CONVERSATION KIT

NATIONAL YOUTH SUMMIT

WAR ON POVERTY

Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center
Thank you for participating in the Smithsonian’s National Youth Summit on the War on Poverty. This kit is designed to provide you with ideas for leading group discussions on the issues surrounding the War on Poverty and how they are relevant today. It also provides details on ways to participate in the Summit. The National Youth Summit is a program developed by the National Museum of American History in collaboration with Smithsonian Affiliations. This program is funded by the Smithsonian’s Youth Access Grants and the Verizon Foundation.

Smithsonian Institution

PROGRAM DETAILS

National Youth Summit: War on Poverty
Date: Tuesday, April 28, 2015
Time: 1-2 pm Eastern
Location: Find the link to the webcast at: http://americanhistory.si.edu/nys/war-poverty

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INTRODUCTION

In 1962, author Michael Harrington, in his book *The Other America*, estimated that about one fourth of the population of the United States was living in poverty. In January 1964, President Lyndon Johnson proposed “an all-out war on human poverty,” pledging “the most Federal support in history for education, for health, for retraining the unemployed, and for helping the economically and the physically handicapped.” Many of the programs that the War on Poverty created—including Headstart, Medicare, and Medicaid—are familiar to us today. But are they working, fifty years later? Did we “win” the War on Poverty? Do we need another War on Poverty? What does poverty look like today? And what can young people do about the issue? We’ll discuss these questions with experts and students at the 2015 National Youth Summit.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS FOR THE SUMMIT

- What are the central debates around the role of government in the fight against poverty?
- How has poverty changed in the United States since 1964?
- How does poverty limit the opportunities of individuals in the United States?
- How are people addressing poverty today? What would you do to address poverty?
PANELISTS

Dr. Marcia Chatelain is Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Georgetown University, where she writes and teaches about African-American migration, women’s and girls’ history, and race and food. In 2014, Dr. Chatelain created #fergusonsyllabus to encourage educators to discuss the national crisis in Ferguson, Missouri. See this Storify for tweets from the #fergusonsyllabus discussion: https://storify.com/neelofer/fergusonsyllabus

Peter Edelman is the Carmack Waterhouse Professor of Law and Public Policy at Georgetown University Law Center, where he teaches constitutional law and poverty law and is faculty director of the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality. On the faculty since 1982, he has also served in all three branches of government. During President Clinton’s first term he was Counselor to Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala and then Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

Professor Edelman has been Associate Dean of the Law Center, Director of the New York State Division for Youth, and Vice President of the University of Massachusetts. He was a Legislative Assistant to Senator Robert F. Kennedy and was Issues Director for Senator Edward Kennedy’s Presidential campaign in 1980.

Professor Edelman’s most recent book, So Rich So Poor: Why It’s So Hard to End Poverty in America, was published by The New Press in May 2012. He previously wrote Searching for America’s Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope, which was published by Houghton-Mifflin in January 2001. He also co-authored Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men, which was published by the Urban Institute in 2006, and is the author of many articles on poverty, constitutional law, and issues about children and youth.

To introduce students to Professor Edelman’s views and experiences, share this short (9 minute) interview: http://www.wn.com/peter_edelman

Melissa Boteach is the Vice President of Half in Ten and the Poverty and Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress. In this capacity she oversees American Progress’s poverty policy development and analysis, as well as “Half in Ten: The Campaign to Cut Poverty in Half in Ten Years.” Under her tenure, Half in Ten has launched its annual report tracking progress to cut poverty in half in 10 years and the Our American Story project, a network of people working to expand economic opportunity through the power of their personal stories.

continued
Melissa has appeared on MSNBC, Fox News, and C-SPAN; has been a guest on several radio shows; and is frequently cited in English and Spanish print and online media. She was named as one of Forbes magazine’s 30 under 30 for law and policy in 2011.

To introduce students to Melissa’s views on poverty, share this short excerpt from her recent post at the Center for American Progress:

https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/report/2014/01/07/81661/the-war-on-poverty-then-and-now/

Soon after President Johnson declared his commitment to end poverty, Congress passed the bipartisan Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and critical civil rights legislation, which created the legislative framework to expand economic opportunity through anti-poverty, health, education, and employment policies. Throughout the Johnson and Nixon administrations, the War on Poverty—and the Great Society more broadly—laid the foundation for our modern-day safety net, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps; Medicare; Medicaid; Head Start; and expanded Social Security.

These and other programs with roots in the War on Poverty have kept millions of families out of poverty, made college education more accessible, and put the American Dream within reach for those living on society’s margins. Our national poverty rate fell 42 percent during the War on Poverty, from 1964 to 1973. And that trend continues today: The poverty rate fell from 26 percent in 1967 to 16 percent in 2012 when safety net programs are taken into account.

