

KEYWORDS

These are words you'll find throughout this toolkit - we are defining them here to clarify how we're using them in the kit. These ideas are vital to the problems, struggles, and possible solutions we outline here, so we chose to highlight the terms below not only to help you with unfamiliar concepts, but to provide a framework for the rest of the ideas in the kit.

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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.

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.

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 prison industrial complex 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.

THE STATE

THROUGHOUT THE KIT, YOU WILL SEE REFERENCES TO THE STATE: STATE VIOLENCE, STATE REPRESSION, AND STATE CONTROL. "THE STATE" IS AT ITS SIMPLEST THE GOVERNMENT. IT IS THE SET OF PEOPLE AND INTERESTS THAT DETERMINE THE LAWS, POLICIES, AND PRACTICES (INCLUDING ECONOMICS) OF A GEOGRAPHICAL AREA.

MANY OF THE PEOPLE MOST INVOLVED PERFORMING THE STATE'S POWER ARE THOSE WHO BENEFIT FROM IT MOST DIRECTLY.

For example, racism is a tool the state uses to maintain white supremacy and keep resources and power from people of color. The PIC is a tool the state uses to control people, maintain its own power, and legitimize itself by claiming that only it can create "safety" for people living under it. This is important since the state controls people not only directly through police, prisons, and surveillance, but more indirectly, by influencing how people and communities imagine themselves, what they can do, and what harm they have to put up with. For example, sometimes people in places that are more heavily surveilled by police and cameras (whether that is where they live or where they spend other time), limit where they go and when, change their behavior, or start to punish or talk down to others in their community who do not. In other words, the power of the state is not only an outside force, but gets internalized in the minds of people subject to it, too.

CAPITALISM

CAPITALISM IS AN ECONOMIC SYSTEM IN WHICH A SMALL NUMBER OF PEOPLE MAINTAIN OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL OF THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION (THE MACHINES, FACTORIES, AND LAND NEEDED TO MAKE GOODS) AND THE WAYS OF DISTRIBUTING AND MAKING MONEY OFF THOSE GOODS.

In a capitalist system, like in the US, the most people do not own the wealth, but are spread out into different classes depending on their relationship to production. Production can be anything from making the actual stuff, to working in service industries like hotels and restaurants, to holding stocks and other financial resources.

Many people who do not own the majority of capital still benefit from their relationship to it. For example, the middle and upper-middle classes have more access to the power and resources controlled by the owners than do the working class and poor.

It is important to understand that capitalism needs two things that are at the heart of the growth of and justification for the PIC. First, it has to constantly grow and expand. Second, for capitalism to thrive, it depends on a surplus of labor (here, *labor* refers to the people who do the work to produce goods and services). In other words, some people (or some class of people) have to be out of work. This unemployment creates competition among the working class and working poor for jobs. It also makes it easier for owners to set lower wages because the unemployed can be used as a threat to workers trying to get better conditions or pay.

The PIC is an important and expanding industry in the US. It fills spaces left open by factory and agricultural work AND it is a primary tool used by the capitalist state to control the working class (both employed and unemployed). The PIC controls these classes through increased state presence in work and labor sites and by warehousing poor people and people of color.

CRIMINALIZATION

CRIMINALIZATION IS THE PROCESS THROUGH WHICH ACTIONS BECOME ILLEGAL. ACTIONS BECOME CRIMES ONLY AFTER THEY HAVE BEEN CULTURALLY OR LEGALLY DEFINED AS CRIMES. IDEAS ABOUT WHAT IS CRIMINAL REACH FAR BEYOND SPECIFIC ACTIONS. WHAT COUNTS AS CRIME CHANGES ACROSS BOTH TIME AND SPACE, AND SOMETIMES HAPPENS REALLY FAST. OFTEN THOSE CHANGES HAPPEN BECAUSE OF POLITICAL FORCES THAT ARE MANIPULATING PUBLIC FEARS INSTEAD OF RESPONDING TO THEM.

Criminalization is also what happens when entire groups of people are targeted by law enforcement for punishment and control. The criminalization of poverty, for example, 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. The criminalization of youth of color includes directly folding police forces into school security, as well as laws in many cities that forbid young people from gathering in groups as small as three on the street. The criminalization of immigrants means that “foreign looking” people get stopped on the street and in airports more often and are vulnerable to police brutality.

