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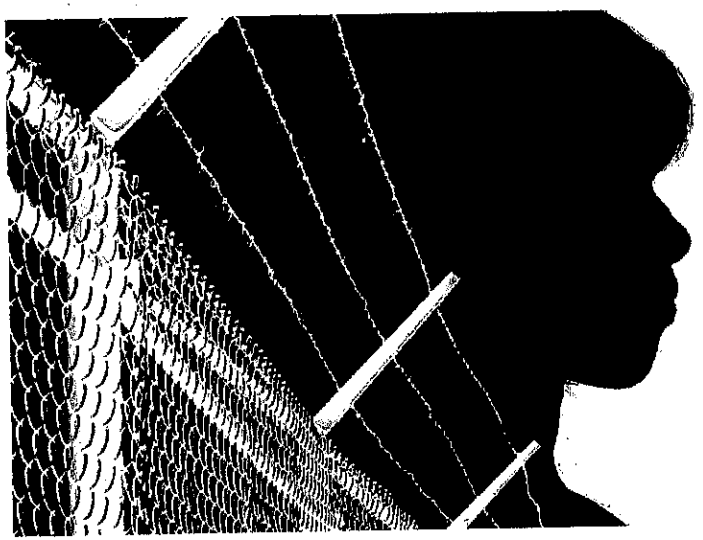
A Growing Asian-American Movement Calls for Prison Abolition



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A growing movement of Asian Americans embracing the vision of the abolition of the prison industrial complex has emerged in the past few years. This movement has grown from the complicated relationship between Asian Americans and the prison industrial complex.

It is widely cited that the Justice for Vincent Chin campaign, which organized around the brutal 1982 murder of Chin in Detroit, was a major catalyst for contemporary progressive Asian-American activism. The two white autoworkers who beat Chin, a Chinese American, to death were upset that Japanese companies were encroaching on the US auto market and leading to job loss and factory closures. The movement found it unjust that the murderers never served jail time for beating Chin to death for what they believed was an anti-Asian hate crime.

Organizing around anti-Asian violence and hate crimes became a cornerstone for much of the Asian-American activism following Chin's murder. The Asian Law Caucus (ALC), a civil rights nonprofit founded in 1972 in San Francisco, was one group that turned their focus on issues of anti-Asian violence and hate crimes.

Anti-Asian hate crimes had become one of their primary issues throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, as the ALC litigated cases pursuing the eviction of Black tenants from public housing for allegedly harassing Asian tenants and the prosecution of a white teenager who had assaulted a group of Asian teenagers, a case that Angela Chan, a current staff attorney, handled as a law clerk in 2004.

"The Caucus put a lot of time partnering with the [district attorney]'s office. I thought it was weird that our sense of justice was that we were going to do whatever we can to go after these white kids and their parents," Chan said. "It seemed like a non-systemic approach of addressing hate crimes."

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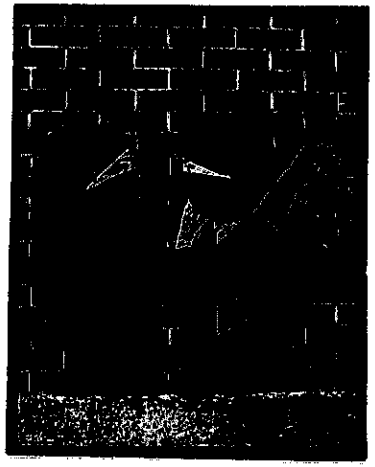
Groups like API Chaya in Seattle have created transformative justice models and are actively fighting a new youth jail. Others, like 1Love Movement and Desis Rising Up and Moving – South Asian Organizing Center, are working in the struggle for immigration justice.

The growing movement for abolition has meant complicating the histories of Asian Americans' relation to the prison industrial complex, and recognizing the legacies of the ongoing fight for abolition, from slavery to prisons.

"We need to make sure we credit this small but growing movement to the lessons we're learning from directly impacted Black people," Chan said. "The Asian prison transformation movement is the product of learning from the Black community and learning from Black activists and directly incarcerated people. I think we have a lot more to learn."



