A primer for

Understanding Prison Abolition

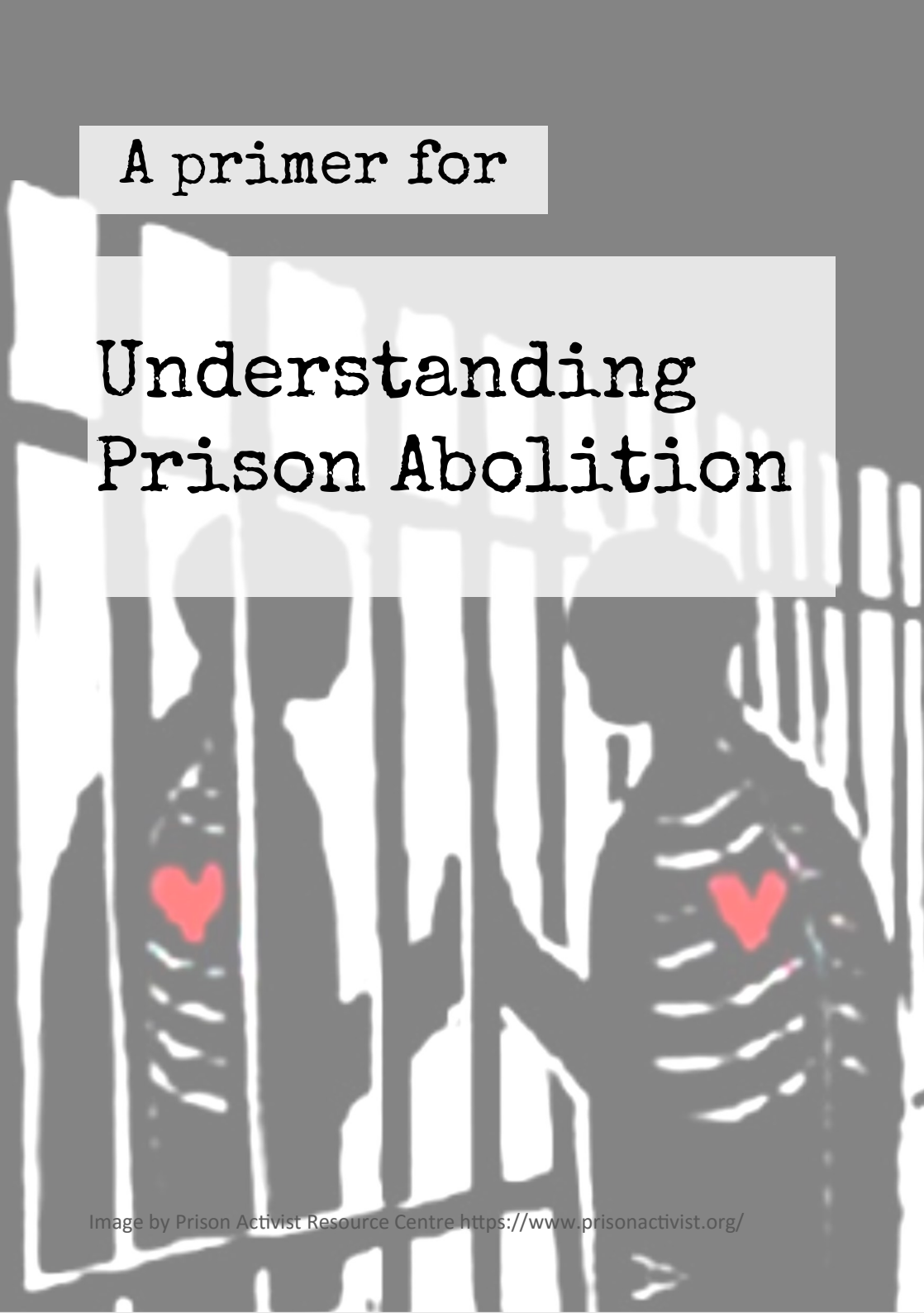
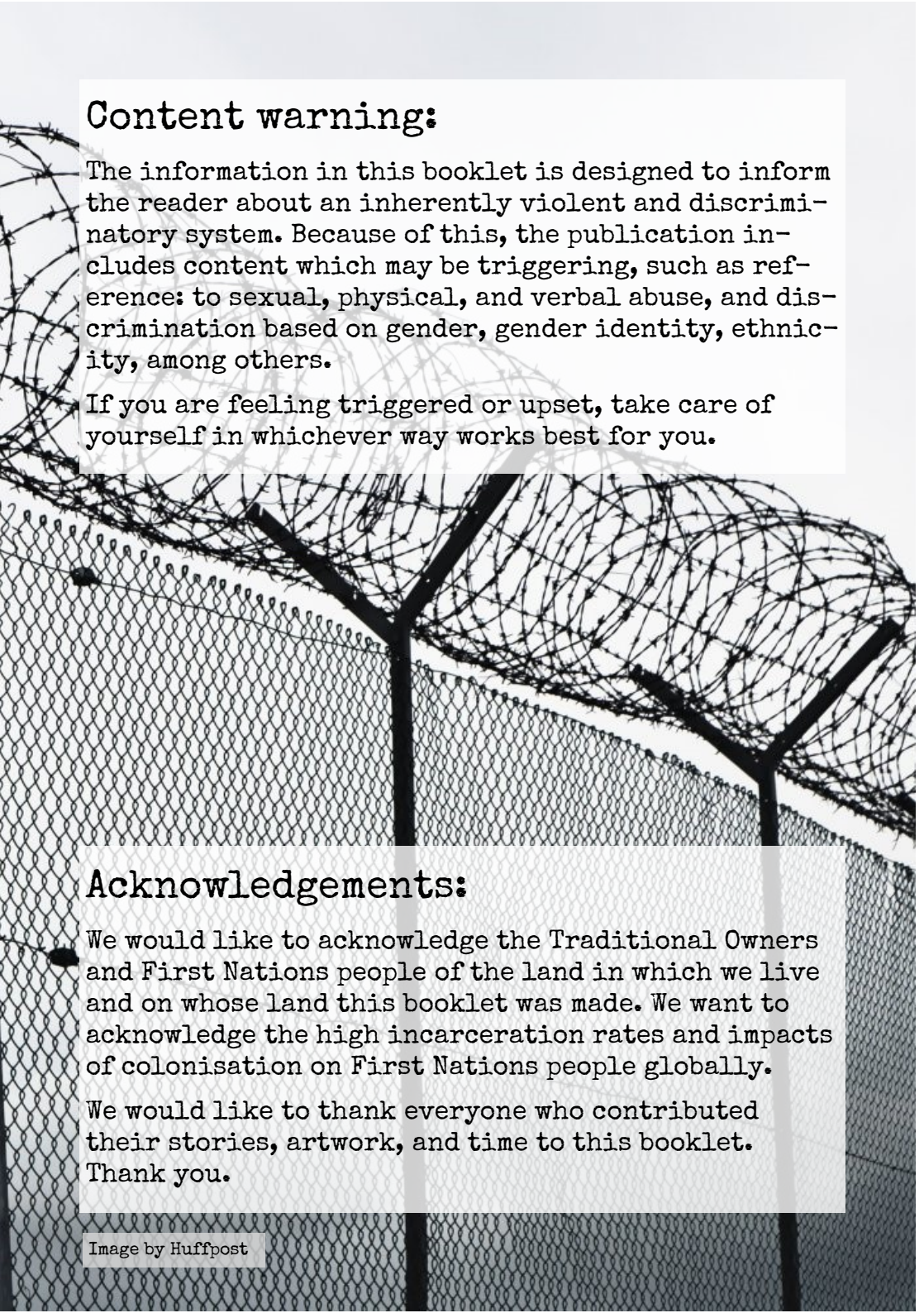


