



The HBO Documentary Film

CLASS DIVIDE

REACT to FILM
Educator's Guide



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Run Time: 74 minutes

Director / Producer: Marc Levin/Daphne Pinkerson

Film Synopsis: A look at gentrification and growing inequality in a microcosm, *Class Divide* explores two distinct worlds that share the same intersection – 10th Avenue and 26th Street in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. On one side of the avenue, the Elliott-Chelsea Houses have provided low-income public housing to residents for decades. Their neighbor across the avenue since 2012 is Avenues: The World School, a costly private school. What happens when kids from both of these worlds attempt to cross the divide?

NOTE TO EDUCATOR: HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Before watching *Class Divide* and using this guide with students, talk with them about “safe spaces”—places where people can express themselves without fear or the feeling of being unwelcome, unsafe or uncomfortable because of their identities. Explain that you want the classroom to be a safe space, where students and teachers show respect and empathy to one another and where everyone feels welcomed.

You may have students who experience feelings of insecurity or discomfort around the topics raised by *Class Divide*, such as poverty, entitlement, inequality, socioeconomic class, and family.

You should also spend time explaining for students the purpose of their viewing the film. Those purposes may vary depending on specific learning goals, student needs and local issues of a diversity of school communities, but should always include these essential goals:

- Expose students to knowledge and information about important social issues.
- Engage students in thinking critically about those issues, forming their own opinions and evaluating diverse perspectives.
- Inspire students to apply what they know and think in their own lives and communities, through personal or social action.
- The materials that follow are designed to support these goals and to be flexible for educators who may want to adapt or enhance them.

KEY EVENTS, CONCEPTS, AND TERMS

Affordable Housing	Affordable housing is housing that is appropriate for the needs of a range of very low to moderate income households and priced so that these households are also able to meet other basic living costs such as food, clothing, transport, medical care and education. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines it as housing for which the occupant(s) is/are paying no more than 30 percent of his or her income for gross housing costs, including utilities.
Chelsea	Chelsea is a neighborhood on the West Side of the borough of Manhattan in New York City. The district's boundaries are roughly 14th Street to the south and the Hudson River and West Street to the west, with the northern boundary variously described as 30th Street or 34th Street, and the eastern boundary as either Sixth Avenue or Fifth Avenue.
Class	A group sharing the same economic or social status.
Condominium	A condominium, frequently shortened to condo when it refers to residential buildings, is a form of multi-unit property. Specified units of the property are separately owned, and the remainder of the property is collectively owned.
Displacement	(in the context of Gentrification): The forced disenfranchisement of poor and working class people from the spaces and places in which they have legitimate social and historical claims.
Economic Inequality	Economic inequality is the difference found in various measures of economic well-being among individuals in a group, among groups in a population, or among countries. More specifically, income inequality is the extent to which income is distributed unevenly in a group of people while wealth inequality refers to the unequal distribution of assets in a group of people.
Gentrification	The process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents.
High Line	The High Line is a 1.45-mile-long New York City linear park built in Manhattan on an elevated section of a disused New York Central Railroad spur called the West Side Line.
Public Housing	Housing provided for people on low incomes, subsidized by public funds. It was established to provide decent and safe rental housing for eligible low-income families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Public housing comes in all sizes and types, from scattered single-family houses to high-rise apartments for elderly families.
Poverty	The condition of lacking sufficient money or goods to meet basic human needs such as food, shelter and clothing.
Tenant	One who has the occupation or temporary possession of lands or tenements of another. Specifically, one who rents or leases (as a house) from a landlord.
Urban Renewal	A process by which old buildings or buildings that are in bad condition in part of a city are replaced or repaired.

*Definitions sourced from Merriam-Webster dictionary; The Equality Trust; U.S. Department of Housing and Development; The Gentrification Reader (Lees, Loretta, Tom Slater, and Elvin K. Wyly)

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

Introduce the topic of income inequality to your students. Use the below information as a reference as you plan to address the issue with your class:

In the United States, income inequality, or the gap between the rich and everyone else, has been growing markedly, by every major statistical measure for some 30 years (Edsall). According to *Growing Apart: A Political History of American Inequality*, “Americans today live in a starkly unequal society. Inequality is greater now than it has been at any time in the last century, and the gaps in wages, income, and wealth are wider here than they are in any other democratic and developed economy” (Gordon).

