roots that bind us together

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IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE WE MOVE TOGETHER

A world where we all have safety, access to dignified work, and a caring community. A world where folks of all abilities and histories have opportunities that inspire them, a beautiful extended family and community and sleep soundly, without fear. A world where we have uprooted the systems that extract labor and wealth from the most vulnerable and have replaced them with abundant resources from our communities, the state, and thriving local economies. And a world where we see each other’s dignity, possibility, and rights and work together to build robust and supportive systems for all.

THIS IS WHAT WE ARE WORKING TOWARDS

Often when we challenge or tackle one social issue, we focus too narrowly on the central issue and create movements with many blind spots. We unknowingly create dominant narratives that cut against the transformative needs of other communities and social change efforts. Many of us have become skilled at talking about an issue, a solution for that issue, and a strategy to win that solution. We have a harder time telling a bigger story that weaves together the many issues and communities, and names the underlying forces that must be shifted to achieve transformation and sustainable change.
The Safe Return Project (SRP), an organization of formerly incarcerated individuals in Richmond, California, set out to build transformative narratives around what we have experienced as a community. SRP trains formerly incarcerated individuals to lead participatory action research that empowers them to share their experiences from incarceration and apply them by participating in research initiatives that influence policy change, and justice reinvestment, and continue to repair the massive generational harm done by racial bias and the exploitation of mass incarceration. The overarching goal of the Safe Return Project is to empower and increase the visibility of all those impacted by criminalization, racial disparities, poverty, and the injustice system.

In Richmond, generations of redlining, segregation, and systemic racism have cemented inequality in the shadow of the Chevron refinery. Generations of kids of color have experienced environmental racism. Generations of Black and brown folks have been incarcerated in San Quentin state prison, right across the water. This project emerged from Richmond and the experience of Tamisha Walker, co-founder and executive director of the Safe Return Project, organizing in Richmond. As Tamisha organically connected with organizations committed to environmental justice and justice for immigrants and refugees, especially in Richmond’s Our Power Coalition, larger questions began looming about how we silo our movements and often struggle to articulate visions at their intersections.

When Tamisha won the Soros Justice Fellowship, SRP partnered with the research institution Othering and Belonging Institute to explore the prison industrial complex, environmental racism,
and transformative narratives. In this report, we set out to do two things. First, we wanted to build a transformative narrative from Richmond, working with community partners in the Bay Area and beyond to articulate the connection between environmental justice and the prison industrial complex. Additionally, we wanted to present our practices and tools for others to build transformative narratives in their own work, in their own communities, and across movements.

Along with other pieces of this project, this report is intended to serve as an example, offer some ideas for embedding this particular intersection in movement work, and encourage those interested in liberatory, transformative narratives.

**Safe Return Project's Bay Area Partners:**
- Budget Justice Coalition
- California Alliance Youth and Community Justice (CAYCJ)
- Coalition and Leadership Council
- The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists
- Contra Costa Central Labor Council - Northern CA
- Contra Costa Racial Justice Coalition
- District Attorney Accountability Table
- Lift Up Contra Costa
- Our Power Coalition - Just Transition
- Reimagining Public Safety
- Reimagining Richmond Coalition
- Reimagining Youth Justice Task Force (District Attorney Task Force)
Our vision comes from the challenges we have all faced. We envision a place where community members involved in the criminal legal system have strong relationships with their families and community, real opportunities for sustainable employment, a stable place to live, and the services that support folks in staying safe and healthy.

A few key insights emerged from our research. We delved into the history and present of prisons, activism for the basic needs of incarcerated people, and intersections where climate change has accelerated insecurity and harm. We know: prisons are often built in polluted areas and then degrade the environment further. Incarcerated people are frequently deprived of clean air, water, and food. Prisons are unprepared to encounter rising temperatures and extreme weather conditions due to climate change; heat is already causing harm to incarcerated people and prison staff. Incarcerated people are fighting wildfires, cleaning up after extreme weather events, and other labor that puts them on the front lines of climate change, work that should be fairly compensated and linked to decarceration.

