

LESSON 2: BOOKS NOT BARS VIDEO, INCARCERATION AND ITS IMPACTS



45–65 minutes

The Poem (5–15 minutes)

Books Not Bars Video (35–50 minutes)

Summary (5 minutes)

OUTCOMES

As a result of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Examine how incarceration impacts economics
- Examine how incarceration impacts human rights
- Examine how incarceration impacts youth
- Analyze an advocacy video

MATERIALS NEEDED

Books Not Bars video (23 minutes)

VCR

HANDOUTS

1. Leo's Song
2. Economists for Equality
3. Human Rights for All
4. Youth for a Better Tomorrow

PREPARING TO TEACH

- Write up and post lesson outcomes.
- Copy **Handout 1** for each student and enough of **Handouts 2, 3, and 4** for a third of the class to get each.

WEB RESOURCES

Collaborating partners for this video include WITNESS (www.witness.org), Books Not Bars (www.booksnotbars.org), and the Ella Baker Center (www.ellabakercenter.org). For more on youth advocacy about prison issues check out: www.prisonactivist.org/youth, www.schoolsnotjails.com, and www.youthec.org/youthforce. For more on the various issues raised by the video, see the Web resources sections of the other lessons here.

THE POEM

1

Place **Handout 1: Leo's Song** on each desk before students arrive.

Handout 1: Leo's Song

Most children dream of genies and princesses
But I dream of you
Every night I go to bed hoping for something new
Awaiting your arrival while I dream of you

Remembering back when you were here
I dream of you
Thinking of the bed time stories
I dream of you

But darkness overclouds my mind
When I think that you are not home
Behind metal bars and stone
Where sick people go crazy and bad people get worse
Why do I have to suffer?

I think it's a curse
I am told I am innocent
But am I really?
Cause when they punish you
They begin to kill me . . .

2

Ask students to briefly discuss what they think this poem is about. Sample discussion points include:

This poem is about the pain and loneliness a teenager faces when her mother is locked-up behind bars. She feels that her childhood has been stolen from her and that even though she is innocent, she has also been punished for her mother's crimes. She is worried that her

mother is not going to get any help while she is incarcerated and might come back “crazy” or “bad.”

Explain to students that the poem is excerpted from the *Books Not Bars* video that examines the issue of incarceration or putting people in prison — its impact on society, the individuals locked-up, and their families. The video was produced by WITNESS, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, and Columbia University, organizations dedicated to furthering human rights.

BOOKS NOT BARS VIDEO

1

Inform students that they will be watching the video that the poem is from to learn some perspectives about how imprisonment impacts economics, human rights, and youth. They will also be thinking about whether building a new juvenile correctional facility is sound public policy in a specific situation.

2

Divide students into groups of no more than five per group and distribute the handouts — **Handout 2: Economists for Equality, Handout 3: Human Rights for All, Handout 4: Youth for a Better Tomorrow** — accordingly. Instruct students that they should read their handout; discuss their handout and strategies for answering the questions while watching the video. For example, each group member might want to be primarily responsible for one question; carefully watch the video to answer the questions for which they are responsible; and prepare to present the class with a summary of their findings when the video is over.

Students should **look over** the handouts, but wait to answer the questions as they watch the video.



NOTE: If you have more than 15 students, have two groups work independently on the same handout as needed.

3

Allow groups about 5–10 minutes to review their handouts.



NOTE: Examples of answers to all the handouts are provided below, but do not appear on the individual student handouts. Use these as your guide as students report on their work after the video has been shown.

Also, it is important to note that these statistics were the most recent available in 2001 *and have changed since then*. Have students research more up-to-date statistics or state-specific stats.

Handout 2: Economists For Equality (Answer Key)

Group Members:

Directions: Read the “problem” below then watch the *Books Not Bars* video and look for facts, arguments, and quotes that outline the economics of incarceration. Be prepared to teach your colleagues the most important facts you learned about the relation of prisons and economics. Take notes to answer the following questions.

Problem: Your city is investigating whether to build a new correctional facility for juvenile offenders. The facility will provide 1,000 new beds for juvenile offenders, 500 new jobs, and state-of-the-art facilities. Your city’s current facility is overcrowded and unsafe. The violent crime rate for juvenile offenders has decreased; however, non-violent crimes and drug offenses have increased 10%.

Your group, Economists for Equality (EFE), is investigating whether the construction of this new facility is sound public policy. EFE is a non-partisan organization dedicated to examining how economics can help create a just society.