Furthermore, there is a striking disparity between what Americans think the level of income inequality is in the U.S. and the reality. For example, in 2011, researchers from Harvard Business School and the Department of Psychology at Duke University found that the average American believes that the richest fifth own 59% of the wealth and that the bottom 40% own 9% while the reality was strikingly different. The top 20% of U.S. households owned more than 84% of the wealth, and the bottom 40% combined for a paltry 0.3% (Wolff).

You may wish to show students a short infographic video found on YouTube that concisely covers income inequality in the United States. The roughly 6 minute-long video is titled, “Wealth Inequality in America,” uploaded by user “Politizane.”

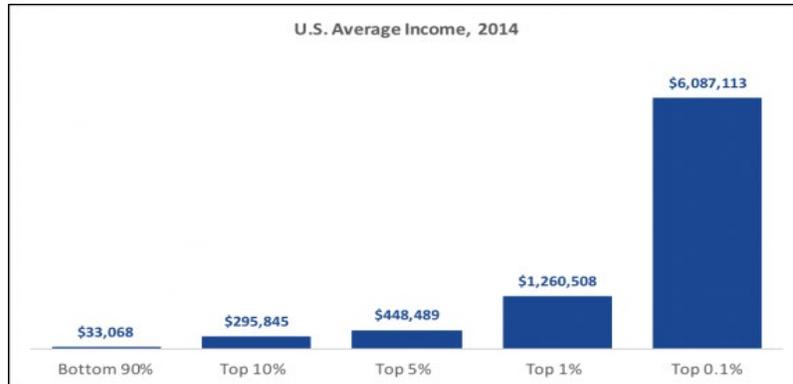
PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS

1. What is income inequality? What are the effects of income inequality?
2. Does the United States have widespread income inequality? Whose responsibility is it to address this problem?
3. What do you understand about the term gentrification? How does gentrification impact a community positively? How does gentrification impact a community negatively?
4. Can you think of any examples of gentrification? Can you name a neighborhood in your city that has recently undergone gentrification?
5. What is the purpose of public housing? Can you think of any other government assistance programs that help lower income households?
6. What is the relationship between income and housing? Does housing define or limit one’s experience of the world and their future/opportunities?
7. What would you consider a fair way for income/wealth to be more evenly distributed?

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

I) Examining trends in income inequality:

Show students this graph on average Household and Family Income in 2014:



Source: Emmanuel Saez, [Center for Equitable Growth](#), June 2015

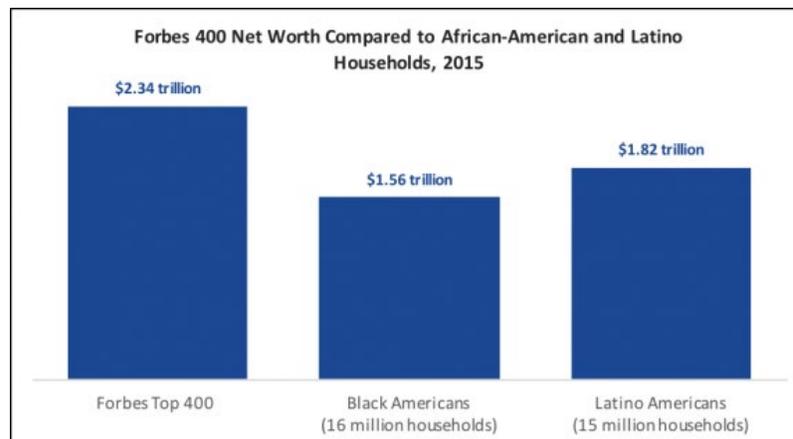
Ask students: What do you notice about income levels across U.S. households?

You can tell students that this graph shows income disparities in the U.S. in 2014. America's top 10% of income earning households now average nearly nine times as much income as the bottom 90%. Americans in the top 1 percent tower stunningly higher. They average over 38 times more income than the bottom 90 percent. But that gap pales in comparison to the divide between the nation's top 0.1 percent and everyone else. Americans at this lofty level are taking in over 184 times the income of the bottom 90 percent. Income inequality has been increasing rapidly since the 1970s and this level of inequality has not been seen for more than 80 years in the US. (Source: inequality.org/wealth-inequality/)

Ask students: Are these numbers surprising to you? Why or why not?

