

# Prisons—Has COVID-19 Offered Hawai‘i the Road to Redemption?

**Kat Brady**

Justice has always been the center of my life. Growing up in the Bronx and managing an actors union in NYC for many years was great training for my life mission—to speak out against injustice, racism, oppression, and inequity. As Coordinator of Community Alliance on Prisons and working on justice issues in Hawai‘i for twenty-five years, I love sharing research, promoting just and humane policies for the legislature to consider, and tenaciously advocating for those whose voices have been silenced by incarceration.

COVID-19 has spotlighted the disparities in Hawai‘i’s failed public health and social policies that are actually causing harm, rather than providing remedy. COVID-19 has shined a light on the dark corners of public policies to reveal the structural racism, settler colonialism, and unabashed crony capitalism upon which they are constructed.

Capitalism demands social control. The fearmongering triggered by the releases of imprisoned people, in compliance with the Hawai‘i Supreme Court’s order to reduce the population of jails and prisons, has been generated by politicians and law enforcement.

Fear is the weapon needed by politicians to continue Hawai‘i’s punitive correctional system, and it has facilitated our overcrowded criminal processing and manufacturing system. The majority of Hawai‘i’s imprisoned people are either pre-trial detainees (innocent until proven guilty) or serving sentences for non-violent offenses. Kānaka Maoli are specifically over-represented and impacted at every stage of the system.

Hawai‘i always portrayed the economy as a three-legged stool, focused on health, education, and human services, until 2011, when public safety was added as the fourth leg. This facilitated the decrease in funding the health, educational, and social services so desperately needed by communities. Now money and resources could easily be shifted to law enforcement officials, who have little to no training to address these sensitive areas.

Hawai‘i’s jails and prisons are populated by many people contending with mental health issues, yet the training that law enforcement and adult correctional officers receive in this sensitive area is minimal and has led to too many preventable deaths.

Placing resource officers in schools doesn't make them safer; it greases the school-to-prison pipeline. And *decreasing* desperately needed social services while *increasing* law enforcement in our most challenged communities has brought Hawai'i to this appalling place where half the families living on the street are Kanaka Maoli—houseless in their homeland.

Building more jails and prisons will not make communities safer; they have become manufacturing centers where low-level lawbreakers enter and exit as criminals. We must challenge the relationships that have fostered inequities. Prisons are inherently violent places, and recidivism evidence highlights that correctional systems do very little correcting; in fact, many people exit with advanced degrees in the “dark arts” when they return to their communities.

The dehumanization and moral disengagement exhibited by some people working in the correctional system are borne of legislative policies implemented by those in positions of power; power over a system that thrives on racism, punishment, and dehumanization.

As Angela Davis writes in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

Since the 1980s, the prison system has become increasingly ensconced in the economic, political and ideological life of the United States and the transnational trafficking in U.S. commodities, culture, and ideas. Thus, the prison industrial complex is much more than the sum of all the jails and prisons in this country. It is a set of symbiotic relationships among correctional communities, transnational corporations, media conglomerates, guards' unions, and legislative and court agendas. If it is true that the contemporary meaning of punishment is fashioned through these relationships, then the most effective abolitionist strategies will contest these relationships and propose alternatives that will pull them apart. (107)

Hawai'i is also one of a handful of states that has been selling our imprisoned people to the lowest bidders, who run dungeons of misery thousands of miles away from families, friends, and for most of the incarcerated, far from their ancestral lands. This works well for some parts of our society, while it sows wholesale destruction to certain communities that have been relegated to the margins.

A sad example of the gross inequities in our system is illustrated by how the COVID-19 pandemic has been addressed in Hawai'i's jails and prisons. Jails and prisons have been ignored while elected officials, agency directors, and law enforcement continued to brag, “there are no cases in our correctional facilities.” The month of August blew that myth to pieces with more than 306 cases of staff and imprisoned people infected at the O'ahu Community Correctional Center (OCCC) and a rising number of cases at the Maui Community Correctional Center. It is well-documented that like nursing homes and cruise ships, jails and prisons are petri dishes for infection, yet the state has turned its back on those who have no choice but to live in these unsanitary and unhealthy environments. I have

been receiving desperate calls from inside and from families outside and the message is always the same: “Please don’t let me/my loved one die in here.”

