

WORDS ALONE CAN'T SAVE US. But our language does shape what we can imagine, and by using new words and old words differently, we can imagine new things. A major reason the PIC grows is that we are told there isn't another option. We need to use language creatively to help us develop strong, specific challenges to the PIC.

The way people talk about policing, prisons, safety, and crime shapes what we think these things are, and forms the ways we imagine change can or should happen. Words are not neutral, and it's important that we break down and reshape their meanings in our own materials and conversations. We can use language to shift debates, make people see things differently, and challenge our own assumptions and fears. Below are discussions and specific examples of how our word choice can not only help us make stronger abolitionist arguments, but figure out what abolition can look like.

INNOCENT	PRISONER	GUILTY	INMATE
VIOLENT	VICTIM	NON-VIOLENT	JUSTICE
CRIMINAL	SAFETY	CONVICT	PUNISHMENT

These words get used all the time when people talk about prisons, police, courts, and public safety. People who support the PIC use them as often as people who are fighting the PIC. They are filled with guesses about the people and ideas they describe. Often, these same guesses make the PIC seem logical and necessary. They re-define people and actions in terms of the categories the word represents. In this way a person becomes a criminal, and the act of the state putting someone in a cage becomes justice. These categories keep up people's fear for their safety, their understanding of what they need to be safe, and their reliance on and acceptance of police and prisons.

Most of these words work in pairs: when we use one, we are really using both. Innocent and guilty are a pair like this. The idea that you are either innocent or guilty is a natural assumption and it's what immediately comes to mind for most people. So saying that innocent people shouldn't be in prison (which most of us can agree is true), also says that guilty people should be. It suggests that most people who are locked up deserve to be there because they "did something." If we want to say that people are being picked up, harassed, or held without charges; there are ways to say it without suggesting that people in other circumstances are worse, or have done bad things, or deserve to be in cages.

It's important to pay close attention to the words we use to describe people in cages. Most often they are called "inmates," "criminals," and "prisoners." What are the differences?

**INMATE.** Originally, this term meant someone who shared a house with others. Currently, it mostly refers to people in prisons and mental institutions.

**CRIMINAL.** This term doesn't just mean someone convicted of a crime, or even someone who harms others. It implies that causing harm is essentially a part of this person, maybe even the most meaningful part of their personality.

**PRISONER.** This is someone kept in a cage against their will by some powerful force (like the state), whether that power is just or not.

These words also have race and gender meanings. For example, *criminal* and *Black* are often code words for each other. There is lots of pressure from white supremacy in media, or in policing, (or both, as in the TV show *Cops* and even local news) to make an automatic connection between these terms, by assuming a "criminal" is going to be a Black person, and in assuming that a Black person is going to be

a “criminal.” There are particular ways terms like these have gender meanings, too. “Welfare queen,” is one term that could be thought of as a femininely gendered word for “criminal.” It works to make Black women and “criminals” interchangeable. This combination of gender and race meanings applies to men, too. “Gang member” and “sexual predator” are two examples of words that work to make Black men and “criminals” the same thing.

Prisoner is different from inmate and criminal, because it describes people who have been put in cages. It helps us remember that people aren’t locked up for their own good or even just as a place to stay (which inmate implies), or that they are can’t be separated from the harm they might/might not have caused (which is implied by criminal). The word prisoner helps us see the state as actively choosing to put people in cages, while inmate and (especially) criminal suggest that imprisonment is the only or even the best way to handle certain people. In this way the word prisoner also gets away from the harmful gender and racial dynamics of a word like criminal, which helps to disrupt the links to the PIC’s white supremacy and sexism.

WHAT ARE THE WORDS YOU USE AND HEAR TO DESCRIBE PEOPLE IN CAGES? WHAT MEANINGS DO THEY HAVE?