Tell students that: this graph indicates that the billionaires who make up the Forbes 400 list of richest Americans now have as much wealth as all African-American households, plus one-third of America's Latino population, combined. In other words, 400 extremely wealthy individuals have as much wealth as 16 million African-American households and 5 million Latino households.

Then examine this graph on the "The Racial Wealth Divide"



Source: Institute for Policy Studies, [Billionaire Bonanza: The Forbes 400 and the Rest of Us](#), December 2015

- In small groups of 3-4, students should discuss the following questions: Does this statistic surprise you? What does this graph suggest about the relationship between wealth and race? What additional information would we need to get a complete picture of the relationship between wealth and race?
- Student groups should share insights with the class.

2) Explaining Gentrification

Start by asking students to revisit pre-viewing question 3:

- (What do you understand about the term gentrification?) and share their responses. You can put useful terms such as “Land Use” and “Real Estate Markets” on the board to help students understand what gentrification means. See below for a more detailed explanation. (Source: PBS Point of View “What is Gentrification”)

The word Gentry means landowners, and the process whereby a neighborhood’s population moves from the Tenantry or the renters, to the Gentry, or the landowners, is gentrification. **Gentrification** refers to the physical, social, economic, and cultural phenomenon whereby working-class or inner-city neighborhoods are converted into more affluent communities, resulting in increased property values and the outflow of poorer residents.

Although there is not a clear-cut technical definition of gentrification, it is characterized by several changes.

Demographics An increase in median income, a decline in the proportion of racial minorities, and a reduction in household size, as low-income families are replaced by young singles and couples.

Real Estate Markets Large increases in rents and home prices, increases in the number of evictions, conversion of rental units to ownership (condos) and new development of luxury housing.

Land Use A decline in industrial uses, an increase in office or multimedia uses, the development of live-work “lofts” and high-end housing, retail, and restaurants.

Culture and Character New ideas about what is desirable and what is attractive, including standards (either informal or legal) for architecture, landscaping, public behavior, noise, and nuisance.

- To explore the class opinions on gentrification, post a sign in one corner of the classroom that says “positive effect” and another sign on the opposite corner that says “negative effect”.
- Students should think about the question: To what extent does gentrification impact a community positively/negatively? Then students should position themselves along the line that reflects their opinion on the impact of gentrification.

- Remaining in the line, ask students to share why they have chosen that position. Then in groups of 3-4 they should discuss the following:
 - a) What factors contribute to gentrification?
 - b) Who is responsible for gentrification? Encourage students to exchange views with peers who have a different experience to their own.
- Finally, discuss the following as a class:
 - a) Can you think of any examples of gentrification?
 - b) Can you name a neighborhood in your city that has recently undergone gentrification?

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS

1. In Class Divide we learn that since 2009, the average rent for Chelsea apartments rose 10 times faster than for all of Manhattan. What have the implications been?
2. What was the role of the High Line in the gentrification of West Chelsea? How has the High Line changed the neighborhood overall (think about both positive and negative impact)? Students should justify their responses with reference to the film.
3. What are some of the perceptions that Chelsea-Elliott Housing residents have about the Avenues students and vice versa? Do you think those attitudes are fair or unjustified?
4. Why is gentrification emotive and controversial? Justify your response with specific references to the documentary.
5. The filmmaker chooses to interview a number of subjects but puts particular emphasis on interviewing youth from both sides of the 'divide'. Do you think this is an effective choice? Why or why not?
6. What is the role of real estate agents and developers in gentrification? Students should make specific references to the documentary e.g. the tactics used to displace old-time residents that NYC councilman Corey Johnson mentions during the protest.
7. What do you think about Yasemin's 115 steps project? What does dialogue across divides achieve?
8. How is gentrification embedded in race and class relations and social stratification? In the documentary, Hyisheem claims, "It's not racism, it's classism." Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
9. In the documentary, residents of the Elliott-Chelsea Houses express uncertainty about their future in the neighborhood. Danny wonders whether they will give his mother money to move out. Brandon says it is like a big question mark on what's going to happen next. The young man sitting on the bench says he feels as if they are already starting to push them out. He says, "I feel like I live under a cloud of darkness surrounded by happiness." Given what you know about the changing face of Chelsea do you think it is inevitable that these families will get pushed out of neighborhood? Justify your response.

