



**TOOLKIT**

# IMPERIAL

Weaponized Data  
in Carceral Chicago

# POLICING

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## Preface

# The Policing in Chicago Research Group

*The Policing in Chicago Research Group (PCRG) is an activist research collective composed primarily of current and former graduate students at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) whose work is committed to supporting abolitionist movements, transformative justice organizations, and policed communities. In dialogue with organizations on the front lines of struggles against police repression in Black, Latinx, and Arab/Muslim communities, we conduct research that assists their ongoing campaigns. Taking direction from organizers, we study high-tech surveillance, massive databases, predictive analytics, and data-sharing mechanisms that facilitate coordination between local police, federal immigration authorities, national security agencies, and close allies of the U.S. empire around the world.*

1. How did the PCRG work together with their movement partners Black Youth Project 100, Organized Communities Against Deportations, and Arab American Action Network? What was their approach to collecting, presenting, and discussing their research? How did they begin working with Circles & Ciphers?

Learn more about the four organizations that the PCRG partnered with:

### **Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100)**

Founded in 2013, BYP100 (Black Youth Project 100) is a member-based organization of Black youth activists creating justice and freedom for all Black people.

<https://www.byp100.org/>

### **Organized Communities Against Deportations (OCAD)**

OCAD is a group of undocumented, unapologetic, and unafraid organizers building a resistance movement against deportations and the criminalization of immigrants and people of color in Chicago and surrounding areas.

<https://www.organizedcommunities.org/>

### **Arab American Action Network (AAAN)**

The Arab American Action Network (AAAN) strives to strengthen the Arab community in the Chicago area by building its capacity to be an active agent for positive social change.

<https://aaan.org/>

### **Circles & Ciphers**

Circles & Ciphers is a hip-hop infused restorative justice organization led by and for young people impacted by violence.

<https://circlesandciphers.org/>

## Introduction

# Imperial Policing in Carceral Chicago

*While big databases, surveillance technology, and military weaponry stand out as the latest advances in policing, they largely reinforce two dynamics that are central to our analysis and can be traced back to the early history of Chicago. First, systems of policing were developed to support settler colonialism, racial capitalism, white supremacy, and empire. Second, policing was never just the work of the local police.*

1. How did the #LetUsBreathe Collective expose some of the connections between policing, war, and empire? How did the Freedom Square encampment protest imperial policing?

Have you participated in or witnessed abolitionist encampments in your community or region? How do these acts of resistance demonstrate what a world without police can look like?

2. What is settler colonialism? What is racial capitalism? How are these forms of power intertwined with white supremacy? How do they operate as the foundations of policing in Chicago?

Why is it critical to dismantle these forms of power in order to abolish imperial policing? What do you think are some of the most important steps toward abolition?

3. What did you learn about the historical origins of the Chicago Police Department (CPD)? How does the CPD prioritize the protection of private property, enforcement of anti-Black racism, and surveillance of Black and brown neighborhoods?

Who has the CPD historically targeted and criminalized? What are some examples of police repression that have taken place in your community?

*Two processes have come together to reshape imperial policing in the early twenty-first century: 1) neoliberal restructuring has generated vast inequality and racialized poverty, along with a proliferation of carceral agencies that carry out joint projects designed to protect the powerful by policing the racialized poor, and 2) the rapid expansion and weaponization of surveillance technology, databases, data analysis, and data sharing has facilitated coordination between agencies.*



*We focus on three police wars, each of which is a pillar of imperial policing in twenty-first century Chicago: the War on Crime, the War on Terror, and the War on Immigrants. Distinct combinations of agencies carry out each war, generating context-specific formations focused on crime, terror, and immigration. Yet there is also considerable similarity and deep connections between these formations. The similarity is grounded in overlapping missions, training, equipment, and discourses. The connections are vast.*

4. What did you learn about the global web of imperial policing? Why are police departments, ICE, the FBI, and other police agencies so intertwined with each other? How does this network of imperial policing increase repressive power throughout the world?
5. How have the three police wars expanded criminalization, intensified surveillance, and strengthened harmful policies? What are some examples of community disinvestment that have been initiated or exacerbated by the three police wars?
6. Why does the movement for abolition encourage us to be both constructive and destructive? What are some examples of the ways that carceral power can be interrupted, resisted, and eliminated? What role could you play within this movement?