- What does the term “prison industrial complex” mean?

The term refers to the business or industry of putting people in prison and the money companies make from incarceration. This term is similar to the “military industrial complex” that President Eisenhower, in his farewell address, warned could be a problem if those who profit from war became too powerful. In housing a prisoner there are economic opportunities for industries including: construction, trucking, security, technology, electricity, air conditioning, food service, correctional staffing, and clothing. Many prisons are run by private companies, while others are run by the state but contract out for goods and services. Putting people in prison has created business opportunities that many companies rely on.

- What trade-offs must society make in order to imprison juveniles? (Note: Remember a trade-off or “opportunity cost” is the cost of choosing one solution over another.)

Examples of trade-offs include not having sufficient funding for schools, keeping juveniles away from families, keeping juveniles from playing active roles in their communities, exposing juveniles, in some instances, to dangerous conditions, and lowering property values by putting prisons in communities. The United States spends 46 billion dollars on

corrections (both adult and juvenile). In other words, that is 46 billion dollars that cannot be spent elsewhere.

- How do activists, in particular Tasha Williams of Youth Force, in this video use knowledge of economics to make a case for their cause?

Tasha educates people by telling them that the state spends four to five times as much on incarcerating a teen for a year as compared to educating a teen.

- How might prisons benefit a community economically?

Many argue that prisons can benefit a community economically by creating jobs in the prison and related industries. In addition, some argue that putting people who have committed criminal acts in prison will prevent future crimes by those people and eliminate those costs.

- What additional information do you need?

Information on the wages for prison employees, employee turnover rates at prisons (i.e., are these jobs that people *want* to bring to the community?), the overall employment rate in the community surrounding the prison, cost to run an alternative facility where youth could be rehabilitated, financial condition of the city, costs of crime, cost of recidivism.

- Do you think the proposed juvenile correctional facility should be built in your city?

Answers will vary — there is no right answer. You may wish to encourage students to think about the most cost effective ways of rehabilitating juvenile offenders and protecting the community. Challenge students to explain exactly why they are taking the position they have.

BONUS POINTS: Fill in the following blanks based on the figures presented in *Books Not Bars*.

The United States spends 46 billion annually on corrections.

At the time his video was produced, it cost Californian taxpayers 4–5 times as much to imprison a teen for a year compared to the cost of education.

In 1997–98 California spending on corrections increased by 30% while state spending on education decreased by 18.2%.

Handout 3: Human Rights for All

Group Members:

Directions: Read the “problem” below then watch the *Books Not Bars* video and look for facts, arguments, and quotes regarding how incarceration impacts human rights. Be prepared to teach your colleagues the most important facts you learned about the relation of prisons and economics. Take notes to answer the following questions.

Problem: Your city is investigating whether to build a new correctional facility for juvenile offenders. The facility will provide 1,000 new beds for juvenile offenders, 500 new jobs, and state-of-the-art facilities. Your city’s current facility is overcrowded and unsafe. The violent crime rate for juvenile offenders has decreased; however, non-violent crimes and drug offenses have increased 10%.

Your group, Human Rights for All (HRA), is investigating whether the construction of this new facility is sound public policy. HRA believes that all people deserve basic human rights even those who have committed crimes. Human rights are the rights all people have just because they are human beings. Human rights are violated when people are not treated fairly, justly, or equally as human beings. HRA believes that all people should be respected and that human rights apply in people’s homes, schools, workplaces, and prisons.

- Name one right that children have according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. How might that right be violated in prisons?

The right to education. Many children in prison do not receive an adequate education and are subjected to conditions that make it impossible to study. Additionally, many schools in the United States are under funded.

The right to be treated with humanity and respect. The video gives examples of some of the degrading abuses some children suffer in prisons including rape and physical abuse.

The right to maintain a personal relationship with parents. Advocates contend that location of prisons along with conditions associated with poverty sometimes make sustained relationships with family impossible when one member is incarcerated.



NOTE: The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was carefully drafted over the course of 10 years (1979–1989) with the input of representatives from all societies, all religions and all cultures. Nearly every country in the world has signed the Convention. It sets standards in health care and education, as well as legal, civil, cultural, and social rights.

These standards are benchmarks against which progress can be assessed. The United States is one of three countries which have not ratified this treaty. The government has argued that it violates the rights of U.S. states to set their own laws about these issues. The convention also outlaws the death penalty against juveniles, which is practiced in the United States and has been upheld by our courts. See **Lesson 1: Human Rights for All** for more information.

