

## **Chain Reaction Listening Session Curriculum**

*Chain Reaction: Alternatives to Calling Police* was a grassroots effort organized in Chicago from 2011-2013 by members of Project NIA and the Chicago Prison Industrial Complex Teaching Collective. You can find other great resources on prisons and policing at [thepicis.org](http://thepicis.org).

*This curriculum is the product of collaborations between Mariame Kaba, Jane Hereth, Sarah Brewster, Debbie Southorn, Sarah Lu and Lewis Wallace, with key contributions from Ethan Viets Van Lear and Lookman Muhammad, as well as all of the young people who are featured in the Chain Reaction stories, online at [alternativestopolicing.com](http://alternativestopolicing.com).*

*This workshop is NOT a “101”; it is for strategic use with groups who want to talk and think about alternatives to policing in your communities. Please feel free to share, distribute, and above all, USE this curriculum where it helps your activism and advocacy. And if you feel like it, tell us what you did! Contact [lewispants@gmail.com](mailto:lewispants@gmail.com) with your stories and feedback.*

### **Goals of the listening session:**

1. To show how contact with police can set off a chain reaction in a young person’s life.
2. To show how policing disproportionately targets young people of color, particularly young Black men.
3. To strategize about an alternative chain reaction in which communities can intervene in police harassment and over-policing of young people and reduce police contact.

**Time: Two hours**

**Size of group: Up to 30 people**

### **Materials needed:**

- Big paper and markers
- Copies of “Ethan’s Story” and “Don’s Story” sequences
- A/V capabilities to show online video (optional) and play online audio (not optional)

### **Agenda:**

#### ***Introductions and icebreaker (20 minutes)***

- Plan an icebreaker or name game that works for the size of the group, and if necessary have people talk about why they are here and what they hope to get out of the workshop.

#### ***What is Chain Reaction? (10 minutes)***

- **Show video:** “What is Chain Reaction?” from [alternativestopolicing.com](http://alternativestopolicing.com)
- **Explain:** Chain Reaction youth interviewed each other about their experiences with police in Chicago in 2011-2012. We wanted to encourage people to think about the chain reaction that is set off when police intervene in young people’s lives, and to strategize about not calling police on young people.
- **Explain (in your own words):** Mass incarceration is an epidemic in the U.S. that disproportionately affects youth of color. Minor offenses for juveniles can lead to and

exacerbate difficulty in school and at home, and in Chicago, over 20% arrests of juveniles take place ON school grounds. So there is an effect of a constant push towards policing, sometimes called the school-to-prison pipeline. Once young people are in the system, it's complicated to completely clear that record, and there is a ripple effect. We want to interrupt this cycle where it starts—by preventing contact in the first place. This workshop is designed as a strategy session to think about reducing police contact with youth, NOT a space to debate whether some police are good or whether or not we need police in some cases.

- **See page 4** for another introductory activity, called “Policing Mind Map”, that takes 20 minutes extra but can be useful for getting on the same page.

### ***Small group discussion (15 minutes)***

- **Break up into groups** of two to four.
- **Discuss** a time you have had an encounter with police.
  - What happened?
  - How were you treated by the police?
  - What were you feeling during the encounter/incident?
  - How did you react/respond?
- **Debrief** by asking for volunteers who are willing to share what they talked about in their pair or group. Questions can include: what similarities do you notice in the story? Who benefits in these encounters? Who is hurt? Who is most affected?
- Be sure to point out race, class, ability, age and gender as they affect the stories brought up. If people are talking around those issues, bring them up. The point here is not to flatten all experiences with police into one big bad thing, but to actually ask people to think critically about what makes some encounters more risky or harmful than others, and why.

### ***Story sequencing activity (20 minutes)***

- **Break up into groups** of five or six. Provide the groups with either Ethan’s Story or Don’s Story (see attachments), or both if you have extra time. Make sure to mix the story cards up before you give them to each group.
- Groups should **read their cards to each other and then try to put these stories back together** in order.
- Ask the groups to **consider the following questions:**
  - i. What happened?
  - ii. How were they treated by the police?
  - iii. What were they feeling during the encounter?
  - iv. How did they react?

### **BREAK (5 minutes)**

### ***Listening session (30 minutes)***

- **Play Ethan’s and Don’s stories** to the whole group (Ethan’s is on [alternativestopolicing.com](http://alternativestopolicing.com) “I’m never going back to CPS again”; Don’s is called “Don’s encounter with police on the South Side.” There are also many other video and audio

stories if you have to time to listen to others. Anthony's video story is another powerful one.)

