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whether they actually are. Overcharging, extortionist cash bail, and horrible, often deadly conditions of pre-trial confinement in county jails all put pressure on potentially innocent people to make a guilty plea.

**COP
HOUSES =
SNITCH
HOUSES**

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actions and analysis from a bad place.

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Snitch House **DEMOCRATS**

...and Funds For Fires.

Snitch House Democrats

There's a bill working its way through the state legislature that will give police \$600,000 to establish snitch houses in many Wisconsin cities ¹. A snitch house, also called a COP or "community oriented policing" house, is a small police department that looks like a house and provides "wraparound services" like after-school programming to the neighboring community in exchange for improved community and police relations. By "improved relations," they mean snitching.

Senator Lena Taylor brought the [senate version](#) of this bill to a public hearing in Milwaukee alongside [some other trash](#) ². There, residents, including many of her constituents, [roundly opposed](#) it. Nevertheless, Taylor went forward, promoting it at a [press conference](#) and then seeing it [pass unanimously in the senate](#) on Tuesday, May 11.

Now the assembly version of the bill, [AB258](#), is coming up for a [hearing](#) in Madison on Tuesday May 18 alongside the assembly version of [SB119](#), the notorious "[fund the police](#)" bill. SB119 is an empty republican provocation with zero bipartisan support. Governor Evers will certainly veto it. The snitch house grant is a bigger threat because, without intervention, it will actually become law.



- 1 These are two articles from ABOLISHmke.com. Snitch House Democrats was published on May 17, 2020 and Funds for Fires on April 15, 2020. In the online version all the underlined words are links to sources and further information. Footnotes have been added to explain links that aren't made clear by the text.
- 2 ABOLISHmke article "Lena Taylor's trash: pretend police reforms", about a slate of bills that either make superficial changes to

Cops lie. They hope to use closer relationships with communities to gain information about locals, and to use that information to inflict violence on the people who live there. When you trust cops you buy into the false idea that cops protect and serve communities and that is the biggest lie. Honestly, we don't have anything new or special to say about this. Activists in Minnesota put together an incredible piece on community policing and it's great.

COP houses are a bad idea, cops are a worse one, and if they were just going to use their own already astronomical budget to "invest" in the "community" in this way, it would be a problem. Unfortunately, AB258 seeks a step further. It will allocate \$600,000 worth of grants to expand police funding. Every city with at least 60,000 residents, of which there are 11 in the state of Wisconsin, would be eligible for these COP house bucks. Putting aside that ridiculous threshold of 60,000 people (West Allis is the smallest city to get this grant at 60,025 and Milwaukee the biggest at 594,548) and always remembering that money is fake, this bill would add thousands to police funding for departments around the state. Communities are struggling to fund things they actually need (healthcare, housing, or just IDK just give us money instead??). ZERO dollars should go to police departments.

What's the plan of attack then?

[State Senator Lena Taylor](#) is the cosponsor, and so far state representative [Sylvia Ortiz-Velez](#) is also on board. We should be yelling at them to withdraw support, and at every other law-maker to oppose it. If this bill remains wildly unpopular with Democrats, Tony Evers will be less likely to sign it as a compromise with legislative Republicans. The more that our representatives hear us clamor for less money for cops, the less likely they are to forget that those are our demands.

You can call State Senator Lena Taylor here – 608-266-5810 and 414-342-7176 or email lena.taylor@legis.wisconsin.gov
You can Representative Sylvia Ortiz-Velez here – (414) 278-4269 or email Rep.Ortiz-Velez@legis.wisconsin.gov

You can also look up your Senator and State Rep [here](#) and contact them too!

Tell these politicians that we don't need grants for building trust with cops. Tell them we don't trust cops, and that we have no reason to. Tell them cops have too much money as it is. If they want to help, cops can give away some of that lots of money they already have. It's our money after all.

And also, they can quit their jobs!

The Racine police chief [made the same argument](#) back on June 1, the morning after the COP house burned. The chief's name is Art Howell, and he's one of those neighborhood kids who got recruited by Themla Orr to join the [largest gang in amerika](#)¹⁵. While shedding some sweet sweet police tears, Howell said, "I will tell you that anyone that is from this community would not do that to the Thelma Orr COP house."

