

# Abolitionist Social Work Praxis: Exploring Feminist Perspectives on Carcerality and Justice

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## Abstract

This article presents a critical literature review of abolitionist and anti-carceral feminist scholarship, with a focus on its relevance to social work theory, practice, and education. Drawing on a postcolonial feminist framework, the review interrogates how carceral logics shape dominant responses to domestic and family violence, particularly in settler-colonial contexts such as Australia. It explores critiques of carceral feminism, the profession's historical complicity in systems of criminalisation and surveillance, and the ideological distinctions between anti-carceral and abolitionist perspectives. Central to this review is a consideration of transformative justice as a community-led, decolonising framework that resists punitive state responses and reimagines justice through healing, accountability, and collective care.

While the literature offers rich theoretical insights, it remains largely American and conceptual in scope. An emergent body of Australian scholarship highlights the interconnections between colonialism and carcerality, particularly the disproportionate incarceration of First Nations women and the ongoing removal of First Nations children. However, significant gaps remain, including limited empirical applications of transformative justice and the absence of lived experience perspectives. This review argues that abolitionist social work provides critical tools for confronting the contradictions of a profession which is both committed to social justice and deeply entangled in state violence. It calls for future research that centres First Nations voices and community-led strategies to address intersecting forms of violence, positioning abolitionist praxis as central for reimagining justice in ways that are emancipatory and transformative.

**Keywords:** anti-carceral social work; abolitionist feminism; anti-carceral feminism; abolition and social work; transformative justice

## Introduction

Abolitionist social work is a nascent but rapidly developing area of scholarship which, in the face of persistent carceral ‘net-widening’ (Cohen, 1985), demands greater attention.

Escalating penal populism and the concomitant criminalisation of social problems have fuelled increasingly punitive policies, even when crime rates remain stable (Cunneen, 2023). Particularly concerning is the intensifying incarceration of women and girls, whose global imprisonment rates have risen 57% since 2000 compared with 22% for men (Fair & Walmsley, 2025). Criminalised populations experience disproportionate rates of homelessness, poverty, mental illness, disability, and chronic health conditions (McCausland & Baldry, 2023), while women’s pathways into criminalisation are further shaped by gendered violence, trauma, mental distress, and substance use (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020; Russell et al., 2022). In Australia, this crisis is especially acute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who remain vastly over-represented within the criminal legal system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). First Nations women represent one of the fastest-growing prison populations, comprising nearly half the female prison population, and are 32 times more likely to be incarcerated than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

Despite a discernible shift within the social work profession towards more critical understandings of systemic oppression, the nexus between social work and carcerality<sup>1</sup> largely continues to evade thorough interrogation (Murray et al., 2024). In other words, mainstream social work has rarely reckoned with its complicity in punitive systems of policing, prisons, and surveillance. In response, a burgeoning field of anti-carceral and abolitionist literature has emerged to challenge the widespread rhetoric that constructs carceral systems as a panacea. This critical scholarship seeks to interrupt dominant social work’s considerable silence on the issue and reimagine the profession’s role (Rasmussen & Suslovic, 2025). Adopting a postcolonial feminist framework, this article examines the literature’s emergent themes, debates, and distinctions regarding social work and carcerality. In doing so, it uncovers myriad implications for practice and underscores the value of an

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the terms *carcerality*, *the carceral state*, *carceral systems*, and *carceral logics* are used interchangeably.

abolitionist social work for addressing women's uniquely gendered and racialised experiences of violence (Baldry et al., 2014). Finally, the review identifies gaps in research including a need for further scholarship on transformative justice within Australia's distinct settler-colonial context.

