

Thinking about the Paul Manafort sentence as a prison abolitionist

Patrick Beadle is serving 12 years after police found medical marijuana in his car. His incarceration doesn't make me feel safer, and neither does Manafort's.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#)

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Paul Manafort after his 2018 arrest.

Last week, a federal judge sentenced Paul Manafort to 47 months in federal prison. The recommended sentence for the guilty verdict on eight counts of bank and tax fraud is between 19 and 24 years. (Yesterday, a different federal judge added three and a half years to Manafort's term, and the State of New York filed additional charges against him.)

The notion of Manafort serving a relatively short prison term puts a spotlight on judicial discretion, uneven sentencing guidelines, and the racialized character of prison terms. As I write this, Patrick Beadle, a black man, sits in prison serving a 12-year sentence after police found legally purchased medical marijuana in his car. He brought that marijuana into Mississippi, where he was stopped by police, tried, and

eventually convicted of trafficking drugs.

Neither Beadle's incarceration nor Manafort's makes me feel any safer. I am a prison abolitionist—not because I believe Manafort deserves better, but because I believe Beadle should not be in prison at all.

Angela Davis convinced me of the economic basis for the expansion of prisons, an industry that tripled in size through the 1980s federal programs to “get tough on crime.” I have seen all the evidence I need that prisons are an extension of chattel slavery, an evolving form of racial discrimination meant to prosper white people at the expense of black and brown communities. I cannot fathom the kinds of programs, communities, and possibilities we could cultivate redirecting the [\\$80 billion](#) a year the U.S. spends on incarcerating 2.3 million people.

When I hear the outrage at Paul Manafort's sentence it is often from those who believe that he ought to be in jail for much longer. The locus of justice is incarceration, the great American myth goes. I don't know anyone who thinks Manafort is a threat to society any more than they think Patrick Beadle is. Still, justice must be served, the laws protected—and enforcement through the threat of wasting away in the jail is the only way of preserving an institution that polices bodies in a free society.

Another mask to pull off from the Manafort conviction: our social order is not built upon the hopes of rehabilitation and the restoration of law-violators. Ours is an economy of punishment for the sake of justice-violation. Our carceral system is in the negative, a relief of justice.

Activist Mariame Kaba works on a different trajectory. Prison abolition, [she explains](#), requires two things happening simultaneously. One is the “dismantling of prison and policing and surveillance as they currently exist.” The other is “the building up of new ways of intersecting and new ways of relating with each other.”

She goes on to say that “the world you want to live in is also a positive project of creating new things.” In Chicago this looks like, [to take one example](#), peace circles that create communities around forms of conflict resolution embedded in cultures that pre-date policing. More generally, community leaders look at pressure points in their community that require forms of peace-making before they become flash points of violence.

Prisons are a sedative for communal restoration, an inoculation against creative ways to reknit social structures decimated by harm. It is simply easier to put people away. Prisons allow us, those outside the central mechanism of incarceration, to place the blame for recidivism on individual maleficence instead of on an institution built to exacerbate shame and instill mistrust. Prisons allow us to ignore the task of restoring right relationship to human community and to make justice someone else's problem instead. As long as we have prisons we will have stunted imaginations for justice.

Recently a pastoral colleague asked me what I would imagine communal restoration might look like for Paul Manafort. I know I cannot answer this question on my own. Instead, I would need a new world: people creating a form of life to help me unlearn the lessons of justice-as-prison and policing-as-safety that are foundational to my political imagination. As it is, these experiments in undoing and reclaiming justice are happening all around me. I have no doubt that a world without prisons, the world I long for, begins here.

This post was edited on March 14 to correct the annual cost of U.S. prisons.