

# From John Henry to George Floyd

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A brief history of black oppression  
and the prison industrial complex

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# Racial Capitalism

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A system in which the production and acquisition of wealth is intentionally racialized. This system relies on violence, exploitation, and involuntary servitude to function.

# Angela Davis on “abolition feminism” (at CCCB Barcelona 2017)



If we say “no” to poverty, we do not want to be contained by a capitalist structure that values profits more than human beings.

If we recognize that those who wanted to solve slavery by creating more humane forms of slavery were employing the logic of racism, we must say that those who call for police “reform” and prison “reform” while retaining the racist structures... are absolutely wrong.

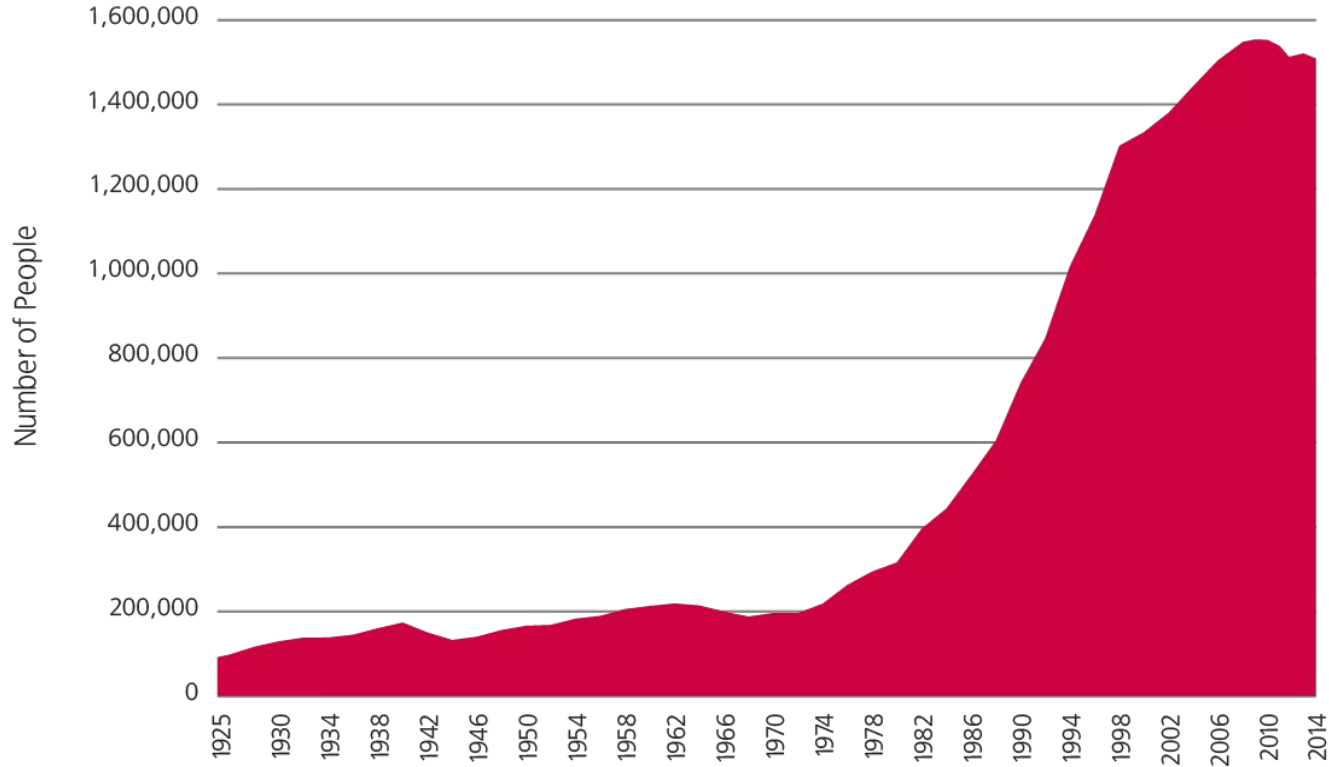
This is why we say “no” to carceral feminism and “yes” to abolition feminism.



**Photo credit: The Atlantic / Whitney Benns  
(2015) “Prison Labor in the United States -  
How is it Legal?”**



## U.S. State and Federal Prison Population, 1925-2014



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics *Prisoners Series*.

