



***Social Justice and Human Rights***

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# Social Justice and Human Rights

“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. . . . Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

– Martin Luther King Jr. (2010)

## Introduction

Social justice is a virtue or societal value that guides human interaction and, in particular, the fair distribution of society’s benefits, advantages, and assets, not just by law and in the courts but in all aspects of society. Social justice is about securing rights but also about our responsibilities and their consequences. It focuses our attention on the relative position of different members of our society and on examining the disparities that might exist, the root causes of these disparities, and the opportunities for eliminating them. Understanding disparities requires us to adopt a systemic analysis of our social context—the institutions (e.g., legal, education, media), infrastructures, and belief systems that shape this distribution. Social justice is linked to the concept of *equity* and the just treatment of individuals in their own social context to meet their needs and reach their potential. It is also linked to the notion of *equality* as a socially just society is a “society for all” that provides an equal basis of opportunity. Fundamentally, it asks us to pose the question: “Is society just?”

The British Columbia Ministry of Education defines social justice as “the full participation and inclusion of all people in society, together with the promotion and protection of their legal, civil and human rights. The aim of social justice—to achieve a just and equitable society where all share in the prosperity of that just society—is pursued by individuals and groups through collaborative social action.” (BCTF, 2014, p. 1)

Categories of historically marginalized or disenfranchised populations include the following:

- Men without property
- Women
- Indigenous peoples
- Youth and children
- Those who are homosexual, transsexual, transgender, or bisexual
- Racial groups
- Ethnic and cultural groups
- People with disabilities
- Peoples with “lower” social status / class
- Religious groups

## Social Justice and Human Rights

- Other species/ecosystems
- Future generations

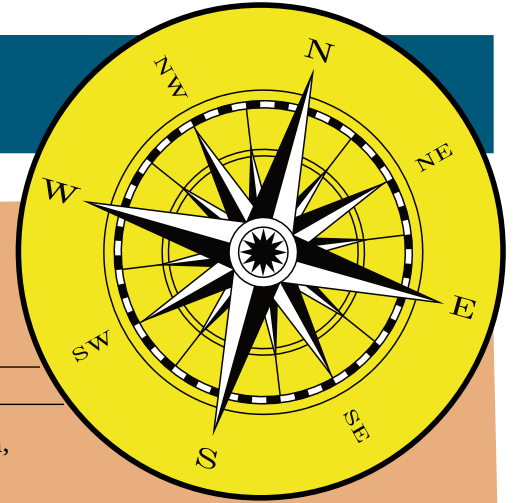
Social justice is a broadly held value and is seen as an important goal of social progress. Canada as a society has adopted national and global commitments to social justice, including ratifying the *United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Canadians have accepted a vision of social justice that supports the principle that all peoples, without discrimination, have the right to live in dignity and freedom and to enjoy the fruits of social progress and should, on their part, contribute to it (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1969).

Social justice is linked to social action because the advancement of social justice is a political issue. Social action includes all actions taken by individuals or groups to achieve a political or social change, or to support a cause. The concept of social justice is a contested terrain because different individuals and social groups hold different perceptions of what is considered a “just society” and who should be allocated or distributed which societal benefits. For example, definitions of “just” and “fair” differ across political ideologies, as does the level of appropriate legislation and policies. The political left places emphasis on securing certain basic needs for all through a social welfare state, and this can extend to income redistribution through taxation and government programs including equal opportunity programs, anti-discrimination laws, and equitable access to food, clean water, education, and medical care. The political right embraces a just society but often contends that government programs cannot be the solution and, in fact, can aggravate injustice. Although there are common religious tenets about the dignity of individuals and ethics of responsibility and obligation to others, the interpretation and application of these principles and values can differ widely. The question remains: Who is responsible for ensuring social justice?

Historically, social justice has been hard fought and won. These struggles have been focused on supporting a marginalized community to achieve a level of access and recognition of their fundamental rights. Activists can adopt a wide range of tactics in achieving their goals, ranging from lobbying, press declarations, and referenda to demonstrations, petitions, occupations, rallies, marches, hunger strikes, blockades, boycotts, and sit-ins. Social action among some activists can extend to violent actions such as property damage, murder, arson, or theft, or can remain relatively peaceful and legal, such as adopting a commitment to non-violence. Social justice has been extended to an ever-growing part of the population, often as a result of activism in various forms. However, the call for social justice continues today because there is an ongoing need to build on past achievements and to extend rights and freedoms to other marginalized groups and communities.

