

The Untold Origin of Policing: A Curriculum Inspired by Empire City

By Tess Raser

Teacher Curriculum Implementation Guide

1. Curriculum Overview

Intended Audience and Setting

- **Grade Level:** High School (Grades 10–12)
- **Course Context:** U.S. History, Social Studies, Civics or Humanities
- **Instructional Setting:** In-school classroom
- **Total Length:**
 - 8 core lessons (approximately one class period each)
 - 1 optional culminating student project (2–5 class periods)

Curriculum Purpose

This curriculum explores how systems of power, policing, media, and moral regulation developed in 19th-century New York City and how these systems continue to influence public life today. The lessons align with each episode of the award winning podcast [Empire City](#), hosted by renowned journalist and scholar [Chenjerai Kumanyika](#). The lessons are designed to follow each episode; thus, students should listen to each episode for homework the night before the correlating lesson. Through historical case studies, students analyze how institutions respond to social change, how public narratives are shaped, and how race, labor, and capitalism intersect with state authority.

Rather than memorizing facts, students engage in historical inquiry, examining primary and secondary sources to construct evidence-based claims and draw connections between past and present. This aligns with NCSS historical thinking standards.

Core Themes

- Power and social control
- Race, labor, and class conflict
- Media and public perception
- Morality, law, and enforcement
- Reform, resistance, and institutional change

Skills Emphasized

- Primary and secondary source analysis
- Claims and evidence writing
- Contextualization and sourcing
- Systems thinking
- Civic reasoning and synthesis

2. Instructional and Pedagogical Approach

Inquiry-Based History Instruction

Lessons are structured around compelling historical questions rather than predetermined conclusions. Teachers facilitate analysis, discussion, and reflection, supporting students in developing their own interpretations grounded in evidence.

Discussion Centered Learning

Classroom dialogue is central to this curriculum. Structured discussion protocols, small-group analysis, and whole-class debriefs allow students to test ideas, challenge assumptions, and refine claims.

Teaching Sensitive and Contested History

Some lessons include racial violence, state repression, and moral regulation. Teachers are encouraged to:

- Provide content warnings in advance
- Normalize emotional responses
- Offer opt-out or alternative reflection options
- Emphasize structural analysis over individual blame

What This Curriculum Is and Is Not

This curriculum is:

- Historical, analytical and inquiry-driven
- Focused on understanding institutions over time
- Rooted in primary source analysis

This curriculum is not:

- A political advocacy program
- A prescriptive moral framework
- An evaluation of students' personal beliefs

3. Scope and Sequence

Lesson	Title	Central Question	Focus
1	Slavery, Slave Patrols, and Bounty Hunters	How did the state use policing to uphold slavery?	Law and enforcement
2	The Formation of the NYPD	How does the media shape public perception of crime and race?	Narrative and bias
3	Political Leaders and Their Use of Police to Build Power	How do political leaders use police power?	Politics and control
4	The 1863 Draft Riots	When does unrest become violence, and how does the state respond?	Race and state violence
5	The Moral Crusade	Who defines morality in law and policing?	Reform and enforcement
6	The Rotten Orchard	Can institutions reform themselves?	Corruption and reform
7	Empire at Home	How does empire shape domestic policing?	Imperialism
8	Does Diversity Change Police Forces	Does diversity change institutions?	Reform vs. systems

9 (Optional)	If Not The Police, Then What	How can history help us reimagine safety and justice?	Synthesis + Project Based Learning
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4. Lesson-by-Lesson Implementation Guidance

Lesson 1: Slavery, Slave Patrols & Bounty Hunters: Modern Day Policing Begins

Purpose: Establish how law enforcement has historically upheld unequal systems of power.

Teacher Focus: Distinguish legality from justice; emphasize moral conflict.

Common Misconceptions: Slavery was only a Southern issue.

Pacing: 60–90 minutes.

Differentiation: Guided source questions; verbal or visual responses.

Lesson 2: The Formation of the NYPD: A New Mode of Managing Poor and Black People

Purpose: Build media literacy through historical examples.

Teacher Focus: Bias, sourcing, and audience.

Common Misconceptions: The media simply reports facts.

Pacing: 60–90 minutes.

Differentiation: Annotated texts; small-group analysis.

Lesson 3: Political Leaders and Their Use of Police to Build Political Power

Purpose: Examine how political power shapes policing.

Teacher Focus: Cause and effect relationships between leadership and enforcement.

Common Misconceptions: Police operate independently of politics.

Pacing: 60–90 minutes.

Differentiation: Graphic organizers; sentence starters.

Lesson 4: The 1863 Draft Riots

Purpose: Analyze mass violence and state response.

Teacher Focus: Structural causes of unrest; racial targeting.

Sensitive Content Note: Includes racial violence; provide opt-out options.

Common Misconceptions: "The Draft Riots were just spontaneous riots by poor Irish immigrants who were angry about the draft."

Pacing: 1–2 class periods.

Differentiation: Chunked readings; reflective journaling.

Lesson 5: The Moral Crusade: Policing of "Morality"

Purpose: Investigate how morality becomes law.

Teacher Focus: Who defines morality and who is punished.

Common Misconceptions: Moral laws affect everyone equally.

Pacing: 60–90 minutes.

Differentiation: Concept maps; structured discussion.

