

Introduction

Extreme Consequences: The Reality of Prison Life

Beginning in the 1970's, the United States began to drastically expand the use of incarceration as a means to increase public safety. Between 1970 and 2005, state and federal authorities increased prison populations by 628 % (Vera Institute of Justice). By the turn of the 21st century, more than 5.6 million living Americans had spent time in a state or federal prison – nearly 3% of the U.S. population. By 2005, the national prison population had reached 2,320,359. The number of people incarcerated in the United States in the year 2007 is nearly the same as the population of the entire state of Utah. A Study by the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Charitable Trusts, projects that by 2011, one in every 178 U.S. residents will live in prison. The costs of this projected increase of 192,000 inmates could be a staggering \$27.5 billion in **additional** spending per year.

The California Department of Corrections has the largest prison population of any other state in the United States, with an annual budget of \$8.75 billion dollars used to house approximately 312,271 inmates (Bureau of Justice). This number continues to grow at an alarming rate each year, including an increase of 9,026 inmates between 2005 and 2006 (California Department of Corrections website). 93% of the incarcerated individuals in California are male and 66% are either black or Hispanic according to CDCR statistics. Most inmates, both male and female, are also undereducated, with an average reading level among them of just seventh grade.

These statistics reflect risk factors facing many of today's youth, not just in California but across the nation. The disproportionate emphasis on incarceration over education is further reflected by the disparity between spending on corrections and spending on education. Between 1985 and 2004, states increased corrections spending by 202%. During those same years, spending on higher education increased only 3%. (Vera Institute of Justice study)

For young people growing up in poverty, in communities where gangs and drugs are the norm, prison is often seen as just a part of everyday life. At the same time, prison life is glorified in the media, video games and music and many young people are being influenced by misconceptions of what it means to be respected and to be successful. As a result of the perpetuation of these myths, young people are ending up in prison and are learning quickly that the reality of prison life is unlike anything they may have heard.

Extreme Consequences: The Reality of Prison Life is aimed at helping to keep kids out of the penal system by dispelling the misinformation and myths surrounding incarceration and providing an accurate, authentic view of prison

life. The video was filmed entirely in Pelican Bay State Prison, a maximum security prison in California “designed to house the state’s most serious criminal offenders” (California Dept. of Corrections). Half of the population is housed in general population settings while the other half are maximum-security inmates housed in the Security Housing Unit (SHU). The SHU is designed to hold “inmates who are difficult management cases, prison gang members and violent maximum custody inmates” (CDCR). All of the most notorious prison gangs were born in the California prison system, including: The Mexican Mafia (or “La EME”), La Nuestra Familia, The Aryan Brotherhood, The Black Guerilla Family, The Texas Syndicate, and the Nazi Lowriders. The SHU in Pelican Bay is where most prison gang members from all the facilities in the California prison system are sent. The institution also operates a program called Transitional Housing Unit (THU), an intensive program designed for prison gang members who disaffiliate from their gangs.

EXTREME CONSEQUENCES includes interviews with members of the **ROCK Program – Reach Out Convicts and Kids** – a group of inmates from general population at Pelican Bay who are committed to helping youth stay out of prison. After undergoing training, the selected inmates participate in events where they are paired up with teenage boys who are part of visiting groups of at risk youth. The video also includes interviews with ex-prison gang members from THU – Transitional Housing Unit (including members of an inmate initiated outreach program called Mentors from Max) Scenes from life in the SHU – Security Housing Unit vividly illustrate the reality most of these men have lived in for years.

Program Summary

EXTREME CONSEQUENCES: The Reality of Prison Life is a 40 minute video designed to introduce viewers aged 12 – adult to the harsh realities of prison life.

The video exposes viewers to the facts and feelings involved in life at Pelican Bay State Prison - from the claustrophobia of sharing a 6X10 foot cell, to the dangers of being assaulted by fellow inmates, to the pressures exerted by prison gangs on young inmates, to the longing for family and ordinary existence, and finally to the despair of being thrown into solitary confinement in the SHU for an indeterminate sentence.

Intended Audience

EXTREME CONSEQUENCES is intended to be used by educators, mental health professionals, counselors and community workers with:

- School based groups
- Violence prevention groups
- Gang Prevention programs
- Programs for children of incarcerated parents
- After school community programs for at- risk youth
- Group home settings
- Juvenile Institutions
- Juvenile Probation groups
- Prison outreach programs
- Prison volunteer and staff trainings

Program Goals

After viewing **EXTREME CONSEQUENCES: The Reality of Prison Life**, and participating in the discussion topics and extended learning activities, viewers will:

- Have a real understanding of the path to prison
- Be able to identify the risk factors leading to incarceration
- Develop a greater understanding and awareness of their own risk factors, including anger management issues, childhood trauma, repressed hurt, susceptibility to peer pressure, and other environmental influences
- Realize the reality of prison life as opposed to the media's glorification of it
- See greater importance in identifying and seeking the support of positive influences in their lives

Instructional Notes For Facilitators

All of the footage for **EXTREME CONSEQUENCES: The Reality of Prison Life** was shot at Pelican Bay State Prison, a California supermax facility, notorious for being one of the most violent in the country. The material you will see is disturbing and unsettling for most viewers, and includes actual

archival footage of inmate attacks and prison riots. It is strongly suggested that you preview the video and review the guide in order to familiarize yourself with their content before showing it to your group.

As you review the materials presented in this guide, you may find it necessary to make some changes, additions, or deletions to meet the specific needs of your class. We encourage you to do so; for only by tailoring this program to your group will they obtain the maximum instructional benefit.

Please be advised that the material may trigger intense emotions for some viewers, particularly those whose lives are directly affected by prison life, including those who have incarcerated friends and family members. You may want to bring in other qualified support staff to help facilitate discussion and activities and to make follow up services and supports available for those who seek help. Allow time to discuss the potentially disturbing nature of the video beforehand to create a context of safety among group members. **The Appendix includes lists of resources, hotlines and national organizations which you can make available to all participants. There is also an extended learning activity which encourages participants to fill out a "Mapping Your Resources" form identifying places and people they can turn to for support.**

It is helpful for facilitators to be familiar with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is common among gang members and incarcerated populations. According to the DSM IV, PTSD is "the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to ones physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate," (p.463). You can find more information on PTSD at **The National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder** <http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/index.jsp>

Confidentiality

Countless youth have been impacted by violence in one or more of its many forms. For many, it is something that is infrequently, if ever, discussed. You will want to stay alert to any signs of trauma or other issues that students may be dealing with and to be ready to seek assistance from counselors or other mental health professionals. In addition, in order to establish an environment of trust and security, it is important to establish rules of confidentiality with the group; what is said in the group, should stay in the group. Students should clearly understand your expectation that privacy will be protected.