



WHAT IS HAPPENING IN FERGUSON, MO?

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old black teenager who was about to start college, was allegedly shot multiple times and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Following the shooting, hundreds of people gathered at the scene of the shooting to organize vigils to remember Michael Brown as well as protest to demand answers as to why he was shot. Over the course of the next several days, these protests, the majority of which were peaceful, were reportedly met with a heavily armed police department. As tensions escalated, reports of police using tear gas and rubber bullets on protesters, as well as protests becoming violent, emerged. Missouri's Governor stepped in and replaced local police with the state highway patrol. The Department of Justice has launched a civil rights investigation into the circumstances surrounding the case and will perform their own autopsy. On August 15—almost a full week after Michael Brown was shot—the police department released the name of the officer who allegedly shot him.

The story has captured the attention of the nation and the media. It struck a chord with many people who perceive the situation as emblematic of a trend in which a disproportionate number of young unarmed black men have been killed by police officers. The story continues to make front page headlines because of the way the police department in Ferguson and St. Louis have handled various aspects of the case and its aftermath, as well as the ongoing clashes between police and protestors. Michael Brown's death and the circumstances around it raise issues of race, inequality, bias, power, police relations with the communities they serve, activism and social and economic justice. This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the situation in Ferguson, grapple with their thoughts and feelings about the case, analyze the militarization of the police and reflect on activism in order to effect change.

[**NOTE:** Before talking about the incident, reflect on the racial diversity and composition of your classroom. If your class is all or predominately white, consider what your students might know and not know as a result of their experience and perspective on the world. If there is one or only a few black students in the class, do not put them in the position of being the “expert informant.” Their thoughts and feelings about the situation do not represent the point of view of all black people. If your class is made up of predominately black and Latino students, the conversation may (or may not) include first-hand experience and strong feelings. Often teenagers of any race have difficult relationships with security and law enforcement/police and you may want to use that angle to build empathy and understanding. Young people with family members employed in law enforcement may also have strong feelings. Keeping all of this in mind, be careful not to make assumptions about anyone. Instead, establish their perspective by asking good questions and affirm all of the feelings of your students, whether they are anger, fear, sadness, frustration or something else.]

See these additional ADL resources: [Anti-Bias Education](#), [Discussing Hate and Violence with Children](#) and [Anti-Bias Education Curriculum Resources](#).

Grade Level: grades 9–12

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Speaking and Listening

Learning Objectives:

- Students will learn more about the police shooting of Michael Brown and the events that followed.
- Students will reflect on their thoughts and feelings about what happened to Michael Brown.
- Students will analyze different perspectives on the extent to which police officers should be heavily armed and use surplus military equipment for everyday policing.
- Students will define activism and consider different strategies for taking action.

Material:

- [Police Shooting of Michael Brown and the Aftermath: Background and Context](#)
- “Are Police Forces Excessively Armed?” (*The New York Times Room for Debate*, August 14, 2014, www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/08/14/are-police-forces-excessively-armed, include copies of the accompanying six short opinion articles)
- “Be Free” song by rapper J. Cole (audio and lyrics, www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jcole/befree.html)
- Internet access, projector, paper and markers; (optional) smartboard

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings.

- Accountability
- Interrogation
- Police brutality
- Activism
- Law Enforcement
- Protest
- Civil rights
- Looting
- Segregated
- Curfew
- Militarization
- Unarmed
- Disproportionately
- Misconduct
- Vigil
- Excessive
- Nonlethal force

WARM-UP: WHAT HAPPENED IN FERGUSON, MO?

Ask students: *Do you know what happened recently in Ferguson, Missouri?* If they don’t have anything to share, give a little more information and say, “Something happened with the police and an unarmed black teenager. Did you hear what happened?” Record their responses on the board/smartboard.

INFORMATION SHARING

To ensure that students understand the basics of what is happening in Ferguson, share information from or distribute the [Police Shooting of Michael Brown and the Aftermath: Background and Context](#) and read aloud with the students.

After going over these points, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

- What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
- What stands out most for you?

- Have you ever heard of something like this happening?
- Can you relate to this story? If so, how?
- Do you think the race of Michael Brown and the police officer are relevant? How?
- Do you think the racial make-up of the police department in Ferguson is relevant? Why or why not?
- Do you think the anger that has been expressed is more than about Mike Brown? If so, what is it about?
- What most surprises you about the situation in Ferguson?
- Why do you think there is so much attention on this case?
- What other questions do you have?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION: THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

1. Divide students in groups of four. Explain that this is an opportunity for students to share their thoughts and feelings in small groups about what's happening in Ferguson. Tell them that they are going to respond to three questions, one at a time. A question will be asked aloud and each student will have one minute to respond to the question. There is no cross talk while the students talk; the other three students will listen. Then you will call "switch" and the next person speaks. This will continue until all four students have answered the question.

Repeat this process for the second and third questions. Remind students that it is important that they follow the format for the questions so that everyone gets to say what they want to say without interruption and that confidentiality is maintained.

NOTE: In addition to asking the questions below, you can also write them on the board one at a time as you process each question.