Most folks fighting wildfires are subjected to

“When we’re talking about abolitionist justice, [we recognize] that, fundamentally, our communities are deserving... we are human, we exist on this earth, we exist with this work. We deserve rest, we deserve joy, we deserve calm, the sanctity of knowing our basic needs are being met. Our sheer existence shouldn’t be to hold up an unjust system, where on the bottom, we’re struggling all the time... We can't throw people away, and we can’t throw neighborhoods away.”
work while serving their time but have been afforded the “opportunity to work” to get credit for good behavior because of their low-level convictions. And after they put their lives in jeopardy to fight environmental crises like fires, they cannot get certified to become a firefighter if they have violent felonies. This problematic and exploitative system allows the state to use their labor without a pathway to financial security.
**In short: prisons challenge the core of the concept of environmental justice.** Incarcerated people in prisons or jails live without access to clean air, water, and nutritious food. They often return from prison disabled, or facing mental and physical health challenges in a world not built to support disabled people. Their human rights— to health, housing, food, and right relationship to nature— are violated at every turn.

**DON'T DRINK THE WATER**

“When I was in Stockton, at the California Youth Authority, when we would get water in our sink, you had to literally shake the glass and watch the stuff settle to the bottom. And mind you, they had a notification, this institution in particular, they sent the mailer out to all the correctional officers, and they advised them to not drink the water, drink bottled water. They didn't give us that same level of protection.”
When we asked about prisons and environmental justice, our folks started at the beginning. At the beginning of this particular country, there was colonialism, slavery, the extended displacement and genocide of Indigenous Americans, systems of policing founded to track and re-enslave Black people. Even after slavery was abolished and replaced with a system of racialized apartheid in the American South and beyond, prison labor has exploited millions.

From the beginning, we have been working within unjust and anti-Black systems. But the establishment of the modern day prison industrial complex and the War on Drugs truly began in the second half of the twentieth century. In the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which established “mandatory minimum” sentences for drug offenses, there was infamously a huge difference between the criminalization of crack cocaine, prevalent in working class Black communities, and powder cocaine, accessed by wealthy and often white folks (War on Drugs, 2). By 1990, 46% of people incarcerated in New York were sentenced for a drug related offense (Schoenfeld, 317).

In a 1994 interview, President Nixon’s domestic policy chief John Erlichmann
revealed some of the core intentions of the continuing War on Drugs: “The Nixon campaign had two enemies, the antiwar left and Black people. We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or Black but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and the Blacks with heroin and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

By 1994, Republicans and Democrats were united in a “tough on crime” policy that criminalized folks involved in illicit industries without addressing the root causes of inequality and poverty. In this environment, the 1994 Crime Bill has come to represent deepening mass incarceration in the United States. In this era, a certain Senator, Joe Biden, introduced the Senate version of the Crime Bill along with the National Association of Police Officers. This influential legislation was written with police unions without inviting those directly impacted by the criminal legal system to participate. In 356 pages, the bill provided for 100,000 new police officers, $9.7 billion in prison funding, and $6.1 billion in prevention programs designed, again, with police officers rather than formerly incarcerated people.

The history of the intentional development of the prison industrial complex shows a country relentlessly cornering and dividing Black people, inflicting racist policies, and also harming other folks of color, poor folks, and folks who use drugs in the process. The War on Drugs and the prison industrial complex were developed with white men and police unions at the helm, without the input of Black community leaders or formerly incarcerated people. Despite their long history of violence and brutality, despite the brutal murders police conduct on a regular basis, police unions were given exceptional power in determining the fates of Black communities.

In 2022, we see movement within California to reverse some of the impacts of mass incarceration and the Prison Industrial Complex. But we are a long way from
When COVID-Hit

“I’m an abolitionist. I wish I could say I was advocating for the prompt release of everyone in the universe. What COVID-19 showed was that we were not prepared for all these releases, that we didn’t have the infrastructure for employment and training, access to housing, and financial support for the masses of people who qualified to be released. We were so busy preparing for release that we weren’t ready for what happened when they were released. My organization, we rented 50 hotel rooms for a month.”

We face an urgency around building infrastructure to meet formerly incarcerated people’s needs on a mass level. Our community learned during the COVID-19 pandemic that we didn’t have the infrastructure for employment and training, access to housing, and financial support for the masses of people who qualified to be released. We must build new structures while dismantling those that no longer serve our communities collectively.

