

HOW TO BLOW UP THE COALFIELD



**TO PRISON
PIPELINE**

9 STEPS TOWARD DECARCERATION IN APPALACHIA

- STEP #1 EDUCATING AND EMPOWERING YOURSELF**
- STEP #2 ORGANIZING WITH YOUR NEIGHBORS**
- STEP #3 REFORMING THE CRIMINAL COURT SYSTEM**
- STEP #4 WINNING A MORATORIUM ON NEW PRISON**
- STEP #5 BREAKING THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POWER OF THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX**
- STEP #6 ADOPTING A DIVEST/INVEST FRAMEWORK FOR REDIRECTING GOVERNMENT INVESTMENTS AWAY FROM PRISONS AND INTO CARE WORK**
- STEP #7 BUILDING A MORE SUSTAINABLE LOCAL ECONOMY**
- STEP #8 INVESTING IN REHABILITATION AND RESOCIALIZATION**
- STEP #9 REPUPOSING FORMER PRISONS**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This how-to manual was created during the fall of 2021 as a part of the University of Pennsylvania's studio, *Designing a Green New Deal: The Spatial Politics of Our Response to Climate Change*. This cross-disciplinary studio within the school of design focused on how the abstract, national-scale ambitions of the Green New Deal (GND) might be translated into real projects in real communities across the United States. While many organizations and activists are already working

toward prison abolition and a more sustainable future for Appalachia, this manual seeks to compile this already existing great work into digestible steps.

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INTRODUCTION

With the uncontrolled rise of incarceration in the last four decades, the construction of prisons in rural locations was framed as serving the dual function of housing the surplus of prisoners as well as employing those hit hard by agricultural consolidation, corporate flight, and the increasing globalization of the economy. The rural prison boom has been especially pronounced in central Appalachia, where 29 state or federal prisons have been constructed since 1989.¹ As the

region transitioned from timber to coal to natural gas to prison-building, the need for economic development, the availability of flat land from mountaintop removal mining, and the desperate need for jobs has fueled this coalfield to prison pipeline. This new form of economic development should be viewed as a continuation of, rather than a break from, the cycle of extraction and exploitation that has long plagued the people and landscapes of Appalachia. However,

a different future for Appalachia is possible. This manual shows how to make this future a reality by first describing the necessary steps to end incarceration and then focusing on building a “community of care” within Appalachia.

While ending incarceration and building a more sustainable future for Appalachia may not happen in this lifetime, starting is the first step. By breaking down the overwhelming task of dismantling the pipeline

into manageable steps, this manual hopes to provide the inspiration and resources for “blowing up”² the coalfield to prison pipeline in Appalachia and actively fighting for a more just and sustainable future.

“For the abolitionist, justice is not simply a collection of principles or criteria, but the active process of preventing or repairing injustice.”³

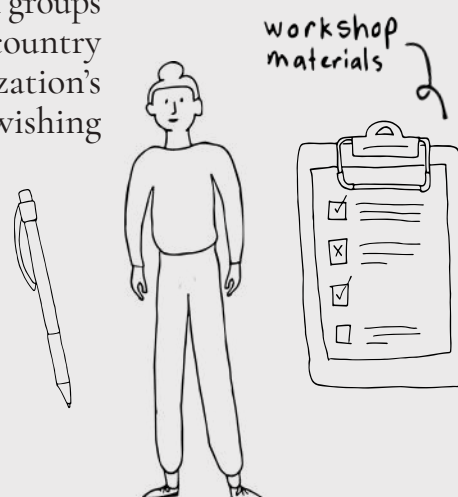
STEP #1 EDUCATING AND EMPOWERING YOURSELF

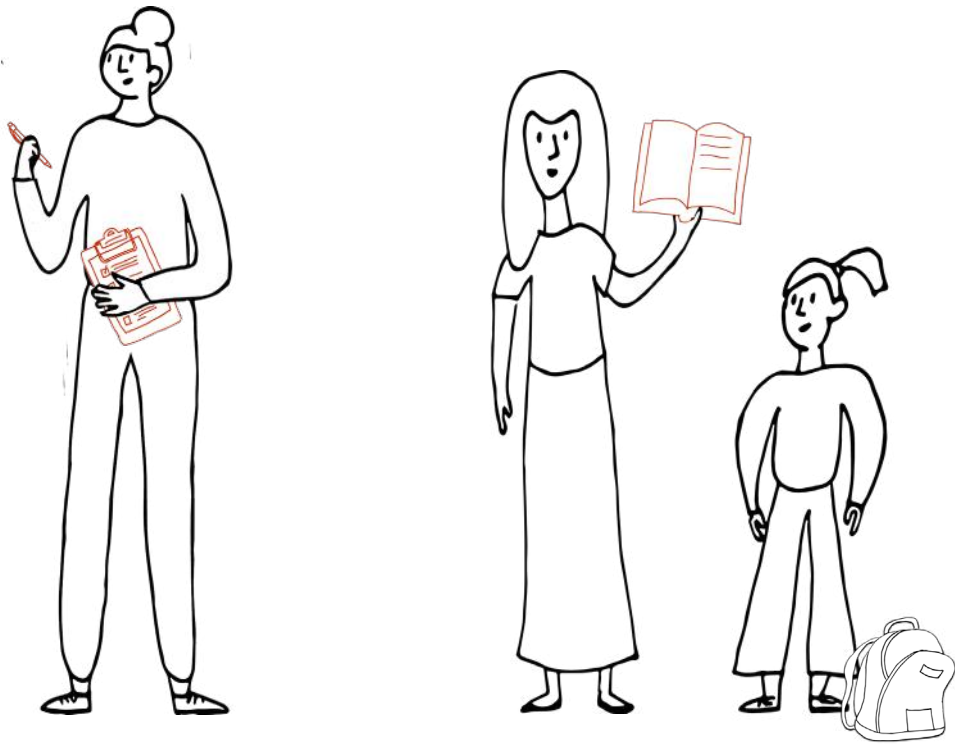
For many people, prisons may seem like a natural and inevitable fixture of life. After someone commits a serious crime, it is often assumed that prison—whether for punitive or rehabilitative reasons—is the right or best place for them. Streaming service subscribers eagerly binge shows set in prisons like *Orange is the New Black*, without questioning the nature of the setting. Citizens are the source of institutional power and, thus, the movement toward prison abolition begins with the education of the general public. It is important that this education is community-led and empowers the community from the bottom up. Education techniques should focus on providing communities with the resources they need to create a vision of prison abolition and change from within.

