

## **PRIMER TO ABOLITION WORK**

### **What is the PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX (PIC)?**

Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems. The PIC maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic, and other systemic privileges, including creating mass media images that stereotype people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth, etc. as criminal, delinquent or deviant. This power is also maintained by earning huge profits for private companies that deal with prisons and police forces; helping to earn political gains for “tough on crime” politicians; increasing the influence of prison guard and police unions; and eliminating social and political dissent by people of color, poor people, immigrants, and others who demand self-determination and the reorganization of power in the United States.”

### **What is ABOLITION?**

PIC Abolition is a political vision with the goal of eliminating prisons, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment. From where we are now, sometimes we can't really imagine what abolition is going to look like. Abolition isn't just about getting rid of buildings full of cages. It's also about undoing the society we live in because the PIC both feeds on and maintains oppression and inequalities through punishment, violence, and controls millions of people. Because the PIC is not an isolated system, abolition is a broad strategy. An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that leads us all to believe that thing really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives. Abolition is both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal.

*From [The Abolitionist Toolkit](#) (2004),  
Critical Resistance*

### **What is CRIMINALIZATION?**

Criminalization is the process that makes some actions illegal. Actions become crimes only after they are culturally or legally defined as crimes. What counts as crime changes over time, often because politicians manipulate public fears. For example, amid the radical social movements of the 1960s, both Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon ran presidential campaigns on “law and order” platforms, even though public polls showed that most Americans didn't see crime as a top concern and distinguished crime from the problems fueling social protest. Rightwing politicians like Goldwater and Nixon manipulated public opinion through the media and by their rhetoric, constructing a moral panic over crime that hinged on ideas of race. Liberals, too, advanced racial ideas about crime and poverty. President Lyndon B. Johnson warned of the “destructive rebellion against the fabric of society” that Black poverty created, and said, “A rioter with a Molotov cocktail in his hands is not fighting for civil rights any more than a Klansman with a sheet on his back and mask on his face. They are both more or less what the law declares them: lawbreakers, destroyers of constitutional rights and liberties and ultimately destroyers of a

free America.” To paraphrase scholar Naomi Murukawa, the United States did not racialize a crime problem; it criminalized a race problem.

Likewise, the criminalization of poverty includes controlling poor people through laws that make everything from public urination to sleeping in the park to participation in informal economies illegal and punishable. Criminalization is an important tool of the prison industrial complex, making it possible for police and courts to target specific actions and specific groups of people. It leads us to believe that everyone who breaks a law is a direct threat to society. Criminalization treats social, political, and economic problems as law enforcement problems, when in reality, watching, controlling and caging those who suffer most because of poverty or racism does not guarantee our safety and economic security. Criminalization is especially deadly for Black and Indigenous people. The numbers of per capita Native American deaths in police custody is roughly equal to those of Black people and nearly double the rates for Hispanics, and almost three times the rates for whites.

### **Are Asian Americans criminalized?**

It is difficult to gain accurate data about Asian Americans in prison, or about Indigenous people including Alaska Natives, Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, because they are all lumped into a group called “other”. Among Asian Americans, it is often Southeast Asians who are criminalized, as well as other Asian Americans living in poverty, and Sikhs and South Asians targeted in the War on Terror. In the words of Oloth Insyxiengmay, a Lao American inmate at Stafford Creek Corrections Center, the criminalization of Southeast Asians is linked to the criminalization of Black and Brown people, and also to the model minority myth:

*“Other more successful Asians didn’t consider themselves as one of us, so help didn’t appear to be offered, nor was help requested. We were the outsiders, the less successful Asians, the ‘un-model minority’. There was an undertone of disdain and resentment between the different Asian groups. This sentiment was expressed and learned in the home. A history of tribalism, colonization, occupation, and conflict amongst the groups contributed to this attitude. From both points of view, a stance of ‘us versus them’ and ‘our problem isn’t their problem, their problem isn’t our problem’ seemed to exist. Furthermore, these ‘well-to-do’ Asians didn’t live in the same neighborhoods we lived in, they didn’t go to the same schools we went to. They were a distant thought, and wasn’t considered a part of us. Whether it was gangs or otherwise, we embraced the attitude of, ‘If nobody wasn’t going to help us, we were going to help ourselves.’ We just didn’t have the resources to do so. Ironically, the criminalization that this produced mirrored that of the dominant minority groups (i.e., African American, Hispanic) in the community.”*