- Name one right that children have according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? How might that right be violated in prisons?

The right to be equal before the law. The video examines the issue of disproportionate minority contact and confinement where African Americans and Latinos are incarcerated at a much higher rate compared to whites.



NOTE: It is important here not to misinterpret these statistics. As is covered further in Lesson 4, disproportionate minority contact with the justice system is a complex issue. It is *not* explained by higher crime rates by people of color.



NOTE: The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a general statement of human rights, which has been agreed to by almost every country. It is not a binding treaty, but a declaration of shared values. The United Nations has established a system of international treaties and other legal mechanisms to enforce many of the rights enumerated in it. The United States signed the Declaration. See **Lesson 1: Human Rights for All** for more information.

- List five human rights abuses that the video suggests sometimes take place in prisons.

Examples include prolonged isolation, exposure to sexual and physical abuse, inadequate sanitation, 4-point restraints, lack of education, beatings, etc.

- How could prisons be improved to respect human rights?

Answers will vary. Sample ideas include giving people who reside in prison more of a chance to live free from humiliation and isolation. For example, the facilities could be better

monitored for safety, respect of rights, and a focus on rehabilitation. Alternative intervention and treatment methods could be implemented including restorative justice programs, job training programs, mental health therapy and counseling, and drug treatment programs. Some contend, though, that prisoners already get better treatment than they should, with regular access to TV, libraries, etc.

- Should the human rights of juvenile offenders be limited when they are incarcerated? Why or why not? If so, what rights should be limited?

Answers will vary. However, by virtue of being locked-up some human rights will be limited to ensure safety such as freedom of movement, right to property, and right to speech. Arguably, rights such as right to religion, equal protections, education, etc., should be respected if they do not create unmanageable safety concerns. Our nation's courts have found that many of these human rights, which correspond to civil rights protected by our government, are indeed still in force in prisons.

- What additional information do you need to know?

Answers will vary but students may want to know more about: human rights, the policies of prisons regarding human rights, how compliance with human rights can be enforced, etc.

- Do you think the proposed juvenile correctional facility should be built in your city? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. Challenge students to explain exactly why they are taking the position they articulate. Have students explore how human rights can be respected if the prison is built.

BONUS POINTS: Fill in the following blanks according to the video.

Black youth are 48 times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated when arrested for a drug offense.

Latino youth are 13 times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated when arrested for a drug offense.

43% of parents in prison live over 500 miles from their children.

Handout 4: Youth for a Better Tomorrow

Group Members:

Directions: Read the “problem” below then watch the *Books Not Bars* Video and look for facts, arguments, and quotes that relate to the incarceration of youth. Be prepared to teach your colleagues the most important facts you learned about the relation of prisons and economics. Take notes to answer the following questions.

Problem: Your city is investigating whether to build a new correctional facility for juvenile offenders. The facility will provide 1,000 new beds for juvenile offenders, 500 new jobs, and state-of-the-art facilities. Your city’s current facility is overcrowded and unsafe. The violent crime rate for juvenile offenders has decreased; however, non-violent crimes and drug offenses have increased 10%.

Your group, Youth for a Better Tomorrow (YBT), is investigating whether the construction of this new facility is sound public policy. YBT believes that the incarceration of youth, particularly youth of color, is the civil rights issue of the 21st century. YBT organizes to educate about the problems and costs of the incarceration of teens. YBT urges that money be spent on preventing crime and providing rehabilitative services when youth engage in criminal activity.

- How does imprisoning youth impact them?

Negatively — damage to self-esteem, physical violence, lack of educational programs, lack of social services, health problems, sexual abuse, and human right violations, bad role models, feeling that the State doesn’t care about them, isolation from family and friends, etc.

- Can you think of ways that it could impact youth positively?

Positively — some facilities might provide teens with rehabilitative services, safety from abusive family or friends, time to reflect or stop negative behavior, protection from gangs, vocational skills, three meals and a bed, etc.

- How might imprisoning youth impact the community negatively?

It produces a generation of youth who don't have the skills for life in the community, can reinforce institutional racism, encourages recidivism (i.e. repeat criminal behaviors) and animosity between state and this group/community, etc.

- How might incarceration impact the community positively?

Incarceration may benefit some teens in some ways. Some argue it safeguards the community, provides jobs in security and in industries needed to run and build prisons, etc.

- List three advocacy strategies that you felt were effective in the video. (Note: Advocacy strategies are methods groups use to educate people about their position and get the results they want.)

