

**PRISONS:**



**NEW FORMS OF  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
RACISM**

In the last 20 years the United States has built more prisons than any country during any period in history. The cost of the US criminal justice system now runs to \$147 billion per year. But the financial costs are only part of the story. There are other costs not so easily seen, costs passed on to those least able to pay them—the poor rural towns in which most prisons are built and the poor urban communities from which most prisoners are sent. Because the costs of the current prison expansion are being passed to the poor, and especially to people of color, we say that prisons are examples of economic injustice and environmental racism.

**We hope this pamphlet raises questions for you about how the prison system really works. We encourage you to ask more questions. If we can help answer any questions or help you to educate others, our phones & emails are on the back page.**

- Critical Resistance & California Prison Moratorium Project

## **WHAT ARE ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?**

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policy making, selective enforcement of environmental laws, and the targeting of communities of color for environmentally disastrous land uses, such as toxic waste disposal sites or other polluting industries. Communities of color and poor communities bear an unequal and unfair number of environmentally destructive land uses, land uses that take from the community but don't give back to it.

A 1987 study by the United Church of Christ\*, for example, found that of 15 million Latinos living in the U.S., 8 million lived in communities with one or more licensed toxic waste sites. The environmental justice movement seeks to end such environmental and economic injustices by eliminating the siting of environmentally toxic facilities anywhere.

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\* *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice; 1987.\*\**Political Difficulties Facing Waste-to-Energy Conversion Plant Siting (also known as the Cerrill Report)*; Cerrill Associates for the California Waste Management Board; 1984 \*\*\**Encyclopedia of American Prisons: "Site Selection & Construction"* p.447; 1996.

## WHERE ARE PRISONS LOCATED TODAY?

Throughout the nation nearly all prisons - just like other more traditional forms of environmental racism - are sited in poor, rural communities on a hollow promise of jobs and economic prosperity. Many of these communities are also communities of color. In California, for example, the vast majority of new prisons have been sited on thousands of acres of what was farmland in the Central Valley. These communities are targeted for prisons much as similar communities are targeted for

other environmentally disastrous industries.

A 1984 report\*\* on the siting of hazardous waste incinerators, for example, concluded that communities that would offer the least resistance to the incinerators were small, rural towns whose residents were poor, majority Catholic with high school educations or less and who worked in jobs like mining, timber or agriculture. California's prison towns fit this profile precisely.

## HOW ARE PRISONS SITED?

As is often the case with other environmentally disastrous land uses, communities are shut out of the public review of proposed prison sites. According to the Encyclopedia of American Prisons\*\*\*, "premature disclosure" makes siting a prison difficult because the public might find out before the deal is set. Not surprisingly, notice of any public hearing is poor, while intimidation by those pushing for the prison is great.

Another barrier to community participation arises because environmental review documents are provided only in English. In Mendota, California for example, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBoP) wants to build a five-prison complex. The FBoP pre-

pared a 1000-page Environmental Impact Statement in English. According to the Bureau of the Census, 86% of Mendota residents speak "a language other than English" at home. When pressed to translate the 1000-page document into Spanish, the FBoP made the outrageous claim that translation was not possible because the EIS contained "scientific" and "technical" terms. Finally, the FBoP produced an insulting 10-page summary in Spanish.

The environmental justice movement insists that the political process be open and democratic, so that all who might be affected by a project have the information and access to participate in making decisions.

# WHAT ARE THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF PRISONS?

Public officials often portray prisons as “clean industries” and promise hundreds of decent jobs to economically desperate towns. In fact, the effects of prisons are almost entirely negative.

They suck up scarce local resources such as water; they require towns to pay for roads, sewers & utilities; they generate tens of thousands of miles of commuting pollution, often in the most polluted parts of the state; they take irreplaceable land out of any productive use, wasting valuable public resources for nothing but holding people in cages.

They give almost nothing back to their host communities. Most prison employees don't come from the host town nor do they

move there after being hired; they commute dozens of miles each way. Neither the prison nor its employees spend much money in the town, so local businesses don't benefit.

Despite well known and proven alternatives, prisons take thousands of people out of their communities and families, further impoverishing already hard-hit urban areas. In the communities whose members make up the majority of the prison population, families are destroyed and local businesses lose customers and employees.

Prisons are environmental & social disasters for the communities from which prisoners come and for the towns in which prisons are built.

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