

Looking at Homelessness in the United States through the Social Sciences and Public Policy

A 10-day mini-course or unit

Part of the Give Us Your Poor: Homelessness & the United States Project

Note on lessons: These lessons are designed for a ten-day mini course in which there are 80-minute class periods. They are geared towards a mature high school student population that either lives in or has access to an urban setting, but my hope is that this unit could be adapted into a longer course or to a course that would explore homelessness as it exists in rural areas as well. This unit requires students have access to the internet and phone services as well as transportation off-campus, though arrangements can be made if this is not possible. I leave assessment options to the discretion of the particular teacher since these depend on the nature of the course in which the unit is taught and the particulars of each teacher's classroom.

Day One

Objective: students will recognize and grapple with modern conceptions of the homeless in the United States

Goals:

- 1) students will define, in their own terms, what homelessness is
- 2) students will identify scenarios that might lead to a person becoming homeless
- 3) students will consider what stereotypes play into modern conceptions of the homeless

Activities:

- 1) As a class, students will brainstorm phrases that create a definition of homelessness. Through discussion, the class will try to create as complete a definition as possible while leaving room for the variety of realities that make up homelessness. Ideally, students will grapple with how difficult it is to define homelessness and how often this term is used as a catchphrase for various unspoken social realities in the United States.
- 2) After the class has determined a working definition of homelessness, the teacher should direct students to think about what their preconceptions of the homeless are where these preconceptions have come from. Students should consider media representations of the homeless as well as how the presence of homelessness on our streets is handled in local political rhetoric.
- 3) Students will then break into small groups of 3-4 students and create at least three scenarios in which a person may become homeless. One scenario might be modeled with the entire class before the groups separate. These scenarios should be written in the 1st person, typed, and submitted to the teacher. The teacher will then redistribute the scenarios, ideally to students other than those who have written them, and have students read them aloud. Ideally, these scenarios will generate discussion about a variety of

possible experiences and sensitize students to realities of homelessness that they had not considered before.

Homework: read Chapter 1, “The Origins and Failure of the Poorhouse” from Michael Katz’s In the Shadow of the Poorhouse. (note to teachers: this is a lengthy chapter and you may want to break this into smaller segments depending on the readiness of your students for the material)

Day Two

Objective: to put the problems of homelessness and persistent poverty into historical perspective

Goals:

- 1) students will understand that poverty and homelessness are historical rather than merely contemporary phenomena
- 2) students will learn what attempts were made in the early 19th century to alleviate the problems of poverty and homelessness
- 3) students will become aware of how historical context influences public policy and private responses societal problems

Activities:

- 1) break students into five groups and assign each group a different chapter subheading. Ask the group to prepare a 3-5 minute report on the sub-chapter wherein they summarize the reading and highlight the major contentions and historical and public policy decisions elucidated in the chapter
- 2) At the conclusion of the reports, ask students to discuss the chapter as a class, paying particular attention to the extent to which the decisions and historical context of the early 19th century remain or are different in modern times. Consider, for example, how the changing economy and immigration realities of the time affected policy and consider how similar and dissimilar our modern social context is from the early 19th century.
- 3) At the conclusion of the discussion, ask students how an historical examination of poverty and homelessness affects the preconceptions of the homeless that they discussed previously.

Homework: read the introduction to Linda Gordon’s Pitied but not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare

Day Three

Objective: to consider how poverty and homeless affect women and how public policy has shaped the reality of poverty among women in the United States

Goals:

- 1) students will become aware of the particular realities of poverty for women
- 2) students will explore the connection between women's role in society as primary caregivers for children and poverty
- 3) students will explore the connection between sexism in the workplace and women's poverty

Activities:

- 1) Ask students to do a quick-write at the beginning of class that answers the following question: "How is poverty and homelessness different for women than it is for men?" After allowing students to write on this topic for ten minutes, ask them to share their responses with the class.
- 2) Ask students to consider how public policy has or has not responded to the particular realities of poor women? Ask them to think in particular about the creation of AFDC and whether they think this was a good feature of public policy or a doomed one.
- 3) Find a recent newspaper article that discusses the Welfare Reform Act that was passed during the Clinton administrations. Ask students to discuss this policy in light of the Gordon reading and their class discussions

Homework: Using the internet and other resources, find at least three agencies or non-profit groups that serve your local homeless population or create public policy that affects the homeless. Write down a contact person, phone number, and a brief description of what each agency or organization strives to do.