Language works not only to define types of people in relation to the PIC, but types of actions, too. People fighting prison expansion or working to end the drug war often focus on taking advantage of public feelings about violent vs. non-violent crimes, or concerns about locking up too many drug users and not enough drug dealers. For example, you might see:

*The drug laws drive prison expansion, fill prisons with non-violent, minor offenders, and drain resources from other services, such as drug treatment and education.*

OR

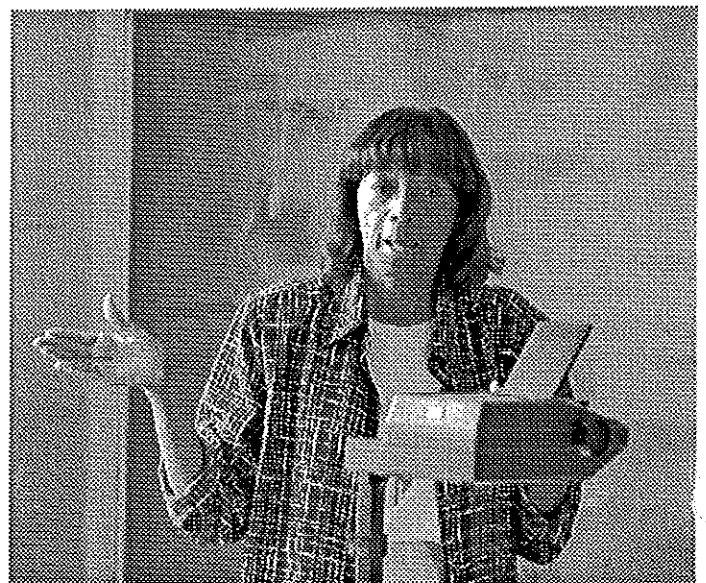
*Non-violent drug offenders are spending more time in prison than murderers and rapists.*

## EXERCISE

Go over these questions about the statements above, and use them to help you write an abolitionist re-working of those ideas:

1. What differences are being made between “violent” and “non-violent” offenders here?
2. What is suggested about the use of prisons generally?
3. How could you re-phrase this information to be in line with the ideas that no one should be in a cage, and that putting people in cages helps no one?

We can use language and ideas to transform how people think about what makes them safe. We can challenge the ways people are told to think about what makes their communities safe. And we can create materials that make clear a vision of community safety that does not depend on controlling, caging, or removing people. We need to be able to decide and create safety for ourselves, without leaving anyone behind. When we make materials, we need to recognize how we can best use language to make our ideas clear and common sense. We must be able to do this without falling into the trap of tough on crime language that weakens the long-term goal of abolition.



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## EXERCISES FOR THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE IN YOUR WORK

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### EXERCISE 1

Get out materials and literature that your organization(s) use (or that the state or other organizations use). Go through these questions to try to understand more critically what the language is doing.

1. Who is this language addressing? Who is it easily understood by? Where is this literature used?
2. What categories are used to describe:
  - people
  - institutions
  - political systems and idealsWhat political views do those categories back up?
3. What political message is being sent—how is or isn't that abolitionist? What is the role of cages in the political program being suggested or implied?
4. How could you change the wording to more clearly oppose all aspects of the PIC? Or, if you're using material you disagree with as an example, how does the language support the PIC?

### EXERCISE 2

Pick out one (or two, or however many you want to handle) words, and try to see how it is used, and how you might use it in a more radical way. For example, you might choose "punishment."

1. Brainstorm all the meanings it has—whose agenda(s) do those meanings serve?
2. What other words is it closely connected to? What do those connections do?
3. Where do you hear this word used most often? By whom?
4. What other words address some of the same issues and assumptions in different ways?
5. Are there ways to use the word "against itself"—to use it in a way that challenges the way it's most commonly used right now?

The point here is not just to change the words we use, but to examine how changing our words changes what we can see. It can also help point out what assumptions we might decide to hold onto. Maybe there is a difference between stealing a stereo and hurting another person. But saying non-violent and violent is only one way to show that difference, one set up by the state through its laws. We endorse that state action every time we use this difference. What are more complex ways to struggle with that difference?

**So it's not that I don't think that any reform work can be done;  
I just think that it's very, very important that people  
keep an abolitionist perspective to always check that against.  
And the way that we've always managed to do that here is to always talk about  
our short-term work, and what our day-to-day looks like, and what our  
long-term vision is. And so every time we're about to work on something or  
someone proposes it, we have this long-term vision about abolition to check it  
against, and to say "does this in any way contradict this" or get us off the track  
or make our path longer to get to this end goal, and if we sense that it does,  
then it's not an option for us.**

**MIMI BUDNICK**



# SHRINKING THE SYSTEM

Decarceration, getting people out of jails and prisons, is one strategy for abolishing the PIC. Getting and keeping people out of cages is a really important step toward ending the use of cages completely. Below are three sets of de-carceral strategies. They are a jumping off point for thinking creatively about what strategies and tactics will help to shrink the PIC to the point of non-existence.

