

introduction to

prisoner letter writing & support



Detroit Anarchist Black Cross

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why we write to prisoners

The purpose of prison is to isolate people from interaction with the outside world. When we write to prisoners, we help keep their links to the outside world open. This an act of defiance against the carceral state's attempts at destroying these freedoms.

Every day, the carceral state targets people who have made our social movements possible - protesters, organizers, reporters, whistleblowers, strikers, rioters, members of revolutionary groups. We write, because they have fought for our liberation, and we must fight for theirs.

all prisoners are political

Like many Anarchist Black Cross groups, we share a strong sense of affinity with those who have been targeted for explicitly political acts. However, our support does not begin and end there. We recognize that **all prisoners are political**.

Some prisoners were arrested for politicized acts of resistance against inequalities like capitalist greed, wage slavery, environmental injustice, sexual and gender based violence, systemic racism... (the list goes on). Other prisoners were arrested simply because they had to face the horrors perpetuated by these inequalities every day of their lives.

Every prisoner is political, because every prisoner is a prisoner of class war. We believe in the release of all prisoners and the total abolition of all prisons.

*Until all are free, we are all
bound by chains.*

Total abolition is the only answer. Apart from the dehumanizing cruelty of incarceration, we simply do not believe that our system, which by design upholds class-based violence and oppression, can ever be entrusted with serving justice. The conviction of Derek Chauvin was not the system working; it was the system failing itself.

who to write to

The United States holds over 2.3 million people captive. There is no shortage of people who deserve to be reminded that the outside world has not forgotten them. Here are some groups that can help you find someone to write to:

Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity (michiganabolition.org) publishes a quarterly online newsletter featuring written works primarily from prisoners in Michigan, and encourages readers to reach out to the authors published in the newsletter.

Black and Pink (blackandpink.org) is a pro-abolition, LGBTQ+ focused prisoner support organization that has a great penpal program. From their website, you can view lists of prisoners seeking penpals and match yourself with someone.

The Jericho Movement (thejerichomovement.com) is a campaign that focuses on community activists and revolutionaries from movements of the 1960s and '70s, with lists of many who are still incarcerated today.

Anarchist Black Cross Federation (abcf.net) has a master list of prisoners who fall under their definition of Political Prisoners or Prisoner of War (PP/POW) - "someone who is in prison as a result of conscious political activity on the street."

A.B.O. Comix (abocomix.com) is a collective that helps give a platform to incarcerated LGBTQ+ community members through art and zines. They have a section on their website with pen pal bios.

Power Blossoms (powerblossoms.org) is an abolitionist organization that supports queer and trans people through letter-writing and birthday card programs. You can use their website to send a birthday card to an incarcerated person.

You can also reach out to a local Anarchist Black Cross, prisoner support, or prison abolition group in your area, and ask if they have any letter writing needs or suggestions. Many of these groups also host letter writing sessions and can help you get started.

Popular websites such as writeaprisoner.com, prisoninmates.com, and inmate.com can also be useful in finding someone to write to and support. However, note that these websites are for-profit and charge incarcerated people to post their profiles. They also make a point to verify and disclose what people have been convicted of. This is in direct conflict with our values as prison abolitionists. We do not believe in profiting off of prisoners or validating what the carceral state does to unfairly target people.

We want to build strong connections and networks with our friends held captive by the state, so that no one feels as if they must rely upon for-profit companies for support.

some basics

So you've found someone to write to...yay! Before you begin writing your letter, there's just a few logistical things to address:

First, it's safest to stick to black or blue ink on plain white paper, mailed in a plain white envelope.

However, a quick check on the prison's mail rules can take your letter a long way! Prisons pretty much never allow crayon, glitter, stickers, tape, glue, paint, lipstick, bodily fluids, stains, or perfume in the letters... but some may allow colored ink, colored pencils, printouts, photographs, postcards, or greeting cards. So check it out!

Second, the envelope and contents of your letter can often get separated (or even stolen by prison guards), so you'll want to ensure that everything that you're sending makes it to its intended recipient. Number the pages, write their legal name and inmate ID # on each page and enclosure, and include your name and return address in the letter. It can also help to list everything you've enclosed at the top of your letter.