At this moment, as California politicians pledge to close prisons, formerly incarcerated people must be at the forefront of the movement for justice. In so many years of advocating for the just treatment of communities of color, we have learned: unjust systems adjust to the current conditions and traditions. Slave catchers became the police; the California Department of Corrections became the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. But the essential nature of these systems is racist, the essential goal of the prison industrial complex is exploitation, and we must divest from prisons and reinvest in communities who have suffered at the hands of Richard Nixon, Joe Biden, and so many more powerful men.

justice: not only are we seeing piecemeal state legislation rolling back War on Drug Policies, but we are also seeing people come home from prisons and struggle to find dignified work, healthcare, food security, and stable housing.
Under American capitalism, extraction of coal for energy and extraction of human bodies for mass incarceration go hand in hand, often preying on the same neighborhoods or communities. In Appalachia, for example, we’ve seen private prisons expanding, marrying mass incarceration and environmental racism.

This is an old pattern. Extraction of people and land goes back to slavery and the Southern cotton economy. Black people were enslaved to build the economy. After emancipation, we were criminalized and became convict laborers: sharecropping, picking cotton, building railroads. *So many Black folks today labor in unhealthy, dangerous, or temporary jobs, underpaid and exposed to toxic chemicals and situations.*
Through extraction, corporations gather obscene wealth and spend it on political power. Corporations hire lobbyists, fund right wing campaigns, and exert inordinate power in their own favor. Corporations have invested in and perpetuated mass incarceration by funding campaigns that criminalize poor people and people of color and investing in prisons. In 2020, a $200,000 donation from Target helped the LAPD purchase controversial surveillance software. In 2018, Coca-Cola pledged $2 million to the Atlanta Police Foundation. Amazon, Motorola, and Microsoft all sit on the board of the Seattle Police Foundation (Seidman, 2).
A GOVERNMENT UNRESPONSIVE TO PEOPLE OF COLOR AND POOR PEOPLE

Police, refineries, prisons, corporations. None of these powerful forces were built to respond to the needs and rights of people of color. In Richmond, we regularly witness refinery explosions and police brutality, and these events are only the tip of the iceberg of extractive systems.

Some places are treated like sacrifice zones. Our neighborhoods have been redlined, disenfranchised, gerrymandered, flooded with police, and polluted. Contamination and incarceration are acceptable to decision-makers in our communities when they would be unacceptable in white, wealthy communities. In Richmond, the symptoms of this neglect and exploitation are clear, from public housing built on landfills to underfunded schools. Protection is not provided equally. And in cases like Richmond’s, public investment often follows the path laid out by corporations and the wealthy.

As time has gone on, instead of making progress on racial justice goals, our communities have been continually excluded from decision-making power. In the examples of gang databases, background checks, and AI facial recognition, technologies have been used to racially profile and divide our communities rather than offer us the support we need.
**WHO WE ARE**

We are the people whose lives have been impacted by mass incarceration and environmental injustice. We are people who are incarcerated and people with criminal records. We are people whose health has been damaged, and loved ones have died because of industry that harms the environment we live in.

We are people who sometimes are even working in the extractive economy and incarceration system because it’s our only opportunity. We are the human bodies who have been extracted out of our communities to be exploited. We are incarcerated women and men who fight wildfires that were caused by an extractive economy.

We come together because we know our destinies rely on it. If we are not organized together, we won’t be able to fight this. *We are the generation of people alive right now who know we must transform our society or there may be irreversible harm to our communities and the planet.*
We will work with everyone who is open to this vision for the future.

**EARLY WORK**

We began exploring through a series of about six in-depth, semi-structured discussions held within the Safe Return Project, the Othering and Belonging Institute, and the Our Power Coalition. These discussions focused primarily on these core questions:

- What is our analysis of the root causes of the struggles caused by mass incarceration and climate change?
- What are the values that guide our work?
- What is our vision for the world that gives us a north star for where we want to go?
- What is the shared identity of us and our people that holds our values, vision, and analysis?

**The Values We Hold Up:**

- The people who have been the most harmed, who have been on the frontlines of being incarcerated and burdened with pollution, must be in the lead of social change.
- Everyone has the right to the resources they need to be whole, including reparations for past injustices.
- Healing for people and land that have been harmed. This means transforming the root causes of this harm and establishing regenerative systems.
- Love and caring for all people with the responsibility to current and future generations.
- We are all caretakers of the earth and are interdependent with each other.
The Values We Must Transcend:

- White supremacy and the belief in an ‘other’ - the criminal, the felon - who is in their nature different and less than.
- Blame and punish approach to harm and conflict
- Individualism
- People and natural systems as “resources” to be exploited and used for their monetary value.
- The belief that some people and places will have to be sacrifice zones and are disposable

BUILDING ON EARLY WORK

Interviews with community and movement leaders: Safe Return researchers, in partnership with The Othering and Belonging Institute, continued to build on our early works by conducting 13 virtual interviews between 2020 and 2022 during a global Pandemic with COVID-19 social distancing orders in place. The interviews included inquiries about the intersections between environmental justice, the work community partners are doing towards a more just world, and their vision for the future. Researchers were able to get an in-depth account of the impacts facing our collective communities.

