Classroom Module: Humanizing Homelessness

About This Activity:
Participant Media provides this activity about **Humanizing Homelessness** to help young people understand the problem of homelessness from a personal perspective. Issues relating to policy, economics, and perception are all explored. This activity is geared towards students aged 12–16 but can be modified for use with other age groups.

Curriculum Connections:
This activity fits in perfectly with lessons that address curriculum standards in language arts, conflict resolution and mediation, behavioral studies, civics, social studies, economics, and health.

Lesson Preparation:
• Prepare copies of **Student Handouts** for distribution

Key Words and Phrases:
Homeless, urban, mentally ill, connotation, figurative, symbolic, intangible, preconception, legislation, hate crime

Rationale:
The purpose of this lesson is for students to consider the importance of the concept “home” and then apply that personal understanding to an exploration of homelessness in America. Specifically, the lesson encourages students to identify and understand some of the causes of homelessness in America, as well as the consequences of the homeless problem.

Student Objectives:
• Students will explore their own biases surrounding homelessness
• Students will learn about some of the legislation that addresses homelessness in America
• Students will explore the importance of the concept of “Home”
• Students will learn about some of the basic facts regarding homelessness in America
• Students will conduct in-depth research on one specific demographic within the homeless population in America
• Students will relate statistics about homelessness to the personal experience of being homeless

Requirements:
Materials:
• Chalkboard and chalk, or chart paper and markers
• **Student Handouts: Faces, Some Facts About Homelessness, and Research Project on Homelessness in the U.S.**

Time:
• 2 class periods

Techniques and Skills:
Vocabulary building, reading comprehension, large group discussion, small group discussion, working in pairs, critical and analytical thinking, public speaking, supporting ideas with examples, comparing and contrasting information sources, listening skills, research, and expository, creative, and responsive writing.
Procedures: Day 1

1. Begin by writing “Home” on the chalkboard or on chart paper. Allow 10 minutes for the class to respond and reflect on the word in writing.

2. Allow 5 – 10 minutes to discuss the assignment as a large group. Ask for volunteers to read their responses.

3. After a few students have read their responses aloud (in whole or in part), allow 5–10 minutes for a short discussion as a whole class. Use some or all of the following questions to guide the discussion:
   - Define the term “home,” in literal terms. What, specifically, does a home provide?
   - Define the term figuratively. What emotional, or intangible, comforts does a home provide?
   - How many of you included a literal definition of “home” in your freewrite? How many of you focused on the intangible, or emotional aspects of “home”? Why do you think this is?
   - Which is more important, the literal provisions of a home (shelter, protection from the elements) or the intangible ones (comfort, a sense of belonging, a place to relax)? Explain your answer.
   - How do you feel about your home? How do these feelings shape who you are?
   - Have you ever felt “homesick”? Why do you think people get homesick?
   - Define the term figuratively. What emotional, or intangible, comforts does a home provide?

4. Write the phrase “Living without a Home” on the chalkboard or on chart paper.

5. Ask the students what comes to mind when they read this phrase. Allow 5 minutes for reflection and discussion.

6. Now write the word “Homeless” on the chalkboard or on chart paper.

7. Conduct a short brainstorm with the whole class, charting responses as a word web. You may use some or all of the following questions to guide the short discussion:
   - Reflect on the definition of the word “homeless” — both literally and figuratively. Could a person have a roof over their head and still be “home-less”?
   - How is the connotation, or implications, of the word “homeless” different than that of the phrase “living without a home”? Is there a literal difference?
   - Have you ever known anyone who has lived without a home?
   - What do you imagine the biggest challenges of being homeless might be?

8. Now write the following definition on the chalkboard or on chart paper:
A person is considered homeless who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and/or has a primary nighttime residency that is: (A) a supervised shelter (B) an institution, or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

9. Explain that this last definition adapted from the McKinney–Vento Act, the first federal legislation developed to address the issue of homelessness in America, passed into law in 1987.

10. Ask the class to describe how this definition of homeless is different than, or similar to, the definitions they have brainstormed as a class. Chart their responses on the board or on chart paper, alongside their responses from the earlier brainstorm.

11. Distribute Student Handout: Faces. Students should complete the handout for homework.

**Procedures: Day 2**

1. Begin class with a 10–15 minute, whole-group discussion, reflecting on last night’s homework. Use some or all of the following questions to guide your discussion:
   - How did you describe the daily life of the person in Photograph 1? Photograph 5? Photograph 6?
   - Of all the people pictured, which would you guess might be experiencing homelessness? Why?
   - How did you describe the family and home environment of the person in Photograph 3? Photograph 4? Photograph 7?
   - If you imagined one of these people being homeless, how do you think he/she got there?
   - Of all the people pictured, did you imagine any of them to be without a family? Which one(s)? Why?
   - Would you be surprised if I told you that the woman pictured in Photograph 2 was homeless? What about the woman pictured in Photograph 6?
   - Would you be surprised if I told you that the little girl pictured in Photograph 8 was homeless? Why? How did you describe her imagined life?