Last, make sure you include your return address on the envelope, as this is often required. If you don't have a reliable return address, many prisoner support groups offer a PO Box for this reason (info on how to use ABCD's PO Box later).

what to write

It's normal to feel intimidated or anxious about writing to an incarcerated person for the first time. People express this to us all the time, and we understand - you've never met the person before, you don't know what to say, you're not sure what things are okay and not okay to talk about... and cops might read your letter.

Just keep in mind that prisoners are regular people like us, and everyone is different. We can't tell you exactly what to write. We can only encourage you to be yourself so that diverse and genuine connections can be built. We can offer some general tips to help you get past any initial writer's block, though:

1. Introduce yourself - tell them your name, location, how you found out about them, and, if it's relevant, what group you're affiliated with.
2. Share some updates on what's going on in the outside world, especially things that are significant to you. Don't be afraid to give lots of details - letters are one of few links to the outside world that many prisoners have, so words and stories that can evoke vivid sounds, smells, tastes, images, and feelings can be very impactful.

3. Be upfront about how often you'll be able to write. It's fine if you're only intending to send a single letter of support, just be clear so you don't set up an expectation of writing regularly if you can't realistically commit to that.
4. If you plan to correspond regularly, ask questions like you would with anyone else you were getting to know. What's their favorite food or movie? What are their interests?
5. If you're not great with words, share a poem or some lyrics that you like. Or draw something! Or, if the rules permit, add articles or photographs; you can write in some commentary to personalize them.

what *not* to write

As we mentioned... all letters are subject to thorough review by law enforcement, so common sense is key. Anything that upsets a cop could create negative consequences for you and who you're writing to.

Plans to destroy the prison-industrial complex are great, but they don't belong in documents that will be held and read by police, prison officials, ICE, the FBI, courts, or any other agencies of the carceral state!

We also don't recommend romanticizing people for having to face the cruelties of the prison system in their everyday lives... it can come off as condescending. Remember why you're doing this - to build a real connection, not to valorize someone as a distant and exotic martyr. Other than that... just don't be rude or vulgar. Stick to your general standards for mutual respect and decency, and you'll do great!

making a commitment

"I don't know if I can commit to it" is a hesitation that people often share with us when they feel uncertain about getting involved in letter writing and support.

Yes, there is some type of commitment involved, but when you write to an incarcerated person, you are simply opening the door to making a new friend - it's not any more of a commitment than you might make with any other friend. Friends enjoy talking, listening, and laughing together; friends help each other through life's everyday obstacles. When you write to an incarcerated person, it is the same experience, just on a slightly different medium. You support each other, you share boundaries, you build real connections, and you have realistic expectations.

Ultimately, we must ask ourselves why we differentiate making friends with incarcerated people from making friends with people in the outside world. Is our hesitance rooted in the criminalization and stigmatization of people by the state whose violence we oppose?

We must also remember how incarceration attempts to deny people the ability to experience honest relationships - on top of attempting to cut contact with the outside world, prisons also create hostile and manipulative environments inside that push people to have to constantly fend for themselves and have difficulty trusting others.

Incarcerated friends often let us know that having friends on the outside is so important, as it lets prison officials and staff know that they're being watched, which is something they typically don't expect. One small phone call or email to a prison can often have a huge impact on someone else's wellbeing.

We may not achieve total abolition in our lifetimes, but supporting incarcerated people is still an act towards abolition, and one where we as individuals do have the direct ability to make a huge difference. Building genuine connections with incarcerated people is a radical act, and one which can be done with complete autonomy - you build relationships in your own time, at your own pace, and within your own boundaries. We don't think folks should feel intimidated by the commitment.

Meaningful solidarity means long-term investment in these struggles, prisoner penpal correspondences which lead to REAL friendships, and always renewing your commitment to work for the oppressed.

- Jennifer Rose, aka Babygirl
from "What Is Prisoner Support?" zine

tools for support

If you do build a connection with someone whom you have written to, you may want to seek out other ways to support them. There are many resources available and ways to provide additional support - some good, some bad. Eventually, you may have to use some of the terrible services that the prison-industrial complex forces incarcerated people and their loved ones to purchase in order to maintain contact. We provide this guide to help you get acquainted with some of the basics.

