

THE BREATHE ACT

A TOOLKIT
FOR U.U.
ADVOCACY

CREATED BY
ANA MARIA DE LA ROSA
A PROJECT OF LOVE RESISTS

WHAT IS THE BREATHE ACT?

[The Breathe Act](#) arose from the Electoral Justice Project of the Movement for Black Lives, and is being championed in the House of Representatives by Representative Ayana Pressley (D-MA) and Representative Rashida Tlaib (D-MI). It has been called “a civil rights bill for the 21st century” that would fundamentally shift how we envision community safety: away from policing, prisons, and militarization of our borders and our communities, and toward investing in and sustaining thriving cities and neighborhoods based on principles of fairness and inclusion. The bill is ambitious in its scope, designed to provoke new thinking and to expand the realm of what we consider possible

The Breathe Act is divided into four sections, each of which includes detailed recommendations. We strongly encourage you to read the full proposed act and study these sections in depth.

Section One divests federal funding from prisons and policing, and seeks to remedy the many harms against Black and brown people embedded in existing systems and practices. It would eliminate the federal agencies enforcing the criminal-legal system, and would make direct changes to policing, prosecution, sentencing, and jailing practices. It also calls for a timeline for the elimination of federal prisons and detention centers.

Section Two envisions life-affirming new approaches to community safety. It would establish federal grant programs to incentivize closing jails and detention centers and supporting alternatives such as neighborhood mediation programs and abuse interruption and prevention. It envisions supportive housing for those living with mental illness, employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated people, and an end to all fees and surcharges within the criminal-legal system.

Section Three allocates new funding to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities for all people. This includes detailed recommendations for reimagining what justice could look like in education, health, housing and infrastructure, job growth and opportunities, and the preservation of our environment. It includes an overhaul of tax policies to increase racial and economic equity.

Section Four focuses on holding officials accountable and enhancing the self-determination of Black communities. It would require that Congress establish commissions to study reparations for African American and Indigenous communities. It would also ensure democratic, fair, and secure voting practices free from racial discrimination and voter suppression.