On June 4, Howell had a couple people who live in nearby Mount Pleasant and Kenosha arrested. [Media reports](#) emphasized that they were "not from Racine." Then, June 11, Howell had a few more people arrested in connection with the fire, this time they were [Racine residents](#). There's also livestream videos showing dozens of people marching near the house when it lit up. The [crowd cheered](#). The community cheered.

The Journal Sentinel didn't talk to anyone who wasn't already a fan of Thema Orr and the COP house in the first place. Such people also must not be "part of the community." Same for the dozens of Racine residents who cheered the flames at this mini-police station that night, I guess. Looks like once we let police entrench themselves into our communities, they begin telling us who no longer counts as a member of the community.

So then, what is AB 258? It is a bill for eliminating people. It reduces "community" to mean police, police-likers, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and of course, those neighborhood developers who stand to profit. Hasn't amerika had enough elimination, already?

The second word that really should get a second look is "trust." What good comes from trusting the police? Well again, not to be reductive here, but there isn't any. It is not a good thing to trust the police. Is it wise to trust Van Wanggaard or Art Howell about what happened to the Thelma Orr house? They lied.

15 NPR report: To West Baltimoreans, 'The Largest Gang Is The ... Police'

There was clear, vocal opposition to snitch houses at the public hearing, and little support from anyone who isn't a cop or a politician. Prior efforts to build snitch houses have met strong local opposition in [Milwaukee](#) and [Chicago](#). Perhaps most emphatically, the program's pilot house in Racine, called the Thelma Orr house, was [burned](#) before a cheering crowd last summer³. At the public hearing, Senator Wanggaard insisted that the house was torched by "outsiders." All the people charged with the arson, however, live in Racine or [nearby](#)⁴.

Other measures to expand police funding have met strong local opposition in Milwaukee. LiberateMKE has mobilized many people to reduce police funding in the budget, stop the [federal COPS grant](#) and prevent police from pilfering the [amerikan recovery act](#) funds. At least in Milwaukee, it is clear the people do not want more money for police. We don't want cops using wraparound services to recruit snitches to do their neighbors dirty, either. Nevertheless, every single senator, including those representing Milwaukee, voted for the bill.

Last summer [protests against police exploded](#) across Wisconsin. Protestors polite enough to make demands were clear: police must be accountable, and [must be defunded](#). The marches continue to this day thanks to [The People's Revolution](#) and other groups. Over time, however, the power of the movement has been watered down. Governor Evers [turned down](#) the Black legislative caucus request for a Juneteenth special session on police reform, then called one after Kenosha police shot Jacob Blake and the city burned. His [handful of police reforms](#) only scratched the surface of protester's demands. The legislature shot them [down without debate](#), then formed a slow task force that [pretended to](#) recommend reforms⁵. Now, what's actually passing the legislature are bills that increase police funding and reduce accountability, the direct opposite of what we fought for.

We expect republicans to hear protestors shouting "defund the police" and respond by tossing cash at cops, but when it comes to snitch houses, senate democrats—some of whom marched or spoke at protests last summer—have joined in, approving \$600,000 in grants for police. If snitch houses get the same treatment in the assembly, Governor Evers will surely sign this bill,

- 3 YouTube video of protest where the Themla Orr house was burned.
- 4 Fox6 article about 2 people charged with the arson, one is from Mt Pleasant, a suburb of Racine.
- 5 Link is to Wisconsin Examiner about the task force on racial disparities, the article is about an email exchange between the leader of the task force and the republican assembly speaker, where the task force head "indicate[d] that the task force was being used by the Republican leaders to gain political points, labeling the issue of racial disparities a "political loser."



expanding police funding and setting up kindling for future fires across the state.

Predatory Policing

Even if the new snitch houses don't burn, connecting needed community resources to the nefarious machinations of police is harmful. It turns neighbors against each other and expands incarceration. Milwaukee police have already gone to great measures to recruit snitches. They've tried [coffee with a cop](#), then began targeting children by handing out [free ice cream](#) treats. They even delivered a [giant teddy bear](#) to one recently traumatized child.



The snitch house program would expand those predatory efforts. By partnering with service organizations to create a “wraparound” center with tutoring, video games, after-school and reading programs for kids, and financial or parenting advice for adults, the police create a bulwark in the middle of a neighborhood. From there they con people into trusting them, and begin to extract information.