JPay

JPay is a privately-owned company that turns huge profits by monopolizing services that are essential to people's survival in prison. JPay charges prisoners and their families to send emails, make phonecalls, and add money to commissary funds on their platform.

As mentioned, we want to build strong networks where no one would have to rely on exploitative companies like these for support. However, like many products of capitalism, we do end up having to use JPay's services, and we think that's okay, as long as we actively consider ways to counter how these companies exploit prisoners and take a lot of money from poorer families.

So, with that said, let's share some tips on how to navigate the capitalist monster known as JPay. First and foremost, it is **very** rudimentary - their business model isn't focused on user-friendliness, and it shows.



When you first log in, make sure to select the person you intend to contact. Unless you change it, this selection will persist for the entirety of your session on the site.

For example, if Friend A is selected, but you navigate to your inbox and read an email from Friend B, then when you hit "reply", you will actually still be sending a message to Friend A.

In some prisons, people are able to access tablets to send emails back; in others, they only receive a printout of the email and would have to respond by postal mail. If that is the case, you should include your return address in your email.

One way to check if the prison allows people to write back via email is if "Include a pre-paid reply for the Offender" is an available option at the bottom of your Compose email box - this option won't be available for those that aren't able to send emails.



Emails are sent through virtual "stamps" that you purchase.

Stamp prices vary depending on the prison, and you will have to buy separate stamps for each prison. Stamps cost about 25 to 50 cents each, sold in bundles. It takes one stamp to send an email, plus one additional per attachment.

Everything that happens on JPay is still reviewed by prison guards who may withhold content without precedent.

If you send emails, photos, or money through JPay, it's good to follow up and make sure they were received - sometimes you'll have to snail mail a separate letter to check on this. Also, anything sent on JPay becomes JPay's intellectual property, so better to keep your more brilliant works to snail mail!



JPay has a phone app that is slightly more user-friendly, but it won't save your email drafts if you exit the app. Also, note that JPay features can vary by prison. If a feature is missing from your interface, then it means it simply is not available for the prison of the inmate you have selected.

There are many other private vendors similar to JPay, such as Securus, CenturyLink, and CorrLinks. Sometimes people prefer these platforms over snail mail, as messages can get through faster. So use them, but understand that they are pretty much all awful - terrible

interfaces, unexplained site errors, hidden fees everywhere, exhaustive verification processes, and you'll probably wonder if they were intentionally designed to make things difficult. The answer is yes. The profit-mongering carceral state knows no bounds.

Why is my friend's mailing address in Florida?

You may want to write to a friend in Pennsylvania, but for some reason their mailing address is listed as a PO Box in St. Petersburg, FL. This is the address of Smart Communications Holding, Inc., another profiteer in the prison-industrial complex. They help prisons increase surveillance on communications between incarcerated people and the outside world under the guise of their "high-tech mailroom processing" service. All mail is sent to a central facility, scanned, and sent electronically to prisons, where the recipient either views the mail on a tablet or receives a printed copy. That means that every correspondence is kept on electronic record. That also means that the recipient never receives their original letter or card. Over 100 facilities across 20 states use their services.

Books to Prisoners

Books to Prisoners is a decentralized network of abolitionist groups who support prisoners by sending free reading material directly to them. Prison libraries often have very limited selections and can be difficult to access, making Books to Prisoners organizations an important resource for those on the inside. Some states require prisoners and their loved ones to purchase books from corporate booksellers (e.g., Amazon, Barnes & Noble) or pay for eBooks through prison communication companies (the same ones who profit from prisoners' phone calls) but many will accept packages from any entity with Publisher & Distributor status.

Books to Prisoners groups can obtain this status through official ties with local bookstores or universities, allowing them to send packages of free books from their donation-based libraries. Requests most often come as letters from prisoners, but these organizations will also send books on your behalf to someone you know on the inside. We recommend seeking out a Books to Prisoners organization in your state if you are looking to supply a loved one with reading material suiting their interests.