As poverty persists across the country, however, critics of our safety net programs might say we lost the fight. But to label the War on Poverty a failure is to say that the creation of Medicare and Head Start, enactment of civil rights legislation, and investments in education that have enabled millions of students to go to college are a failure. In fact, without the safety net, much of which has its roots in the War on Poverty, poverty rates today would be nearly double what they currently are.

The War on Poverty has not failed us, but our economy has.

Our economy and social fabric have changed significantly in the past 50 years. Demographic shifts, rising income inequality, and insufficient access to jobs and education pose new policy challenges. Too often, our public policies have not met the needs posed by these trends.

It is time for a renewed national commitment to reduce poverty.
Cato Institute senior fellow Michael Tanner heads research into a variety of domestic policies with a particular emphasis on health care reform, social welfare policy, and Social Security. Tanner’s writings have appeared in nearly every major American newspaper, including the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. He writes a weekly column for National Review Online, and is a contributing columnist with the New York Post. A prolific writer and frequent guest lecturer, Tanner appears regularly on network and cable news programs.

To prepare your students for Tanner’s discussion on the webcast, share with them this executive summary of his latest writing, on the War on Poverty:

**The War on Poverty Turns 50: Are We Winning Yet?**
By Michael Tanner and Charles Hughes

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The War on Poverty is 50 years old. Over that time, federal and state governments have spent more than $19 trillion fighting poverty. But what have we really accomplished?

Although far from conclusive, the evidence suggests that we have successfully reduced many of the deprivations of material poverty, especially in the early years of the War on Poverty. However, these efforts were more successful among socioeconomically stable groups such as the elderly than low-income groups facing other social problems. Moreover, other factors like the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the expansion of economic opportunities to African Americans and women, increased private charity, and general economic growth may all have played a role in whatever poverty reduction occurred.

However, even if the War on Poverty achieved some initial success, the programs it spawned have long since reached a point of diminishing returns. In recent years we have spent more and more money on more and more programs, while realizing few, if any, additional gains. More important, the War on Poverty has failed to make those living in poverty independent or increase economic mobility among the poor and children. We may have made the lives of the poor less uncomfortable, but we have failed to truly lift people out of poverty.

The failures of the War on Poverty should serve as an object lesson for policymakers today. Good intentions are not enough. We should not continue to throw money at failed programs in the name of compassion.

**Note:** a response to conservative critiques can be found in this Pew Research Center study:
http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/02/chart-of-the-week-how-americas-poor-can-still-be-rich-in-stuff/
REGIONAL YOUTH SUMMIT LOCATIONS

- Cincinnati, Ohio: National Underground Railroad Freedom Center
- Miami, Florida: HistoryMiami
- Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Oklahoma History Center
- Seattle, Washington: Museum of History and Industry

WHERE, WHEN, AND HOW TO WATCH

Viewing the Program
- The program will be webcast live from 1-2 pm Eastern on Tuesday, April 28, 2015.
- To view the program, visit http://americanhistory.si.edu/nys-live. Prior to the program, ensure that Ustream is not blocked in your school or district. You can test this by accessing the webcast page, going to http://ustream.tv, or contacting your school’s technology coordinator. If you miss the live event, you can access the archived version at http://americanhistory.si.edu/nys/war-poverty

During the Event
- We will host a live chat where students can pose questions to the panelists and to an expert on the topic of poverty in America who will join the chat. If possible, have students view the program individually or in small groups at laptops so that they can join the online conversation. If you are watching together as a class, ensure that you have speakers that are sufficient to hear the webcast, use a strong internet connection, and ensure that there is someone—either you or a student—on the chat and communicating between the class and the rest of the web audience.
- During the webcast, give your students a goal. Have them listen closely to and assess the speakers’ viewpoints on the history of the War on Poverty and modern debates about how to address economic inequality. See the “Scoping the Speaker” sheet on page 16 of this packet.
COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

English Language Arts: Speaking and Listening Standards

Comprehension and Collaboration, Grades 9–10
1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension and Collaboration, Grades 11–12
1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Student Perceptions
Before you begin, start with a conversation about students’ perceptions of poverty. What does that mean to them? What causes it? What about wealth? What causes wealth? How does it accumulate? What causes economic inequality? Follow this conversation with a reflection on the relative roles of access to quality education, generational wealth, race, gender, and access to social programs, using the resources below. Or, have students compare their perceptions with the data, using this article from the Pew Research Center: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/13/whos-poor-in-america-50-years-into-the-war-on-poverty-a-data-portrait/