*We describe our praxis as countersurveillant abolitionist research. Collectivity, multiplicity, and engagement allow our research to be dynamic, relevant, responsive, and accountable to social movements. We believe that activist research should not only be theoretically connected to ongoing struggles for liberation; it also necessitates the creation of relationships of resistance among research team members, movement partners, and marginalized communities.*

## Chapter 1

# Weaponized Data: High-Tech Surveillance in Chicago

*What we call data-based policing is a mechanism of racialized surveillance. The term draws attention to the role of police databases in transforming racialized archetypes into seemingly objective “facts” and facilitating their circulation through the webs of imperial policing.*

1. How have data-based tools and high-tech surveillance expanded policing in Chicago? What communities are most at risk of being targeted by surveillance and weaponized data?  
  
What measures could prevent further expansion of data-based policing? Are there organizations in your community already doing this work?
2. What is community policing? How has this practice expanded racialized surveillance and expanded the carceral web of control? Why do you think community members, organizations, and businesses support this practice?
3. In what ways do the police produce their own data? How do the police obscure the conditions in which data is produced? What are some of the connections between police-produced data and racialized criminal archetypes?
4. How are databases and other data collection tools used to cleanse police data? Why are the police motivated to conceal the bias and harm connected with data production?
5. What kinds of technology do police and other carceral agencies use? Would more transparency around data-based policing eliminate or minimize harm? Why or why not?
6. Why is data circulated between carceral agencies? What are some of the harms that come from data sharing? What are some of the challenges of exposing and interrupting these practices?

*Since the 1960s, every attempt to reform the CPD has expanded the department’s capacity for high-tech, data-based, racialized surveillance. As a result, communities of color in Chicago confront a police department that deploys an arsenal of advanced technology, relies on the vicious spiral of predictive analytics, and shares its data with an imperial web of criminalizing agencies. Yet none of this has led to a sustained reduction in gun violence.*

*These data are run through algorithms and other tools that further erase the social conditions of production, providing supposedly objective evidence that police should continue targeting the same people and places. And data-sharing processes enable multiple agencies to target the same populations, expanding the webs of criminalization and surveillance. In this way, data become a weapon of war—a vicious, ever-expanding spiral of surveillance and criminalization.*



On October 9, 2016, a multiracial coalition of organizers disrupted the beginning of the Illinois Tactical Officer's Association Conference in Chicago. Photograph by and courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee (@loveandstrugglephotos).

### **Envisioning a world without surveillance**

Make a list of the ways that you encounter surveillance in your daily life. Consider the paths you travel, the businesses you interact with, and the people you are in relationship with—in person and online. Imagine that you are able to eliminate every instance of surveillance that you've included on your list. What would change? How different would your life feel? How would life change for the people around you? Using a journal, a sketchbook, or a voice recorder, respond to the following prompt:

A world without surveillance is...



# Focused Deterrence: Carceral Liberalism in the War on Crime

*Though presented as an alternative to repressive policing, focused deterrence is a fundamentally carceral project. Focused deterrence projects emphasize police legitimacy, depend on police surveillance, and seek to incorporate community organizations into an expanding carceral network.*

1. What were some of the issues with Chicago's "Our City, Our Safety" plan? How were individuals identified as high risk? How were the city's risk assessment measures intertwined with the police?

What are some of the limitations of categorizing people based on risk of exposure to violence? What are some alternate ways to identify people and communities in need of support and resources?

2. What is carceral liberalism? How is focused deterrence an example of carceral liberalism?

What carceral liberal projects exist in your community? Who are the individuals and organizations in your community working to create alternatives to these projects? How can you support their work?

3. What are some of the limitations of focused deterrence programs? How do these programs shift attention away from harmful structural dynamics?

Why do focused deterrence programs encourage disinvestment from public social welfare programs? What actions could shift community attention toward investing in public programs that shrink the carceral network?

*By "carceral," we mean that these programs rely on threats of arrest, incarceration, or other forms of state violence and that they attempt to increase the legitimacy and expand the power of the police and the empire state more generally. By "liberalism," we do not mean simply the Democratic Party. Instead, we are pointing to liberal logics of individual choice and personal responsibility that offer a pathway to redemption for individuals who make the "right" choices by rejecting violence. The same logics hold people responsible for their own oppression on account of "bad decisions," thereby erasing the structures of violence that condition these "choices."*

*Radical alternatives would include funding for community-based organizations and violence interruption that does not require or incentivize participation in carceral networks, the provision of wraparound services that are not grounded in a threat of enhanced prosecution, and interventions that seek to transform structures rather than just small numbers.*

4. How do shooting review meetings, custom notification programs, and call-ins increase racialized surveillance and contact with the police? Could these programs be successfully reformed to exist without police involvement? Why or why not?
5. How are major philanthropic organizations in Chicago entangled with the police? How does philanthropic support of focused deterrence programs intensify the criminalization of Black and brown communities?

