



educating for cultural literacy  
and mutual respect

## Creating Inclusive and Equitable Communities – A Call to Action

*Understanding the origins and impact of bigotry in the  
U.S. today and what we can do about it*

### **Lesson 7: Dominant Narratives in Governmental Policy**

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## Introduction

This lesson is dedicated to helping students recognize instances when the United States government uses dominant narratives to justify discriminatory policies. From mass incarceration to the southern border wall to the Muslim Ban, the U.S. government has relied on stereotypes and harmful portrayals of minority groups to persuade Americans to support policies meant to maintain a system of racial hierarchy.

This lesson teaches students how to identify dominant governmental narratives like “maintaining law and order” and “protecting our borders” that mask racist policies in seemingly neutral language. By examining these narratives through case studies on governmental discourse about African Americans, Lesson 7 will help students become more civically engaged and critically attentive to government rhetoric and policies.

**Theme:** Systems of Power

**Disciplinary Area:** General Ethnic Studies

**Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment:** 3, 4, 5

### Relevant Curriculum Standards

California's [Literacy in History/Social Studies Standards](#):

● **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: RST.11.12.1; RST.11.12.2; RH.11.12.7; RH.11.12.8**

- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- 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.
- Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

● **Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: WHST.9.10.1; 9.10.4; 9.10.9**

- Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.
- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### Background Information for Educators

Since our country's inception, the United States government has used dominant narratives to justify discriminatory policies and laws that benefit whites and disadvantage people of color. From slavery to immigration bans to internment camps to mass incarceration, the government has relied on particular rhetoric to frame its actions against non-white ethnic groups as legitimate in the name of law and order, safety, and freedom. This rhetoric often paints members of non-white groups as dangerous and subhuman.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Travis L Dixon and Keith B Maddox, "Skin Tone, Crime News, and Social Reality Judgments: Priming the Stereotype of the Dark and Dangerous Black Criminal," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35, no. 8 (2005): 1555–70; "Popular and

Consider the policy of mass incarceration. Although the U.S. population makes up only 5% of the world's population, it holds 25% of the world's prisoners.<sup>2</sup> In the last 40 years, the U.S. prison population has exploded by 700%, from 357,292 inmates in 1970 to over 2.4 million incarcerated persons in 2014. Mass incarceration has disproportionately targeted African Americans by imprisoning Blacks for drug offenses at a rate ten times higher than that of whites, even though Blacks and whites use drugs at roughly the same rates.<sup>3</sup>

To justify mass incarceration, public alerts began to air on television under President Reagan in the 1980s, showing drug use as a Black, poor male epidemic that threatened children's safety. All this time, incarceration rates were skyrocketing while drug use and crime rates were decreasing, yet the U.S. government was able to hide this statistic under its propaganda of keeping Americans safe.<sup>4</sup> This ideological language of "War on Drugs," "super predator," and "law and order" persisted through the George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush eras, who all ran for the presidency on a platform of being "tough on crime." Presidents masked their discriminatory mass incarceration policies in language that appealed to voters and citizens by framing mass incarceration and racial profiling as necessary methods to keep citizens safe.<sup>5</sup>

Similar dominant narratives have been used to justify other discriminatory policies, including more recently the Travel Ban directed mainly against Muslim-majority countries and southern border wall under President Trump. Framed as necessary actions to protect the safety of Americans, this rhetoric has masked the discriminatory and racist nature of these policies.

## Learning Objectives

**Identity:** *How will my instruction help students learn something about themselves and/or others?*

- Students will be able to explain how formal governmental policies and discourses shape our views of and attitudes toward ourselves and others.

**Skills:** *How will my instruction build students' skills relating to the content?*

- Students will be able to conduct content analyses of dominant narratives in governmental policies and discourses.
- Students will be able to analyze articles and extrapolate key takeaways.

