

Are Prisons Obsolete Notes

- [PDF](#)

- [Link to Purchase Are Prisons Obsolete from a Black Owned book store](#)

- [Audio Book](#)

Introduction: Prison Reform or Prison Abolition

- Prisons are normalized around the world
- Reform vs Abolition
 - Kwame Ture
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iw_r2eeB-Xo
 - Lenin
“The Liberal bourgeoisie offer reforms with one hand, & with the other always take them back, reduce them to naught, use them to enslave workers & to divide them into different groups & perpetuate wage slavery.”
- The fight to abolish the death penalty is familiar, & many can see the world without the death penalty but cannot imagine a world without prisons.
- People have been fighting against imprisonment since its inception.
- People assume those that have issues with prisons want reform and think that abolitionists are idealists.
- Imprisonment has increased so rapidly that many Black, Latine, and Native folks have a higher chance of going to prison than going to university & many join the military to avoid going to imprisonment.
- We currently have over 2 million people in prison in the US (Prison Policy Initiative) & the number is going up exponentially. We know that prisons are violent places & that the US government is corrupt. Are we willing to allow them to imprison more people?
- The US has 5% of the world's population & 20% of its prisoners.
- Large prison populations do not reduce crime or make people safer but lead to even larger prison populations (Why is that?)
- As prisons expanded, corporations became more involved because prisons are lucrative & the prison industrial complex (PIC) emerged. Prisons were being built & filled 10 times faster than the previous 100 years.
- Prisons in the u.s. are built with the implicit consent of the public, right under our noses
- Ruth Gilmore - prisons are a geographic solution to socio-economic problems, prisons are built on devalued rural land with the promise of new jobs & a boost in local economies (never happened). We are told that prisons will not only reduce crime & make us safer but also would stimulate economies
 - When capitalists promise us economic growth, we know that they are going to fill their own bank accounts at our expense. That will always be the case
- We take prisons for granted but are afraid to acknowledge the violence within them and the flaws of their existence

- Prisons allow us to lock away larger issues. They are seen as a solution for sociopolitical problems. We can lock up entire communities and say it is because they are bad. They are criminals. Without acknowledging the reasons they are criminalized. Instead of realizing that it is capitalists stealing our lives from us, we blame those suffering the worst and we lock them away.
- Capitalists roam the globe looking for people to exploit so they don't have to worry about unionized workers & labor laws (which they pay politicians to undermine anyway). They lay off entire counties worth of people. Because education and other community resources are funded from taxes/the income of those people the community suffers. People starve, in more ways than one. The state doesn't just do nothing. It responds with aggression. It responds with crime bills. & the corporations that are associated with the punishment industry profit. They use the profits to increase their profits.
- Prisons allow the capitalist state to lock up its problems. To hide its evils. And on top of that, they've made it profitable.
- Deindustrialization and increasing imprisonment are linked but the public is told more prisons are needed because there is more crime,
 - but crime rates were falling during the reagan presidency & still three strikes laws are on the agenda in many states & drug laws are being passed
- Prisons are normalized in media
- The supermax prison is created
- The amount of people in prison in the u.s. is still rising exponentially & it is BIPOC, specifically Black, Native, and Latine people that are being imprisoned, with the greatest increase being Black women, Black people are the highest percentage of people in prison
- (at the time) most conversations were revolved around reform, but we must begin to figure out the logistics of abolition

Summary/Thoughts:

The fight for prison abolition in the united states has existed since its inception. We do not consent to prisons & we are told they exist to lock away people that would be a danger to us. In reality, prisons exist because they make corporations money & they allow the ruling class to lock away people that they deem a threat. Many can agree to various prison reforms (no death penalty, no supermax prisons), but think that abolition is taking things too far. But when you look past state propaganda you can see that prisons should be abolished.

Questions:

The text states that prisons are normalized and that they should not be. Can you think of other harmful things in our ~society that are normalized that you think should not be?

I can think of quite a few:

Capitalistic exploitation (obviously lol)- working until you die, working at all, prioritizing work over loved ones

The gender binary- assigning a set of traits and an entire life path based on one area of the body & then policing those that do not adhere to these impossible standards
The lack of bodily autonomy children have

How have we allowed so many people to be imprisoned without resistance?