In an April 8, 2020 letter to the Hawai‘i Correctional Oversight Commission, Dr. Pablo Stewart, a licensed physician who is in O‘ahu’s jail (OCCC) four times a week, wrote: “*Everyone* is at risk by the failure to take meaningful action in Hawai‘i’s correctional facilities.”

Dr. Stewart’s letter has been denied by the department and ignored by the legislature.

The misinformation promoted by law enforcement regarding the early jail releases caused fear in the community, while people were dealing with the pandemic, unemployment, and decreasing resources to feed their families. This was beyond cruel, and exemplifies what happens when the state turns its responsibilities over to law enforcement.

This law-enforcement focus has created a surveillance-focused society, training the next wave of students to feed the very hungry perpetual prisoner machine instead of building educational resources and the services needed to strengthen our families and communities. Hawai‘i’s remedy to social and public health challenges has become incarceration.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore asks: why, as a society, would we choose to model cruelty and vengeance? Yet that is exactly what Hawai‘i has done, at great economic and social cost that has harmed and continues to harm generations of struggling families who need a hand up, not a ticket to jail.

Is this who we are?

Turning humans over to the inhumane criminal (in)justice system is not going to address the pressing issues of our time: racism, poverty, overcriminalization, climate change, economic and social inequity, and health disparities, when scarce resources are diverted to hide the real issues in jails and prisons.

Instead, we must start building the future that our children and grandchildren need and deserve.

While the COVID-19 spotlight is shining, Hawai‘i must reimagine ways to construct the kind of people-centered and intentional communities that result in more just, healthy, and safe neighborhoods—where everyone looks out for everyone else, where police are again known as “peace officers,” and where law enforcement are seen as guardians of the people rather than armed military warriors.

Another world *IS* possible.

When government systems are deconstructed, reimaged, and then reconstructed with the ideas and aspirations of the people they serve; when laws and rules are developed by the people to address community needs and are written in plain language, *then* we start to build a people’s budget. A budget focusing on justice, inclusion, access, and participation is crucial to a vibrant democracy. Crafting people-centered systems in thoughtful communities, with intentional services for the people who live there, would ameliorate many of today’s challenges.

Abolition is about moving beyond prisons as a way of addressing social challenges. It’s about working for a better world that is built upon the needs of *all* the people; structuring an economy that funds the communities most impacted by incarceration, overcriminalization, poor health, unemployment, underfunded schools, and other social needs to lift up the quality of life for all.

We must dismantle systems of oppression that have created our multitiered society that celebrates wealth instead of health. Abolition means working to build relationships that foster sustainable, just, healthy, and safe communities. This path to equity has become clearer since COVID-19. The disparities and gross inequities in Hawai‘i’s systems highlighted by COVID-19 offer us a road to redemption that mandates inclusive and transformational change, not just reforms that come and go at the whim of politicians seeking reelection.

COVID-19 and the fact that the crime rate in Hawai‘i has been the lowest in decades creates the perfect storm for us to take this opportunity to deconstruct the state’s economy, dismantle the relationships that tear our communities apart, and work to build an equitable and just society, never returning to the racist, exclusionary business as usual.

The roadmap to redemption starts by dismantling the structure of Hawai‘i’s economy—a pyramid with the elite and influential at the top, the working people in the middle providing stability, while the people at the bottom struggle to survive. And Hawai‘i’s government has even gone further, by placing the people it imprisons outside the pyramid, as if they don’t really exist.

John F. Kennedy said, “Things don’t just happen; they are meant to happen.”  
Time to invert the pyramid.

### Works Cited

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