

Human Rights, History, and Progress

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Hello, I'm Caitlin Riley and for my AHS capstone, I'm going to talk about human rights, history, and progress. I started off this capstone by researching historical events, particularly early US history, and human rights. Once I felt that I had a good handle of these topics, I began examining textbooks and media intended to be used to teach history to school-aged children to see how these topics were being addressed and what implicit messages and assumption were embedded in the narratives. The results of this research and critical examination is what I will be presenting to you today.

What will be covered?

- Origin and definition of modern day human rights
- Why it matters how historical violations of human rights are taught
- Examples of how these are currently being taught to students in elementary schools
- Concluding thoughts

To give you all a quick overview of what I'll be covering in this presentation, I will start by explaining what our modern understanding of human rights is and how a little bit about how that came to be. Then, I will address why it matters how violations of these rights are taught is history and how it can shape perceptions of modern events. I will then go over some examples of how things are actually being taught to elementary school aged children. And finally I'll briefly cover how things could be taught differently. As I go through this presentation, I encourage you to reflect on what you learned in social studies and history classes as you were growing up and how that may have shaped your own perception of current events and the world today.

What are human rights?

“Human rights, rights that belong to an individual or group of individuals simply for being human, or as a consequence of inherent human vulnerability, or because they are requisite to the possibility of a just society. Whatever their theoretical justification, human rights refer to a wide continuum of values or capabilities thought to enhance human agency or protect human interests and declared to be universal in character, in some sense equally claimed for all human beings, present and future.”

“Human Rights.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015.

A pretty important question to start out with is “What are human rights?” Here is what human rights are according to Encyclopedia Britannica: “Human rights, rights that belong to an individual or group of individuals simply for being human, or as a consequence of inherent human vulnerability, or because they are requisite to the possibility of a just society. Whatever their theoretical justification, human rights refer to a wide continuum of values or capabilities thought to enhance human agency or protect human interests and declared to be universal in character, in some sense equally claimed for all human beings, present and future.” Okay, so that’s pretty vague, right? There’s some sort of wide continuum of values with some theoretical justification that is “in some sense” equally claimed for all human beings. And this is often the trouble with the way that human rights are described and understood. It tends to be very vague and untheorized. Most people you stopped on the street probably couldn’t name many human rights, but at the same time many people seem to have this sort of “I know it when I see it” attitude to human rights violations. So maybe a better place to start is “Where did modern day human rights come from?”

Where did human rights come from?



Ebensee concentration camp survivors.



The first meeting of the Commission on Human Rights.

"United Nations News Centre." UN News Center. UN. Web.

You might believe that human rights are something that have always existed, but in actuality, what we think of today as human rights stems from events that occurred following WWII. After the end of WWII, the world was horrified by the atrocities that had been committed during the war and particularly during the Nazi Holocaust. These atrocities inspired calls for a global human rights standard that could be used to protect citizens from abuses by their own government. Governments around the world became united by this horror and by the goal of preventing such barbaric acts from ever occurring again. For this among other reasons, the United Nations was chartered in 1945. Two years later, the UN established the Commission on Human Rights. You can see a picture taken during their first meeting in January of 1947, here. The Commission on Human Rights was tasked with creating an International Bill of Human Rights.

What are human rights?

- Human dignity
- International Bill of Right
 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights
 - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
 - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights



So this leads us back to the question of “What are human rights?” There was a strong sentiment that during the Nazi Holocaust basic human dignity had been violated, and this idea of dignity became the basis of human rights. Because human dignity must be protected and all humans have inherent dignity, all humans are entitled to the human rights that were constructed to protect that dignity.

The International Bill of Human Rights that the Commission on Human Rights finally settled on consists of 3 documents. –click to display documents- The first is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The other two are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, commonly known as the UDHR, was the first document that the council worked on and it was adopted by the UN in December of 1948. It is important to note that the UDHR is a declaration not a treaty. So in a sense it is to international law what the Declaration of Independence is to US law – it’s not legally binding but it has been extremely influential. The concept of human rights based on human dignity that I mentioned before shows up really strongly in this document, which states in its preamble that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” The Commission on Human Rights had planned to draft one covenant, a treaty that would be legally binding, following the adoption of the UDHR. However, it

turned out that drafting something legally binding was much more difficult than drafting a declaration, and the global unity felt following WWII was quickly giving way to Cold War tensions. In 1952, the UN General Assembly decided to split the single covenant into two different covenants. It was not until 1966, 14 years after this split and 18 after the adoption of the UDHR, that the two covenants were finally adopted.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

- Right to life and freedom from torture and slavery
- Liberty and security of the person
- Procedural fairness in law
- Freedoms of movement, thought, conscience and religion, speech, association and assembly
- 168 parties
 - Signed and ratified by the US

"International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." United Nations Treaty Collection. N.p., 2015. Web.

