



JUSTICELA



6/22/21

Editors and Writers of The Times,

We're writing in hopes of evolving The Los Angeles Times' coverage on prison closure. An article released two days after Juneteenth sought to center the narrative that closing prisons equals economic devastation. This dialogue reminds us of the arguments of the Antebellum South. Like prisons, slavery was also deemed "good for the economy." We know nothing could be further from the truth.

It *is* true that thousands of people rely on income generated from prisons in California. However, having "happy little prison towns" with economies that depend on prisons to survive is deeply unhealthy—that's a relic of the past, and must end.

And let's be clear: prisons are racist.

Black people—as well as Latinx and Indigenous people—face ongoing generational damage and destabilization in their families and communities because of California's racist system of imprisonment. The Exceptions Clause of the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, subsequent Jim Crow laws, and similar forms of criminalization, transformed prisons to resemble the enslavement-dependent industries of the South, with exploitation along similar racial lines. The idyllic images of Susanville residents in the aforementioned piece erase the torture of people inside California prisons. Romanticizing systemic racism that descends from historic mass atrocity is never a good look; the dangers of normalizing historic racialized violence cannot be understated.

If towns cannot sustain life without depending on a system that criminalizes, cages and harms people generationally, we must rethink the structure of our economies and how they work. The positive economic conditions of communities can *not* be linked to racialized, mass incarceration. We deserve a state that leads with a #CareFirst vision, in recognition and respect of our human and environmental rights. We need a [Budget to Save Lives](#).

In the article, our colleague Nicole Porter from The Sentencing Project said it best: “It’s the state’s responsibility to help guide a conversation around redevelopment. That community’s economic success should not be predicated on being a human warehouse that disappears people from their homes. The state created this problem, and it’s the state’s responsibility to address it.”

We can have a safe and healthy economy for all if there is bold, visionary state leadership. That’s why California must embrace CURB’s People Plan for Prison Closure¹, as well as strategies for a #JustTransition that shifts California from an extractive, exploitative, carceral economy to a restorative, *care first* economy. You can find some of our strategies for community investment [here](#).

Some folks interviewed for the article suggested working at a prison was their dream job. Yet the data suggests that prisons are traumatic, unhealthy places shaped by violent and dehumanizing cultures that lead to lasting physical and emotional health outcomes not just for incarcerated individuals and their families, but also for the people that work in those facilities.² We are not convinced—and don’t accept—that the greatest dream people have for themselves and their communities is a prison. Prisons have led to environmental and health disasters, with COVID-19 showing how deadly mass incarceration can become. Cages are a threat to the public health of communities everywhere.

Prisons must close in the interest of racial justice, public health and responsible budgets. Our coalitions envision a world where instead of spending more than \$16 billion annually on a racist system that is punitive and carceral, we invest in building healthy, sustainable, and equitable careers and opportunities for communities across California—especially in rural communities like Susanville.

Our community hopes that The Times will continue substantively reporting on prison closure in California and take our perspective into consideration for future articles.

—CURB, JusticeLA, Care First CA and Budget 2 Save Lives

¹ Amber-Rose Howard, et al., “The People’s Plan For Prison Closure.” Californians United for a Responsible Budget,

<https://www.curbprisonspending.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Peoples-Plan-for-Prison-Closure.pdf>

² Emily Widra, “Incarceration Shortens Life Expectancy.” Prison Policy Initiative, 26 Jun 2017, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/06/26/life_expectancy/#:~:text=Each%20year%20in%20prison%20takes,life%20expectancy%20by%205%20years.&text=New%20research%20expands%20the%20notion,s.post%2Drelease%20barriers%20and%20discrimination..