- **Ask the groups** to consider the following questions:
  - i. Do you feel any differently about these stories now that you have heard them narrated in the voices of the youth who were targeted?
  - ii. What could have been done differently to prevent these encounters?
  - iii. Who could have intervened and at what point?
  - iv. What are some alternatives to policing that you can imagine?
  - v. What would you need? Who would be involved? How can you start to build that possibility?
  - vi. In what situations can you not imagine calling the police? What is it that seems obvious to you to do instead?

### ***Conclusion (20 minutes)***

- **In the full group, ask people to talk about some solutions they came up with and write these down for all to see.**
  - What alternative routes could have occurred in these stories?
  - What resources or work are needed to make those routes possible?
  - Does it bring up other situations where you could imagine similar interventions?
- **Point out** that every situation is different, and of course not all of them are “false accusations” the way Don’s and Ethan’s stories are. But what matters here is what the outcome is for the young people, and whether policing can serve justice. We believe that it can’t and doesn’t, and that we need to seek alternatives.
- **If people are raising a lot of obstacles** to pursuing those alternatives, that’s okay: but try to focus the conversation on how to overcome those obstacles, and what resources the community can deploy. Do you need more public spaces for youth to hang out and build community? Do you need to recruit more adults who are willing to intervene? Do you need education or awareness-raising about police or prisons? All of these are examples of what building alternatives actually means in action, and they should be on the table alongside direct interventions.
- **Do a brief checkout** and collect evaluations if you need them for your future work.

### ***Policing Mind Map (optional activity takes 20 minutes)***

- **Explain** that we are going to create a mind map as a group to get a sense of how we understand policing. We will build off the map throughout the workshop and learn from each other's knowledge.
- **Write "Policing" in a circle** in the middle of a big piece of butcher paper. As you gather the answers below, write them surrounding the circle in the middle. Draw lines where you see connections (for example "police" and "school" and "the courts" and "youth" may all go on the map, and be connected)
- **Ask:** When we think about policing, who is involved?
  - Who else is impacted?
  - What systems/institutions are impacted?
  - Who benefits?
  - Who is harmed?
  - Where do you fit in?
- **Explain** that police and other items listed on this mind map (draw some of them out—prisons, courts, surveillance, etc.) are part of a larger system we sometimes call the Prison Industrial Complex, which includes a lot more than brick and mortar prisons. Police are kind of the gatekeepers for the PIC, and often when we're talking about inequity in terms of who is getting locked up in the U.S., we can trace it back to interactions with police, overpolicing in certain neighborhoods, etc.
- Read the Critical Resistance definition of the PIC, first paragraph: **"Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems."**
- Let people know that this is a definition we like, but we did the mind-map to point out how the prison-industrial complex and policing can mean different things to different people. It has lots of different parts—government and prisons, but also corporations and individuals who keep it going. Our understanding of it will always be growing and changing, even during this workshop.

# Don's Encounter with the Police

At 10:45pm, Don is on his way home and remembers that he needs to pick up some eggs and milk before going home.

Don meets up with his girlfriend, who gives him grocery money. He hugs and kisses her and heads to the store.

No more than five minutes after leaving his girlfriend,  
Don is pulled over by cops.

The cops get out of the car and search Don. They claim they witnessed a “transaction” between Don and his girlfriend.

The police take Don into custody for possession of marijuana, though they did not find any.

Don cannot afford an attorney so cannot fight his case effectively.

Don accepts an offer of probation for something he did not do. The alternative given to him was 3 years in detention.

# Ethan's Story

Age 16

Ethan is sitting in class at his school when a security guard enters the classroom and tells him that he must come down to the office.

The security guard escorts Ethan to the office and handcuffs him so that he is locked to a chair. Ethan's friend already is in the office.

Ethan repeatedly asks what is going on and if he's under arrest. He becomes angry because the officers will not explain what is happening. One officer tells him, "You're the bad guy."

Another officer handcuffs Ethan so that his hands are behind his back. The officer waits for the bell to ring to begin the next passing period. The officer escorts Ethan out of the school, through the hallways in front of his friends and fellow students.

The officer drives Ethan to a police station a couple of blocks away and leads him to the interrogation room. Ethan doesn't know his rights, and officers question him without a parent or lawyer present.

The officers interrogate Ethan about a theft at a recent party where he was the only Black youth who attended. Someone has falsely accused him. Ethan feels scared and stressed but has no information to share. The officers eventually release Ethan.

This is the second time officers have removed Ethan from his school to question him about an incident not related to the school. After a couple of additional incidents with school staff, Ethan decides he's "never going back to CPS." He leaves school.