



Human Rights in the U.S.

Lesson Plan The People Behind the Statistics

Grade Level: 8-12



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Lesson Plan: The People Behind the Statistics

Goal: To put a human face on the violation of human rights within the United States.

Objectives:

- Students will gain a general understanding of the concept of human rights.
- Students will examine how well the United States is doing in fulfilling certain fundamental human rights.

Essential Question: How is the U.S. doing in fulfilling the most basic human rights for its people?

Resources:

- Handout: Universal Declaration of Human Rights - abbreviated version (page 14)
- Handout: Role Play Instructions (page 5)
- The People Behind the Statistics Statements (pages 6-13) - cut into separate strips
- Human Rights Toolkit - download at <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=354>.

Time Frame: 1-2 class periods

Age Level: 8-12

Appropriate Subject Areas: Social Studies

Procedure:

1. **Teach.** Ask the students if they have ever heard of human rights. Can they explain what they are? Explain that human rights are those rights which are essential for us to live as human beings. Solicit some examples from the group. Human rights are agreed upon by everyone, make sense and are fair. They are meant to protect people from unfair rules, and ensure not only access to basic needs such as food and shelter, but also the chance to grow and develop beyond what is required for survival.

Human Rights Overview: Explain that after WWII and the formation of the United Nations (UN), a group of 50 countries got together and agreed on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which lists the rights that every person has. The UDHR is not a law; it is a statement about what countries should do.

There are also two international covenants (treaties) based on the Declaration that provide the principles of the UDHR with legal backing: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). These two documents, along with the UDHR, make up the International Bill of Human Rights. Several other treaties on specific rights, such as the rights of women and children, have also been adopted by the UN. Give each student Handout: Universal



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Declaration of Human Rights - abbreviated version.

Explain that human rights come in different categories but they are all equally important. Give examples of each category:

- Political rights (right to vote)
- Civil rights (right to freedom of opinion)
- Equality rights (right to be free from racism)
- Economic rights (right to be paid fairly for work)
- Social rights (right to an education)
- Cultural rights (right to speak one's own language)

- 2. Prepare.** From The People Behind the Statistics Statements choose an equal amount of statements from each category (e.g.: Work, Health, Education, etc.) to hand out. Students will break up into small groups based on these categories. It is important to have enough students (at least 3 to 4) in each category for good discussion. If necessary, you can eliminate one or more categories to accommodate the size of the class. Hang posters around the room for each of the categories you will be using in the activity.
- 3. Introduce.** Explain that in this lesson students are going to look at human rights issues within the United States. Give each student a different statement. Make sure to mix them up so they are reading them in random order. Explain to the students that too often when we are looking at statistics we forget that they represent real people with real stories. Based on concrete data, these statements put a human face on the very real challenges people are confronting in the U.S.
- 4. Read.** Have the students read the statements out loud one by one. Remind them that they are representing not just one person, but symbolizing thousands of others facing similar situations. Encourage them to read loudly, clearly, and with expression and to listen respectfully to others reading their statements. Once a student has finished reading their statement, they should choose which of the rights hanging on the wall has been violated in their scenario and go stand next to that poster.
- 5. Small Group.** Once all the statements have been read, there should be separate small groups representing each of the rights on the posters. Provide each student with Handout: Role Play Instructions. In their small groups have students take on the role of the person in their statement. Let the students know that they are taking part in a Summit on Human Rights in the United States. Each group will have a chance to discuss their issue and come up with a list of recommendations or solutions they believe would help them overcome some of the obstacles they are facing in getting their rights met. It is important for each group to have concrete goals for change and be able to discuss their reasons. To help them with their presentation, give each group the Human Rights Toolkit. Allow 20-25 minutes for students to read over the



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information and create their main talking points on: 1) the problems they are facing and 2) what should be done about it. Each group should have 5-7 minutes to present.

6. **Present.** Have the room set up so that everyone can see and hear one another. Give each group 5-7 minutes to present on their conclusions. As the teacher, you are the moderator of the summit. If possible, have someone write down each group's main issues and solutions on the board.
7. **Discuss.** Once all the groups have presented discuss the following questions:
 - What are your reactions to this information?
 - How did it feel to play your role?
 - Does personalizing factual information make it more relevant? Does it make the need for action more urgent?
 - How important do you think these issues are?
 - In your opinion, what responsibility should the United States have in fulfilling these rights? What improvements do you think should be made if any?
 - How are these rights interrelated? Does the inability to have one right fulfilled affect other rights?
 - How realistic do you think some of your solutions are? What are the barriers to implementing them effectively?