What organizations are connected to the police in your community? What types of resources and support do they provide the police? How could these relationships be exposed and interrupted?

6. What are some of the connections between racial capitalism, the empire state, and gun violence? Why do carceral networks of violence obscure the roots of structural violence? What would happen if these roots were exposed? What are some radical alternatives to existing carceral solutions?

### **Visualizing radical alternatives**

What do the roots of structural violence look like, and what should be planted to help us grow new ways of being? Create a side-by-side collage using digital images, found materials, or by sketching your ideas. For the first collage, choose images that represent existing structural violence and resulting harms. On the other side, choose images that represent the radical alternatives that will support life-affirming communities. As you look at the two sets of images, reflect on the following prompt:

What actions, ways of being, and systems will help us move from violence to liberation?



## Chapter 3

# Strategic Subjects: Predictive Policing and the Gang Member Archetype

*Predictive policing does not just anticipate reality; it helps shape it by influencing the deployment of officers and surveillance technologies, identifying people and places as targets for aggressive policing, and informing officers' interactions with the people they stop.*

1. What is dark sousveillance? What are some of the ways that gang-involved young people use dark sousveillance to resist racialized surveillance? What are some other forms of resistance to surveillance?
2. What are some of the harms that result from the criminal archetype of the “gang member”? How is this archetype reinforced by databases and predictive policing?
3. What kinds of information are stored in CPD gang databases? What are some of the tactics for collecting this data? Can this type of database ever be helpful? Why or why not?
4. What are some of the ways that people are negatively impacted by police databases? Why do databases often increase people’s exposure to conflict and violence? Why should gang databases be abolished rather than reformed?
5. Why are funerals and memorials increasingly becoming sites of racialized surveillance? How is this surveillance influenced by predictive policing?

What are some of the individual and community benefits of gathering for collective mourning and grief? How can these types of gatherings be spaces for envisioning and practicing abolition?

6. How did the PCRG work with and learn from gang-involved young people? What were some of the things they learned while doing this work? What challenges did they experience?

Why is it critical to involve and work with young people when developing community solutions to police violence? What happens when young people are not involved in this process?

### Memorializing the three police wars

Create an altar for the victims and survivors of the three police wars. Select three images or objects to represent the people who have been harmed in each war. Clear a space in your home, office, or in a shared community space to place these objects. Spend some time in front of your altar reflecting on the losses we have and continue to experience from the violence of these wars. Keep a journal close by to capture any meditations, prayers, or commitments that arise as you interact with this memorial. Reflect on the following prompt:

What could a memorial for the three police wars look like in your community?



A North Side memorial honors those killed by police.  
Photograph by and courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee (@loveandstrugglephotos).

## Chapter 4

# Manufacturing Terrorists: Palestinian Americans and the Dif/Fusion of Surveillance

*Government policies concretized and activated the archetype of the Arab/Muslim terrorist in the American imagination, justifying surveillance, criminalization, and death as necessary to create an illusion of safety for the citizens of the United States. This, in turn, provided legitimacy to private-sector fearmongering, harassment, and violence against Arabs and Muslims throughout the country.*



Rasmea Odeh at an April 28, 2015, emergency action in solidarity with Baltimore after the killing of Freddie Gray. Photograph by and courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee (@loveandstrugglephotos).

1. Why was Rasmea Odeh targeted, arrested, and deported? What does her story reveal about the coordinated imperial network of carceral agencies?
2. What is the dif/fusion of surveillance? How does dif/fusion contribute to the mass production of harmful data? How is dif/fusion used to erase the conditions of data production?
3. How is the War on Terror connected to Israeli settler colonialism? How are people on the frontlines of the Palestinian liberation movement targeted within the United States?

Where have you seen this happening in your community? What does resistance to the War on Terror look like in your community?



*The dif/fusion of surveillance has exponentially increased reports of potential terrorist activity, reinforcing the claim that fusion is effective. The “terrorist” archetype provides a shared focal point for surveillance, which helps ensure that reports submitted by a decentralized network of state and private-sector actors continually identify the same populations as suspects. This is how imperial policing manufactures terrorist suspects.*

4. What are some of the ways that the United States expanded surveillance networks after 9/11? How did new policies fortify structures of surveillance and criminalization?