Community Workshops and Public Education Campaigns

01.

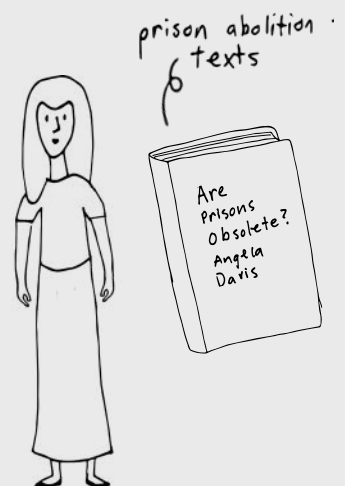
Hosting public education campaigns and workshops in communities most affected by overincarceration can help these communities develop the skills and tools necessary to demand justice. Prison abolition groups such as Critical Resistance⁴ have local chapters around the country and are important resources for getting started. The organization’s “The Abolitionist Toolkit”⁵ is an important tool for those wishing to begin organizing.





Prison Abolition School Curriculum

Prison abolition school curriculum or an extracurricular after-school program can help get youth in the region involved in the prison abolition movement. While the state and federal governments can supply funding and direct some required curricula, most changes in curricula happen at the local level. While there is no national curriculum, independent organizations, such as the National Conference of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)⁶ can create model curricula with voluntary standards for school districts to incorporate. Pressuring city- or district-level school boards to include education on incarceration or the abolition movement in school curricula can lead to youth getting involved. Important texts to include in such a curriculum include *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis;⁷ *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* by Ruth Wilson Gilmore;⁸ and *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power across Neoliberal America* by Brett Story.⁹



STEP #2 ORGANIZING WITH YOUR NEIGHBORS

Politically organizing can help the prison abolition movement achieve its goals at a national scale. While the prison abolition movement most importantly depends on social acceptance of its ideas, organizing politically can put these visions into action and push them into the national agenda. The broad, abstract visions of prison abolitionists are often translated into action in the form of local campaigns targeting the closure or protesting the construction of specific prison sites.

Political Coalitions

Creating political coalitions can help organize resources and combine power. Political coalitions such as Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) push the agenda of prison abolition into action. Founded in 2003, the coalition of over 70 organizations has prevented over 140,000 new jail and prison beds from being constructed and notably succeeded in stopping the construction of a women's jail in Los Angeles.¹⁰ A similar coalition can build comparable power in Appalachia. The fight against the construction of a new federal penitentiary in Letcher County, Kentucky is a notable example of a successful mobilization effort within an Appalachian community that can be followed as an example elsewhere.¹¹





Electing Pro-Prison Abolition Candidates and Passing Pro-Prison Abolition Legislation

02.

Getting pro-abolition candidates on the ballot and into office can work toward turning the vision of the movement into concrete policy changes. Progressive state and legislation groups, such as ProgressNow¹² and Ballot Initiative Strategy Center (BISC),¹³ create strategic grassroots ballot initiative campaigns supporting progressive politics. Progressive democratic party election groups such as Progressive Campaign Committee¹⁴ or Progressive Democrats of America¹⁵ provide resources for progressive candidates to organize and run smooth campaigns. Working with these groups or organizing new ones to incorporate pro-prison abolition policies into their agendas and supporting pro-prison abolition candidates can push pro-abolitionist policies into the legislative agenda.

Ballot

Decarceration Candidate

Prison Moratorium?