Good news! The statements all involve human rights violations and can make the situation in the United States seem hopeless or overwhelming, but change does happen! You can let your students know that we had to retire a few statements because the human rights violation stopped.

- Iowa used to prohibit providing election materials in languages other than English, making it hard for immigrant citizens to vote. That was overturned by a court in 2023!
- Maryland (and other states) used to restrict post-conviction DNA testing, but now every state and the federal government have laws allowing people to access DNA testing to prove their innocence even after they are convicted.



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Role Play Instructions:

Take on the role of the person in the statement you just read out loud.

You are now part of a small group representing a specific human rights issue in the United States. As a group of concerned citizens, you have all been chosen to take part in a Summit on Human Rights in the United States. You have been given the opportunity to discuss your issue and come up with a list of recommendations or solutions that you believe would help people like you overcome similar obstacles.

Each group will have 20-30 minutes to prepare for their presentation and 5-7 minutes to present. To help with your presentation, read the *Human Rights Toolkit* or research your topic on the internet.

In your presentations, be sure to cover:

- 1) the main issues you are facing as a group
- 2) what your group thinks needs be done to address those issues

Key Questions to discuss in your small groups:

- What are your reactions to this information?
- How did it feel to play your role?
- Does personalizing factual information make it more relevant? Does it make the need for action more urgent?
- How important do you think these issues are?
- In your opinion, what responsibility does the United States have in fulfilling these rights? What improvements do you think should be made if any?
- How are these rights interrelated? Does the inability to have one right fulfilled affect other rights?
- How realistic do you think some of your solutions are? What are the barriers to implementing them effectively?



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Right to Equal Protection & Due Process

My wife and I were driving home when we were pulled over by the police. The police said they had to search the vehicle. By the end of the search, our belongings were scattered all over the ground. When no drugs were found, the police left us there on the side of the road with no explanation. I believe we were treated this way due to our race - police in our city stop Black people at 6.5 times the rate of similar white people.

I am a public defender. In the past three years, my case load has doubled, while our state's budget for criminal defense has declined drastically. With so little money and so many clients, I cannot provide a thorough defense. For instance, I am forced to accept police reports without an independent investigation. This lack of adequate representation adds to the disproportionate numbers of poor individuals and minorities in prison.

I am a female inmate at a state prison. Like many other women convicted of drug trafficking, my partner kept and sold drugs in our home. I was too afraid to report him because he abused me. Although the judge sympathized with me, the law did not allow him to consider domestic violence as a defense in my case.

I was born in Thailand and have been an American citizen for ten years. Eleven months ago, immigration officials put me in jail because I didn't have my citizenship papers with me when I was pulled over for a minor traffic violation. It took 10 months and a skilled lawyer to get me out of jail. I was lucky because I was able to afford a lawyer. Over two thirds of all detained immigrants have no legal representation.



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Right to Housing

I wanted to buy a reasonably priced home, but the bank wouldn't give me a mortgage for less than \$150,000. Instead, I had to turn to a risky arrangement where I don't have the deed to my property until I make my last payment in 20 years. Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic Americans are more likely than other buyers to have to use risky alternative financing to buy a home.

It seems like forever that I have been on a waiting list for public housing. My family has to share an apartment with my sister, and a one-bedroom is not enough room for the five of us. The landlord is threatening to kick us out, but we have nowhere to go. Considering that only 1 in 4 eligible applicants actually receive assistance, we may never find a place of our own to live.

I want to leave my abusive boyfriend, but I do not have anywhere else to go. I wish that I could save money for my own place, but he controls the finances. I am worried that my children are suffering, but if I leave him, then we will not have a roof over our heads. 20% of women in homeless shelters in my state left their last home due to abuse and I do not want to suffer a similar fate.

There was not room at the homeless shelter and I had to spend a night on the street. I was picked up and given a misdemeanor for loitering. Now I am employed and looking for an apartment, but my applications have been denied based on my misdemeanor. This is the effect of criminalizing people experiencing homelessness.

I'm in 7th grade and failing. I have been at six different schools this year alone. Between shelters, staying with friends, and scraping by until my family gets evicted, I have had a hard time keeping up. At least I still go to school. 37% of youth experiencing homelessness are chronically absent from school.