Let's first talk about the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The complete list of rights covered by this treaty is included in the handouts, but some highlights include the right to life, freedom from arbitrary arrest, procedural fairness in law – such as due process and an impartial trial, and individual freedoms. Something to note is that the rights included in the Covenant of Civil and Political Rights are mostly what are known as negative rights. A negative right asserts that you have the right to not have something happen to you, whereas a positive right states that you have the right to have something available to you. For example, the right to life described here essentially means that you have the right to not be murdered – to not be prevented from living. But if you happen to be stabbed, for example, you don't per say have a right to life saving medical treatment.

168 countries are party to this treaty, including the US, which should make sense as a lot of these rights are things that are included in the US Bill of Rights.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

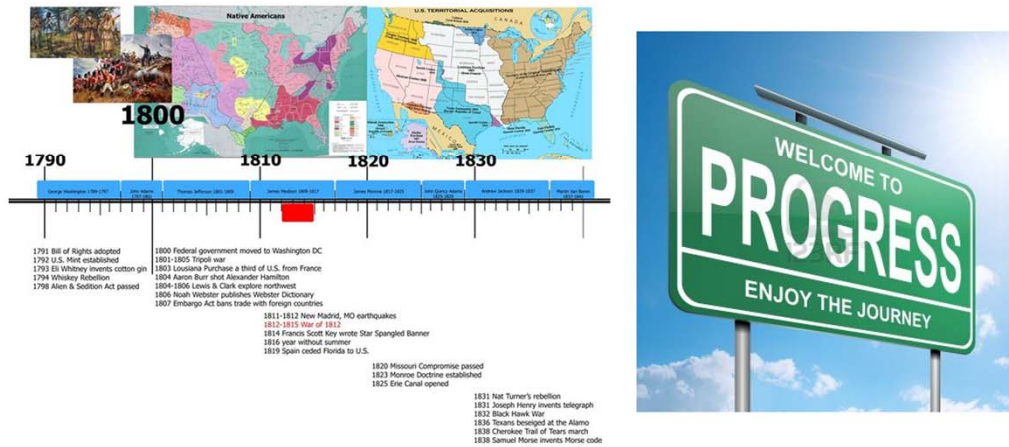
- Right to work and just and favorable working conditions
- Right to social security, including social insurance
- Right to an adequate standard of living
- Right to health
- Right to free education
- 164 parties
 - Signed but not ratified by the US
 - “Merely desirable social goals”

“International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.” *United Nations Treaty Collection*. N.p., 2015. Web.

In comparison with the treaty we just discussed, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights includes a lot more positive rights. The complete treaty is one of the handouts, but some major categories of rights that are covered are listed on the screen. You can see how these rights differ from the ones we just looked at. The right to an adequate standard of living for example includes the rights to food and water. Food and water are obviously necessary for human life to be sustained, but those things are not necessarily covered by the right to life included in the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

There are 164 countries that are party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The argument that’s been made for why it hasn’t been ratified is that these are “merely desirable social goals”, not inherent rights.

How do human rights relate to history?



So how does all of this relate to history? I think we can all agree that history is filled with examples of often egregious violations of human rights. And some of those violations have shaped the world and made it what it is today. Additionally, something that's often present in history, as it is frequently taught, is a narrative of progress. A funny thing happens when we pair this narrative of progress with instances of human rights violations because then we have a reason to overlook them – the results become more important than the horrible acts that have been committed. Conditions for factory workers were pretty poor during the Industrial Revolution, for example, but the Industrial Revolution has arguably improved quality of life in the long run. But should we overlook those violations in this way?

How do human rights relate to history?

“Was all this bloodshed and deceit - from Columbus to Cortes, Pizarro, the Puritans - a necessity for the human race to progress from savagery to civilization? Was Morison right in burying the story of genocide inside a more important story of human progress?” – Howard Zinn

Zinn, Howard. *A people's history of the United States*. HarperPerennial, 1990. 17. Print.

Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States*, put it this way. “Was all this bloodshed and deceit - from Columbus to Cortes, Pizarro, the Puritans - a necessity for the human race to progress from savagery to civilization? Was Morison right in burying the story of genocide inside a more important story of human progress?” Morison, for reference, was an American historian who wrote a biography about Christopher Columbus extolling his skills as a sailor and navigator. Looking back at Encyclopedia Britannica's description of human rights, human rights are “equally claimed for all human beings, present and future”. But what about the people of the past? Does overlooking the violations of their rights encourage us to overlook modern day violations? The narrative that what was bad for factory workers in a faraway time ultimately ended up being good for us certainly shares similarities with the narrative that bombing a faraway village to kill a terrorist will help keep us safe. At the same time, the idea that we've progressed beyond violating rights, that we know better than to do those things now, also encourages us to turn a blind eye when they do happen. But racial discrimination, genocide, and all manner of human rights violations are still occurring.

As I'll demonstrate, in the United States we begin teaching history as a story about human progress to children quite young, overlooking violations of human rights all the while. So by the time that those children are adults, this way of thinking has become ingrained.

Christopher Columbus

What do we learn?



To start off with, let's consider the example of Christopher Columbus. Many would say that Christopher Columbus played a very important role in history and in the eventual founding of the United States. In fact, we have a holiday to celebrate his achievements. So what do we teach children about who he was and what he did? There are a number of animated movies aimed at children about Christopher Columbus' first voyage. I'm going to play a clip from one of these movies that depicts his first contact with the inhabitants of the first island he encounters, so that we can see an example of how this is being taught.

play video

Christopher Columbus

What do we learn?



Christopher Columbus. Mondo Films, 1990. YouTube. 10 Aug. 2014. Web.

So, what did we learn from the clip? –wait for audience response- Cristopher Columbus seems like a pretty nice guy, doesn't he? He's establishing a trusting friendship with the indigenous people and isn't planning to conquer anyone by force. At the end there you see some of the island's inhabitants happily directing a boat.

Christopher Columbus

What gets left out?

- Slavery
- Genocide

• “My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature, and now I tremble as I write...from 1494 to 1508, over three million people had perished from war, slavery, and the mines. Who in future generations will believe this? I myself writing it as a knowledgeable eyewitness can hardly believe it.” - Bartolome de las Casas



Zinn, Howard. *A people's history of the United States*. HarperPerennial, 1990. 2-7. Print.

Unfortunately, most historical accounts suggest that Christopher Columbus was not really that nice of a guy, contrary to what the video suggested. For example, the first man on their expedition to spot land was supposed to get a yearly pension for life. First person accounts suggest that a sailor named Rodrigo was actually the first to spot land, but in the end Columbus insisted that he was the one that had first spotted the island and claimed the reward for himself.

But altering Christopher Columbus's character isn't the biggest problem with this clip. The reality of Columbus' first meeting with the inhabitants of the island is that he immediately took some of them as prisoners and demanded that they take him to their source of gold. Those happy people willingly directing that boat were in reality probably not so happy or willing.

The monarchy of Spain had paid for Columbus' expedition and expected a return on their investment. Because repeated exploration failed to reveal a significant source of gold, slaves became the primary export from the Caribbean islands. Indigenous people that were captured but not shipped back to Spain were forced to work so that goods, including what little gold could be found, could be sent to Spain to pay back the investors. Initially, all inhabitants of the islands over 13 was expected to collect a certain amount of gold each month and those that failed had their hands chopped off, as depicted in this image. But

there was actually very little gold on the islands and eventually most of the inhabitants who still survived were enslaved on plantations. Bartolome de las Casas, a priest who owned a plantation on which slaves worked before giving it up wrote this: "My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature, and now I tremble as I write...from 1494 to 1508, over three million people had perished from war, slavery, and the mines. Who in future generations will believe this? I myself writing it as a knowledgeable eyewitness can hardly believe it." It is estimated that on many of the islands that Columbus visited, the indigenous population decreased by as much as 98% in the years following his first voyage. And so Christopher Columbus' legacy is not just one of discovery, but also of slavery and genocide. The inhabitants of the islands were not "liberated from ignorance through love" like the Columbus in that clip proclaimed, they were enslaved and murdered en masse.

Christopher Columbus

What's implied?