2. Explain to the class that none of the photographs from their handout were specifically of people experiencing homelessness. However, the point of the exercise was to show that there is no “profile” of a homeless person. The homeless population in the United States is as diverse as the general population. Anyone, regardless of age, gender, race or ethnicity, could find himself “without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”
3. Distribute Student Handout: *Some Facts About Homelessness*. Allow 5–10 minutes for students to read the handout silently. Or, alternatively, ask for volunteers to read the handout aloud.

4. After the class has had time to read the handout, allow 10-15 minutes to discuss what they read. Use some or all of the following questions to guide the discussion:
   - Name one fact from this handout that surprised you. Explain.
   - What social implications can be drawn from the fact that families with young children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population? How might this statistic contribute to the continuation of homelessness? How might it contribute to other social issues such as crime, the federal deficit (our nation’s economic woes), or unemployment?
   - A hate crime can be defined as a crime that is committed against someone because of their perceived race, color, national origin, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. Why or how might a violent crime committed against a homeless person be classified as a hate crime?
   - Why is it relevant to note the incidents of hate crimes perpetrated against those experiencing homelessness?
   - The overwhelming majority of people in a shelter on any given night are homeless for only a short period of time, and only approximately 10% of homeless people are the “chronically homeless,” that you might picture panhandling or living out of a shopping cart. Does this statistic surprise you? Why or why not?
   - According to the fact sheet, what are the main reasons why “unaccompanied youth” (minors without a guardian) find themselves homeless?
   - How might drugs and alcohol contribute to the nation’s homeless problem?
   - How might homelessness contribute to the nation’s drug and alcohol problem?
   - What do you see as a correlation between mental illness and homelessness? How might mental illness lead to homelessness? How might homelessness lead to mental illness?
   - As you read through all of the statistics on the fact sheet, what questions come to mind?
   - As you read through all of the statistics on the fact sheet, what solutions come to mind?

5. Divide the class into small groups. Assign each group one of the following categories:
   - Homeless Families
   - Runaway Youth
   - Homeless and Mentally Ill
   - Addiction and Homelessness
   - Elderly Homeless
   - Life in the Shelter, Life on the Street
Extension Activities and Ideas for Further Learning

1. Comparing and Contrasting Multiple Sources
In 2005, Steve Lopez, a columnist at the Los Angeles Times, began writing a series of feature articles about Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, a street musician that he befriended after hearing Ayers play beautiful music on a two-stringed violin. The articles uncovered the incredible life story of a musical prodigy, from a single-parent household in Cleveland, to New York’s Juilliard School of Music, to the devastating universe of mental illness, and, ultimately, the streets of LA’s Skid Row. The weekly stories of Lopez’s developing friendship with Ayers captured the city’s imagination. It soon became clear that this story had leapt beyond the boundaries of Lopez’s column. He began writing a book about his remarkable, ongoing bond with Ayers called The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music, which was published in early 2008. In April, 2009 their story was released as the feature film, The Soloist. In addition to the personal stories of Mr. Ayers and Mr. Lopez, the LA Times articles, the nonfiction book, and the feature film explore the very real problem of urban homelessness, each in a different way that is unique to the medium.

Assignment: Read the book, see the film, and read the abstracts of the original articles (abstracts are available for free online at the L.A. Times Archives: http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/advancedsearch.html) that tell the story of Steve Lopez and Nathaniel Ayers. Take notes on how these accounts are similar and different. Also consider the purpose of each account: are they for entertainment? Education? Both? Who are their primary audiences? How do the various audiences and purposes affect how the story is told? As a reader/viewer, what did you gain from one account that was missing from another? Which account affected you the most? Why? Then, identify two or three recurring social issues that exist in all three accounts. Recurring issues that you might consider include: homelessness, mental illness, music education, race relations, politics, socio-economic disparities, or others. Then, conduct your own independent research on these topics. What are the real challenges and implications associated with each of these issues? What are the organizations that are working to solve these problems? What are your opinions about how these issues are affecting our nation?
Write a comprehensive report in which you compare and contrast the three sources (book, film, and newspaper articles) to the independent research you conducted and explain what you learned about the three main issues as a result of your inquiry.

2. Homelessness in Your Own Backyard
The film *The Soloist* explores homelessness against the backdrop of downtown Los Angeles, a city with the highest homeless population in the country. Yet homelessness is not limited to only the largest cities, or to certain areas within large cities, such as Los Angeles’ infamous Skid Row. In every state, and in every community, there are people who have felt the effects of homelessness.