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Right to Just & Favorable Working Conditions

I work at a nursing home in Arizona. Even though I have a full-time job and often work overtime, I still cannot seem to make ends meet for me and my family. I thought that if I worked hard, my family would never live in poverty. Apparently, I was wrong. Almost 3 million full-time, year-round workers live in poverty due to the low wages of their jobs.

I really enjoy my job, but as a deaf individual I have difficulty communicating with my coworkers. I am afraid that my resulting isolation will limit my advancement in the company and increase my chances of being laid off. Many workplaces still lack basic adaptations necessary for my career success such as interpreters, text phones, and pagers. I am not surprised that almost half of the deaf community in the U.S. is not in the labor force.

I recently migrated to the U.S. to do agricultural work. I pick tomatoes for twelve hours a day with almost no breaks for rest, food, or going to the bathroom. Just last week, a young man fell ill from heat exhaustion while picking. This culture of exploitation must be one reason why farm workers are 4 times more likely than the general public to be fatally injured while working.

Recently, I started hearing anti-gay comments at work, some made by my boss. I am not “out” at work and worry that someone will learn of my sexual orientation and I will lose my job. Did you know that under the laws of 16 states, it is legal for an employer to fire someone because they are lesbian or gay?

I work on an assembly line at a locomotive plant. I want to join the local union, but fear that doing so will cost me my job. I have heard that while firing employees because of unionizing is against U.S. labor law, our company views the small fines as routine costs that are nothing compared to the trouble they think is caused by union members.



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Right to Food

My family qualifies for food stamps but only for the minimum benefit. That means we receive \$23 worth of food stamps each month. I hate to complain but \$23 doesn't last very long, even for just two people.

I got severely sick from an E. coli outbreak that affected spinach. I question whether our food production protects the health of animals, workers and consumers. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 48 million Americans are sickened; 128,000 are hospitalized; and 3,000 die each year from food borne illnesses.

I am a senior citizen who relies on the food shelf, but I still have to choose between paying for food or medical care. 20% of food shelf users have had to make that difficult choice, and even more of us have to choose between buying food and paying utility bills.

I am a 3rd grader and I have been struggling in school. I feel hungry often and sometimes school is the only place where I get fed. I heard another adult tell my mom that children who experience severe hunger like me have higher levels of chronic illness, anxiety, depression, and behavior problems than children who do not experience hunger.



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Right to Health

We have no health insurance because my state did not expand Medicaid and I earn too little to get a subsidy on the individual insurance exchange. 1.9 million people fall into this coverage gap, even though we were promised everyone would have health insurance.

I have a disability and some of my special needs are not covered by my insurance provider. I understand that my case is not unique at all. 30-50% of adults with disabilities have to delay or forgo medical care because of gaps in insurance coverage.

I am an African American mother. My infant son died before we could even bring him home from the hospital. Did you know that infant mortality rates for African American babies are more than twice as high as those for whites in the United States?

I am a sophomore in college and I had a mental health crisis that landed me in the emergency room. Even after I stabilized, there was nowhere for me to go. I spent weeks in the emergency room before a space opened up in a residential treatment program. 1 in 5 patients stay in hospitals even when they could be treated elsewhere because my state has so few resources for the mentally ill.

Some say health care in the U.S. is the best in the world, but certainly not for all. As a racial minority in the U.S., I receive a lower quality of care than do my white counterparts, especially for more complicated procedures. This is true even when minorities have health insurance and are of the same social class as whites.



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Right to Political Participation

I have been out of jail for 8 years, yet my state will not allow me to vote in any elections. Some states, including my own, bar certain convicted felons from voting for life. I have served my time and work hard to be a productive member of society. I am tired of feeling like an outcast because of a mistake I made years ago.

Yesterday, I went to my local polling station to vote and I could not get into the building because it didn't have wheelchair accessible entrances. This is not unusual. Less than half of U.S. polling stations are completely accessible to persons with disabilities. I feel discriminated against. All Americans, regardless of ability, should be able to vote at a polling station if they want!

As a resident of the District of Columbia, I am not allowed to vote in Congressional elections. This is particularly upsetting because D.C., and thus its 710,000 residents, is under the direct authority of Congress.

I recently went to a polling station and was told I did not fulfill the residency requirement for voting in my state. As a person experiencing homelessness, I often have to move among city districts for food, shelter, and employment. This should not prevent me from being a part of the election process.



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Right to Education

I am the parent of a four year old who qualifies for Head Start, but there are no spaces available. Only half of all eligible children are able to attend Head Start centers. No wonder only half of the kindergartners from low income families are ready to start school. It's not fair that my child should be left behind.