Have students consider which groups have made the
most gains since the War on Poverty. Or, replicate the exercise of the video below on wealth inequality. Ask students to suggest an ideal distribution of wealth in the US and what they think the distribution actually is. Then, watch the 6 minute video together and discuss: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM

**Structural Racism**

“A system of societal structures that work interactively to distribute generational and historic advantages to groups of people based on race and that produces cumulative, race-based inequalities. This includes laws and policies with ‘unintended consequences based on racialized behavior.’” – definition from Associated Black Charities, http://www.abc-md.org/the-perfect-example-of-structural-racism/

Consider structural racism. How does this contribute to economic inequality? In “The Quiet Plunder” and “Making the Second Ghetto”—two portions of his essay “The Case for Reparations”—writer Ta-Nehisi Coates outlines examples of structural racism and their contributions to economic inequality in America. Ask students to read the article and cite specific examples of policies that contributed to economic hardship for African Americans: http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/#v-the-quiet-plunder

**Gender**

Share this chart from the New York Times and the article below to stimulate a discussion about how gender and economic inequality may relate to one another: http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2006/12/23/business/24GAP.jpg


**Constructive Service Learning**

One obvious and common way for young people to address issues of poverty is to hold food or clothing drives. But without deep conversations about the nature of poverty and issues facing specific communities, such projects may do little to fundamentally change students’ understanding of the issue. Teaching Tolerance’s resources on teaching about poverty, http://www.tolerance.org, includes an outline of best practices:

- Incorporate reflection about student attitudes
- Work with and not for
- Address real needs
- Include study of social policies/problems that contribute to ‘need’

See this planning sheet for a guide to creating meaningful service learning projects for students. www.tolerance.org/supplement/multicultural-service-learning-teacher-planning-sheet

Part of the conversation about student perceptions is the importance of recognizing the resources that *do* exist in communities in need. While the War on Poverty was a series of government programs, consider the networks within communities that address issues of poverty—from individual relationships to career classes at community centers to church support groups to community gardens, how are people helping themselves?
WAR ON POVERTY LESSON SUGGESTIONS

The activities below were designed to give your students background on some of the central arguments and conversations for the National Youth Summit program and to provide a final assessment for participating in the Summit.

What was the War on Poverty?

Try an existing lesson that provides an overview of the War on Poverty. Examples can be found from:

- Stanford History Education Group:

- The National Endowment for the Humanities:

Or, begin with a general conversation about the War on Poverty. What was it? What did it hope to achieve? Have students view this portion of the American Experience documentary LBJ from PBS:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amERICANexPERIENCE/features/bONUS-video/presidents-economy-lbj/

Then discuss the following: What was LBJ’s vision for the War on Poverty, according to historian Robert Dalleck?

Then read and discuss the following articles, using the follow up questions provided:

“Everything You Need to Know About the War on Poverty” from the Washington Post:

- What were the four major pieces of legislation that made up the War on Poverty, and what did each do?
- Does this article suggest that the War on Poverty was a success? Why or why not?

“Fifty Years Later the War on Poverty is a Mixed Bag” from the New York Times:
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/05/business/50-years-later-war-on-poverty-is-a-mixed-bag.html?_r=0

- What evidence does Lowrey present that the War on Poverty was a success?
- What evidence does she present that suggests it did not meet expectations?

Have students develop an argument in response to the question “Was the War on Poverty a success?” using at least two pieces of evidence from the articles to support their argument.
Understanding the Laffer Curve

To implement the War on Poverty programs, the Johnson administration required funding; today, much of federal tax revenue goes to support social programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. There continues to be debate about how high taxes should be to foster economic growth but still support the general welfare. One way of thinking about the relationship between the economy and taxes is the Laffer Curve, famously conceived of and sketched on a napkin that is now in the collections of the National Museum of American History (see image above). Complete this exercise from the Council on Economic Education to learn one perspective on the top tax rates, then ask students to consider this: where do you think the top of the curve should be? [Link](http://www.econedlink.org/interactives/index.php?id=235&type=student)

For context, provide students with the graphs of proposed federal spending, listed on pages 12 and 13, created by the National Priorities Project, a non-partisan research organization dedicated to making complex federal budget information transparent and accessible.