**Intellect:** *How will my instruction build students' knowledge and mental powers?*

- Students will be able to recognize and critique bias in governmental policies and discourses.

**Criticality:** *How will my instruction inform students' views of power and equity and the disruption of oppression?*

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Pervasive Stereotypes of African Americans," National Museum of African American History and Culture, July 19, 2019, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans>.

<sup>2</sup> "Mass Incarceration," American Civil Liberties Union, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2010..

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

- Students will be able to explain how dominant narratives in government are harmful to non-white ethnic groups.
- Students will be able to explain who benefits from dominant narratives in government.
- Students will be able to analyze dominant narratives that have been used to justify mass incarceration and police brutality.

## Guiding Questions

1. How do governmental policies and discourses shape our views of others?
2. How have members of the United States government used dominant narratives to justify discriminatory policies and laws?

## Key Concepts and Terminology

- **Content Analysis** - a research method used to describe and evaluate messages and narratives.
- **Discourse** - written or spoken communication.
- **Bias** - an attitude of favor or disfavor toward something or someone.
- **Stereotypes** - beliefs and opinions about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of various groups.
- **Racism** - the belief that people have different attributes because of their skin color and that people can be divided based on the superiority of one race over another.
- **Discrimination** - treating people differently based primarily on membership in a group.
- **Mass Incarceration** - the policy of imprisoning vast populations, disproportionately impacting people of color.

## In-Class Activities

1. **The Hook** - Explain to students that this lesson will focus on dominant narratives put forth by the United States government. Students will study how the government used/uses dominant narratives to justify discriminatory policies against African Americans, particularly mass incarceration and police brutality. Write the term “mass incarceration” on the board and ask students to answer the following prompts:
  - a. Something I know...
  - b. Something I wonder...
  - c. Repeat the exercise for the term “police brutality.” Explain that this lesson will examine
  - d. how the United States government used dominant narratives about African Americans to try to justify mass incarceration and police brutality.

2. **Main Activity - Students Read About and Discuss Mass Incarceration** - Ask students to independently read the excerpt from *The New Jim Crow* and take notes using The New Jim Crow Notetaking Sheet handout on page 8. (Note: you can also assign this article for homework in advance of the class period to allocate more time for class discussion). After students finish reading, divide the class into groups of 3-4 students and have students discuss the article and their answers to the guiding questions. Bring the class back together and ask each group to share what they discussed. Further class discussion questions may include:
  - a. How has the United States government used dominant narratives to justify discrimination against African Americans?
  - b. Alexander argues that mass incarceration is the new version of the Jim Crow era. Have you heard about Jim Crow before? What does this term mean? Why does Alexander make this comparison?
  - c. What is the “racial caste” system that Alexander refers to?
  - d. **Students Read About and Discuss Police Brutality** - Students will most likely be familiar with the Black Lives Matter protests that achieved widespread significance after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Explain that this contemporary case study about police brutality and the government’s rhetoric about the Black Lives Matter protests elucidate the persistence of harmful government narratives about “dangerous” or “criminal” Black bodies. Ask students to independently read the article [“Trump is shouting his racism. He must be stopped,”](#) which discusses Trump’s use of dominant narratives to justify police brutality against African Americans in the name of “law and order.” (Note: the article includes an endorsement for Joe Biden, so you may want to clarify with students that you are not having them read this article for partisan reasons). Have students take notes using the Reading Comprehension Notetaking Sheet (page 9).
3. **Class Discussion** - After students finish reading, divide the class into groups of 3 or 4 students and have students discuss the article and their answers to the guiding questions. Bring the class back together and ask each group to share what they discussed. Use the Discussion Questions (page 6) to guide the conversation.
4. **Reflection** - Ask students to revisit the answers they wrote to the prompts at the beginning of class and write new answers to the questions:
  - a. Something I now know...
  - b. Something I still wonder...
  - c. Ask students to brainstorm other case studies of the government’s use of dominant narratives to support discriminatory policies.
5. **Extension Activities** - Here are some ideas for further student exploration:
  - Students watch the documentary “13th”, which explores mass incarceration in depth.