People who grew up with [officer friendly](#) visiting our kindergarten classrooms might struggle with the idea that talking to police is harmful, so we're going to take some time really breaking down policing, and specifically “community-oriented” or snitch-recruitment policing.

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COP house program in Racine and how it turned the – in the words of one police officer – “Murder capitol of Wisconsin” into a far safer and lower crime area.

It sounds great! If... you don't look at the words closely. First it would be valuable to look at this claim about Racine being the “murder capitol of Wisconsin.” This has never been true, and is a typical myopic and narrative-driving lie that both the cops and politicians love to use. In fairness to that cop, homicide rates in Racine have fallen, but this is consistent with homicide rates over the entire state and country as well. To say these COP houses are the solution is a stretch.

Let's look at some of those other words that COP house-likers use! Next up: “community.” Community is a wonderful sitcom about 7 wacky friends who attend a Community College for 6 seasons together. It ran inconsistently from 2009-2015 and is not what we are talking about here. The word “community” in THIS context seems to mean the rich and powerful, or the regular rich, or in certain cases the middle class and powerful. For example, there are middle and even lower-class community non-profits who stand to gain power from good relationships with police. At any rate, the community that police want to know and be a part of, will never include homeless people, students, poor people, or criminalized people.

Not for nothing, but it really seems like “building community” means “building a community of police-trusters” and “lowering crime” really means “raising property values.” Maybe a big piece of these COP houses exist to push poor people out of neighborhoods, and make room for rich people to move in, so that landlords and businesses can make more money. I just wish that there was a word for [this](#)¹⁴.

Thelma Orr's Limited Community

This limiting definition of community was put on clear display during the [March 18 public hearing. A Racine](#) activist I could only identify as ReBecca testified against the senate version of AB 258. Her full remarks are [on YouTube](#). ReBecca described how last summer, Racine locals spoke out against the concept of COP houses by attempting to burn one to the ground! [Senator Van Wangaard](#), a former cop, dismissed ReBecca's excellent testimony by asserting that, “the individuals that torched that house were not from the community.”

14 Wikipedia entry for the word “gentrification”.

Funds for Fires: the COP House Grant Bill

“Assembly Bill 258 is ramming its way through with the support of Representatives Spiros, Armstrong, Brantjen, and Ortiz-Velez. This bill sucks cuz it gives the cops more of the money than they already have to do stupid shit that also sucks. So if these are your representatives you should call them and tell them this bill sucks, and that they suck and that they owe you money for wasting your own time with this phone call.

That’s the article, see you next time!”

Well that was the article I had written, but we sent it to our editors at the Abolitionist Archives HQ and they sent it back to tell us we should include more information and a better detailed plan of action. So let’s see what we can do with that bit of feedback!



Assembly Bill 258 is the Assembly version of the Senate Bill 124. The one about COP, or Community Oriented Policing, houses. From what we can tell from a few minutes of Googling it seems like this idea exists in its current form based on a program the City of Racine started in the 90’s. The first house was named after Thelma Orr, [a lady](#) who made it her business to turn neighborhood kids against each other by recruiting them to join the fuzz.

The COP house idea is that police departments get funding to buy up old houses in “bad” (poor) neighborhoods and turn them into mini police departments where the cops spend time with the community to build trust. Proponents of this type of community based policing will cite the

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The willingness of police to cut corners, [lie to people](#), and [coerce false testimony](#) has been frequently demonstrated⁶. Even when cops aren’t knowingly deceitful, they rely heavily on eyewitness testimony that has been [proven unreliable](#)⁷. Once someone is arrested and indicted, prosecutors open new opportunities for wrongful convictions. Only about 3% of all criminal cases [go to trial](#), while the rest are resolved through plea bargains where prosecutors use their [immense power](#) to coerce people into pleading guilty regardless of whether they actually are. [Overcharging](#), [extortionist cash bail](#), and horrible, [often deadly](#) conditions of pre-trial confinement in county jails all put pressure on potentially innocent people to make a guilty plea⁸.

Which brings us back to snitching. Prosecutors love to withhold favorable plea deals unless their target testifies against someone else. Again, the truth takes a backseat to securing convictions. Prosecutors and police interrogators often coach coerced witnesses, suggesting who to finger, or what details need to be filled in to strengthen their case. People end up saying whatever they think the interrogators want to hear.

