



SLAVERY

by Another Name

FORCED LABOR, THEN & NOW

GRADE LEVEL: College

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OVERVIEW

This activity guide focuses on the economic implications of forced labor, both in the past and in the present. Students will examine the history of peonage prior to the twentieth century. Students will also investigate the use of forced labor around the world and its impact on local and global economies.

BACKGROUND

Peonage, also called debt slavery or debt servitude, is a system where an employer compels a worker to pay off a debt with work. Peonage was outlawed by Congress in 1867. However, after Reconstruction, many Southern black men were swept into peonage through different methods. The system continued for more than seventy-five years, from the end of the Civil War until the beginning of WWII, when Congress finally passed another statute making all forms of involuntary servitude illegal. During that time, hundreds of thousands of Americans were forced to labor against their will.

Peonage took many forms. In some cases, employers advanced workers some pay or initial transportation costs, and workers willingly agreed to work without pay in order to pay it off.

Often, however, workers became indebted to planters (through sharecropping loans), merchants (through credit), or company stores (through living expenses). Workers were often unable to re-pay the debt, and found themselves in a continuous work-without-pay cycle.

But the most corrupt and abusive peonage occurred in concert with Southern state and county governments. In the South, many black men were picked up for minor crimes or on trumped-up charges, and, when faced with staggering fines and court fees, forced to work for a local employer who would pay their fines for them.

For more than seventy-five years after the end of the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of Americans were captured and trapped in the peonage system.

Though peonage could be found nationwide during this time, it was most prevalent in the South, and the victims were disproportionately black and poor. Peonage was tightly bound to systems of racial oppression. Today, peonage, in various forms, continues to exist around the world.

For additional background, visit the following from the *Slavery by Another Name* Theme Gallery:

Judgments and Contracts

<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/false-contracts/>

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. What forms of forced labor have existed in the past and what forms exist today?
2. What are some domestic and global impacts from the use of forced labor?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1: THE LEGACY OF PEONAGE

1. Prepare to view the film clip “What Is Peonage?” Facilitate a discussion using the pre- and post-viewing questions.
2. Continue the discussion about peonage/debt slavery as a form of forced labor. Also inform students that various forms of forced labor are still practiced around the world.
3. Divide students into groups. Have students research the origins and use of peonage prior to the twentieth century. Explain that peonage was used in places like Mexico and Peru during the sixteenth century and New Mexico in the nineteenth century. Provide students with the following to research: practices, purpose, economic/labor implications, and impact.
4. Once students have concluded their research, give them time to share their findings in their group, develop a format for their presentation, and practice before presenting. Consider providing a framework or rubric for student presentations and encourage the use of multimedia elements in their presentations.
5. After students present, facilitate a post-activity discussion about peonage and its economic, social and political position in history.

ACTIVITY: HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

Materials

- Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States | Southern Poverty Law Center
<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/close-to-slavery-guestworker-programs-in-the-united-states>
- A Brief History of Guestworkers in America | Southern Poverty Law Center
<http://www.splcenter.org/publications/close-to-slavery-guestworker-programs-in-the-united-states/a-brief-history-of-guestwork>
- Recruitment: Exploitation Begins at Home | Southern Poverty Law Center
<http://www.splcenter.org/publications/close-to-slavery-guestworker-programs-in-the-united-states/recruitment-exploitation-beg>
- “Indictment Accuses Firm of Exploiting Thai Workers” by Julia Preston (*New York Times*, 9/3/2010)
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/04/us/04trafficking.html>

1. Have students read the following: Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States; A Brief History of Guestworkers in America; Recruitment: Exploitation Begins at Home.
2. Facilitate a discussion about each article. Inquire about macro and micro economic implications surrounding the guestworker program.
3. Distribute “Indictment Accuses Firm of Exploiting Thai Workers” by Julia Preston. Have students read the article independently.
4. Next, have students develop a list of specific similarities between the exploitation that exists within the guestworker programs and the peonage-based forced labor systems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. How are these systems similar? What role do/did they play(ed) in developing economies and labor forces? Have students share their similarities with the class. Compile a list on the board.
5. Facilitate a discussion about other forced labor practices that students are aware of in addition to the overall economic/political impact and legacy of forced labor in America and around the world, both in the past and now.
6. Have students write a commentary about the connections between peonage/debt slavery and economic and political systems. This assignment should draw upon class discussions, handouts, and research. The Southern Poverty Law Center publication “Close to Slavery” can also be used as a resource.

ACTIVITY: SLAVERY: A GLOBAL PRACTICE

1. Continue the conversation about the present-day use of forced labor.
2. Screen the presentation on the website Slavery Footprint (<http://www.slaveryfootprint.org/>). Have students complete the website survey to

determine how many slaves are used daily to create the goods that they purchase and consume.

3. When students complete the survey, a map will appear that reflects where the forced labor markets still exist in the world. Encourage students to share the results of their Slavery Footprint survey on Facebook and Twitter.
4. Have students select a country (not the United States) to further research the use of forced labor there. Students should research demographics, industry, economic conditions, and labor forces of their selected countries. Ask students questions that will allow them to connect the dots between forced labor and world economies in their presentations:
 - a. What is the relationship between a country's overall wealth and the number of forced labor markets it supports? Does a forced labor market seem to enrich a country or impoverish it?
 - b. How does their selected country fare in the global economic community? How does its use of forced labor compare with other countries?
 - c. What are the modern-day benefits of creating an underclass of forced laborers around the world? Who benefits from this class structure?
 - d. In what ways does the forced labor of today equate to economic slavery? How is the workers' quality of life affected around the world?
 - e. What long-term effects might poverty have on the modern-day forced laborers' descendants?
5. Have students present their findings about their countries to the class. Facilitate a post-activity discussion about the implications and impact of the use of present-day forced labor.
6. Lead a discussion about the responsibility to change these practices. Who is responsible? Bosses? CEOs? Consumers? Politicians? Moral leaders? What effect could students have on this?

MULTIMEDIA CLIPS

What Is Peonage?

<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/classrooms/economics>

This video clip examines peonage and the system's tendency to prey on the vulnerable.

Pre-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. What is the connection between debt and labor?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. Why does peonage most often affect vulnerable populations?
2. What role does coercion play in peonage?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

“Debt Peonage in Postbellum Georgia” by Price V. Fishback

The CNN Freedom Project: Ending Modern Day Slavery | CNN
<http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/>