Answers will vary, but examples include:

- Petitioning
- Protesting at a government hearing
- Posting compelling facts
- Peer-to-peer teach-ins
- Person-on-the-street leafleting
- Interviewing teens who have stories to tell
- Using experts to explain the problems
- Linking abuses to human rights issues
- Using film to make the issue come alive
- Creating visual images like the Healing Wall
- Organizing college campuses to boycott

- How should society respond when teens commit crime?

Answers will vary, but encourage students to explore what services juvenile offenders need to be law-abiding, healthy and successful adults and how society can be protected in the short term and the long term.

- What additional information do you need to know?

Sample answers include information about recidivism rates, educational programs that work, and the causes of juvenile crime.

- Do you think the proposed juvenile correctional facility should be built in your city? Why or why not?

Answers will vary, but encourage students to look at how building a prison will impact youth. Challenge students to explain exactly why they are taking the position they have.

BONUS POINTS: Fill in the following blanks according to the video.

Black youth are 48 times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated when arrested for a drug offense.

Latino youth are 13 times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated when arrested for a drug offense.

It costs the Californian taxpayers 4-5 times as much to imprison a teen for a year compared to the cost of education.

4

When everyone is finished bring the class back together.

Tell students that they will now watch the video.

Explain that *Books Not Bars* is an advocacy video. Ask students:

- What do you think it means that this is an advocacy video?

The key point here is that this video was created to document the work being done by activists and experts advocating one side of this issue. It was not meant to show multiple sides. Instead, it is meant to convince you of a specific point of view.

Tell students that as they watch the video they should think about the important information being presented. They should *also* think about who is *not* featured and what questions they have that the video does not address.

5

Play the video. Pause the video clip every few minutes to give students an opportunity to work on their handouts.

6

When the video ends, give students a few minutes to prepare a two-minute summary of their group's findings to present to the class.

7

Have a representative from each group present their position to the class. Allow other students to ask questions of the representative and his/her group members. Sample questions to ask the groups include:

- What was the most compelling reason that led you to your conclusion?
- If you think the facility should be built, how would you make sure that it safeguards the human rights of youth? The economic rights of the community?
- If you do not think the facility should be built, how should society respond when children commit crimes? How can you respond?

8

Close the discussion by returning to the issue of *Books Not Bars* as an advocacy video. Ask students:

- Is *Books Not Bars* effective as an advocacy piece?
- What qualities make it effective? Ineffective? How might you make the video better?
- Whose views are not represented here?
- How would they respond to the video?
- What else would you want to know in order to make a well-informed decision about this issue?
- How would you go about exploring other points of view that this video does not present?

SUMMARY

Ask students:

- What was the most compelling information you gained from the video?
- How did the video make you feel? Why?
- Was there anything you disagreed with in the video?
- What surprised you the most?

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

This video presents several opportunities for homework assignments, depending on the subject of your class. One option—beginning a youth advocacy project—is described in the extension activity included with the lessons. www.youthact.org can be a useful resource.

For a literature or English class, give students a creative writing assignment. Have students write a poem similar to “Leo’s Song,” but from the perspective of the parent in prison. Or have them write a persuasive essay based on the position taken by their group on the imagined new correctional facility.

In a government or social studies class, give students a library research assignment to find an article that takes a position on stronger or weaker penalties or other alternatives to incarceration. Have students write a brief response, critiquing the article they find. Be sure to give explicit expectations for the responses.

HANDOUT 1

Leo's Song

**Most children dream of genies and princesses
But I dream of you
Every night I go to bed hoping for something new
Awaiting your arrival while I dream of you**

**Remembering back when you were here
I dream of you
Thinking of the bed time stories
I dream of you**

**But darkness overclouds my mind
When I think that you are not home
Behind metal bars and stone
Where sick people go crazy and bad people get worse
Why do I have to suffer?**

**I think it's a curse
I am told I am innocent
But am I really?
Cause when they punish you
They begin to kill me . . .**

HANDOUT 2

ECONOMISTS FOR EQUALITY

Group Members:

Directions: Read the “problem” below then watch the *Books Not Bars* Video and look for facts, arguments, and quotes that outline the **economics** of incarceration. Be prepared to teach your colleagues the most important facts you learned about the relation of prisons and economics. Take notes to answer the following questions.