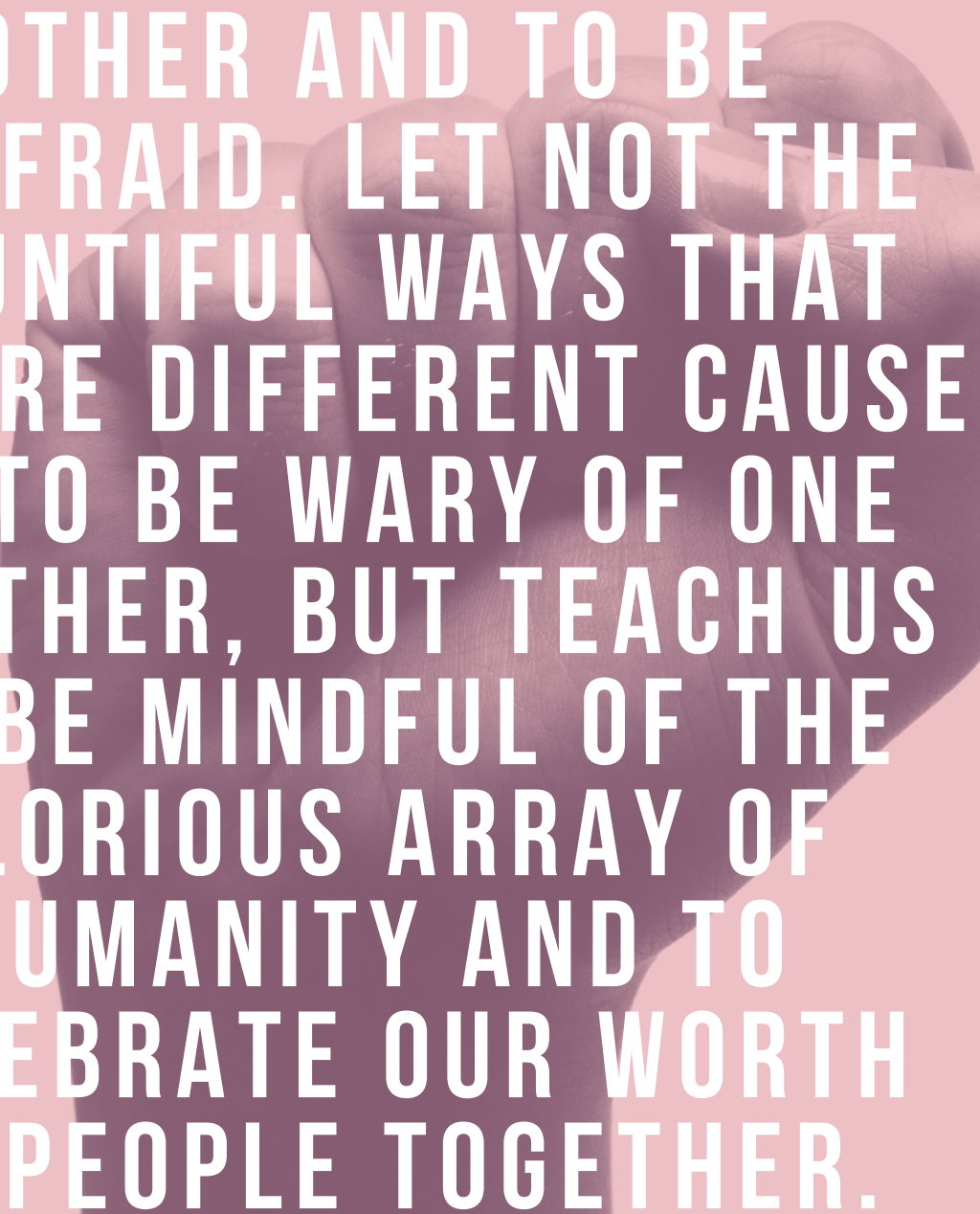
TAKING A COLLECTIVE BREATH: DEEPENING U.U. ALIGNMENT TO THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES

The prophetic vision of the BREATHE ACT weaves the best practices and work of decades on local, state, regional and national levels without sacrificing one policy issue or conceding community demands. This intersectional approach affords an opportunity to fully support and advance Black life. We each have a role to play, let's find it together. We are so glad that you are joining us on this life's journey for liberation and dignity for all.



CONNECTING U.U. VALUES & THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES

Unitarian Universalists have a history of responding in faith and action where human rights are being violated. In this moment we are being called into reflection and action, as we continue to follow the leadership of the movement for Black lives. Among other things, the 2nd U.U. principle of Justice, Equity and Compassion In Human Relations calls us to support activists working to create a more accountable and free society. It is through continued action that we are able to live into these values, and boldly proclaim that Black Lives Matter.



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GLORIOUS ARRAY OF
HUMANITY AND TO
CELEBRATE OUR WORTH
AS PEOPLE TOGETHER.

PRAYER BY ADRIAN L. H. GRAHAM IS A MEMBER OF THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF BALTIMORE

MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES & CRIMINALIZATION

Following the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, Side with Love, UUSC and the UUA recognized the need to present a joint response to newly emboldened—but historically deep-rooted—forces of anti-Blackness, white nationalism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in U.S. politics. Grassroots movement leaders shared with us the core insight behind what ultimately became the Love Resists campaign: namely, that structural injustices against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and Immigrant communities often take the form of labeling and treating whole communities as presumptively “criminal.”

This system of criminalization takes many forms. Policing and incarceration have inflicted violence against Black communities at disproportionate rates throughout U.S. history. Immigrants, especially Black immigrants, are more likely to face deportation and detention if they have an arrest or criminal record or have been placed (without due process) onto a “gang database.” Federal agencies and local law enforcement have surveilled and profiled Muslims, including Black and immigrant Muslims, for years, with these civil liberties violations accelerating during the so-called “War on Terror.”

