

The House I Live In

Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. Depending on their social class and where they live, students may respond in contrasting ways to the question about prevalence of drugs in their community and whether they are a problem. As the film will confirm, residents' awareness of the use and sales of drugs in their communities may depend on race and social class. "Recreational" drugs are widely available and used by white-collar workers living in middle and upper class communities, and students may be aware of this drug use. In the urban housing projects, and in some rural areas, widespread sales and use of harder drugs afflict the lives of many people. Students may have first-hand and family anecdotal support, with specific examples, to illustrate their understanding of drug use in their communities.
2. Students may have varied responses to this question, depending on their experiences and observations in their communities, but most will realize that drugs are ubiquitous, regardless of race or economic status. However, some may recognize that many drug dealers are often from impoverished backgrounds, seeking more money in illegal drug sales than they can earn legally.
3. Unless students have a personal history with legal punishments for drug use, or have family members who have been sentenced in the courts for the use or sale of drugs, it is unlikely they will be aware of the minimum sentencing requirements imposed by the legal system for punishment. This film will be a revelation and a cautionary tale for many students.
4. The term "War on Drugs" may not be familiar to all students because it was more commonly used decades ago, but many will be aware of the periodic raids, stings, and arrests at drug houses in their communities. Some will recall various political campaigns fueled by vows to crack down on drugs and to put drug dealers behind bars. Most will not know that the term "War on Drugs" was first coined by President Richard Nixon and that it was initiated officially by him to improve his polls. As students will learn from journalist David Simon, Nixon actually was more forward looking than later presidents on this issue and 2/3 of his War on Drugs budget was devoted to treatment rather than law enforcement. Simon notes that Nixon understood the need to address addiction if the War on Drugs was to be effective. Many presidents after him were determined to be tough on crime. The film notes that President Ronald Reagan signed into law "an unprecedented array of mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes."

Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. As the film makes painfully clear, the equality of life choices ought to be guaranteed in a democracy. Yet it is possible to look at the newborn nursery in a hospital and predict, based on color and social class, where those babies are going to end up. The major factors that contribute to drug use and sales include the following:
 - absentee parents or a dysfunctional family situation

- children who are hungry when they go to school and can't concentrate on their studies
- overcrowded housing
- poverty and lack of education
- no perceived economic opportunities
- existing crime in the community including drug use and sales
- the lure of the drug dealer who buys gifts for poor children and then entices the young to become users and sellers.

The drug dealer is often venerated by young people in the community. He may help people who are behind in their rent or need some cash for food. He buys Converse sneakers for the teenagers and ice cream for the children. As one resident put it: "When [the dealers] came around, it was Christmas." Going to work selling drugs may seem a rational decision for a young person who sees selling drugs as the only job opportunity in his or her community.

A pattern that has overwhelmed the Black community is the assumption among young people that they are destined to be in the criminal justice system and part of the drug culture. With 2.7 million children in America with a parent behind bars, the vicious cycle of the drug war spans generations. The children of parents who are behind bars for drug use or sales are more likely than other children to be incarcerated during their own lifetimes. Drug addiction is often a result of human suffering. People who are in stress want to soothe their pain and often turn to drugs. As Dr. Gabor Mate, an expert on addiction, has said, "The real question is not why the addiction but why the pain?" Doctors can work with addiction, but we have not solved the social problems that create the pain.

2. Director Eugene Jarecki explains that Nannie Jeter was like a second mother to him. She was hired by his family to care for him while his parents worked, and she was a part of his family when he first came home from the hospital in Connecticut where Eugene's father worked as a doctor. Later when his family moved to a comfortable suburb of New York City where his father had started a successful business, they offered to double Nannie's pay if she would go with them to New York. She thought that more money would make a better life for her family left behind in New Haven.

But years later, she reveals, "Eugene, that was the wrong thing to do. I was always working in New York while my kids were in New Haven. My youngest son James started smoking at 14 and at 20, he started really going to drugs. It's amazing how you spend your life loving your kids" but you don't always see what's going on with them emotionally. Nannie explains that Eugene and his brothers not only had their parents taking care of them but they had her as well, whereas her own children were often alone. Her son James died of AIDS from using shared and contaminated needles; she deeply regrets that she was not able to be with him as much while he was growing up.