## Suggested Issues

- universal human rights (ethnicity, race, culture, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender, abilities)
- economic disparities, poverty, quality of life
- access to food, water, health care, education, employment
- child exploitation, human trafficking, and slave labour
- action for human rights
- forms of activism (the power of one, resistance to oppression, civil disobedience, conscientious objectors, boycotts, protests, grassroots movements, local community groups; citizen action groups, social networking and mobilization for change, popular culture, and the arts)
- labour movement and unions, strikes, non-violent revolution
- Indigenous rights and self-determination
- crime and punishment, penal systems and economic implications, ethical treatment of prisoners
- environmentalism and environmental organizations
- ethical treatment and human use of animals
- eco-activism
- NGOs and international collaboration, role of governments in international aid (e.g. CIDA, disaster relief, the economics of aid)



## Exploring the Issues

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### Social Justice: Meaning and Implications

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- Universal human rights (ethnicity, race, culture, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender, abilities)
- Status of women and children internationally: exploitation and trafficking
- Poverty and the perpetuation of global economic inequality
- Access to basic needs/quality of life: food, water, education, health care/sanitation
- Environmental justice: how the disadvantaged are affected by environmental degradation
- Human Rights in Canada: immigration, racism, stereotyping, discrimination

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### Indigenous Rights

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- legacy of oppression and colonialism
- the treaty process and Indigenous self-government
- access to services, access and recognition in education
- poverty and employment rates
- *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*

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### Social Action, Activism, and Change

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- forms of social action: non-violence, grassroots movements, new media and technologies
- historical progress: civil rights movement, international recognition of human rights
- international aid for development: NGOs and international collaboration, government cooperation, Canadian International Development Agency, International financial institutions

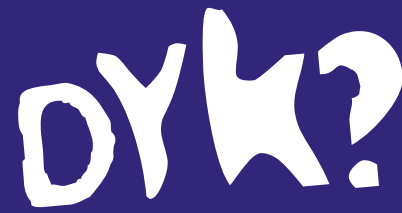


### Essential Questions

Social justice is an evolving concept that has real-world implications as to who has advantages, assets, and benefits in society. By asking questions about social justice, students are exercising their rights as citizens to be part of this discussion, and they can choose to take action as citizens so as to ensure fairness to those whom they deem to be marginalized or disadvantaged. As Plato wrote, “justice in the life and conduct of the State is possible only as first it resides in the hearts and souls of the citizens.”

Essential questions related to social justice and human rights issues include the following:

- How should we define social justice?
- What gains have we made for social justice? What social injustice exists?
- What are some of the causes of social injustice? ...in our communities? ...in Manitoba? ...in Canada? ...globally?
- What are the relationships between poverty and injustice?
- What are the consequences of social injustice?
- How do you think we could work towards creating social justice? ...individually? ...as a community, here and globally?
- What is the role of the international community in creating and maintaining social justice?
- How are Indigenous peoples represented in contemporary society?
- How do historical relations, including colonialism, affect current Indigenous relationships? ...in Canada? ...globally?
- Which government and social structures discriminate against and which empower Indigenous peoples? ...in Canada? ...globally?
- What is social action? What is activism? Who is an “activist”?
- What tactics are activists using both here and internationally?
- How has social action changed over time?
- What kind of tactics would you use to create positive change for an issue you care about?

A purple rectangular box with the white text "DYK?" inside, tilted slightly to the right.

### Did You Know...?

*UN World Day of Social Justice* is on February 20th each year, and it is aimed at contributing to the efforts of the international community in poverty eradication, the promotion of full employment and decent work, gender equity, and access to social well-being and justice for all. Participating governments have made a commitment to the creation of a framework for action to promote social justice at national, regional and international levels. They recognize that economic growth should promote equity and social justice and that “a society for all” must be based on social justice and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

[www.un.org/esa/socdev/social/intldays/IntlJustice/](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/social/intldays/IntlJustice/)

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“Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names.”  
(Bellamy, 1999).

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“In more than 70 countries, same-sex relationships are illegal. In nine countries, the penalty is death.”  
– Jessica Williams

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### In Canada and Manitoba

A recent Statistics Canada report projects that about one-third of the population will be members of a visible minority by 2031, with whites becoming the minority in Toronto and Vancouver over the next few decades.

