

BREAKING DOWN CARCERAL SOCIETY AND BUILDING ANOTHER WORLD

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OVERVIEW: THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

The prison industrial complex (PIC) describes the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as SIMPLE solutions to COMPLEX social, economic, and political problems (*Critical Resistance*). To paraphrase Angela Davis, prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear people. What we understand today as “mass incarceration” cannot be solved through *less* incarceration, or reform. We must then ask: why do people consent to human caging? How is it that through the 1990s into the early 21st century the U.S. locked up more people than any country has ever done in history?

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world. The growth of the PIC is linked to: 1) the power and presence of radical liberation movements during the 1960s and 70s and subsequent caging of dissent, 2) the neoliberal turn that disappeared millions of jobs, and 3) the criminalization of everything under the sun, from joblessness and houselessness to mental health and drug use. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, thousands of laws were passed to criminalize people under the banner of law and order (e.g. the war on drugs). According to a Center for Economic and Policy Research 2010 report, crime (itself a social construction) can explain only a small portion of the rise in incarceration between 1980 and the early 90s, and *none of the increase* in incarceration since then.

- Nearly 2.5 million people in the U.S. are currently caged (including jails, prisons, youth facilities, migrant detention centers, and military prisons).
- The number of people swept into the criminally unjust system grows to 7 million, counting people under correctional control (probation & parole).
- Over 65 million people have criminal records and are thus subjected to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives.
- The majority of folks targeted for cages are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), working-class or poor, unhoused, queer, trans, and other identity categories subjected to structural oppression.
- As Michelle Alexander notes in *The New Jim Crow*, if we hope to return to the rate of incarceration of the 1970s, *we would need to release approximately 4 out of 5 people currently behind bars today.*
- Since 1972, the prison population has nearly quintupled in the U.S.
- People sent to prison for “nonviolent offenses” (e.g. drug violations) increased 975% between 1982 and 1999.
- Abolitionists do not just focus on those who’ve done time for “nonviolent offenses,” but are deeply invested in developing alternative ways of redressing harm. We must challenge the violent/nonviolent dichotomy.

- Contrary to popular belief, private prisons are not the driving force of incarceration. Huge amounts of money slosh through and are extracted from the PUBLIC (i.e. government) infrastructure that warehouses, overall, about 95% of people in prisons and jails.
- As the Prison Policy Initiative reports, the carceral state costs the government as well as system-impacted people and their loved ones more than \$182 billion per year.

GENDER AND IMPRISONMENT

- Women have become the fastest-growing sector of the incarcerated population. BIPOC and LGBTQ women are disproportionately targeted.
- Check out *Survived & Punished*, an organization dedicated to ending the criminalization of survival (many women are criminalized for defending themselves against sexual and domestic violence). Some statistics from their website (SurvivedandPunished.org) are highlighted below:
 - About 67% of women in prison in the U.S. are Women of Color.
 - As many as 94% of some women’s prison populations have a history of physical or sexual abuse prior to their incarceration.
 - 84% of girls incarcerated in the U.S. experience family-based violence prior to criminalization.
 - Policing and prisons institutionalize sexual violence.
- Every 5 days a cop is caught engaging in sexual abuse or misconduct.
- Many incarcerated people identify as trans and/or queer. Trans People of Color constitute the group most likely to be arrested and imprisoned.
- Carceral feminists (relying on policing and prisons to address women’s rights) believe “gender-responsive” prisons are the solution, but abolitionists know that any reform that expands rather than shrinks the carceral state will only exacerbate structural violence.
- Women are disproportionately stuck in jails. Moreover, 60% of women in jails under local control are awaiting trial (*PrisonPolicy.org*).
- 80% of women in jails are mothers, the majority of whom are primary caretakers of their children (*PrisonPolicy.org*).
- We need trauma-responsive care, not criminalization, for survivors.
- Domestic violence activists have led the charge on developing alternative ways of redressing harm and cultivating safety without cops or cages.
- The PIC not only fails to address harm, but amplifies it.
- Check out *Critical Resistance*’s website for an incredible compilation of resources on addressing harm and holding space for accountability and healing without relying on carcerality: CriticalResistance.org
- Join SONG (*Southerners on New Ground*), *Humanities Behind Bars*, and other groups organizing bail out actions and bail funds!