Image by Prison Activist Resource Centre https://www.prisonactivist.org/

Content warning:

The information in this booklet is designed to inform the reader about an inherently violent and discriminatory system. Because of this, the publication includes content which may be triggering, such as reference: to sexual, physical, and verbal abuse, and discrimination based on gender, gender identity, ethnicity, among others.

If you are feeling triggered or upset, take care of yourself in whichever way works best for you.



Acknowledgements:

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and First Nations people of the land in which we live and on whose land this booklet was made. We want to acknowledge the high incarceration rates and impacts of colonisation on First Nations people globally.

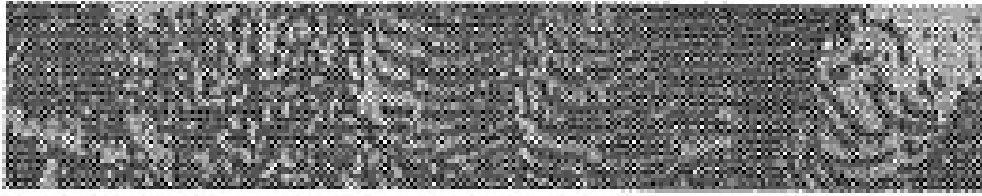
We would like to thank everyone who contributed their stories, artwork, and time to this booklet. Thank you.

Image by Huffpost

"THE PRISON IS SYNONYMOUS WITH VIOLENCE. EVEN IF WE ADVOCATE FOR ITS REFORM, WE NECESSARILY HAVE OUR EYES SET ON ITS ABOLITION."

-EMILIE RĀKETE

No pride in prisons http://nopridеinprisons.org.nz



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.

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.

ACCOUNTABILITY

THE IDEA THAT IF SOMEONE DOES SOMETHING WRONG, THEY SHOULD BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE IS OFTEN A DRIVING FORCE BEHIND POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE PIC. IN THIS KIT, WE USE THE TERM DIFFERENTLY. TRUE ACCOUNTABILITY MEANS MAKING SURE THAT RESPONSIBILITIES BETWEEN PEOPLE OR GROUPS ARE MET. IT ALSO MEANS THAT EACH SIDE'S NEEDS GET MET.

Within the PIC, punishment is commonly thought of as a tool for creating accountability. Usually the state, through the district attorney, the police, and the courts, claims to use the PIC to hold people accountable for their crimes. This means that they will be held responsible (to the state), given a punishment, and serve out that punishment.

We suggest that accountability has many parts. First, there is the accountability of people to each other, or individuals acting from a sense of responsibility to other individuals. There is also the accountability of groups of people to other groups and to individuals, or the group or society having a responsibility to those groups or individuals. In a broader model of accountability, society as a whole should be responsible to see that the basic needs of individuals and groups are met, and should not stand in the way of those needs being met.