Yes

No

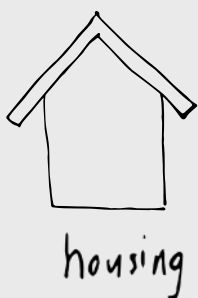
STEP #3 REFORMING THE CRIMINAL COURT SYSTEM

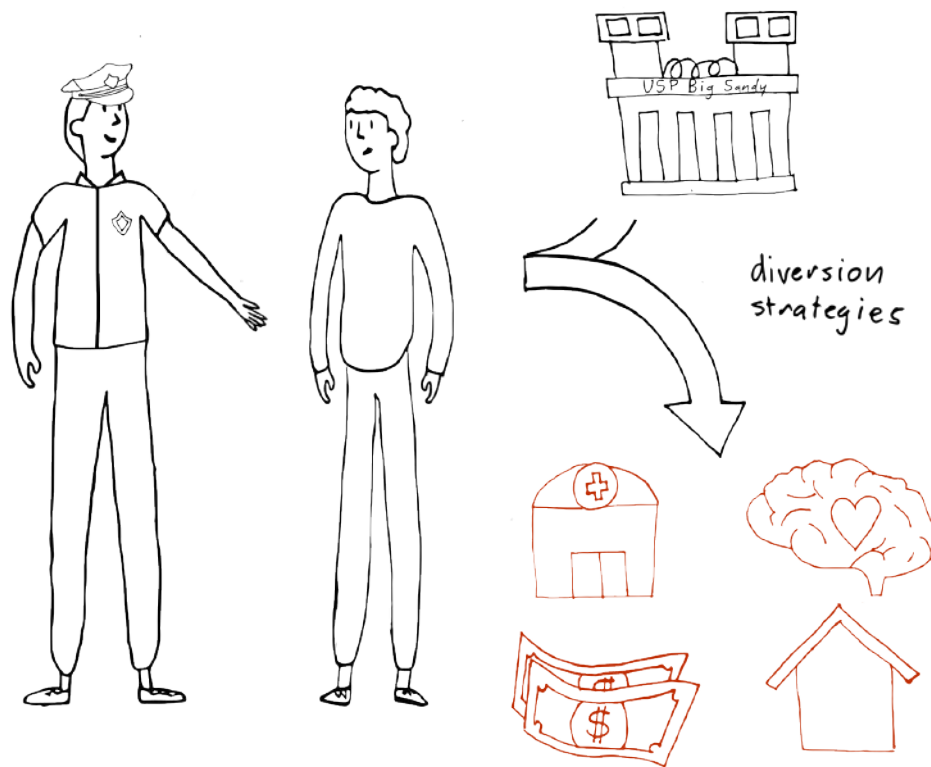
The work of building a world without prisons will be a multi-generational effort. As the process of decommissioning and repurposing of carceral infrastructure starts, a parallel effort must begin to radically reform the criminal justice system. Each sector of the criminal justice system is responsible for mass incarceration and must be engaged to turn off the flow of people into the already over-crowded jails and prisons of the system. While reforming the laws surrounding who is incarcerated and for how long will decrease the prison population in the short term, the ultimate goal of such changes is to implement a restorative justice system which takes prisons out of the community and focuses on the healing of survivors.

01.

Misdemeanor Reform and Law Enforcement Diversion

Law enforcement diversion programs, such as Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion in Seattle,¹⁶ can redirect offenders to needed resources for issues such as homelessness, substance use, or mental health, instead of making arrests. The Restorative Justice Project at Impact Justice is a training project that partners with communities across the country and teaches them how to use such diversion methods.¹⁷ Diversion also includes lowering penalties for crimes such as minor drug possession from a felony to a misdemeanor and giving opportunities for drug-related counseling instead of incarceration. The Criminal Law Reform Project (CLRP), a division of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), aims to turn the diversion model into a reality by using strategic litigation to reduce the number of people incarcerated from the “front end” of the system.¹⁸ Such strategies work to stop the addition of people to prisons as decarceration efforts begin.





Prosecutor Reform

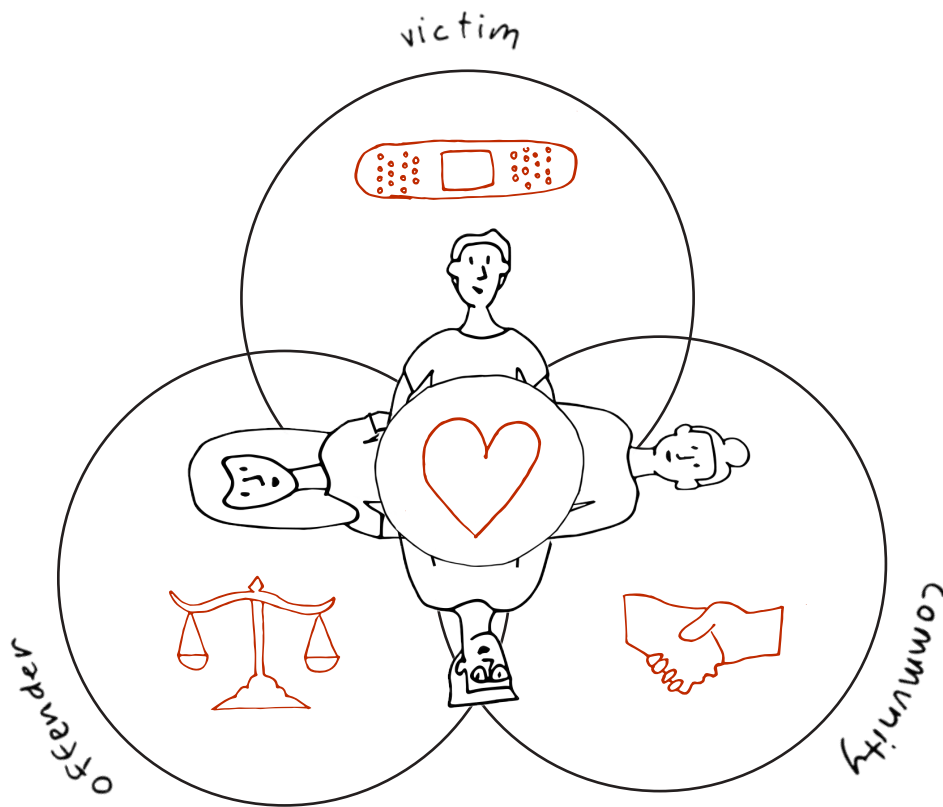
02.

