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Building a Rural Abolitionist Feminist Movement: Community Not Cages

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REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AS DISMANTLING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON NEXUS

Tova Strange (she/her)
Mary Jo Klinker (she/they)

Image Description: "Kids Not Cages: stop the school-to-prison pipeline" written surrounding three silhouettes of children reaching out to a cage with a rainbow-colored background.
Methodology

• Feminist Ethnography and Participatory Action Research
  • 6 Ethnographic interviews
  • Local newspaper archive
  • Activist speeches

• "If community organizing wouldn’t have been in place, cops would still be in school, they would have built a bigger jail. They would have had a juvenile holding center to place kids regionally. They would have torn down the rec. I mean, that's all a lot of harm that we stopped in our community, a lot." (Katie, Community Not Cages)
Theoretical Frameworks

• Reproductive Justice
  • Sister Song, 1997

• Abolition feminism
  • INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans people of Color Against Violence, 2000

• School-to-prison Nexus
  • Kaba & Meiners “Arresting the Carceral State,” 2014
July 2020
MN Department of Human Rights investigation documents police harassment in Winona Area Public Schools. After organized community pressure police are removed from schools.

April 2021
Stopped the building of a juvenile detention center.

September 2022
Stopped Cop Block, a plan to demolish a youth rec center, and replace it with a three-story police and fire station, with a gun range and heated garage for police cars.

"Power tripping, they want to go where the money is made. And that push of that school-to-prison pipeline. And make sure that it's already not much in this community for kids to do. And it's like, let's take away the East End Rec. ... Let's keep aggravating these kids. And then hey, let's build this prison so we are going to aggravate these kids... And I felt like that rally, the push to remove cops from schools, was like we angered them. And they didn't want to be defeated. So [next] we want to have talks of building this detention center." (LaShara, Founder of Our Voices)
Disrupting the School-to-prison nexus

- During the 2017-2018 school year black students made up 5.88% of the district’s population but received 30.34% of all disciplinary actions. As of the 2018-2019 school year... black students still 7 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students in WAPS. —“Unlearning Racism in the School System” Channel 8, 2020

- June 2020: Recognizing Racism in WAPS: BLM Rally & Storytelling

- “I’m appalled that it’s taken this long for the WAPS, with it being such a small town, that it hasn’t taken action swiftly... I only think the police are there because there are Black kids that go there.” — Vineka quoted in Klinker “WAPS must fund a Black liaison” Winona Post 2020

Image Description: A screenshot from Instagram “decolonialatlas” picturing a light gray map of the continental United States with dots and black lettering naming cities where police have been removed from schools.
Stopping a Juvenile Detention Center

“If they’re going to spend all this money to build it, they are going to ensure that it’s full, [to the point where] it’s at least making the money back. We’re not going to have an empty juvie facility in town.” Tova Strange, Community Not Cages, quoted in Sent Away “Winona Post 2/24/2021

Reproductive Justice: centering the voices of children in safety Activity:

What would you fund with $5 million?
- water park
- kids center
- Update the playground at the rec center
- Kids are on a streets, give us something to look at
- Build a place where they can go and study
- spend money on books for kids

Image description: States “Imagine” (rainbow-colored font and “People’s Budget” Various handwriting of desired community resources.)
Whose Safety?

Cops in Schools

- “to have a police officer in the school, it’s like, what would be the cause to tase or shoot a student in school, you don’t need that....” (WAPS student, 2016)
- “I’ve heard stories of how he would try to intimidate the students. During lunchtime, he would stand near their tables. He would always point at them and just say little things to them. And it got to the point where the kids were in fear of him being there. They did not want police in the school. And that was another reason why I did want to have the meetings once I’ve started our voices at the school because I feel like these kids are not feeling safe.” (LaShara, Our Voices Founder)

Police Gun Range Proposal (2022)

- "You know, I never figured that out because in my brain I thought, How many shootings do we have here? And I thought, What the fuck are you aiming at?" (Darryl, community coalition member)

Image description: banner in front of truck stating "Black and Brown Kids Don’t Lie"
Abolition Feminism: Parenting Kids in a Safe and Healthy Environment

“My feminism does not drive me into the arms of the state, but even further from it.” (Susan Saxe qtd in Kaba, We Do This ’Til We Free Us 115)

“Like I want, first of all, my kids not to grow up with the same fear and intimidation I have.” (Freddie, Community Not Cages)

“Okay, this has to change because these kids are here 7 hours a day and as a parent, I expect that if my kids go to school, they have somebody that cares for them or that's looking out for them, or you know. I want for my kids. I want that for all the other kids..” (Maurella, Residents Organizing Against Racism)
Mutual Aid as Rural Feminism

• “I like to think of this type of work as like a 5-course meal. Obviously. It’s easy to come sit at the table and be like wow, this is such a big table, and it looks so great. But it’s like, do you want to go to the kitchen? You want to go see where the magic happens? Yeah. Because after we eat, guess who’s going to do the dishes?” (Alexis, Our Voices and Community Not Cages)

• “One of the most common things we do to care for our families, friends, and communities is feed them. We grow food, cook together, and eat together because this feels natural and necessary….When we would hold our meetings at the park, I would always…make sure to bring food…kids need snacks if we’re going to get any work done.” (Katie, Community Not Cages)