



FREEDOM

FOR

ALL

*WHY AND HOW TO AVOID
HIERARCHICAL MESSAGES
IN OUR EFFORTS TO END
CARCERAL PUNISHMENT*



ABOUT THE JUSTICE BEYOND PUNISHMENT CAMPAIGN

The Justice Beyond Punishment Campaign (JBPC) is dedicated to strengthening our movements' efforts for narrative change around violence, punishment, safety, and justice. Centering the leadership of directly impacted people and addressing the fundamental racism in the current narratives, JBPC is working to end state violence and the reliance on punishment, criminalization, and incarceration as the primary responses to interpersonal violence, and to advance more just and effective approaches to safety and justice. Our objectives are to build power and solidarity around shared and cooperative understandings, messages, and efforts, and to develop tools and resources for those active in the movements to end mass incarceration and carceral punishment. Together, we are building powerful narratives towards justice beyond punishment.

ABOUT THIS ZINE

This zine came out of a JBPC working group that focused on how advocacy often creates binaries or hierarchies of worthiness. This is done in messaging, policy demands, or concessions to get bills passed. We explored how this approach can be harmful to the overall movement to end punishment and violence and further “otherize” people who are already experiencing oppression and violence from the state.

The purpose of this zine is to be interactive with readers. We encourage you to engage in the reflective questions and use the QR codes to submit your thoughts/questions/comments to the JBPC!

2024. *Freedom for All: Why and How to Avoid Hierarchical Messages In Our Efforts to End Carceral Punishment*

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Learn more about JBPC at beyondpunishment.org

WHAT IS HIERARCHICAL MESSAGING?

Hierarchical messaging is when we either purposefully or inadvertently create a **hierarchy of deservedness** when pushing for policy change, **carving out** certain categories of people from our movements and access to their rights.

EXAMPLES:

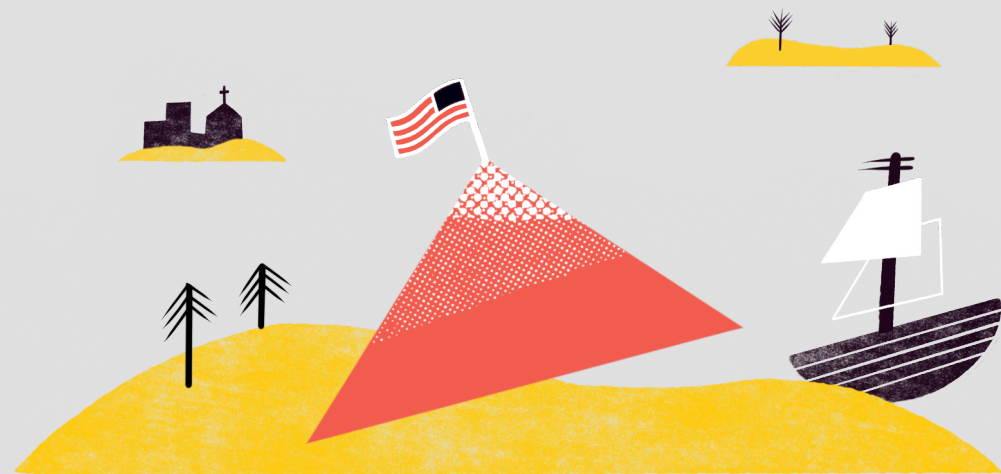
The “non-violent” vs. “violent” crime binary often only focuses on “low-level, non-violent crimes” as deserving of reforms, but not those convicted of violence.

The “good” vs “bad” immigrant framework promotes the harmful idea that some immigrants deserve to have rights (“hard working,” “innocent”) and others deserve to be deported or excluded (often people with criminal convictions).