A scope unknowable

It is impossible to know how many testimonies and convictions are based on lies because this whole process happens in secret. A false testimony will only come out in the cases when someone has managed to exonerate themselves. The [National Registry of Exonerations](#) documents 2,783 wrongful convictions since 1989, many of which involve snitch or eyewitness testimony. There could be many, many more that remain unproven. You can’t count what you can’t see, so we don’t really know.

What we do know is how upset the police get when people stop snitching. In 2005, a softer version of the well-worn adage “snitches get stitches”

- 6 Innocence Project: Why the Prevalence of Lying by Police is a Problem for the Innocent and The Appeal podcast interview with Alexandra Natapoff called The Problem With Jailhouse Informants
- 7 The Conversation article: New research reveals how little we can trust eyewitnesses
- 8 Vox: How bad prosecutors fuel America’s mass incarceration problem, Center for American Progress: What You Need To Know About Ending Cash Bail, and Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: A 26-year-old man died while in custody at Milwaukee County Jail

broke into mainstream fashion. People across the county, including celebrities and sports players started wearing t-shirts emblazoned with a red octagon that said “STOP snitching.” Alexandra Natapoff, a law professor at Loyola, wrote a great [article in Slate](#) examining the trend, the predatory police and prosecution practices that inspired it, and the reaction from law enforcement afraid of losing their witnesses. The shirts disrupted trials, Boston’s mayor banned their sale, and some departments promoted a “keep talking” campaign to counter it. John Chisholm [said](#) the “stop snitching” message has the potential to “destabilize the whole criminal justice system”. He and Milwaukee police pressured local sellers to [stop printing them](#).

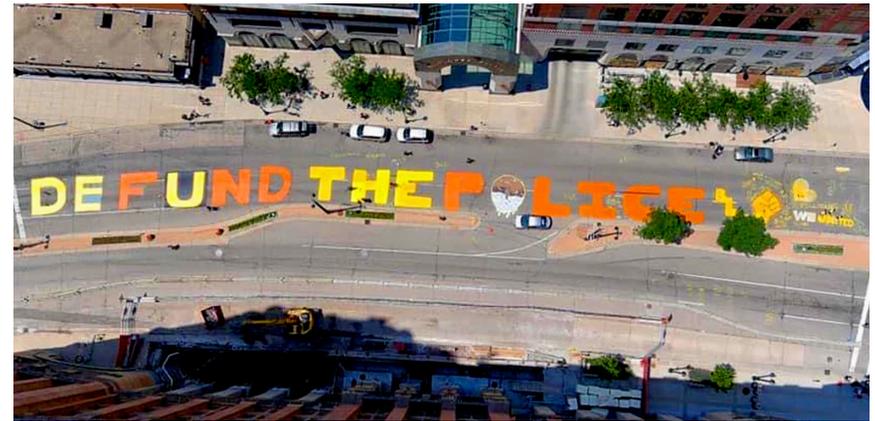


It wasn’t until 2009 that the federal government caught up with the trend and studied more effective responses. The office of Community Oriented Policing or COPS—a creation of Joe Biden’s [now regretted](#) 1994 crime bill—put out a report called, “[The Stop Snitching Phenomenon](#).” This report frames anti-snitch culture as a dire threat to police operations: “*The threatening nature of the stop snitching message intimidates witnesses and erodes trust between communities and police by undermining police efforts to involve communities in preventing and combating crime. This [...] impedes investigations, arrests, and convictions, and could severely erode the criminal justice system. This problem [...] is overwhelming for many police departments.*” While we can’t see

9 Insider article about 1994 crime bill, and Biden apologizing during 2020 campaign.

Milwaukee police need to hand out treats and teddy bears to children to salvage their reputation so they get back in our trust and hurt us again.

Elected officials who want to give police \$600,000 for houses and more bribes scattered around the city are complicit in this abusive relationship, this predatory deception. Seems it's time to remind them what we fought for last summer.



Attend the public [hearing](#) at the state capitol north hearing room (2nd floor) on Tuesday May 18 at 10 am. Contact your [assembly representatives](#) and members of the [committee](#) hearing this bill, especially the democrats: [Mark Spreitzer](#) (Beloit), [Samba Baldeh](#) (Madison), and [Sue S Conley](#) (Janesville). Talk to your friends and neighbors about protecting yourselves from the police. Film police and discourage people from talking to them. Take or host a “know your rights” training class. Read up on [transformative justice practices](#) and integrate them into your life.