Resources:

ASIAN PRISONER SUPPORT COMMITEE (APSC) P.O. BOX 1031, OAKLAND, CA 94604
email: apscinfo@gmail.com

CRITICAL RESISTANCE
1904 FRANKLIN ST., #504
OAKLAND, CA 94612

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Asian-American Participation in the Prison Industrial Complex

A complicating factor in organizing Asian Americans against the prison industrial complex has been an implicit investment that many have in the state — an investment that has often been at the expense of Black communities.

"I don't see or I don't know if they are actually addressing anti-Blackness in the Asian-American community, especially within criminal justice. I don't see that happening," said Tash Nguyen, an organizer with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland.

The 2014 murder of Akai Gurley, a Black man killed by police during a "vertical patrol" of his public housing residence in New York, sparked massive rallies from the Chinese community in support of Peter Liang, the Chinese-American officer charged with his murder, as well as an outpouring of support for Gurley's family from groups like CAAAV. The mass mobilizations have pushed longstanding racial tensions to the forefront.

Whether through notions of personal safety, or capital accumulation, Asian Americans have a long history of participating in the prison industrial complex. Tamara Nopper has written about how many Asian Americans uphold structures of anti-Blackness in the everyday policing of Black people in the relationship between Asian business owners and Black customers. She argues that the racism and policing that Black people often experience while shopping in Asian-owned stores, for instance, is a fundamental component of anti-Blackness's racial hierarchy.

Nopper also argues that the model minority myth has often been invoked as a way to deflect claims of Asian racism. In this way, the myth supposedly serves as a "wedge" to divide communities with overlapping struggles. Yet, as Dylan Rodríguez has argued, the model minority myth is in fact more than an inaccurate stereotype: It also plays a crucial role in supporting the growth of the prison industrial complex through the criminalization of Black

Such groups that emerged in the 1980s included the Asian Women's Shelter (AWS), Manavi and Sakhi. These groups drew connections between state violence and domestic violence, reshaping the models built around the Chin case to center experiences of Asian women. While some groups grew to rely on the Violence Against Women Act to increase prosecution of gender-based violence, others challenged the ability of the state to actually provide justice for victims.

Hyejin Shim, a worker at AWS and an abolitionist organizer, experiences these limitations in her daily work. "These more mainstream groups often think that the only domestic violence work there is to do is in the courts and to make sure that victims are prosecuting their batterers, which is not true," Shim said.

For example, Shim worked on the campaign to free Nan-Hui Jo, an undocumented Korean woman facing deportation and criminal charges for fleeing her abusive partner with their young child. In court, Jo was cast as "malicious" and a "tiger mom," plotting to abuse the immigration system. Like many other survivors, her self-defense was outside of the legal system's understanding of "legitimate victimhood" and used to criminalize her.

Though Shim began organizing for Jo with other Korean Americans like herself, the work quickly grew to accommodate broad-base support. Now, the organizers working to support Jo are part of a multiracial coalition, Survived and Punished, that works to free imprisoned survivors like Bresha Meadows and transform models of addressing violence.

"This drive to prosecute and lock everyone up is just unrealistic in so many ways," Shim said. "Who does that serve? Does it create long-term safety, and is that also what the survivor wants?"

For groups like Survived and Punished, abolition means not only dismantling the prison system, but also creating community-led responses that work to end cycles of harm. One key organizer in this realm is Mimi Kim, who worked at AWS for 10 years in the 1990s. Kim now works with Creative Interventions, and, in collaboration with other organizers, has developed a

toolkit focused on transformative justice for interpersonal violence. Such resources provide tangible alternatives to engaging with the state.

Nguyen's involvement with a current fight to stop a new mental health jail in Alameda County is also instructive of the ways that she believes Asian Americans can immediately get involved.

"The abolitionist vision is actually an irresistible vision. It's like the thing that all parents and families and communities actually want. When you talk about it through the lens of health and safety and accountability, it's like no one can argue with that," Nguyen said.

"I think we need to do more base-building in the name of fighting anti-Blackness, and fighting against state violence. I think our work, all of our work, can be in service of that. But there's not enough of us. There's just not enough of us," Nguyen said.

In 2014, when Liang murdered Gurley, CAAAV had already been involved in long-term organizing to end the New York Police Department's vertical housing patrols as part of the coalition Communities United for Police Reform. Their long-term work to organize Asian communities meant they were able to mobilize against the roots of racist surveillance and patrols that led to Gurley's death and support his family, not just advocate for Liang's conviction.