### **Do prisons reduce harm?**

Many experts agree that prisons do not effectively reduce crime. However, we should remember the definition of criminalization: a process that makes certain behaviors illegal. Crime is constructed for reasons that have little to do with safety or reducing harm, and more to do with politics. For this reason, there are many reasons to oppose prisons, apart from whether they reduce crime. Some of these reasons are: putting people in cages is immoral; getting rid of

prisons is central to challenging white supremacy; and prisons are a form of violence, and are sites of violence.

### **What do prisons have to do with race?**

The United States locks more human beings in cages than any other country in the world. The majority of those who are locked up are people of color. Black men are nearly six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men and Hispanic men are 2.3 times as likely. One in every 10 Black men in their thirties is in prison or jail on any given day. However, prisons also include growing numbers of white people. Even if the prison population reflected the demographics of the overall U.S. population, prisons would still be racial, in that they sort people between those who deserve power and self-determination, and those who don't. Remember that race is not biological or essential; it is constructed to sort humanity into "deserving" and "undeserving". For this reason, the word "race" is better understood as a verb, not a noun. Prisons race humanity.

### **Why are there so many people in prison?**

In the 1980s, the United States launched the biggest prison-building spree in the history of the world. The United States is the world's leader in incarceration with 2.2 million people currently in the nation's prisons and jails — a 500% increase over the last 40 years. Changes in sentencing law and policy, not changes in crime rates, explain most of this increase.

### **How do prisons affect our communities?**

Prisons have broad and deep affects on our communities. They affect everyone in the United States by convincing us of the lie that we are safer because of prisons, and by using our tax dollars to fund prisons. The number of women in prison has been growing at nearly double the rate of men since 1985. Women in prison often have significant histories of physical and sexual abuse, high rates of HIV, and substance abuse problems. Women's imprisonment in female-led households forces children to suffer from their parent's absence and from the weakening of that family relationship. In addition, The United States is the only nation that sentences people to life without parole for crimes committed before the age of 18.

### **Most prisons are PUBLIC.**

Private prisons are growing, but only hold about 8 percent of the prison population and a barely measurable number of those in jails. The other 95 percent of prisoners are locked up in taxpayer funded, public prisons and jails. We should oppose both the privatization of prisons and the public funding of prisons.

### **What do prisons have to do with slavery?**

As Angela Davis points out, the 13th Amendment abolished slavery except for convicts. The prison system, through Black Codes that criminalized Black people, and through convict leasing that forced prisoners to work for industries, recreated slavery after Emancipation. The end of slavery marked a profound change politically, economically, and culturally. As formerly enslaved Black people entered into U.S. political and economic life, and as angry whites staged a violent backlash, prisons were used to create the appearance of stability, and to rebuild the infrastructure of a devastated post-Civil War South. Similarly, the recent massive growth of

prisons and the prison population since the 1980s is the state's response to profound changes in the economy through deindustrialization and globalization, which have rendered growing ranks of people unnecessary to the U.S. and global economy. Prisons are a way to manage these "surplus" people, and because of how the economy is structured, people of color bear the brunt of incarceration. As scholar and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, "Put simply, capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it."

### **What do prisons have to do with settler colonization?**

Tribal courts originated in 1824 with the formation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the War Department. Up to that time, Indigenous people had their own justice system beyond the reach of U.S. authorities. Pre-1824 tribal courts embodied a restorative approach that greatly differed from the punitive, adversarial system of the United States. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, a host of laws and court decisions gradually eroded the judicial power of those Indigenous courts. This erosion took two forms. First, tribal authorities' power to prosecute has been limited to misdemeanors; felony cases are referred to federal jurisdiction. Second, the 1978 Supreme Court decision in *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* eliminated any tribal authority in criminal or civil matters where a non-Native person commits a crime on Native American land.