The historical accuracy of this clip is definitely questionable, but there's something else going on that is a little bit more subtle. If any of you accidentally cut your hand on something you didn't expect to be sharp, what would you do? –wait for audience response- So what you would do is probably not this. –click for picture- You would probably not fall helplessly to the ground until a white man comes to help you. And if your friend was injured and did fall helplessly to the ground, you would probably do something more than just kneel over him until someone you've never met before comes to his aid. The reactions that these two men have in this situation are very child-like, while the actions of Columbus and his party are more adult-like – they are the adults coming to the rescue of this helpless child that's just injured itself. And that's no accident. So much of the justification for slavery and colonialism centers around the idea that the indigenous people were naïve and child-like and needed to be educated. Columbus himself in his journal wrote "As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first Island which I found, I took some of the natives by force in order that they might learn..." This idea of the European bringing religion and culture to the "savages" is a form of a progress narrative and it's a narrative that this video subtly perpetuates.

Spanish Colonization

How to address genocide?

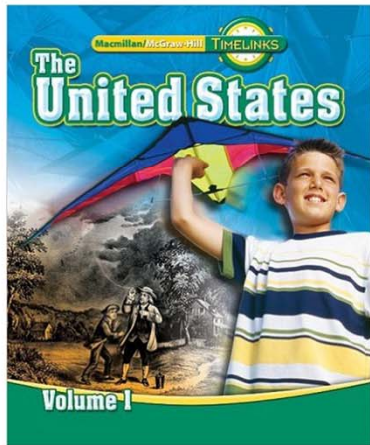


Chart and Graph Skills

Compare Line and Circle Graphs

VOCABULARY
line graph
circle graph

When European explorers arrived in the Americas, both Native American and European cultures experienced change. One way you can measure changes is to use **line graphs** and **circle graphs**. A line graph shows a change over time. A circle graph shows how something can be divided into parts. All of the parts together make up a circle. Circle graphs are also called pie graphs because the parts look like slices of pie.

Learn It

- To find out what information a graph contains, look at its title.
- Study the labels on a graph. Labels on a line graph appear along the bottom of the graph and along the left side. Labels on a circle graph explain the subject.

Try It

- Look at the line graph. What was the Taino population of Hispaniola in 1570?
- Look at the circle graph. Which group made up the largest part of the population of Hispaniola in 1570?

Apply It

- Summarize the line graph's information about the Taino people on Hispaniola.
- Summarize the circle graph's information about the people of Hispaniola in 1570.
- Summarize what both graphs tell you about the meeting of different cultures.

Taino Population of Hispaniola, 1498-1570

Year	Population
1498	3,750,000
1500	12,000
1510	41,800
1515	31,000
1525	17,000
1540	11,600
1570	4,100

Population of Hispaniola, 1570

Group	Percentage
Enslaved Africans	~90%
Whites	~8%
Taino	~2%

77

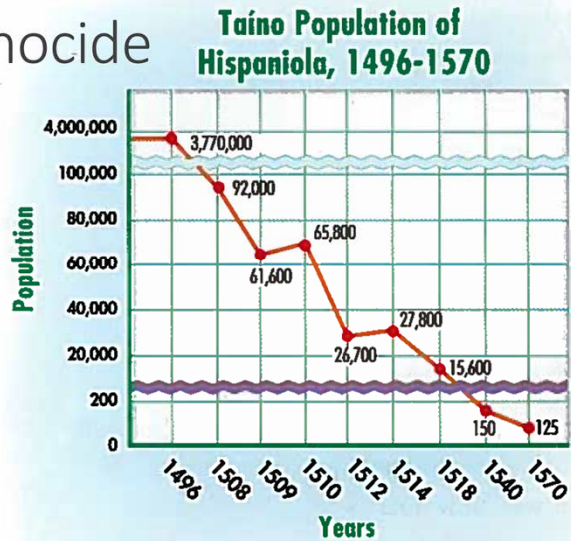
Banks, James A., et al. The United States. Columbus, OH: Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, 2009. 77. Print.

Obviously this video is just one example and teaching children about genocide is definitely difficult. If the video had been historically accurate, it probably wouldn't be so appropriate for children. So let's look at another source of information from which children are learning about this topic. This is a social studies textbook for 5th graders that is used in many states across the US. The lesson on Spanish colonization of North America includes this page on "chart and graph skills".

Spanish Colonization

How to disregard genocide

When European explorers arrived in the Americas, both Native American and European cultures experienced change. One way you can measure changes is to use **line graphs** and **circle graphs**. A line graph shows a change over time. A circle graph shows how something can be divided into parts. All of the parts together make up a circle. Circle graphs are also called pie graphs because the parts look like slices of pie.