Day Four

Objective: to comprehend how the school's local community attempts to serve or handle the problem of homelessness

Goals:

- 1) students will become aware of how their city or community strives to serve the homeless population and how the city construes the "problem" of homelessness
- 2) students will become aware of specific agencies that interact with those who are homeless
- 3) students will learn what competing and cooperative strategies are extant in public policy decisions regarding the homeless

Activities:

- 1) Each student will report on his or her three agencies or nonprofit groups and the class will compile a master list of these agencies

2) Through group discussion, the class will choose 6-8 organizations or agencies that they are interested in exploring.

3) Students will pair off and be assigned one agency to research and contact. For the rest of the period and for homework, students will contact the agency and prepare to report back to the class on: a) the group's goals b) the group's philosophies c) the group's strategies

Homework: make contact and prepare a report on assigned agency

Day Five

Objective: to comprehend how the school's local community attempts to serve or handle the problem of homelessness

Goals:

- 1) students will become aware of how their city or community strives to serve the homeless population and how the city construes the "problem" of homelessness
- 2) students will become aware of specific agencies that interact with those who are homeless
- 3) students will learn what competing and cooperative strategies are extant in public policy decisions regarding the homeless

Activities:

- 1) students present informal reports on agencies
- 2) using these reports, the class chooses three agencies or organizations that represent or employ varied approaches to serving the homeless and creating public policy
- 3) students then divide into three groups and adopt an agency or organization
- 4) students then plan to contact the organization and ask to either visit its office or headquarters or speak on the phone with a representative from the organization

Homework: identify at least two people from the organization with whom you would like to speak and interview. Come up with at least 15 interview questions for each person your group will be interviewing and prepare to visit or call for the interview.

Day Six

Objective: to comprehend how the school's local community attempts to serve or handle the problem of homelessness

Goals:

- 1) students will become aware of how their city or community strives to serve the homeless population and how the city construes the "problem" of homelessness
- 2) students will become aware of specific agencies that interact with those who are homeless

3) students will learn what competing and cooperative strategies are extant in public policy decisions regarding the homeless

Activity: students spend the class period either visiting or speaking with members of the agency

Homework: Write a report on your organization and prepare to present your findings to class

Day Seven

Objective: to assess the success or failure of the local community's attempts to serve its homeless population by speaking with homeless persons

Goals:

- 1) students will become familiar with some of the realities of living as a homeless person
- 2) students will be able to determine success or failure of local attempts to serve the homeless population
- 3) students will be able to determine success or failure of local attempts to alleviate the problems of persistent poverty and homelessness

Activities:

- 1) Students report on findings after interviews/visits
- 2) As a class, students identify ways to speak with/interview various homeless persons in the local community
- 3) Students divide into groups of two and determine a way to interview at least one homeless person in order to assess how the local community is doing in terms of serving its homeless clientele

Homework: students either go to site to interview or plan interview for tomorrow in class

Day Eight

Objective: to assess the success or failure of the local community's attempts to serve its homeless population by speaking with homeless persons

Goals:

- 1) students will become familiar with some of the realities of living as a homeless person
- 2) students will be able to determine success or failure of local attempts to serve the homeless population
- 3) students will be able to determine success or failure of local attempts to alleviate the problems of persistent poverty and homelessness

Activity: In pairs, students meet with a homeless person or persons to interview them regarding the city's care for them. (The particulars of this activity depend on your school and classes' circumstances. One option might involve the whole class traveling to a shelter, another might involve inviting some clients of an organization to school for lunch, etc...)

Day Nine

Objective: to assess the success or failure of the local community's attempts to serve its homeless population by speaking with homeless persons

Goals:

- 1) students will become familiar with some of the realities of living as a homeless person
- 2) students will be able to determine success or failure of local attempts to serve the homeless population
- 3) students will be able to determine success or failure of local attempts to alleviate the problems of persistent poverty and homelessness

Activities:

- 1) student pairs report on findings from interviews
- 2) class discusses which policies or services seem to be working from the standpoint of the homeless

Homework: students generate ideas for improvement for the local agency or organization that they previously adopted

Day Ten

Objective: to think creatively about alternatives or improvements to the current policies or practices employed by local organizations serving the homeless population

Goals:

- 1) students will become creators of public policy that could serve the homeless population and work towards alleviating persistent poverty
- 2) students will become skillful at debating the merits and shortfalls of various public policy decisions and services, keeping in mind the opinions and needs of homeless persons
- 3) students will use knowledge garnered from those they are trying to serve to create public policy

Activities: Students prepare and present brief policy proposals that they will either mail to or discuss with their adopted agency

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