America's Violent Past

Overview

In this lesson students will complete an introductory reading about violence in American history, then each student will read about a specific era of American history and violence in that era. Next, students will join a group with peers who learned about different eras to create a timeline detailing nine eras, major events, and causes of violent activity.

Standards/Topics

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL. 9-10; 11-12.1.A: Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL. 9-10; 11-12.1.B: Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2; RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

Topics: survey of American history; causes of violence; immigration; racism

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe historical events of violence from nine eras of American history;
- Develop hypotheses as to causes of violence;
- Work in collaboration with peers to construct a timeline.

Materials

Handout A: America's Violent Past (1 per student)
Handouts B – E: Each handout focuses on a different era. (1 of the handouts per student)

Note: Students will form groups so that each of the eras is represented in one group (jigsaw). Each group will construct a timeline using the eras from Handouts B-E. Students could use blank notebook paper, chart paper, or create an electronic timeline using PowerPoint, Prezi, or one of the many free apps available.

Procedure

I. Focus Activity – Brief Discussion

  A. Ask students:

- Would you say that violence is a problem in America? What about other places?
- Other than wartime, what examples of violence or violent crime do we have from American history?

   Explain to students that today they are going to examine the problem of violence from a historical perspective.

II. Readings – America's Violent Past & Eras from American History

   A. Distribute **Handout A: America's Violent Past** to each student. (Or assign as homework to begin activity the next day.)

   B. Once students have completed the reading on Handout A, provide each student with one of handout—B, C, D, or E. Allow time for students to read about the eras described.

III. Small Group Activity – Creating a Timeline

   A. Group students according to the eras they read about, ensuring that each group has at least one student who read handouts B-E. Explain to the groups that they are going to create a timeline based on the eras they studied. Their group timeline should include:

- Nine eras in American History from Handouts B-E. (Each section of each handout represents an era. There are nine sections total.)

- Key events during each era.

- Violence during each era.

- Possible causes of that violence in each era.

   B. Allow groups to present portions of their timelines, focusing on the possible causes of violence. Make a list on the board as students share their views about causes.

III. Assessment/Closure

   A. Conduct a brief closing discussion asking students:

- Do you think the causes of historic violence are still relevant today? Why or why not? Are there other causes of violence today that might not have been relevant historically?

- What could be done to better address violence today?

   B. Have students answer the Points of Inquiry questions on Handout A:

     1. Why do you think violent crime existed at such high levels throughout American history?

     2. Why are violent outlaws like Jesse James and Billy the Kid so often portrayed as heroes?

     3. What groups have been victimized by violence more than others? What do you think are the causes of this?

     4. List as many causes of crime in American history as possible. Discuss the list and select the five most important. Explain your reasons.

Look for students to reference the texts and to state and support opinions.

The Problem of Violence: America's Violent Past

- To a busy urban street comes the staccato clap of automatic weapons fire. From a passing car, someone fires at a rival gang member, but misses and kills a young girl instead.

- On an empty field late at night, the sounds of yelling and cursing can be heard. Two young men struggle in a drunken brawl after a weekend party. One falls to the ground mortally wounded with a skull fracture. The other is arrested for murder.

- Two young college students kidnap a 14-year-old boy for ransom and brutally kill him. They are eventually captured and tried for their senseless crimes.

Stories such as these confront us on a daily basis. But these particular stories come from America's distant past. The first took place in the early 1930s on the streets of New York; the second occurred in Springfield, Illinois in 1837; and the third is based on the infamous Leopold and Loeb murder case, which shocked the country in 1924. They prove a simple point: Violent crime is deeply rooted in American history.

Historians and sociologists have offered a number of explanations for why American culture, past and present, is so violent. Some have argued that the frontier experience in America was a crucial factor. From the nation's discovery until 1890 or so, Americans pushed westward establishing settlements. They often resorted to force and firearms with each other as they made claims on the land. In some cases, there was little legal authority present to settle disputes or keep law and order. Westward expansion also frequently involved violent encroachment on the lands of indigenous Native Americans.

Another theory suggests that the tendency toward violence in the United States can be partially explained by the frustrations caused by the American Dream itself. According to this reasoning, people throughout history have come to expect a prosperous life in America, and our culture celebrates wealth and property. Yet in spite of the opportunities, many people fail to meet their expectations or, for larger economic reasons, significant numbers of people are trapped in poverty. These conditions can lead to social tensions that often result in violence.

As with most theories, evidence can be found for and against all of these explanations. In any case, a brief survey of our history demonstrates that violence has always been a factor in American life.

Instructions

1. Read your handout about violence in specific eras in American History. (Handouts B-E)

2. Join a group of students who read about different eras.

3. Each person in your group should share what you learned about the era you studied. Next, work together to construct a timeline. Your timeline should include:

   - Nine eras in American History from Handouts B-E.

   - Key events during each era.

   - Violence during each era.

   - Possible causes of that violence in each era.

4. Discuss and answer the questions below.

POINTS OF INQUIRY

As you answer these questions, reference the texts along with stating and supporting your own opinions.