How does the War on Terror allow the United States to target liberation movements throughout the world? Where do you see this happening today? What tools and tactics are used to silence these movements?

5. How has the War on Terror expanded the surveillance of Black and brown communities in the United States? How have you noticed this expansion in your own region?

6. What are suspicious activity reports (SARs)? How do they operate as tools of racialized surveillance?

How is surveillance diffused throughout the civilian population? Have you witnessed surveillance of Arab and Muslim members of your community? What protections and interventions could interrupt this practice?

### Erasing labels and archetypes

Select source material for writing an erasure poem about the war on terror. You could choose a news article, a piece of legislation, a crime report, or a document mentioned in this chapter. Print your source material and use a permanent marker to black out sections, words, and letters, creating a new piece of writing with the remaining text. After you complete your piece, reflect on the following prompt:

What did it feel like to physically remove harmful language?

For examples of erasure poems, see *it wouldn't take much* by Eve L. Ewing:

<https://www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database/poem/it-wouldnt-take-much> and *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure* by Nicole Sealey: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/07/31/the-ferguson-report-an-erasure-nicole-sealey-poem>.

## Chapter 5

# Welcoming City? Punitive Exceptions and Disavowed Collusion in the War on Immigrants

*Chicago embraces a regime of liberal sanctuary that uses police data to fabricate a distinction between “law-abiding” and “criminal aliens,” offering sanctuary protections to the former and aggressively policing the latter. In this context, we document two major mechanisms through which the local police engage with the War on Immigrants—punitive exceptions and disavowed collusion—both of which involve interagency data-sharing processes.*

1. What is liberal sanctuary? What protections does it offer? What are some of the limitations of liberal sanctuary policies?
2. What are punitive exceptions? How does data-based policing create pathways for criminalization and removal? How could these pathways be interrupted and destroyed?
3. How are Chicago’s sanctuary protections a form of carceral liberalism? In what ways do sanctuary policies perpetuate labels of “criminal aliens” and “good” immigrants?

Where have you seen narratives about “good” vs. “criminal” immigrants? How could these narratives be disrupted?

4. How are people targeted by immigration enforcement also impacted by gang labels? Why are the police permitted to designate gang affiliations without evidence? What are some of the short and long-term harms that result from gang designations in CPD databases?

What organizations and institutions support the use of gang designations? How could their rejection of gang labels, affiliations, and databases impact policing?

5. What is disavowed collusion? How did Wilmer Catalan-Ramirez’s story reveal the mechanisms of disavowed collusion between the CPD and ICE?

What are some of the limitations of using a single story like Wilmer’s to analyze police practices? How can we assess whether Wilmer’s case is an exception or if disavowed collusion is a widespread practice?

*To truly confront the power of punitive exceptions and disavowed collusion means to address the fact that police manufacture criminality by transforming racialized archetypes into data and disseminating these data through a web of carceral agencies.*

## Building abolitionist sanctuary

Imagine that your community implements an abolitionist sanctuary policy and is hosting a gathering to celebrate its launch. Create a flyer that includes an event program for this community gathering. How will people interact with each other? What kind of food, entertainment, and activities will be featured? How will people learn about and discuss sanctuary together? After you create the program, share it with a trusted comrade and reflect on the prompt:

What would abolitionist sanctuary look like in our community?



The updated banner at the Expanded Sanctuary campaign launch press conference. Photograph by and courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee (@loveandstrugglephotos).

*Through everyday interactions, CPD officers produce the criminal records and gang labels that activate deportability by differentiating between “law-abiding” and “criminal” immigrants—and they do so by relying on racialized archetypes and the criminalization of associations and neighborhoods. This reveals how the state actively fabricates much of the gang population that it claims to control.*



# Expand Sanctuary! Erase the Database! Joint Struggle against Criminalization and Deportation | with Tania Unzueta Carrasco

*Abolition is the theory and practice of chipping away at a vast system of formal social control through punishment and surveillance, while also building new practices and systems that affirm people's humanity. As defined by Critical Resistance, a national organization at the forefront of efforts to abolish the prison-industrial complex, abolition is a political vision that aims to eliminate imprisonment, policing, deportation, and surveillance by creating lasting alternatives that make punishment obsolete. An abolitionist framework entails, more specifically, dismantling structures of organized violence and exploitation while developing and implementing projects, institutions, and conceptions for collectively regulating our social lives and redressing shared problems—interventions that can render policing, imprisonment, and surveillance insignificant methods for ensuring relative peace and security.*

1. What is abolitionist sanctuary? What were the goals of the Expanded Sanctuary campaign in Chicago? How was the campaign bolstered by “political quilting”?
2. What were the goals of the Erase the Database campaign? What were some of the organizers' guiding principles? How did these principles ensure that the campaign kept its focus on abolition?
3. How did the PCRG support the Erase the Database campaign with their research? Why did they center the goal of developing community expertise about the harmful effects of gang databases?