Prosecutors have enormous influence over who ends up in prison. By controlling decisions about if plea bargains and mandatory minimum sentences happen, prosecutors can determine whether and for what length of time defendants remain in jail or prison. Prosecutors need to be better educated on abolitionist principles and have stricter guidelines for sentencing. Guides like the Brennan Center for Justice’s 21 Principles for the 21st Century Prosecutor can be followed by prosecutors to enact the law with mercy and justice.¹⁹ Such guidelines include encouraging the treatment of drug addiction and mental illness over criminalization, minimizing misdemeanors, and addressing racial disparities.²⁰

Federal Legislation

03.

While most people encounter the justice system on the local or state level, just as the federal government encouraged states to incarcerate, it can encourage them to decarcerate. In 2019, U.S. Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), along with Representative Tony Cárdenas (D-CA) introduced the “Reverse Mass Incarceration Act.”²¹ This bill would have allocated funds to states who met benchmark decarceration rates to incentivize States to reduce prison populations. While the bill died in Congress, it can still be re-introduced in subsequent sessions of Congress, in new bills, or added to larger bills. A new version of this bill could also include a prison building moratorium (see step 4).



Restorative justice focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community as a whole. One of the ultimate goals of the abolition movement is to move away completely from the punitive justice system. Restorative justice presents an alternative that works to interrupt the cycle of the offender and focuses on the healing and repair of the victim. Programs using restorative justice measures are already happening in communities across the country. The Harlem Community Justice Center is a neighborhood-based community court with the mission of creating a fair system of justice in the neighborhood through housing, community health, and access to justice.²² Similar programs can be implemented in communities in Appalachia and across the country.



accountability

healing

STEP #4 WINNING A MORATORIUM ON NEW PRISON CONSTRUCTION

Once the flow of incarcerated people is slowed, organizers can build campaigns around ending the construction of new prisons. A moratorium will allow room for prison abolition work to continue without putting resources and energy into ongoing fights against opening new prisons. Massachusetts-based advocates recently had a bill introduced into the Massachusetts legislature, that would establish a 5-year moratorium on building new or expanding existing jails and prisons in the state. More states can consider prison moratoriums and the federal government as a whole can also consider taking action, such as including a moratorium measure in the “Reverse Mass Incarceration Act”²³ (see step 3). Together, by ending both the funneling of people into prisons and the construction of new prisons, the conditions for full decarceration can begin to appear.



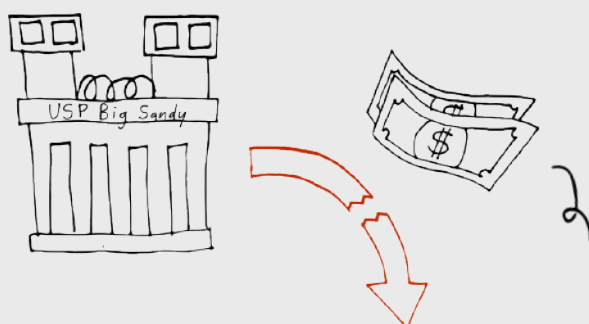
STEP #5 BREAKING THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POWER OF THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

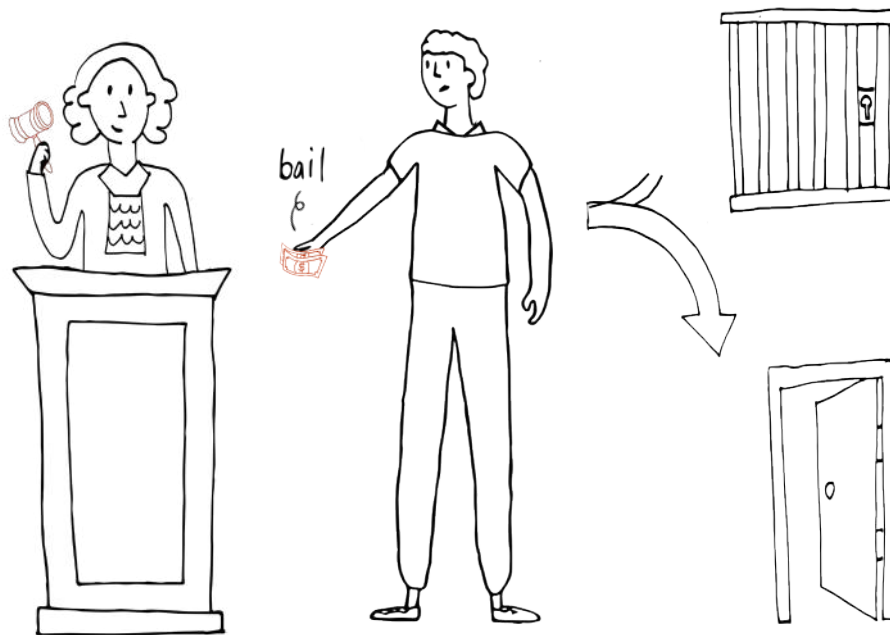
This step aims to remove the profit motive from the criminal justice system. The incentive structure for private prisons, construction companies, bail bond companies, ancillary providers, and commissary vendors must be dismantled. Many private parties profit directly or indirectly from the prison industrial complex. While ultimately the goal is to eliminate prisons altogether, this step helps make doing so easier by eliminating profits from the equation.