When members of these communities resist state violence, criminalization is often used to silence their activism. Indigenous leaders have been arrested and imprisoned for defending their land and water from extractive projects. Many state governments in recent years have passed bills that would create harsh new penalties for non-violent protest near pipelines and other fossil fuel infrastructure.

Black Lives Matter organizers have faced arrest and trumped-up lawsuits for exercising their First Amendment rights.

And ICE has selectively targeted immigrant leaders in the Sanctuary movement for arrest and removal.

In spring 2020, UUSC launched the Right to Resist campaign to oppose this criminalization of activism and uphold the human right to express dissent. This work builds on the longstanding framework that Side with Love and the Love Resists campaign have established for organizing UUs to oppose and dismantle criminalization.

In advancing this work, support for the BREATHE Act is key. This bill does away with many of the federal institutions and programs responsible for maintaining and perpetuating the harm of criminalization, and replaces funding for these programs with initiatives to promote community safety and collective wellbeing.

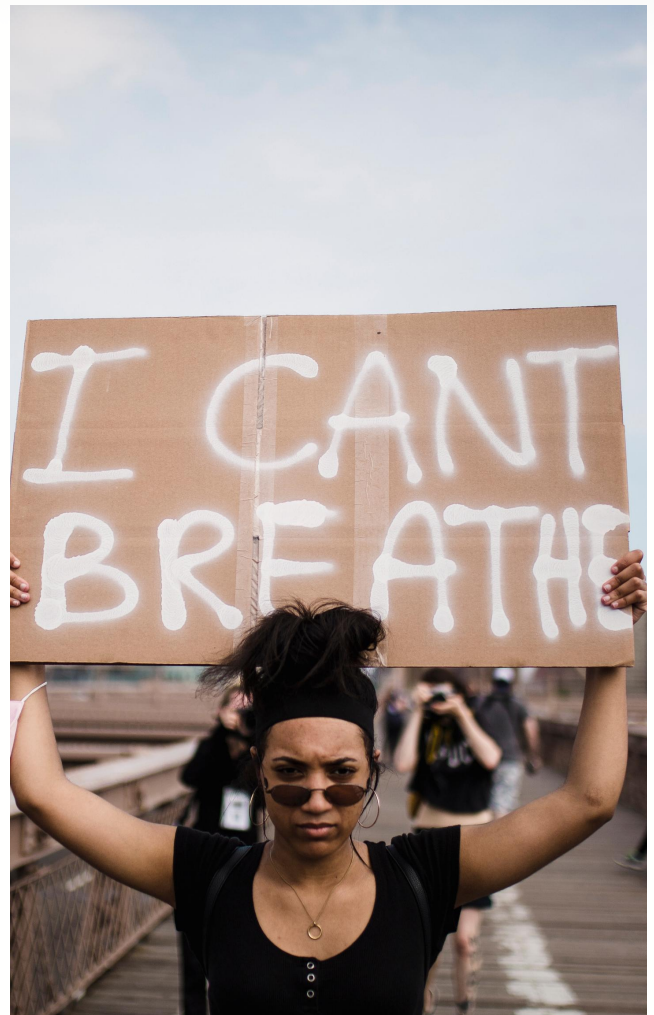
In doing so, the bill defends Black lives as well as the rights and safety of immigrants, Muslims, Indigenous people, and other intersecting communities who are most impacted by systems of state violence.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Given the restrictions placed on us from Covid-19, we are called into creative organizing and advocacy. Whether you are a long time activist used to marching through the streets or a recent high school graduate fired up by this political moment, there is an opportunity for all of us to show up.

- Sign the e-action in support for the Breathe Act and urge your members of congress to sign on in support.
- Bring together other passionate folks in your community to sign up for a [Community Action Circle](#), to build connections as we take action. For more information on how to get one started contact Abby Crum at acrum@uucsj.org.
- Plug into a local [Mutual Aid Network](#). We all have something to offer and we all have something we need. Communities across the country are springing into action to help their neighbors through mutual aid networks as this is a powerful way to build strong connections.
- Organize a [Virtual Lobby Day](#) with your Members of Congress. Does your state have a State Action Network (SAN)? If so, chances are they are already organizing virtual lobby days. Reach out to your SAN to find out how you can plug in!
- Stay tuned to the [Side With Love](#) and [UUSC](#) Facebook pages for updates and upcoming opportunities.

