

Unit 3: Your Town

Introduction

Although the world has made great strides to eliminate poverty 1.5 billion people still lack access to safe water, and 125 million children around the world do not attend primary school. Also millions, especially children, go to bed hungry every night, according to the World Bank (<http://www.worldbank.org/ourdream/>).

Begin this unit by brainstorming with students about poverty. Ask your students to define poverty and to research poverty rates in the United States versus other countries. You may also want to introduce the question of equity. Ask your students if they have noticed differences in the community they live in as compared to other neighborhoods in your city or state.

This unit is designed to facilitate a discussion about life in less fortunate communities, but be careful not to alienate students in the class. Its aim is to encourage students to examine what assets and liabilities are relevant to communities and what it takes to make a change in a neighborhood.

Once you have introduced the concept of poverty, show the video especially the segment from (23:12 to 28:09) about Blanca Rojas' concerns about inviting her college friends to see her community. Ask your students to point out the differences in Blanca's life as compared to her college classmates.

Use the glossary of terms to begin a discussion about social, economic, and political change. The discussion questions will help you frame the issues as they relate to *colonias* and other poor communities, but encourage your students to discuss problems that may exist in affluent communities as well.

The project at the end of this lesson is designed to encourage students to compare communities, to discover inequities that may exist, and to formulate a strategy for overcoming some of those inequities.

We encourage you to share your experiences for this discussion, project, and essays. We also encourage you to give us feedback on what impact this unit had on your classroom and the experience of your students. To share your experience, contact Kierstan Gordon by e-mail (kgordon@klru.org).

Glossary of Terms

Grade Levels: 7-12

The following broad terms are designed to spark discussion and central to understanding American politics and history. All of these terms are defined at the Web sites listed at the end of this unit. However, many are illustrated throughout the film.

- **neighborhood associations**
- **development**
- **consensus**
- **public**
- **private**
- **resources**
- **decision makers**
- **policymakers**
- **strategy**
- **revitalization**
- **enterprise zones**
- **liabilities**
- **assets**
- **privileges**
- **rights**
- **public services**
- **local**
- **national**
- **federal**
- **economic development**

Discussion Questions

Grade Levels: 7-12

Overview: Students will discuss how neighborhoods differ and the assets and liabilities of poor communities. They will also explore how community organizing and grassroots organizing has produced political, social, and economic change.

Objectives:

The student will:

- Use *The Forgotten Americans* film, the PBS Web site and the Internet to find information.
- Demonstrate research skills and reading comprehension.
- Demonstrate media literacy skills.
- Demonstrate a willingness to learn about other cultures.

Questions About Colonias:

- Most people say that *colonias* residents can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, but is anything more needed?
- What must teachers take into consideration when dealing with students living in *colonias*?
- Which *colonia* is one of the largest in the Rio Grande Valley?
- Gangs are attributed to what?
- Why are many children unsupervised after school?
- Why will more than half of students not graduate from high school?
- What is the major threat that 90 percent of *colonias* face?
- What percentage of *colonias* children go to college?

Questions About Your Town:

- Where are the poor communities in your hometown?
- What are the problems in those communities?
- What assets do those communities have?
- What buildings are being repurposed for a use other than what was originally designed?
- What new buildings are being built?

- What services are lacking in those communities?
- Do residents have access to new technologies such as DSL lines, cable and other telecommunications?
- How do most residents get around?
- Where do most residents work?
- What is missing in these communities?
- How are these poor communities different from your neighborhood?
- How are these communities the same?

Project

Grade Levels: 7-12

Overview: Students will gain an understanding of the democratic process through a hands-on project comparing neighborhoods.

Estimated Time: Two weeks to gather information, work with the groups and develop an essay.

Objectives:

The student will:

- Learn about the democratic process.
- Gain a better understanding of local government.
- Gain a better understanding of community organizing.
- Record the experience.

Related National Standards:

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by MCREL at <http://www.mcrel.org/>:

Social Studies

- Knows examples of conflicts stemming from diversity, and understands how some conflicts have been managed and why some of them have not yet been successfully resolved.
- Knows some of the discrepancies that have arisen between American ideals and the realities of political and social life in the United States (e.g., the ideal of equal justice for all and the reality that the poor may not have equal access to the judicial system).
- Knows how various individual actions, social actions, and political actions can help to reduce discrepancies between reality and the ideals of American constitutional democracy.
- Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.

Economics

- Understands unemployment, income, and income distribution in a market economy.

Health Education

- Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health.

Technology

- Knows ways in which technology and society influence one another (e.g., new products and processes for society are developed through technology; technological changes are often accompanied by social, political, and economic changes; technology is influenced by social needs, attitudes, values, and limitations, and cultural backgrounds and beliefs).

Procedure:

- Select groups of four or five students and have them examine neighborhoods in your town.
- Have each group choose a different neighborhood in your town. At least one group should select one of the less affluent areas of town and one should choose the most affluent.
- Have each group create an asset map of the neighborhood they have selected. What buildings are there? What community groups or other programs are in place to work in the neighborhood?
- Have the students take notes about the conditions of the roads, parks, libraries and other public services. Have the students take notes about those same public services in the wealthier part of town.
- Have the students compare what they find and discuss the differences and similarities.

Assignment:

- Have the students write a report comparing the differences in neighborhoods.
- Have the students research economic conditions of the area and discuss what can be done to improve their town.

Assessment Recommendations:

- Teachers should set standards for the project before it is assigned based on individual work and group work. Also, teachers should determine how much time should be spent on the lesson as well as the amount of research required. For example, seek student input on what will make a successful report and how it should be presented to the class.
- Ask your students to grade themselves and their peers. Decide as a class what percentage of the total grade should come from peer feedback and self-assessment.
- Decide on specific skills that you want to emphasize, for example, group work, leadership, research abilities, collective learning, and presentation skills, and grade accordingly.

Extension and/or Adaptation Ideas:

- Have the students write letters to the editor of the local newspaper describing the differences in community services.
- Have the group or each individual student develop a photo essay to illustrate the differences.
- Have the students make appointments with city or county officials, express their concerns, and present their plan.

Recommended Online Resources:

- PBS Democracy Project (<http://www.pbs.org/democracy/classroom/index.html>)
- Class in America (<http://www.pbs.org/classinamerica/resources/index.html>)
- U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (<http://www.doc.gov/eda/>)

- **American Economic Development Council** <http://www.aedc.org/>
- **National Association of Counties** <http://www.naco.org/>
- National League of Cities (<http://www.nlc.org/>)
- **National Association of Towns and Townships** <http://natat.org/natat/Default.htm>
- Council for Urban Economic Development (<http://www.cued.org/>)
- Online Women's Business Center (<http://www.onlinewbc.org/>)
- Center for Applied Rural Innovation (<http://www.ianr.unl.edu/rural/>)