# THE UNITED STATES HAS

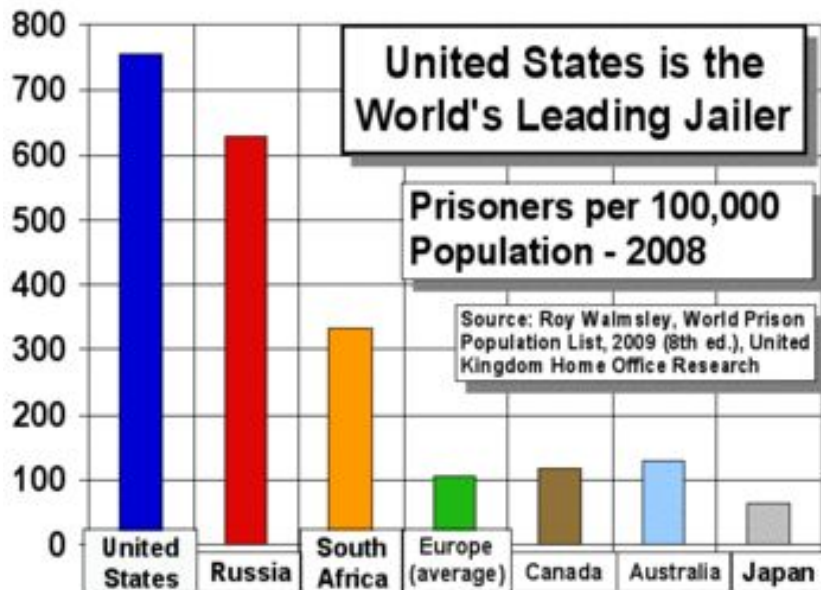
LESS THAN 5% OF THE  
WORLD'S POPULATION



BUT ALMOST

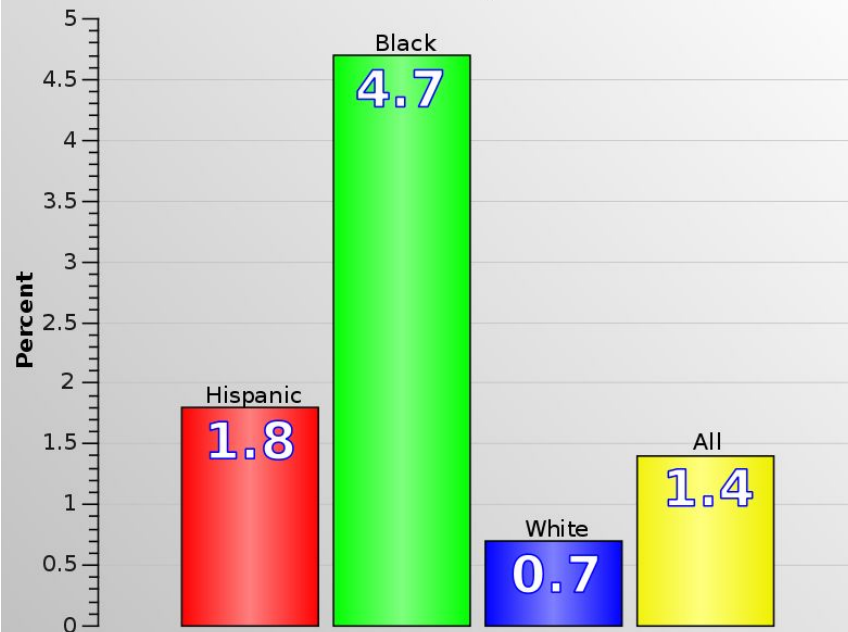


25% OF THE WORLD'S  
PRISON POPULATION



### Percent of adult males incarcerated by race and ethnicity

USA 2009. Prisons and jails combined



Prison Inmates at Midyear 2009 (NCJ 230113)



## JOSHUA B. FREEMAN - STEVE FRASER “21st Century Chain Gangs” (Salon 2012)

Companies can, in most states, lease factories in prisons or prisoners to work on the outside. All told, nearly a million prisoners are now making office furniture, working in call centers, fabricating body armor, taking hotel reservations, working in slaughterhouses or manufacturing textiles, shoes and clothing, while **getting paid** somewhere between 93 cents and \$4.73 per day.