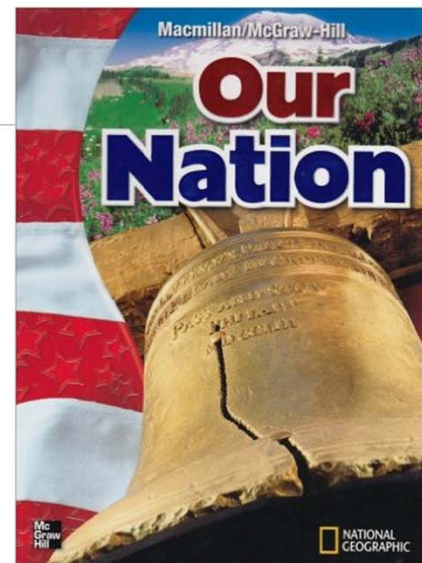
Banks, James A., et al. *The United States*. Columbus, OH: Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, 2009. 77. Print.

When we take a closer look, we can see that this graph is showing the population of an island decreasing over the course of 74 years from nearly 3.8 million to 125. So I would say that this is a great example of a successful genocide. The description that accompanies the chart says this “When European explorers arrived in the Americas, both Native American and European cultures experienced change.” and then goes on to explain different kinds of graphs. The book also encourages the reader to summarize what this graph tells them about the “meeting of different cultures”. This is a pretty blasé treatment of the death of millions. I would argue that this wasn’t so much a “cultural change” for the Native Americans as it was cultural obliteration. And there appears to be no “meeting of different cultures” here, as if somehow both cultures were equally affected by this. The end result of this “meeting of cultures” was that Spain gained land on which they could have large encomiendas worked by slaves and everyone living on that land before Columbus arrived died. The chapter only addresses the deaths of the peoples that the Spanish came into contact with twice. The first time it states that “...disease carried by [Hernando de Soto’s] men and animals killed thousands of Native Americans”. The second time is “On the encomiendas, many Native Americans died from starvation, disease, and overwork.” These are both very passive statements, the first implies that the deaths caused by Hernando de Soto were entirely unintentional and the second makes no mention to the people that caused the starvation and overwork. So in a sense any 5th grader who uses this book in their classroom is being exposed to the idea of genocide, but rather than learning that it is

a terrible tragedy, as something to be prevented in the future, it is portrayed as something that just happened to occur. There's something about the way it's addressed that makes this kind of gross violation of human rights seem inevitable - as if when two cultures meet the death of millions is just bound to happen.

The Founding of the United States

“After explaining why the Declaration of Independence was written, Jefferson listed the rights all people should have... people establish governments in order to ‘secure these rights.’ The governments get their power, or authority, from ‘the consent of the governed’, or all of the people.”



Banks, James A. *Our Nation*. New York: Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, 2005. 280. Print.

Switching topics a bit, let's look at another book. *Our Nation* is another social studies book for 5th graders that is used throughout the US. About the Declaration of Independence it says this, “After explaining why the Declaration of Independence was written, Jefferson listed the rights all people should have... people establish governments in order to ‘secure these rights.’ The governments get their power, or authority, from ‘the consent of the governed’, or all of the people.” But the rights listed in the Declaration of Independence were not actually meant for all people. Slaves certainly were not considered to have a right to liberty. And the government as set up by the United States Constitution, only cared about the consent of a small portion of the people being governed.

The Founding of the United States

DISTRICTS	Free white Males of 16 years and upwards, including heads of families.	Free white Males under sixteen years.	Free white Females, including heads of families.	All other free persons.	Slaves.	Total.
Vermont	22435	22328	40505	255	16	85539
N. Hampshire	36086	34851	70160	630	158	141885
Maine	24384	24748	46870	538	NONE	56540
Massachusetts	95453	87289	190582	5403	NONE	378787
Rhode Island	16019	15799	32052	3407	948	68825
Connecticut	60523	54405	117448	2808	2764	237940
New York	83700	78122	152320	4654	21324	340120
New Jersey	45251	41416	83287	2762	11423	184139
Pennsylvania	110788	106948	206363	6537	3737	434373
Delaware	11783	12143	22384	3899	8887	59094
Maryland	55915	51339	101395	8043	10306	19728
Virginia	110936	116135	215046	12866	29267	747610
Kentucky	15154	17057	28922	114	12430	73677
N. Carolina	69988	77566	140710	4975	100572	393751
S. Carolina	35576	37722	66880	1801	107094	249973
Georgia	13103	14044	25739	398	29264	82548
	807094	791850	1541263	59150	694280	3893635

