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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2018 Volume I: Race, Class and Punishment

From Mass Incarceration to Reform: An Analysis of Crime Policy Nationally and in the City of Brotherly Love

Guide for Curriculum Unit 18.01.05, published September 2018
by Matthew Menschner

This unit is designed to review the history and evolution of criminal justice and mass incarceration in the United States, with Philadelphia as a parallel case study. Many of my students understand that the system disproportionately affects people of color, yet they lack a nuanced understanding of the series of events that led to this crisis. Beginning with a brief history of early prisons in North America, we will examine the policy makers and their enacted legislation in relation to the continually-rising prevalence of “get tough” attitudes. The War on Drugs, the crack epidemic and controversial three-strikes laws will be detailed through case studies and rhetorical analysis. Short statistical analyses will give students a broad view of the scope and demographics of mass incarceration, while the aforementioned policy overviews will provide the historical context and socioeconomic minutiae. The unit will conclude with students conducting their own ethnographic research. By interviewing and detailing the experiences of members of their family or community who have had involvement with the criminal justice system, they will utilize firsthand knowledge to create an editorial piece or photo essay detailing what they have researched.

(Developed for U.S. History, grade 10; recommended for U.S. History, African American History, and Social Science, grades 9-12)

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