



Lesson Plan: Economic Decision Making

OVERVIEW:

This lesson plan is designed to be used in conjunction with the film *Prison Town, USA*, which tells the story of a small town (Susanville, CA) that tries to resuscitate its economy by hosting a prison. This lesson will explore factors that influence economic decision making at both the individual and community level.

P.O.V. documentaries can be taped off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, P.O.V. offers a lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE!

OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Identify factors that influence their personal decisions regarding employment.
- Use viewing skills and note taking strategies to understand and interpret a video clip that illustrates employment decisions made by residents of Susanville, CA.
- Work in groups to research and synthesize information for a presentation that makes the case for or against the hosting of a prison in an economically depressed rural community.
- Act as a member of a planning commission and vote on whether or not hosting a prison is an appropriate economic development strategy for the community.

GRADE LEVELS: 6-12

SUBJECTS: Economics, Civics, Geography, U.S. History

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Handout: Viewing Guide (PDF file)
- Method (varies by school) of showing the class video clips from the P.O.V. Web site for *Prison Town, USA*, or have a copy of the film and a VHS/DVD player and monitor
- Computers with Internet access

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED: Three 50-minute class periods (Note: Less time is required if only Part 1 or Part 2 of the lesson is taught.)

SUGGESTED CLIPS:

Clip 1: Job Opportunities in Susanville, CA (5:25)

The clip begins at 11:25 with shot of “No Trespassing” sign, then slate that Susanville’s last mill closed in 2004. The clip ends at 16:10 with “The only thing left is the prison.”

Clip 2: Frank Ferris (1:30)

See the “Additional Video” section on P.O.V.’s *Prison Town, USA* Web site:

www.pbs.org/pov/pov2007/prisontown/special.html

Clip 3: Economic Impact of Prisons (3:00)

The clip begins at 26:50 with a shot of downtown stores. Slate says, "Rural towns often welcome prisons..." The clip ends at 29:50 with "They call them the Mom and Pop stores" followed by the "Available for Sale or Lease" sign.

BACKGROUND:

In the early 1990s, crime emerged as perhaps the central issue in domestic American politics. The rate of violent and property crimes had risen steadily for decades, and the rise during the 1980s was pronounced -- in 1980, there were 597 violent crimes per 100,000 persons, while in 1991 there were 758 such crimes per 100,000 persons, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report.

The rise in crime rates led to efforts to extend prison sentences, often by mandating minimum sentences for particular crimes (e.g., "three strikes" laws) and by putting an end to the discretion that allowed judges to impose variable sentences. As prison sentences grew, so did the inmate population: in 1980, there were about 500,000 people in state and federal prisons and local jails. In 1995, that number was 1.6 million; and in 2005 it reached 2.2 million.

The exploding inmate population necessitated a boom in federal and state prison construction. Much of the prison boom has been concentrated in small towns and rural areas that have seen their economic base erode as industry and factories close down or relocate. One study reported that 350 rural counties saw prisons open between 1980 and 2001. The possibility of employment and a boost for local businesses are often part of the campaign to bring prisons to such localities, and have led some small towns to offer extraordinary concessions to attract prisons. Among the offerings include free land, road construction, and infrastructure upgrades.

The promised benefits, however, are not always realized. The jobs that new prisons bring are often filled by outsiders. Local workers may not be qualified for some positions, such as corrections officer, and may find that work for which they are qualified is being performed instead by prison labor. Secondary benefits, such as contracts with local businesses to provide goods or services to the prison, may not last, as prison management chooses to renegotiate contracts or outsource aspects of the work. A 2003 study of prisons (see the Resources section) sited in rural communities found that there was no overall effect on local employment, per capita income, or consumer spending, three leading indicators of economic vitality.

ACTIVITY:

Part 1: Personal Employment Decisions (30 minutes)

1. Ask students who work why they chose the job that they did. If no students in the class are employed, ask them to imagine where they would choose to work if they could and why. List factors influencing their decisions (e.g., job wages, location, work involved, available positions locally, employee discounts, etc.) on the board. Point out that a person's employment decisions are often shaped by a number of factors.

2. Explain that the class is going to take a closer look at factors influencing employment decisions by watching two brief video clips that feature residents of the town of Susanville, California. Explain that Susanville is a rural community that has experienced a number of changes to its local economy in recent times. As a result, residents have

needed to adjust to these new circumstances and make certain decisions about their employment.

3. Pass out the Viewing Guide to help focus student viewing, and then show these clips:

- Job Opportunities in Susanville, CA (length: approximately 5:25)
- Frank Ferris, Fifth Generation Rancher (length: approximately 1:30)

4. Discuss the issues that affect the employment decisions for Dawayne, Gabe, and Frank (e.g., limited opportunities, job skills, wages and benefits, need to support a family, etc.). Compare them to the list of factors affecting employment decisions from Step 1. Which factors are most and least influential for students when making employment decisions? What about for the residents of Susanville?

