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AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY, INC.

LESSON PLAN: "Every Mother's Son"

OBJECTIVES:

Students will:

- Recall and discuss personal encounters with local police.
- Complete a viewing guide for a film that presents three examples of police brutality, illustrates systemic problems related to policing, and shows what some are doing to bring about reforms.
- Work in groups to develop a class report on the mission and practices of local police.
- Develop recommendations for how local police can be more effective in the community.
- Meet with a local police department representative to present and discuss student recommendations.

SUBJECTS: Civics, U.S. History (see related learning standards below)

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

MATERIALS:

- TV and VCR or DVD
- Copy of P.O.V.: *Every Mother's Son* (Note: P.O.V. broadcasts can be taped off-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. Alternatively K-12 schools can Buy the Film for \$40 at www.andersongoldfilms.com)
- Transcript of film (for teacher planning purposes)
- Discussion Guide
- Internet access for research
- Guest speaker: Police department representative

The transcript of the film and the Discussion guide are available to download from:
<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/everymothersson/resources.html>

ESTIMATED TIME: Five 50-minute class periods. Breakdown: Two 50-minute class periods to set-up, watch, discuss the film, and make research assignments; one 50-minute class for group work (assuming some research is done outside of class); one 50-minute class period for students to report research findings and create a set of recommendations; one 50-minute class period for dialogue with a police department representative. Advanced students may be able to complete the lesson in four 50-minute class periods.

BACKGROUND:

Policing in the United States is a dangerous job. As they go about their duties, officers can find themselves under tremendous pressure to make split-second decisions regarding the use of force, including lethal force. In some cases, such force can be excessive, resulting in unjustified shootings, severe beatings, fatal chokings, and rough treatment.

When this type of police brutality occurs, it is often challenging to hold the officers involved accountable. A Human Rights Watch report on police brutality states, “overwhelming barriers to accountability make it possible for officers who commit human rights violations to escape due punishment and often to repeat their offenses. Police or public officials greet each new report of brutality with denials or explain that the act was an aberration, while the administrative and criminal systems that should deter these abuses by holding officers accountable instead virtually guarantee them impunity.”

This lesson plan features a P.O.V. film that profiles three victims of police brutality that made headlines around the country in the late 1990’s: Anthony Baez, killed in an illegal choke-hold; Amadou Diallo, the young West African man whose killing sparked intense public protest; and Gary (Gidone) Busch, a Hasidic Jew shot and killed outside his Brooklyn home. Their stories are told from the perspective of the men’s mothers, who fight for justice and accountability for their sons’ deaths, and seek systemic reforms that will help prevent such deaths from happening in the future.

After watching and discussing the film, students will research their local police department and work to improve its effectiveness in the community.

ACTIVITY:

Step 1:

Ask students to take five minutes or so to write a description of the last encounter they had with police in your area. (If a student has never had interacted with police, suggest that he or she write about an experience of a friend or relative, or one that they have watched or read about in the media.) Invite a few volunteers to share what they’ve written and allow the class to react. Are most experiences of class members like the ones that students shared? Did others have encounters that were dramatically different? Based on the discussion, facilitate the development of a statement that students believe generally describes policing practices in your area.

Step 2:

Explain to students that you are going to show them a film that shows what happened during three bad encounters with New York City police in the 1990’s. The film also addresses systemic problems related to policing and what some are doing to bring about reforms. Then distribute the Viewing Guide handout (see [Materials](#) section), review it with students, and start the film. (Viewing time: approximately 55 minutes) Note: You may find it helpful to refer to the program transcript (see [Materials](#) section) if you want to

stop and address points on the Viewing Guide while watching the film, or if you need to find a logical stopping point for spreading student viewing over two class periods.

Step 3:

Review and discuss student responses to the Viewing Guide. (Refer to the transcript as needed to help with discussion.) Be sure that students have identified what steps citizens can take to bring about reform in government and its departments.

Step 4:

Ask students how the problems with the policing system shown in the film compare to your area. Explain that the class will be able to answer that question in more concrete terms after examining the mission and practices of local police, and then making recommendations for improvement.

Step 5:

Work in groups to develop a class report on your local police department. Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students. All members of each group should complete a research task, as well as fulfill the responsibilities of a specific role in the group: “Leader” (works with group members to divide up research assignments and group responsibilities, keeps group members on task and on time, ensures overall success of group), “Writer” (synthesizes group research results for submission), and “Reporter” (shares group findings with the class). If a group has a fourth member, that person can serve as “Editor” (reviews work of “Writer” and provides corrections/feedback).

Assign each group one of the research areas below related to the local police department. To find data for their topic, students should use Internet or library resources to access police department information, examine government or community reports and statistics, and review related news reports. Phone calls and interviews will also be helpful. Consider contacting a police public affairs spokesman in advance and seeing if that person or another representative can be available to field student questions in a timely manner via telephone or email.

Recruiting: What qualifications does the police department look for in potential officers? Is there a shortage of officers? A high turnover rate? Do they recruit specific types of people? Do recruits need to be able to speak languages common in the community, if applicable? Does the department consider it important for officers to live in the community in which he or she will serve? What is the average pay of a police officer in your area?

Training: How are recruits trained for their role as police officers? What percentage of their training focuses on crime fighting tactics? On community service and people skills? Other areas?

Operational Guidelines: What is the mission of the police department? What priorities are emphasized in the patrol guide or other printed guidelines? What are

some examples of appropriate responses to situations of conflict, as outlined by local police?

Accountability: What statistics are kept by the police department related to officer activities? How are officers held accountable for adhering to department standards of conduct? What is the department's disciplinary record? What is the most common complaint from the community regarding police practices?