My simplified answer:

The united states has powerful propaganda (war on drugs, war on crime, war on poverty). It's run by the ruling class aka the bourgeois aka the rich. Prisons make money. Biden & the city of LA is clearly getting ready to imprison more people. Which is the playbook when the people are organizing. What are we going to do now?

Large prisons populations do not reduce crime or make people safer, but lead to even larger prison populations (Why is that?)

We are told that crimes are things that are inherently/morally bad. When in reality, crimes are determined by those in power & ~those that make the rules make them to benefit themselves. The state often criminalizes societal issues instead of working to fix them ex. Drugs -- People become addicted to drugs for a variety of reasons & criminalizing drug use & drug selling hasn't helped anyone. Medicare for all would tho. For starters.

Do you know how many people are imprisoned in your county? In your city & in your state? Why do you or don't you know this information? How does this impact those around you?

Videos to watch:

[On Copaganda](#)

Slavery, Civil Rights, And Abolitionist Perspectives Towards Prison

TW: Description of convict leasing (racism, abuse, torture)

- Slavery was once seen as something we could not abolish
 - abolitionists like John Brown seen as extremists
- Even abolitionists refused to believe that Black people could be intelligent or equal to them ex: the treatment of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth
- The penitentiary was viewed as progressive after the abolition of slavery, with few abolitionists speaking out against it.
- after the 13th amendment, white supremacy continued: chattel slavery, convict leasing lynching, & segregation were all racist institutions people thought could not be abolished & their function is similar to that of prisons today & prisons is seen as an absolute just like its predecessors
 - Convict Leasing (we'll get to that)
 - Lynching
 - Segregation
 - The ending of segregation was not an ending of white supremacy. The issue of segregation was that it was claimed to be separate & equal, but that was not true. Black people had less resources & opportunity. The ending of segregation did not make us equal, it just made us together and unequal (as opposed to separate). & once again white supremacy continues.
 - Similarities between prisons and chattel slavery
 - You are subjected to the will of others (inmates forced to follow a routine)
 - You have to depend on others for basic needs (food, water, shelter)
 - Isolated from general population
 - Forced to do free or poorly paid labor
 - Being convicted of a felony means a permanent loss of rights
- During slavery, nonslave prisoners would be sentenced to hard labor, but because enslaved people were already doing that they had far more vile forms of punishment for them
- After the abolition of slavery, former slave states revised slave codes to regulate the behavior of free Black people in ways similar to slavery. They made things like vagrancy, absence from work, & insulting gestures crimes (only if the person in question was Black). This was done to exploit the ~loophole~ of the 13th amendment
- Mary Ellen Curtin's study of Alabama prisoners shows that before the abolition of slavery 99% of prisoners were white & after abolition a majority of prisoners were Black
- As more Black people were imprisoned the more prisons began to incorporate the same types of punishment used on slaves
 - The Convict leasing was often worse than slavery because slave owners absolutely did punish their slaves, but never wanted to injure them so badly they

could not work. Convicts were not leased as individuals, but as a group. They could and were worked to death.

- Black convict laborers were used to quickly industrialize the south
 - We are aware of our history of slavery, but convict labor remains hidden
Ex. Georgia railroads and downtown atlanta were built by convict laborers
- Convict leasing has been abolished but the privatization of prisons & corporatization of punishment by the prison industrial complex is just a way to rebrand
 - Convict leasing was not regression or a mistake, it was the way capitalists and racists quickly industrialized the south with free labor
 - California colleges and universities are furnished by prison labor
- Propaganda closely links race and criminality
- 1833 Frederick Douglas wrote about the south's tendency to "impute crime to color"
 - When a crime was committed, Black men were punished regardless of guilt
 - White men often disguised themselves as black to get away with crimes
- Prisons have a long history of racism against Black people, & racism against Latine, Asian, and Native folks is a part of the history as well.
- Racial profiling is systemic, with many police departments having explicit systems in place to ensure they are detaining more Black and Latine people
 - Ex. After 9.11 police & INS began detaining middle eastern and south asian people without probable cause

Summary: After the passing of the 13th amendments and ending of chattel slavery, convict leasing, lynching & segregation continued the violent legacy of white supremacy. Prisons were viewed as progressive reform by slave abolitionists & slave states wrote laws to target newly freed Black people. Convict leasing allowed folks to continue enslaving Black people & the conditions were often worse than chattel slavery. Now convict leasing is illegal but the current prison system continues to target Black people for the benefit of corporations. Propaganda closely links race to criminality and the PIC has a history of racism against nonBlack POC as well.