Divest from the Prison Industrial Complex

01.

Companies and institutions across varied sectors profit from the carceral system. Even mission-driven companies that have public corporate social responsibility agreements do business with prisons. More thorough supply chain monitoring systems can make these connections more visible. Supply chain monitoring can help companies identify their ties to the prison industrial complex and make divestment easier. Universities, municipalities, and faith-based institutions should also divest from all of their connections. Divestment includes ending all financial relationships with companies that profit from or participate in the prison system. Additionally, financial holdings such as public pension funds, university endowments, and mutual funds should divest from prison-related holdings.





Eliminate Cash Bail

02.

The Cash Bail system criminalizes poverty as people who cannot afford bail are forced to stay in jail as they await trial. This can cause people to lose their job, housing, or even custody of their children, which may perpetuate further instability and further encounters with the justice system. New Jersey eliminated cash bail and moved to a method of risk assessments in 2017 and Kentucky switched to pretrial risk assessments in 2011.²⁴ Day fines and risk assessments similar to those used in New Jersey and Kentucky can be used as alternatives for cash bail and remove the profit motive for keeping people in the system.

Full Disclosure of Lobbying and Political Activities

03.

Twenty-two of the largest publicly traded or private equity-owned corporations that are fully dependent on the prison-industrial complex spent \$33.2 million lobbying the federal government between 2015 and 2017.²⁵ Additionally, around 500 companies that are dependent on the prison-industrial complex gave \$2.5 million to political candidates in 2016, excluding contributions to political action committees (PACS).²⁶ Securing full disclosure of lobbying and political activities from these companies will help break prisons' political ties and make dismantling the system easier.

STEP #6 ADOPTING A DIVEST/INVEST FRAMEWORK

FOR REDIRECTING GOVERNMENT INVESTMENTS

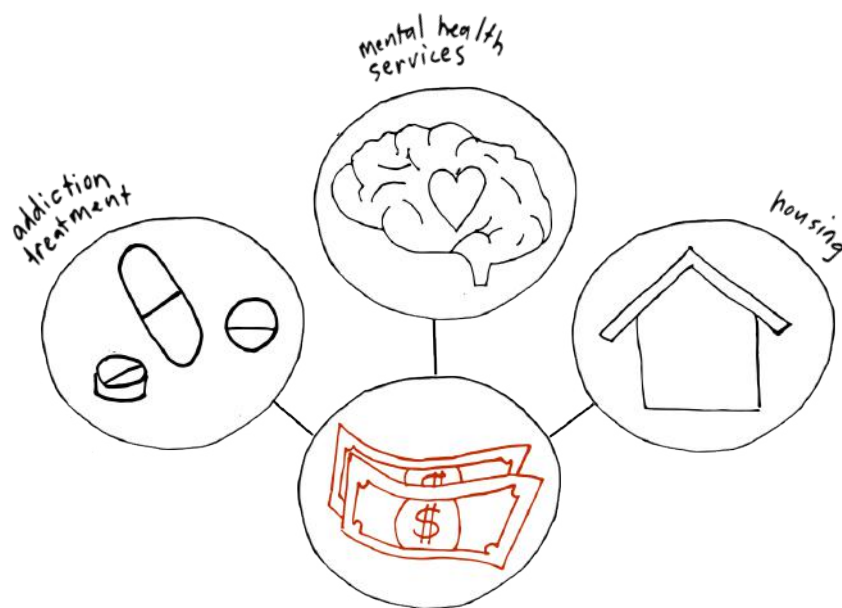
AWAY FROM PRISONS AND INTO CARE WORK

The carceral state has many costs beyond just the hard costs of paying to keep the system running. For a given person in the carceral system, every dollar spent on corrections generates 10 more dollars in social costs.²⁷ These costs include the opportunity cost of people's time and job potential, as well as costs on families and communities. For instance, people who have interacted with the justice system are more likely to face discrimination in the hiring process and earn lower wages over their lifetime.²⁸ Additionally, family members of those incarcerated can spend between 9-26% of their total income to keep in contact with their loved one behind bars through the cost of phone calls, visits, and care packages.²⁹ The isolated locations of many of the prisons built in Appalachia exacerbate this problem.

Redistribute Budget

01.

Securing funds to go toward reinvestment into the community can happen in several ways. First, creating a "reinvestment fund" that captures estimated savings from criminal justice reforms can ensure that these savings are reinvested into the community and not used elsewhere. Funds can also be secured from rearrangements in state and city budgets through the annual budget process. Finally, reallocation can take place at the department or agency level. As incarceration declines and crime rates lower, resources that are already in Departments of Public Safety or Corrections can be redistributed to community investments.



Additionally, a large percentage of cities' budgets go toward police forces for crime prevention. Louisville, Kentucky spends a total of \$191 million on policing every year or 29% of its total budget.³⁰ Redistributing government spending from the carceral system and police toward a “community of care” will not only create safer and more just communities, but it will also generate substantial savings.