1. Why do you think violent crime existed at such high levels throughout American history?

2. Why are violent outlaws like Jesse James and Billy the Kid so often portrayed as heroes?

3. What groups have been victimized by violence more than others? What do you think are the causes of this?

4. List as many causes of crime in American history as possible. Discuss the list and select the five most important. Explain your reasons.

The Early Years

During the 1700s, robbery and other violent crimes were already troubling the English Colonies of North America. Land was becoming scarce. During the mid-1700s, the English fought a series of wars and demanded high taxes from the colonists to pay for them. In turn, the Colonies suffered high rates of unemployment and poverty. Crime flourished in this environment.

In addition, throughout the century, English authorities transported criminals from England's jails, both men and women, to America as indentured servants. Before the Revolution, over 50,000 lawbreakers were sent to the American Colonies. While most became law-abiding colonists, some ran away once they arrived and went back to their old ways of crime and violence.

Philadelphia, known as the "city of brotherly love," was anything but loving. During the early 1700s, it became known as the "crime capital of the Colonies." Robbery, rape, murder, and arson, all crimes of violence, occurred on a regular basis. By the mid-1700s, New York City challenged Philadelphia for the dubious title of "crime capital." Boatloads of new immigrants to the colonies swelled its population. Urban crowding fomented social tensions and a rise in violent crime. A New York newspaper editorial complained: "It seems to have now become dangerous for the good People of this City to be out late at night without being sufficiently strong or well-armed."

In the countryside and on the frontier, gangs of thieves and robbers preyed on travelers and farmers. Gangs in the North Carolina backwoods provoked citizens to take the law into their own hands. In 1767, the citizens formed the first American vigilante group, which attacked and punished gang members.

Violence in the 1800s

During the 1800s, the population of America and its cities grew rapidly. Textile mills and new industries attracted immigrants from England and Northern Europe. With 60,000 people, New York passed Philadelphia and Boston to become the biggest city in the country by 1880.

The waves of new immigrants, and people leaving the countryside to find work in cities, created crowded conditions. Many were squeezed into crowded tenements in urban areas. Cities like New York gained a reputation for overcrowding and criminal violence. In the decade before the Civil War, over 3,000 homeless children roamed the streets of New York. Many of them became pickpockets and street robbers. One civic leader wrote in 1842: "Thronged as our city is, men are robbed in the streets . . . . The defenseless and the beautiful are ravished in the daytime and no trace of the criminals is found."

Out in the West, men wore guns for protection wherever they went. Others wore guns to rob. Los Angeles was only a sleepy village of about 8,000, but in one 15-month period in the 1850s, there were 40 murders. This is a murder rate more than twice as high as it is today. In much larger San Francisco to the north, there were entire neighborhoods where no one dared go after dark.

Be prepared to discuss:

- Key events during each era.
- Violence during each era.
- Possible causes of that violence in each era.

The First Urban Gangs

In many cities in the 19th century, jobless immigrants often lived in impoverished neighborhoods called "slums." In Philadelphia, working-class Irish immigrants faced poverty as well as hostility and even violence from nativist (anti-immigrant) residents. One nativist gang, the Bloody Tubs, favored local anti-immigrant politicians and physically attacked opposing voters. Many young Irish men formed street gangs, too, that were involved in robberies, assaults, gang fights, and petty crime. With names like the Bleeders, Garroters, Rangers, Tormentors, and Killers, the gangs sometimes fought bloody battles on a spot known as the Battle Ground. Gang members as young as 10 carried clubs, knives, brass knuckles, and pistols.

In New York, well-organized adult street gangs controlled the immigrant areas of Five Points and the Bowery. Made up mostly of young Irish immigrants, gangs called the Dead Rabbits and Shirt Tails became famous for mugging people. In the nearby Fourth Ward, the Daybreak Boys were responsible for 20 murders between 1850 and 1852. Nativists formed the Plug Uglies gang that instigated riots on behalf of nativist politicians.

In the cities of the Northeast, during the 1830s through the 1850s came a period of serious urban rioting. Crowded conditions, intergroup tensions, and unemployment created pressures that exploded into ethnic riots, labor riots, election-day riots, and anti-Catholic riots. White mobs occasionally assaulted free black neighborhoods in Cincinnati, New York, and elsewhere. In that period Baltimore alone had 12 major riots, Philadelphia had 11, and New York had eight. It was this burst of lawlessness that spurred the development of police forces in most cities.

After the Civil War

The Civil War killed over 600,000 people, more than any other war in our history. It also left behind enduring habits of hatred and violent revenge. Two families, the Hatfields and McCoys, had supported different sides in the Civil War. Their feud along the Kentucky-West Virginia border killed or wounded dozens of people between 1873 and 1888.

But the most vicious and widespread postwar violence was directed against African Americans. During the period of Reconstruction, freed slaves served in state legislatures in the South. Former slaves educated themselves, voted, and many started businesses or began farming their own small fields.