## **Social Work and the Carceral State: A Fraught Relationship**

Professionalised social work has an extensive and fraught relationship with the carceral state which has come under renewed scrutiny in recent years. Following the racial justice uprisings of 2020, long-ignored abolitionist demands to divest from penal institutions became popularised through rallying cries to 'defund the police' (Cunneen, 2023; Davis et al., 2022). In an effort to quell public dissent over police brutality and systemic racism, some proposed expanding social work's role as a logical auxiliary to police, embodied in the expression 'counsellors not cops' (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). This led many to enthusiastically embrace this invitation for increased police-social work collaboration. However, opponents suggested that such reforms in fact cast social workers as 'soft police', "whose purpose is not to replace cops but to expand their reach" (Kaba, 2024, p. 2). Critics urged the profession to "problematise social work's existing investment in and collaboration with law enforcement and policing" (Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 38) rather than deepen those ties. In other words, the post-2020 moment became an inflection point that generated significant ideological debate about social work's past, present, and future role in systems of social control. A review of the literature reveals how this normative positioning of social workers as adjunct police (or 'soft cops') prompted intense reflection within the field (Murray et al., 2023). Some social work scholars began re-examining the profession's complicity in punitive practices and asking whether strengthening social work's partnership with law enforcement truly serves social justice or simply extends policing under a benevolent guise.

As a burgeoning field with limited empirical research into anti-carceral/abolitionist applications, the current literature (and thus, this review) is mostly theoretical. However, it should be noted that abolition has long been both a politics and a practice – one that seeks to move the world closer to a future in which carceral systems are obsolete (Davis et al., 2022). Reading the literature through this lens encourages us to embrace what Copeland (2023, p. 2)

calls “collective experimentation” and to reject overly prescriptive, one-size-fits-all instruction, as such rigid blueprints are ultimately antithetical to an abolitionist praxis. Rather than a fixed program, abolitionist social work encompasses a vast, creative ecosystem of praxis and reflection “grounded in the principled commitment to ensuring that all people have what they need to thrive” (Battle & Powell, 2024, p. 549). It must also be acknowledged that a lack of empirical scholarship does not equate to an absence of practice. Marginalised communities have long enacted collective care, solidarity, and resistance against the state, yet such ways of being, doing, and knowing are often obscured by dominant systems (Kim et al., 2024). As Hunter and Wroe (2024, p. 326) remind us, “there is a body of knowledge that exists within marginalised communities that is not only hard earned, but hard thought”. Scholars have pointed to this tension between empirical scholarship and community-based practices, emphasising the need for careful attention to how such practices are represented so as not to be co-opted, while still interrogating what role – if any – professionalised social work might play in abolitionist projects (Brockbank & Greene, 2022; The Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work, 2024).

Given the breadth of this topic, it is beyond this article’s scope to review the entire catalogue of anti-carceral and abolitionist social work literature. Instead, the focus has been purposefully delimited to the arena of domestic and family violence (DFV). As a key site of carceral entanglement, this domain offers rich discussion about how carceral logics have permeated social and community services and how feminist social work perspectives are grappling with alternatives.

## **Carceral Feminism and its Discontents in the DFV Space**

Anti-carceral and abolitionist frameworks are fundamentally based in critical, feminist analyses of how the carceral state (re)produces inequitable outcomes. A seminal example is Richie and Martensen (2020)’s *Resisting Carcerality, Embracing Abolition*, in which the authors’ post-structuralist examination of rapid carceral expansion over the last half-century reveals that today’s mass incarceration rates do not correspond to equivalent increases in crime. Rather, this phenomenon is driven by carceral logics that seek to maintain structural oppression and privilege. Many anti-carceral/abolitionist feminists are particularly troubled

by the increasing criminalisation of marginalised women. As O'Brien et al. (2020, p. 7) observe, "women and girls are indeed targeted by the carceral state in ever-growing numbers... and the forms of violence they endure are often specifically gendered". Similarly, Davis (2024, p. 20) defines the carceral state as a "gendering apparatus" which functions to preserve a (racialised) gender binary. These analyses highlight that mass incarceration is not a neutral response to crime, but a political project that often targets those who are already oppressed (women, people of colour, homeless, poor, or disabled people, etc) under the guise of maintaining 'law and order', which is to say a "neoliberal, racially gendered, social, and economic order" (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 46). The manifestation of this is especially clear in the DFV space, which has undergone a significant carceral shift. As rates of DFV have gained public visibility, responses have skewed heavily towards punitive, criminal-legal interventions, frequently at the expense of preventive and supportive measures.