Justice Reinvestment

02.

States should actively reduce prison costs and reinvest the resulting savings into efforts that reduce recidivism. Instead of investing in maintaining incarceration, money should be redistributed into the communities to solve the root causes of incarceration, including poverty, addiction, homelessness, and mental-health. Imprisonment does not solve the root causes of these issues and can even exacerbate their effects. Redirecting government spending to increase social investment in housing, employment, healthcare, and social support programs can lower crime rates and reduce recidivism.³¹

Reentry Reform

03.

Releasing individuals who are deemed as low-risk can further reduce the costs of prisons and pave the way for full decarceration. These populations include all prisoners with low drug offenses, as well as the elderly. Maximizing earned-time credit for prisoners who participate in rehabilitative programming can also further reduce prison populations. Improving reentry programs to focus on stability, including offering housing vouchers and job trainings, can reduce the risk of recidivism.

STEP #7 BUILDING A MORE SUSTAINABLE LOCAL

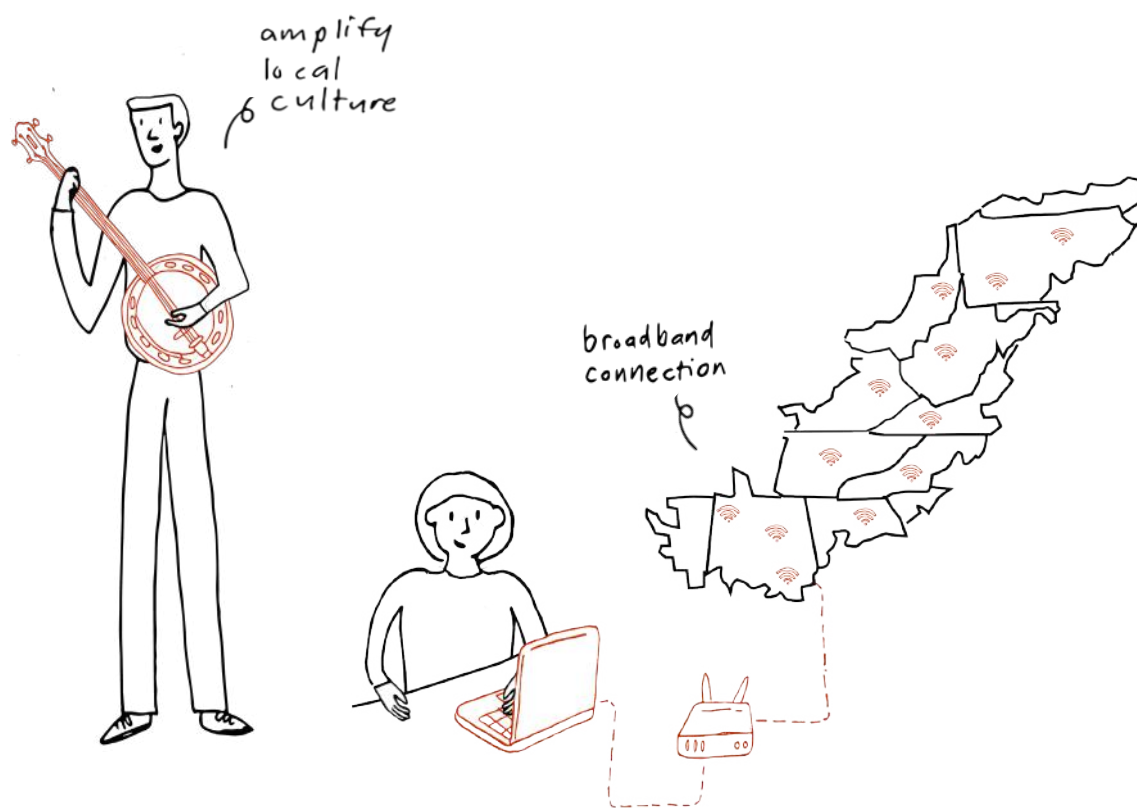
ECONOMY

Appalachia's abundant natural resources fueled the growth of the rest of the region, country, and world while leaving itself depleted. Generations of absentee landowners and financiers transformed the region from a site of abundance to one of extreme precarity. After decarceration efforts begin, billions of dollars can be freed up from carceral and policing budgets to be reinvested into creating a more diverse, sustainable model of rural economic development. As more prisons are decommissioned, both those who are released and former prison employees will need high-paying, stable jobs to enter into. Creating a local, self-sustaining economy is necessary to support this transition and also finally break the cycle of extraction and exploitation of Appalachia's people and resources.

Diversify and Localize

Due to its rich natural deposits, Appalachia became overly dependent on the exportation of coal. This phenomenon of the "resource curse" prevented Appalachia from developing a diverse, well-rounded economy. Additionally, with large out-of-state companies running the mines, very little of the wealth generated by the coal industry was reinvested into local communities. As Appalachia moves away from an economy based around resource extraction, building a diverse, localized economy is critical.

First, money from coal severance taxes can be reinvested into building a more sustainable, localized economy. Similar programs have been set up in Alaska, Montana, and Wyoming and can turn coal money into job training programs or infrastructure that support local economic growth.³² Groups such as the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) can also provide funding and loans to new small businesses and nonprofits.³³ Business incubators such as the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks can provide further support to local entrepreneurs in the region.³⁴



Move Away from Extraction

02.

