

CRITICAL RESISTANCE

KEY DEFINITIONS

PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX (PIC)

The term prison industrial complex (PIC) describes the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems.

Through its reach and impact, the PIC helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic and similar privileges. There are many ways this power is collected and maintained through the PIC, including creating mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of 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 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 make demands of self-determination and reorganization of power in the US. All these things are parts of the PIC.

PIC ABOLITION

A political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, 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 lead us all to believe that things 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.

ABOLITIONIST (NON-REFORMIST) REFORM

A practical effort or step that changes aspects of the prison industrial complex towards completely dismantling the system. Abolitionist reforms do not increase the scope, scale, or life of the prison industrial complex, rather they either take power away from these systems (i.e. through control measures or defunding) or they grow community-based alternatives that are needed in order to ensure the dismantling of the PIC.

POLICING

A social relationship made up of a set of practices that are empowered by the state to enforce law and social control through the use of force. Reinforcing the oppressive social and economic relationships that have been central to the US throughout its history, the roots of policing in the United States are closely linked the capturing of people escaping slavery and the enforcement of Black Codes. Similarly, police forces have been used to keep new immigrants “in line” and to prevent the poor and working classes from making demands. As social conditions change, how policing is used to target poor people, people of color, immigrants, and others who do not conform on the street or in their homes also shifts. The choices policing requires about which people to target, what to target them for, and when to arrest a book them play a major role in who ultimately gets imprisoned.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES OF THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Critical Resistance Los Angeles developed the concentric circles chart to think through and explain the prison industrial complex with its overlapping and intersecting interests. You can read the circles from the innermost outward to form a complete sentence.

