental illness. The contemporary abolitionist movement — focused on the simultaneous work of abolishing carceral and punitive systems while creating and advancing life affirming social relations, institutions, and practices — has emphasized state violence as a core social harm and as something that must be dismantled. In recent years justice oriented social workers and social work formations have taken up the mantle of abolition and sought to bring abolitionist politics and principles into social work theory and practice, sometimes referred to as abolitionist social work (Kim et al, 2024; NAASW, n.d.; Rasmussen, 2024; upEND, 2022). This has included making struggles against state violence central to this particular form of social work, and to social work more broadly.

Mainstreaming attention and concern with state violence within social work is long overdue, and should be of particular relevance today as the Trump administration, and governments around the world increasingly turn towards authoritarian rule, using the violence of the state to punish those it considers its opposition. While the use of criminalization, detention, incarceration, and deportation have long served as tools of social control and mechanisms for repressing opposition and resistance in the US (Abu-Jamal & Fernández, 2014; Alexander, 2010; Garland, 2019), carceral infrastructures have never been larger, and are now at the disposal of an escalating authoritarian regime. Social work's ability to remain a partner in state violence, or on the sidelines only offering support to those who have been harmed by state violence, will likely become harder to endure.

In this article we begin by defining state violence and examining the relationship between state violence and social work. This is followed by an analysis of why the abolition of state violence is not only important to abolitionist social work, but should be of relevance to all of social work. Finally the article ends with an exploration of abolitionist strategies to abolish state violence that are of particular relevance to social work, looking specifically at strategies in relationship to the state itself. It is important to note that this article is focused on state violence and social work in the United States.

State violence and social work

Defining State Violence

Despite social work's limited attention to state violence, the term is one that has long been studied and examined in other disciplines including law, criminology, sociology and other social sciences. State violence has taken on various definitions ranging from holistic to specific, and from including physical violence and force only, to also including what Gilmore (2022) refers to as organized abandonment, or what others refer to as structural violence which includes the social structures of society that create inequality and social harm (Butler, 2022). For example, Abuso (2022) writes that "[s]tate violence, (is) generally defined as the use of violence and excessive force by governments to subdue their citizens" which offers a broad conception of the term. Abolitionist scholars understand that the violence enacted by the state usually comes vis-a-vi policing, incarceration and other carceral systems, and because of this, among other reasons, have named carceral systems as forms of state violence (Acheson, 2022; Kaba & Richie, 2022; Scott, 2016). In more recent years abolitionists have argued that abolitionist politics also include militarism as a form of state violence (Acheson, 2022; Wright & Achilleos, 2025; Haymarket Books, 2021). Acheson (2022) argues that abolition of state violence "includes defunding, demilitarizing, disbanding, and divesting from current structures of violence." Butler (2022) distinguishes between structural violence, the unequal social structures of society, and overt state violence, the physical violence enacted on people by state institutions. Butler argues that both forms of violence cause suffering and death, and that reckoning with state violence must include both. Many abolitionist scholars, including us, agree with Butler's assertion that state violence includes both structural violence and overt state violence. While we use his conception of state violence for this article, we focus more specifically on overt state violence to offer more specificity of its harm, and for why its abolition should be a necessary pursuit in social work.

The Harms of State Violence

There are many forms of overt state violence that could be examined including but not limited to policing, detention, incarceration, deportation, child separation, militarism. Here, policing and incarceration are highlighted to illuminate the broader harms of varying forms of overt state violence. In broad terms, abolitionists argue that systems of policing and incarceration are inherently violent and harmful. This is not only because of the violence they enact directly onto people, but because they cause further violence between people, both through the trauma, isolation, and poverty they engender, and because of the significant investment in these violent systems that divert public resources away from the systems and practices of care that create actual and lasting safety (Kaba & Richie, 2022; Kim et al., 2024; Rasmussen, 2024).