*Assignment:* Conduct your own research into homelessness in your community. Conduct your own interviews, identify and visit local organizations that provide support to people without homes. Find information, statistics, and local policies on homelessness in your community. Then, create an informational pamphlet about homelessness and distribute it to the students in your school. The pamphlet should include information on the PROBLEM (what is homelessness? How is it affecting your local community? Who is affected?), the SOLUTIONS (what organizations exist in your community that offer support to people experiencing homelessness? What are the local policies that are in place to help solve the problem of homelessness in your community?), and SUGGESTIONS FOR INVOLVEMENT (what can people do to help? Examples might be: donations, volunteering, and letter writing). The pamphlet might also include some basic facts about homelessness to help educate students and their families about homelessness.

3. Homelessness in the Public Sphere
Homelessness not only affects those individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness, but all citizens in terms of the quality and availability of our healthcare, public assistance and services, public education, safety, employment, taxes, and others.

*Assignment:* Choose one population of the nation’s homeless that you wish to research. Populations might include families, the elderly, people experiencing mental illness, women, veterans, individuals with addictions, or unaccompanied minors. Research questions to consider: What is the impact on the public sphere of having people experiencing homelessness? How does your city deal with the homeless crisis? What is the impact of your city’s homeless situation on larger economic and social forces? What is the government’s role? What is the role of non-governmental organizations? What about our current system works? How does permanent supportive housing answer some of the problems? What are the issues that arise around permanent supportive housing? In general, what doesn’t work? What solutions would you put forward? Present your findings in a comprehensive, 5-page research paper.
Student Handout: Faces

Directions: As you look at each photograph, imagine a life for the person depicted. In the space provided, be creative. Invent a description of the person, a daily routine, a backstory. What sort of life does each person lead? What are their families like? Where do they live?

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1. Children under the age of 18 account for nearly 40% of the homeless population. Almost half of these children are under the age of 5.

2. Approximately 80% of people who stay in urban homeless shelters are homeless only once and for a short period of time. Approximately 10% are chronically homeless: single adults with disabling conditions who have been homeless for a year or more, or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

3. The homeless population is estimated to be 42% African-American, 39% Caucasian, 13% Hispanic, 4% Native American and 2% Asian.

4. Battered women who live in poverty are often forced to choose between abusive relationships and homelessness. Nationally, approximately half of all women and children experiencing homelessness are fleeing domestic violence.

5. On any given night, 271,000 veterans are homeless. 40% of homeless men have served in the armed forces.

6. Approximately 16% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness.

7. Between 1999 and 2007, there were 774 hate crimes committed against homeless people, resulting in 217 murders.

8. There are an estimated 3 million people who are homeless in the United States on any given night. This translates to approximately 1% of the U.S. population experiencing homelessness each year.

9. Between 30 and 40% of homeless adults are addicted to drugs or alcohol.

10. The number of unaccompanied homeless youth is estimated at 1.6 million, 1% of the nation’s urban homeless population. The primary causes of homelessness among unaccompanied youth are physical and sexual abuse by a parent or guardian, neglect, parental substance abuse, and family conflict.

11. Approximately 10.3% of the nation’s homeless are considered “elderly,” over the age of 51. These older homeless people, often ravaged by poor nutrition and severe living conditions, have physical health issues that are usually associated with people over 70 years old.

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Your group will be researching the following topic: _____________________________

(fill in topic here)

Your research project should be organized around the following “Six P’s”:

1. State the PROBLEM: What is the defining issue or problem that people who fall into this category face?

2. Research existing POLICIES: What public policies (federal, state, or local legislature) are in place to help the people in this category?

3. Research existing PROGRAMS: What sorts of programs are already in place, locally and nationally, to try to help people in this category? What non-profits exist and what sort of work are they doing? What governmental organizations and/or programs exist? What are they doing to try to help?

4. Find PERSONAL STORIES: Research books, newspapers, magazine articles, films and documentaries, or radio programs to find real-life stories of people who are, or who have been, a member of this category. Who are they? What are their names? What was their experience? How did they get there? How did they (if applicable) get out?

5. Note your own change in PERSPECTIVE: How has this research changed your own perspective on homelessness in general, and, more specifically, the people in this category? Were any of your own stereotypes challenged? Have your understandings changed? Have your own thoughts and opinions on the issue changed at all? If so, how? If not, why?

6. Create your own PLAN FOR ACTION: Come up with a 5-point plan of action that you or your peers could implement that will help solve some of the problems and issues that the people in your category face.

Deliverables: Your final research project must consist of two elements. First, a 10-minute oral presentation to the class, and second, a 6-page minimum written report (one page for each “P.”).

Additional things your group should consider:

- Decide how to divide the assignment among members of the group before you begin.
- Decide how you plan to present your findings to the class. You can be creative!
- Remember that research projects require citations. All sources must be cited.