The process of criminalization is an important piece of the PIC. It is one of the tools that make it possible for police and courts to target specific actions as well as specific groups of people. It sets us up to believe that everyone who breaks a law is a direct threat to us and to our families. Criminalization also adds to the myth that social, political, and economic problems are really law enforcement problems—that safety of all kinds, including economic security, can be guaranteed by watching, controlling and caging the groups of people who suffer most because of poverty or racism.

RACE & RACISM

RACE IS NOT A NATURAL CATEGORY. IT IS A CATEGORY HUMANS HAVE MADE UP THAT CLASSIFIES PEOPLE BASED ON PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS. EVEN THOUGH IT IS MADE UP, IT HAS VERY REAL CONSEQUENCES IN THE U.S.

It is also a deciding part of who is targeted for control by the PIC over and over again. This is a result of **racism** - the use of race as a basis for societal inequalities. The creation of race and the formal uses of racism are at the heart of how the PIC works.

The prison industrial complex controls people by limiting their life choices. It does this by saying who can have access to what and under what circumstances (see *Criminalization*). In controlling and limiting people's life choices, the people involved in upholding the PIC are able to maintain the current balance of power (see *White Supremacy, The State, and Self-Determination*). And even though many people of color participate in the state and in corporations that work with the state, the state's power is still tilted in favor of white people. Prisons, policing, surveillance, and other manifestations of the PIC are made possible by exploiting racial inequalities and working them further into the fabric of society.

WHITE SUPREMACY

THE TERM WHITE SUPREMACY DESCRIBES A **SYSTEM OF POWER** THAT HAS ITS HISTORICAL ROOTS IN THE EUROPEAN EFFORT FOR SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND GEOGRAPHICAL DOMINANCE. THIS SYSTEM OF POWER IS ALSO KEY TO HOW THE U.S. HAS BEEN ORGANIZED TO SYSTEMATICALLY BENEFIT WHITE PEOPLE AND ACT OUT VIOLENCE ON PEOPLE OF COLOR.

This violence is not limited to personal hatred, but includes arrangements of society that limit the choices, opportunities, and safety of people of color. White supremacy concentrates resources, power and wealth in white communities and denies those things to communities of color on purpose. Of course, these benefits are not the same for all white people. Rich white people acquire more economic resources and power than poor white people.

Simple statistics about who goes to prison, who stays there longer, whose communities get policed most heavily, and so on show that the PIC targets people of color (see the fact sheets for more info). The common sense (see the *Common Sense* section of this kit) encouraged through the PIC also feeds white supremacy. For example, police safety materials and the nightly news encourage racist fears about who does crime by showing the same images over and over regardless of who actually commits harms. The use of these images makes it easier to impose policing, surveillance, and prison on communities of color. This burden, in turn, keeps white supremacy alive by removing or keeping down challenges to it. Historically these challenges have included struggles by people of color for self-determination. Without these challenges it is harder to keep resources and control from getting concentrated in white communities.

Struggles against white supremacy and the PIC cannot be separated. By putting anti-white supremacy at the core of how we organize for abolition, we can challenge white supremacy in all its forms and locations, even ones that don't seem immediately related to prisons or jails or police.

GENDER & SEXUALITY

GENDER IS USED TO DESCRIBE THE IDEAS OF MALE AND FEMALE THAT HAVE BECOME COMMON SENSE FOR US AND THE BIGGER IDEA OF GENDER BEYOND JUST MALE AND FEMALE.

For this kit, it is important to address both of these uses of gender. Both the opposite pairing of male and female and the wider idea of gender (including transgendered, transsexual, gender variant, intersex, and gender queer) play important roles in the way the PIC targets people.

Gender “norms” are ideas about what men and women should be and reflect the belief that there are only men and women. These norms are connected to white supremacy, heterosexism, and class prejudice because straight, white, upper-class ideals shape them. Gender is often used to portray people in relationship to the PIC. For example, people are often targeted by the police because of what others see as difference from gender norms. For example, transgendered people are often physically searched to determine their “sex” when stopped by police.

Police also target people based on stereotypes of people that include gender *and* race or class. For example, poor women and women of color on the street at night are sometimes stopped on suspicion for prostitution, while working class men and men of color are targeted as “loiterers”.

Sexuality is often closely linked to gender. Just as there are gender norms that tell people how they should act according to gender, there are also sexual norms that say who people should be attracted to and have physical and emotional relationships with.