Get ready to shut down any snitch house they try to build near you.

managed to maintain a [progressive reputation](#), despite declining to charge [Christopher Manney](#) for murdering Dontre Hamilton or [Joseph Mensah](#) for murdering Alvin Cole, and slow-walking Baron Walker's [parole release](#), although he still [took credit](#) for it¹². The state officials on the panel with Sered were speaking an entirely different language, reminding us that we cannot rely on the state to develop restorative justice. We need to do it for ourselves. First we need to get the police and their violent, self-interested priorities out of the equation.

From snitch houses to jailhouses

The worst harm and longest informant-based sentences tend to come from jailhouse snitches. People who are facing or serving time have a much stronger incentive to lie. Juries are also less likely to put someone away for decades based on the testimony a child gave cops in exchange for ice cream and video games. But that doesn't mean snitch houses aren't a piece of this horrific puzzle. Information gained through community-oriented policing may help police set up and threaten someone with lower-level charges. That person can be put through the coercive jailhouse snitch-recruitment wringer to secure more substantial convictions against others. A snitch house helps the police get the jailhouse snitches that get the big convictions.

Put simply, everyone has a very good reason to not talk to police. Police hurt people. In Milwaukee, they consume [nearly half](#) of the city budget while they're at it. In 2018, [the Vera institute](#) found that 79% of MPD's 18,349 arrests were for non-serious, non-violent offenses, and that Black people were arrested at a rate 3.56 times higher than white people. That means eighty percent of what MPD does is carry guns and [murderous intent](#) into conversations about burned out tail-lights, dime bags of pot, broken windows, and loosie cigarettes¹³. More than three out of four times they are aiming that violence at Black people.

We know that Joseph Mensah killed Alvin Cole, Antonio Gonzales, and Jay Anderson. Michael Mattioli strangled Joel Acevedo to death in the street. Sylvelle Smith was shot in the back. Derek Williams slowly suffocated in a squad car pleading for mercy. Christopher Manney murdered Dontre Hamilton for sleeping on a bench. Michael Vagnini and other cops sexually assaulted dozens, or perhaps hundreds of people in broad daylight under the pretext of body cavity searches for years. It is no wonder

12 ABOLISHmke's Questions not asked at the Turner Hall CMI Series, which confront DA Chisholm and DOC Secretary Carr

13 Mother Jones article on popular police trainer Dave Grossman's killology training.

for ourselves how heavily police departments depend on snitch recruitment, we can see that at least they view the practice as essential.

In its conclusion, the report suggests some now-familiar recommendations to restore snitch recruitment. It states: "[the] success of a police department's [...] program will be based [...] on its fundamental efforts to build trust in the neighborhoods, create partnerships with other criminal justice and social service agencies, and establish strong relationships with community groups and leaders." This is exactly what the community oriented police house grant seeks to do. It is a countermeasure to community self-defense through anti-snitching culture. That's why we call them snitch houses, and why they must be opposed.

The violence of snitch culture

Another thing we can know about policing is how badly it harms people caught in the web of false or mistaken testimony. [The Innocence Project](#), [ProPublica](#), [the Appeal](#), [Prison Legal News](#), and others have compiled reports with countless heart-rending stories of people across america going to prison because prosecutors and police used lying snitches to convict them.

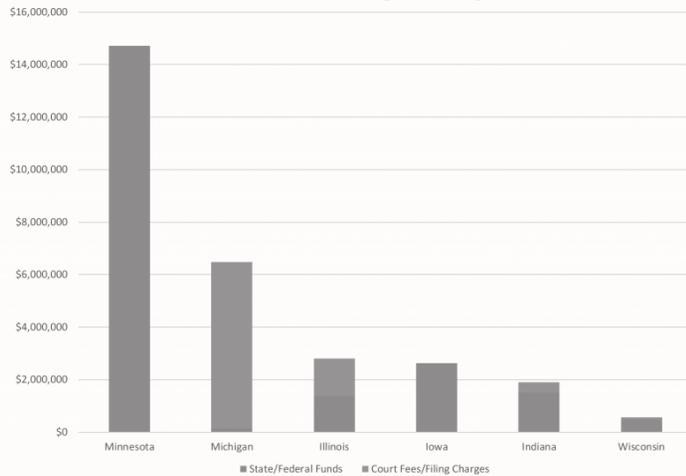
The practice is particularly harmful in Wisconsin, where legal protections are weak and jail or prison conditions are atrocious. [Until recently](#), Wisconsin public defenders were among the most underpaid and overworked in the country, making it easier for prosecutors to force people into bad deals with false evidence¹⁰. There is very little support after conviction for indigent people working on their appeals in Wisconsin, and this state ranks last in the region for [civil legal aid](#), making it harder for convicted people to sue over wrongful convictions and [horrible conditions](#) in prisons¹¹. For those who do manage to exonerate themselves, Wisconsin ranks [dead last](#) nationally in compensation for wrongful conviction.

