



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

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

Introduction

by James Forman, Professor of Law

Our seminar began with the startling fact that the United States has the largest prison system in the world. We dove down to explore mass incarceration's historical roots, and its particular impact on communities of color. Many of the Fellows wanted to study juvenile justice and school discipline, and these topics became a theme of our seminar. Our second theme was student advocacy and activism. As a result, most units begin by exploring a problem and end with lessons on how students might work for reform.

Some Fellows sweep broadly across time, place, and subject matter. **Sean Means** identifies three systems of oppression—the education, economic, and judicial systems—and studies the ways in which they have worked to isolate and oppress black communities throughout American history. Reflecting the great number of immigrants in his school, **Mark Hartung's** curriculum contrasts debates over immigration with those over mass incarceration. **Robert Schwartz** uses Ana Duverney's documentary *13th* alongside my own *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* to contrast America's rhetorical commitment to freedom with its actual practice of overincarceration.

Other Fellows chose to ground their units in their own states, cities, and even neighborhoods. Philadelphia's **Matt Menschner**—who became known as the Fellow who had read every book on every topic—examines the evolution of crime policy in the City of Brotherly Love as a microcosm of the national story. Richmond, VA's **Rodney Robinson** teaches in a school inside a juvenile prison. His unit seeks to understand the juvenile and adult criminal systems in Virginia and nationally, while forcing his student to grapple with how and why they have become targets. **Ann Brown**, also from Richmond, VA, focuses on her school's own Church Hill neighborhood. Church Hill is at once a site of slavery and rebellion, black cultural pride and systematic over-policing, and Ann uses those contrasts in a unit that asks her students to imagine how they can overcome their neighborhood pitfalls and achieve greatness.

Finally, a number of Fellows choose to focus on the place where mass incarceration meets schools most directly: school discipline and the school to prison pipeline. **Sara Mingione** connects Hummarabi's Code in ancient Mesopotamia with school discipline policies in her own San Jose middle school. Our hard-working seminar leader **Jennifer Vermillion** (aka "Verm") analyzes California's juvenile justice system and the school to prison practices that sustain it. **Sharon Ponder** studies restorative piece circles as an alternative to exclusionary zero tolerance practices of suspension and expulsion. **Kalah Bell** studies three remarkable individuals who succeeded despite early involvement with punitive school discipline and juvenile courts. In so doing, she hopes to equip her students to understand—and overcome—the obstacles they face. These units do two things at once: challenge students to imagine what justice in schools looks like, while equipping them with the tools to make their vision a reality.

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