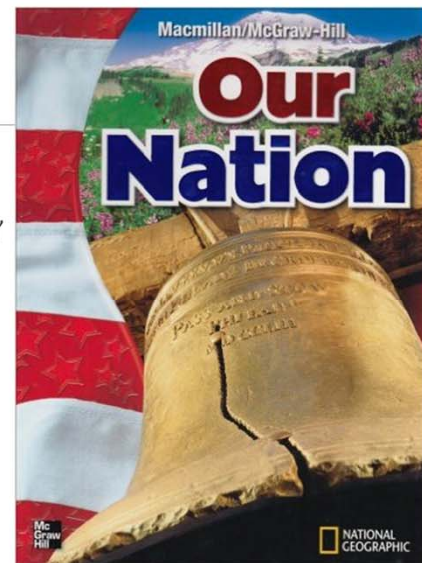
- Only 21% of the population in 1790 were “Free white Males of 16 years and upwards”.

United States. Census Bureau. Washington: GPO, 1790. Web.

This shows the results of the United States census performed in 1790, two years after the Constitution was ratified. At this time, voting rights were determined on a state by state basis and all but a few states chose to restrict voting to only free white property-holding males. According to this census, only 21% of the population of the United States in 1790 were “Free white Males of 16 years and upwards”. This means that less than 21% of the population was eligible to vote because only the portion of that 21% that was property-holding was eligible to vote in most states. So at the founding of the United States, more than 80% of the population was actually being governed without their consent.

The Founding of the United States

“Although in 1776 only white male property owners were allowed to vote, over time the phrase ‘all men are created equal’ has been expanded to include all people.”



Banks, James A. *Our Nation*. New York: Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, 2005. 283. Print.

Our Nation does briefly address this issue and at the end of the chapter states “Although in 1776 only white male property owners were allowed to vote, over time the phrase ‘all men are created equal’ has been expanded to include all people.” So here is that narrative of progress popping up again and it does make for a nice feel-good statement in this instance. But it also implies that people in the United States are actually treated equally now and that with time we’ve somehow overcome our racist and sexist beginnings, which is obviously not the case.

Are all people equal in the United States?

- “The United States has a vibrant civil society and strong constitutional protections for many basic rights. Yet, particularly in the areas of criminal justice, immigration, and national security, US laws and practices routinely violate rights. Often, those least able to defend their rights in court or through the political process—racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, children, the poor, and prisoners—are the people most likely to suffer abuses.” – Human Rights Watch
- In 2002, less than 33% of crack cocaine users were black, but more than 80% of people sentenced under federal crack cocaine laws were black.
- 27 states have never elected a female governor and only 4.6% of S&P 500 and Fortune 500 companies have female CEOs.
- 20-40% of homeless youths identify as LGBT, but LGBT youths make up only 5-10% of the general youth population.

“World Report 2015: United States.” Human Rights Watch. 20 Jan. 2015. Web.

In its 2015 report on human rights in the United States, the Human Rights Watch stated “The United States has a vibrant civil society and strong constitutional protections for many basic rights. Yet, particularly in the areas of criminal justice, immigration, and national security, US laws and practices routinely violate rights. Often, those least able to defend their rights in court or through the political process—racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, children, the poor, and prisoners—are the people most likely to suffer abuses.” And consider these statistics: in 2002, less than 33% of crack cocaine users were black and yet more than 80% of the people sentenced under federal crack cocaine laws were black. Women are still hugely underrepresented both in politics and in the upper levels of management in large companies – the majority of states have never elected a female governor and only 4.6% of S&P 500 and Fortune 500 companies have female CEOs. And despite making up only 5-10% of the general youth population, LGBT youths account for between 20 to 40% of the homeless youth population. There is still inequality across a range of dimensions in the United States and pretending that we’ve somehow reached the ideal where all people are treated as equals is not going to help make that a reality.

Why does this matter?



So why does the way that we teach history matter? Does anyone have any ideas? –wait for audience response- If we wish to protect human rights both within the United States and globally, we first need to know what those rights are and recognize when they are being violated. In the United States right now, history is taught in such a way that human rights take a back seat to the notion of advancement and this can result in a populace that is unaware of and uninterested in human rights issues. To use a rather tired quote, “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” And right now, not only are children not learning about the human rights context of historical events, the narrative of progress that is embedded in what they are learning teaches them that violations of human rights are okay when the ends justify the means and that by and large human rights is a solved problem because we’ve moved past those issues.

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