Questions:

"What is the relationship between these historical expressions of racism & the role of the prison system today?" Page 25

Because it is the bourgeois/white supremacists that are in control of the government, the judicial system exists to police the most marginalized. The prison system imprisons Black people for the benefit of white people (money & social control). Prisons in the US have also incentivized prisoners to undergo surgeries to make them unable to have children or straight up done it without their consent.

Why are we told that prisons exist?

What is the function of prison?

Google companies that use prison labor today.

Further Reading:

Women, Race, Class by Angela Davis

The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander

Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865-1900 by Mary Ellen Curtin

Imprisonment & Reform 38--58

- Our current prisons are a reformed of the corporal punishment inherited from England
 - Inspired by other reforms during the enlightenment period
 - Reformers were deeply religious
 - People began to question and stop corporal punishment inflicted on free mem.
 - Reformers rarely cared to change the brutal punishments subjected to women & even less about the punishments of slaves
 - Prior to this period punishments were often given before the guilt or innocence of a person was determined, during the enlightenment they began to imprison people while determining the person's guilt or innocence
- Prison reformers, that were primarily protestants, thought prisons used for pretrial detention were dirty (both morally and literally), with inmates living in filth, drinking, and soliciting sex workers
 - Prisons weren't restricted to prisons & could often come and go as they wish, eat & drink what they wanted, and sex workers were allowed temporary entry
 - Reformers wanted prisons to be stricter with rules that would "enforce solitude & penitence, cleanliness & work"
- The first prisons can be traced to John Howard and Jeremy Bentham from the mid to late 1700s
 - Howard emphasized disciplined self reflection during imprisonment
 - Bentham stressed the importance of surveillance & that being constantly surveilled will help prisoners reform
- During the 17th and 19th centuries absolute solitude & strict regimentation of the prisoner's every action were viewed as strategies for transforming habits and ethics.
- Prisons were not the primary method of punishment until 18th century (Europe & the nations they were colonizing) & 19th century (US & the nations they were colonizing)
- Imprisonment became the most popular form punishment during the rise of capitalism & the ruling class & their influence of scientific, philosophical and cultural ideas
- During the rise of incarceration, men were disproportionately incarcerated
 - Because men had more rights & prison is about taking away people's rights
 - Women were primarily punished inside the home for failure to fulfil the domestic duties expected of them.
- First U.S. Prisons:
 - The Pennsylvania model
 - Total isolation silence and solitude
 - Solitary confinement was seen as a way to allow you to reflect and heal, now it is seen as the cruel punishment that it is
 - Auburn Model
 - Solitary cells, but labor in common (labor must be done in silence)

- Auburn model became the dominant model in US & Europe because it was profitable
- At the time this book was written prisons are expanding into the supermax prisons, whose purpose is to address disciplinary problems within the penal system
 - Mostly Black and Latine people in supermax prisons
 - Emerged when correctional authorities began to send “dangerous” prisoners to the federal prison in Marion, Illinois
 - Locked down in 1983 with prisoners being in their cells 23 hours a day
 - When this book was written there were about 60 supermax prisons in 36 states & many more super max units, according to a quick google there is only one open today
 - Supermax prisons rely on state-of-the-art technology for monitoring and controlling prisoner conduct & movement ex: video monitors & remote control electronic doors
- Supermax prisons and the first US prisons have many similarities, no one would argue that solitary confinement is conducive to healing. It is argued that supermaxes exist because they are made to complement the “horrific” people being imprisoned there. There is no pretense that rights are respected, no concern for the individual, there is no sense that those incarcerated in supermax prisons deserve anything approaching respect of comfort.
- Books have a long history of pushing prison reform, with books by those incarcerated being very impactful
 - George Jackson, Mumia Abu-Jamal, MLK, Malcolm X
 - 1994 crime bill bars prisoners from receiving pell grants and cuts funding for prison education programs -- which is one of example of many ways the gov disregards any rehabilitative strategies]