Of course, district attorney John Chisholm isn't going to share how heavily he relies on overcharging and snitch testimony, but anyone from Milwaukee in regular contact with many incarcerated people or people on probation and parole knows anecdotal examples of unreliable informant testimony putting people away. The CLOSEmsdf campaign revealed [stories](#) of people held on informant testimony and enduring harsh conditions to force cooperation.

10 Journal Times: Evers signs bill boosting pay for state public defenders

11 FFUP's 2020 Torture in Wisconsin Prisons report.

Government Investment in Civil Legal Aid in Wisconsin and Neighboring States



Graph shows funding mechanisms with available comparative data. Source: Information provided by state IOLTA programs.

The National Registry of Exonerations lists [18 cases](#) of people falsely convicted in Wisconsin. The story of [Chaunte Ott](#) and [Sammy Hadaway](#) reveals the complex webs Milwaukee police can weave around people using snitch recruitment. In 1996, Sammy Hadaway was 20 years old and had cognitive and physical disabilities related to cerebral palsy. The police arrested him and threatened him with 80 years in prison for rape and murder, but offered him 5 years for armed robbery if he would testify against his friend Chaunte Ott for a crime he knew nothing about. During the fourth round of interrogations, after jailing and charging Hadaway, he got scared enough to tell them what they wanted to hear. By then, he had learned most of the details about the crime from the interrogators themselves, and made up the rest. Ott was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

A third man, Richard Gwin, who is now deceased, had implicated both Hadaway and Ott after being implicated himself by a fourth man. Gwin later recanted his testimony, but Ott didn't get relief until DNA evidence linked an unrelated fifth man to the crime in 2007. Even then, Ott's conviction was overturned, but the DA's office persisted in attempting to retry him until June 2009 when they finally gave up and dropped the charges. Ott received Wisconsin's measly \$25,000 compensation for losing the prime years of his life, ages 21 to 34, on a coerced lie. Then he spent six years fighting a wrongful conviction lawsuit, which he eventually won.

By the time the DNA evidence came out, Hadaway had served his armed robbery sentence, but he still had a false felony conviction on his record. He spent years fighting the courts to get his plea vacated, which didn't happen until 2018. He has also [filed a lawsuit](#) against Milwaukee and the police who interrogated him, which is currently pending. These are just a few of the lives ruined by Milwaukee police and prosecutors. The public knows and trusts Hadaway and Ott's stories because they were able to prove their innocence. Innocent people convicted without DNA evidence, or who are unable to get legal assistance are far less likely to recover.

Stories of exonerations are often framed as regrettable mistakes or side effects of an otherwise necessary system, but police and prisons are not necessary. Remember, police "solve" less than half of the crimes they investigate, and even for cases where they do capture the actual perpetrator, all they do is harm that person. After months or years of traumatic confinement and violence, people return to the community worse off than they would have been without police contact. Alternatives to police are possible. Given how ineffective police are for public safety, it should be no surprise that these alternatives are often advanced by the people most likely to be victims of crime: Black women from low income communities. [Mariame Kaba](#) from [Project Nia](#), [Ruthie Gilmore](#), co-founder of [Critical Resistance](#), and the women of [INCITE!](#) are survivors of violent crime, and they are on the forefront of building alternatives like restorative or transformative justice to police and prison.



A renowned advocate of [abolition](#) and effective practitioner of restorative justice through [Common Justice](#) named Danielle Sered recently joined a [virtual panel](#) from [Confronting Mass Incarceration](#) held in Milwaukee. DA Chisholm was also on the panel, but [we're doubtful](#) that this prosecutor will allow programs that take his office out of the equation. He has