An all-woman chain gang in Arizona, preparing for a long day's work.

**Nigel Farndale, The Daily Telegraph** Nov 27, 2012



Estimates suggest during wildfire season, as much as 30%-40% of California's firefighters are incarcerated people. Currently over 2,000

Firefighting inmates earn between \$2.90 and \$5.12 per day, with an additional \$1 per hour when fighting fires.

([Isabelle Chapman](#), CNN)

Inmate firefighters watch a blaze in Kern County in 2010.  
Casey Christie/The Bakersfield Californian/ZUMA





PHOTO: PAIGE ST. JOHN

Photo Credit Democracy Now: [\\$1 per hour to fight the largest fire in CA history. Are Prison Firefighting programs slave labor?](#)

# White Supremacist Social Conditioning

America is a deeply racist, classist, and patriarchal culture.  
Therefore, ALL of us have this in our social conditioning:

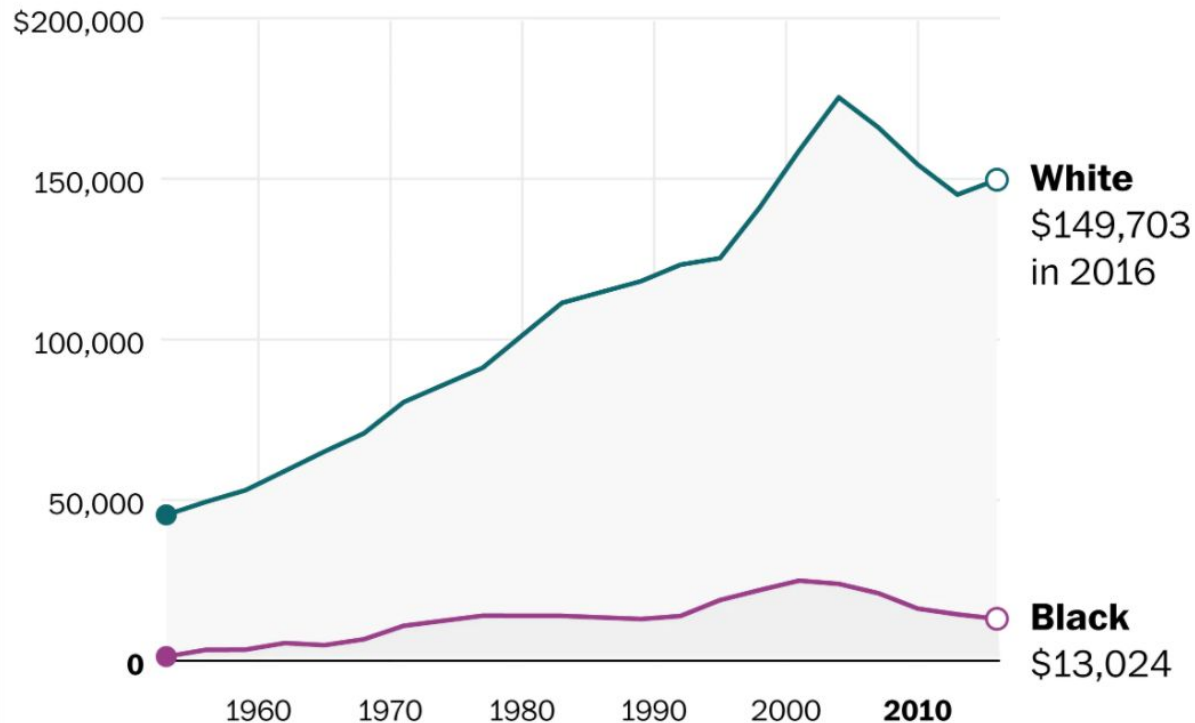
- Racist thoughts and beliefs
- anti-Semitic thoughts and beliefs
- Misogynist thoughts and beliefs
- A worldview centered on heterosexual and cis-gender identities.
- Classism (rich people deserve their wealth, poor people aren't working hard enough)
- Fear and disdain of immigrants and outsiders
- Racial Capitalism (Black athletes are overpaid but Bill Gates earned his money)

Having racist thoughts does not make you “a racist.” It means you were raised in America and you have learning and growing to do. Being anti-racist is not about guilt or shame. It is about turning your self-reflection into **personal action** (addressing and changing thought patterns) and **social action** (reforming, dismantling, and divesting from racist structures).