Host a congregational zoom Recognize & Organize movie night followed up by a discussion on how the tenets of the Breathe Act play out where you live. Examine what policies your state, city, and counties currently have in place that continue to disproportionately harm Black and Brown residents. Want to know more? Reach out to



SAMPLE CALL SCRIPT

"Hi. My name is _____ and I'm a constituent of State [Representative/Senator] _____. I'm calling today urging State [Representative/Senator] _____, to stand up for justice and sign on to the Breathe Act. This is an opportunity for us to do what is necessary to right the historical wrongs and harms Black citizens of this country have and continue to experience. It is an opportunity to do what is right in this political moment when we can see ever so clearly all that is wrong. Please tell State [Representative/Senator] _____ to support this bill. Thank you for your time."



HERE ARE A FEW TIPS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN WRITING AN LTE:

Placing a letter to the editor (LTE) in your local paper can go a long way toward getting policymakers' attention. Many legislators follow local news closely to get a sense of public opinion. Views published and circulated to the whole community carry real weight in determining how they vote. Pay attention to local bills that uphold the principles of the Black Lives Matter platform, and write to you local papers expressing your support and connections to your own faith values.

Tie your letter to a specific news item. Most LTEs are printed in response to a specific article that recently appeared in the paper—usually within the last forty-eight hours. you wish to write about the Movement for Black Lives, look out for a story that covers some of the tenets of the Breathe Act,

Track Its movement with your MOC's, or any opposition or criticism it has faced. When you submit your letter, be sure to also name and link to the specific article you're referencing. Follow specific instructions when submitting. Most papers will post guidelines on their website giving specific instructions for how to submit LTEs. Be sure to follow those instructions closely as editors can be nitpicky. Be concise. Many newspapers will have maximum word counts for the LTEs they consider, and they often enforce these limits strictly. Make sure that your LTE submission does not exceed the word limit given in the submission guidelines. If no maximum is listed, aim for around 150-200 words, which is standard LTE length.

CONGREGATION AND COALITION SIGN ON LETTERS

Sign on letters are an effective tool for bringing together diverse groups who all stand behind similar values around a particular issue. Creating a sign on letter that the congregations or community organizations in your community can stand behind deepens solidarity.

[Black Lives Matter: Solidarity Letter from the Immigrant Justice Movement](#)

June 4, 2020

Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. Tony McDade. George Floyd. Yassin Mohamed. Finan Berhe. Across the country, people of conscience are saying 'Black Lives Matter!' 'Enough is Enough!' in our grief and rage. From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin to Rodney King, Latasha Harlins to Sandra Bland, we bear witness to the injustice, to the pain and rage of our Black brothers and sisters. For too long, we have lived within a system that perpetuates institutional and direct violence against Black people. We reject this anti-Black violence, and demand justice. White supremacist institutions and the historical criminalization and overpolicing of Black communities have led to heavily militarized police forces and a system that uses prison beds as a form of punishment and social control but denies people an opportunity, a job, an education, healthcare, or equal access to thrive. These are the same systems that enable the for-profit incarceration of humans, and trigger discrimination against Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. Historically we have repeatedly seen massive transfers of wealth from communities of color to corporations. In the midst of a global health pandemic, this racialized inequality has only increased - corporations have been given billions of dollars while millions of Americans are not able to have their basic health care and economic needs met. Communities of color are left struggling to pay for food and rent, and in the case of many immigrants, excluded from federal relief packages altogether. When asked to do more for Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, state and local governments claim budget shortfalls. Yet they either maintain or increase inflated and unnecessary police budgets. We know that support systems, services, quality housing and dignified jobs are what keeps our communities safe, not law enforcement. The recent violence directed at protestors has shown that the police state values property over the lives of people they've sworn to serve. In order for resources to be brought back to communities, governments at all levels must divest from harmful institutions such as the prison industrial complex, surveillance, and policing. We call on governments to instead invest these funds in basic needs like quality housing and education, financial and economic support, climate justice, healthcare for all, and mental health support.