Results: What does the police department see as its greatest contribution to the community? How does it measure its success? In what areas is the department trying to improve? What prompted these reforms?

Step 6:

Have group Reporters report their findings orally to the class and submit his or her group's written research summary. Summaries should then be assembled to form a class report on the local police department. How do class research findings compare with the initial statement/judgment that they made about local police in Step 1 of this lesson? Briefly discuss if and how students were surprised by anything they learned in their research.

Step 7:

Solicit recommendations from the class for how local police can be more effective in the community. To help stimulate ideas, consider referencing the P.O.V. online feature: [Best Practices in Community Policing](http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/everymothersson/special_practices.html) (http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/everymothersson/special_practices.html). Record and display the recommendations where everyone in the classroom can see them.

Step 8:

Invite a representative from the police department to attend class and comment on the class' research report (fax or email in advance) and set of recommendations. As part of the discussion, have the police officer suggest ways that students and their families can make his or her job easier. Conclude the class by agreeing on "next steps" or "action items" that will continue the process of helping local police be more effective in the community.

ASSESSMENT:

Consider the following opportunities for assessment:

- Collect the Viewing Guide handouts and assign points for completion.
- Grade students on participation in class discussions.
- Evaluate the written summaries of group research findings.
- Ask students to evaluate the performance of fellow group members.
- Have students write a "personal contract" for actions they will take to improve community relations with police.

EXTENSIONS:

- Write the transcript of an imaginary interview with the police officers accused of murdering the three men featured in the film. What would you ask? How do you think they would respond?
- Compare and contrast this film to a TV program that shows some of the challenges faced everyday by police officers, such as NYPD 24/7 or COPS. What dangers do police officers face on a daily basis? Would students want to be police officers? Why or why not?
- Do students believe that racial profiling by law enforcement exists in the United States? Should it exist? Why or why not? Have students research statistics and case studies and report their findings back to the class for a follow-up discussion.
- Filmmakers have to make decisions about what to include and what to leave out of their films. Have students write an essay about what was left out of this film and why they think such decisions were made.
- Debate whether or not public safety, or even national security, can be achieved while protecting civil liberties.
- Write letters to appropriate authorities and ask for changes that can help curtail human rights violations by police. The Human Rights Watch organization recommends who to write and what to ask for at <http://www.hrw.org/reports98/police/what.htm>.
- Have students complete the P.O.V. online quiz, What Would You Do? (http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/everymothersson/special_what.html), which puts students in the shoes of a mayor, a police officer, and a citizen. Do students change their approaches to law enforcement based on whose shoes they are standing in? If so, why? How do some of the approaches described in the quiz compare to local decisions and strategies related to law enforcement?

RESOURCES:

Please visit the P.O.V. link directories on the following topics:

Community Policing

http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/everymothersson/resources_02.html

Access links to reports on community policing and organizations that advocate for community-oriented policing practices.

New York City: Police Practices, Organizations, and People From the Film

http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/everymothersson/resources_03.html

Examine reports on NYC police practices, the “Broken Window” theory of the relationship between quality of life perceptions and crime rates, and Web resources on people in the film like Amadou Diallo, Rudolph Giuliani, and activist Richie Perez.

Police Brutality

http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/everymothersson/resources_04.html

Explore common obstacles to accountability for police abuse, cases of police brutality in cities nationwide, a community action manual for fighting police abuse, and organizations the advocate for police reforms and help citizens file complaints with law enforcement agencies.

RELATED LEARNING 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 18: Understands the role and importance of law in the American constitutional system and issues regarding the judicial protection of individual rights

Level IV, Benchmark 3

Knows historical and contemporary events and practices that illustrate the absence or breakdown of the rule of law (e.g., events such as vigilantism in the early West, Ku Klux Klan attacks, urban riots, corruption in government and business, police corruption, organized crime; practices such as illegal searches and seizures, bribery, interfering with the right to vote, perjury)

Standard 28

Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals

Level III, Benchmark 1

Understands how participation in civic and political life can help bring about the attainment of individual and public goals (e.g., personal goals such as living in a safe and orderly neighborhood, obtaining a good education, living in a healthy environment; public goals such as increasing the safety of the community, improving local transportation facilities, providing opportunities for education and recreation)

Level IV, Benchmark 3

Knows the many ways citizens can participate in the political process at local, state, and national levels, and understands the usefulness of other forms of political participation in influencing public policy (e.g., attending political and governmental meetings, demonstrating, contacting public officials, writing letters, boycotting, community organizing, petitioning, picketing)

Level IV, Benchmark 4

Knows historical and contemporary examples of citizen movements seeking to expand liberty, to insure the equal rights of all citizens, and/or to realize other values fundamental to American constitutional democracy (e.g., the suffrage and civil rights movements)

Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life

Level IV, Benchmark 1

Understands the importance of established ideals in political life and why Americans should insist that current practices constantly be compared with these ideals

Level IV, Benchmark 2

Knows discrepancies between American ideals and the realities of American social and political life (e.g., the ideal of equal opportunity and the reality of unfair discrimination)

Level IV, Benchmark 3

Knows historical and contemporary efforts to reduce discrepancies between ideals and reality in American public life (e.g., union movements, government programs such as Head Start, civil rights legislation and enforcement)

U.S. History

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

Level 3, Benchmark 5

Understands how different groups attempt to achieve their goals (e.g., the grievances of racial and ethnic minorities and their reference to the nation's charter documents to rectify past injustices, local community efforts to adapt facilities for the disabled)