

## ABOUT ICOPA

The *International Conference on Penal Abolition* (ICOPA) is a bi-annual gathering of activists, academics, journalists, practitioners, people currently and formerly imprisoned, as well as survivors of interpersonal, corporate and state harm from across the world who are working towards the abolition of imprisonment, the penal system, carceral controls, and the prison industrial complex.

At these meetings, discussions amongst participants often focus around the following questions:

- What is to be abolished?
- How is abolition to be achieved?
- What alternative relations will emerge in a world without prisons, punishment and exclusion?

In the spirit of the politics of abolition, this initiative remains 'unfinished' and will change as abolitionist thought and action evolves.

### **The Founding of ICOPA**

With different groups engaged in prison abolitionist struggles across the world in the 1960s, 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, most notably in Europe and North America, the Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice in Canada determined that there was a need to establish an international forum where the politics and practices of prison abolitionism could be discussed. With the initiative of many and the efforts of conference founder Ruth Morris, the planning for the first International Conference on Prison Abolition began in 1982. A year later, the first ICOPA was held in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

### **Targets of Abolitionism**

#### ***The Prison***

At ICOPA I (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), it was resolved that the prison system is both a cause and a result of violence and social injustice. Throughout history, the majority of prisoners have been the powerless and oppressed. It was increasingly clear that the imprisonment of human beings, like their enslavement, was inherently immoral, and was as destructive to the cagers as to the caged. It is with this in mind that delegates called for alternatives to imprisonment.

#### ***The Penal System***

At ICOPA II (Amsterdam, Netherlands), it was widely acknowledged that the introduction of alternatives often did not reduce the use of imprisonment where they had been implemented and had extended the reach of the penal system in the community. This being the case, delegates agreed that ICOPA be changed from the International Conference on Prison Abolition to the International Conference on Penal Abolition. Participants also called for alternatives not only to imprisonment, but also to the penal system itself – what is sometimes also called the prison industrial complex – composed of retributive police, courts, imprisonment, and agencies responsible for community-based punishments such as probation and parole.

#### ***The Carceral***

At various ICOPA meetings, the continued expansion of imprisonment and the penal system, as well as the rapid expansion of carceral practices including surveillance and spaces of confinement such as immigration detention centres, have been the subject of abolitionist thought and action. These issues were the primary focus of the Colloquium on the Universal Carceral held at ICOPA XII (London, England) and continue to be an important part of the agenda of the conference.

## Why Abolition?

Research and experience has shown that imprisonment, the penal system, carceral controls and the prison industrial complex are used to suppress marginalized groups who are disproportionately targeted by these systems. Targeted groups include the poor, ethnic and racialized minorities, women and transgendered communities, communities of prohibited substance users and people defined as mentally ill.

The penal system and its practices are seen as a cure-all tasked with addressing complex social conflicts and harms in our communities that have been designated as 'crimes'. Seen in this light, responses and solutions to these issues are appropriated by the state in a way that systematically erodes the ability of people most impacted by them to have meaningful input in related 'justice' processes and outcomes.

From the first moment an act (such as consuming an 'illicit' drug) or status (such as not having legal documentation of citizenship) is criminalized, an enormous industry emerges of people profiting from that criminalization. That profit extends through the public, private and 'non-profit' sectors that materially benefit from their provision of security services, surveillance, policing, judicial proceedings, imprisonment, and community supervision. Because the institutions and practices that form the prison industrial complex (PIC) have a vested interest in the continued expansion of the penal system and other repressive tools they represent a substantial barrier to a world without prisons, punishment, and exclusion.

Prison, penal, carceral and PIC abolitionists are working towards building a society concerned with generating solidarity instead of criminalizing difference, building community instead of othering, and promoting self-determination instead of authoritarian forms of repression.

## Mission of ICOPA

1. Motivate the abolitionist community while increasing solidarity;
2. Provide a forum for the flow and exchange of ideas advancing abolitionist goals;
3. Contribute to the public sensitization and education on abolitionist issues;
4. Address questions of viable alternatives to the prison industrial complex; and
5. Acknowledge and involve those most affected by state repression, particularly the incarcerated and those connected to them.

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	<b>Locations</b>	<b>Conference Themes</b>
<b>ICOPA 1</b>	Toronto, Canada	How to Include All the Most Difficult Groups in the Community
<b>ICOPA 2</b>	Amsterdam, Netherlands	Theoretical Directions in Abolitionism
<b>ICOPA 3</b>	Montreal, Canada	From Prison Abolition to Penal Abolition
<b>ICOPA 4</b>	Kazimierz, Poland	Abolitionism in Eastern Europe
<b>ICOPA 5</b>	Bloomington, Indiana, United States	Aboriginal Roots and Radical Empowerment
<b>ICOPA 6</b>	San Jose, Costa Rica	Challenging Third World Governments to Adopt Abolitionist Steps
<b>ICOPA 7</b>	Barcelona, Spain	Penal Abolition, A Real Utopia
<b>ICOPA 8</b>	Aotearoa, New Zealand	Pathways to Penal Abolition
<b>ICOPA 9</b>	Toronto, Canada	Transformative Justice: New Questions, New Answers
<b>ICOPA 10</b>	Lagos, Nigeria	
<b>ICOPA 11</b>	Tasmania, Australia	Listen
<b>ICOPA 12</b>	London, England	Creating a Scandal: Prison Abolition and the Policy Agenda
<b>ICOPA 13</b>	Belfast, Northern Ireland	Abolition, Reform and the Politics of Global Incarceration
<b>ICOPA 14</b>	St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago	Inspiring Abolition: Strengthening Ourselves for Local/Global Influence