WHERE DO THESE HIERARCHIES COME FROM? →

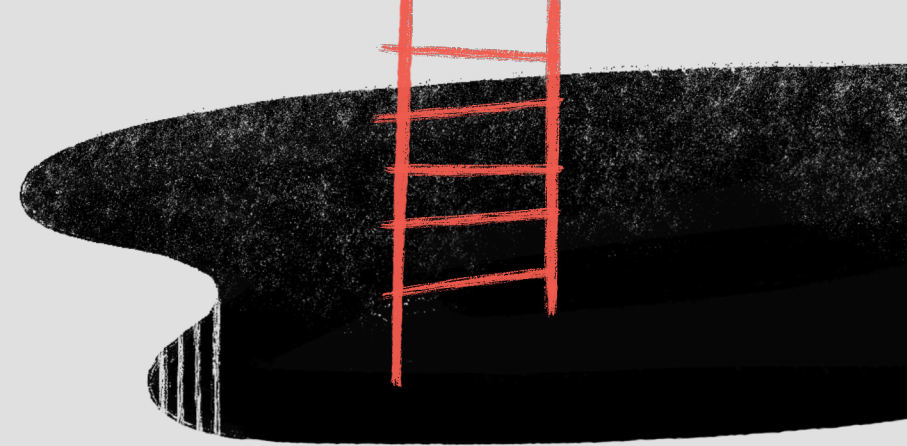
*“Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it.”
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore*

Colonization and slavery were **dependent** on hierarchies. White settlers presented indigenous people and people forcibly removed from Africa as sub-human in order to justify their subjugation.



Prisons and policing are a **continuum of colonization and slavery** and a **manifestation of racial capitalism**.

Their existence relies on assigning value to some people and taking away value from others.



“ PUNISHMENT IS LIMITLESS.

UNDER THE STATUS QUO, THE SYSTEM WILL ALWAYS FIND MORE WAYS TO PUNISH PEOPLE IT HAS DEEMED AS DISPOSABLE—HARSHER SENTENCES, SOLITARY CONFINEMENT, EXILE, MORE SURVEILLANCE AND MONITORING, ETC. WE’VE SEEN HOW RELYING ON HIERARCHIES CAN LEAD TO HARSHER PUNISHMENTS FOR THOSE WHO’VE BEEN CATEGORIZED AS LESS WORTHY OF PROTECTION. ”

-Mizue Aizeki, Surveillance Resistance Lab

WHO IS **← HARMED BY →**
WHO **≡ BENEFITS FROM ≡**

HIERARCHIES?

Because the current systems of policing and incarceration are built on this implicit binary of who is “criminal” and who is redeemable, any hierarchical language only serves to **promote the system**, even when proposing minor reforms. This means that the very **communities hardest hit by racist policing and incarceration are further harmed** when we promote hierarchical thinking.

WHY HIERARCHIES OF WORTH ARE HARMFUL

1

They are used as justification to oppress some to “protect” others

2

They reinforce the status quo including the “need” for punishment

3


They take attention away from state violence, obscure root causes of violence, and often blame individuals, rather than structural oppression

