



LAW, MOCK TRIAL & JUSTICE STUDIES

Criminal Justice System Explainer Unit

From Arrest to Sentencing and Beyond

UNIT DETAILS

Grades 9-12 | 2-Week Unit | 10 Lesson Plans
US Criminal Justice System
Juvenile vs. Adult Courts • Plea Bargaining
Incarceration Data • School-to-Prison Pipeline
Reform Movements • Wrongful Convictions

INCLUDES:

10 Detailed Lesson Plans • Criminal Justice Flowchart Activity
Incarceration Data Analysis Worksheet • Wrongful Conviction Case Study
Reform Debate Activity • Discussion Protocol
Unit Assessment with Answer Key

UM Printables

Premium Educational Resources

Table of Contents

Unit Overview & Standards Alignment	3
Lesson 1: Introduction to the Criminal Justice System	5
Lesson 2: Arrest, Booking & Initial Appearance	7
Lesson 3: Prosecution, Bail & Pretrial Procedures	9
Lesson 4: Plea Bargaining — The System's Engine	11
Lesson 5: The Trial Process	13
Lesson 6: Sentencing — Purposes & Practices	15
Lesson 7: Juvenile vs. Adult Courts	17
Lesson 8: Incarceration & Data Analysis	19
Lesson 9: The School-to-Prison Pipeline & Reform Movements	21
Lesson 10: Wrongful Convictions & the Innocence Project	23
Criminal Justice Flowchart Activity	25
Incarceration Data Analysis Worksheet	28
Wrongful Conviction Case Study (Innocence Project Model)	31
Reform Debate Activity	34
Discussion Protocol	37
Unit Assessment	39
Unit Assessment Answer Key	43

UNIT OVERVIEW

Course & Unit Information

Subject Area	Law, Mock Trial & Justice Studies
Unit Title	Criminal Justice System Explainer Unit
Grade Level	9–12
Duration	2 Weeks (10 Lesson Plans)
Pacing	50–60 minutes per lesson

Unit Description

This two-week explainer unit provides students in Grades 9–12 with a comprehensive, inquiry-driven examination of the United States criminal justice system. From the moment of arrest through trial, sentencing, and beyond, students will trace the path of a case through the system while critically analyzing the structures, policies, and disparities that shape outcomes. The unit addresses juvenile versus adult court systems, the role of plea bargaining, incarceration statistics and their societal implications, the school-to-prison pipeline, contemporary reform movements, and wrongful convictions through the lens of the Innocence Project. Students engage with primary data, case studies, structured debate, and analytical writing to develop a nuanced understanding of justice in America.

Essential Questions

- How does a case move through the US criminal justice system from arrest to sentencing?
- What are the key differences between juvenile and adult court proceedings?
- Why do the vast majority of criminal cases end in plea bargains rather than trials?
- What do incarceration data reveal about equity and disparity in the justice system?
- What is the school-to-prison pipeline, and what policies contribute to it?
- How do wrongful convictions occur, and what mechanisms exist to address them?
- What reform movements are shaping the future of criminal justice in the United States?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit, students will be able to:

1. Diagram the sequence of stages in the US criminal justice system from arrest through sentencing and corrections.
2. Explain the rights of the accused at each stage of the criminal justice process, including Miranda rights, the right to counsel, and due process protections.

3. Compare and contrast juvenile and adult court systems, including jurisdiction, procedures, and sentencing philosophy.
4. Analyze the role and prevalence of plea bargaining in the US system and evaluate its benefits and drawbacks.
5. Describe the phases of a criminal trial, including jury selection, opening statements, examination of witnesses, and deliberation.
6. Identify the purposes of sentencing (retribution, deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation) and how they influence judicial decisions.
7. Interpret incarceration data, including rates by demographic group, and discuss factors contributing to disparities.
8. Define the school-to-prison pipeline and analyze the policies and practices that sustain it.
9. Evaluate major criminal justice reform proposals using evidence and reasoned argument.
10. Analyze a wrongful conviction case study using the Innocence Project framework and identify systemic factors that contributed to the error.

Standards Alignment

C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- D2.Civ.6.9-12: Critique relationships among governments, civil societies, and economic markets.
- D2.Civ.13.9-12: Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes.
- D2.Civ.14.9-12: Analyze historical and contemporary means that societies use to change existing power structures.
- D2.Jus.1.9-12: Explain how the US Constitution and Bill of Rights define and limit the power of government in the context of criminal justice.
- D2.Jus.3.9-12: Analyze the purposes and functions of the US criminal justice system.

