
**The Center for Justice
Education at Eastern State
Presents:**

PRISON LABOR

LESSON PLAN

**EASTERN STATE
PENITENTIARY**

DEFINING JUSTICE

LESSON PLAN

Unit Title:

Prison Labor, Then and Now

Grade Levels:

6th through 12th

Number of Class Periods:

Two periods (75 minutes)

Author:

Designed by the Eastern State Education Team.

INTRODUCTION & UNIT OVERVIEW

This 75-minute activity explores the historical through lines between the 13th Amendment, incarceration, and prison labor including a case study analysis. Students will explore the ethics of incarceration, reflecting on rehabilitation, labor practices, prisoner wage and benefits, and workplace safety.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How has the history of incarceration and forced labor shaped modern labor practices in prisons?
- What role did the 13th Amendment play in permitting prison labor in the United States?
- Is it ethical for companies or government to use prison labor? Why or why not?
- Who benefits from prison labor, and how does it affect the broader economy?
- How does prison labor intersect with issues of systemic racism and inequality?
- What reforms or alternatives could address the ethical and economic concerns associated with prison labor?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Examine Eastern State's rehabilitative philosophy of prison labor.
- Consider the impact of the 13th Amendment on prison labor historically and today.
- Complete a case study analyzing the uses of prison labor today.
- Write about and discuss ethical and economic concerns associated with prison labor.

MATERIALS

- [The 13th Amendment](#)
- [Wildfire Case Study](#)
- [Economics Case Study](#)
- [Case Study Graphic Organizer](#)

PROCEDURES

1. Eastern State Penitentiary's founding organization, the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Misery of Public Prisons, believed labor to be a critical part of the rehabilitative or "penitence" process. The organization's philosophy on labor was that if a person was trained in common trades while incarcerated, then they would have more access to viable job opportunities upon release from incarceration. Different forms of prison labor have existed throughout history, most notably through the 13th Amendment and the Convict Lease System. In this system, states leased prisoners to private businesses - like railways, mines, and plantations - for a profit and prisoners received no pay for their work.

- The 13th Amendment outlawed slavery and involuntary servitude, "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."
- Convict Leasing and Black Codes
 - The US South had to re-establish control of labor after enslavement; we see rise of Black labor under convict leasing and chain gangs.[1]
 - Black codes were state laws authorizing the leasing prisoners to private industries.[2]
 - Farm prisons
 - Formerly enslaved people and their descendants were arrested for minor violations, and then imprisoned until could pay their debts. They would labor on plantations and farms, or in prisons that were converted into farms. "Paid next to nothing, convicts were effectively enslaved in perpetuity..."[3]

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2. The next 30 minutes of this lesson will include a close examination of prison labor in prisons today. The exploration will be guided by questions like, "How should people in prison be compensated for their work?" and "Can there be a time where a person in prison is exploited for their labor? Or should all work be considered experience?" Explore the difference in perspective between the people working while incarcerated. Some prisoners believe their work and labor is being exploited - low wages, unsafe working conditions, etc. - while others feel that the work they are doing is productive, important, and more about the experience gained.

3. The final 30 minutes of this activity will be spent completing a case study analysis, writing in graphic organizers, and discussion in small groups. One student from each group should share out key points of their discussion.

[1] Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Justice 101: Conversation on Civil Rights Movements Within Prisons with Prof. Hasan Jeffries, January 2024.

[2] Equal Justice Initiative, Reconstruction in America, page 38.

[3] Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow, page 157.

ASSESSMENTS

- How would you describe the philosophy behind prisoner labor at Eastern State Penitentiary?
- What is one criticism of prison labor today?
- What were your main takeaways from the discussion on your prison labor case study?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

RH.6-8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a historical context.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA.Literacy.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.1: Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.9: Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research.

QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

Contact education@easternstate.org.

Learn more about the Center for Justice Education at Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, and about the Teacher Institute, at

EASTERNSTATE.ORG