Problem: Your city is investigating whether to build a new correctional facility for juvenile offenders. The facility will provide 1,000 new beds for juvenile offenders, 500 new jobs, and state-of-the-art facilities. Your city’s current facility is overcrowded and unsafe. The violent crime rate for juvenile offenders has decreased; however, non-violent crimes and drug offenses have increased 10%.

Your group, Economists for Equality (EFE), is investigating whether the construction of this new facility is sound public policy. EFE is a non-partisan organization dedicated to examining how economics can help create a just society.

- What do you think the term “prison industrial complex” means?

- What trade-offs must society make in order to imprison juveniles? (Note: Remember a trade-off or “opportunity cost” is the cost of choosing one solution over another.)

- How do activists, in particular Tasha Williams of Youth Force, in this video use knowledge of economics to make a case for their cause?

HANDOUT 3

Human Rights for All

Group Members:

Directions: Read the “problem” below then watch the *Books Not Bars* Video and look for facts, arguments, and quotes regarding how incarceration impacts **human rights**. Be prepared to teach your colleagues the most important facts you learned about the relation of prisons and economics. Take notes to answer the following questions.

Problem: Your city is investigating whether to build a new correctional facility for juvenile offenders. The facility will provide 1,000 new beds for juvenile offenders, 500 new jobs and state-of-the-art facilities. Your city’s current facility is overcrowded, and unsafe. The violent crime rate for juvenile offenders has decreased; however, non-violent crimes and drug offenses have increased 10%.

Your group, Human Rights for All (HRA), is investigating whether the construction of this new facility is sound public policy. Human Rights for All believes that all people deserve basic human rights, even those who have committed crimes. Human rights are the rights all people have just because they are human beings. Human rights are violated when people are not treated fairly, justly, or equally as human beings. This does not mean that everyone has to be treated the same way—there may be good reasons that not everyone should be allowed to exercise their freedom. However, HRA believes that all people should be respected and that human rights apply in people’s homes, schools, workplaces, and prisons.

- Name one right that children have according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. How might that right be violated in prisons?

- Name one right that children have according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? How might that right be violated in prisons?

HANDOUT 3 CONT.

- List five human rights abuses that the video suggests sometimes take place in prisons.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
- How could prisons be improved to respect human rights?

- Should the human rights of juvenile offenders be limited when they are incarcerated? Why or why not? If so, what rights should be limited?

- What additional information do you need to know?

- Do you think the proposed juvenile correctional facility should be built in your city? Why or why not?

BONUS POINTS: Fill in the following blanks according to the video.

- Black youth are _____ times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated when arrested for a drug offense.
- Latino youth are _____ times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated when arrested for a drug offense.
- _____% of parents in prison live over _____ miles from their children.

HANDOUT 4

Youth for a Better Tomorrow

Group Members:

Directions: Read the “problem” below then watch the *Books Not Bars* Video and look for facts, arguments, and quotes that relate to the incarceration of youth. Be prepared to teach your colleagues the most important facts you learned about the relation of prisons and economics. Take notes to answer the following questions.

Problem: Your city is investigating whether to build a new correctional facility for juvenile offenders. The facility will provide 1,000 new beds for juvenile offenders, 500 new jobs, and state-of-the-art facilities. Your city’s current facility is overcrowded and unsafe. The violent crime rate for juvenile offenders has decreased; however, non-violent crimes and drug offenses have increased 10%.

Your group, Youth for a Better Tomorrow (YBT), is investigating whether the construction of this new facility is sound public policy. YBT believes that the incarceration of youth, particularly youth of color, is the civil rights issue of the 21st century. YBT organizes to educate about the problems and costs of the incarceration of teens. YBT urges that money be spent on preventing crime and providing rehabilitative services when youth engage in criminal activity.

- How does imprisoning youth impact the *youth* negatively?

- Can you think of ways that it could impact *youth* positively?

- How might incarceration impact the community *negatively*?

- How might incarceration impact the community *positively*?

HANDOUT 4 CONT.

- List three advocacy strategies that you felt were effective in the video. (Advocacy strategies are methods groups use to educate people about their position and get the results they want.)
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- How should society respond when teens commit crime?

- What additional information do you need to know?

- Do you think the proposed juvenile correctional facility should be built in your city? Why or why not?

BONUS POINTS: Fill in the following blanks according to the video.

- Black youth are _____ times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated when arrested for a drug offense.
- Latino youth are _____ times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated when arrested for a drug offense.
- It costs the Californian taxpayers _____ times as much to imprison a teen for a year compared to the cost of education.