In addition, Indigenous scholars view reservations as "open-air prisons," spaces that in the early days were patrolled by white vigilantes to prevent Native people from "escaping." Boarding schools were yet another form of prison designed to control and contain Indigenous people as part of the U.S. colonial project. Just as police violence sparked the formation of the Black Panther Party, abuse in the prison system precipitated the formation of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1960s and 1970s.

### **What do prisons have to do with imperialism and war?**

One skyrocketing area of incarceration is immigration detention, and private prison companies are responsible for 62 percent of the beds used by the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement branch. Private firms like the Corrections Corporation of America and GEO Group operate nine out of 10 of the country's largest immigration detention centers. Both companies have lobbied the Department of Homeland Security on immigration policy, and are a powerful force in shaping the fate of refugees in the global War on Terror and undocumented migrants who leave their homes because of free trade agreements and violence due to the U.S.-supported drug war.

### **How can we dismantle the prison industrial complex?**

There are many efforts to dismantle the prison industrial complex, and we will not be able to do it overnight. One great resource to consider is a toolkit created by Critical Resistance, cited below. It is also important to know that Indigenous decolonization efforts have often fought to empower tribal courts that embody a restorative justice approach focused on healing and community building rather than on punishment. Today, many tribal courts sit in peacekeeping circles rather than vesting all authority in one judge seated on high. Fighting for ending the prison industrial complex should involve fighting for decolonization and the authority of tribal

courts, which has been eroded by the U.S. government over centuries. It is also critical to organize with people who are currently and formerly incarcerated, and to create the conditions of community and deep humanity we need to dismantle the prison system.

From [Asian-American Racial Justice Toolkit](#) (2016),  
*Grassroots Asians Rising*

## **TOOLKITS AND RESOURCES**

### **CRITICAL RESISTANCE TOOLKIT**

<http://criticalresistance.org/resources/the-abolitionist-toolkit/>

“This toolkit emerged out of discussions that began in Boston in March 2002. Members of Critical Resistance (CR) and partner organizations gathered for a roundtable discussion on abolitionist organizing strategies. One of the things that we agreed we needed to strengthen our work was a set of ideas, exercises, and resources to share with the people we organize with that would explain the idea of abolishing the prison industrial complex (PIC) and would help us take concrete steps toward that goal.

The kit is not a step-by-step guide to PIC abolition. It is a kit designed primarily for U.S.-based community organizers already working toward abolition and our allies. However, we hope it will be useful even for people who may not have thought much about abolition or who feel unsure about how useful it is as a goal.”

<http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CR-Abolitionist-Toolkit-online.pdf>

Critical Resistance’s Work in NYC:

<http://criticalresistance.org/chapters/cr-new-york-city/our-work/>

### **ASIAN AMERICAN RACIAL JUSTICE TOOLKIT**

This toolkit represents the work and thinking of 15 grassroots organizations with Asian American bases living in the most precarious margins of power: low-income tenants, youth, undocumented immigrants, low-wage workers, refugees, women and girls, and queer and trans people. It reflects their experiences with criminalization, deportation, homophobia, xenophobia and Islamo-racism, war, gender violence, poverty, and worker exploitation. All of the modules are designed to begin with people’s lived experiences, and to build structural awareness of why those experiences are happening, and how they are tied to the oppression of others. By highlighting the role of people’s resistance both past and present, the toolkit also seeks to build hope and a commitment to political struggle. In these perilous times, it is an intervention by today’s Asian American activists to restore our collective humanity across our differences through a practice of deep democracy, by looking first to history and then to one another to build a vigilant and expansive love for the people.

<https://www.asianamtoolkit.org/the-toolkit>

With particular focus to **Whiteness on Fire: Building Together, A Long Table Conversation**

<https://abolitionistfutures.com/feminist-queer-antiracist-abolition>

Abolition for Queer and Trans Communities:

<https://www.abolitionforqueertranspeople.org>

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/18SFqfFoKRORKw2SmZFUGSQVrTTEdv8Ez>

Roundtable on Sex Work Politics and Prison Abolition:

<https://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/18-sexworker>

Bystander Intervention to stop anti-Asian/American and Xenophobic Harassment:

<https://www.ihollaback.org/bystanderintervention/>

Center for Anti-Violence Education, NYC:

<https://www.caeny.org/>