

Lesson Plan:

The vicious cycle of incarceration and homelessness

Overview: After being released from prison or jail, many people struggle to find housing. That in turn can prevent them from getting treatment for an addiction or from securing a steady job, and ultimately, staying out of jail. In this lesson, students will hear from families and individuals who have struggled to find adequate housing after time in prison for felonies. They will assess the impact on individuals and communities when returning citizens have inadequate housing and research organizations in their own communities that may help address the problem.

Subjects: U.S. History, U.S. Government & Civics, Criminal Justice, Legal Studies

Estimated time: One or two 50-minute class periods

Grade level: 7th-12th grade

Objectives:

- Students will examine the challenges faced by those individuals formerly convicted of felonies in reintegrating into their communities, including finding housing and work.
- Students will discuss the impact on both the homeless and the community caused by lack of adequate housing for those who served time for felony convictions.
- Students will research organizations and other entities working to address homelessness in their own communities.

Activities

Warm-up activity: Think, write, and share with a partner (virtual option – create a google doc or online discussion – have students write their answers and respond to at least one other student's answer).

1. What is the importance of having a home, and of having a physical address as an adult?

Watch **Main activity:**

Have your students watch the video and answer the questions below. You can use this [Google doc worksheet](#) for responses. (You will need to have students make a copy of the document so they can add their names and input answers.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhYSZ7t-7vc>

1. First, have students answer the following factual questions, either in class discussion and/or as written answers.

1. What was the crime for which the mom, Rachel Skyler, was arrested?
 2. What was the impact on her family?
 3. In what ways is she still being punished despite having served her time?
 4. What has been the impact of COVID-19 on the criminal justice system, including those who have served time and been released?
 5. How is a home address important to having access to other services, according to Andrew Jones?
2. Have students write a personal response summarizing the video – How do you feel after seeing the conditions these families and individuals are living in?
 1. If you could speak with anyone interviewed in the video, what are two questions you would ask them?
 3. Have students pair/share with a partner. Discuss as an entire class.
 4. Have students discuss the following question: Using [this resource](#), what are the homelessness rates in your area? In the U.S.? What stuck out to you from this website? Any surprises?
 5. [Read up on the organization mentioned in the video](#) of people trying to help homeless people. What do they do? How do they help?
 6. Have your students look up homeless aid organizations local to your area – how can you help? How can your school community help?
 7. *If there is time:* Discuss the ways crime and punishment have been covered in the media in the United States. Visit our site journalisminaction.org and click on the case study for the Muckrakers. If you 'd like, you can skip [to this primary source page](#) and have students answer questions there. After reviewing the case study, ask your students.
 1. What parallels do you see between the ways crime is covered in the media today and the ways it was covered by muckrakers at the turn of the century?
 2. What are some significant differences?

Extension activities:

This lesson uses a video segment from PBS NewsHour's "Searching for Justice" series. Searching for Justice explores criminal justice reforms unfolding across the country, as the leaders from both sides of the political aisle attempt to end mass incarceration by rethinking laws that some say have become barriers to work, housing, and economic stability. [Click here](#) for more stories and the series and watch for more NewsHour EXTRA lesson content based on Searching for Justice stories.

- If you would to extend this lesson, [click here for a lesson](#) on "collateral consequences" and felony disenfranchisement — the ways those convicted of crimes face limitations to their rights as punishment beyond prison.
- You can also use this lesson to discuss other obstacles facing those who have been released from prison.