

Baby's First Guide*
to the
American Prison
Industrial Complex



by Emilee G.H.

***this zine is not intended for actual children**

is for Abolition

This is the vision and the end goal. The current carceral system in the US does not create safety or justice; it serves the rich and punishes the poor and working class.

is for Books

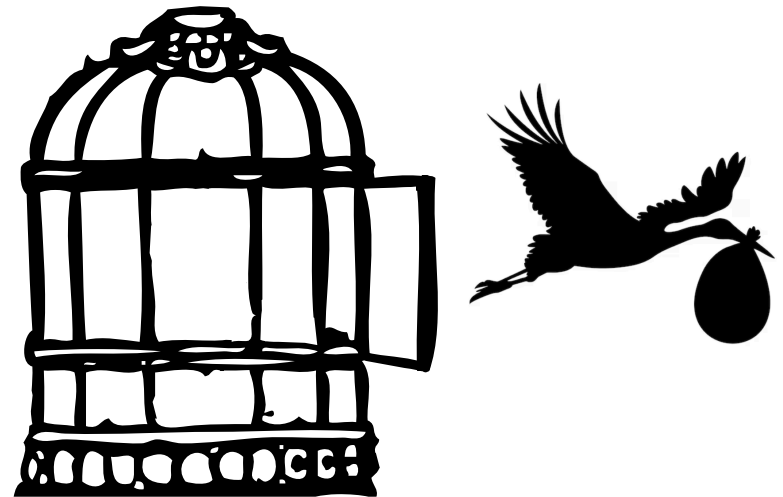
Books are one of the few ways to pass time while incarcerated, but prison libraries are too often highly restricted or underresourced. Prison Book Programs send books to incarcerated people for free. However, facilities are making it increasingly hard to send books and other packages.

is for Children and Caregivers

Around half of incarcerated people are parents to children under 18. When a father is incarcerated, his children almost always live with their mother or their father's partner. When a mother is incarcerated, her children's future is typically less certain. Children of incarcerated mothers usually end up with one/both of their mother's parents, another female family member, a family friend, or in foster care.

is for Zero-Tolerance Policies

Zero-tolerance policies impose automatic, harsh punishments for even minor rule violations, leaving no room for context, care, or discretion. These policies disproportionately penalize Black, Indigenous, Latine, low-income, disabled, and LGBTQ+ youth, making them much more likely to come in contact with and be funneled through the school-to-prison pipeline.



is for War on Drugs

The War on Drugs is the primary reason for the exponentially growing incarcerated population since the 1970s. Harsh sentencing for drug-related crimes (three-strikes rules, mandatory minimums, expanded policing) have been unevenly applied, disproportionately targeting Black, Latine, Indigenous, and low-income communities.

is for Xenophobia

Xenophobia is the fear or distrust of people deemed “foreign”. It fuels laws and practices that criminalize migration, expand detention centers, and justify surveillance of immigrant communities. It also shapes everyday interactions with state systems, where language, appearance, nationality, and ethnicity become grounds for suspicion, exclusion, and punishment.

is for “Youth Offenders”

“Youth offender” is a term used to describe young people who come into contact with the criminal legal system. Despite research showing that young people are still developing and highly responsive to support, many are funneled into punitive systems through school discipline, policing, and juvenile detention.

is for Decarceration

Decarceration means reducing the number of people being incarcerated in jails and prisons. This includes reducing admissions and increasing releases through reform policies like decriminalizing low-level offenses, eliminating cash bail, supporting reintegration to the Outside.

is for Early Intervention

Early intervention includes any support or service that prevents an individual’s contact with the criminal legal system, particularly if they are at a heightened risk of becoming incarcerated in the future. These approaches attempt to address the systemic issues by meeting needs, reducing harm, and strengthening communities rather than relying on punitive responses.

F is for “Felon”

Once someone is convicted of a felony, they are marked as a “felon” long after they’ve completed their sentence. This word is used against formerly incarcerated individuals to justify discrimination in housing, employment, voting, and a social life.

G is for Good Behavior

Good behavior credits can allow incarcerated individuals to “earn” small reductions in their sentence by following institutional rules, however they often operate more as a tool of control than a meaningful pathway to release. Credits can be inconsistently applied, easily revoked, and limited by scarce programming.

H is for Healthcare

For some incarcerated folks, being incarcerated is their first time being able to access healthcare. For others, some forms of healthcare, such as gender-affirming healthcare, become significantly harder to access.