## White wealth surges; black wealth stagnates



Median household wealth, adjusted for inflation



Source: Historical Survey of Consumer Finances via Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and University of Bonn economists Moritz Kuhn, Moritz Schularick and Ulrike I. Steins

THE WASHINGTON POST

# On Being Anti-racist, Ibram X. Kendi

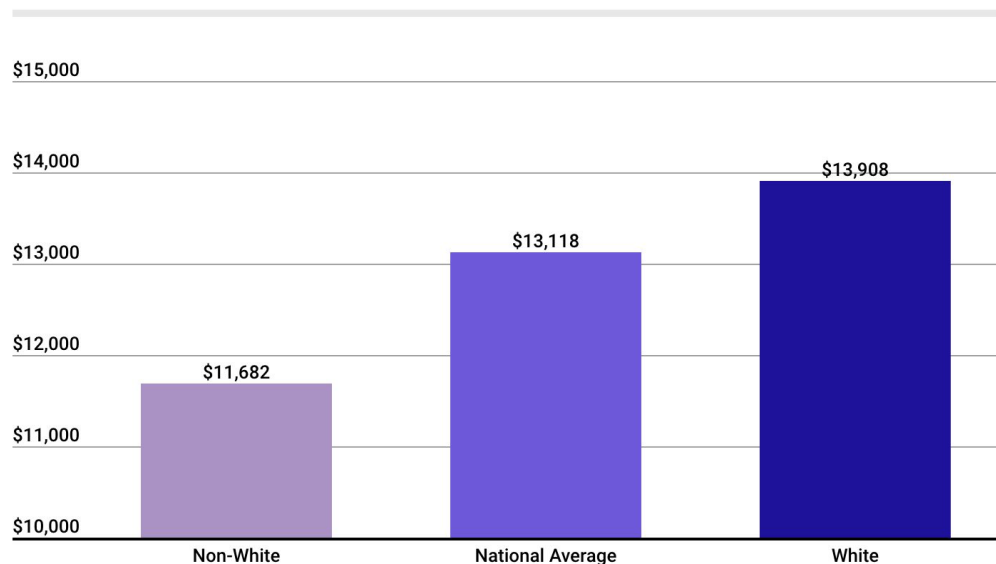
Racism is a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to a racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas. Anti-racism is a powerful collection of anti-racist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by anti-racist ideas.

**Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.**

# What is a “good” school?

**NON-WHITE SCHOOL DISTRICTS GET \$23 BILLION LESS FUNDING THAN WHITE ONES**

Average Amount of School District Funding per Student



# Signs of White Supremacist Thinking

## Individualism

(Blames oppression on oppressed people)

- “If you work hard, you’ll be successful. That’s what I (or my parents) did!”
- “If you don’t break the law, you won’t get stopped by police.”
- “Black people should just stop using drugs and being in gangs.”
- “Learn to speak and dress properly!”
- “He should have just followed instructions” (when killed by police)

## Universalism

(Erases the identities of non-white people)

