

The United States Prison System

Course Information

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Honors Course

I chose for this course to be an honors course because the type of students I would prefer to take this course are students who will take it seriously. That's not to say that non-honors students do not take their classes seriously, but I have found in my experience so far that my honors courses are full of attentive and ready-to-learn students, while my other courses include many students who genuinely could not care less about what they are learning. I would very much prefer for my course to be given to students who will listen.

Course Description

In the United States, prisoners are routinely treated inhumanely, are given little to no resources, and have very little chances of being rehabilitated. This course delves into issues in our prison system such as mental and physical healthcare, overcrowding issues, issues with rehabilitation and education leading to incarceration, and a felon's rights upon being released from prison.

Course Schedule

Unit 1: Prison Failures

BIG Question: How do prison systems in the United States fail to help both free citizens and incarcerated citizens?

Argument of the Unit: Prison systems in the United States do not deter crime, give appropriate punishments, or provide rehabilitation for inmates.

Key Words: mass incarceration, for-profit prisons, occupancy clauses, solitary confinement, supermax prisons, delirium, rehabilitation

Link to Reading: [Adam Ruins Prison](#)

Annotation of Reading: In *Adam Ruins Prison*, the episode argues that the United States prison system is a failure on every level. Mass incarceration of prisoners has had virtually no effect on crime rates and for-profit prisons create occupancy clauses and longer sentences for prisons and prisoners in order to make money off of incarcerated citizens. Solitary confinement is argued to be a cruel and inhumane punishment that causes permanent brain damage and delirium to prisoners. Rehabilitation is borderline impossible due to governmental budget cuts on prison college and education systems. The episode's main argument is that these issues allow prisons to set inmates up to fail even after paying their debt to society. It shows students that prison systems sometimes do not even do the most basic things that they are supposed to do- from stopping crime to not having cruel and unusual punishments to allowing inmates to re-enter society.

Unit 2: Mental Health in Prisons

BIG Question: In what ways are prisons unable to properly care for mentally ill inmates?

Argument of the Unit: Prisons do not typically have the staff, training, experience, or physical facilities to properly care for mentally ill inmates.

Key Words: “serious mental illness,” functional impairment, prevalence rates, substance abuse units, specialized units,

Link to Reading: [Effective Prison Mental Health Services: Guidelines To Expand and Improve Treatment](#)

Annotation of Reading: In “Effective Prison Mental Health Services: Guidelines To Expand and Improve Treatment,” the authors argue that because prisons are now housing more people with mental illnesses than ever before, prisons must be equipped with the resources to care for these inmates. They created a manual for correctional professionals to use in order to help them understand and help mentally ill inmates instead of abuse them. It goes over definitions of mental illnesses that officers might come across, challenges both officers and inmates might come across when dealing with mentally ill inmates, and the benefits of having effective mental health services available to inmates. This not only shows students what correctional officers and prisons are doing to improve mental health systems in prisons, but it also shows that in some ways prisons are willing to make positive changes- not everything is wrong and unfixable.

Unit 3: Medical Care in Prisons

BIG Question: How do prisons medically treat their inmates when using a for-profit medical provider?

Argument of the Unit: Prison health care is generally not adequately provided to inmates when for-profit medical providers are in charge of it.

Key Words: for-profit medical provider, standards of care, financial penalties, settlements, independent monitor

Link to Reading: [How Bad is Prison Health Care? Depends on Who's Watching](#)

Annotation of Reading: In “How Bad is Prison Health Care? Depends on Who’s Watching,” author Beth Schwartzapfel describes the abysmal health care that inmates in Arizona and other states with for-profit medical providers are given. She argues that not only are these prisoners not given adequate care, but also that better care is directly linked to how closely these providers are being watched- something that Arizona prisons do not do. Because of this, prisoners receive delayed or denied treatment, not enough doctors or nurses, and medications that are regularly not refilled. This can result in treatable illnesses turning deadly for prisoners while providers sit idly by and watch. This article further shows students what for-profit institutions do to hurt prison systems, as well as showing them that prison health care is not at all where it should be.

Unit 4: Overcrowding Issues

BIG Question: How does the treatment of prisoners in overcrowded prisons affect their ability to re-enter society upon release as citizens?

Argument of the Unit: The abuse of inmates in overcrowded prisons inhibits them from peacefully re-entering society by teaching them dangerous skills and ways of adapting to life in prison that hurt their chances of integrating themselves in the free world.