Relying too much on coal extraction left Appalachia vulnerable to the highs and lows of the market. With the rise in renewable energy sources and advancement of mining technologies, coal jobs have long been on the decline in Appalachia. Additionally, coal extraction has brought extreme environmental and health costs to the region. Creating a more sustainable future for Appalachia will require moving away from extractive industries. Many groups in Appalachia have already looked to turn conservation into business. The Appalachian Carbon Partnership helps landowners sell carbon offsets based on the forests on their land.³⁵ Organizations like Green Forests Work and Appalachian Voices work to envision futures for land that has been formerly strip-mined.³⁶ The continuation and expansion of this work can build a more sustainable future for the region.

Infrastructure Advancements

03.

Improvements in critical infrastructure such as broadband and transportation networks can turn the diversification and localization of Appalachia's economy into a reality. High-speed broadband and expanded highway networks are necessities for starting and expanding businesses in the region.

STEP #8 INVESTING IN REHABILITATION AND RESOCIALIZATION

As legal reforms allow for more incarcerated individuals to be released, having effective infrastructure and programming in place to allow for more effective reentry will be essential. More than half of formerly incarcerated people are unable to find stable employment within their first year of release, which can lead to a higher risk of recidivism.³⁸ Reentry should focus on stability with plans in place for health, housing, mentorship, and career development.

Housing

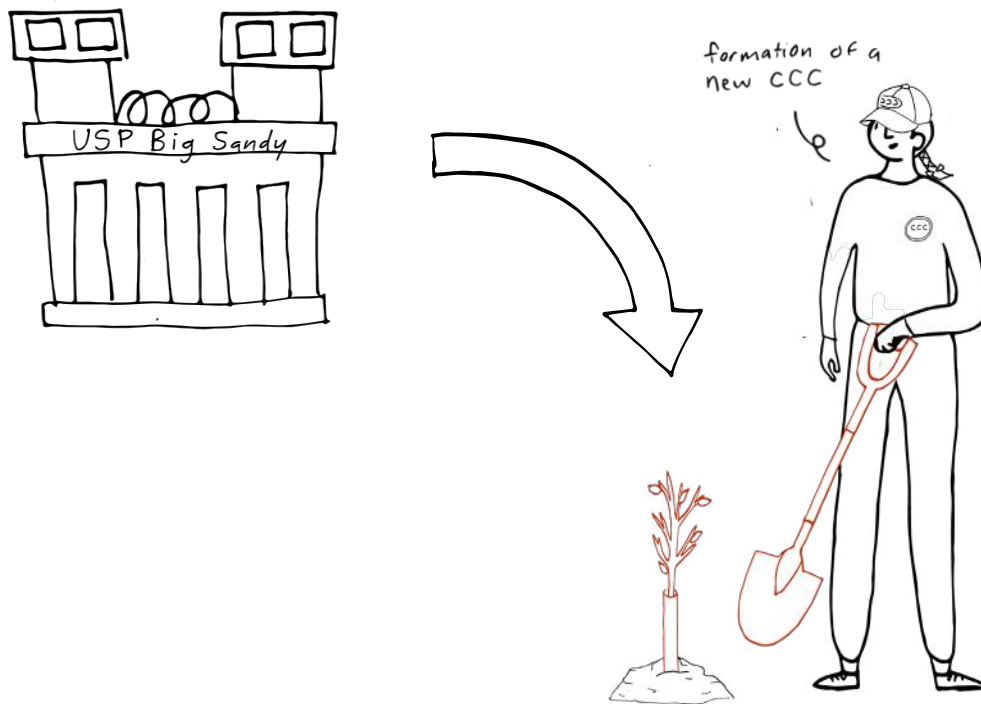
01.

Currently, those who are released for parole with no other housing options lined up must wait in prison until a spot opens in a residential reentry center (RRC). RRC's are operated by private prison corporations and cost States millions of dollars in contracts each year.³⁷ States' investments into these centers can instead be redirected into housing voucher programs. Housing vouchers would allow for those who are released to reestablish themselves close to family and find more stable employment.

Mentorship Program

02.

A well-structured mentoring program can help formerly incarcerated individuals more smoothly readapt to life on the outside. Research has shown that mentorship programs can positively affect social, behavioral, and academic outcomes. Through building a trusting relationship, the mentor can provide consistent, nonjudgmental support and make the process of reentry easier to navigate.



Employment

03.

Having full-time stable employment has been shown to reduce recidivism and post-prison social disabilities.³⁹ However, for many formerly incarcerated individuals, finding employment can be difficult due to their criminal record and lack of education or skills.