State Resources

Occasionally, there are resources put out by the beasts that maintain the prison-industrial complex that are worth knowing about, despite the fact that they tend to be intentionally vague and difficult to navigate. For example, every two years, people incarcerated in Michigan can apply for a pardon or commutation from the Michigan Parole Board. However, the majority of incarcerated people in Michigan do not apply. Applications are open-ended, vague, and often left to defense lawyers to figure out. Most incarcerated people do not have access to expensive attorneys. It is our hope

that enough collective knowledge and support will increase access to these resources. In any case, we feel that it is always worthwhile to contact state parole boards in support of clemency applications or early release of parole-eligible people just so they are aware of the magnitude of outside support that incarcerated people have. And we always support clogging up the inboxes and phone lines of Governors, Attorney Generals, corrections offices, and local Congressional leaders to demand action for abuses of power and inhumane prison conditions.

Noise Demos

Raising a racket outside of a prison can be a meaningful way to show solidarity with incarcerated friends. Historically, prison abolitionists have marked New Year's Eve with noise demonstrations to let incarcerated friends know that there is a movement on the outside against prisons and the world that creates them, but you can organize a noise demo anytime. Just gather as many folks as you can and bring banners, drums, buckets, pots and pans, horns, loud voices (etc), and LOTS of energy!

local resources

PO Box

If you do not have a reliable address for receiving mail and stay in the Detroit area, you are welcome to use ABCD's PO Box as your return address. Just notify us that you'll be using it, so we know where to contact you if we receive a response for you. From there, we can scan and email, arrange for local pickup, or forward by mail.

[Your Name] c/o ABCD
PO Box 32087
Detroit, MI 48232

Abolition & Prison Support Groups in Michigan

[Hamtramck Free School](http://hamtramckfreeschool.org) hamtramckfreeschool.org

[Liberate! Don't Incarcerate](http://liberatedontincarcerate.org) liberatedontincarcerate.org

[Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Support \(MAPS\)](http://michiganabolition.org) michiganabolition.org

[No Detention Centers in Michigan](http://nodetentioncentersmi.org) nodetentioncentersmi.org

[Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration \(MI-CEMI\)](http://michigancollaborative.org)

michigancollaborative.org

[Michigan Liberation](http://miliberation.org) miliberation.org

[Midwest Books to Prisoners](http://midwestbookstoprisoners.org) midwestbookstoprisoners.org

friends

The people listed below are friends of ABCD, and we encourage anyone to write to them. Please check online to learn more about them and to make sure addresses are up-to-date.

Marius Mason supportmariasmason.org

Marius Mason #04672-061
 FCI Danbury
 Route 37
 Danbury, CT 06811

Sean Swain seanswain.org

Sean Swain #A243205
 OSP Youngstown
 878 Coitsville-Hubbard Rd
 Youngstown, OH 44505

Corrine Mackenzie

Corrine Baker #706127
 Women's Huron Valley
 Correctional Facility
 3201 Bemis Road
 Ypsilanti, MI 48197-0911

Donnell Miracle

Donnell J. Miracle #234256
 Women's Huron Valley
 Correctional Facility
 3201 Bemis Road
 Ypsilanti, MI 48197-0911

Casey Brezik

Casey Brezik #1154765
 Algoa Correctional Center
 8501 No More Victims Road
 Jefferson City, MO 65101

Greg Curry gregcurry.org

Greg Curry #213-159
 Toledo CI
 2001 East Central Ave.
 Toledo, OH 43608

Comrade Kado

Noah Coffin #01795167
 Ellis Unit
 1697 FM 980
 Huntsville, TX 77343

Summer K. Breeze

Laderic McDonald #1290182/3C.205
 SECC
 300 East Pedro Simmons Drive
 Charleston, MO 63834

Comrade Easley

David Easley #A306400
 Toledo CI
 2001 East Central Ave.
 Toledo, OH 43608

**For me, prisoner support isn't "prisoner support";
it's more like mind and identity reclamation.**

**I exist on the other side of the fence, and I have
meaning out there, which gives me meaning and
purpose for getting up in the morning.**

**I care about those people and they care about me;
they make it possible for me to participate in
changing the world.**

**These people have reduced prison and
captivity to a question of geography.**

**I happen to be on this side of the fence, which is
really meaningless, since my physical body isn't
what makes me dangerous to our common enemy.**

**In many important respects, my physical
captivity has become of practical irrelevance.**

People out there have made that true.

Anarchist Prisoner Sean Swain
Serving a life sentence since 1991



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