A common theme in the literature is a critique of carceral feminism. Carceral feminism views the criminal legal system as the primary avenue for securing women's safety and justice (Bernstein, 2007; Goodmark, 2023). Carceral feminists (and by extension, carceral social workers) tend to endorse solutions such as tougher laws, aggressive prosecution of perpetrators, and increased police involvement in situations of DFV. Consequently, anti-violence advocacy is "almost always accompanied by calls for law reform and 'better' criminal legal responses and an increase in state resources" (Loney-Howes et al., 2024, p. 167) devoted to policing and prisons. Abolitionist scholars describe this approach as 'reformist reform', wherein well-intentioned but parochial reforms become invariably co-opted to reinforce the carceral state (Brockbank & Greene, 2022; Rasmussen & Kim, 2024). As Gruber (2023, as cited in Loney-Howes et al., 2024, p. 165), notes, mainstream or 'whitestream' feminist anti-violence efforts have often been led by white, upper-class perspectives that overlook how "race, class, gender identity, and immigration status leave certain women more vulnerable to violence and that greater criminalization often places these same women at risk of state violence" (Law, 2014, as cited in Jarldorn, 2020, pp. 330-331). This solipsistic outlook engenders an uncritical embrace of what Richie and Martensen (2020) term 'carceral services' wherein social services are intertwined with law enforcement. They warn that any form of social work which aligns itself with punitive systems ceases to provide genuine social services and instead deliver carceral ones which ultimately reinforce

structures of oppression. Such approaches fail to address the root causes of gendered violence (like patriarchy, racism, colonisation, poverty, and trauma) and can even cause additional harm. When DFV is framed purely as an individual crime to be solved by police and prisons, broader questions of social inequality and community healing are sidelined (Kim, 2020). Barrie (2020, p. 71) encapsulates this well, saying “while the safety of survivors is essential, the urge to incarcerate perpetrators or cut them out of communities does not ultimately address the conditions that make this violence possible”. Such an approach not only neglects the structural drivers of violence but also perpetuates harm by enmeshing victim-survivors and their communities in coercive systems. Jacobs et al. (2021, p. 39) encapsulate this critique by defining ‘carceral social work’ as a synergistic process where practitioners both collaborate with penal actors and deploy controlling tactics “dependent on the same White supremacist and coercive foundations as policing”. In short, though often well-meaning, carceral feminism and social work expand the carceral net under the banner of protection and help.

## **Social Work’s Complicity in Structures of Oppression**

Many scholars problematise social work’s complicity in intersecting systems of carcerality, racism, and colonialism. Building on a rich theoretical knowledge base (including du Bois (1903); Foucault (1975); Garland (1991, 2002); Wacquant (2009); and Weber (1919)), anti-carceral/abolitionist feminists maintain that the modern ‘prison nation’ (Richie, 2012) is driven by political ideologies designed to sustain racial capitalism (Gilmore, 2007), or what bell hooks (2004) termed the ‘imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy’. In this view, the ever-expanding carceral apparatus is not a neutral tool, but a political project which (re)produces hierarchies of race, gender, and class. This project is achieved through massive investments of ideological and economic capital into surveillance, policing, and punishment, coupled with a systematic divestment from life-affirming services (Brock-Petrossius et al., 2022; Dettlaff et al., 2023; Leotti, 2021). In this way, governments spend on prisons and police while cutting back on housing, healthcare, education, and welfare. These carceral spending priorities further entrench systemic inequality and disproportionately harm marginalised peoples – whose wellbeing and liberation social workers ought to be fundamentally invested in (Kam, 2014). In Australia, the entanglement of carcerality with

colonialism is particularly significant. First Nations women are one of the fastest-growing prison populations and are grossly overrepresented, comprising nearly half of all women incarcerated (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Baldry and Cunneen (2014) frame this through the lens of colonial patriarchy, where First Nations women's disproportionate incarceration reflects the perpetuation of the settler colonial state's originary logic of elimination (Wolfe, 2006).