Common Core ELA Standards

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 / RI.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.8 / RI.11-12.8: Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal US texts.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-12.1: Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-12.7: Conduct short and sustained research projects to answer a question.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions.

NCSS Thematic Standards

- Theme II: Time, Continuity, and Change
- Theme VI: Power, Authority, and Governance
- Theme X: Civic Ideals and Practices

Unit Materials

Required Materials

- Student handouts (all reproducibles included in this resource)
- Access to internet for data research (Lessons 8–9)

- Chart paper and markers for collaborative activities
- Copies of the Criminal Justice Flowchart Activity (Lesson 1 / Activity Section)
- Copies of the Incarceration Data Analysis Worksheet (Lesson 8 / Activity Section)
- Copies of the Wrongful Conviction Case Study (Lesson 10 / Activity Section)
- Copies of the Reform Debate Activity (Lesson 9 / Activity Section)

Suggested Supplementary Resources

- *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson (excerpts)
- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (excerpts)
- Innocence Project website (innocenceproject.org)
- Bureau of Justice Statistics (bjs.ojp.gov)
- Sentencing Project website (sentencingproject.org)

Unit Assessment Overview

The unit culminates with a comprehensive assessment that includes multiple-choice questions, short-answer responses, a data interpretation section, and an extended-response essay. The assessment measures student mastery of content knowledge, analytical reasoning, and the ability to apply course concepts to real-world scenarios. A complete assessment and answer key are included at the end of this resource.

Suggested Pacing Guide

Day	Lesson	Focus
1	1	Introduction to the Criminal Justice System
2	2	Arrest, Booking & Initial Appearance
3	3	Prosecution, Bail & Pretrial Procedures
4	4	Plea Bargaining — The System's Engine
5	5	The Trial Process
6	6	Sentencing — Purposes & Practices
7	7	Juvenile vs. Adult Courts
8	8	Incarceration & Data Analysis
9	9	School-to-Prison Pipeline & Reform Movements
10	10	Wrongful Convictions & the Innocence Project

LESSON 1: Introduction to the Criminal Justice System

Lesson Objectives

- Define the criminal justice system and explain its primary purposes: maintaining social order, punishing lawbreakers, and rehabilitating offenders.
- Identify and describe the three main components of the criminal justice system: law enforcement, the courts, and corrections.
- Explain the concept of discretion and how it operates at each stage of the system.

Materials

- Whiteboard and markers
- Handout: Criminal Justice Flowchart (unlabeled, for student note-taking)
- Sticky notes (two per student)

Warm-Up (5–10 minutes)

Display the following prompt on the board: *"What does the word 'justice' mean to you? Write one sentence defining justice and one sentence describing what a 'just' society looks like."* Students write their responses on sticky notes and place them on a designated wall space or whiteboard. Read 3–4 responses aloud to initiate a brief class discussion about how justice can be interpreted differently.

Direct Instruction (15–20 minutes)

1. Defining the Criminal Justice System

Explain that the criminal justice system is a network of agencies and institutions responsible for responding to and managing crime. Its three primary pillars are:

1. **Law Enforcement:** Investigates crimes, apprehends suspects, and gathers evidence (e.g., local police, FBI, state troopers).
2. **The Courts:** Determines guilt or innocence and imposes sentences (e.g., judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, juries).
3. **Corrections:** Carries out sentences imposed by the courts (e.g., prisons, jails, probation, parole).

2. The Concept of Discretion

Introduce **discretion** as the authority to make decisions based on one's own judgment rather than strict rules. Provide examples:

- A police officer deciding whether to issue a warning or a ticket.
- A prosecutor deciding whether to file charges and what charges to file.
- A judge determining an appropriate sentence within statutory limits.

3. The Flow of a Case

LESSON 10: Wrongful Convictions & the Innocence Project

Lesson Objectives

- Identify the leading causes of wrongful convictions in the United States.
- Understand the role of the Innocence Project and post-conviction DNA testing in exonerating the innocent.
- Analyze a wrongful conviction case study to identify systemic failures and propose reforms.

