Policing, Punishment, Property, Control: A Brief History of Policing and the Prison Industrial Complex in Colorado's Front Range, 1850s-2000s

Link to Story Map: tinyurl.com/yyhgb42r
Bibliography: tinyurl.com/32754rb4

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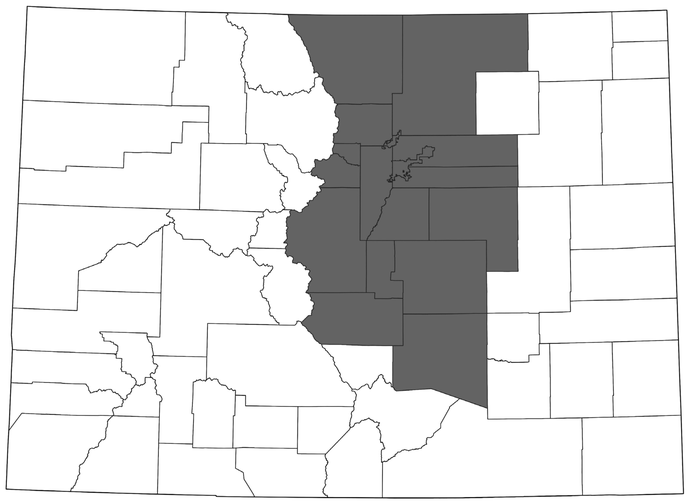
Abstract

Since its emergence in the 1970s, the prison industrial complex (PIC) has expanded rapidly. Today, the U.S. incarcerates more people (both in raw numbers and per capita) and spends more on policing than any other country in the world. In response, the political project of PIC abolition argues for the dismantlement of the PIC and its constitutive elements, and their replacement with meaningful alternatives to punishment and imprisonment. But, while the PIC itself emerged in the mid-to-late 20th century, its historical roots stretch back further, to the 19th century, if not earlier. **This story map seeks to expand the geographical focus of the PIC's history by briefly illuminating the PIC's historical development in Colorado's Front Range region, with a particular emphasis on policing, starting in the mid-1850s and concluding in the early 21st century.** As such, it adopts an abolitionist perspective to show how protecting property, punishing deviation from social norms, controlling local populations (especially minorities and poor people), and facilitating the accumulation of wealth drove the PIC's growth in the Front Range. In doing so, it traces the settlement of the region during the Gold Rush in the late 1850s, Denver's construction by chain gang labor, the infiltration of the Denver Police Department (DPD) by the Ku Klux Klan, suppression of the Denver Black Panther Party, and a number of other topics.

Colorado's Front Range



Map by Drew Heiderscheidt

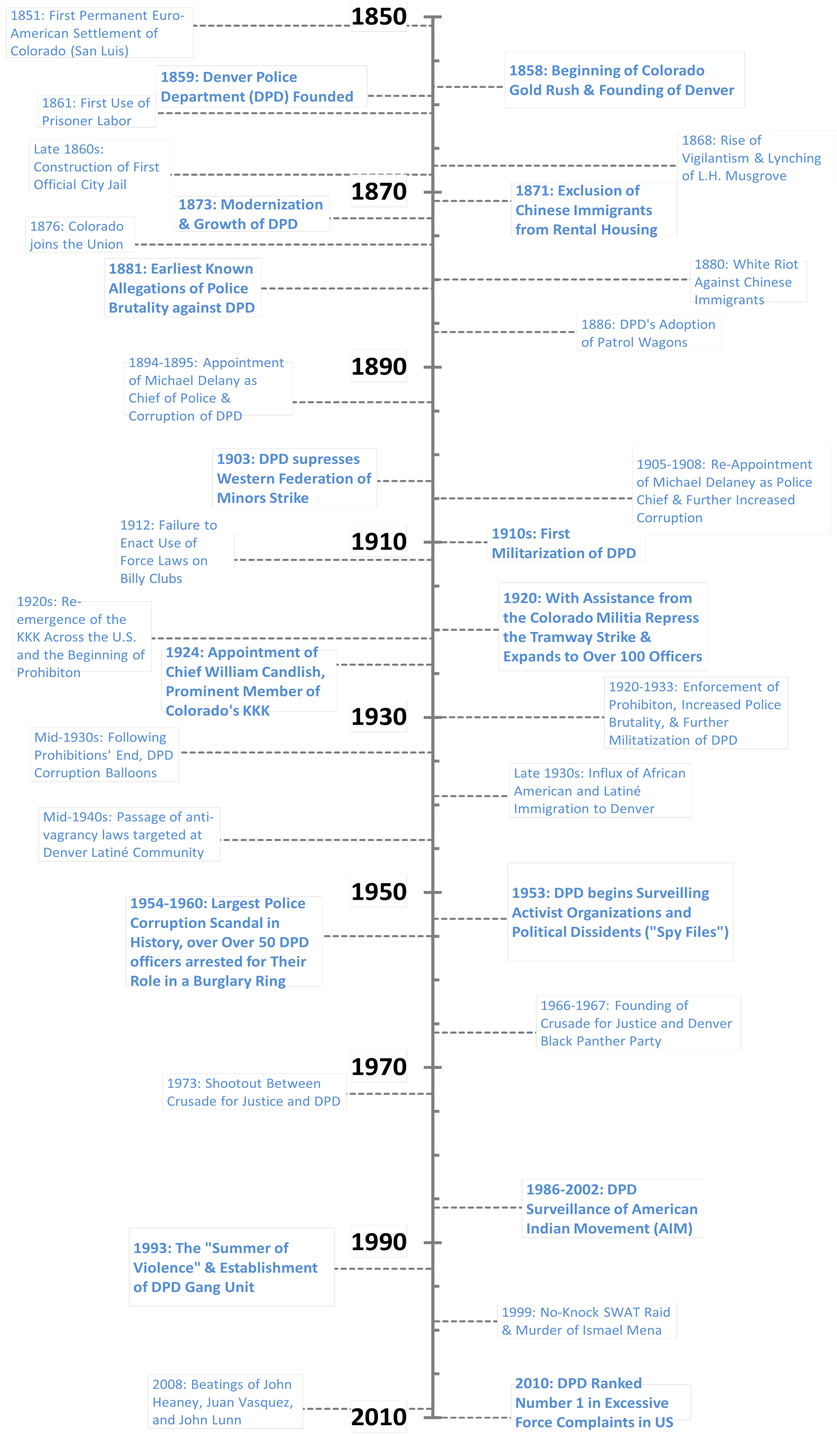
The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC)

Graphic by Critical Resistance (tinyurl.com/y4c3wwde)

What is Abolition?

Abolition is a political project that seeks to create a society where prisons, police, and other carceral systems that make up the PIC and rely on punishment are made "obsolete."

Central features of abolition include:

- There is no such thing as "criminality," rather some behaviors and people are criminalized while others are not, regardless of the harm they cause.
- **Violence in the U.S. criminal justice system signifies that the system is not broken, but rather is working *exactly as it was designed.***
- **The PIC is predicated on *racial capitalism*, whereby profit is produced through the punishment and incarceration of people of color.**
- Understanding that the PIC is a way of managing complex social and political problems (i.e. homelessness, unemployment, and more) through punishment.
- **The purpose of policing is to protect property and the interests of wealthy (often white) people.**
- Abolition is not only about destroying the PIC, but also about *building a world* where punitivity and carcerality are unnecessary.

Partial Timeline of the PIC in Colorado