## A STRATEGY FOR REDUCING THE US PRISON POPULATION: NO ONE DIES IN PRISON.

BY RACHEL MADDOW

WHAT IF THE ANTI-PIC MOVEMENT COMMITTED ITSELF to the goal, "No one dies in prison"?

The Bureau of Justice Statistics says that in the year 2000, there were 2865 deaths in state prisons:

- 84 people were executed
- 185 people killed themselves
- 56 people were killed by another person
- 24 people were victims of accidents
- 2313 people died of "natural causes"
- 203 people had no specified cause of death\*

2865 is a relatively small number, compared with the millions who pass through US jails and prisons every year. Taking on the issue of death in prison is therefore not, at first glance, a strategy that strikes at the heart of the US imprisonment binge.

But reducing the number of deaths in prison can still be an important abolitionist strategy for two reasons: 1. it is a relatively practical, achievable goal that could actually reduce the prison population, and 2. working toward this goal requires a type of prison activism that helps the abolitionist cause.

[WHY IS THIS A PRACTICAL, ACHIEVABLE GOAL?]

THE VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE WHO DIE IN PRISON DIE FROM ILLNESS and old age ("natural causes"), so to seriously reduce the number of deaths in prison, advocates could focus on obtaining early release for ill and elderly prisoners. While releasing prisoners is rarely popular among the "general public", there are a few cracks in the system through which we could begin to make this argument. It is very expensive to incarcerate ill and elderly prisoners. During our current national fiscal crisis, targeting potential strategies for reducing spending can be an effective tool for arguing for decarceration (see below for more examples). A majority of states already have laws providing for "medical parole" or "compassionate release" of dying prisoners, or prisoners whose medical needs cannot be met in prison, that advocates of this position could build upon.

Strategies could include:

- expansion and implementation of medical parole (a.k.a. compassionate release) for terminally ill or elderly prisoners
- sentencing diversion for ill or elderly prisoners
- no prison hospices

[WHY DOES THE PROCESS OF WORKING TOWARD THIS GOAL HELP THE ABOLITIONIST CAUSE?]

•CAMPAIGNS TO GET INDIVIDUAL ILL OR ELDERLY PRISONERS released usually put activists in close contact with an imprisoned person, sometimes with the prisoner's friends behind bars, and sometimes with the prisoner's family members outside, often contributing both to the level of commitment people feel to the issue and the level of knowledge people have about what goes on inside prisons. The more people know about conditions inside, generally the easier it is to suggest to them that prisoners not live in those conditions.

•CAMPAIGNS FOR INDIVIDUAL ILL OR ELDERLY PRISONERS REQUIRE ACTIVISTS to apply pressure on (and therefore learn about) a number of different levels of the prison bureaucracy: medical, prison hierarchy, parole board, legislature, governor. Furthermore, campaigns to improve and expand medical parole laws require activists to learn about legislative/administrative accountability for prison policy – an area that is confusing and intimidating for many activists.

•MEDICAL PAROLE CAMPAIGNS USUALLY REQUIRE A COMMUNITY PLACEMENT for the prisoner after release (i.e. a community hospice). Working to find a placement for ill and elderly prisoners in the community makes more community agencies think about prisoners, and makes additional connections between prisons and the outside world. Finding appropriate placements also forces us to consider the kinds of services and settings that will truly make people coming home safe and secure.

•PRISON HOSPICES ARE A “REFORMIST”, NON-ABOLITIONIST SOLUTION to the problem of deaths in prison: they give prison officials and doctors an excuse to not release people to die in the community. Opposing prison hospices can be a radicalizing experience for prison activists, because it opposes liberal reform, and clarifies the principal need to get people out of prison, rather than making prisons nicer.

#### ENDNOTE

1. Bureau of Justice Statistics (2002) HIV in Prisons, 2000. [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/hivp00.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/hivp00.htm)



## MENTAL HEALTH AND DECARCERATION

ADAPTED FROM PIECES BY TERRY KUPERS

“THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS BEHIND BARS,” FORUM/ THE HARVARD MENTAL HEALTH LETTER, JULY 2000 AND “BEWARE OF EASY ANSWERS FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS BEHIND BARS,” THE FORTUNE NEWS, FALL 2000

THE JAIL AND PRISON POPULATIONS COULD BE GREATLY REDUCED by putting diversion and restorative justice programs into place for harms committed by people suffering from serious mental illnesses. 90 to 95% of all prisoners will be released, the average within several years. Criminal defendants suffering from serious mental illnesses, and those who commit minor crimes involving alcohol and drugs, have a much better chance for recovery if they are diverted into an appropriate mental health or drug treatment program.