Chan and others have also started to ask what restorative justice would have looked like for the Chin case.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of Asian-American organizers around the country are becoming involved in abolition work. People like Vanessa Huang, who was an organizer with Justice Now; Alexander Lee, who started the TGI Justice Project; Victoria Law, a journalist and activist who has worked with women prisoners for more than a decade; disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha; and multi-issue social justice activist Emi Koyama are but a few Asian-American activists that have been leaders in the movement for prison abolition.

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The Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV), which organizes Asian communities in New York City, was another group formed in the wake of the Chin case in the late 1980s. Their work, while focusing on hate crimes, took a different approach than the ALC.

"Our work was stimulated by the Vincent Chin case, but our analysis was always broader than hate crimes," said Mini Liu, one of CAAAV's founders. "We were critiquing the system that results in hate crimes that do not adequately get punished."

Much of their work involved working in multiracial coalitions, especially with Black communities, against police brutality. They highlighted the ways that anti-Asian violence was primarily perpetrated by police, and how larger systemic issues like poverty and exploitative housing conditions constituted violence. Because "police brutality was not a daily experience in the Asian-American community," as Liu said, coalition work necessitated moving toward an analysis about systemic harm and long-term organizing, and not just responding to individual instances of anti-Asian violence and police brutality.

While CAAAV was developing an analysis of systemic violence, Black and Korean conflict was showing the limitations of the hate crimes framework for multiracial coalition building, and the rhetoric of "hate crimes" took on a life of its own. CAAAV's earlier advocacy as part of the National Network Against Anti-Asian Violence, which also included the ALC, centered on more punitive solutions like hate crimes enhancements and statistics collection.

Chin's legacy and the dependence on the hate crimes framework has reinforced and strengthened the criminal punishment system, leading to harsher prosecution and prison sentences. Moreover, the reliance on the hate crimes framework has been inadequate for understanding the intersections between Asian Americans and state violence.

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lengthy court process caused strain on the family members, and some lost their jobs after missing work to support their children.

"None of these reasons were addressed by the juvenile system. They were made much worse," Chan said. "It does not work. It's dysfunctional, ineffective and harmful. I started looking at alternatives, and that's what drew me into restorative justice."

The ALC does not work on prosecuting hate crimes anymore, and has recently shifted to focus on supporting Asian communities who are impacted by the prison industrial complex. In shifting their priorities by making prison a central Asian Pacific Islander issue, they are also challenging a system that has historically targeted Black communities.

In July 2016, the ALC announced the founding of the Yuri Kochiyama Fellowship, which is currently supporting two formerly imprisoned people, Rajeshree Roy and Aelam Khensamphanh. Kochiyama's legacy as a lifelong anti-prison activist and a founder of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee — currently co-chaired by Eddy Zheng — is now inspiring a growing Asian-American abolitionist movement. By empowering formerly imprisoned Asian Pacific Islanders, the ALC hopes to make prison a central issue for Asian Americans fighting for social justice.

A Growing Movement

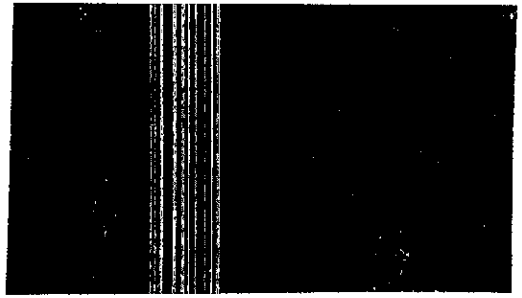
Emerging from critiques of dominant anti-Asian violence rhetoric came a host of organizations focused on addressing violence against women. Queer and feminist organizers challenged a lack of intersectionality in existing models of racial solidarity and rearticulated anti-Asian violence to address intimate violence as well.

populations and de-criminalization of whites and Asians. The history of Black and Asian conflict and hate crimes advocacy, which obscures the realities of anti-Blackness by suggesting Asians are victims of Black people's hate, are components of this investment in and enactment of carceral violence.

In the Bay Area, Asian-American investment in policing and property has positioned Asians at the forefront of gentrification in Black communities. "Asian Americans are doing an impressive job gentrifying neighborhoods, and actually being a gentrifying, driving force. It's really complicated, and a lot of it comes down to capitalism and us, our communities maintaining capitalism as a means of maintaining our safety. I think there's a lot of unpacking there," said Nguyen.