In 2001, only 8% of the 25–34 age group of Indigenous peoples had a university degree, while 28% of all Canadians had one.

In 1996, 68% of Aboriginal youth were in school, compared to 83% of non-Indigenous youth.

In 2003, only 24% of Indigenous peoples under 25 were able to converse in an Indigenous language (Centre for Social Justice, n.d.).

There were 55,755 Indigenous people in Winnipeg in 2001, up from 45,750 in 1996, and comprising 8% of Winnipeg’s total population. Winnipeg has the highest Indigenous population of any Canadian city (Anderson, 2003).

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### Thought-Provoking Quotations

“In the absence of justice, what is sovereignty but organized robbery?”

– St. Augustine

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

– Martin Luther King, Jr. (1960)

“Whereas 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, whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people. . . .”

– United Nations (1948)

“The (60th Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights) campaign reminds us that in a world still reeling from the horrors of the Second World War, the Declaration was the first global statement of what we now take for granted—the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings.”

– United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 2008

“Concerned that Indigenous peoples have suffered from historic injustices as a result of, inter alia, their colonization and dispossession of their lands, territories and resources, thus preventing them from exercising, in particular, their right to development in accordance with their own needs and interests; Recognizing the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources.”

– United Nations (2007)



“We are not myths of the past, ruins in the jungle, or zoos. We are people and we want to be respected, not to be victims of intolerance and racism.”

– Rigoberta Menchu, Guatemala Nobel Peace Prize Winner, 1992

“The mobilization which is urgently needed to effect the transition within two or three years from a culture of war to a culture of peace demands co-operation from everyone. In order to change, the world needs everyone.”

– Federico Mayor, Director General of UNESCO

“When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked why the poor were hungry, they called me a Communist.”

– Dom Helder Camara, Brazilian Roman Catholic archbishop, author, and Nobel Peace Prize nominee

“Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends on commitment instead of circumstance. Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table; faith-based justice offers a place at the table.”

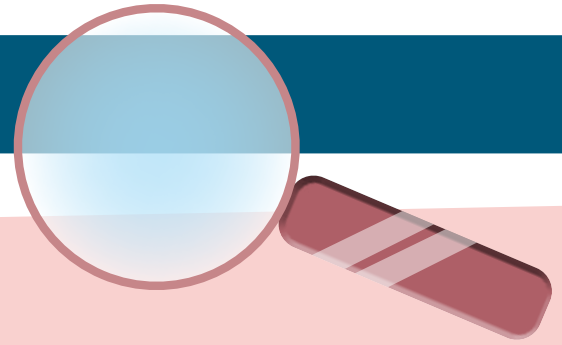
– Bill Moyers

“If we were to wake up some morning and find that everyone was the same race, creed and color, we would find some other cause for prejudice by noon.”

– George Aiken

“Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison...the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor.”

– Henry David Thoreau



## Glossary

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**Advocacy:**

Publicly supporting, recommending, and seeking to advance a particular cause or policy.

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**Civil disobedience:**

The deliberate refusal to obey certain laws or governmental demands in a peaceful form of political protest in order to bring attention to an injustice.

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**Colonialism:**

The policy or practice of settling another country or region, taking political control of it, and reaping the economic benefits while the original inhabitants are exploited and subjugated.

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**Diversity**

The inclusion of a wide range of different characteristics or identities (such as different ancestries, religions, cultures, languages, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, or socio-economic backgrounds).

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**Discrimination:**

The unjust treatment of particular groups of people because of their race, age, culture, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

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**Empowerment:**

The authority or power to accomplish something, particularly something of importance like the elimination of institutional injustices.

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**Entitlement:**

The state of having a right to something that is not equally enjoyed by others.

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**Equality:**

The quality of being fair and impartial so that all groups and individuals receive the same treatment.

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**Equity:**

The quality of being fair and impartial while acknowledging group differences and working to improve outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

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**Globalization:**

The increasing tendency of large businesses and other organizations to expand their international influence and operations as technology improves the connectivity among countries and regions.

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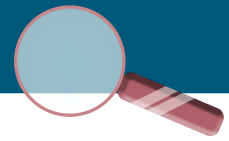
**Grassroots:**

The local, common, ordinary people in a social organization or political movement, in contrast to its leadership.