There also need to be more stepdown units, which are more or less the same as residential treatment facilities in the community, where prisoners with serious mental disorders can be partially sheltered as they undergo treatment. Mental health staffs need to make contact with prisoners' families and need to do conscientious post-release treatment planning. Diversion and stepdown units both make it possible to provide supported and supervised treatment, while not relying on caging people as a solution.

While diversion from prison into mental health care offers hope for reducing the prison population and providing treatment for many prisoners, however, it also has the potential to increase the repressiveness of the criminal justice system. New laws that expand involuntary outpatient treatment programs could also be applied to many other individuals who have merely failed to follow their treatment plans and will recycle into prisons. There is also danger that the focus will be too narrow, and the newly sensitized public's shock about

the mistreatment of prisoners suffering from mental illness will result in some empty relief for a small subpopulation of prisoners while the inhuman conditions and human rights abuses suffered by almost all prisoners will continue unchecked.

Diversion programs, including drug courts and mental health courts, could be a positive development, but sufficient resources must be put into public mental health programs so that the people eligible for those programs would want to voluntarily agree to quality treatment. If resources are inadequate and people are just forced to take medications, diversion becomes another repressive measure fueling the further expansion of the prison industrial complex. Like people on probation and parole, people who are diverted to mandatory outpatient treatment are still under the control of the prison industrial complex even while living outside of prison settings. And many mental health facilities aren't very different from prisons themselves, so we need to be mindful about not just trading one cage for the another.

## |BUDGET CUTS AND DECARCERATION|

BELOW ARE JUST SOME OF THE EXAMPLES OF WAYS THAT STATES have cut prison spending (by either closing prisons or prison yards, introducing plans to end prison construction, using early parole, or making changes to current sentencing practices). It is important to note that the cuts listed below are changes made by states in hopes of maintaining prison systems (not get rid of them)—minimum and medium security prisons get closed, nonviolent prisoners get sentencing relief. During this period of intense financial crisis, however, the budget is a good place to suggest additional cuts that could strike at the heart of the PIC.

**I don't see a society with other values still having this same kind of system. So if you don't want to call it abolishing, you can call it something else, but I just think that ultimately, that's where a lot of folks are going to get to—they're going to get there.**

MASAI EHEHOSI

WHAT U.S. STATES ARE DOING TO  
REDUCE PRISON SPENDING:  
REDUCING THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN PRISON  
AND THE NUMBER OF PRISONS

ROSE BRAZ, JUNE 2003

ALASKA	Legislation to build a large prison are on hold in Juneau as Gov. Frank Murkowski's administration takes a look at corrections issues.
ARKANSAS	The state Board of Corrections made up to 513 prisoners eligible for early release. The Legislature has moved to revise the state's requirement that a prisoner do 70% of his or her time.
DELAWARE	The House approved 37-0 a bill that rewrites sentencing guidelines for many crimes, easing the penalties for some drug offenses.
GEORGIA	Department of Corrections proposed closing one prison to save costs. State legislature is considering sentencing reform.
HAWAII	Changed sentencing law in 2002 to mandate probation and drug treatment in lieu of incarceration for nonviolent, first-time drug offenders, to ease costs and prison crowding.
IDAHO	Considering sentencing reform.
ILLINOIS	Did not open two newly built prisons; delayed opening of a nearly completed youth prison; closed two work camps, one boot camp and four work-release facilities; halted construction on two prison projects.
INDIANA	Gov. Frank O'Bannon discussed early release of some prisoners.
IOWA	Cut 225 prison staff during last fiscal year and 355 this year. The House gave final approval to sentencing reform package that would equalize penalties for powder and crack cocaine and would allow some "violent offenders" to have their prison terms shortened.
KANSAS	Senate Bill 123, a reform package aimed at directing drug users to community rehabilitation programs rather than to prison, was signed into law by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius April 21.
KENTUCKY	Released 567 "nonviolent offenders" early by governor's order; cut Department of Corrections 5% from FY2001 and FY2002. Senate Passed Bill On Reduction Of Sentences. Parolees returned to prison for minor parole violations are getting credit for time served on the street under a systematic change the General Assembly approved as part of the state budget this spring. State officials hope to save more than \$2.6 million through the summer of 2004 with the change that took effect April 1.