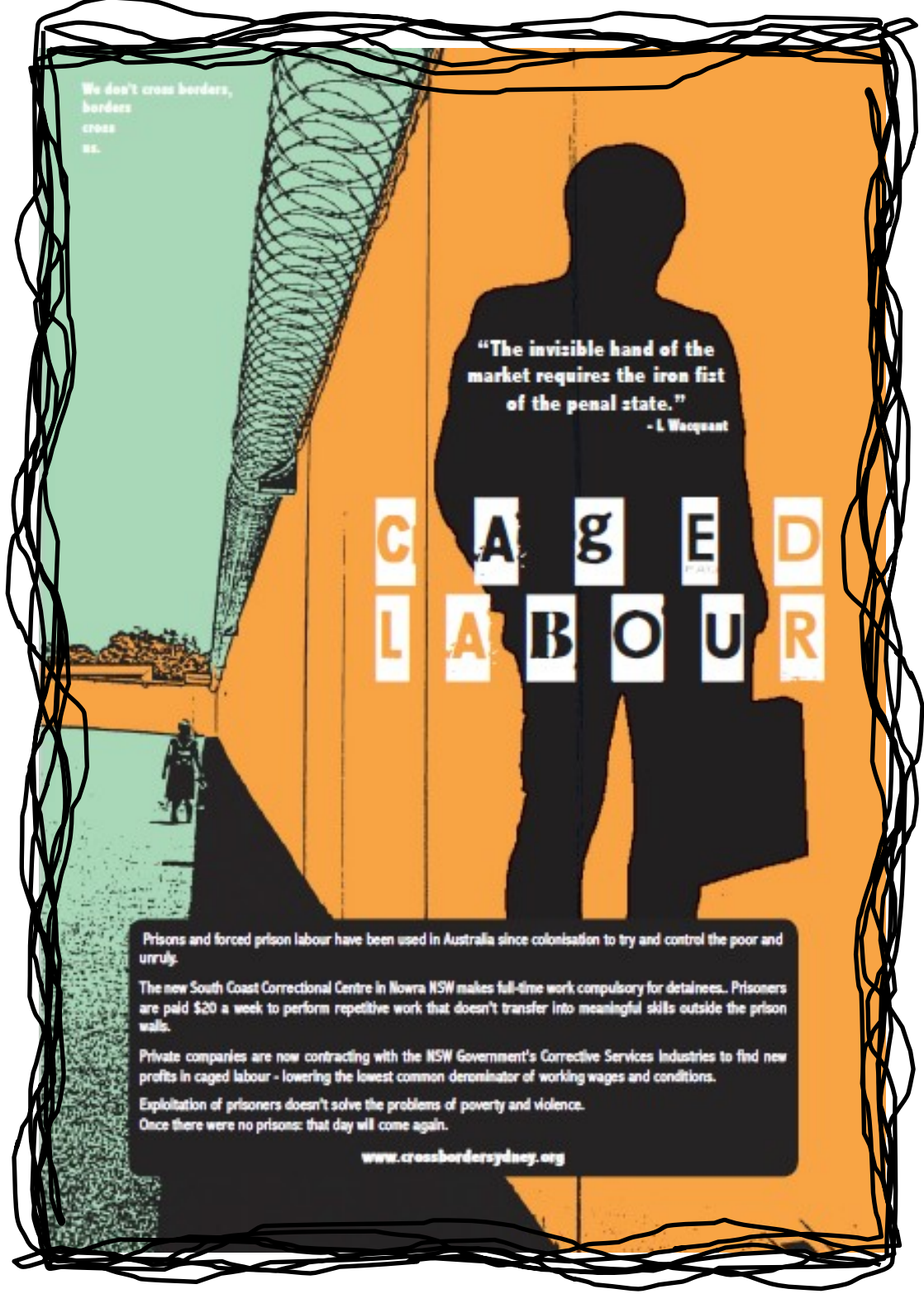
With this model of accountability, responsibility for harm rests not only on a person who caused the harm, but also on the groups of people around them that respond to it, and, the steps taken to address the harm that meet the needs of everyone involved (not just the state). This model of accountability also seeks to provide support both to the harmed and to the person who caused the harm.

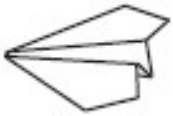
RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IS A SET OF IDEAS AND A SET OF PRACTICES. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE DEFINES CRIME AS HARM THAT IS DONE BOTH AT THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY LEVEL.

With that in mind, the goal of restorative justice programs and practices is to repair and prevent harm by addressing the needs of all involved in an incident. It focuses on the accused, the accuser or survivor and the communities in which they live, work, or learn (see Alternative Practices section for specific examples).

In the United States, experiments with restorative justice have been mixed. Since many restorative justice practices have their roots in native traditions, their use has not always taken into account cultural features that might not translate well into mainstream US culture. However, restorative justice ideas and strategies can be very helpful in thinking about alternative ways of addressing harm and providing frameworks for programs that are not linked to the state's punishment system.


We don't cross borders,
borders
cross
us.
"The invisible hand of the market requires the iron fist of the penal state."
- L Wacquant
CAGED LABOUR
Prisons and forced prison labour have been used in Australia since colonisation to try and control the poor and unruly.
The new South Coast Correctional Centre in Nowra NSW makes full-time work compulsory for detainees.. Prisoners are paid $20 a week to perform repetitive work that doesn't transfer into meaningful skills outside the prison walls.
Private companies are now contracting with the NSW Government's Corrective Services Industries to find new profits in caged labour - lowering the lowest common denominator of working wages and conditions.
Exploitation of prisoners doesn't solve the problems of poverty and violence.
Once there were no prisons: that day will come again.
www.crossbordersydney.org



the border

arrive by boat

or on a student visa

or as a 'guest' worker

you are vomited out

your money extracted

your labour extracted

land in mandatory detention

it's nearly impossible to work legally for a fair wage and a gamble whether you can stay

then you get sent back

non 'genuine' refugees get deported

the guts of the australian border

WeDontCrossBorders
borders cross us.
www.crossbordersydney.org

WHO WERE THE FIRST ABOLITIONISTS?