As Kaba and Richie (2022) argue, policing has played a particularly significant role in the lives of communities in the US, as they are often the only government resource available to meet the needs of people facing conflict and harm, and because when they respond, they often cause additional harm instead of bringing a resolution. More than 600

people are killed by the police annually and approximately 250,000 are injured by police violence each year (Law Enforcement Epidemiology Project, 2025). The Black Lives Matter Movement and the uprisings of 2020 brought national consciousness to the reality that Black people are significantly more likely to be targeted by police violence than their white counterparts, and people of color generally experience more police violence than white people (Hatfield, 2023). Being killed by the police is now one of the top six causes of death for Black men in the United States (Edwards et al., 2019). The uprisings of 2020 and the years of organizing against police violence that preceded brought new scholarly attention to the issue of police violence, and led scholars of public health to study and recognize police violence as a social determinant of health, disproportionately impacting the mortality, and physical and mental health of Black, Latinx and other marginalized communities (DeVylder et al., 2022). One likely consequence of these realities is that more than half of people who are victimized by interpersonal violence do not call the police (Green). In addition, police have been and remain at the frontlines of quelling protest and resistance, serving as the violent arm of the state to police and punish people for speaking up against injustice and oppression (Federman, 2024; Fernandez, 2008; Hamilton, 2021).

Like policing, incarceration has been used as a way to repress dissidents. Abu-Jamal and Fernández (2014) argue that locking up Black dissidents in the 1960s was a core part of what led to the initial rise in incarceration. Today, the US is the most incarcerated nation in the world, locking up more than 20% of all people incarcerated globally (Sawyer & Wagner, 2025; Wagner and Betram, 2020). Similar to policing, Black people, Indigenous people and people of color more broadly are disproportionately incarcerated with Black men likewise facing particularly high rates of incarceration (Sawyer & Wagner, 2025). Incarceration is associated with a wide range of negative social, economic, and health consequences that are felt unequally in poor communities and communities of color (Grawert & Craigie, 2024; National Research Council, 2014; Wildeman & Wang, 2017). While mass incarceration is now widely recognized as a social problem, there is significantly less willingness to name incarceration as a form of state violence.

Social Work's Role in State Violence

While the use of the term of state violence has been limited within social work in the US, scholarship and education critical of carceral systems, and of policing and incarceration specifically is on the rise. This growing body of scholarship includes the seminal work of Kim (2012) who sought to analyze the carceral nature of social work responses to domestic violence, and the ways in which criminalization, often supported by social work(ers) further harmed people at the margins. In recent years a growing number of social work and social work adjacent scholars have studied both the longer history of social work collaboration with carceral systems, and the contemporary harms of these longstanding partnerships (Dettlaff et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2020; Rasmussen & Suslovic, 2025; Washington et al., 2021).

This scholarship addresses several themes related to social work and state violence. First, that the profession of social work has been a partner in building carceral systems, including the modern day police, the juvenile justice system, probation and parole, and family policing (Rasmussen & Suslovic, 2025; Roberts, 2022; Roberts & Brownell, 1999;

Toraif & Mueller, 2023; Washington et al., 2021). Second, that collaborations between social work and carceral systems has led social work organizations and social workers to cause significant and ongoing harm to people, especially people of color, those are poor, people who undocumented and LGBTQ+ (Dettlaff, 2022; Jacobs et al., 2020; Kim, 2012; Kim et al., 2024; Rasmussen & Suslovic, 2025; Roberts, 2022). And finally, that to align with the values and ethics in the Social Work Code of Ethics, the profession of social work should halt partnerships with carceral systems, and work to rid the profession of the carceral logics of surveillance, policing, punishment and social control that are present in many social work practices and services (Dettlaff, 2022; Jacobs et al., 2020; Murray, 2025; Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work, 2024)

Importantly, social work's role in state violence extends beyond formal collaboration with carceral institutions; it also lies in how the profession operationalizes state power under the guise of care (Nadasen, 2023). Social workers are often positioned as frontline agents of the state, tasked with regulating families, assessing "risk," and enforcing compliance with institutional mandates—roles that frequently align with punitive rather than supportive goals. Whether through court-mandated treatment, child removal decisions, housing eligibility assessments, or benefits sanctions tied to behavioral "noncompliance," social workers can act as instruments of state surveillance and control. These interventions are not always recognized as violence, yet they often result in deep, lasting harm—particularly for those already targeted by systemic oppression. In many cases, these actions are justified through a professional discourse of safety or responsibility, masking the coercion embedded in everyday practice. By fulfilling these roles, social work not only legitimizes state power but also extends its reach into the most intimate parts of people's lives, transforming acts of care into mechanisms of discipline, and turning helping professions into sites of harm. Recognizing this dynamic is essential to confronting the structural role social work has played in sustaining state violence—not just in moments of crisis, but in the quiet, bureaucratic routines of daily practice.

