

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?

- Understand that the PIC not only fails to address harm, but amplifies it.
- Distinguish between people *with* problems and people *as* problems.
- Fight prison expansion projects and reinvest in life-affirming infrastructure (e.g. free education and community-based arts practice, mental and physical health care, housing, drug treatment facilities, employment and job training).
- Repeal draconian sentencing laws and policing policies that have targeted communities of color.
- End solitary confinement, the death penalty, and life sentences.
- 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!)
- Strategize actions toward a just world, including a moratorium on prison and jail expansion projects, the decriminalization of drug and status crimes, incarceration, stopping pretrial imprisonment and cash bail, and investing in communities instead of cages.
- Follow the work of the *Virginia Prisons Accountability Committee*: vapac.blogspot.com; @vapacommittee
- Join in local grassroots efforts to replace social control with social welfare! For example, *Virginia Organizing* is working to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline: virginia-organizing.org

The fight against the prison industrial complex is also a struggle for racial, economic, and social justice!

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, HumanitiesBehindBars.org, PrisonPolicy.org, SentencingProject.org

BREAKING DOWN CARCERAL SOCIETY AND BUILDING ANOTHER WORLD

By Alison Reed, PhD

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 economic, social, and political problems (*Critical Resistance*). To paraphrase Angela Davis, prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear people. What we understand today as “mass incarceration,” as Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow*, is a comprehensive system of racialized social control. We must then ask: for whom are prison beds being created? 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 in the world—with 5% of the world's population, and 25% of its imprisoned population. 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).
- 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 People of Color (esp. Black and Latinx people, although Native Americans represent the highest group per capita).
- 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 quintupled in the U.S.
- People sent to prison for drug violations increased 975% between 1982 and 1999.
- Between 5 to 7.9% of federal prisoners have been convicted of “violent crimes,” which is to say, harming another human being. Yet this small percentage is used to justify the entire system.

- Mass incarceration costs over \$182–200 billion each year.

GENDER AND IMPRISONMENT

- Women have become the fastest-growing sector of the incarcerated population.
- Every five days a police officer 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.
- 1 in 111 white women, 1 in 18 Black women, and 1 in 45 Latina/x women will be incarcerated during their lifetime (*Sentencing Project*).
- Though many more men are in prison than women, the rate of growth for imprisoning women has been twice as high as that of men since 1980 (*Sentencing Project*).
- In 2016, the imprisonment rate for African American women (96 per 100,000) was twice the rate of imprisonment for white women (49 per 100,000).
- Latina/x women were imprisoned at 1.4 times the rate of white women (67 vs. 49 per 100,000).
- Women are disproportionately stuck in jails (*Prison Policy Initiative*).
- While the majority (50–60%) of men in prison suffer from mental health issues, 75% of women do (*The Guardian*).
- 84% of girls incarcerated in the U.S. experience family-based violence prior to criminalization.
- We need trauma-responsive care, not criminalization, for survivors of domestic violence.
- Join SONG (*Southerners on New Ground*) and other groups organizing bail out actions!

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.
- 40% of incarcerated youth in VA are between the ages of 8–14.
- Black youth are overrepresented in every stage of the VA juvenile “justice” system and accounted for 71 percent of all admissions to Juvenile Correctional Centers in 2016.
- 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*.

- Virginia should spend money on quality public education, not criminalization and human caging.
- RISE for Youth is a campaign in support of community-based alternatives to youth incarceration in Virginia: RiseForYouth.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 People of Color. 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.
- 1/3 people in the U.S. have a record, and 1/4 people in VA have a record.
- As Michelle Alexander writes in *The New Jim Crow*, 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” (57).
- A study conducted by the McCormick Institute of Public Affairs found that nearly a quarter of guests in shelters had been incarcerated within the previous year (147).
- 90% of employers say they are willing to consider filling their most recent job vacancy with a welfare recipient, only 40% are willing to consider doing so with a formerly caged person (149).
- Less than a quarter of employers were willing to consider hiring someone convicted of a drug-related felony; the number plummeted to 7% for a property-related felony, and less than 1% for a violent felony (149).

ABOLISHING THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Although prisons (and prison labor) remain profitable for private companies, the system as a whole—which is largely public, not private—does not produce wealth. It devours the social wealth that could be used to actually address harm that happens in our communities, and redress structural oppression. We must challenge