

Mass Incarceration and Racial Injustice

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Audience: Secondary School

Lesson Plan Overview

Lesson: Mass Incarceration & Racial Justice

Rationale for the Lesson: A common misconception surrounding the abolishment of slavery following the passing of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution is that white Americans no longer had the legal means to strip African Americans of their freedom. The 13th Amendment, instead of creating a nation of equality, created a new way for white Americans to covertly enslave African Americans called mass incarceration. Since the passing of the 13th Amendment in 1865 there have been various events that have instigated the effectiveness of this new form of slavery. Specifically, the “War on Crime” has been a key component for fueling this system of oppression. This lesson plan seeks to introduce students to the topic of mass incarceration as one of the most pressing civil rights issues of the 21st century.

Standards: Grade 11-12 History/Social Studies

RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to and understanding of the text as a whole.

RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors’ differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors’ claims, reasoning, and evidence.

RH.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Essential Question/Guiding Question: Are African American people incarcerated at higher rates than white people, if so why?

Objectives: Students will be able to identify the origins of mass incarceration as well as have the opportunity to analyze data in order to formulate a well-informed opinion on mass incarceration as a system of oppression.

Lesson Opener/Anticipatory Set/Lead-In/Do Now: (7 minutes)

- Instructor introduces themselves
- Provide following statistic on PowerPoint/Prezi slide: “America is home to 5% of the world’s population and 25% of the world’s prisoners” (Citation in Annotated Bibliography)
- Ask students to discuss in pairs or groups of three possible reasons as to why this statistic is possible
- Mass incarceration: A phenomenon that refers to the current American experiment in incarceration, which is defined by comparatively and historically extreme rates of imprisonment and by the concentration of imprisonment among young, African American men living in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage

Step-By-Step Procedures:

1. Slide show of statistics regarding the spike in prisoners since 1980, U.S. population separated by race, percentage of young adults incarcerated by race and white versus black crime rates/convictions (5 minutes)
2. Play music video for “Letter to the Free” by Common from 1:00-3:40 and ask class to take notes and point out 2-3 interesting they notice about the video. If students do not bring up the jail setting then guide discussion towards mass incarceration. (5 minutes)
3. Put this into historical context, specifically slavery, Emancipation, and the 13th Amendment. (Slide show) (10 minutes)
4. Show a clip of documentary *13TH* (14:05-19:00) in order to provide information on the era of Law and Order under the Nixon administration. Have students answer questions that are deemed appropriate by the instructor as they watch. (5 minutes)
5. Lead class discussion on film clip: Share answers they wrote down. Make connection between clip and current rates of mass incarceration. How has this affected us since 1980, and why does this matter today? (10 minutes)

Lesson Closure/Closing Activity:

At the end of the lesson (if time permits), instructors should discuss relevant material regarding mass incarceration, including but not limited to articles, statistics and legislation. After discussion, the instructor should discuss what students could do to combat the effects of mass incarceration today. (5 minutes)

Materials and Equipment Needed:

- Index Cards
- Pens or Pencils
- Chalk/White Board
- Projector
- Projection Screen
- Access to Netflix Account

Assignment:

Instructors will hand out paper with one question: Is mass incarceration a system of oppression and give one reason why.

Assessment:

In order to evaluate student learning, the instructor will look closely at the responses given in the assignment paper or if time permits will ask for volunteers to share their answers with the class. In the event that a majority of the class respond that mass incarceration is *not* a system of oppression than the goal of the lesson was not achieved.

Modifications for Diverse Learners:

This lesson focuses on presentation with a secondary focus on discussion. During activities the instructor should make themselves available to walk around to assure each student comprehends the material. If a student is not understanding instructor should place all students in pairs or groups, assuring that the students who may not be understanding are paired with students who do understand. This lesson also provides an opportunity for discussion after each presentation so students can engage and apply their newfound knowledge.

Annotated Bibliography

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow : Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York : [Jackson, Tenn.] :New Press ; Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2010. Print.