At the end of the film, Nannie reveals, "I feel I cheated myself out of what I could have accomplished. I never knew that I wanted to be in politics, to be a voice for someone, to say what was wrong, whether it changed or not, but to make it known that

something is wrong. Eugene, I've learned so much and I've tried to tell it to other people, but people would rather go down the same road that you went down before they learn. You make a lot of mistakes with your life, but when you somehow blow your kids' life, you always think about it. I don't understand the War on Drugs. All I know is . . . I miss my son." Jarecki uses Nannie's story and words to underscore the personal loss of millions of people who, like Nannie, made difficult decisions to help their families but weren't able to anticipate the consequences--or to see better alternatives.

3. The film asserts that since 1971, the War on Drugs has cost over one trillion dollars and has resulted in more than 45 million arrests, yet illegal drug use has remained the same. Journalist David Simon claims that the United States is the "jailingest nation on the planet" with 2.3 million prisoners, yet drugs are more available than ever. A great deal of money has been spent on prisons, probation officers, and narcotics agents but the "Draconian measures" do not curtail drug use or suppress the sale of drugs in communities. Individuals who are sucked into drug use and selling drugs are seen as failures, but the community has also failed them by providing poor living situations that include incarcerated parents, weak schools, indifferent teachers, and inadequate job opportunities. Both the individual incarcerated for drug use or sales and the war on drugs that pursues that individual perpetuate the cycle that spans generations and contributes to the perception of futility in the community. The drug wars create animosity in the community. The residents of the community fear the police and narcotics squads who often profile and pursue hapless victims. The legal system, strapped with mandatory minimum sentences for apprehended users and dealers, concludes the cycle by incarcerating drug offenders and further disrupting the community by removing its sons, husbands, and fathers, often for a lifetime behind bars.
4. The film exposes the following inconsistencies in the drug laws:
 - As Julie Stewart, Director of Families Against Mandatory Minimums, reveals, "African Americans make up 13% of the population in the U.S. and they're about 13% of the crack users. In other words, the rest of the crack users are white and brown, which is kind of amazing because 90% of the crack cocaine defendants in the federal system are African American."
 - The penalty for crack cocaine, typically used by blacks in public housing and on the streets, was made 100 times more punitive than for powdered cocaine, often used in board rooms and in suburban America. However, as Judge Mark Bennett notes, this makes no sense because "all crack cocaine comes from powdered cocaine. The only difference is you add baking soda, water, and heat from an oven in order to make crack." Yet, a defendant with 5 grams of crack cocaine is treated the same as a defendant with 500 grams of powdered cocaine.
 - Numerous judges and law enforcement officials have protested that the mandatory minimum sentences are so extreme and unfair. In fact, in 1995 the Sentencing Commission actually voted to make the same penalty for crack and powdered cocaine, but Congress was unyielding and refused to change the sentencing minimums.