- How did you feel when you first heard about what happened in Ferguson (either from the news or now in class)?
 - Why do you think some people have strong feelings about this issue?
 - What do you think needs to be done about the situation in Ferguson?
2. After all four students have responded to all of the questions, allow a few minutes for them to talk together about the discussion without a formal structure.
 3. After the small group discussion, ask if students would like to share anything that came up in their groups. Remind them that they should only share their own perspectives and not what was shared by others in their group.

READING ACTIVITY: MILITARIZATION OF POLICE

1. Explain to students that one controversial aspect of the story is the way the police have interacted with the residents of Ferguson and others who are protesting. Some people have called it the "militarization of the police" and are critical of how heavily armed the police officers are. Citing the minority population in Ferguson, others criticize the disproportionate impact this has had on people of color. Some law enforcement officers and other people believe that armored police officers have saved lives and decrease the risk for police officers.

2. In *The New York Times*' "[Are Police Forces Excessively Armed?](#)" Room for Debate six different perspectives are presented in short opinion articles. Choose some or all of the articles and distribute them evenly among the students so that a variety of perspectives are read (e.g. If you have 30 students in the class and you distribute all six articles, five students will read each article). Give students 10–15 minutes to read the articles (and take notes) or give the articles to students in advance of the lesson to read for homework. After students have read the articles, have one or two students per article share their perspective. They should (1) give a summary of the article, including the person's point of view and (2) state whether they agree or disagree with the writer and why.

ACTIVISM: WHAT CAN WE DO?

1. Ask students: *What is activism?* Define **activism** as the practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals, sometimes by demonstrations, protests, etc.
2. Then ask: *What kind of activism is currently taking place in Ferguson as well as around the country?* (protests, vigils, social media, online petitions, national moment of silence). *What do you think the protestors want or need? What are their "demands?"*
3. On a piece of paper, have students write down one thing they think should be done about what's happening in Ferguson. If time permits, have students illustrate their statements. When students are done, have them hold them up and read aloud.
4. Ask students: *What other ideas do you have for activism around this issue?* Brainstorm a list that may include the following:
 - Protests
 - Vigils
 - Social media activism
 - Demand for improved police training
 - Put pressure on public officials to press charges against the police officer who allegedly shot Michael Brown
 - Civil disobedience and training protestors in these methods
 - Push for a police force that more closely reflects the community
 - Write letters to public officials
 - Dialogue between community and public officials
5. Ask students: *Has something like this happened or could it happen in our community? If so, what can we do as a community to ensure something like this doesn't happen here?* Brainstorm ideas of community-level activism. The ideas may be similar or different from the list generated above. As students come up with ideas, discuss each in more detail and whether the idea is viable. If time allows, choose one of the ideas and work as a class or group to implement.

CLOSING

Rapper J. Cole wrote a song called "Be Free" as a response to the police shooting of Michael Brown (see *Rolling Stone* article "[J. Cole Mourns Michael Brown in Somber new Song 'Be Free'](#)" dated August 15, 2014).

[Play the song](#) for the students (link also includes the lyrics). After listening to the song, ask students the following questions:

- How did you feel while listening to the song?
- What do the lyrics mean?
- Why do you think he wrote the song?
- Will it make a difference?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY IDEAS

- Have students follow the hashtag on Twitter #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. The hashtag seeks to bring to light the way young black men are depicted in the news media. Their position is that the media uses pictures of slain black men and distorts and filters them through negative stereotypes, instead of other available photos, which would paint them in a more positive light. After reviewing tweets posted under this hashtag, have students write an essay on what they saw and their interpretation of it.
- Have students look at the photo gallery from [The Kansas City Star](#) and [The New York Times](#). Project the photos on a smartboard and before reading the captions, have students write their own captions for each of the pictures. Then have students do online research, compiling photos and creating their own online photo galleries to tell the story of what is happening in Ferguson, MO. Photos can include Michael Brown, the protests and vigils, photos from social media, celebrities who have made statements, police activity, press conferences, public statements, etc.
- Have students interview friends, classmates, family members and other adults to survey what different people think and feel about what is happening in Ferguson and what should be done about the situation. Students can develop the questions in advance, decide how many people to interview, conduct the interviews, and look for patterns and areas of divergence. As a culmination, they can write an essay with a synopsis of what they found out or create a video of their recorded interviews, narrating a summary of their findings.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“In Ferguson, Black Town, White Power”](#) (*The New York Times*, August 18, 2014)
- [“Frustration in Ferguson”](#) (*The New York Times*, August 18, 2014)
- [“Grief and Protests Follow Shooting of a Teenager”](#) (*The New York Times*, August 10, 2014)
- [“New Tack on Unrest Eases Tension in Missouri”](#) (*The New York Times*, August 14, 2014)
- [“Even before Michael Brown’s slaying in Ferguson, racial questions hung over police”](#) (*The Washington Post*, August 13, 2014)
- [“Local police involved in 400 killings per year”](#) (*USA Today*, August 15, 2014)
- [“What You Need to Know About the Death of an Unarmed Black Teenager in Missouri”](#) (*The Washington Post*, August 11, 2014)
- [“Ferguson’s weaponized cops and America’s long, ugly history of police violence”](#) (*Salon*, August 16, 2014)