Have abolitionist campaigns in your community offered education and training? How might you contribute your skills toward developing community expertise?

4. What were some of the wins from the Erase the Database campaign? How was the campaign limited in its ability to address the ways that data may have been shared throughout a larger carceral network?
5. How were the Expanded Sanctuary and Erase the Database campaigns examples of abolition in practice? Why do you think these campaigns used both abolitionist tactics and non-reformist reforms to accomplish their goals?

What is a current abolitionist campaign in your community or region? Is it supported by cross-racial, cross-issue coalitions? What are some of the challenges that this campaign faces?

### Mapping connections and resources

Consider the violence and harm that you want to erase and the existing networks of care that you want to expand. What will it take to create the world you imagine? Draw a web of the resources and connections that are currently available to you and the people you are in relationship with. What skills do you and others in your community have? What resources, equipment, and spaces exist? What do you have access to? After drawing this map, reflect on the following prompt:

How could this web be used to erase harm and expand care?



The official logo of the Erase the Database campaign.  
Image courtesy of the Erase the Database campaign.

## Conclusion

# For the Abolition of Imperial Policing

*The War on Crime is primarily an effort to contain or eliminate the Black poor rendered disposable by white supremacy and neoliberal restructuring; the War on Terror is an imperial project to support U.S. hegemony in the greater Middle East, corporate access to inexpensive oil, and Zionist rule in Palestine; and the War on Immigrants is a project to control the flow and regulate the subjectivity of people seeking opportunities in the imperial mainland after being displaced from the Global South.*

1. What are organizers in Chicago doing to expose and resist data-based policing? How are their demands grounded in abolition and a vision for transformation?
2. Why must the struggle against imperial policing have a global focus? How is organizing in Chicago shaped and informed by internationalist struggles against racist, colonial, and imperial violence?

What would a world without imperial policing look like? What are the strategies and campaigns that can help us to move in that direction?

Learn more about some of the organizations building campaigns against data-based surveillance:

- Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE): <https://acrecampaigns.org/>
- Data for Black Lives: <https://d4bl.org/>
- Detroit Community Technology Project: <https://detroitcommunitytech.org/>
- Lucy Parsons Labs: <https://lucyparsonslabs.com/>
- Mijente: <https://mijente.net/>
- Our Data Bodies: <https://www.odbproject.org/>
- Stop LAPD Spying Coalition: <https://stoplapdspying.org/>

Bookmark and share some of the grassroots databases and tools that map police misconduct and abuse:

- Citizens Police Data Project: <https://invisible.institute/police-data>
- Evidence of Violence: <https://evidencialaviolencia.org/>
- Mapping Police Violence: <https://mappingpoliceviolence.us/>



## Afterword

# Abolition Dreaming in Chicago: Channeling Refusal in Unsettling Times | David Omotoso Stovall

*If there is one thing of which we can be sure, it is that there is no greater time than the present to be counted in the multitudes of those who overstand the imperative of dedicating our blood and bone to the work. - David Omotoso Stovall*

1. What reminders does David Omotoso Stovall offer readers about the function and origins of the police? How can an embrace of fugitive work help us to envision and build practices of abolition?
2. How can you embrace and build a practice of liberatory engagement? What commitments will you make to continue your understanding of and resistance to imperial policing?



Photograph by and courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee (@loveandstrugglephotos).

## Methodological Appendix

# Countersurveillant Abolitionist Research

*We seek to amplify marginalized voices while producing knowledge that is relevant and useful for abolitionist political campaigns and for people directly impacted by policing.*

1. How did the PCRG ground their work in countersurveillant abolitionist research and praxis? Why did they center their work around collectivity, multiplicity, and engagement?
2. What are some of the principles that the PCRG used to help them maintain accountable partnerships with community organizations? How can you use one or more of these principles in your own movement work?
3. What are some of the challenges that scholar activists face when conducting research for social justice movements? What are some of the strengths of collectives like the PCRG?



Artwork by and courtesy of Monica Trinidad.

This toolkit was written and designed by [Rachael Zafer](#), with support from the PCRG.