This book is one of my main sources of my research. This book by Michelle Alexander is an incredible source of information on this topic. The chapters include: “The Rebirth of Caste” which is a mainly historical chapter, “The Lockdown” which discusses tools that are used to systematically oppress the black community, “The Color of Justice” begins to further connect the dots by discussing the disproportionality of the incarceration of black men compared to other races as well as court cases that further prove the unfairness of this system, “The Cruel Hand”, a play on a Frederick Douglas quote, looks at the after prison life of these men and how they are treated in society, “The New Jim Crow” which discusses specific and in detail parallels between Jim Crow and how African Americans are treated in society today and “The Fire This Time” which will be helpful to you when closing your lesson. These chapters are full of content that can be used when discussing this topic, as this book hits almost every point needed to make a well-rounded and in-depth argument about Mass Incarceration. The last chapter can be important when closing as it discusses actions that can and should be taken now to help this issue.

Thompson, Heather Ann. “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History.” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 97, no. 3, 2010, pp. 703–734., www.jstor.org/stable/40959940.

This article by Heather Thompson delves deeper into issues facing urban areas post war. Thompson walks the reading through history while providing statistics on the war on drugs and the war on crime as well as the 1994 crime bill. Thompson discusses how these occurrences are still prevalent to today. This source will be good asset to discover the deeper effects the war on drugs had not only on African Americans but on people in general. This source deals less with race and more with numbers which I think will be an important tool while presenting on such a serious topic. It will not be enough to just tell the students that this system of oppression exist but it is imperative to show it exists with numbers.

Williams, Michael K. "War on Drugs Is a War on People." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 22 Sept. 2016. Web. 18 Feb. 2017.

This article zeros in on one specific aspect of mass incarceration, the war on drugs. The war on drugs has played a major role in the demonizing of black men. This article very appropriately claims that the war on drugs was not a war on drugs but a war on people. Similarly to the tactics used in 13th people in positions of power found new ways to criminalize a group of people and having it be not only legal but supported by majority of the country. This article will be useful for alternative sources as well as links to different statistics that will help further prove and support the point you are making.

Alexander, R., & Gyamerah, J. (1997). Differential Punishing of African Americans Who Possess Drugs a Just Policy or a Continuation of the Past? In R.J. Lazrus (Ed.), *Boundaries Readings in Deviance, Crime and Criminal Justice*: Boston (2004). Reprinted from *Journal of Black Studies*, 28(1), September 1997, 97-111. Sage Publications.

A hard point to prove during this lesson plan is simply that this unjust sentencing is actually happening. In order to not just make the lesson normative there needs to be proof provided that will assist the student to form their own thought-process. This article is a thought-provoking piece on drug related crimes, including possession and use, committed by both african americans as well as whites and then analyzing the sentencing these people received. As educators we are aware this is happening but we need to relay this to the students. This article will assist making you, as the educator, more knowledgeable on the constitutionality of this process and how it is possible in America in modern times.

Jakubiec, David; Kilcer, Andrew; and Sager, William, "The War on drugs" (2009). RIT: College of Liberal Arts 2009, Accessed from <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/article/1662>

This article is one of my personal favorites on the War on Drugs. This article dissects this issue from so many different angles and it is easy to read. It looks at legislation as well as presidents and breaks them down into categories which makes it easy to follow. This source can be used as a guide when looking for specific information. The information this article provides on the militarization of police is particularly interesting. The author looks at police militarization today as well as from the beginning of the war on drugs. The author suggests a psychological argument to their reading to see how the actual wording of “war” is affecting how police see themselves and how other see police.

13TH. Dir. Ava DuVernay. *Netflix*. N.p., 6 Oct. 2016. Web. 18 Feb. 2017.
<<https://www.netflix.com/search?q=13th&jbv=80091741&jbp=0&jbr=0>>.

This documentary is crucial to getting a well-rounded and necessary lesson on this topic. The director, Ava DuVernay takes the viewers on a journey through time and through mass incarceration as a whole. DuVernay interviews some of the most influences authors, writers and scholars of the 21st century such as: Angela Davis, Bryan Stevenson, Van Jones, Newt Gingrich, Cory Booker, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and so many others. The Director takes a special approach by tackling this subject matter from a legislative side instead of numbers. While numbers are extremely important, Legislation is another way to see that this system is constantly attacking the African American community. One special topic this documentary deals with is American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and how groups like ALEC support and make this system thrive. In the lesson plan this documentary will not only provide you with the best understanding of this topic but also will be a great resources to use during the presentation.