Additionally, the profession's proximity to systems of punishment has shaped not only practice but also pedagogy. Social work education frequently prepares students to work within carceral-adjacent settings—courts, probation departments, child welfare agencies—without offering the critical frameworks necessary to interrogate these systems' logics or resist their harms (Munston, 2011; Reamer, 2023. As a result, students are often socialized into roles that reinforce existing power structures, rather than equipped to dismantle them. This signals a need for a radical reorientation of social work education—one that centers abolitionist theory, uplifts community-based alternatives, and trains future practitioners to imagine and build systems of care that exist entirely outside the carceral state.

Abolishing State Violence as Core to Making Social Work the Work of Abolition

To move social work toward abolition is to fundamentally reorient the profession away from practices that are centered on control, compliance, and institutional allegian-

ce, and toward practices rooted in care, community accountability, and collective liberation (Kim et al., 2024). It requires a structural reckoning with the profession's core assumptions, including how it defines safety, intervention, and help. At the heart of bringing abolitionist principles to the social work profession is a refusal to accept harm as inevitable or necessary. Abolition challenges the idea that surveillance and punishment—whether administered through a courtroom or a case plan—are tools for healing (Kaba et al., 2021). And it demands that we build something else entirely.

This reorientation calls for deep institutional and ideological change. Abolition asks for more than to just replace a few policies or adjust language in mission statements. Abolition asks us to confront the histories that have shaped social work's alignment with systems of domination—and to move with urgency toward new futures built from the ground up (Kim et al., 2024; Washington et al., 2021). It requires us to examine the training, practices, and assumptions that are so deeply normalized within the field that they often go unquestioned. For example, the widespread use of risk assessment tools, behavioral contracts, and mandated services are often framed as "evidence-based" or "trauma-informed," yet function in ways that replicate surveillance, coercion, and control (Dettlaff, 2023). In many cases, these interventions mirror the very carceral logics they are presumed to interrupt. To abolish state violence in social work is to recognize that meaningful change will not come from reforming the edges of the system—it will come from a wholesale reimagination of how we get safe, and how we get well.

Abolishing state violence within social work requires more than severing ties with police departments or rejecting partnerships with correctional institutions. It demands that we actively unlearn the carceral logics that have long shaped our interventions—logics that conflate protection with control, help with oversight, and safety with removal. Many social work practices, even those housed in community organizations or schools, are still governed by risk assessments, behavioral compliance, and mandatory reporting structures that are functionally indistinguishable from the punitive systems they often claim to critique. Bringing abolitionist principles to social work challenges us to ask: Who gets to define harm? Who benefits from surveillance? And what would it mean to build systems of care that do not rely on the threat of punishment?

This unlearning process is not merely technical—it is emotional, ethical, and political. It demands discomfort and vulnerability, particularly from those who have long benefited from proximity to state institutions or who have been trained to see their roles as neutral or benevolent. It also requires imagination. Abolition and social work insists that another way is possible: one that prioritizes relationships over rules, dignity over discipline, and collective well-being over institutional compliance (Kim et al., 2024). This means refusing the binary logic that positions people as either "at risk" or "a risk," and instead recognizing how individuals are shaped by the structural conditions in which they live.

To commit to this work is to recognize that abolition is not just about the dismantling of systems—it is about the reconstruction of relationships and responsibilities (Washington et al., 2021). It is about reimagining our obligations to one another outside of state enforcement (Mingus, 2019; NAASW, 2024). This includes how we train future social workers, how we distribute resources, and how we hold each other accountable

when harm occurs. It also means moving away from models that individualize risk or pathology, and instead confronting the structural conditions that create harm in the first place—poverty, displacement, criminalization, and systemic neglect. Bringing abolition to social work offers a framework through which we can respond to harm not with punishment or expulsion, but with care, repair, and transformation.