CARE, NOT CAGES, FOR YOUTH IN VIRGINIA

Virginia has the distinct dishonor of leading the nation in sending youth to law enforcement, at double the national average! Over 70% of youth incarcerated in VA are Black Americans. Virginia should spend money on life-affirming resources, not criminalization and human caging.

- The Department of Juvenile Justice spends \$15 on youth incarceration for every \$1 spent on community-based services. It costs over \$171,000 to incarcerate one youth per year (\$171,588).
- White youth are 50–60% more likely to be offered alternatives to incarceration than Black youth for *identical charges*.
- *RISE for Youth* is a campaign in support of community-based alternatives to youth incarceration in Virginia: RISEforYouth.org
- *Virginia Organizing* is working to end the school-to-prison pipeline in VA: Virginia-organizing.org

REDEFINING “REENTRY” AND SAFE SHELTER AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Since the carceral is not just a built structure but the governing logic of society and its institutions, systematic discrimination, dispossession, and displacement face many folks—before, during, and after a period of imprisonment. When we discuss “reentry,” we must consider the structural conditions that lead to criminalization in the first place, and *de facto* criminalization as a structural condition of carceral culture. In other words, formerly incarcerated people most likely experienced structural dispossession and displacement prior to a period of caging.

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 did not include people with records as a protected class, but it technically makes housing discrimination illegal. Despite comparable criminal records, white people are more often given a second chance than BIPOC folks. Call HOME (*Housing Opportunities Made Equal of Virginia*) if you feel you have been denied housing because of your record: (804) 354-0641. Calls are confidential and free of charge. You can check out additional info here: HOMEofVA.org

- More than 650,000 people are released from prison each year.
- During Clinton’s tenure, Washington slashed funding for public housing by \$17 billion (a reduction of 61%) and boosted corrections by \$19 billion (an increase of 171%), “effectively making the construction of prisons the nation’s main housing program for the urban poor” (Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 57).
- 1/3 people in the U.S. have a record, and 1/4 people in VA have a record.
- Having a record dramatically affects one’s ability to secure safe and affordable housing, employment, access to services, etc.
- The fight against the prison industrial complex is also a struggle for racial, economic, and social justice!

ABOLISHING THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Although prisons remain profitable for private companies, the system as a whole does not produce wealth. It devours the social wealth that could be used to actually address communal harm, redress structural oppression, and sustain communities. We must challenge the idea that prisons keep us safe. As New Orleans poet Kalamu ya Salaam has argued, “people who control nothing are blamed for everything, while those who control everything are blamed for nothing.” Carceral society depends on the language of consent to conceal its constitutive grounding in coercion, criminalization, and control. You cannot address individual and interpersonal harm with a system that perpetuates institutional harm. So, what can we do instead? As Ruth Wilson Gilmore asserts, abolition is not just about the *absence* of the prison industrial complex, but the *presence* of lasting alternatives: “Abolition is a theory of social change ... of social life.” In the words of *Critical Resistance*, “Abolition is both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal.”

- Distinguish between people *with* problems and people *as* problems.
- Study these concrete steps from the #8toAbolition website:
 1. Defund the Police, 2. Demilitarize Communities, 3. Remove Police from Schools, 4. Free People from Prisons and Jails, 5. Repeal Laws that Criminalize Survival, 6. Invest in Community Self-Governance, 7. Provide Safe Housing for Everyone, and 8. Invest in Care, Not Cops.
- Build community-based networks of restorative and transformative justice.
 - Restorative justice = survivor-centered, community-based ways of repairing harm
 - Transformative justice = based on Indigenous models and non-western practices of self-determination and mutual care, and dedicated to transforming the social conditions that create and maintain violence (Check out @tjzine on Instagram for more!)
- Fight prison expansion projects and reinvest in life-affirming infrastructure.
- Strategize actions toward a just world, including decriminalization and excarceration, ending pretrial imprisonment and cash bail, and investing in communities instead of cages.
- Join in local grassroots efforts to replace this genocidal, racial capitalist system of social control with self-determination and mutual aid!

Abolition is an active aspiration toward collective life-affirming social relations and away from systems of domination. Abolition calls upon our profoundest efforts to love, and love deeply, because it replaces spectacles of revenge with reciprocity, judgment with justice, and refusal with recognition of people’s complex humanity.

Another world is possible!

SELECTED RESOURCES: CriticalResistance.org, PrisonPolicy.org, SurvivedandPunished.org, RISEforYouth.org, www.8toAbolition.com