For Nguyen, this means better understanding the history of Black freedom struggles in order to more fully develop frameworks such as the vision for abolition of the prison industrial complex, which views safety in terms of eliminating state violence and building strong communities, instead of in terms of policing and prisons.

Abolition also means engaging with Asian Americans who have not benefited from investments in capitalism and the prison industrial complex, such as refugees and Muslims. This means avoiding the reproduction of the model minority myth's anti-Black assumptions about the culture of crime and deviance, which reproduces notions of Black criminality, when working with Asian-American communities involved in the criminal legal system. "We need to do more organizing in the Vietnamese community [with] those that are most impacted by incarceration and criminalization," Nguyen said, noting that shame and stigma often keep Asian Americans mired in the criminal legal system hidden from their communities without support.



A Different Legacy

In the years preceding Chin's murder, a national movement fought for Chol Soo Lee, a Korean immigrant serving time on death row for a San Francisco Chinatown gang murder, for which he was wrongfully convicted in 1973. The decade-long struggle for Lee's freedom, while often neglected, in many ways empowered the Asian-American community around the violent nature of the criminal legal system.

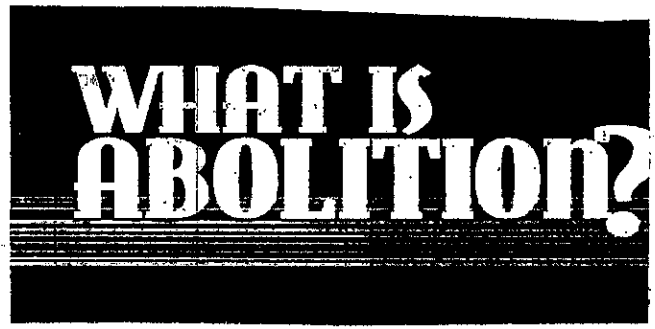
Jeff Adachi was a young college student who had just moved to Berkeley from Sacramento and joined the struggle for Lee's freedom.

"There were very few Asian Americans involved in criminal cases then," Adachi remembers. "And there were very few Asians in prison, so there wasn't any history of supporting people behind bars."

Adachi joined with the dozens of grassroots efforts across the country going to schools and churches trying to get support for Lee's case. Though Lee was hardly a model victim, for Adachi and others, his case exposed issues of police and prosecutorial corruption that led to Lee's unjust conviction.For five years, Adachi was active in the campaign that eventually freed Lee in 1983.

"I decided to become a lawyer as a result of the case, and when Lee was found not guilty, it was one of the most defining moments of my life," Adachi said. "I would have never even dreamed it was possible to get him out."

Adachi and other organizers like Ranko Yamada became part of a generation of activists that pursued legal careers as ways to challenge the legal system that unjustly imprisoned Lee for a decade. Adachi has been the elected public defender of San Francisco since 2002, and his job is now to keep people out of jail.



"That movement not only affected Chol Soo Lee, but a whole generation of Asian-American activists, immigrants, churchgoers, and it banded us together for the purpose of fighting for justice," Adachi said.

Lee's case stands in contrast to the ways that activists would perceive the criminal legal system after Chin was murdered. While many of the groups that formed in response to Chin's murder pushed for measures like mandatory minimum sentencing and hate crimes enhancements, those that fought for Lee's freedom sought to disempower the system they knew was unjust.

Prison Is an Asian Pacific Islander Issue

Lee's legacy can be seen in the emerging work to support Asian Americans involved in the criminal legal system. Until Chan arrived at the ALC, much of its work still centered around hate crimes. After starting the organization's Juvenile Justice and Education Project as a Soros Justice Fellow, Chan now leads the Criminal Justice Reform program. It was as she began working with Asian youth who were involved in the juvenile court system that she started to question the ALC's work around hate crimes.

"It took me to juvenile hall, where I partnered with the public defender's office," Chan said. "I was really shocked by what I saw. I started looking at Asian youth who were in the system. A lot of times it was Asian youth getting in an altercation with another youth of color, bullying incidences."

"That got me thinking. The more I was there, the more I realized the juvenile system does not work — period — for addressing crimes at all, or really any of our societal ills."

The youth she worked with had problems with unaddressed developmental needs, divorced parents and poverty. She found that the