While the literature is fairly saturated by American perspectives, there are many scholars within this who highlight the carceral-colonial nexus (Barrie, 2020; Beltran et al., 2024; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Kim, 2024; Murray et al., 2024; Pirie, 2024). Additionally, there is a growing body of cross-disciplinary literature emerging from Australia exploring the interdependent nature of the settler-colonial and carceral states (Baldry et al., 2014; Baldry & Cunneen, 2014; Carlton, 2018; Cripps, 2023; Jarldorn, 2020; Kilroy et al., 2023; Lewis, 2022; McCausland & Baldry, 2023; Rule & Jarldorn, 2024). Notably, Loney-Howes et al. (2024, p. 175) maintain that the mainstream DFV movement in Australia has been informed by a "carceral-colonial feminist agenda", one which simultaneously privileges white settler women while harming First Nations communities. Indeed, while it is outside the scope of this review, there have been a range of reforms across the nation that expand police powers and punitive measures (ostensibly to protect women) which ignore concerns voiced by First Nations women about the potential for harm, especially around misidentification (Longbottom et al., 2024). Additionally, many authors point to social work's complicity in the child protection or 'family policing' system as an extension of carcerality. Statutory child protection interventions, they argue, often pathologise social problems like poverty or trauma as individual failings, leading to the unjust removal of children (who are disproportionately First Nations), which contributes to the criminalisation and pathologisation of socially constructed problems like poverty and trauma (Dettlaff et al., 2023; Garcia-Hallett & Begum, 2022; Gruber, 2023; Jacobs et al., 2021; McMillan & Roberts, 2024; Murray et al., 2023; Sotiri et al., 2024). These systems frequently serve as pipelines to the criminal legal system. This phenomenon is encapsulated in the term 'crossover children', referring to the significant number of children and young people who move from child protection to the child justice system (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024). In Australia, social workers continue to remove First Nations children at vastly disproportionate rates, surpassing that of the Stolen

Generations (O'Donnell et al., 2019). This practice all but sentences these children to harmful cycles of institutionalisation and criminalisation due to the criminogenic nature of contact with the criminal legal system (Anthony, 2013). The escalating cycle of removal and incarceration of First Nations children has been rightly deemed a human rights concern (Boffa & Mackay, 2025), underscoring how deeply social work is entangled in carceral and colonial power structures.

The literature thus raises difficult questions about social work's contradictory identity: how can a profession supposedly grounded in social justice also be deeply implicated in state violence against marginalised communities? Many scholars critique the "legacy of reformist social work that has too often colluded with the logic and institutions of incarceration" (O'Brien et al., 2020, p. 9). Indeed, social work's historical roles in oppressive state policies – including the attempted genocide of First Nations peoples through the Stolen Generations – are not anomalies but part of its very foundations (Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis, 2020). While some scholars hold that this carceral co-optation of social work is an aberration that can be remedied through a recommitment to anti-oppressive practice, others contend that social work's carceral collusion is emblematic of the profession's originary function as an arm of the colonial/carceral state (Dettlaff, 2024; Frederique, 2024). From this more radical perspective, the institution of social work itself may need to be fundamentally reimagined or even abolished. Similarly, Murray et al. (2023) critique the persistent failure of social work institutions to meaningfully engage with anti-racism and decolonisation, despite a groundswell of grassroots work being done on these fronts. This disjuncture suggests that individual well-meaning social workers are constrained by structural forces that the profession as a whole has yet to confront. In advancing an anti-racist social work praxis, Brock-Petroshius et al. (2022, p. 231) concede that "many of the normative forms of social work practice must end". There is a growing recognition that tinkering around the edges will not suffice in effecting meaningful change. Indeed, reflecting on the post-2020 flashpoint, Kim et al. (2024, p. 9) note that this "animated an unprecedented demand for and by social workers to name, imagine, and manifest what some were beginning to call *abolitionist social work*". In other words, the events of recent years have inspired many social workers to openly question whether true social justice work might require letting go of traditional roles tied to the carceral state.

