

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/lesson-plans-for-justice-reform-a-call-to-action-for-students-and-teachers>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Whether you're a teacher or student and whether you're preparing for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, [Black Lives Matter at School Week](#) (Feb. 37, 2020), or Womens History Month (March), its time to develop a lesson plan on justice reform.

Teachers and students are on the front lines of some of our justice systems toughest issues [shootings in schools](#), [immigration enforcement](#), disproportionate [disciplining and policing](#) of youth of color, and [untreated trauma](#) from being a witness to violence. Yet despite a vibrant bipartisan movement for justice reform in this country, teachers and students aren't sufficiently enlisted to address these issues.

Many students and teachers are natural leaders, as Black teens fighting gun violence [have shown for decades](#), joined since 2018 by the impressive multiracial movement led by [Parkland teens](#).

One obvious way to enlist more students and teachers in the movement is to teach in our schools about the problem and the emerging solutions. But few lesson plans, units, or curricula on justice reform exist, and the ones that do tend to become outdated quickly and focus only on the problem. More and better models are needed.

To help, Vera compiled some educational resources in the chart below. But it'd be great to hear from students and teachers who are teaching about the problem and solutions and about new lesson plans you develop.

Here are Vera's suggestions on what should go into these teaching materials:

These are just a few examples that may be useful in designing a lesson plan. More examples are described below. [E-mail us](#) your plans and post them on social media with the tag @VeraInstitute and #JusticeLessonPlans. We'll feature your contributions in a future post.

Let's muster the power of students and teachers to transform the U.S. justice system.

With links to key articles, the *Times* efficiently lays out summaries of each topic, suggested activities, and a reference to curriculum standards. But it is now out-of-date and lacks an adequate focus on reforms, solutions, and how people can make and are making things better.

*The New York Times Learning Network: Multi-Topic*

*Social studies aligned. Topics: mass incarceration, mandatory minimums and sentencing, stop-and-frisk, juvenile justice, restorative justice, death penalty, right to counsel (2013)*

If there is a (more equity-oriented) *Great Gatsby* of justice reform, it is Michelle Alexander's 2010 book, [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#). This 10-lesson teaching guide builds in ample time for Socratic style discussion, assessment, and inward reflection. Vera recommends supplementing it reform-minded extension projects.

*Teaching Tolerance - Southern Poverty Law Center: Multi-Topic*

*ELA appropriate. Topics: mass incarceration, mandatory minimums and sentencing, juvenile justice, restorative justice, death penalty, right to counsel (2014)*

Focused on reentry, this curriculum uses clips from a *POV* episode called *The Return*, which tells the story of incarcerated people in California returning home after several sentencing reforms in 2012. The site itself is a model for curriculum providers, offering a lesson plan, a discussion guide, a reading list, and a screening toolkit.

*PBS - POV episode "The Return": Reentry*

*ELA-aligned. Topics: sentencing, restorative justice, reentry (2016)*

A two-class lesson plan on mass incarceration, this offering for North Carolina school systems provides thoughtful, engaging activities to explore criminal justice, including a mock committee meeting of the state legislature. The lesson transitions nicely to an interactive policy reform debate.

*Carolina K - 12 - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Mass Incarceration*

Based on Karen Houppert's book *Chasing Gideon: The Elusive Quest for Poor People's Justice* (The New Press, 2013) and *Defending Gideon*, a 30-minute video by The Constitution Project, this Street Law lesson effectively communicates the importance of the Constitution's promise of legal representation and how, under current constraints, it is failing to deliver justice for low-income people in

the United States. The plan, which is accompanied by a teachers guide and five handouts, moves from identifying issues to suggesting and analyzing solutions. It uses video clips, the story of a representative case, and state policy reforms, as well as providing suggested extensions.

*Street Law: Right to Counsel*

*Civics, Government, and ELA standards. Topics: sentencing, right to counsel, court system, legal precedent (2013)*

ADL offers numerous lesson plans on high-profile issues involving fairness and discrimination, including several related to criminal justice. This one was created in response to the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and reviews the systemwide problems that contribute to police shootings of unarmed African Americans. It leads students through an overview and discussion about unearned privilege and the racial disparities in the criminal justice system. It is recommended for teachers with a firm grounding in antibias education (and provides help in gaining that firm grounding). Students work with material that exposes the vastly different relationships that people of color have with the justice system.

*Anti-Defamation League: Police Relations*

*Grades 9-12, Reading, Speaking, and Listening standards. Topics: police conduct, police-community relations, criminal justice identity disparities (2014)*

This sitean international collaboration led by three civic education groups in the United Statesoffers a range of lesson plans in several languages. (See each organizations separate sites for additional lesson plans.) This short plan (approximately 45 minutes) gets students to engage with the major arguments for and against the death penalty, with one glaring omission: it does not address the issue of race. After reviewing arguments for and against the death penalty, students argue one side and then the other.

*Deliberating in a Democracy - Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF) of Chicago, CRF of Los Angeles, Street Law: Death Penalty*

*English and Spanish. Topics: death penalty (2011)*

This lesson plan focuses on police conduct through the history and practice of stop-and-frisk. It offers a beautifully designed slide presentation but few other resources.

*The Lowdown - KQED Learning: Police Conduct*

*ELA-aligned. Topics: police conduct, police-community relations (2017)*

This lesson plan could serve as a useful introduction to other criminal justice lessons. The 60-minute seminar-style lesson focuses on distinguishing one's own biases and understanding how larger-scale biases can affect the fairness of our police, prosecutors, and courts. The plan should be supplemented with other material, but it presents an important conceptimplicit biasin a helpful way.

*University of Washinton Law School: Implicit Bias*

*Topics: Implicit Bias, Stop-And-Frisk, Sentencing (2014)*

Students and teachers who want to dig deeper can draw from these more advanced syllabi. Dr. Jesse Carr compiled several of these syllabi and others on [racial violence](#) in the United States on his website, [State Sanctioned](#). Another great resource is the website of the [African American Intellectual History Society](#).

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