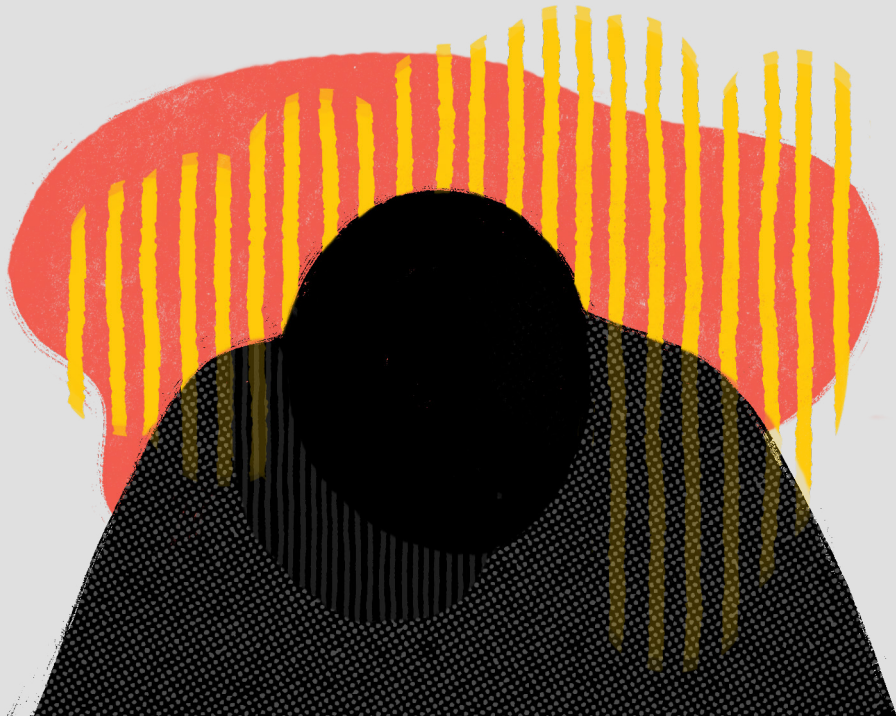
Question for reflection #1: In what other ways are hierarchies harmful to the overall movement and/or your work?


Let us know your thoughts! ----->

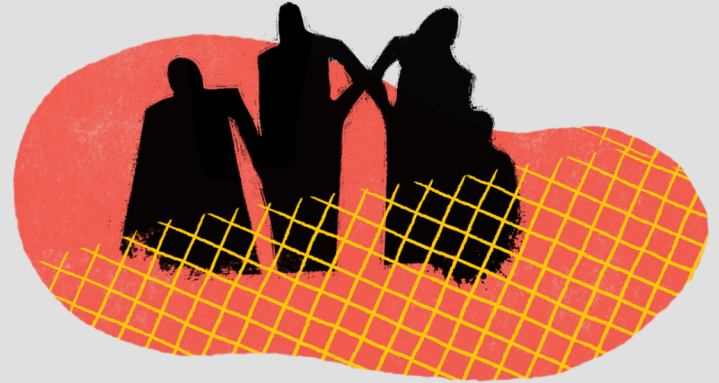



CURRENT DOMINANT HIERARCHICAL NARRATIVES ABOUT PUNISHMENT, VIOLENCE, AND PRISONS

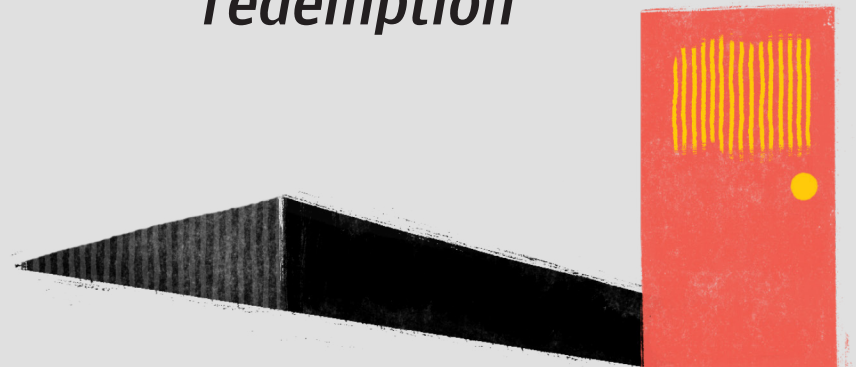
 *“Bad” and “unworthy”
people deserve
punishment and therefore
whatever happens to them
in confinement*



 *Certain groups of people
are inherently “bad” or
“criminal”*



 *People convicted of
certain crimes (i.e. sex
offenses, people convicted
of murder) are beyond
redemption*



SO YOU DON'T WANT TO CREATE HIERARCHICAL MESSAGES...

Questions to ask yourself when creating messaging in order to avoid hierarchical exclusions:

CONSIDER THE AUDIENCE

Who benefits from your messaging?

Who is not included in your messaging?