Summary: Imprisoning people as punishment is a reform that comes from 1700's England. Religious, usually protestant, reformers saw the prisons used for pretrial detention & thought they were morally and literally dirty. These reformers thought prisoners would be made into better people through self reflection, surveillance, and hard work while being imprisoned. This system was spread through colonization. In the U.S., prisons and incarceration rose along with capitalism & the ruling class. With prisons housing mostly white men until the abolition of chattel slavery. During the writing of this book, supermax prisons were being built rapidly. Supermax prisons have prisoners in their cells for 24 hours a day and closely mirror early prison models. Books written by those incarcerated have helped us learn about the horrors of the prison system, but the 1994 crime bill barred prisoners from receiving pell grants & cut funding for prison education programs.

Further Reading:

The Autobiography of Assata Shakur

Blood in my Eye by George Jackson

Watch:

The Last Graduation Documentary

How Gender Structures the Prison System 58-81

TW: Sexual Assault, slavery, brutality, domestic violence

- Although cismen are a majority of people imprisoned in the world, you lack a complete understanding of the PIC if you ignore the ways it oppresses noncismen
- Women are the fastest growing sector of the US prison population
- Punishment is gendered
 - Ex. Strip Searching
 - 2001 Sisters Inside - an Australian support org for women in prison deemed it “state sexual assault”
- The history of women’s punishment
 - Since the end of the 18th century (when we say imprisonment emerge as the dominant form of punishment) women have been represented as essentially different from men
 - Masculine criminality is deemed more “normal” than feminine criminality & women prisoners are seen as more threatening to society
 - Many of the ways women have been punished have not been acknowledged as such ex - psychiatric institutions
 - Women are more likely to be given psychiatric drugs while in prison
 - As criminality was seen as different from “insanity” - insanity became highly gendered as female, but because POC are seen as criminals this distinction is mostly for affluent white women
 - Until the abolition of slavery a vast majority of Black women experienced brutal gendered punishment ex - pregnant women had different penalties for not working fast enough, sexual assault
 - Women are typically punished by the men that are “in charge” of them & the threat of sexualized punishment is a constant
 - The connection between state-inflicted corporal punishment and the physical assaults on women in domestic places are not often acknowledged
 - Quaker reformers (1780s) played a pivotal role in campaigns to substitute imprisonment for corporal punishment & wanted separate prisons for women.
 - Men’s prisons were better taken care of & women’s prisons were overcrowded & harsh treatment & sexual abuse were common.
 - Male punishment was linked to penitence and reform through forfeiting of rights, but since women did not have these rights to begin with they were not seen as redeemable.
 - 19th century Reformers of women’s prisons pushed that women could be redeemed by learning to be good wives & domestic servants & women’s reformatories were created

- Black and Native women were segregated from white women and tended to be disproportionately sent to men's prisons & after the civil war Black women were sentenced under the convict leasing system
 - All women received longer sentences for similar offense because "the reform of women required more time"
 - The eugenics movement pushed for longer prison sentences for women so that "inferior" women could have less child bearing years
 - As corporation became more involved with prisons the goal changed from rehabilitation to incapacitation
 - Black women, Latine, & Native women are targets of the PIC
 - Women's & men's prisons are supposed to be "separate but equal" & even feminists have demanded that women prisons be treated the same as men (harshly) instead of everyone being treated better
 - Gender and race - The criminalization of Black and Latina women includes persisting images of hypersexuality used to justify sexual assault
- Women have written a lot about their experience with the prison system
 - Assata Shakur's memoirs show the dangerous intersections of racism, male domination, & state strategies of political repression
 - Assata was imprisoned after she and her comrade were racially profiled, her comrade opened fire to protect them & died.
 - While she was imprisoned she was subjected to harsh treatment because she was a black woman & deemed "soul of the black liberation army" by the police and media
 - She was confined in a men's prison under 24 hour surveillance during her pretrial detention
 - The cruel treatment she experienced was not unique to her, many Black & Puerto Rican women underwent the same treatment
 - Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, labor activist and communist leader
 - Dominant model for women's prison during that period insisted that "criminal" women could be rehabilitated by assimilating correct womanly behaviors, this trained more white women to be better housewives and WOC to be domestic servants
 - Other writers: Ericka Huggins, Susan Rosenberg, Linda Evans, Kathy Boudin, the Bedford Hills ACE collective

