Disability Justice Is an Essential Part of Abolishing Police and Prisons

Ableism forms and informs violence, oppression, and incarceration, yet it continues to be ignored by social justice movements

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This article is part of Abolition for the People, a series brought to you by a partnership between Kaepernick Publishing and LEVEL, a Medium publication for and about the lives of Black and Brown men. The series, which comprises 30 essays and conversations over four weeks, points to the crucial conclusion that policing and prisons are not solutions for the issues and people the state deems social problems — and calls for a future that puts justice and the needs of the community first.

While it is well known that policing in the united states was originally developed and later honed to control Black and Indigenous people's lives — our movement, labor, speech, ownership, family, and more — most are unaware that disabled people (and those labeled disabled) have always been primary among the carceral machine's intended targets. In fact, there is evidence disabled people have the most frequent and catastrophic encounters with carceral systems, and ableism has long been central to the nation's economic, political, legal, and social anatomy. Indeed, no social justice issue, including abolition, can be properly addressed without intentionally centering disability and ableism — and no social justice movement can be successful without disability justice at its heart.

Understanding Disability, Ableism, Policing, and Prisons

The majority of society has come to understand disability through a lens of whiteness, wealth, and other privileges that actively exclude the experiences of Black/Indigenous and low- and no-income people. Importantly, those with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by deprivation, violence and/or precarity—and indeed, these environmental factors and socioeconomic experiences are a cause, complicator, and even consequence of disability.

More importantly, one does not have to be disabled to experience ableism. Rather, ableism is a systemic oppression that allows society, systems, and individuals to assign value to people based on their appearance and their ability to re/produce, excel, and behave. Ableism evaluates people on their divergence (whether actual or perceived) from constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, and productivity. In the united states, these constructions are necessarily rooted, as is the country itself, in anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, misogyny, eugenics, colonialism, and capitalism.

Still, most people in social justice movements are unable to recognize ableism, and are unaware of just how ordinary yet lethal it is. But, policing, incarceration and institutionalization, labor exploitation and impoverishment, forced familial separation and deprivation of resources, climate and environmental injustice, and other state and corporate violence disproportionately affect disabled and other marginalized people while creating and exacerbating disabilities.

Disability justice is a requisite for abolition because carceral systems medicalize, pathologize, criminalize, and commodify survival, divergence, and resistance. The past and present connections between disability and all forms of carceral violence are overt and overwhelming. Disabled/neurodivergent people comprise just 26% of the united states population — but represent up to half of

the people killed by police, over 50% of the incarcerated adult prison population, up to 85%of the incarcerated youth population, and a significant number of those incarcerated in medicalized carceral spaces like nursing facilities, group facilities, and civil commitment, "treatment" facilities, and "hospitals." Whether under the pretense of "care" or "corrections," disabled people are highly represented in *all* carceral populations. History explains this phenomenon.

The united states government and corporations have always used constructed ideas around disability and criminality alongside constructed ideas about class and race to classify, criminalize, cage, and disappear its "undesirables." In this way, those in positions of power maintain the white supremacist status quo and create an exploitable labor pool while sowing discord within and across marginalized communities.

For instance, mainstream doctors and scientists diagnosed Black enslaved people who engaged in work stoppages, "property" destruction, or "theft" with *dysaesthesia aethiopica*, or "rascality"; similarly, mere thoughts of escaping enslavement was dubbed *drapetomania*. In both cases, these purported mental illnesses could only be had by Black people, and could only be "cured" by yet more unpaid hard labor and insufferable violence. Or take the 1880 census' "3D schedule," which described the so-called "dependent, defective, and delinquent classes" using terms rooted in eugenics — now considered disability slurs — to label people as: "idiots; insane inhabitants; deaf and dumb; blind; homeless children; inhabitants in prisons; paupers and indigent inhabitants in institutions, poor houses or asylums, or boarded at public expense in private houses." Forced institutionalization/incarceration and sterilization of people in all of these "classes" was not uncommon, and continues to this day — with carceral classifications premised on sex assigned at birth alone serving as a form of eugenics of people labeled criminal and/or disabled.

