

# Towards the Abolition of Imprisonment: Dismantling Jails

## Jails are inherently violent and destructive

Jails are an integral part of the prison industrial complex. Out of the 2.3 million people imprisoned in the US, nearly one-third are held in jails.

The prison industrial complex – together the systems of policing, imprisonment, courts, surveillance, and all state control – serves to repress and marginalize communities for the functioning of racial capitalism. The tools of the prison industrial complex may shift over time, however the functions of mass social, political, and economic control remain constant. It is for this reason that communities of color, poor people, homeless people, people with mental health needs, youth, and those prone to disrupt state order will be most targeted by policing, imprisonment, and surveillance. As long as jails continue to exist, their beds will continue to be filled. Cosmetic improvements to jails will not undo the function or target of jailing.

## On what basis is the state pushing for jail expansion?

When we examine the history of jail and prison construction, dating back to its very beginning, we see how imprisonment can be framed as a reform. In fact, the first modern western prisons were a reform to systems of capital punishment in the 1800's. Up to present day - from the \$3.5 billion LA County jail plan, to replacing the seismically doomed SF Jail, to closing Rikers - bids to build new jails are often framed as reformist improvements to existing systems. In reality, these jail proposals waste valuable resources to build more cages that will by definition be unsafe, unhealthy, and unjust.

**Conditions and Overcrowding** – Prisoner advocates and imprisoned organizers have led important legal and organizing struggles to fight against the conditions of caging. Critical life-sustaining victories that have been won. Our movements must continue to ensure the daily survival of community members locked in jails and prisons, however replacing older cages with newer cages simply perpetuates the lifespan of the prison system. Each victory must be used as an opportunity to lower numbers of imprisoned people, reduce the power of the jail system, or build the capacity for resistance. A powerful movement to close the jails at Rikers continues to build momentum, however grassroots pressure is currently being met by proposed liberal reforms to reopen, expand, or build new borough based jails. In another example, in California, despite important gains made by fighting overcrowding of the prison system, over the last 10 years the State has succeeded in hijacking court orders to reduce the prison population by pumping \$10 billion into bolstering county jails for increased localized imprisonment. Currently 53 of 58 California counties are renovating, expanding, or building new jails.

**Service Based and Accommodative Jails** – Another major trend in jail construction and expansion has been governmental justification through claiming the need for improved mental health and health services or specialized jails for women, trans people, or youth. Liberal law makers have abandoned tough-on-crime punishment based rhetoric and pivoted towards improved rehabilitation and care. However, studies have shown that the isolation and forced control inherent to jailing only serves to worsen mental health conditions. Similarly *carceral feminism*, whereby lawmakers use protection and gendered needs as rationale for building women's jails, distracts from addressing the impacts of male supremacy in communities, including those that lead towards the imprisonment of women, trans, and gender nonconforming people.

## What would it take to abolish jails?

**Stop jail construction** – Key to abolishing jails and prisons is the rejection of expenditures – both public or private – for jail construction, renovation, expansion, or re-opening which will only serve to prolong the lifespan of jails. Historically, new jail construction for replacement purposes has not resulted in old jails being put out of use but rather new construction serves to increase overall jailing capacity.

**Create and invest in alternative means of addressing harm and accountability** – When someone causes harm, injury, abuse, or mistreatment, that person or people must be responsible for their actions and work to make amends for their actions' impact. Accountability is often used as a driving force behind popular support for jailing, however accountability cannot be arbitrated by a punitive state force. Accountability is not about punishment, but requires that responsibilities between people or groups are addressed and the needs of all involved parties are met within a broader structure or system that may also need to change or adjust.

**Stop criminalizing communities, reduce the power of policing and prosecution** – Without a critical examination of the ways policing, prosecution, and the courts serve to imprison people, reforms to jails will never result in their abolition.

**Build infrastructures for community care** – Community care must not be connected to policing, courts, and imprisonment. Substantial investments must be made in social welfare, including substance use facilities, user-led and voluntary mental health care, housing, and other services necessary for the wellbeing of communities.

## Why we have to look beyond just the jails

***Abolishing jails means that we cannot replace them with other repressive tools. As grassroots pressure mounts for jail reform and the need to address mass incarceration, political reforms to control people by other means are growing. We must resist:***

**Increased use of electronic monitoring** – Also known as GPS surveillance, use of these tools is climbing across the country. This surveillance increases the reach of imprisonment and policing by bringing it further into communities. People on electronic monitors are restricted in their movements, often have to pay fees for the monitor, and are used to mine data on their neighborhoods and communities. What's more, use of electronic monitoring is not being increased as contingent on jail closure, thus we end up with more people in physical cages and more people on community control.

**Locked mental health institutions, substance use facilities, and jails disguised as housing** – Any construction of housing and mental health care should be open facilities where people are free to leave and are treated with dignity — not criminalized, surveilled or isolated. People must be treated with dignity and respect as patients or residents. These must also be user-led and self-determined services that are trauma-informed and emphasize harm reduction and determining accountability through joint processes.

**Restrictive, mandatory and punitive/court ordered programs** – Municipalities must not operate service programs and facilities under the Sheriff's Department, courts, or other supervision. Policing agencies should not be positioned as gate-keepers to services. Instead, programs and facilities should be operated by community-based or public agencies that provide care in other contexts. People who receive care should have access without fearing criminalization. Staff should not be able to charge people with in-custody crimes.