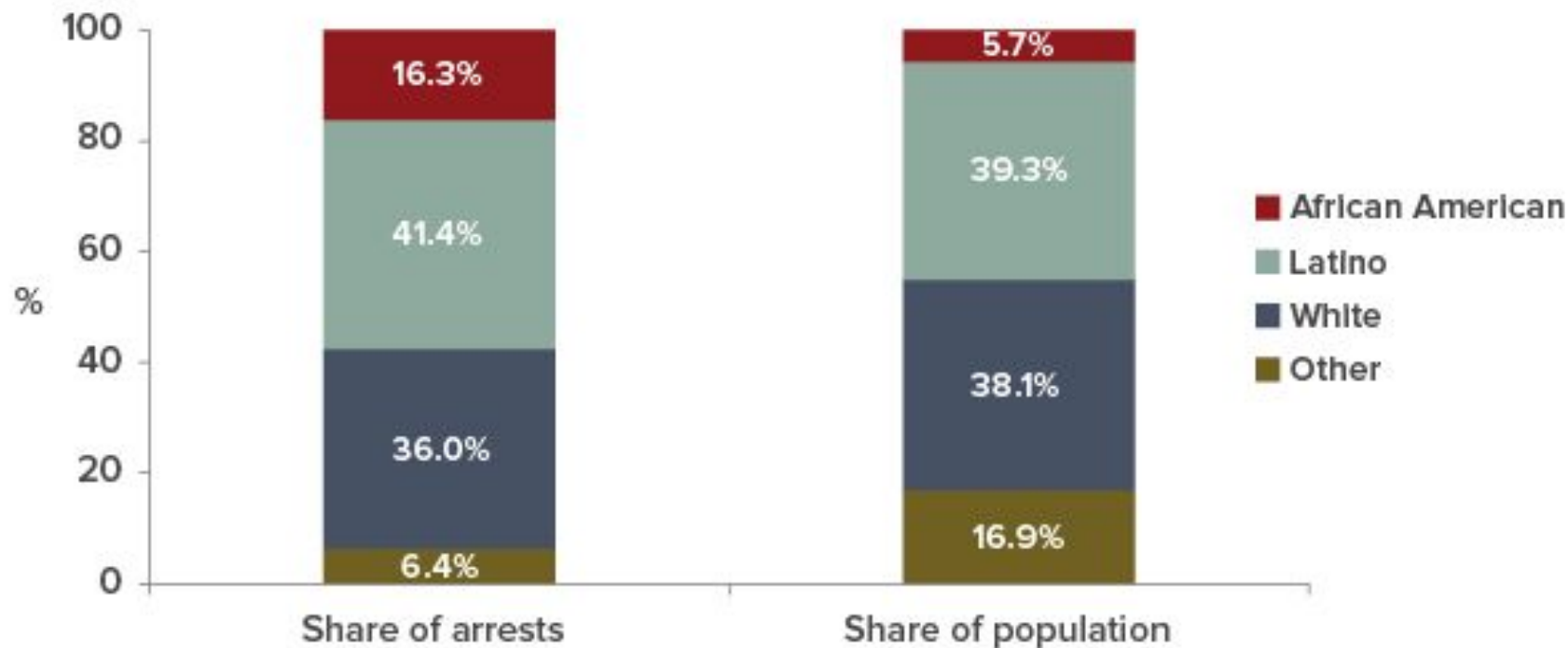
- “We’re all just one human race”
- “I don’t see color”
- “I just treat everyone the same”
- “All Lives Matter”
- “It’s not about race, it’s about class”
- “Talking about race is too divisive.”
- “Why do you always make it about race?”
- “Why can’t we all just get along?”

What-about-ism (Changes the subject) - “But what about (Irish immigrants, black-on-black crime, etc)”

My Racial Résumé (Denies personal racism) “I have black friends/family,” “I taught in inner-city schools,” “I was in Peace Corps,” “I give to charity,” “I marched in the 60’s,” etc.



## AFRICAN AMERICANS ARE HIGHLY OVERREPRESENTED IN ARRESTS, RELATIVE TO THEIR SHARE OF THE POPULATION



Source: California Department of Justice's Monthly Arrest and Citation Register and California Department of Finance Population Data, 2016.

Note: \*Other\* includes Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.

From: PPIC Blog, December 2018.

# Black and Jewish Relations

## Alliances

- Common love of Hebrew texts and prophets
- Strong Civil Rights alliance of the 50's-60's
- Shared history of enslavement and diaspora
- Common enemies (KKK, Nazis, etc)

## Challenges

- Severe economic disparities (blacks roughly 33% below average American income, Jewish people roughly 33% higher than average income)
- Israel/Palestine disagreements
- Potential access to “whiteness”



Abraham Joshua Heschel presenting the Judaism and World Peace Award to [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), December 7, 1965



## Jewish Social Justice Roundtable

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The Jewish Social Justice Roundtable is a network (64 organizations) that “strengthens and aligns the Jewish social justice field in order to make justice a core expression of Jewish life and help create an equitable world.” “We envision a loving, caring, and equitable world in which power is shared and all are free from injustice.”