As immigrant justice organizations and ally organizations, we commit to:

- Standing in solidarity with Black communities to demand justice by advocating for their recommendations and solutions.
- Working to dismantle white supremacy, white nationalism, and the anti-Blackness that permeates our society, including within the immigrant justice movement.
- Joining the calls to dismantle the police state by defunding and decreasing police budgets. Demanding governments invest in communities by increasing funding for housing, education, healthcare, and other supports.
- Demanding a COVID 19 recovery and reconstruction that benefits communities, not corporations.
- Denouncing the use of criminalization and militarization as a response to people's pain and people demanding more change.
- Rejecting the "national security" frame and redefining "public safety" so that it truly means communities -- including Black communities -- are free to live without fear of being killed.
- Just as COVID-19 has taught us that we are interconnected, our collective well-being depends on all of us being healthy and safe, not criminalized and dehumanized. We grieve with our Black neighbors, and are committed to building a country where Black Lives Matter.

Signed by the following Immigrant Justice Organizations and Ally Organizations:

List Congregation/Organizations Alphabetically

COFFEE HOUR TALK

Engaging your community, congregation, family, and elected officials in conversations about the BREATHE Act Across the country—including in UU congregations—people are having new and deeper conversations about ways we might fundamentally reimagine our society's dominant approach to law enforcement. This has led to visionary proposals to abolish, defund, and otherwise transform the system of policing, incarceration, and mass criminalization that have inflicted so much harm on Black communities. The BREATHE Act, while it does not address every aspect of the sprawling criminalization system, is conceived in this spirit and was born of this same movement.

For many people, these may be ideas they had not previously encountered or considered. This may be true of members of our families, congregations and communities, and even of ourselves. Moreover, vested interests with a financial stake in the current criminalization system actively promote misinformation and stereotypes to preserve the status quo. These include the false belief that mass criminalization is key to promoting public safety and that activists working to transform these systems don't care about the goal of keeping people safe from violence.

In these circumstances, it is inevitable that some will respond to the BREATHE Act's proposals with fears and misconceptions. Having frank conversations with members of your community, family, and elected officials about these issues can help counter some of the mistaken ideas out there and encourage people to approach the bill with a more open mind. Below are a few common misconceptions people have about the BREATHE Act and suggestions for how to address them in conversation.



Misconception #1: *This bill would make us less safe/lead to a world where you dial 911 and no one answers.*

Ways to respond:

- Invite people to rethink what they mean by public safety. Refocus the conversation on the lives and safety of Black and Brown people who have been disproportionately killed, locked up, deported, and harmed by the current system. Remind people of the harms they have witnessed perpetrated by police violence. In what way is the current system keeping people safe?
- Encourage people to look more closely at what the bill says. It does not eliminate emergency response systems. Point folks to section 2 of the bill, which funds alternative forms of community interventions to prevent violence. Ask who they would rather interact with in a situation involving mental health, substance abuse, or violence: armed officers with military-grade equipment, or community workers trained in violence prevention and reduction? Which would make people safer?

Misconception #2: *This bill may be a good idea in the abstract, but it is unrealistic. We should focus on more achievable goals.*

Ways to respond:

- Challenge the scarcity mentality and invite people to adopt a both/and approach to social change. Is it really true that time is so scarce that we can't advocate for both the BREATHE Act and other forms of reducing harm from criminalization? Is scarcity the actual barrier, or is that argument a rationalization? All social movements have depended on having both long-term visionary goals and short-term objectives. Why would we need to choose one over the other?
- Invite people to think back to some major milestones of social change that have happened in their lifetimes, whether civil rights legislation, marriage equality, protections against Transphobic and sexist discrimination in the workplace, or others. Consider whether these achievements would have seemed "realistic" just a few years before they became law. Reflect on how social movements often begin by envisioning and working toward the "impossible," and how frequently in the past apparently impossible things have become reality through collective effort.