## **From Anti-Carceral to Abolitionist: Key Distinctions and Overlaps**

This ferment in social work has revealed important differences between anti-carceral and abolitionist frameworks, even though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Whilst there are always complexities and nuance throughout the literature, these stances largely diverge in terms of their scope of change, relationship with the state, and ultimate end goals. In broad terms, anti-carceral social work involves working (albeit critically) within existing state institutions to reduce harm – for example, advocating for decarceration, less punitive policies, and developing service alternatives that might shrink the reach of police and prisons. Anti-carceral approaches often focus on reforms that subtract from the carceral system without necessarily rejecting the system outright. By contrast, abolitionist social work is more philosophically and politically expansive and it ultimately aims to make policing, prisons, and related institutions obsolete and imagines a world beyond the colonial/carceral state entirely (Davis, 2024). As such, abolitionist social workers are inclined towards a politics of prefiguration, where communities actively create new structures of care and justice that render the current system unnecessary (Gilmore, 2021; Kaba, 2021). Crucially, abolitionist social work has a paradoxical relationship with the profession itself, as it is grounded in a vision of society where communities are self-sufficient in creating safety and wellbeing (Rasmussen & Kim, 2024). In other words, if the end goal of abolition is liberated communities taking care of one another, then the need for professionalised social work as a mediator or gatekeeper should diminish over time.

It is important to stress that these categories are not mutually exclusive. In practice, many social workers occupy a spectrum of positions between working for incremental reforms and pushing for transformative change (Ballantyne, 2024). Furthermore, some scholars caution against getting bogged down in semantic binaries (anti-carceral vs. carceral, reformist vs. non-reformist reform) at the expense of the larger vision – ending systemic violence and building a just society (Brockbank & Greene, 2022; Carlton, 2018; McGlynn, 2022; Terwiel, 2020). Likewise, Kim et al. (2024, p. 10) warn against “drawing... boundaries of what does and does not fit into a more rigid formulation” as this risks gatekeeping the movement. As Hunter and Wroe (2024, p. 313) illustrate through an auto-ethnographic study, even now

communities are finding imaginative ways to “create safety away from, and often in response to, professionalised forms of ‘care’”. These community-based practices reveal how care and accountability can happen outside of the state’s punitive framework and highlight the generative potential of abolitionist praxis – it is as much about building the new as it is about tearing down the old.

## **Centring Transformative Justice over Criminalisation**

Despite their differences, abolitionist and anti-carceral scholars alike overwhelmingly eschew traditional criminal-legal approaches to justice in favour of approaches grounded in transformative conceptualisations of justice. Angela Davis (2024, p. 21) argues that carcerality produces a stultifying effect on anti-violence work, as it “assumes that the violence will recur repeatedly, and that the only solution is to send the perpetrators to prison”. By doing so, these carceral approaches foreclose more imaginative and productive ways to address harm. In contrast, transformative justice frameworks recognise that interpersonal and state violence are interconnected as they are both rooted in structural oppression. As Kaba and Ritchie (2022, p. 257) put it, “oppression is at the root of all forms of harm, abuse, and assault”. Thus, responses to violence must address these root causes and not merely punish symptoms. Transformative justice is an abolitionist framework which rejects punitive, individualising responses to harm. Instead of relying on police, prisons, or courts, transformative justice promotes community-led interventions which prioritise healing for victim-survivors, accountability and growth for those who caused harm, and transformation of the social conditions that (re)produce violence (Barrie, 2020; Kim, 2024). Rooted in a politics of care, embodied in the abolitionist phrase ‘solidarity not charity’ (Spade, 2020), transformative justice involves collective organising, mutual aid, and a dual focus on dismantling systems of harm and actively building communities of care (Harrell, 2024; INCITE!, 2017).