Case Studies in Movements Coming Together: We are inspired by examples of people using their collective power and common ground to achieve transformative change in their communities. When movements and their leaders find common interests or address how different social issues can reach a variety of populations--differentiated according to race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, and/or geographical location--there is more room to consolidate power, draw attention and institute change for themselves and their communities. This is a contemporary occurrence that informs how activists and community organizers are working toward their goals today, and there are also historical examples that can inform the present.
Movement Building Workshops: In order to disseminate knowledge and involve others in our thinking, we conducted a series of movement building workshops introducing the concept of a transformative narrative, reviewing movement history, highlighting movements at the intersection of environmental justice and mass liberation, and building new narratives.

We found ample evidence to confirm and describe the intersection between prisons and environmental justice, but we were interested in broader visions. How do we build narratives of our future that include us all and are concentrated on justice?
WHAT ISN’T WORKING FOR US?

We are surrounded by stories that do not center the truth of our communities. Structures of white supremacy have told lies to justify the oppression of Black people for centuries, spreading myths about Black neighborhoods and systematically criminalizing Black resistance. In our research, we found categories of narratives that are not serving people at the intersections where we work, narratives that we need to shift away from. We are beginning to speak the stories we do need instead, the stories of a just world that will sustain our visions long term.

Mainstream Environmentalism

In June 2000, as the State of California barreled towards the construction of a new prison named Delano II, a group of formerly incarcerated people, other activists, academics, and community members began building a coalition to oppose its building. In the resulting campaign, which involved a wide variety of abolitionist, environmentalist, and government groups, the organization Critical Resistance filed a lawsuit against the California Department of Corrections (CDC), insisting that the proposed prison project would pollute the air and water, endanger local wildlife, and continue the violence of incarceration.

The organizers of the Prison Moratorium Project took a wide view on coalition building: “if prisons benefit almost no one, then almost anyone is a potential ally in the fight against more prisons” (Cite). Through this logic, the group organized with academic centers and NAACP chapters, with mainstream environmentalists and the Public Utility District. These organizers moved with an expansive definition of environmental justice: it is not only about Kangaroo Rats and protecting nature but also about ensuring that people are not harmed by environmental racism, redlining, pollution, over policing, and incarceration. But 20 years later,
environmental justice and climate justice groups still struggle to articulate how environmental justice is linked to mass incarceration: prisons are toxic, violate the human right to clean food, air, and water, and serve no one.

And over the years, the evidence that prisons are toxic has only increased, especially as the climate crisis has worsened. As we did our research, stories of toxic prisons rose up to the surface. One advocate told us that when he was imprisoned in the California Youth Authority, the water coming from the sink would have particles in it that settled to the bottom of the glass. One of our staff told stories of the deadly, incurable Valley Fever in prisons in the central valley, where incarcerated people would put gloves on and cover toxic land with more dirt.

*People leave prison physically and mentally impacted from when they entered it, and for every year they spend inside, they are expected to lose two years of their life on the outside.*

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**People with incarcerated immediate family members have reduced life expectancy**

Compared to people with no incarcerated family

1. **Immediate Family Member Incarcerated**
   - 2.6 fewer years of life expectancy

3+ **Immediate Family Member Incarcerated**
   - 4.6 fewer years of life expectancy

*Created by the Prison Policy Initiative with data from Sundaresh et al., 2021.*
When we speak to our people about the environment, we must build narratives around the realities of environmental racism and toxic prisons.

**Scarcity**

In so many of our movements, we move with the conception that we are competing with other movements, organizations, and organizers for resources and, because of the structure of nonprofit work, grant funding. It is neither easy nor intuitive for communities directly impacted by the prison industrial complex to divest from narratives of scarcity, given the trauma and scarcity prisons and jails create.

Often the narratives say that we don't have enough money or resources for communities that experience trauma at the hands of injustice systems, but we find that there are a lot of funds and resources that don't make it into poor communities of color because they are being misused.