We take the name "abolitionist" purposefully from those who called for the abolition of slavery in the 1800's. Abolitionists believed that slavery could not be fixed or reformed. It needed to be abolished. As PIC abolitionists today, we also do not believe that reforms can make the PIC just or effective. Our goal is not to improve the system; it is to shrink the system into non-existence.

WHAT ABOUT PUBLIC SAFETY?

We all want safe communities. The question is 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 solve any of the problems that lead to harm, like harmful drug use, poverty, violence, or mental illness. By separating people from their home communities, and isolating them in abusive and violent environments, these problems can even get worse. 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.

For example, providing drug users with health care and harm reduction strategies instead of locking them in cages helps reduce the harm that drug use might cause. When public funding is directed into policing and prisons, budget cuts for social programs, including women's shelters, welfare and public housing are the side effect. These cutbacks leave women less able to escape violent relationships. Focusing more energy on creating safe and stable conditions instead of policing and imprisonment reduces harm.

Studies have shown that states with more prisons and prisoners do not have lower crime rates than other states. The PIC claims to be about safety and order. In reality, the PIC makes the lives of most people – especially the poor and people of color – less safe and more disordered. For example, poor people and people of color are often targeted by the cops based on the way they look. And even in instances where people call the cops to solve problems, the cops are often more disruptive than the original problem. We cannot build strong communities when people are constantly being taken out of them.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

We do not have all the answers. But, we do know that people in other parts of the world rely on prisons and police far less than the U.S. does, and suffer from far less harm. We also know that communities where people have housing, food, education and jobs have the lowest crime rates. The best way to reduce harm is by building safe, healthy communities where people have their basic needs met.

"What is Abolition" criticalresistance.org

WHAT CAN I DO TODAY?

Today, there are small steps that will move us toward abolition, such as:

- Instead of supporting construction of a new prison to make the horrible conditions that most prisoners live in a little better, we can push for alternatives that reduce the number of people locked in cages.
- Instead of calling the police everytime there is a conflict in our neighborhoods, we can establish community forums and mediation practices to deal with harm and conflict.
- We can build safer and healthy communities by working to eliminate barriers to housing and jobs faced by people coming home from prison to help them stay out of the system.

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 instead of police, courts, and cages.

It has taken over 200 years to build up the PIC. We can't expect to take apart such a complicated system in a short time. The first slavery 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.

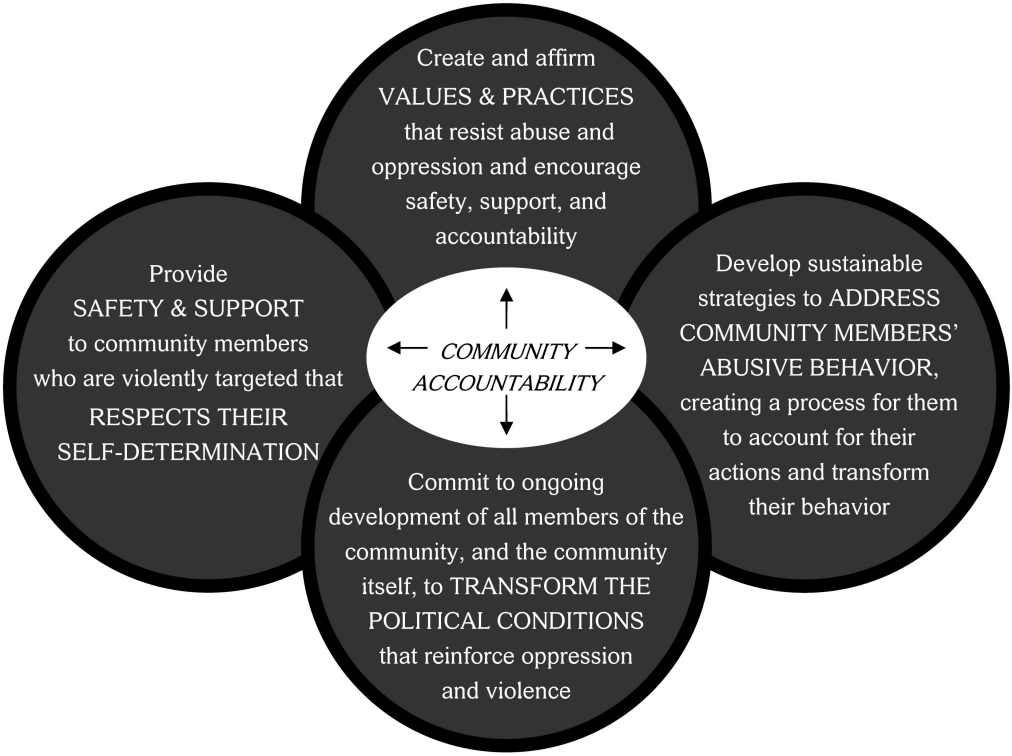
www.flatout.org.au
SCHOOLS NOT JAILS
NO JUSTICE IN PRISON FOR ABORIGINAL WOMEN
DECARCERATION NOW
BUILD COMMUNITIES NOT PRISONS
STRIP SEARCHES ARE SEXUAL ASSAULT
CENTRE FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF IMPRISONED PEOPLE
FLAT OUT