Lesson 6: The Rotten Orchard: Corruption and Capitalism

Purpose: Explore corruption, reform, and economic power.

Teacher Focus: Reform versus systemic change.

Common Misconceptions: "Exposing corruption fixes institutions."

Pacing: 60–90 minutes.

Differentiation: Side-by-side definitions; optional extension sources.

Lesson 7: Empire at Home: Imperialism, Power and Policing in New York City

Purpose: Connect imperial ideologies to domestic policing.

Teacher Focus: Continuity of control strategies across contexts.

Common Misconceptions: "Imperialism only affects foreign countries, not domestic policy."

Pacing: 60–90 minutes.

Differentiation: Guided notes; collaborative synthesis.

Lesson 8: Does Diversity Change Police Forces?: The Limits of Representation in American Institutions

Purpose: Prepare students for synthesis and debate.

Teacher Focus: Evidence-based claims about institutional change.

Common Misconceptions: "If an institution becomes more diverse, it will automatically change how it functions."

Pacing: 60–90 minutes.

Differentiation: Debate prep sheets; choice in response format.

5. [Optional Lesson 9](#): If Not the Police, Then What? Designing Systems for Community Safety

Project Purpose

Students synthesize historical insights to reimagine systems of safety.

Student Options

- Visual art or posters
- Written proposals
- Multimedia presentations (i.e., podcasts or documentaries)
- Zines, poetry, or storytelling
- Policy or community based ideas

Teacher Role

- Ensure historical grounding
- Support planning and checkpoints
- Assess reasoning rather than political stance

Suggested Timeline

- **Short:** 2 days
- **Standard:** 3–5 days
- **Extended:** Exhibition or showcase format

6. Assessment and Evidence of Learning

Formative Assessments

- Source annotations
- Exit tickets
- Small-group discussion
- Claims and evidence writing
- [Lesson Rubrics](#)

Summative Assessment

- Lesson 8: **Creative Task – “Institution Remix” (Assessment)**
 - Student Choice (Pick One):
 - Create a mini-podcast script
 - Design a political cartoon
 - Build a timeline with commentary
- Lesson 9: Final Project-[If Not The Police, Then What?](#)
 - Students are asked to design a **community safety system** that keeps people safe **without relying on traditional policing**, using historical evidence and research

Indicators of Mastery

Students can:

- Make historically grounded claims
- Use evidence effectively
- Analyze institutions as systems
- Connect past structures to present questions

7. Differentiation and Accessibility

Supports include:

- Chunked texts
- Sentence starters
- Visual organizers
- Multiple response formats
- Extended time or alternative assessments as needed

8. Pacing and Adaptation

If Time Is Limited: These lessons can be stand alone that educators can incorporate into existing curriculum.

- Combine Lessons 2 and 3
- Teach Lesson 4 as a focused case study
- Shorten the final project

If students struggle with specific concepts due to gaps in background knowledge or the complexity of connecting the content to lived experiences:

- Revisit systems mapping activities to reinforce connections and patterns
- Model the process of developing evidence-based claims through think-aloud strategies
- Increase structured discussion time to allow students to process ideas collaboratively and build understanding through dialogue

9. Classroom Culture and Facilitation

- Establish discussion norms early
- Encourage evidence-based disagreement
- Monitor emotional intensity
- Validate student uncertainty and curiosity

10. Appendices

Appendix A: Standards Alignment: This curriculum is aligned to the C3 Framework by engaging students in historical inquiry, evaluating multiple perspectives, analyzing evidence, and constructing claims supported by sources. Lessons also integrate Common Core Literacy Standards for Social Studies through close reading, source analysis, academic discussion, and evidence-based writing tasks that strengthen critical thinking and disciplinary literacy skills.

- [C3 Inquiry Arc](#)
 - Dimension 1: Developing Questions and planning inquiries
 - Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary concepts and tools
 - Dimension 3: Evaluating sources and using evidence
 - Dimension 4: Communicating conclusions and taking informed action
- [Historical Thinking Skills](#)
 - Sourcing
 - Contextualization
 - Corroboration
 - Close Reading
- [Literacy in History/Social Studies \(CCSS\) Grades 9-10](#)
- [Literacy in History/Social Studies \(CCSS\) Grades 11-12](#)

Appendix B: Key Vocabulary: The vocabulary terms included in this lesson are intended to serve as a foundational guide to support student understanding and discussion. Teachers are encouraged to add, modify, or emphasize additional terms based on the specific lesson content, instructional goals, and their professional interpretation of the materials.

Lesson 1: fugitive, fugitivity, captivity, resistance

Lesson 2: Jim Crow, caricature

Lesson 4: conscription, draft, riot

Lesson 5: morality, power, gender, sexism, vice, crusade

Lesson 8: diversity, union, representation, power structures

Appendix C: How to address the unit topic

Schools are encouraged to send a parent or caregiver letter before beginning this unit to promote transparency, build trust, and create opportunities for meaningful family engagement around sensitive or complex topics. Providing advanced communication helps families understand the academic purpose of the unit, the historical thinking skills students will develop, and the supportive classroom structures in place to ensure respectful, inquiry-based discussions. You do not need to have all the answers. Your role is to create space for inquiry, evidence, and thoughtful dialogue. Refer to the [Habits of Discussion](#) framework to support and guide respectful, thoughtful student conversations throughout the unit.