Their website also features an excellent list of

Racial Justice  
Resources

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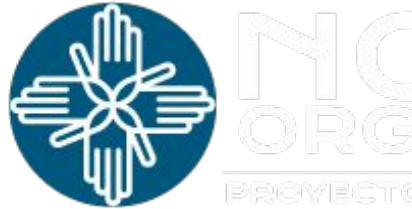
<https://www.surjbayarea.org/>

SURJ is an excellent organization for white allies to learn about activism in the Bay Area. SURJ educates white folks about how to best support people and organizations of color.



Indivisible Sonoma County is a progressive political organizing group with phone scripts, information about local politics, and an excellent set of Anti-Racist actions to engage in.

### North Bay Organizing Project



The **North Bay Organizing Project (NBOP)** is a “grassroots, multi-racial, and multi-issue organization comprised of over twenty-two faith, environmental, labor, student and community-based organizations in Sonoma County.” Working on empowering minority communities in Sonoma County.



### Peace and Justice Center (Santa Rosa)

**“The mission of the Peace & Justice Center of Sonoma County is to inform, support and energize the Sonoma County community to create peace and social justice through active nonviolence.”**

## **Divesting, part 1 (the stock exchange)**

### **These companies build and manage For-Profit Prisons**

GeoGroup (GEO) and CoreCivic (CXW)

### **These financial institutions support For-Profit Prisons**

Bank of America (BAC) Regions Financial (RF) Citizens Financial Group (CFG)  
Pinnacle Bank (PNFP) First Horizon Bank (FHN) Synovus Financial (SNV)

### **These companies contract with or rely on For-Profit Prisons**

Fairfax Financial Holdings (FRFHF) Tokio Marine Holdings (TKOMY)

Aramark (ARMK) Sysco (SYY)

## Divesting, part 2 (businesses)

The following companies used prison labor either directly or through subcontractors in the last 20 years, and some as recently as 2014:





## Divesting, part 3 (Confirmed to still use prison labor)



“As permitted by law, a small number of our U.S. suppliers use voluntary labor as part of prison rehabilitation programs,” according to a [2020 statement](#).



Costco uses the prison labor of 9 industrial and agricultural prison facilities throughout the US, according to its [Statement on Prison Labor 2019](#)

## But the LARGEST consumer of prisoner labor is:

- US Military
- Public Education Facilities
- Federal, State, and Local Police
- Government Buildings and Facilities

# Anti-Racist political positions that help abolish “racial capitalism.”

- Be a Pacifist - Defund the Pentagon
- Advocate for progressive tax policies (poor pay less, rich pay more)
- Move resources **AWAY** from police and **INTO** community uplift programs (#defundthepolice)
- Stronger labor unions
- Higher minimum wage laws (end exceptions for “tip” workers and prisoners)
- Decriminalize drug abuse and prostitution
- Healthcare as a human right
- Abolish SuperPACs and take corporate money out of political campaigns
- Universal voter registration, election days off, and guarantee voting rights to all
- Abolish ICE and defund similar institutions (CBP, DHS, TSA)
- The Green New Deal
- Ultimate goal is the total abolition of war, incarceration, and poverty





### #Defund the Police overview

1. We recognize that the police funnel people into the prison industrial complex in a racialized way
2. We recognize that police are not drug counselors, social workers, or mental health experts
3. We understand that most crime is related to poverty, despair, and weak social infrastructure
4. We advocate strengthening communities to reduce crime instead of throwing people in cages

# Moving Forward as an Anti-Racist

- Divest from banks and put money into B-Corp banks and Credit Unions
- BUY FROM LOCAL SMALL BUSINESSES
- Stop calling police for “suspicious behavior.” Dial 2-1-1 for mental health calls.
- Buy books online at [bookshop.org](http://bookshop.org) or [indiebound.org](http://indiebound.org), NEVER Amazon.
- Join a progressive political group, get on a good newsletter (like SURJ)
- SHOW UP to anti-racist events
- Learn about current city, county, and state legislation, and VOTE!
- Normalize talking about race with neighbors, family, and friends
- Call-out racism in family and friends even when it’s uncomfortable
- Browse [www.meadowslist.com](http://www.meadowslist.com) for suggestions for books, films, articles, etc.
- Share WIDELY among your friends and family that you are taking these steps!
- Tell your other organizations to invite Benjamin Mertz to do workshops!
- My album “Climbing Up the Mountain” is at [www.benjaminmertz.com/shop](http://www.benjaminmertz.com/shop)

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