

WHAT IS ABOLITION?

CRITICAL RESISTANCE'S MISSION is to abolish the prison industrial complex (PIC). The PIC is a system that uses policing, courts, and imprisonment to control populations and maintain oppressive structures under the appearance of solving social problems. We do not need the PIC to keep us safe. Instead, we must build genuinely safe and healthy communities that do not depend on prisons and punishment.

WHO WERE THE FIRST ABOLITIONISTS?

We take the name “abolitionist” purposefully from those who called for the abolition of slavery in the 1800’s, including enslaved and free activists. Abolitionists believed that slavery could not be fixed or improved. It needed to be abolished. As PIC abolitionists today, we also do not work for improvements to make the PIC just or effective. Our goal is not to make the system work better; it is to use concrete abolitionist reforms to shrink the system into non-existence.

WHAT ABOUT PUBLIC SAFETY?

How do we build safe communities? Is it by locking up and policing more and more people? Or is it by dealing with the causes of the harm that is called “crime” in our communities?

Even the worst kinds of harm do not happen without a reason. Putting people in cages does not change the conditions that led to harm or violence. By separating people from their home communities and isolating them in the abusive and violent environments that are prisons, these problems invariably worsen. We take seriously the harms that happen between people. We believe that in order to reduce harm we must change the social and economic conditions in which those harms take place.

When public funding is directed into policing and prisons, budget cuts for social programs such as shelters, healthcare, welfare, and public housing are the side effect. Focusing more energy on creating safe and stable conditions instead of policing and imprisonment reduces harm to communities.

Studies have shown that states with more prisons and prisoners do not have lower crime rates than other states. In reality, the PIC makes the lives of most people — especially the poor and people of color — less safe and more disordered. We know that when people call the cops to solve problems, police often cause more harm than the original problem.

We cannot build strong communities when people are constantly being forced out of our neighborhoods and into jails or prisons.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

We are learning abolition as we build it. There are large and small examples of people currently creating accountability and addressing harm in their families and communities without engaging the PIC. These are often collectively referred to as “alternatives.” To abolish the PIC we must understand that capitalism and the PIC strip away human, natural, and financial resources that are needed in order to meet communities’ basic needs. In this sense, our work necessitates that alternatives are not seen as replacements to the PIC but rather mechanisms for its abolition. Therefore, our efforts for abolition must include proactive reforms that work to both chip away at the PIC as well as build up solutions for confronting harm and providing social needs. Alternatives to the PIC can include:

- Resources that help people from being targeted by the state, such as housing and jobs
- Changing the paradigm of punishment, such as safe injection sites in place of criminalizing drug use
- Addressing harm and accountability without using courts or imprisonment, such as transformative justice circles

ABOLITION IS A REALISTIC VISION.

The PIC did not always exist. The modern-day prison is only about 200 years old. Even today there are places where people rely on each other to address harm and accountability instead of police, courts, and cages.

It has taken over 200 years to build up the PIC. We can't expect to dismantle such a complicated system in a short time. The first abolitionists began working decades before they won the abolition of slavery. Our struggle is a long one. Believing we can abolish the PIC is the first step.