

## Session One: Abolitionist responses to Covid 19

1. 'Ruth Wilson Gilmore on Covid-19, Decarceration, and Abolition: How should abolitionists respond to the coronavirus pandemic?'  
Ruth Wilson Gilmore, in conversation with Naomi Murakawa for Haymarket Books (2020)

Available from:

<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/blogs/128-ruth-wilson-gilmore-on-covid-19-decarceration-and-abolition>

2. 'Three Reasons Advocates Must Move Beyond Demanding Release for "Nonviolent Offenders"'  
Micah Herskind (2020)

Available from:

<https://medium.com/@micahherskind/three-reasons-advocates-must-move-beyond-demanding-release-for-nonviolent-offenders-2e76629e7d03>

3. 'The Lockdown: Arresting the Virus'  
Oonagh Ryder and Carl Cattermole with Kevin Blowe and Becka Hudson (2020)

Available from: <https://novaramedia.com/2020/04/03/arresting-the-virus/>

4. 'Mutual Aid Incorporated'  
Josie Sparrow in *New Socialist* (2020)

Available from: <https://newsocialist.org.uk/mutual-aid-incorporated/>

### Why these readings?

These resources are very recent and show the beginnings of abolitionist responses to COVID-19 and its various accompanying crises. They consider the impact of coronavirus on the criminal justice system, on wider society and on abolitionist or broader social justice movements.

The first, a talk given by Ruth Gilmore Wilson, explores her conceptualisation of neoliberalism as ‘organised abandonment’ in relation to the COVID-19 crisis and what this tells us about the state. This video invites us to consider the ways in which punitive systems, institutions and relations have been privileged in order to bolster an exploitative economic system, at the expense of our collective health and happiness.

The article by Micah Herskind offers a response to the reformist calls to release ‘low risk’ prisoners to prevent deaths from coronavirus. This article challenges assumptions about risk, harm and effective campaigning strategies, suggesting that abolitionists must approach ‘risk’ as a structural problem rather than an individual one. The article helps us to apply the learning about ‘non-reformist reforms’ from session two to the current context.

The podcast episode ‘Arresting the Virus’ looks at the Coronavirus Bill, brought in by the government in late March, bolstering police powers and stripping back rights in social care and mental health care. The hosts and guests compare the delayed and chaotic measures to protect public health with the relatively fast paced move to broaden the scope of criminalisation, and asks what this tells us about the function of the criminal justice system.

The last reading by Josie Sparrow looks at the broader opportunities for reshaping our society presented by the COVID-19 crisis, as well as capitalist attempts to co-opt these and restrict our collective imagination. In particular, this article asks us to consider how we can reimagine ‘care’ through the proliferation of mutual aid, moving away from the capitalist restriction of care to the family and towards tending to human needs.

### **Questions to discuss**

1. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes neoliberalism as ‘organised abandonment’, noting the increase in investment in criminal justice alongside the decrease in investment in healthcare systems in many countries. Do you think this frame is helpful for understanding the current situation in the UK & Ireland?
2. What are the problems with using mainstream definitions of risk and public safety when campaigning around prisons and the criminal justice system? Are there ways we can push for people to be released from prison without reinforcing the idea that ‘risk’ is part of an individual identity?



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3. Is increased policing of the general public necessary or effective in order to prevent the spread of the virus? What could be the long-term effects of increased police presence in our day to day lives?
4. Josie Sparrow asks us to use the idea and experience of mutual aid to expand relationships and systems of care beyond the family. How could this affect the way we think about and deal with harm as a society? What could the proliferation of relations of collective care mean for the ways in which we prevent harm, handle conflict and hold ourselves accountable for how we treat each other?