As a follow up activity, examine the opinions offered in this 2010 “Room for Debate” series from the New York Times, then pose the central question to the class: [Link](http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/09/16/rising-poverty-and-the-social-safety-net/services-cant-keep-up)
President’s Proposed Trillion Total Spending (FY 2015)

- Social Security, Unemployment & Labor: 33%
- Military: 16%
- Housing & Community: 3%
- Education: 2%
- Interest on Debt: 6%
- Veterans’ Benefits: 4%
- Food & Agriculture: 3%
- Transportation: 3%
- Energy & Environment: 1%
- Science: 1%
- Health: 27%
- Government: less than 1%
- International Affairs: 1%

Image courtesy of National Priorities Project, www.nationalpriorities.org

Source: OMB, National Priorities Project
President Obama’s 2015 Budget

Where The Money Comes From
($3.9 trillion in revenue and borrowing)

Tax Revenue: Federal Funds
$2.2 trillion
- Individual Income Taxes $1.53 trillion
- Corporate Income Taxes $448 billion
- Other $146 billion
- Customs Duties $35 billion
- Excise Taxes $50 billion

56% of revenue

15% of revenue

Tax Revenue: Trust Funds
$1.12 trillion
- Social Security & Medicare Taxes $1.05 trillion
- Excise Taxes $60 billion
- Customs Duties $1.7 billion
- Other $3.3 billion

$252 billion

6% of spending

Borrowing
$561 billion

Mandatory Spending
$2.56 trillion
- Medicare & Health $999 billion
- Social Security $900 billion
- Other $506 billion
- Food Assistance $106 billion
- Unemployment $47 billion

65% of spending

Discretionary Spending
$1.16 trillion
- Military $640 billion
- Other $284 billion
- Education $72 billion
- Housing & Community $61 billion
- International Affairs $38 billion
- Energy & Environment $38 billion
- Transportation $26 billion

29% of spending

Where The Money Goes
($3.9 trillion in spending)

Source: OMB
National Priorities Project

Image courtesy of National Priorities Project, www.nationalpriorities.org
DO WE NEED A NEW WAR ON POVERTY? WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Help students to consider one of four policy proposals that would address poverty in the US, then ask them to develop a new policy to address poverty with this activity from New York Times Learning:

Make connections to English and language arts with an examination of Barbara Ehrenrich’s book Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America:

Or, have students learn about poverty in their own communities and methods for addressing it with this activity:

First, examine this chart to understand the federal poverty level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person in Household</th>
<th>2014 Federal Poverty Level for Continental U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$11,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$15,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$19,790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$23,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$27,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>$31,970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>$36,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>$40,090</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- What is the federal poverty level for a family of four?
- Research poverty statistics in your community. What is the poverty rate in your county? Use these resources to answer the question:
  • Find an organization in your community or state that addresses poverty (examples include Habitat for Humanity, food pantries). Name one and explain its mission or goals. Note whether they have opportunities for student involvement or student fundraising.
  • Consider an issue in your local community. Research the causes. Research the solutions that have been attempted or are currently being used to address it. Create an action plan to address it. Who are the stakeholders? What are the resources in the community that you can rely on? What resources are needed? What are your intended outcomes?

For ideas on how to address poverty and links to organizations in your community, visit:

Bill Moyers & Company:

Habitat for Humanity:
http://www.habitat.org/youthprograms

DoSomething.Org:

Talk Poverty:
http://talkpoverty.org/local-state-groups/
JOIN THE NATIONAL YOUTH SUMMIT

Have students view the program, and based on their viewing, answer one of the following questions.

Have them cite at least one specific argument or speaker from the program to support their claim.

- Was the Great Society/War on Poverty a success?
- Do we need a new War on Poverty, and if so, what should it entail?
- What is the responsibility of government to the people? What is the meaning of “promote the general welfare”?

Additional Resources

Introduction to definitions of poverty from the Census Bureau:
https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/

Interactive for students from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library:
http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/lbjforkids/poverty.shtm

Oral histories from the Johnson administration, via the Social Security Administration:
http://www.ssa.gov/history/LBJ/lbj.html

Data on poverty via BillMoyers.com:
http://billmoyers.com/2013/05/29/u-s-poverty-by-the-numbers/
NATIONAL YOUTH SUMMIT: WAR ON POVERTY

Scoping the Speaker

During the webcast, select one speaker to follow closely, and record their arguments and supporting evidence below. Pay close attention to point of view and rhetorical techniques.

Name of Speaker:

Background or Connection to War on Poverty:

WHILE LISTENING

As you listen to the speaker, note key points he or she makes in the bulleted list below:

•

•

•

•

Make note of one memorable quote:

AFTER THE EVENT

What do you think this speaker believes we should learn from the War on Poverty?
OUR PARTNERS

The National Youth Summit on Freedom Summer is presented by the National Museum of American History in collaboration with Smithsonian Affiliations with the support of the Smithsonian’s Youth Access Grant program and the Verizon Foundation.

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