The prevalence of criminal background checks is a major roadblock for acquiring employment for those with criminal records. Around 94 percent of employers use background checks to evaluate potential employees.⁴⁰ Expanding oversight and increasing regulation of the criminal background check industry would increase employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals. Under New York City Fair Chance Act, employers cannot complete a background check unless they have made a job offer.⁴¹ Additionally, more than 36 states have “banned the box,” making it illegal for employers to ask about an individual’s arrest record on job applications.⁴²

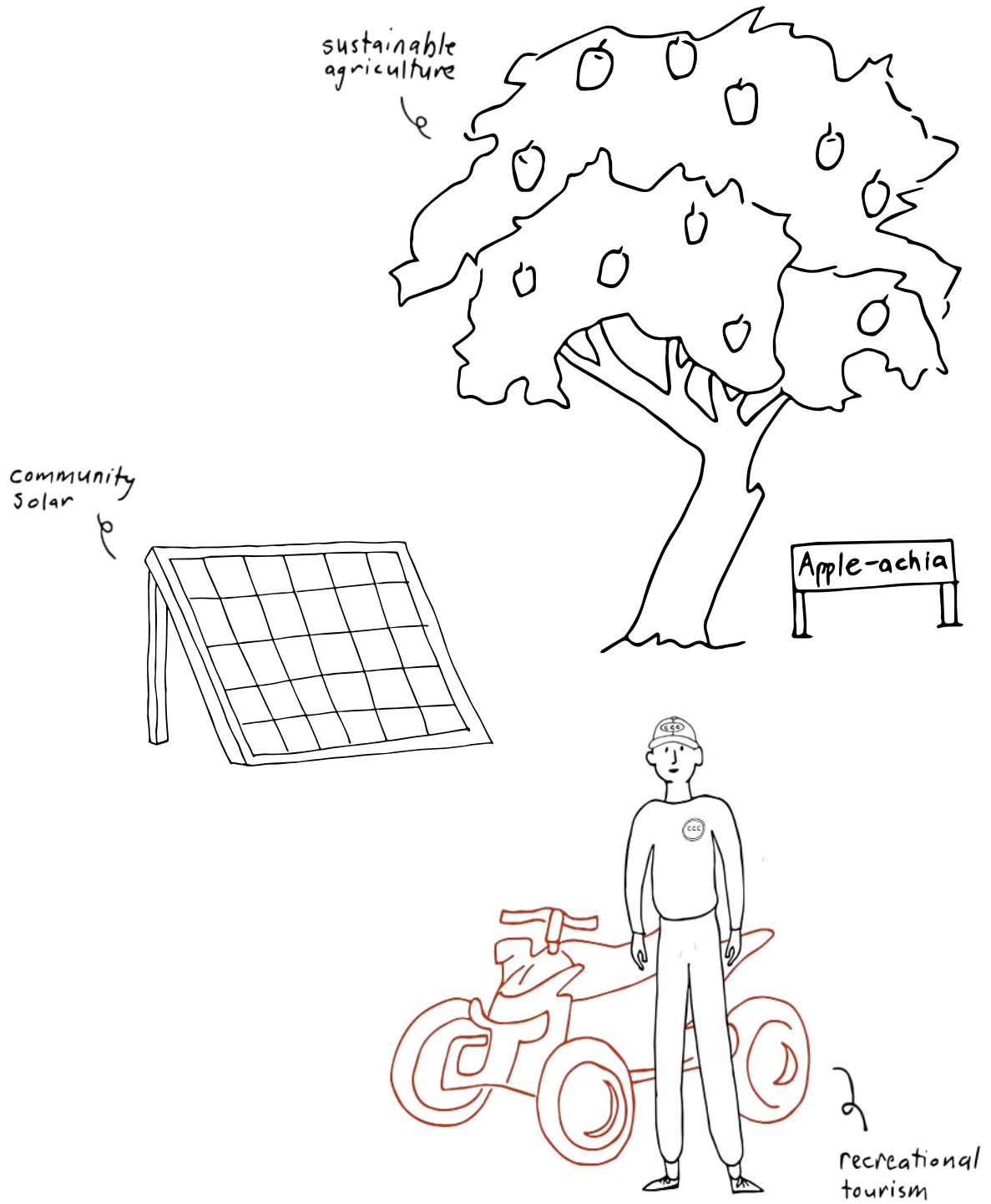
Furthermore, improved job training and placement programs can help formerly incarcerated individuals find stable employment. Around two-fifths of those entering prison do not have a high school diploma or General Educational Development GED credential.⁴³ Thus, job training programs can be essential in preparing incarcerated individuals for employment. Minnesota’s EMPLOY program and Florida’s Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Individuals (WCTTII) are two examples that can be emulated across the country.⁴⁴

STEP #9 REPURPOSING FORMER PRISONS

As crime rates drop and alternatives to incarceration are established, the prison population will begin to dwindle until disappearing completely. Creating a world without prisons will require decommissioning and repurposing the newly obsolete carceral infrastructure of former jails, prisons, and correctional facilities. While the sheer number of existing jails and prisons means that no one solution for repurposing former prisons is best, centering the plans based on community-based resources or needs is a necessity. Community members, private developers, county officials, and the local economic development council can work together to bring positive economic change to the community. Elected officials must encourage community engagement in the decision-making process for repurposing prisons to understand the community's needs.

Former carceral infrastructure has been repurposed for an eclectic mix of uses. Prisons are becoming high schools, museums, new housing, farms, and renewable power plants. Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary, which was located in Tennessee became a distillery and tourist attraction.⁴⁵ Former Fulton Correctional Facility in New York is now a reentry center that offers housing and job training for released incarcerated individuals.⁴⁶ The site of Hanna City Work Camp in Illinois is now being used as a small farm incubator, which distributes locally grown food and provides training.⁴⁷ In some cases, carceral infrastructure has been demolished altogether. The valuable flat land that prisons now occupy in Appalachia poses a unique opportunity for creative uses.





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