- The mandatory minimum sentences, that have unfairly incarcerated so many Black Americans, are now imposed on meth-amphetamines offenders, often poor whites and gays. Judge Mark Bennett explains the injustice here: "Today the average person that I sentence in a drug case is a non-violent blue collar worker who lost his job and then turned to manufacturing meth-amphetamines to support his habit and we treat them all like they're kingpins."
 - Non-violent drug defendants are often receiving life without parole when convicted murderers are being released on parole after a much lesser sentence. *A non-violent defendant like Kevin Ott, convicted of having only 3 ounces of meth-amphetamines, is serving a lifetime sentence without parole. Nine years ago, he was able to take his case all the way to the Supreme Court, but then they refused to hear it. He has already served 14 years in jail and realizes he made a huge mistake, but he doesn't believe he deserves to die in jail for this bad judgment.
 - Chief of Security Mike Carpenter describes himself as "very much a law and order type of guy." But even he is vocal against the injustice he sees in our system: "I think sometimes we have people doing a whole lot of time for not very much crime. It's like they are paying time for our fear rather than paying for their crime."
 - Police officers get paid much more and earn promotions for easy drug arrests that take very little real police work, investigation, and effort whereas the more serious crimes such as murder and rape are often neglected because they take months to investigate with very little reward.
 - Film director Garecki notes, "Watching arrest after arrest, I began to see for the first time the destructive impact of drug laws not only on those they target but on those who enforce them as well.
 - Even law enforcement officers express frustration that prevention has been ignored by a system that favors incarceration Past Chief of Police William Bratton protests that "Too many people in jail don't need to be there. How do we prevent people from becoming drug addicts and from being incarcerated?"
 - With only 5% of the world's population, the United States has 25% of the world's prisoners. "The biggest drug industry in the world isn't in Mexico; it's not in Columbia; it's not in Afghanistan; it's in the United States," one of the most advanced and educated countries in the world.
5. The film attempts to represent multiple political perspectives first by showing the trend among politicians of each party to pursue the War on Drugs—especially as each presidential contender sought votes in an approaching election. In sound bites of political candidates' speeches, we hear the future Presidents of the country from both political parties—from Lyndon Johnson to Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan, to George Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—universally describe drugs as the #1 enemy to the United States. Each politician shown supports a war on drugs to get the

villains out of the communities.

There are surprising historical facts revealed in the film. For example, while Richard Nixon, who originated the term the “War on Drugs,” is often perceived as hard-nosed and intolerant of drug use and a man who had “no sympathy for the users and pushers,” he nevertheless originally wanted two thirds of the money spent fighting drugs to be spent for treatment rather than incarceration. The film makes clear his stance that “law enforcement is not enough,” and his thinking is described as progressive in that he supported treating drug addiction. In contrast, Bill Clinton is shown firmly insisting that with “three strikes, you are out!” No single political party is shown as superior to the other in its perception of how to treat drugs, a concern that at one time interested only 2% of the American public.

In addition to the selected sound-bites of political contenders’ speeches, the film also shows the multiple perspectives of law enforcement individuals, health care workers, and legal experts. Their sensitivity for the individuals who are caught, incarcerated, and often given life sentences, exemplifies the multiple perspectives that the film intends to convey to the viewer. David Kennedy, who works at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, insists that it’s “not just black hats and white hats” working in the communities to bring order. “On the ground, it’s more mixed up than that.” He sees policemen who blame the community for supporting sellers and users. But the film also shows one caring policeman who knows the neighborhood he patrols and the kids who are on the streets. Marshall Larry Curlion in Magdalena, New Mexico, admits profiling drivers and their vehicles, admitting the action that is illegal but, as he sees it, useful in apprehending drug dealers and catching them transporting their drugs—a lucrative stop for him and his police department.

One extended example in the film follows Mike Carpenter, a prison's Chief of Security, who describes himself as Mr. Law and Order. He could be the epitome of a “hardened prison official” who would lack sympathy for incarcerated drug sellers. As the camera follows him from his home to his job, he seems to be an average American who might be ignorant of the social and political forces that have put men behind bars, the men he sees while he is doing his daily job. However, he thoroughly understands the political and social conditions that have incarcerated drug users and sellers. He recognizes that contenders for public office believe they must maintain a “tough on crime, tough on drugs” stance in order to get votes. He realizes that we voters have become “victims of the sound bite.”

Carpenter supports the rehabilitation program at the prison where he works because he realizes that if the incarcerated lack skills, like being able to do carpentry or electrical work, should they ever be released from prison, these former inmates would quickly return to selling drugs in order to survive. Carpenter also perceives that drug laws were shaped by both political parties that joined forces to write the mandatory sentencing laws that raced through Congress without debate and with an almost unanimous vote. Carpenter represents the film director’s stance when he acknowledges that laws related to drug crimes are “a whole lot of time for not very much crime.”

6. During the War on Drugs, the prison system has been a growing market, profitable for numerous corporations invested in "the system of mass incarceration," as author Michelle Alexander terms it. So many employees and their families rely on the prisons for their economic stability. Among the other industries that she identifies are taser gun

manufacturers, private health care providers, phone companies, and entire communities that now depend on prisons as their primary employer.