Crucially, abolition does not begin or end with critique. It is generative. It draws from the wisdom and strategies of those who have long resisted carceral logics—grassroots organizers, care workers, survivors, and directly impacted communities. These communities have not waited for institutions to save them. They have built networks of mutual aid, transformative justice, and healing in the absence of state support—and often in direct opposition to it. Their work demonstrates that accountability, safety, and healing are possible without coercion, surveillance, or incarceration. The role of abolitionist social workers is not to co-opt these models, but to learn from them, support them, and build alongside them with humility and accountability.

In this way, abolition becomes not only a political stance but a professional and ethical mandate. It calls us to fundamentally reimagine what it means to be in relationship with others—especially those most impacted by harm and systemic violence. It invites us to ask not how we can fix broken systems, but how we can co-create new structures entirely—ones that refuse to treat people as problems to be managed, and instead see them as full human beings worthy of care, agency, and liberation.

Why This Is Important to Social Work

The urgency of this transformation lies in the ethical crossroads at which the profession currently stands. Social work cannot continue to uphold values of dignity, equity, and self-determination while simultaneously maintaining practices and policies that surveil, displace, and disappear marginalized people. These contradiction between stated values and actual practices are increasingly unsustainable. Abolition invites the profession to move beyond surface-level reform and toward a deeper, values-driven alignment with justice.

This shift is not simply theoretical—it is practical, moral, and necessary. As social workers, we often find ourselves deployed as agents of systems that manage harm, rather than prevent or transform it. We are asked to intervene in people's lives all under the guise of "support." But these interventions often replicate the very forms of violence they purport to solve. Abolitionist thinking urges us to examine how our tools, institutions, and interventions are shaped by histories of control, surveillance, and racialized punishment—and to reject those elements as incompatible with care.

What makes abolition essential—rather than optional—for social work is that it expands the scope of what social work can be. It refuses a limited vision of practice where the best we can offer is harm reduction within oppressive systems. Instead, it demands that we imagine—and work toward—liberatory conditions where harm is less likely to occur in the first place. This means shifting resources away from surveillance and punish-

ment and toward housing, education, health care, and community-led forms of support. It means building infrastructures that are rooted in trust, not fear. And it means cultivating a professional culture that values political imagination as much as technical competence.

This vision requires us to reframe the purpose of our work: not to manage crisis, but to address the conditions that produce it. Not to adapt people to unjust systems, but to dismantle those systems altogether. Abolition gives us a language and framework for this shift. It is not about abandoning care—it is about reclaiming it from the hands of the state. It is about imagining safety and support beyond the reach of punishment. And it is about recognizing that true safety comes not from containment or surveillance, but from meeting people's needs and honoring their humanity.

Moreover, centering abolition pushes the profession to confront its own discomfort. It challenges social workers to examine how our training, our institutions, and even our well-intentioned practices may reproduce the very inequities we claim to address. It forces us to ask difficult questions: What do we do when our "help" causes harm? How do we move forward when the systems we work within are part of the problem? And how do we remain accountable—not to funders or bureaucracies—but to the people we serve? These are not rhetorical questions; they are calls to action.

This is especially critical as social work continues to position itself as a social justice profession. That claim means nothing if it is not accompanied by a willingness to interrogate and change the ways we cause and enable harm. Abolition is not antithetical to social work—it is a call to return to its radical roots. It is a demand that we prioritize healing over control, relationships over regulation, and transformation over compliance.

Social work at its best has always been rooted in care, community, and collective well-being. But it has too often fallen short of those ideals, constrained by its proximity to state power and its investment in legitimacy over liberation. Abolition offers a path forward—not just as a political commitment, but as a professional imperative. It calls on us to shed the remnants of carceral thinking, to step outside the confines of punitive systems, and to build a new kind of practice—one that is accountable, imaginative, and uncompromising in its pursuit of justice.

Abolitionist Strategies in Social Work to Abolish State Violence

There are many ways to conceptualize the work of bringing abolitionist politics and principles to social work practice, and in this case as it relates to abolish state violence. One framework for considering abolitionist approaches to social work locates strategies in relationship to the state; work against the state, work outside of the state, and work in and around the state. This framework has been written about by Mijente (2022), Interrupting Criminalization (2022) and Rasmussen (2024), and likely has its origins in Gramsci's analysis related to struggling against facism in Italy. This framework has particular relevance for the work of abolishing state violence given the state's centrality as a perpetrator of violence, and as a primary focus of what is to be abolished. Importantly, most of the stra-

tegies analyzed below are not exclusive to social work or the social work context, but are ones that social workers have and should continue to engage in abolishing state violence.