Materials

- Handout: Wrongful Conviction Case Study (provided later in this resource)
- Highlighters
- Internet access for follow-up research (optional)

Warm-Up (5–10 minutes)

Prompt: *"If an innocent person is convicted of a crime, what do you think is the most likely cause of the mistake? Is it a lying witness, bad police work, a weak defense attorney, or something else?"* List student ideas on the board. Introduce the concept of wrongful convictions.

Direct Instruction (15–20 minutes)

1. The Reality of Wrongful Convictions

Since 1989, over 3,000 people have been exonerated in the United States according to the National Registry of Exonerations. The Innocence Project, founded in 1992 by Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld, has been instrumental in using DNA evidence to free the wrongfully convicted.

2. Leading Causes of Wrongful Convictions

1. **Eyewitness Misidentification:** The single greatest cause of wrongful convictions. Human memory is malleable and can be influenced by stress, lighting, cross-racial identification challenges, and police line-up procedures.
2. **False Confessions:** Suspects may confess to crimes they did not commit due to coercive interrogation techniques, exhaustion, mental impairment, or fear of harsher punishment.
3. **Government Misconduct:** Prosecutorial misconduct (withholding exculpatory evidence in violation of *Brady v. Maryland*) or police misconduct (coercing witnesses, fabricating evidence).
4. **Flawed Forensic Evidence:** Use of unvalidated or improperly applied forensic methods (e.g., bite mark analysis, hair microscopy, arson investigation methods that lack scientific rigor).
5. **Informants / Jailhouse Snitches:** Witnesses with incentives to lie (e.g., reduced sentences) providing false testimony.
6. **Inadequate Legal Defense:** Overworked public defenders or inadequate funding leading to failure to investigate, call witnesses, or challenge prosecution evidence.

3. The Innocence Project Model

The Innocence Project takes cases where DNA evidence exists that was not available at the time of trial. They work to have the evidence tested, and if it proves innocence, they file motions for exoneration. Their work has also led to policy reforms, such as improving eyewitness identification procedures and mandating the recording of interrogations.

Guided Practice (15–20 minutes)

Activity: Case Study Analysis

Distribute the Wrongful Conviction Case Study handout (based on the Innocence Project model, provided in the Activities section). Students read the case, identify the causes of the wrongful conviction, evaluate the systemic failures, and write a brief recommendation for how the system could prevent such an error in the future.

Closure (5 minutes)

Reflection: What is one systemic change that could prevent wrongful convictions? Why is it important for society to care about the wrongfully convicted?

Homework / Extension

Visit the Innocence Project website (innocenceproject.org) and select one exoneree's story. Write a one-page summary of the case, identifying the cause(s) of the wrongful conviction and the evidence that led to exoneration.

ACTIVITY: Structured Academic Discussion Protocol

Protocol Overview

The Structured Academic Discussion (SAD) protocol is designed to ensure equitable, text-based, and rigorous classroom discourse. Unlike a traditional debate, this protocol emphasizes deep listening, building on peers' ideas, and reaching a nuanced understanding rather than "winning" an argument. This protocol is ideal for complex ethical and legal topics in the criminal justice system.

The S.A.D. Framework: Prepare, Discuss, Reflect

Phase 1: Prepare (10 minutes)

Before the discussion begins, students must ground themselves in the topic. The teacher provides a core question and a relevant text or data set.

- Read and annotate the provided text/data.
- Formulate an initial thesis in response to the core question.
- Identify at least two pieces of specific evidence from the text to support your thesis.
- Write down one counter-argument to your own position.

Phase 2: Discuss (20–25 minutes)

The discussion operates under strict norms and uses a "talk token" system to ensure balanced participation.

Discussion Norms

1. **Ground all claims in evidence:** Reference specific data, case studies, or texts.
2. **Practice active listening:** Do not interrupt. Wait for a speaker to finish before responding.
3. **Build, don't just rebut:** Instead of simply saying "I disagree," try "I agree with X, and I would add Y" or "I hear X, but my evidence suggests Z."
4. **Use talk tokens:** Each student receives 3 tokens. You must spend a token each time you speak. You must spend at least 1 token, but no more than 3.
5. **Step up / Step back:** If you are someone who usually dominates discussions, step back. If you usually stay quiet, step up.

Academic Language Sentence Starters

To facilitate evidence-based discourse, students should use the following sentence frames:

Function	Sentence Starter
Agreeing & Building	"I agree with [Name] because the data shows..."
	"[Name]'s point about [Topic] is strong. I would add that..."