It's important for our communities to know that despite what unjust systems have offered us, there are enough resources for all, and with that understanding, we are so much more able to imagine and heal. Scarcity tells us that we can't show up for each other, that we are stuck in silos with our most immediate community, and that justice for one group may marginalize another. It is time to divest from the scarcity that defines so many of our movements and build movements that focus on common enemies in order to bring us together.
In order to move towards a just world, speaking from formerly incarcerated communities, it is crucial that we reframe and rework what public safety means to us.

Our understanding of what public safety is is all carceral, or connected to prisons, all anti-Black, and it always involves law enforcement. We know that police show up after harm has been committed. They are not there to prevent harm from occurring, rather, they are there to pick up the pieces and incarcerate people. We also know that the money used to jail someone could be used to heal the harm that's been caused and perhaps on a pathway to recovery and rehabilitation that actually works for the betterment of the person.

Often, we use the examples of affluent suburbs to redefine public safety. In affluent areas, people are well-resourced, with access to green space, healthcare, quality schools, and the resources to buy peace and safety. Meanwhile, in communities struggling with environmental racism and over-policing, the constant presence of the police creates suspicion, toxic stress, and a direct pipeline to the prison industrial complex. In our current system, these neighborhoods are linked, and policing in redlined areas can be structured to protect affluent areas from the consequences of poverty. We dream of redistribution where resources flow easily and equally, where we all have access to abundance and safety.
**Disappearing People**

Prisons and policing disappear people. *The system as it currently stands gathers traumatized, hurt people and declares them unworthy of support, care, and equal access to crucial rights such as voting and housing.* It further divides people into violent and non-violent offenders, creating categories reinforcing the false idea that some folks are beyond help, support, and human dignity.

**OUR NARRATIVES**

“Every reform I’ve organized in the last twelve years, I have been excluded from as a violent offender. These categories exist— but we don’t help each other by leaning into the system's narrative. Do we continue to lean into that narrative, or do we create new narratives? Even all the folks who got relief under Prop 57, there is a tone in those spaces that violent offenders are largely excluded.”
VISIONS WE CANNOT ACCEPT

• That new economic opportunities must rely on accepting mass incarceration and extractive industry. In coal country, we are told we can now work in prisons. In communities hit hard by mass incarceration, we are told we can work in refineries and other extractive industries. This is a poison apple solution.

• That the solution is to monetize climate change and mass incarceration. Cap and trade is the state receiving money to pollute. Privatization of prisons and reentry is allowing a few to profit from essentially the same system.

• Solutions that are developed without the leadership of, and benefits to, communities of color.

• Solutions that allow the same corporations and institutions who have advanced mass incarceration and climate change to have control over the next system.
WHAT STORIES DO WE NEED?

Invest in Abundance

What does abundance mean to you? To us, it means safe schools and thriving neighborhoods. It means jobs and housing for all. It means a strong social safety net where we care for people and give them what they need to live well. It means that we do not throw people or neighborhoods away. A better world is possible, one where instead of being pitted against each other for crumbs, we all have a seat at the table and make decisions together. Abundance is possible.

As we look forward towards a just future, we are inspired by systems such as Community Land Trusts (CLTs) that take housing off the speculative market and work toward providing housing as a human right. As we move away from narratives of scarcity, we have to embody abundance in our actions and celebrate our wins. Investing in abundance means investing in people and their holistic well-being.

Moving from abundance also means having the space to find our interconnections and common enemies. Together, we can work against the walls the powerful have put up between us to find where we can work together toward a strong social safety net and abundance in our communities.

RECLAIM AND FIGHT

“I come from a perspective that we need to reclaim and fight for the role of government to actually serve the people... it is our right to shape, and participate in and guide institutions that make decisions in our lives.”
Building Together

It is well known in movement spaces that building interpersonal connections and solidarity is key to winning together. In this research, we heard from individuals building across the Bay Area and beyond, in communities of color, folks working for labor rights, survivors of sexual violence, and more. In building solidarity across movements, understanding each other’s struggles helps us see each other and fight for each other.

CONNECTION

“It's about building relationships. Right, it's building connections. It's how we humanize each other.”
Give Power to those Directly Impacted

Truly radical and transformative organizing gives money, power, and energy directly to those most impacted by the issue at hand. Within the framework of organizing against the prison industrial complex, this means moving past narratives of how we “help” incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and towards narratives of giving power and agency freely to those who have been harmed.