- [“Ferguson Under Siege: Why Michael Brown's Murder And Nationwide Police Brutality Is The Tipping Point For Revolution”](#) (*Vibe*, August 14, 2014)
- [“Ferguson Images Evoke Civil Rights Era and Changing Visual Perceptions”](#) (*The New York Times*, August 14, 2014)
- [“Before Ferguson: Deaths of other black men at hands of police”](#) (*Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2014)
- [“Exactly How Often Do Police Shoot Unarmed Black Men?”](#) (*Mother Jones*, August 14, 2014)
- [Please Enact New Federal Laws to Protect Citizens from Police Violence and Misconduct](#) (Change.org)
- [“Visualizing The Rapid Racial Change In Ferguson Over The Past Decade”](#) (*The Washington Post*, August 14, 2014)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Standard 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

POLICE SHOOTING OF MICHAEL BROWN AND THE AFTERMATH: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- On August 9, 2014, an unarmed black eighteen-year old named Michael Brown was allegedly shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a working-class/middle income suburb outside of St. Louis of about 21,000 residents. Following the shooting, hundreds of people gathered at the scene of the shooting to organize vigils to remember Michael Brown as well as protests to demand answers as to why this unarmed young man was shot. Protests continued and grew in size throughout the week that followed. The police chief said he would not release the name of the officer who shot Michael Brown because he was concerned about the officer's safety. Six days later, the name of the police officer was revealed. Charges against the police officer for killing the unarmed teenager have not been filed as of this writing. There is a discrepancy between what the police and witnesses have said about what happened. Friends and witnesses said that Michael Brown's hands were in the air when the last of the shots was fired. The St. Louis County Police Chief said that Michael Brown physically assaulted the officer and, during a struggle between the two, Brown reached for the officer's gun. One shot was allegedly fired in the car followed by other gunshots outside of the car.
- After the shooting, there were five nights of protests. There was a small amount of looting but most of the protests were peaceful. Reports, photographs and videos showed police officers firing tear gas and rubber bullets into crowds of protestors and fifty people were arrested. Police wearing camouflage, black helmets and vests and carrying assault rifles and ammunition, slender black nightsticks and gas masks confronted protestors. When the protestors refused to leave the streets, the police officers reportedly used firebombs, tear gas and rubber bullets. Attorney General Eric Holder stated: "At a time when we must seek to rebuild trust between law enforcement and the local community, I am deeply concerned that the deployment of military equipment and vehicles sends a conflicting message." Subsequently, Governor Jay Nixon removed the St. Louis police and had the state highway patrol take over security operations in Ferguson. He appointed Ronald Johnson, an African-American Missouri State Highway Patrol Officer, to oversee the security team responsible for maintaining order at the protests. On August 16, Governor Nixon declared a state of emergency in Ferguson due to rioting and looting and imposed a midnight curfew after which residents could not go outside. A small group of people defied the curfew and clashes erupted shortly after the curfew with tear gas and gunshots in the streets. One person was shot by an unknown assailant and seven were arrested that evening.
- On August 15, six days after the shooting, the Ferguson Police Department identified the name of the officer allegedly involved in the shooting as Darren Wilson. At the same time, they released a videotape that they said showed Michael Brown taking a box of cigars from a convenience store shortly before the shooting. The Ferguson police chief initially suggested that the officer who shot Michael Brown had been alerted to the robbery and the two events were connected. Hours later, Police Chief Jackson said that the officer did not know Michael Brown was a robbery suspect when he stopped him and that the reason the officer stopped Mr. Brown and a friend was "because they were walking down the street blocking traffic."

- People from all over the United States have expressed concern and anger over the shooting of Michael Brown and the way the police have handled both the investigation and the protests. Civil rights activists Jesse Jackson and Reverend Al Sharpton have come to Ferguson. Organizers planned vigils in more than 90 cities across the country to mourn the death of Michael Brown and protest the police response to the aftermath. The events were organized on Twitter by social media activists under the hashtag #NMOS14, meaning National Moment of Silence. A change.org petition to President Obama has been circulated urging enactment of federal laws to protect citizens from police misconduct and violence.
- St. Louis is one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States. Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis, has seen its population shift in recent years. About two-thirds of the city's 21,100 residents are African American. The police force patrolling Ferguson has not changed along with the population. The police force has 53 members, and only three of them are black; that means 5% are African American. The city's mayor and police chief are white, as are most of the members of the Ferguson City Council. A recent study shows that while African Americans constitute 63% of the city's population, they account for 86% of the traffic stops by the police.
- According to the most recent accounts reported to the FBI, during a seven-year period ending in 2012, nationwide nearly twice a week a white police officer killed a black person. The data comes from reports that local police departments submit to the FBI every year, reporting who gets killed, how and by whom (including age and race). The reports show that 18% of the blacks killed during those seven years were under age 21, compared to 8.7% of whites killed by police officers. This data is somewhat flawed in that the killings are self-reported by law enforcement and not all police departments participate in the database. This means that these numbers are likely lower than the actual number of deaths by police officers.