- Students read the article [“Fighting racial injustice is about more than rhetoric, political pandering”](#) by Rashad Robinson

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you heard any of these dominant narratives that the author mentions in your own lives?
2. The author mentions a tweet by Trump about “low-income housing”, which the author argues is “not-so-coded language for ‘Black and Brown people moving in next door.’” Do you understand this argument? How does Trump use seemingly neutral language to mask racist statements?
3. What questions are you left with?
4. What do you want to know more about?

## Homework

**Students Prepare Presentation** - This homework assignment is designed to allow students to deep-dive into a historic or contemporary case of a discriminatory governmental discourse or policy. Ask students to choose a case that they want to learn more about and conduct research on this case. Students will prepare a presentation (slideshow, poster board, recorded video, podcast, etc.) to show during a future class period. Possible case studies could include:

- **Historic case studies:** segregation, Japanese internment camps, forced relocations of Indigenous Peoples, Chinese Exclusion Act, anti-miscegenation laws
- **Contemporary case studies:** Muslim ban, southern border wall, housing policies

You may want to provide guiding research questions for students. Questions may include:

- When was this policy enacted and by whom?
- Who supported this policy?
- What groups were/are impacted? Who benefited? Who was harmed?
- What dominant narrative(s) did this government use to justify this policy?
- How did people resist or protest this policy?

## Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection

- Refer to steps 3-4 of the In-Class Activities section

## Additional Resources

- The American Prospect - “The New Jim Crow: How mass incarceration turns people of color into permanent second-class citizens” by Michelle Alexander - <https://prospect.org/special-report/new-jim-crow/>

- Texas Lutheran University, “Michelle Alexander: “The New Jim Crow”” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLdjVOswjRQ>
- Teaching Tolerance, “The War on Drugs-Mechanisms and Effects” - <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/the-war-on-drugsmechanisms-and-effects>
- Teaching Tolerance, “Mass Incarceration as a Form of Racialized Social Control” - <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/mass-incarceration-as-a-form-of-racialized-social-control>
- CNN, “Trump calls Black Lives Matter a 'symbol of hate' as he digs in on race” by Kevin Liptak and Kristen Holmes - <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/01/politics/donald-trump-black-lives-matter-confederate-race/index.html>
- The New York Times, “Analyzing Trump’s Immigration Ban: A Lesson Plan” by Michael Gonchar and Katherine Schulten - <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/29/learning/lesson-plans/analyzing-trumps-immigration-ban-a-lesson-plan.html>
- The New York Times, “Deconstructing the Wall: Teaching About the Symbolism, Politics and Reality of the U.S.-Mexico Border” by Michael Gonchar - <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/06/learning/lesson-plans/border-wall-lesson-plan.html>



## Student Worksheets

### *The New Jim Crow* Notetaking Sheet

1. Explain two of the main arguments of this excerpt.
2. How does Alexander discuss the role of dominant narratives in justifying discriminatory policies? (Hint: she doesn't use the term "dominant narratives" but instead uses the words "language" and "labels.")
3. What does Alexander mean by "new tactics have been used for achieving the same goals"?
4. What does Alexander mean by "legalized discrimination"?
5. Were there any terms you didn't recognize or what to know more about? What questions are you left with?



## Reading Comprehension Notetaking Sheet

### **“Trump is shouting his racism. He must be stopped” by Eugene Robinson**

1. According to Eugene Robinson, what has Trump’s response to the protests over the murder of George Floyd been like? What dominant narratives can you identify in Trump’s language?
2. What policies has Trump recently enacted in response to the protests?
3. What language did his administration use to justify these policies?
4. What does the author argue Trump’s “message to whites” is?
5. Were there any terms you didn’t recognize or what to know more about? What questions are you left with?