SEXUALITY CAN REFER TO A PERSON’S SEXUAL BEHAVIOR. IT CAN ALSO REFER TO HOW A PERSON IDENTIFIES WHOM THEY ARE ATTRACTED TO, HAVE SEX WITH OR HAVE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH.

Both queer sexuality and sexuality that falls outside the norms are targeted by the PIC (especially for women). This happens through intense policing of queer spaces, surveillance of women alone in public spaces, and the enforcement of laws regulating sexual norms. Inside prisons and jails, queer people are often vulnerable to increased harassment, segregated housing, and targeting by prison guards.

The PIC is a tool for controlling people. Both gender and sexuality are targets for control because of the important roles gender and sexual norms have in dictating a person’s behavior and place in the US. The PIC depends on controlling people’s bodies, both in public spaces and in cages, for its power. It uses gender segregation, gender norms, sexism, and gender oppressions with race and class to act on that power.

We realize that the word *queer* might make some people uncomfortable because it is sometimes used as a violent word meant to hurt and humilate.

In the kit, we use the word *queer* for two main reasons:

ONE, BECAUSE QUEER CAN TALK ABOUT A BROADER, MORE INCLUSIVE SET OF SEXUAL AND GENDER IDENTITIES THAN ANY LIST OF SPECIFIC TERMS (LIKE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, ETC.).

TWO, BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT THE WORD QUEER GIVES US THE MOST RADICAL WAY TO ADDRESS THE OPPRESSION OF PEOPLE BASED ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY.

We also use queer to challenge a common goal of many mainstream gay and lesbian movements - seeking acceptance into the current system. Instead, we use it to support the goal of working to undo the strict norms of gender and sexuality that are so much a part of the PIC. (for more, see *Gender and Sexuality* this section.)

COMMUNITY

IN THIS KIT YOU WILL FIND REFERENCES TO COMMUNITY: COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZING, COMMUNITY-BASED RESPONSES TO HARM, COMMUNITY SELF-DETERMINATION, ETC. IT IS KEY THAT WE THINK ABOUT HOW TO DEFINE WHAT WE MEAN BY “COMMUNITY,” BECAUSE SOMETIMES WE FALL BACK ON A COMMON IDEA THAT A “COMMUNITY” IS SOMETHING THAT ALREADY EXISTS, AND THAT ALL THE PEOPLE IN IT WANT ALL THE SAME THINGS.

That idea doesn't work for building practical abolitionist tools because often we are trying to build alternatives to prisons, policing, and the rest of the PIC among people who don't always agree on how to do that or if we even should do this work to begin with.

Communities, then, are always being made and re-made. A community can be geographical (a town, a neighborhood, an apartment building), based on identity or situation (Black people, queer people, white anti-racists, people on public assistance), or something as small as a group of friends. When we suggest that we can find new solutions for confronting harm and creating real safety, we imagine these solutions beginning in communities—groupings in which people are accountable to each other and act on the principles of abolition in everyday practice.

Often challenges can be best met in groups of people who can create new ways to respond to harm in their immediate surroundings and among themselves, without involving the state (or with as little involvement as possible). To build toward abolition, our communities are essential. However, we have to be conscious about the different ways we group ourselves and aware of the different needs and concerns of all the people in those groupings. We also need to be in tune with the different pressures on and resources available to our communities. What a community is will always keep changing as the people inside it keep re-defining it.

IN THIS TOOLKIT, WE DEFINE HARM BOTH AS SOMETHING ONE PERSON DOES TO HURT ANOTHER - FROM YELLING AT YOUR PARTNER TO KILLING ANOTHER PERSON - AND AS THE EFFECT OF OPPRESSION OR VIOLENCE CARRIED OUT BY THE STATE (SEE *STATE*).

IMPORTANTLY, THESE KINDS OF HARM ARE LINKED.

This means that when one person hurts someone else, that harm can often be linked to the harm the state and economic institutions do in communities of color, poor communities, and other oppressed communities. We define harm this broadly to recognize that current ideas of crime are limited to ways that specifically target the communities that are also the targets of harm from the state. We also do it to challenge the idea that the best ways to address harm in our communities is through punishment and imprisonment. For more ideas about harm see the section *Confronting "Crime," Confronting Harm*.