Over the last decade, formerly incarcerated people and allies have won major changes to remove some of the barriers to employment, housing, voting rights, and more. But formerly incarcerated people still face countless types of discrimination. We know: If our movement fights each form of discrimination one by one, we will take generations to have our rights and freedom restored.

We need to advance the claim that discrimination against formerly incarcerated people is wrong across the board. At Safe Return, we advocate for protected legal status for formerly incarcerated and criminalized people, which would prevent government bodies and agencies from enacting laws and policies that discriminate against us.

Ultimately, we believe that the burden of discrimination and trauma that formerly
incarcerated people have been subjected to in the United States is more than enough for one lifetime. It is not sufficient to simply eliminate discrimination against formerly incarcerated people—we must affirmatively and in one voice establish formerly incarcerated people as a protected class with access to resources, healing, and programs that allow us to lead dignified lives. Our world without prisons is one in which those freed from cages are also free from scarcity and discrimination.

**OUR VISION**

This is what life will be like for us, our communities, and society in some number of years when we have completely achieved mass liberation and a just transition:

- Everyone has the resources we need to thrive in the face of challenges, from clean water and air to education, income, and social support.
- We are all considered valuable. We all see and treat each other as fully dignified human beings and have meaningful work that is valued.
- We respond to harm and conflict with healing—all relationships and well-being are reconciled.
- All feel safe and can dream—there is peace.
- We are truly free. We are free from oppressive systems like incarceration and the extractive economy that prey on people for wealth and power. We have governance where everyone can fully participate.
- People and communities are self-sufficient and share the wealth so all can produce and thrive.
- All have access to safe spaces to build community, and there is worldwide solidarity across our differences and borders.
- Systems invest in people and are regenerative of living ecological communities and healthy people. Damage done by past extraction has been repaired, and ecological systems and community health have been restored to achieve thriving human and non-human communities.
- All people can breathe clean air and drink clean water every day. Jobs are
available to all that support and regenerate ecological systems. There is the inclusion of all people in the new systems that have been built for a just transition.

- Wealth is shared among all so that everyone can participate in the production and distribution of the products and services that everyone needs to live.
Now, as always, our liberty depends on the relationships we build, the solidarity we offer, and the narratives of change that center the most marginalized. We aim to survive the big lies, invest in true community safety, and learn to thrive together.

We set out to describe and understand the intersection between environmental justice and the prison industrial complex, but in some ways, we barely scratched the surface of the kind of intersections folks working in prisons are encountering. As we go forward in this work, we are keeping in mind the attacks on the rights of women and trans or gender-nonconforming people on issues of abortion and reproductive justice, as well as the mass criminalization of immigrants and refugees seeking to build a life in the United States.

But in so many of the stories we tell ourselves in the movement for justice, people directly impacted by the criminal legal system are invisible and excluded. At Safe Return, we work towards protections inside and outside prisons and jails for decriminalization, true safety, and the establishment of formerly incarcerated people as a protected class.

Liberation is not defined solely by the absence of oppression or discrimination; it is also defined by the presence of true repair, restoration, and healing of the harms done to ourselves and our people through mass incarceration. We offer this work as a model of how to transform ourselves and our movements through research, and we offer these tools to build transformative narratives in work that reaches for larger, grander visions. We aim to name our common enemy, connect on common struggles, and build a world—first in narrative, then in practice—that includes us all.
Authors and Acknowledgements

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**Ableism:** A term for the ways our social world discriminates against people with disabilities, whether they be physical or psychiatric.

**Carceral:** Having to do with incarceration, that is, the prison, jail, and criminal legal system.

**Criminal Legal System:** Also known as the criminal justice system. A set of policies and practices around policing, courts, and prisons that make up the United States’ response to all things defined as crime.

**Directly Impacted:** Those who have directly experienced the harms of the criminal legal system through incarceration in prisons or jails.

**Environmental Justice:** The idea that all communities deserve equal access to clean air, water, food, and housing, with the understanding that Black folks and other communities of color have been systematically denied that access.

**Environmental Racism:** The process by which people of color experience more polluted neighborhoods, toxic jobs, and lack of basic needs than their white counterparts.

**Formerly Incarcerated:** Individuals who have spent time in jail or prison.

**Mass Incarceration:** A term to describe the increase in incarceration, largely related to criminalization of drugs in order to disrupt Black and leftist communities, in the last 20 years of the twentieth century.