Summary:

Women are the fastest growing sector of the US prison population & gender determines how you are treated within the prison system. Many of the ways women have been punished have not been acknowledged as such (psychiatric institutions, domestic violence). White women are more likely to be seen as "hysterical" while WOC are usually seen as criminals and have more severe punishments. Women's prisons in the U.S. were created by Quaker reformers. These prisons wanted to make women more feminine and subjected them to cruel and sexist punishment. You can learn more by reading the works of women that have been incarcerated.

Notable women include Assata Shakur & Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

Further Reading:

Ain't I A Woman by Bell Hooks

Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex

The Prison Industrial Complex 82-102

- During the 1980s/globalization: corporations became deeply invested in the punishment industry & welfare “reform” privatized services that were previously run by gov
- Growth in prison populations happened as major corporations began to rely on them for free labor, despite statistics showing crime trending downward Similarities to the convict leasing system:
 - Federal, state, & county gov pay private companies a fee for each impact -- incentivizing them to keep as many people in prison for as long as possible
- Media campaigns used fear mongering to make the public think we needed the expanding prison system
- To understand the social meaning of prison today you must sever punishment from its link with “crime”
- Mike Davis first used the term in relation to California's penal system, which in the 1990s already began to rival agribusiness & land development as a major economic and political force
- The term was coined by activists that saw that the increasing prison population was driven by racism & profit margins
- The exploitation of prison labor by private corporations is one aspect among an array of relationships linking corporations, government, correction communities, & media --- the prison industrial complex
- The term prison industrial complex resonates with the military industrial complex → usage began when the military and corporate world began to form an alliance during the eisenhower presidency
- The PIC & MIT support and feed into each other ex they share tech & important structural features
 - Huge profits from social destruction
 - Advantageous to corporations, elected officials, and government agents
 - The transformation of imprisoned bodies - especially those of color
 - Devours public funds which might otherwise be available for social programs such as education, housing, childcare, recreation & drug programs
- You cannot separate the various problems with the prisons system without linking it to global capitalism/imperialism

This chapter is real concise so ima skip the summary

Here's a video i always recommend about the prison industrial complex because it's not boring and explains so much so many things

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhGELPFmmMw>

Abolitionist Alternatives 103-113

TW: Addiction/Drug mention, intimate partner violence, murder & rape mention

- If we focus only on prisons, it may be difficult to think of alternatives, but if we look at the intertwined systems of oppression we can begin to imagine
 - The prison industrial complex is more than the buildings themselves, it is a set of symbiotic relationships among correction communities, transnational corporations, media conglomerates, guards' unions, & legislative & court agendas.
 - Abolition is not just tearing down the prisons, but tearing apart everything connected to them
- First step - let go of the desire to punish (house arrest, electronic surveillance etc are not abolitionist alternatives)
 - The concept of crime is not neat & is often linked to the agendas of the bourgeoisie
 - Why are criminals a separate class of people that are not worthy of rights?
 - Many people in jail are not there because they commit crimes (we all do), but because their communities have been criminalized.
- Decarceration is a key strategy- demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides FREE physical & mental care to all, & a justice system based on reparation & reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance
 - Taking armed guards & police out of schools especially school with mostly children of color will help end the school to prison pipeline
 - Health care systems also currently act like prisons for those with mental and emotional disorders
 - Drug use should be decriminalized and replaced with free community based programs for those wish to tackle their drug addiction
 - Abolish ICE
 - Not only are actions criminalized, but entire communities we must decriminalize those communities as well.
- Instead of imagining one single alternative to the existing system, we must envision an array of alternatives - alternatives that are not intersectional will not lead to decarceration & abolition
 - Retribution vs Reparation
 - Abolition is not about ignoring instances where people were harmed
 - Restorative & Reparative justice

What else should be decriminalized on the road to abolition?

Why are criminals a separate class of people that are not worthy of rights?

Further Reading:

Everything by ruth wilson gilmore