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**Human rights:**

“Human rights have been described as all the things we are entitled to be, to do or to have simply because we are human. Human rights describe how we instinctively expect to be treated as persons. Human rights define what we are all entitled to — a life of equality, dignity, and respect. A life free from discrimination.” (CHRC)



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**Oppression:**

Prolonged, unjust, and often systematic persecution, abuse, or maltreatment of individuals or groups

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**Stereotype:**

A preconceived, oversimplified, and biased notion of the common characteristics of a particular social or cultural group.



## Resources

### Online

#### Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 3 million supporters, members, and activists in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights. Their vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and other international human rights standards. They are independent of any government, political ideology, or economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

[www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca)

Amnesty International's work on business and human rights:

[www.amnestyusa.org/business/shareholder.html](http://www.amnestyusa.org/business/shareholder.html)

#### Oxfam

"Oxfam Canada's mission is to build lasting solutions to poverty and injustice with a focus on improving the lives and promoting the rights of women and girls."

[www.oxfam.ca](http://www.oxfam.ca)

#### The Centre for Social Justice

"The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) conducts research and provides education and advocacy on issues of equality and democracy."

[www.socialjustice.org/](http://www.socialjustice.org/)

#### Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

"The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives is an independent, non-partisan research institute concerned with issues of social, economic, and environmental justice. Founded in 1980, the CCPA is one of Canada's leading progressive voices in public policy debates."

[www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca)

#### Avaaz.org

"Avaaz empowers millions of people from all walks of life to take action on pressing global, regional and national issues, from corruption and poverty to conflict and climate change. Our model of Internet organizing allows thousands of individual efforts, however small, to be rapidly combined into a powerful collective force."

[www.avaaz.org](http://www.avaaz.org)



### **Canadian Museum for Human Rights**

“The Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) is the first museum solely dedicated to the evolution, celebration and future of human rights. Our aim is to build not only a national hub for human rights learning and discovery, but a new era of global human rights leadership.”

[www.humanrightsmuseum.ca/home](http://www.humanrightsmuseum.ca/home)

### **Gladys Redak: A Woman on a Mission**

“Radek is on a quest to seek justice for the countless number of Indigenous women who have either gone missing or have been murdered throughout Canada, and focuses especially on those who have been lost to violence or simply vanished along what has become known as the Highway of Tears, a notorious stretch of Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert.”

[www.ammsa.com/publications/ravens-eye/gladys-radek-woman-mission](http://www.ammsa.com/publications/ravens-eye/gladys-radek-woman-mission)

### **Craig and Marc Kielburger – Free the Children; Me to We**

“Through leadership training at home and community development projects abroad, Free the Children empowers youth everywhere to make a difference.

Me to We is a social enterprise with a mission. It transforms consumers into world changers, one transaction at a time. Me to We sells socially conscious and environmentally friendly clothes, books, and music—as well as life-changing experiences. It also provides inspiring speakers, leadership training, and transformative travel experiences.”

[www.freethechildren.com/](http://www.freethechildren.com/)

### **The Manitoba Human Rights Commission**

“The Manitoba Human Rights Commission is an independent agency of the Government of Manitoba. It is responsible for carrying out the protections in Manitoba’s *Human Rights Code*. Its staff includes mediators, investigators, and administrative support.”

[www.manitobahumanrights.ca//index.html](http://www.manitobahumanrights.ca//index.html)

### **Canada’s International Human Rights Policy**

“Canada has been a consistently strong voice for the protection of human rights and the advancement of democratic values, from our central role in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1947–1948 to our work at the United Nations today.”

[www.international.gc.ca/rights-droits/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng](http://www.international.gc.ca/rights-droits/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng)



## **TakingITGlobal**

This site is a platform for resources and discussion on global issues, including human rights.

[www.tigweb.org/](http://www.tigweb.org/)

## **BC Teacher's Federation**

This site includes social justice learning resources and links.

<http://bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=6270>

## **United Nations Cyber School Bus**

The United Nations' Cyber School Bus education resource includes a useful human rights curriculum.

[www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/](http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/)

## **Global Affairs Teacher Zone**

“Resources for young global citizens: learn more about making mothers and children healthier!”