**Redlining:** A system of housing discrimination where Black people were only offered housing in specific areas, and Black neighborhoods were marked as poor investments, impacting economic growth and community safety.

**Systems Impacted:** Those who have experienced the harms of the criminal legal system secondhand through incarceration of family members, which has wide ranging impacts on communities.

A deep dive on the Letcher County prison fight. Includes other environmental disasters that occurred in the area and is very concrete about how, after coal mining and mountaintop removal devastated the area, the industry turned to prison building as “recession-proof” economic development. Points out that the cancellation of the prison project occurred in the context of the federal government building more immigrant detention centers and the border wall.


Begins with the case study of the Letcher prison cancellation and emphasizes that communities of color and marginalized white folks deserve access to clean jobs and the Green New Deal, not the false promises involved in building new jails. Details how capitalism forces competition between the rural and the urban that could be bridged through coalitions and reform around agriculture, electricity, and land ownership.


Starts with central California organizing and dives into histories of EJ/Mass Liberation in California, including MELA and a deep dive on the diverse campaign against the Delano II prison in the San Joaquin Valley.


A super in depth legal report on prisons and climate change. Recommends decarceration to combat overcrowding, closing old and obsolete facilities (but also building new ones).
and upgraded cooling technology. Overcrowding in California prisons is the worst in the nation. Incarcerated people self-reported 33% higher levels of asthma as they had when they became incarcerated. Details lawsuits against departments of corrections for cruel and unusual punishment due to heat. There’s very patchy and heterogeneous regulation of how prisons need to confront excessive heat. Incarcerated people who are older, disabled, or mentally ill are particularly at risk, especially since many incarcerated people use medication regularly and that may affect the body’s ability to regulate heat.


Details the impact of climate change on prisons: extreme heat, extreme weather events, outbreaks of disease, and the use of prisoner labor to clean up after extreme weather events.


Example of a win in the intersection of environmental justice and mass liberation, where the EPA added a layer to the EJSCREEN tool to track the proximity of prisons to pollutants, Superfund sites, etc. Points out that the EPA ran more oversight on conditions in prisons until 2011, when the program was canceled.


Points to how many political prisoners, incarcerated for their work in revolutionary social movements and even environmental justice work, cannot access clean water, food, and air. Many of the political prisoners interviewed or quoted worked on Black liberation or Native EJ.

Details some of the ways immigration detention risks people’s health and lives. Includes a case study of organizing for better environmental conditions within prisons at SCI Fayette in Pennsylvania.


Is super clear that prisons are an environmental disaster for those living within them and the community around them. Details many case studies of prisons and individual incarcerated people being deprived of the right to clean air, water, and food. Encourages the LA Board of Supervisors to reject a women’s jail in Mira Loma; the campaign was successful and the project was canceled in early 2019. Also discusses Valley Fever.


Defines the “systematic poisoning of prisoners in the United States.” Also does some work on inhumane conditions in immigrant detention centers, including denial of medical care, unsafe food practices, and chemical warfare, through sedatives and psychotropics, of minors. Also describes issues of extreme heat, especially in Arizona and Texas prisons. Describes how prison labor exposes incarcerated people to dangerous chemicals and health effects: “Ranging from oil spill clean-up crews to asbestos abatement programs, inmates across the country frequently work in extremely hazardous occupations.” Prisoners don’t have labor protections from OSHA.
Interview Guide

1. In your work, how did you find and become committed to the intersection between prisons and environmental justice?
2. What are some of the important historical events at this intersection?
3. What, in your view, are the impacts of prisons on the communities in which they are sited?
4. What are some of the benefits and difficulties of using environmental review to halt prison projects?
5. How does reentry for formerly incarcerated people intersect with environmental justice?
6. How has the COVID-19 pandemic altered your thinking or the landscape of campaigns against toxic prisons?
7. What are some of the upcoming challenges in this landscape as we face COVID-19 and climate change?
8. What forces are behind mass incarceration that are also behind environmental injustice?
9. How do we name the communities affected by mass incarceration AND environmental injustice? (getting at the reality that they are often not separate communities but we treat them as such when we just talk about the issues)
10. Keeping in mind the intersection of mass liberation and environmental justice, what is your vision for the world we should live in?
11. What is the shared story across our movements for how we build the power and ultimately achieve the world we want?
12. How do we build a sense of shared fate across our movements?
13. What are the narratives that even we or our allies use that harm our work in the long run? What are the narratives we need to advance toward the vision we have?