Misconception #3: *Our elected officials already support this sort of measure; they don't need to hear from us about it. OR: Our elected officials would never support this kind of bill in a million years; it would be a waste of time to reach out.*

Ways to respond:

- If your elected official is a champion of this bill, they may be facing a constant barrage of misinformation and polemical attacks from colleagues, in addition to harassment from online trolls. Hearing from you as a constituent can be a critical vote of confidence to continue to advance this legislation in a political environment that has been deliberately seeded with bogus fears and racist dog-whistles.
- If your elected officials are die-hard opponents of this legislation and seem unwilling to budge, consider that the messages they hear from their constituents nonetheless help frame the terms of the debate and expand the limits of what's possible. Invite people to consider what would happen if these elected officials never heard from any constituents who support measures like the BREATHE Act. It is by keeping a message, a vision, and an ideal alive through long years of bitter opposition and disappointment that social movements are able to make incredible changes happen.

RESOURCES FOR REDEFINING

COMMUNITY SAFETY

Systems of criminalization, policing, and incarceration are killing people and ruining lives. Plainly, we need to think twice when told that these systems are needed to promote “public safety.” Below are some resources to expand the conversation to think of new ways to keep communities safe that don’t rely on punishment and state violence.

- [INCITE! Critical Resistance, “Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex”](#) INCITE! Critical Resistance is a national organization of radical feminists of color who are working to end violence against women of color by using solutions that do not rely on policing and the criminal justice system, which are often not safe solutions for survivors who are themselves experiencing criminalization.



[Creative Interventions, “A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence”](#)

This toolkit was created by a coalition of Asian American, Pacific Islander, and immigrant women’s organizations in the Bay area. It presents stories, examples, and innovative responses to violence that rely on the intervention of community members to stop interpersonal violence, rather than turning to policing and courts as a first resort.

[Audre Lorde Project: Safer Party Toolkit](#)

This toolkit comes out of the Audre Lorde Project’s Safe OUTside the System (SOS) Collective, which creates alternative ways to address violence, including hate and police violence, that don’t rely on criminalization. The Safer Party Toolkit specifically provides tips for how to throw parties that reduce the risk of interpersonal violence and police violence.

TERMS TO KNOW

1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act:

On September 13, 1994, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (the federal "crime bill"). This legislation increases federal penalties for many crimes, including adding new offenses that can be punished by death.

- [*The Complex History of the Controversial 1994 Crime Bill*](#)
- [*Bill Clinton, "Black Lives" and the Myths of the 1994 Crime Bill*](#)

Baby Bonds Programs:

[The American Opportunities Accounts Act](#) was introduced by Senator Cory Booker. Baby Bonds policy would provide every child in America an account seeded with \$1,000 to \$3,000, an amount allocated in inverse proportions to that child's family's income. Each subsequent year, children would be eligible for additional payments based on family income until at age 18, when they would be able to access these accounts for specified uses including education, homeownership, and retirement.

- [*A Cheap, Race-Neutral Way to Close the Racial Wealth Gap, It's time to try baby bonds*](#)
- [*Could Baby Bonds Help Reduce Wealth Inequality In America?*](#)

Civil Asset Forfeiture:

Civil asset forfeiture or civil judicial forfeiture, is a process in which law enforcement officers take assets from persons suspected of involvement with crime or illegal activity without necessarily charging the owners with wrongdoing.

- [*Asset Forfeiture Abuse*](#)
- [*The Injustice of Civil-Asset Forfeiture*](#)

Community Land Trusts:

Community land trusts (CLTs) are nonprofit organizations governed by a board of CLT residents, community residents and public representatives that provide lasting community assets and shared equity homeownership opportunities for families and communities.