I am a 13-year-old Latino student. We took state tests this year and I was not proficient at reading or math. I assure you it has little to do with my IQ. I question these tests and our methods of teaching when only 1 in 5 Latino and African-American 8th graders are proficient in math and reading, compared to over half of all white students.

I am a high school guidance counselor. I have heard my state has one of the worst counselor-to-student ratio in the country. My school is a typical example. My case load includes nearly 800 students. It is impossible for me to meet the needs of all of my students.

I came to this country from Mexico when I was four. I am an A student in high school right now and dream of going to college, so I applied for DACA, the program designed to help children like me stay in the United States. The program was created by a presidential order, but several states sued to end it and no one knows what will happen. I am afraid that immigration now knows I am undocumented and has all of my contact information.

I am a student with a learning disability. Although statistics show a rise in graduation rates overall for students like me, 29% of Americans with disabilities fail to complete high school, compared to 13% of those without disabilities. The federal government promised more funding to students with disabilities but they have delivered less than half of it.



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Right to Safety & Security

I am a 16-year-old resident of a primarily black neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio. Last week, a young girl in my community was shot and killed in the crossfire of a dispute. I am scared for the safety of my friends and myself. Black youth have firearm homicide rates that are 10 times the rates for white and Asian youth.

My child committed suicide while in a youth prison. He is not alone. Due to inhumane practices such as weeks-long isolation and verbal and physical abuse, the suicide rate for incarcerated children is estimated to be between 3 and 18 times greater than the rate for non-incarcerated children.

Six months ago, my husband and I emigrated from Mexico. Since then, my husband has hit and sexually assaulted me. Last week, I went to a local domestic abuse shelter for help, but they told me they could not help me because their Spanish-speaking advocate's case load was full. I don't know where to go for help and I feel completely alone.

I am the father of a gay teenager. I recently read in an FBI report that approximately 18.8% of hate crimes in the U.S. are aimed at LGBT individuals. I support the sexual identity of my son, but I also worry about his safety now and in the future.

Last week, I gave birth to my first child while in a state prison. It was a very scary and painful experience. During labor, my feet were shackled to the bed, limiting my ability to move and achieve a comfortable birthing position. No woman should have to give birth the way I did, regardless of her criminal record.



The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (abbreviated)

Article 1

Right to Equality

Article 2

Freedom from Discrimination

Article 3

Right to Life, Liberty and Personal Security

Article 4

Freedom from Slavery

Article 5

Freedom from Torture and Degrading Treatment

Article 6

Right to Recognition as a Person before the Law

Article 7

Right to Equality before the Law

Article 8

Right to Remedy for Violations of Rights

Article 9

Freedom from Arbitrary Arrest and Exile

Article 10

Right to Fair Public Hearing

Article 11

Right to be Considered Innocent until Proven Guilty

Article 12

Freedom from Interference with Privacy, Family, Home and Correspondence

Article 13

Right to Free Movement in and out of Own Country

Article 14

Right to Asylum in other Countries from Persecution

Article 15

Right to a Nationality and the Freedom to Change Nationality

Article 16

Right to Marriage and Family

Article 17

Right to Own Property

Article 18

Freedom of Belief and Religion

Article 19

Freedom of Opinion and Information

Article 20

Right of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Article 21

Right to Participate in Government and in Free Elections

Article 22

Right to Social Security or a Social Safety Net

Article 23

Right to Desirable Work and to Join Trade Unions

Article 24

Right to Rest and Leisure

Article 25

Right to Adequate Living Standard, Including Food, Housing, and Medical Care

Article 26

Right to Education

Article 27

Right to Participate in the Cultural Life of Community

Article 28

Right to a Society that Upholds this Document

Article 29

Rights Limited by Need to Respect Rights of Others

Article 30

Freedom from State or Personal Interference in the Above Rights



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The Advocates for Human Rights is a volunteer-based, non-governmental organization, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to the promotion and protection of internationally recognized human rights. Since 1992, The Advocates for Human Rights' Education Program has been a local and national leader in bringing the principles of international human rights to the classroom and the community. We partner with schools to provide training and support on how to incorporate human rights into the school curriculum. We also create, pilot, and disseminate curricular resources for use in human rights education throughout the U.S. We believe that educating about human rights and responsibilities is the most important way to ensure long-term improvements in respect for human rights in the United States and around the world.

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