Disagreeing Respectfully	"I understand [Name]'s perspective, but the evidence from [Source] suggests..."
	"While [Name] argued X, I interpret the data to mean Y because..."
Clarifying	"Could you clarify what you mean by [Term]?"
	"When you stated [Point], were you implying that...?"
Synthesizing	"It seems like we have two strong viewpoints: [Viewpoint 1] and [Viewpoint 2]."
	"Both [Name] and [Name] highlighted [Common Theme], which suggests..."

Phase 3: Reflect (10 minutes)

After the discussion concludes, students independently complete a written reflection.

1. How did your understanding of the core question change or deepen as a result of the discussion?
2. What was the most compelling piece of evidence shared by a peer? Why did it stand out to you?
3. What is a question that remains unanswered for you at the end of this discussion?

Sample Discussion Core Questions

Use the following questions as focal points for Structured Academic Discussions throughout the unit:

1. Is the primary purpose of the US criminal justice system to punish offenders or to rehabilitate them? Which purpose do our current laws best reflect?
2. Does the plea bargaining system undermine the constitutional right to a fair trial, or is it a necessary mechanism for an overburdened court system?
3. Can a society claim to have a just legal system if wealth determines a defendant's level of freedom before trial?
4. Should juveniles who commit violent crimes ever be tried and punished as adults?

- B) Incapacitation
- C) Rehabilitation
- D) Retribution

7. Which of the following is a key characteristic of the juvenile justice system that distinguishes it from the adult system?

- A) Juveniles have no due process rights.
- B) Proceedings are focused on rehabilitation rather than punishment.
- C) Juveniles always have the right to a jury trial.
- D) Proceedings are open to the public.

8. What is the 'school-to-prison pipeline'?

- A) A program that helps incarcerated individuals get their GEDs.
- B) The process by which students are recruited to study criminal justice in college.
- C) Policies and practices that push students out of schools and into the justice system.
- D) A system where juvenile courts send offenders to specialized boarding schools.

9. According to the Innocence Project, what is the leading cause of wrongful convictions in the United States?

- A) Flawed forensic evidence
- B) False confessions
- C) Government misconduct
- D) Eyewitness misidentification

10. What did the Supreme Court rule in *Batson v. Kentucky* (1986)?

- A) Defendants have the right to an attorney even if they cannot afford one.
- B) Prosecutors cannot use peremptory challenges to exclude jurors based on race.
- C) Police must read Miranda rights before a custodial interrogation.
- D) Juveniles are entitled to due process rights in delinquency proceedings.

Section B: Short Answer

Respond to the following questions in 2–4 complete sentences. (5 points each)

1. Explain the concept of prosecutorial discretion and provide one example of how a prosecutor might use it.

2. Describe the difference between determinate and indeterminate sentencing. Which model gives more power to a parole board?

3. What is the *parens patriae* philosophy, and how does it guide the original intent of the juvenile justice system?

4. Identify two policies or practices that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline and briefly explain their impact.

Section C: Data Interpretation

Use the data table below to answer the questions. (6 points)

Table: Pretrial Detention Status in County Jails (Hypothetical Data)

Status	Percentage of Jail Population	Average Length of Stay
Convicted (Serving Sentence)	35%	8 months
Pretrial (Awaiting Trial)	65%	3 months

1. What percentage of the jail population in this data has **not** been convicted of a crime? Explain the legal principle that protects these individuals.

2. Based on your understanding of the cash bail system, why might so many individuals remain in jail awaiting trial for an average of three months?

Section D: Extended Response

Respond to the following prompt in a well-organized essay of 2–3 paragraphs. (14 points)

Essay Prompt

The US criminal justice system has faced significant criticism regarding equity and fairness. Choose **two** of the following systemic issues discussed in this unit: the cash bail system, mandatory minimum sentencing, or the school-to-prison pipeline. For each issue, explain how it contributes to inequity in the justice system and propose one specific reform that could address the problem. Use evidence and reasoning to support your argument.

UNIT ASSESSMENT — Answer Key

Section A: Multiple Choice

#	Ans	Rationale
1	B	Law Enforcement, Courts, Corrections
2	B	Before conducting a custodial interrogation
3	A	A judge oversees a preliminary hearing, while citizens oversee a grand jury.
4	D	Over 90%
5	C	The prosecution
6	D	Retribution
7	B	Proceedings are focused on rehabilitation rather than punishment.
8	C	Policies and practices that push students out of schools and into the justice system.
9	D	Eyewitness misidentification
10	B	Prosecutors cannot use peremptory challenges to exclude jurors based on race.