T is for Trans and Gender-Nonconforming

The US carceral system operates on the gender binary. Trans and GNC folks are often forced into facilities according to their assigned sex at birth, denied use of their preferred names, preferred pronouns, and dressing according to their preferred gender expression.

U is for Underwear

Incarcerated people almost never have a choice in the underwear they wear. Most facilities will hand out standard-issue underwear. Incarcerated women (and those who do not identify as women but are housed in women’s facilities) are typically given standard-issue, ill-fitting bras with no support. Additionally, if you are visiting a prison, do not wear a bra with an underwire; you may be forced to remove your bra in the bathroom and give it to staff for inspection.

V is for Vagrancy Laws

Vagrancy laws are laws that criminalize poverty, unemployment, migration, and being in public without proof of work or property. Although traditional, broader vagrancy laws are now generally considered unconstitutional, they still exist in local ordinances that target unhoused people, sex workers, and other marginalized communities.

is for Queer

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual adults are significantly more likely to be arrested and 3 times more likely to be incarcerated than their straight peers. Further, while incarcerated, LGBTQ+ adults are more likely to be placed in solitary, to be sexually victimized by staff, and sexually victimized by other incarcerated people.

is for Reintegration and Recidivism

Reintegration refers to the process of reintegration to the Outside after release. Recidivism refers to “reoffending”. To reduce recidivism, we need to provide proper support to the recently released. This includes providing access to housing, food, healthcare, support finding a job, and other resources. This also means limiting parole and probation officers’ individual power over their parolees and probationers.

is for Secondary Prisonization

Secondary prisonization describes the ways families and loved ones of incarcerated people experience the burdens of the carceral system (surveillance, financial strain, restricted movement, emotional stress, etc.) despite not being incarcerated themselves. Visiting rooms, phone call fees, background checks, and long travel distances pull families into the same web of control that shapes life on the Inside.

is for ICE

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in 2003 as part of governmental reorganization after 9/11. Although they claim to protect national security and uphold public safety, they mostly exist to complicate the lives of immigrants, refugees, asylees, and mixed-status families. They have done incalculable harm under every administration they have existed under, and it is only getting worse. Fuck ICE.

is for JPay, Securus, and Global Tel Link

These three private companies control the telecommunication, money transfer, and digital services inside US prisons and jails. They charge high fees for phone calls, video visits, emails, and commissary deposits; the cost to cover these fees fall almost entirely on families of the incarcerated.

is for Knowledge Production

There is a long tradition of incarcerated people engaging in scholarship, writing, and theorizing while incarcerated. However, knowledge production is not just about traditional academia; individuals might be able to earn their GED, pick up new hobbies, become journalists, learn to read, or become teachers and mentors to other incarcerated folks.

L is for Language

For any marginalized person, language can be used to dehumanize them. Terms like “criminal” and “prisoner” blame incarcerated people, rather than the systems that lead them to incarceration. “Inmate” is a term often used by correctional officers to assert power and separate themselves from their actions while on duty. Similarly, facility staff can choose to ignore preferred names, pronouns, and other identity terms, usually with no repercussions.

M is for Martin Sostre (1923–2015)

His name is nearly lost to time, but during his two periods of incarceration Sostre brought forth some of the first lawsuits that established incarcerated people maintain some rights while incarcerated. Sostre spent several years of his life in solitary confinement, and during that time he challenged censorship, brutality, and the conditions of isolation itself, helping set early precedents that recognized the constitutional limits of solitary and the state’s obligation to protect the basic rights of people in prison.

ZN is for “No Touching”

Despite the fact that incarcerated people are typically surrounded by other humans 24/7, there is little ability for physical contact of any kind. Whether it's with a visitor or another incarcerated person, hugs, hand-holding, and other types of contact are often denied due to fears of contraband and sexual misconduct.

O is for Overcrowding

Because the prison industry is a business, many parts of the system are incentivized by funneling more bodies into jails and prisons. However, the incarcerated population is growing faster than facilities can handle. Too many people are packed into cells and pods. If a facility is too overcrowded, people may be moved across states or even across the country to a different facility.

P is for Prisonization

Prisonization is the process by which people adapt to the routines, rules, and survival strategies of prison life. These adaptations (hypervigilance, emotional withdrawal, distrust, rigid boundaries, etc.) help people endure incarceration but can make life after release far more difficult.