[www.international.gc.ca/development-developpement/youth-jeunes/teacher-enseignant.aspx?lang=eng](http://www.international.gc.ca/development-developpement/youth-jeunes/teacher-enseignant.aspx?lang=eng)

## **The Diversity Toolkit**

This site is a portal to online resources, selected readings, and other tools to challenge racism and promote the acceptance of differences within schools and communities.

[www.ucalgary.ca/dtoolkit/resources](http://www.ucalgary.ca/dtoolkit/resources)

## **Youth for Human Rights**

Videos, music, and free curricula

[www.youthforhumanrights.org/](http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/)

## **Oxfam Water Week**

This site provides U.K.-based resources on exploring water issues in a context of poverty and social justice.

[www.oxfam.org.uk/Waterweek/TeachersResources/Learn](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/Waterweek/TeachersResources/Learn)

## **Aboriginal Elders: A Grade 12 Unit Lesson Plan (UBC)**

“This unit plan is intended to give educators the tools to teach a comprehensive unit on the importance of elders in Aboriginal communities.”

<http://faculty.educ.ubc.ca>

## **Trading Trainers**

A game exploring labour and wage inequality, particularly focused on poor working conditions in Latin America.

<http://learn.christianaid.org.uk/TeachersResources/secondary/trainers.aspx>



## **Impact of Collective Actions**

Students plan collective action campaigns on issues they care about.

[www.teachitcitizenship.co.uk/index.php?CurrMenu=1015&resource=14355](http://www.teachitcitizenship.co.uk/index.php?CurrMenu=1015&resource=14355)

## **Active Citizenship: Pressure Groups**

Exploring the power of pressure groups and discussing positive changes that could be made to society.

[www.teachitcitizenship.co.uk/index.php?CurrMenu=1015&resource=14606](http://www.teachitcitizenship.co.uk/index.php?CurrMenu=1015&resource=14606)

## **“Social Movements: A Summary of What Works” by Charles Dobson**

“What affects the success of reform movements? What do the civil liberties, feminist, environmental, gay rights, anti-nuke, gun control, don’t drink and drive, and living wage movements have in common? Research-based theory on social movements complements the limited, often personal, perspective of activists and organizers because it looks at larger numbers of people, longer periods of time, and major shifts in popular attitudes.”

[www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/movements.pdf](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/movements.pdf)

## **A History of Rights in Canada**

This site provides links to resources about the history of human rights in Canada.

[www.historyofrights.com/ngo.html](http://www.historyofrights.com/ngo.html)

## **The Change Agency**

The Change Agency is a collective of activist educators and researchers. They work with community organizers to help people clarify their purpose and develop plans that will enable them to be heard, focus their energies, and achieve social and environmental justice outcomes.

[www.thechangeagency.org/](http://www.thechangeagency.org/)

## **We Left Because We Had To**

This resource helps students understand what the experience of a refugee might be like, and asks them to dispel some of the myths surrounding refugees.

[www.teachitcitizenship.co.uk/index.php?CurrMenu=1015&resource=10104](http://www.teachitcitizenship.co.uk/index.php?CurrMenu=1015&resource=10104)

## **The Facebook Generation**

“Students explore the definitions of identity, cohesion and community. They engage in a class debate about the effects of modern technology upon communities and think about ways in which identity, cohesion and community are changing within the Facebook generation.”

[www.teachitcitizenship.co.uk/index.php?CurrMenu=1015&resource=12704](http://www.teachitcitizenship.co.uk/index.php?CurrMenu=1015&resource=12704)





## **Living Experiment 2: Day of Social Justice, Social Psychology Network**

Students spend a day focused on addressing injustice.

[www.socialpsychology.org/teach/daysj.htm](http://www.socialpsychology.org/teach/daysj.htm)

## **Social Justice 12 Curriculum, BC Ministry of Education**

“The aim of Social Justice 12 is to raise students’ awareness of social injustice, to enable them to analyze situations from a social justice perspective, and to provide them with knowledge, skills, and an ethical framework to advocate for a socially just world.”

[www.bced.gov.bc.ca/](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/)

## **Multimedia**

### **“Greening the Ghetto” by Majora Carter**

“In an emotionally charged talk, MacArthur-winning activist Majora Carter details her fight for environmental justice in the South Bronx—and shows how minority neighborhoods suffer most from flawed urban policy.”

[www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/majora\\_carter\\_s\\_tale\\_of\\_urban\\_renewal.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/majora_carter_s_tale_of_urban_renewal.html)

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