Section B: Short Answer

1. Prosecutorial Discretion

Sample Answer: Prosecutorial discretion is the authority of a prosecutor to decide whether to bring criminal charges, what charges to file, and whether to offer a plea bargain. An example is a prosecutor deciding to reduce a felony charge to a misdemeanor if the defendant agrees to attend rehabilitation, thereby prioritizing treatment over incarceration.

2. Determinate vs. Indeterminate Sentencing

Sample Answer: Determinate sentencing is a fixed term of imprisonment (e.g., exactly 5 years) with little to no opportunity for early release. Indeterminate sentencing is a range (e.g., 5 to 10 years), where a parole board determines the actual release date. The indeterminate model gives more power to the parole board.

3. Parens Patriae

Sample Answer: *Parens patriae* is a legal doctrine meaning 'the state as parent.' It guided the original intent of the juvenile justice system by emphasizing that the state's role was to act in the best interest of the child, focusing on rehabilitation and guidance rather than punishment.

4. School-to-Prison Pipeline Contributors

Sample Answer: Two contributing policies are zero-tolerance policies and the presence of School Resource Officers (SROs). Zero-tolerance policies mandate harsh consequences for minor infractions, pushing students out of school. SROs criminalize behaviors that used to be handled by administrators, funnelling students directly into the justice system.

Section C: Data Interpretation

1. Pretrial Percentage & Legal Principle

Sample Answer: 65% of the jail population has not been convicted of a crime. The legal principle that protects them is the **presumption of innocence**, meaning a defendant is considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

2. Cash Bail & Pretrial Detention

Sample Answer: Many individuals remain in jail awaiting trial because of the cash bail system. If a judge sets bail and the defendant cannot afford to pay it, they must remain in custody until their trial date, which can take months. This disproportionately impacts low-income defendants.

Section D: Extended Response

Grading Rubric (14 points total):

- **Selection of Issues (2 pts):** Clearly identifies two relevant systemic issues from the prompt.
- **Explanation of Inequity (6 pts):** Thoroughly explains how each issue contributes to inequity (3 pts per issue). Must reference specific mechanisms (e.g., wealth-based detention for bail, racial disparity for mandatory minimums).
- **Proposed Reforms (4 pts):** Proposes one specific, logical reform for each issue and explains how it would address the problem (2 pts per issue).
- **Writing & Evidence (2 pts):** Well-organized, uses complete sentences, and incorporates evidence/reasoning from the unit.

Sample Essay Outline:

Paragraph 1: Introduction & Issue 1 (Cash Bail). Introduce the cash bail system. Explain how it creates inequity by allowing wealthy defendants to go free while low-income defendants remain jailed pretrial, violating the spirit of the presumption of innocence. Propose bail reform (risk-assessment models or elimination of cash bail) to ensure release is based on danger to the community, not wealth.

Paragraph 2: Issue 2 (Mandatory Minimums). Introduce mandatory minimum sentencing. Explain how it creates inequity by stripping judges of discretion, often resulting in disproportionately harsh sentences for minor roles in drug offenses, disproportionately impacting communities of color. Propose sentencing reform to repeal mandatory minimums and restore judicial discretion.

Paragraph 3: Conclusion. Summarize how these reforms shift the system from punitive toward equitable, ensuring outcomes are based on conduct and risk rather than wealth or inflexible statutes.

Thank You for Your Purchase!

Your Feedback Matters!

Thank you for choosing the **Criminal Justice System Explainer Unit** from **UM Printables**. I am dedicated to providing premium, rigorous, and engaging resources for your classroom.

If you found this resource helpful, please consider taking a moment to leave a review on Teachers Pay Teachers. Your feedback not only helps me improve future products but also helps other educators find high-quality materials.

How to Leave a Review:

1. Log in to your TPT account.
2. Go to 'My Purchases'.
3. Find this product and click the 'Provide Feedback' button.
4. Rate the product and leave a brief comment.

Thank you for supporting UM Printables!

UM Printables

Premium Educational Resources for Law, Mock Trial & Justice Studies

This resource is for single-classroom use only. If you wish to share it with colleagues, please purchase additional licenses at a discount. Reproducing any part of this product for commercial purposes or free distribution is strictly prohibited.