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

- Andrew Rai, the social worker, featured in the protest, makes the point that if lower-income families are priced out of New York City, then “Who will clean the streets, teach your children and put out fires?” Discuss his point of view as a class.

Extension questions to facilitate discussion:

1. What does a city need in order to thrive?
2. If food service workers, maintenance workers, waste management workers and others cannot afford to live in the city, where does that mean they will live?
3. Should there be economic diversity in a sustainable urban environment? Racial diversity?
4. Is equality possible in a free market system?
5. Given the intense demand for limited urban space, competition for housing, retail and business can become fierce in major cities. We know from basic economic principles that higher demand for something in short supply indicates that the price will generally go up. What does this trend do to the social fabric and diversity of a society?

Students should write a short essay responding to one of the following prompts with specific references to the film:

1. How does housing maintain and/or disrupt class divisions?
2. How does educational access/quality of education impact social mobility and social stratification?

ACTION STEPS

I) INTERVIEW A NEIGHBOR OR FAMILY MEMBER about:

1. Their opinion on gentrification in their city;
 2. Their experience witnessing the gentrification of their neighborhood
 3. Their experience moving into a gentrified neighborhood.
- Students can instead opt to interview a community organizer from a grassroots organization advocating for affordable housing, a small business owner or a real estate agent/developer.
 - Students should compile a list of questions to prepare.
 - After the interview, students should write a journal reflection on the following prompts: What did you discover about gentrification during your interview? What new questions would you ask if you were to interview the same person again?

2) ATTEND A LOCAL ZONING MEETING

To present or make observations about an issue related to their own neighborhoods.

3) INVITE A GUEST

Invite a real estate agent, landowner, small business owner, real estate developer, community board member, public housing advocate, or community organizer from a grassroots organization relating to gentrification to your classroom to discuss issues pertaining to the documentary and to answer student questions. You should ask students to draft questions in advance of the speaker's visit.

4) PARTNER WITH A SCHOOL

If your school serves predominantly low-income or high-income students consider pairing with a school nearby that serves students with a different socioeconomic background for a community project that will allow students to cross cultural, racial, class divides; to demystify the 'other'; to ask tough questions; to challenge their biases and preconceived notions.

A good example is the narrative storytelling exercise that is described in the New York Times article "The Tale of Two Schools." University Heights High School and Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx have collaborated in a project conceived by the organization Narrative 4 to create pedagogy of radical empathy. According to the article, "Under the supervision of Narrative 4, the students paired off, one from each school, and shared stories that in some way defined them. When they gathered as a group a few hours later, each student was responsible for telling the other's story, taking on the persona of his or her partner and telling the story in the first person." Use this as a template to create your own project.

5) USE PHOTOGRAPHY TO EXPRESS YOUR STORY

Inspired by HBO's documentary, *Class Divide*, and in partnership with Street Dreams Magazine, *VIEWS FROM THE BLOCK* empowered students to represent their communities, their perspectives, their identities—all through the power of photography. Encourage your students to do the same and share their perspective of their neighborhood, community, identity, etc. through their visual eye. Join in on the conversation using #ViewsFromTheBlock on Instagram.

6) BRING REACT TO FILM CURRICULA TO YOUR SCHOOL.

REACT to FILM educates middle and high school students about today's critical issues through the lens of documentary film—teaching media literacy, promoting civic responsibility and incubating social justice in the process.

Elective courses offered to students focus on fostering active viewership and critical thinking, with opportunities for guest speakers and field study. Throughout the semester, students work toward a final action project, which may include a student-created PSA, letter-to-the-editor, or petition. REACT to FILM also offers a Filmmaking for Social Change course. Learn more at www.reacttofilm.com/educate

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

“CEO Pay: How Much Do CEOs Make Compared to Their Employees?” PayScale. www.payscale.com/data-packages/ceo-pay. Accessed 7 Sept. 2016.

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