ORGANIZING COMMUNITY

➲ HOW DO WE ADDRESS VIOLENCE *WITHIN* OUR COMMUNITIES?

We are told to call the police and rely on the criminal justice system to address violence *within* our communities. However, if police and prisons facilitate or perpetrate violence against us rather than increase our safety, how do we create strategies to address violence within our communities, including domestic violence, sexual violence, and child abuse, that don't rely on police or prisons?

Community accountability is one critical option. Community accountability is a community-based strategy, rather than a police/prison-based strategy, to address violence within our communities. Community accountability is a process in which a community – a group of friends, a family, a church, a workplace, an apartment complex, a neighborhood, etc. – work together to do the following things:



ACCOUNTABILITY

➲ WHAT DOES COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY LOOK LIKE?

Art by Cristy C. Road, croadcore.org

Community-based responses to violence have a long history in many of our communities and networks, and have often been developed in contexts where we could not rely on the state or larger community to protect us from violence (such as Black communities in the slavery and post-slavery eras, immigrant communities, queer communities, and Indigenous communities). But these practices may not necessarily be called "community accountability" and can look very different depending on the circumstances.

Community accountability can be about directly addressing violence as well creating on-going practices within our relationships and broader networks that are opposed to oppression and violence. Networks of people can develop a community accountability *politic* by engaging in anti-violence/anti-oppression education, building relationships based on values of safety, respect, and self-determination, and nurturing a culture of collective responsibility, connection, and liberation. Community accountability is not just a reaction — something that we do when someone behaves violently — it is also *proactive* — something that is ongoing and negotiated among everyone in the community. This better prepares us to address violence if and when it happens. **Concrete strategies and examples of community accountability can be found in the blocks on the right and in the documents referenced below.**

Do participatory action research to learn what strategies women of color and LGBT/queer folks of color think might work for them to increase their safety

Make agreements with your friends about what to do if one of you is in an abusive relationship

Organize a "liberated ground," mobilizing a neighborhood block by block to agree to resist rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment.

Work with family members of a survivor to enhance support for that person.

➲ IS COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY REALISTIC?

Understandably, many of us want a quick fix to end domestic and sexual violence in our communities. However, community accountability work can be difficult and complicated because of oppressive attitudes and beliefs internalized by people within our communities. Community accountability can also be hard because we are often isolated from other people, sometimes because of the abuse itself, making it difficult to work collectively to support one another as well as hold each other accountable. Doing this work can be emotionally risky or even relationship breaking. Sometimes a process can take a very long time. **For these reasons, it can be vital to create a support network when doing this work and to *work collectively*.** It is also true that engaging in intentional community accountability work can sometimes help to *build* connections with people, strengthening a collective political commitment to respectful, loving, and liberatory relationships.

Use street theater to demonstrate to community members how they could react if they see acts of violence or harassment

Please visit www.incite-national.org for more info!

I am not proposing that sexual violence and domestic violence will no longer exist. I am proposing that we create a world where so many people are walking around with the skills and knowledge to support someone that there is no longer a need for anonymous hotlines.

I am proposing that we break through the shame of survivors (a result of rape culture) and the victim-blaming ideology of all of us (also a result of rape culture), so that survivors can gain support from the people already in their lives. I am proposing that we create a society where community members care enough to hold an abuser accountable so that a survivor does not have to flee their home. I am proposing that all of the folks that have been disappointed by systems work together to create alternative systems. I am proposing that we organize.

