



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
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Understanding the System: A History of Prison and the Virginia Juvenile Justice System

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The criminal justice system in America is ever expanding. The United States has the highest incarceration rate of any industrialized country in the world. In 1970, there were less than 250,000 prisoners in the United States. Today, there are over 2 million. It is one of America's biggest problems. Prisons are continuing to grow despite crime declining all across the country. 1 in 3 black males will be incarcerated at some point during their lifetime. This is not an accident. Criminal justice policies are rooted in racism and classism.

In Virginia, youth are incarcerated in 24 juvenile detention centers, 18 group homes, and one youth prison—Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center—all operated or overseen by the state's Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). Black youth are overrepresented in Virginia's juvenile justice system and accounted for 71 percent of all admissions to Juvenile Correction Centers in 2016 (Justice 2016). Virginia's public-school system has the highest number of student referrals to the juvenile justice system in the country, with a rate double the national average. This is a system that presents significant problem.

My students are incarcerated in the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center in Virginia. Their life experiences have led to bad choices, which have caused their incarceration. Most are in survival mode 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The students do not have the vision to understand the juvenile justice system because they are too busy trying to survive the system. This unit will allow the students to step outside of themselves and examine the system and the circumstances that have led to their incarceration and a better understanding of how to avoid future incarceration.

(Developed for Virginia and U.S. History, grades 6, 7, and 11, and Virginia and U.S. Government, grade 12; recommended for Sociology and African American History, grades 9-12)

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