Abolitionist strategies against the state, and against state violence, are focused primarily on shrinking the size, scope and power of carceral systems, and their capacity and ability to enact violence. These strategies generally come in the form of grassroots organizing campaigns that seek to close jails and prisons or prevent them from being built, campaigns that seek to change policies related to sentencing, prison conditions, and probation and parole, and campaigns to free people including political prisoners and individual clemency campaigns, as well as campaigns for more large scale release of people inside. These campaigns can also take the form of organizing for reparations for the harm caused by state violence in particular for people and families who have been harmed or killed by police or while incarcerated. While these kinds of campaigns should be supported by social work and social workers, there are also campaigns more closely connected to social work institutions including to end the separation of families by ICE and family policing systems, challenging mandated reporting policies, and partnerships between social work(ers) and carceral systems.

Abolitionist strategies outside of the state are efforts aimed at meeting safety and care needs without relying on the state. Many of these strategies have come as a direct result of state violence, both the overt state violence that police and other carceral systems have enacted that have led to fear, distrust, and critique; and the structural violence and organized abandonment of the state that has left people without the basic necessities needed to live a dignified life. Abolitionist strategies outside the state have their roots in varying histories including Indigenous ways of life, in anarchism, in resistance groups and practices like the Black Panthers survival programs and Food Not Bombs, and in more contemporary abolitionist movement formations (Kropotkin, 1902; Loggans, 2021; Mingus, 2019; Spade, 2020). While these outside of the state strategies take up a wide range of forms and practices, mutual aid and transformative justice are two more recognized traditions aimed at organizing and skilling up communities to meet their own care and safety needs. Notably, both of these traditions engage dual strategies of working to meet the more immediate needs while taking up political education and community organizing to address the root causes that create these needs in the first place (Mingus, 2019; Spade, 2020).

Abolitionist strategies in and around the state are the most fraught given the relational proximity to state violence. These strategies are generally aimed at supporting people who are under the control of carceral systems. While work against and outside the state are generally in clear and vocal opposition to state violence, working in relationship to the state requires navigating dual relationships, to state authorities in some way, and to the people and communities you are serving and / or representing including people who are incarcerated. This can at times require a muting of vocal opposition to state violence, and varying kinds of collaboration with the state. There are at least two ways of relating to the state; working directly for carceral state institutions that enact state violence, or working with an organization or as an individual in partnership with the state in some way, for example providing services or programs in jails and prisons. There is debate about whether abolitionist work is possible working directly for carceral institutions (Dettlaff, 2022) and while we believe that working directly for the state is in conflict with abolitio-

nist praxis, we also recognize that there are many people who hold these positions who aspire towards abolitionist horizons.

In the long term social work must divest from direct partnership with carceral systems. In the near term, we are more concerned with what Hassan (2021) calls right practice — the idea that we should be concerned first with right practice, and then with right politics. Working in relationship to the state, whether directly or indirectly, is full of tensions and contradictions. The more enmeshed the relationship to the state, the more contractions there will be. Efforts that are working indirectly with the state, like partnering to provide services to people within carceral systems, are generally less enmeshed than people who work directly for carceral institutions. Regardless of whether one is working directly or indirectly with the state, we argue that strategizing on how best to navigate these dual relationships requires some sort of political home to analyze and decide together what the best course of action may be.

Against State Violence

It is time to ask not only what social work is, but what it could become if it were truly aligned with the liberation of the people it serves. Abolition doesn't offer easy answers—but it offers a horizon of possibility and praxis for bridging the divide between the actions of today and the horizon of tomorrow. One that invites us to dream, to disrupt, and to build again—with care at the center, and justice as our guide. Abolitionist politics and scholarship makes clear that part of bridging this divide requires an uprooting of the causes of human suffering, inequality and violence, namely state violence (Davis, 2015; Kaba, 2021; Kim et al., 2024). For social work to live into its liberatory aspirations, it must be unequivocal in its opposition to state violence.

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