While a comprehensive review of practical applications of transformative justice is beyond the scope of this article, Battle and Powell (2024)’s exploration of DFV responses is particularly instructive. The study, comprising of 131 interviews and an ‘abolition feminist methodological approach’, makes visible how pervasive carceral disillusionment is driving

communities to reimagine how they approach safety and justice. Notably, the data revealed how a significant number of participants are unintentionally gravitating towards transformative justice-based approaches even if they did not explicitly identify as abolitionists. The fact that people are unintentionally gravitating towards transformative practices suggests a broader intuitive understanding that the current carceral system is failing in achieving justice or safety for communities. It indicates a yearning for approaches that actually heal and prevent harm rather than perpetuating cycles of trauma. As social work increasingly grapples with its professionalised identity and troubled relationship with the carceral state, transformative justice appears to be a promising horizon – one that realigns social work with its core values of social justice and emancipation.

### **Transformative Justice in a Settler-Colonial Context**

With its commitment to community self-determination and decolonisation, transformative justice holds particular promise for addressing First Nations women's criminalisation and incarceration in Australia. Dominant carceral approaches have, overall, retraumatised First Nations women and reinforced colonial power dynamics (Fitts et al., 2023; Lindeman & Togni, 2022). In contrast, transformative justice approaches emphasise truth-telling, healing, and self-governance, which align closely with First Nations visions of justice. Beltran et al. (2024), through an Indigenous 'talk story' methodology, highlight that any abolitionist social work praxis must centre Indigenous worldviews and prioritise culturally safe, community-based interventions that encompass a holistic understanding of social and emotional wellbeing rather than relying on criminalisation. An abolitionist social work approach within this context would seek to facilitate resources and space for community solutions to be enacted by promoting First Nations self-determination while leveraging any available institutional power to support community demands.

It must be noted, however, that Australian scholarship and practice on transformative justice remain limited. There are only nascent examples of transformative justice in the Australian context, and they often struggle to ascertain legitimacy against the prevailing colonial-carceral paradigm (Howe, 2018). Moreover, the extant literature is overwhelmingly academic and the voices of women with lived experience of criminalisation and incarceration are

largely absent (although not completely – see Kilroy et al. (2023)). This gap suggests a crucial direction for future inquiry into an abolitionist social work praxis – centring the experiences and expertise of women who have been touched by both interpersonal and state violence. Additionally, further scholarship and experimentation are needed to adapt transformative and abolitionist models to Australia's context, with a specific focus on First Nations women's intersectional experiences of gendered and racialised violence and criminalisation. Only through intentionally decolonial efforts can an abolitionist social work truly be achieved in a settler-colonial setting.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the anti-carceral/abolitionist feminist social work literature is rich, complex, and deeply challenging – but it offers critical insights into addressing interlocking forms of violence. Galvanised by a long genealogy of revolutionary Black and Indigenous feminist thought, the 2020 racial justice uprisings sparked an international cultural reckoning. This has proven both confronting and inspiring for social work, as evidenced by the growing body of critical literature unsettling the profession's longstanding carceral complicity. Within this burgeoning scholarship, there is significant diversity of perspectives that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. Yet there are also clear convergences. The literature overwhelmingly recognises that carceral systems are inherently harmful and that society cannot continue its current course. Anti-carceral and abolitionist alike, these approaches share a feminist, intersectional analysis of state violence and insist on examining how power operates through institutions to oppress along the lines of race, gender, class, and other axes, and they call out those injustices. A consistent theme is the importance of decolonisation and of centring those most affected, including First Nations women. The exciting implication is that an abolitionist social work praxis – one committed to dismantling harmful systems and building alternatives – aligns intrinsically with social work's professed mission of social justice and emancipatory practice. Rather than abandoning social work values, abolitionist social work arguably realises those values in their most authentic form. By rejecting the false comfort of punitive, short-sighted measures, it redirects our attention to the arguably much harder but necessary work of healing communities and transforming society. Approaches like transformative justice are especially valuable frameworks for promoting First Nations and gender justice in

the Australian colonial-carceral state, where dominant approaches have failed. In embracing transformative, community-based strategies, social work can move from being an agent of surveillance and control to an ally in the struggle for liberation. The path forward will not be easy – it requires courage, imagination, and humility – but the literature makes plain that another world is not only possible, it is already being prefigured in the here and now (Roy, 2014).

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