In a racist response to these developments, some Southern white people created the Ku Klux Klan and other groups to terrorize black people and bring about an end to the social reforms of Reconstruction. In a reign of terror in Louisiana in the 1870s, a group called the White League killed over 3,500 black people, many by lynching, a form of mob execution of an accused person without a lawful trial. In incidents all over the country, 2,000 or more African-Americans were lynched from 1882 to 1903.

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The Violent West

After the Civil War, violence in the West increased. Thousands of young men displaced by the war or just out of the army headed west. Some turned into outlaws. The most famous robbers were the James and Younger brothers. They had been Confederate guerrillas and after the war turned to robbing trains and banks, terrorizing Union states from Missouri to Minnesota. They killed 16 people.

In the 1870s, Billy the Kid, who was born in a New York slum tenement, roamed the West, gambling, killing, and hiring out as a cattle rustler. Sheriff Pat Garret finally tracked him down and shot him. According to legend, Billy the Kid had killed 21 men, one for each year of his life. Most historians believe that the actual number he killed was much smaller.

John Wesley Hardin from Texas killed his first victim at age 15. The victim was a black boy who had beaten him at wrestling. He went on to kill more than a dozen men, including one because he had badmouthed Texas. Hardin was shot and killed in 1895 and became another outlaw legend, though today we would probably think of him as a psychotic murderer.

Even more violent were the range wars. Throughout the Western states, cattle and land barons hired armies of gunmen to guard or expand their private empires. In some cases, the cattlemen had the law squarely on their side. But often their gunmen settled scores and fought battles. Texas had the Sutton-Taylor feud, the Horrell-Higgins feud, the Jaybird-Woodpecker feud, and several others. Montana had the Johnson County War which pitted European immigrant homesteaders against a cattle baron. Arizona had the worst range war of all. In the Pleasant Valley War, the cattle-raising Grahams fought the sheep-raising Tewkesburys with hired armies. The conflict raged for six years and was fought literally "to the last man."

Racial Violence

The end of the century marked the beginning of a long era of race riots. In 1871, a white mob in Los Angeles went on a rampage and hanged 20 Chinese workers from street lamps. Near the turn of the century, cities in the East and Mid-West experienced a rash of race riots in which white people attacked black neighborhoods, beating and lynching many residents. Black people were the victims of major race riots in Atlanta in 1906, Springfield, Illinois in 1908, Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921, and in many other cities.

Gang Wars and Prohibition

In 1920, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution made the manufacture, transport, or sale of alcoholic beverages illegal. The era of Prohibition, one of this country's most violent crime periods, extended from 1920 until the 18th Amendment was repealed in 1933. Prohibition created the conditions for thriving illegal businesses and violence as rival gangs warred for the profits from bootleg alcohol.

In Chicago, by 1927, the mobster Al Capone had come out on top, but gang violence continued, climaxing with the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929. In it, gangsters thought to be working for Capone, herded seven men against a wall in a downtown garage and machine-gunned them to death.

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The Depression Decade

During the early 1930s, various criminal organizations sought to form alliances to control gambling, prostitution, narcotics, and other illegal money-making activities. Gangster rivalry and greed, however, led to the murder of numerous underworld figures.

It was also the era of a number of very violent gangs which preyed on banks in the Mid-West and South. These gangs headed by the likes of John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, "Baby Face" Nelson, Ma Barker and others often shot their way out of trouble, killing a number of law enforcement officers and innocent bystanders.

As the Great Depression began in the early 1930s, violent crimes reached a peak. In 1933, the murder rate was 9.7 murders for every 100,000 Americans. The murder rate would not be this high again until the late 1970s.

A curious thing happened as the Depression continued: The violent crime rate declined. The murder rate, for example, dropped 50 percent between 1933 and the early 1940s. Other serious crimes fell by a third.

Why did crime decrease during a time of great hardship for almost all Americans? According to some historians, the Depression brought Americans closer together, because almost everyone was in the same boat. World War II unified Americans even more. In addition, the birthrate had dropped in the 1920s, which meant that the youth population — 14 to 24 year olds — declined in size. Statistically speaking, young people commit most crimes.

The Postwar Years

Following World War II, the 1950s were a period of relative calm, but the turbulent 1960s saw an increase in many kinds of violence. More than 40 people calling for equality for African Americans were murdered in the South during the civil rights movement between 1954 and 1968. Many tens of thousands of anti-war activists took to the streets in demonstrations that sometimes turned violent. The major urban riots of the later 1960s exploded in African-American communities in Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit, and other cities where urban problems were growing.

Street crime, too, began to increase again. Many crime experts believe that a surge of young people in the population contributed significantly to the increase of crime in the 1960s and its peak in the 1970s.

In the early 1980s the sudden appearance of crack cocaine caused a tremendous rise in drug-related and violent crimes, especially among young people. Along with a rise in unemployment and homelessness, reports of street crime skyrocketed. But violent crime overall has sharply declined since the 1990s.

In recent years, however, hate crimes have dramatically increased. In 2017, three out of five hate crimes were based on race and ethnicity. Other hate crimes were based on religion, particularly against Jews and Muslims, and sexual orientation. According to the FBI, this is a result of an increasingly polarized political climate and of law-enforcement agencies becoming better at identifying and reporting hate crimes.

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