- [*How One Boston Neighborhood Stopped Gentrification in Its Tracks*](#)
- [*A Promising Tool for Expanding and Protecting Affordable Housing*](#)

Decarceration:

The process of removing people from institutions such as prisons or mental hospitals—the opposite of incarceration. In the middle of the twentieth century, this became a central feature in the reorganization of social control, and is closely allied to programmes of community care and community control.

- [*Decarceration Strategies: How 5 States Achieved Substantial Prison Population Reductions*](#)
- [*Protecting Decarcerated Populations In The Era of COVID-19: Priorities For Emergency Discharge Planning*](#)

Department of Defense 1033 Program:

A program that allows local police forces to obtain surplus military equipment from the Defense Department, including tanks, firearms, and other weapons of war. The bill would eliminate this program, which has been shown to increase police violence through militarizing law enforcement agencies.

- [*Rights Groups Urge US Congress to End the 1033 Program, Demilitarize Police*](#)
- [*Militarization and police violence: The case of the 1033 program*](#)

Gang Databases:

Lists maintained by police departments and federal agencies of people "suspected" of having gang affiliations, often based on nothing more than clothing, tattoos, or racial profiling. Unlike a criminal conviction, there is no legal process for getting on or off the list. Oftentimes, people have no way of knowing if their names are included. The bill would end these programs and help restore crucial legal safeguards of due process and the presumption of innocence.

- [*Are You in a Gang Database?*](#)
- [*What Makes a City a Sanctuary Now?*](#)

TERMS TO KNOW

H.R.40 “Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act”:

H.R. 40 is the Congressional Reparations Study Bill that has been introduced by Representatives John Conyers and Sheila Jackson Lee every Congress since 1989. The bill would create a commission to study and make recommendations for the Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act.

- [Reparations- Has The Time Finally Come?](#)
- [The Case For Reparations by Ta-Nehisi Coates](#)

Misdemeanor and “Pay Only” Probation:

Pay only probation means that an individual who can pay their court costs up front is not subject to probation supervision and its associated conditions and costs, leading to significantly different financial and legal outcomes for poor defendants.

- [How Georgia's Probation System Squeezes the Poor and Feeds Mass Incarceration](#)
- [“Set up to Fail” The Impact of Offender-Funded Private Probation on the Poor](#)

Qualified Immunity:

Qualified immunity is a judicially created doctrine that shields government officials from being held personally liable for constitutional violations—like the right to be free from excessive police force—for money damages under federal law so long as the officials did not violate “clearly established” law.

- [An Immune System](#)
- [Why police can violate your constitutional rights and suffer no consequences in court](#)

“Three-Strikes” Law:

Numerous state legislatures have enacted a version of this law, which imposes a mandatory life-in-prison sentence for anyone convicted of three criminal charges (even minor misdemeanors, in some states). Throughout the country, these laws have been responsible for drastically expanding the number of people incarcerated. Unsurprisingly, they were originally masterminded by lobbyists linked to private prison companies.

- [Three-Strikes Basics](#)
- [ALEC Exposed](#)

Transformative Justice:

Transformative justice is a way of addressing an individual act of harm that relies on community members instead of the police, the law, or the government.

- [What is Transformative Justice?](#)
- [Transformative Justice, Explained](#)

UUSC is Guided by the belief that all people have inherent worth and dignity. UUSC advances human rights globally by partnering with affected communities who are confronting injustice, mobilizing to challenge oppressive systems, and inspiring and sustaining spiritually grounded activism for justice. We invite you to join us in this journey toward realizing a better future!

For more information about this toolkit and how UUSC can support the Right to Resist in your state please contact:

Ana Maria De La Rosa
Senior Grassroots Organizer
adelarosa@uus.org

Side With Love is a public advocacy campaign that seeks to harness love's power to stop oppression. It is sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association. It serves as a living invitation for those seeking to deepen their commitment and understanding of the ways we are called to fight for justice. Our faith demands us to show up with and for justice. We are called to organize in the spiritual communities we participate in, create and cultivate in alignment with social and human rights movements.

For more information or to join Side With Love please contact: Side With Love love@uua.org Everette R. H. Thompson
Side With Love Campaign Manager