Part 2: Community Economic Development Decisions (Two 50-minute class periods)

1. Ask students to imagine that they are members of a planning commission for a small, rural community that is economically depressed. Explain that the state wants to build another prison and thinks some state-owned land in your area would be the ideal location.

2. Divide students into four groups; two that favor the idea of hosting a prison in your community, and two that are against it. Using the Web sites in the Resources section, the video clip “Economic Impact of Prisons”, and other research materials, have each group create a persuasive presentation that makes its assigned case for or against bringing a prison to town.

3. Allow class time for a “planning commission meeting” where each group makes its presentation to the “board.” Then, have each student “vote” for or against hosting the prison by writing a paragraph that states his or her position and then justifies this view using information shared in the presentations.

4. Share with the class the results of the “vote.”

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS:

Students can be assessed on:

- Completion of the Viewing Guide.
- Contributions to class discussions.
- Effectiveness of presentations.
- Written justification of votes.

EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS:

- Find out how going to prison affects the lives of family members left behind. Watch additional scenes (www.pbs.org/pov/pov2007/prisontown/special.html) not included in *Prison Town, USA* to see how one family prepares for the return of their loved one, and to hear the reflections of an inmate’s wife living without her husband. Discuss specifics of how families are impacted by a loved one’s incarceration. Consider also reading books that address having a parent in prison, like *Visiting Day*, by Jacqueline Woodson (ages 4-8) and *Let’s Talk About When Your Parent Is in Jail*, by Maureen K. Wittbold (ages 8-11). Other resources and support for families are available from the Family & Corrections Network (www.fcnetwork.org/).

- Explore prison sentencing issues at P.O.V.'s Web site for *The Legacy: Murder & Media, Politics & Prisons* (www.pbs.org/pov/pov1999/thelegacy/index.html). Engage students in the “You Be the Judge” activity where they consider various crimes and determine an appropriate punishment. Also, follow the evolution of “three strikes” laws with a timeline (from 1992-1998) outlining key activities related to the passage of such influential legislation.
- Take an in-depth look at the school-to-prison pipeline. Conduct research to determine how schools contribute to or prevent the flow of students into the criminal justice system. What types of students are most frequently represented in the “school-to-prison pipeline?” Why? Students could also debate the need for and effectiveness of “zero tolerance” disciplinary policies in schools, develop case studies that illustrate which school and criminal justice policies are working and which aren't, and create policy recommendations for legislators that analyze how targeted investments in education might reduce expenditures in corrections.
- Investigate issues of prison life by pairing the viewing of *Prison Town, USA* with the documentary, *The Farm*, which illustrates life in a maximum security prison in Angola, Louisiana. Get more details on *The Farm* here: (www.gabrielfilms.com/Farm/Farm_project_pg.html). What do students think life in prison should be like? What daily activities should be available to prisoners? How would students design a prison? Be sure students consider the perspectives of both prisoners and prison guards.

RESOURCES:

Back to the Floor

www.pbs.org/opb/backtothefloor/prison/index.htm

Read what happens when the CEO of a private prison building and operating company works as a prison guard for one week and sees the day-to-day realities of working at a prison.

Big Prisons, Small Towns

www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/articles_publications/publications/bigprisons_20030201

This 2003 study from The Sentencing Project examines 25 years of economic data for rural counties in New York, covering both counties in which prisons were built, and those without any facilities. Results indicate that rural communities received no significant economic benefit from hosting a prison.

Building a Prison Economy in Rural America

www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/building.html

This book excerpt, written by one of the authors of *Big Prisons, Small Towns* (listed above) analyzes the impact of prisons in rural communities.

Communities See State Prisons As Economic Opportunity

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3718/is_200009/ai_n8906066

Residents of St. Lawrence County (New York) tout the benefits that hosting a prison in the county would bring.

Grayson Prison

http://blogs.roanoke.com/roundtable/new_river_valley_issues/grayson_prison.htm

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The Roanoke Times (Virginia) hosts a thoughtful round table discussion of community members talking about the pros and cons of bringing a prison to their rural area.

We Love 'Em

www.rte50.com/2007/06/we-love-em.html

An editor from the Planning Commissioner Journal talks to city leaders in Canon City and Fremont County, Colorado, who describe how Canon City has prospered by hosting 14 prison facilities.

STANDARDS:

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Civics

Standard 1: Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government.

Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.

Economics

Standard 2: Understands characteristics of different economic systems, economic institutions, and economic incentives.

Standard 5: Understands unemployment, income, and income distribution in a market economy.

Geography

Standard 4: Understands the physical and human characteristics of place.

Standard 11: Understands the patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface.

Language Arts

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

U.S. History

Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in broadcast journalism, secondary education, and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's Director of Education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource Web site (now PBS Teachers), and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.

Background Sources:

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