7. In some poor and urban communities, people on the street are easy targets for police to catch, like “fish in a barrel.” Anyone in the area can be stopped and searched. As journalist David Simon describes it, “The drug war requires nothing more than getting out of your car and jacking people up against the side of a liquor store.” The officer who apprehends a drug user or seller, and the policeman’s department, will reap the profit of the stop if drugs or suspicious money are found. The policeman will gain hours of overtime for running the drugs found to a laboratory for analysis, taking the prisoner in for booking, and additional overtime for sitting at his desk writing reports of the arrests. He may gain 40 to 60 hours of overtime pay in addition to his base salary that month.

Entire police departments have an incentive to make drug arrests. Money confiscated during the drug bust and the vehicle used in the alleged crime are seized by the police department making the arrest. The police department operates on the money it seizes. The officer paid to investigate a murder or other violent crime may make one arrest per month, and only one arrest slip is signed. The person making many arrests—as in the policeman pursuing drug crimes—becomes the favored candidate for department promotion. The film shows that in Baltimore, for example, while drug arrest statistics are twice what they were years ago, the arrests for murder, rape or robbery are half what they once were. The war on drugs has created an incentive for frequent, often random, or profiled police stops and arrests. These actions have angered communities and soured relationships between the neighborhood and the police.

8. According to journalist and TV producer David Simon--Jarecki's main spokesman-- the War on Drugs is "a holocaust in slow motion" because an entire group of people is being systematically annihilated. Simon explains important distinctions between the Holocaust against the Jews and this holocaust: "It's not somebody arguing racial superiority or arguing for the destruction of a given race or religion--that doesn't exist--let's be honest about what is unique to the Holocaust. But there is an incredible destruction of human life that is class-based, not race-based, that is going on under the guise of a war against illegal narcotics." Ultimately, the film argues that the War on Drugs targets the "bottom 15%"-- the poor--in the United States and focuses on eliminating them. Historian Richard Miller underscores the parallelism between the drug war and the Holocaust by explaining the five steps in the "Chain of Destruction" that occurs in any holocaust: * **identification** of the problem citizens, perceived as bad, evil, worthless, or dangerous; ***ostracism** of the undesirable citizens, forcing them into a ghetto, taking their jobs away; * **confiscation** of their property and their rights when they are arrested; ***concentration** in prisons and camps, very corrosive environments that create a culture of hopelessness, especially because prisoners are isolated from loved ones and typically denied the necessary drug treatment; * **annihilation**, either indirectly by withholding medicine and food and by preventing births, or directly by killing them through sanctioned violence during prison fights and attacks. Professor Miller emphasizes that these steps tend to occur of their own momentum, without anyone forcing them to happen. The film contends that by identifying and targeting undesirable people and then applying some

fear mongering and special laws, a holocaust is often inevitable.

9. The title "The House I Live In" is directly related to the closing song by the same title, written by Lewis Allan and the blacklisted Earl Robinson, and sung powerfully by long-time activist Paul Robeson. The song focuses on the question, "What is America to me?" and the answer is one that encourages people to embrace everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, or political views: "My neighbors white and black, The people who just came here and the generations back, The townhall and the soapbox, The torch of liberty, A home for all God's children, That's America to me." Promoting tolerance and acceptance, this song reminds us of our common heritage as "God's children"--each innocent, beloved, and vulnerable. The lyrics underscore that we all live in the same house here on earth, emphasizing that we are all family and need to care for each other, especially those most vulnerable and needy.

The song provides a nod back to the director's opening when he reveals that his parents fled torture and persecution in Europe: "As children, my brothers and I were taught that we were the lucky ones who made it out. But with that luck came responsibility. 'Never again' didn't just mean that people like us shouldn't suffer. It meant others shouldn't suffer either." Throughout the film, Jarecki demonstrates our common humanity: Nannie was like a second mother to him even though she was African American. White judges, historians, journalists, and activists protest the injustice against people of color in the prosecution of crack cocaine. Experts from higher social classes--judges, professors at prestigious universities, respected journalists--are all united in protesting the unreasonable mandatory minimum drug sentences that result in the incarceration of citizens from lower economic classes.