If this is not evidence enough, disenfranchisement of people with felony records and people with disabilities can often be found within the same section of law, the exclusion of one group often used to defend the exclusion of the other. What many now call collateral consequences of incarceration — being barred from voting or holding public office, even after release — are often still called "civil disabilities." Modern coronavirus criminalization, resisting arrest, and disorderly conduct laws, and police officers and unions using pseudoscience diagnoses of *excited delirium* to defend murder all help illuminate the unbroken chain between past and present carceral logics.

These warped and circular logics are used to justify horrific exploitation, experimentation, and extermination, and quell public outcry over what otherwise would be deemed indefensible theft of dignity, life, and liberty. The goal of incarceration has always been civic, social, economic, and physical marginalization and death of people who society deems unfit — the categories of "unworthy" being so intentionally broad and intersected as to be endlessly applicable. The nimble, timeless, and comprehensive nature of structural and systemic oppression demonstrate that power holders deeply appreciate how identities intersect and illustrate why intentionally intersectional responses to state violence are necessary.

When abolitionists do not have a strong disability justice analysis, systems of incarceration simply recategorize and redistribute people into other violent carceral institutions for other manufactured reasons — often based on purported health, criminality, and vulnerability. Knowing this, we are left no choice but to view carcerality much more broadly, through a disability justice lens. If we fail to fill this gap in our collective consciousness, ableism will continue to be used as an excuse for inflicting violence upon marginalized people under the guise of care, treatment, and rehabilitation.

The Difference Between Disability Rights and Disability Justice

Where disability rights seeks to change social conditions for some disabled people via law and policy, disability justice moves beyond law and policy: It seeks to radically transform social conditions and norms in order to affirm and support all people's inherent right to live and thrive. All social justice movements, then, must put the needs of disabled people — especially those at the margins of the margins — front and center. This work begins with unearthing and understanding the inextricable links between ableism and other systems of oppression.

Abolitionist movements must contend with how disability and ableism interact with carceral systems, and be committed to abolishing *all* spaces to which marginalized people are disappeared. Disability rights communities must begin to practice disability justice and disability solidarity, which demand a radical reorientation of our collective understanding of systems of oppression especially as related to disability, inter/dependence, and carcerality. And advocates for any other form of racial, environmental, and economic justice must work to understand how ableism interacts with racism, classism, and other oppressions and violence to create, perpetuate, and exacerbate inequities.

Such a comprehensive approach would challenge carcerality from its core. No longer could arbitrary concepts of class, criminality, or disability serve as a wedge between disability and abolitionists' struggles — for they are one and the same.

Like transformative justice and abolition, disability justice fundamentally alters our approach to everything we think and do. It provides meaningful and necessary context for marginalized people's responses to their lived experiences. It helps us politicize our disabilities, love ourselves and others

more fully, creatively dismantle oppression, and uplift people who are perpetually marginalized within our own communities and movements. It honors Black/Indigenous disabled wisdom, builds strong care networks, and develops community/cultural health and healing workers. It helps foreground the necessity of harm reduction and transformative justice, and supplants punitive responses that find refuge in carceral logics and spaces. And it develops the requisite relationships, knowledge, and tools to help us practice accountable advocacy across identities, communities, and movements.

Abolition depends on racial, economic, and healing justice — all of which depend on disability justice. We have an opportunity to bring to the fore experiences of a group that has largely been invisibilized in the abolition movement. Now is the time to challenge dominant narratives about disability, ableism, policing, and incarceration — to invite people to revisit everything they think they know about these interlocking systems of oppression, and to commit themselves to disability justice. Successful abolition strategies will weave communities together by highlighting the ties between oppressions that lead to seemingly intractable structural and systemic inequity.