Key Words: prison overcrowding, humane treatment, “cool out”/”shot out,” incentives, classification system

Link to Reading: [Home Truths About Prison Overcrowding](#)

Annotation of Reading: In “Home Truths About Prison Overcrowding” by Alonzo Cobb, Jr., the horrible living conditions of prisoners are brought to light. Prisoners are regularly subjected to poor ventilation and no air conditioning. Many prisons have radios, televisions and hundreds of people’s voices blaring at full volume at all hours of the day. Hygiene is also an issue- washed clothes, proper supply of hygiene products, and toilets available to prisoners are all very hard to come by. Food in prisons is inadequate and often stolen by other inmates. Personal possessions are also very often stolen unless the prison is somehow kind enough to provide lockers- which is not often. Generally, there is not a lot to do to pass the time as a prisoner, leading to idleness. Staff members very often use physical force against prisoners when difficulties arise. These issues and many others are discussed in this article, and they make it incredibly difficult for prisoners who are released to adjust to everyday life upon release. This text introduces the idea that prisoners in America are not provided with adequate means of living, leading to dangerous adaptive methods and ultimately a cycle of going back to prison.

Unit 5: Cycle of Prison

BIG Question: Why is transitioning from prison life to living in the free world hard for prisoners?

Argument of the Unit: Prisoners' lack of autonomy in prison makes the transition from living in prison to living in the real world incredibly difficult- in prison, all one needs to do is survive until release, whereas in the real world, possibilities are endless.

Key Words: total institution, reentry, "wildin' out," "jacket," lost time, sensory overload

Link to Reading: [Convicted and Condemned: The Politics and Policies of Prisoner Reentry](#)

Annotation of Reading: In "Convicted and Condemned: The Politics and Policies of Prisoner Reentry," Keesha Middlemass interviews actual former prisoners about how they were able to cope when being released from prison. She argues that prisoners do not have autonomy- they are treated like animals and degraded to the point where they feel like animals, too. Prisoners are given a "jacket," a file that generalizes who they are and what they have done that diminished who they are into a few pieces of paper. Their first days home can either feel so good it hurts or so overwhelming it causes anxiety. Prisoners are not given the chance to be individuals, make decisions, or live a fast-paced life in prison, so the free world can feel incredibly confusing. Many prisoners are left feeling like they are not given a fair chance to adjust to the free world, and many end up going straight back to prison because of this. This introduces students to the idea that even after prisoners have served their time, they are not necessarily able to be free and happy.

Unit 6: School-to-Prison Pipeline

BIG Question: How are students, especially students of color, students with disabilities, and students with a history of poverty, abuse, or neglect, given disadvantages in some school systems?

Argument of the Unit: Students are pushed from school into prisons instead of being properly educated because of some schools' harsh policies and practices.

Key Words: school-to-prison-pipeline, zero-tolerance policies, school-based arrests, disciplinary alternative schools, juvenile detention facilities

Link to Reading: [School-to-Prison Pipeline](#)

Annotation of Reading: The ACLU argues that students should be educated and not incarcerated, and that certain school policies and practices make it hard for students to have a fair chance. Public schools have inadequate resources, which increases disengagements and dropouts in the student body. Zero tolerance policies suspend and expel students for small, first-time offences. Increased reliance on police and school resource officers with no experience working with kids increases the amount of school-based arrests made on children. Juvenile detention facilities offer little to no education for children put in them. This article shows students that not all criminals are the result of scary, horrible people. Some people are pushed into prisons due to circumstances that have nothing to do with their personal choices in life, and once they're in the system, it's hard to get out.

Unit 7: Rights After Prison

BIG Question: How does restricting the rights that prisoners have upon being released affect their readjustment to the free world?

Argument of the Unit: Restoring convicted felons' rights to vote allows them to be seen as full citizens of the United States and reduces their chances of returning to prison.

Key Words: "civil death," disenfranchisement, executive order, "social contract," recidivism

Link to Reading: [Should Convicted Felons Lose the Right to Vote?](#)

Extra reading that includes other rights:

[What Rights Do Convicted Felons Lose?](#)

Annotation of Reading: In the article "Should Convicted Felons Lose the Right to Vote?," author Kimberly Kras argues that reinstating a felon's right to vote when they are released from prison helps them with reentry and treats them as the citizens they are. Currently, there is a lot of controversy surrounding disenfranchisement of prisoners. Some states never take away a felon's right to vote, while others never let felons vote again. Many argue that once a person commits a crime, they violate the "social contract" and therefore are no longer entitled to the rights and liberties other citizens have. Kras argues that felons are still citizens and should have the same rights as others. Not only this, but reinstating the ability to vote may also help felons to restore their own "social contracts" and therefore adjust to the free world easier. This article introduces students to the idea that in some areas, no matter if a person has paid their debt to society and done their time in jail, their criminal record will follow them for the rest of their lives.