Rebecca Farr, CARA member

HOW IS THE PIC HARMFUL TO SURVIVORS?

Although the lion's share of public funding dedicated to addressing domestic and sexual violence goes to the prisons and policing, most survivors never access the criminal system for protection or justice. In the meantime, the prison industrial complex is actually having a terrible impact on many survivors of rape and abuse:

- **The War on Drugs has incarcerated thousands of survivors of rape and abuse.** Women who have experienced abuse are more likely to use drugs as a coping mechanism. For example, rape victims with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are 26 times more likely than non-rape victims to have two or more major serious drug abuse problems.[1] Women who have abusive partners that sell or abuse drugs are sometimes threatened by their partners to participate. Also, women who are poor because of domestic violence sometimes turn to drug-related income sources.[2]

- **Prisons are a location for intensely high rates of sexual violence and exploitation.** Many women, men, and children are raped and sexually exploited by prison guards as well as other inmates while in prison. The number of sexual assaults in prison is three to four times higher than the number outside prison walls. (See Stop Prison Rape, www.spr.org). Juveniles in adult prisons are especially vulnerable to sexual assault. Also prison rape is resulting in increasingly high rates of HIV and other STDs among prisoners.

- **Increasing collaboration between federal immigration law enforcement and local police endangers immigrant survivors.** The U.S. Department of Justice continues its expansion of ICE (immigration law enforcement) influence and activities into local policing and incarceration. The "War on Terrorism" has resulted in the detainment and deportation of thousands of immigrants, effectively decreasing the trust immigrant survivors have for any law enforcement.

- **Of women convicted of violent crimes, the vast majority were convicted for defending themselves or their children from abuse.** In California alone, there are 600 women in prison for killing their abusers in self-defense. Average prison terms are twice as long for killing husbands as for killing wives.[3] Also, mandatory arrest laws and untrained police officers sometimes result in survivors of domestic violence being arrested for domestic violence crimes instead of the perpetrators.[4]

- **Prisons waste critical public resources.** The exorbitant cost of prisons limits national resources that ought to be used for economic justice. Social services – including services for survivors of rape and abuse – are cut in order to make more room in state and federal budgets for the maintenance of the prison industrial complex. Survivors are left without the critical resources we need to address our experience of abuse. Communities also need those resources to create our own safety and accountability strategies.

- **Prisons don't work.** Prisons do not help to transform abusive people. When people who batter or rape are incarcerated, they are not set up with the services they need to ensure that, when they are released, their behavior will have changed. Instead, prisons isolate, de-humanize, and humiliate inmates. Sometimes prisoners may even change for the worse after they have experienced incarceration. After they are released, they can sometimes be more dangerous to the community than they were originally.

women don't belong in cages

80% of imprisoned women are inside for poverty related offences.

90% of Aboriginal and 82% of all women in prison are survivors of incest, rape or physical assault.

The number of women in prison increased 200% in the past 15 years.

prisons are the real crime

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NO YOUNG PEOPLE IN ADULT PRISONS

DID YOU KNOW?

- People as young as 16 years of age are being placed in Victoria's adult prisons.
- Many young people in adult prison are held in solitary confinement, often involving long-term lockdown for 23 hours a day.
- Solitary confinement breaks the spirit of adult prisoners, with even worse consequences for young people, including serious psychological and physical harm, heightened risk of suicide, and other forms of self-harm.
- Young people in adult prison suffer lasting, serious damage to their mental, physical and emotional health, and risk being trapped in the adult prison system.
- Placing young people in adult prison puts rehabilitation at risk and increases the likelihood of future offending.
- The reasons young people are placed in adult prison are not open to independent review.
- Transfers to adult prison from youth training centres are occurring because of inadequate resourcing and management of more appropriate options in the youth justice system.
- Most of these young people have had long involvement in the child protection system prior to their incarceration in adult prison.
- Most of these young people are either Aboriginal, of refugee background or are young men or women of 'colour.'

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit our blog: **www.noprison4kids.org.au**

Without community

there is no liberation

...but community must not mean

a shedding of our differences,

nor the pathetic pretense that these

differences do not exist.

- Audre Lorde