Is the exclusion intentional? If so, why? If not, can they be included?

Are there people not directly excluded but could be implied?



CONSIDER THE IMPACT

Does the benefit to this group *require* others to be excluded?

How might their exclusion further marginalize them?

How might exclusion impact their families & others advocating for them?

What is the unspoken messaging being sent of the worthiness of those excluded?



CONSIDER REFRAMING

There is a difference between exclusion that occurs when you focus on a specific demographic and intentional exclusion. Reconsider supporting any policy or messaging that *requires* others to be excluded in order to pass or work.

Consider how to highlight needed changes while calling for humane treatment of all people. Ex: "We need sentencing reform for drug related offenses *and* we should challenge our use of prisons as the solution to any social issue."

Consider consulting with directly impacted people, their families, and organizers supporting the excluded group about how to either include them or mitigate the impact of the exclusion.

Consider ways to name and refute the unspoken messaging. Ex: "Those navigating the immigration system should have better access to resources. Citizenship status should not be a factor in how people are treated."

COMMON MESSAGING

▼ P I T F A L L S ▼

WHEN ADDRESSING CARCERAL PUNISHMENT

▼ UPHOLDING INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES WITHOUT ACKNOWLEDGING STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

- Storytelling can be very powerful, but we must be careful not to focus solely on the exceptionalism of certain individuals because it can reinforce the legitimacy of systems of punishment, control, and containment.

Example: “Jon” is arrested by ICE police at home and detained, facing deportation. To win his release, advocates highlight that he is a father with no criminal record. They don’t point to the structural violence of deportation as a system, so their messaging could reinforce that people without families or with criminal records deserve to be detained and deported. While Jon might be helped in the immediate, this messaging might harm larger efforts to abolish deportation and challenge ICE’s message that they are protecting “public safety”.

▼ PUSHING FOR SOLUTIONS THAT REINFORCE PUNISHMENT AS THE ONLY PATH

EXAMPLE:

- Responding to police or racist violence with calls for enhanced criminal penalties as “justice”, when in reality increased penalties usually only impact already over-criminalized communities

▼ AVOIDING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE

- This could include messaging that minimizes any harm caused or excludes survivors of violence

Question for reflection #2: What are other common messaging pitfalls we encounter when trying to fight a dominant narrative that may create or reinforce a hierarchy?

Let us know your thoughts! ---->



TOWARDS **MORE** **INCLUSIVE** MESSAGING

▶ Stay **focused** on shared beliefs and goals, such as:

- Prisons, police, detention, etc. **are** violence and must be seen as the problem, not the solution
- Everyone should have access to support
- People are not inherently more worthy of rights than others
- We all want to be safe and address roots causes of violence

▶ When focusing on specific groups of people, **avoid throwing others under the bus** in order to bring attention to your issue.

Example: It can be tempting to want to point out that someone eligible for clemency was not convicted of a violent crime as justification for why they should receive clemency, but people convicted of violent crimes are also deserving of clemency.

▶ **Contextualize** and **complete** your messaging. “Yes, and...”

*Example: Yes, people who are aging in prison should have meaningful opportunities for release, *and* prison is a public health crisis for everyone who is detained there.*

Question for reflection #3: What are other ways we can be more inclusive in our messaging?

Let us know your thoughts! ---->





REMINDER AND FINAL QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

We are part of a **collective** movement working on tearing down various parts of oppressive systems. We can succeed in addressing the many facets of oppression and end policing, prisons, and paradigms of perpetual punishment for good ***if*** we are working together and not against each other!

If we are considering using hierarchical messaging that expand the rights of some at the cost of others, we must first grapple with the fact that ideas of hierarchy and worthiness have been **fundamental** for justifying conquest, occupation, oppression, and genocide.

So...how can we collectively succeed and continue to open the pathway for liberation of all people while dismantling the status quo?

Let us know your thoughts! ---->





**JUSTICE
BEYOND
PUNISHMENT**