MICHIGAN	Michigan Legislature Repealed Draconian Mandatory Minimum Drug Sentences. On March 1, some first-time, "nonviolent drug offenders" sentenced under Michigan's mandatory minimum law were freed. Lenawee County commissioners agreed to try again for a state grant to launch a community corrections program aimed at reducing the number of people sent to prison and jail.
MISSISSIPPI	Mississippi has saved \$11.6 million since July 1, 2001, from a 11/2-year-old law that reduces mandatory prison sentences from 85 percent of the original sentence to 25 percent for certain "nonviolent offenders." Some prisoners could earn a day off for every day they work, rather than a day off for every three days worked, under a plan the House OK'd.
MISSOURI	Proposes to shut two prisons and release more than 1,000 "nonviolent offenders" early. Considering not opening Jefferson City Correctional Center next year. Senate Advances Bill That Would Revise Criminal Laws, Shrink Prison Population.
MONTANA	Corrections has 68 job vacancies, its budget cut by \$1.6 million. Bill would eliminate jailing of some drug users.
NEBRASKA	Proposes to close a youth prison. In a move designed to send a message about the severity of the state's budget crisis, lawmakers voted to save money by closing a maximum-security prison and releasing about 500 inmates.
NEVADA	Pending budget cuts would force closure of 13 minimum-security facilities, requiring early release of thousands of prisoners.
NEW HAMPSHIRE	Closed one prison. Corrections is expected to cut another 62 positions.
NEW MEXICO	With Gov. Bill Richardson steadfastly opposed to building more prisons, New Mexico corrections officials are hoping to revive an early-release program scuttled in the mid-1990s.
NEW YORK	As part of the budget, the state Legislature approved a plan to let about 1,300 "nonviolent" prisoners out of prison early. Gov. George Pataki, who was first elected to office on a platform of harsher jail terms and parole restrictions, is advocating letting some well-behaved drug offenders out of prison early and ending parole early for others.

NORTH CAROLINA	House members said legislators should hold off building one of three prisons proposed in the Senate's budget, and avoid future overcrowding by passing a series of changes to state sentencing laws that would let some prisoners out early.
OHIO	Closed one prison and plans to close a second. Considering closing a juvenile detention facility.
OKLAHOMA	State senators voted to restore a law that would reduce prison crowding by letting some prisoners out at least 60 days early. The Oklahoma Sentencing Commission approved strategies that include broader use of probation and cutting mandatory minimums for minor drug possession to reduce Oklahoma's prison population.
OREGON	Released prisoners early from some prisons; plans to close four juvenile detention centers.
PENNSYLVANIA	Northampton County released about 100 prisoners early to cut prison costs. Corrections plans to close two prisons in FY2003-04, keeping them on standby or "mothballed."
SOUTH CAROLINA	Corrections budget cut by nearly one-fourth in two years; prison system now operating with approximately 600 fewer security staff than four years ago. Corrections says it might need to release workers - and possibly 2,600 prisoners - to avoid a \$20 million deficit.
TEXAS	The tough-on-crime Lone Star State reduced its prison population by 8,000 by paroling more people and reducing the number of parolees returned to prison for noncriminal, technical violations of parole. With the state facing a \$9.9 billion budget shortfall and agencies required to make cutbacks, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice has sent a list of potential reductions, totaling seven percent -- or \$172 million -- from the department's 2003 fiscal year budget to Gov. Perry.
UTAH	Considering Sentencing reform.
VERMONT	Cut funds for Corrections housing in 2002, eliminating supervised apartments for furloughed prisoners, many of them juveniles.
WASHINGTON	Some prisoners convicted of lesser crimes will be released early under a new law. Senate Bill 5990 is a scaled-down version of Governor Locke's own proposal to save nearly \$100 million by cutting sentences for some nonviolent offenders and eliminating supervision for some released prisoners.
WISCONSIN	Approximately 400 "nonviolent offenders" who violate probation or parole would avoid prison and enter a rehabilitation program under governor's proposed budget.