



LESSON PLAN

Citizen Photojournalism



RELATED PHOTO ESSAY

The Geography of Poverty

BY MATT BLACK



Class: 60 minutes

Key Idea

California has the highest poverty rate in the country. A widespread epidemic in the U.S., poverty affects health, access to education, homelessness, unemployment, and food security.

Background

California's Central Valley is one of the world's most productive and fastest growing agricultural regions in the country.* Stretching for 450 miles, more than 6.5 million people inhabit the area. It is estimated that the Valley will be home to almost 12 million people in 2040.** Migration is the leading source of population growth with jobs, housing, and family the primary reasons for relocation, according to the Public Policy Institute of California. Fresno, Modesto, and Bakersfield-Delano—all within the Central Valley region—are three of the top five U.S. cities or counties with the highest percentage of residents living below the poverty line.

Poverty can be defined as the condition of lacking sufficient money or goods to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. Forty-five million people qualify as poor in the U.S., according to the Census Bureau. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that in 2014, a person earning less than \$11,670, or \$23,850 for a family of four, is living in poverty.

In this photo essay, photographer Matt Black creates a unique and in-depth overview of poverty throughout California's Central Valley using photos, geolocations, and poverty data. For 20 years, Black has documented migration, farm labor, and poverty issues in the Central Valley, where he lives. He was a 2003 Pulitzer Prize finalist, in the feature photography category, for his work published in the *Los Angeles Times*, which documented the legacy of black sharecroppers who migrated to California's San Joaquin Valley during the Depression. He was also named *Time Magazine's* Instagram photographer of the year for his project, titled "The Geography of Poverty." Black is expanding this work, photographing America's poorest places in 70 U.S. cities, towns, and rural communities.

* Mark Bittman, "[Everyone Eats There.](#)" *The New York Times Magazine*, October, 10, 2012.

** "[Just the Facts: California's Central Valley.](#)" Public Policy Institute of California, June, 2006.

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- Art
- Geography
- Journalism
- Modern World Studies
- Photography

COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Economics
- Geography
- History
- Journalism
- Photography

THEMES

- Bearing witness
- Geographic literacy
- Human rights
- Poverty and inequality

MATERIALS

- Map of the United States
- Access to the photo essay online (or printed copies of it)

PREPARATION

- (Optional) Make copies of the photo essay



Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. W.9-10.3 and W.11-12.3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. D2.Geo.2.9-12. Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-8. Evaluate the evidence for the role of group behavior and individual and species' chances to survive and reproduce.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the story by showing California's Central Valley on a map. Point out that students will view a photo essay created by a photographer, Matt Black, who grew up in the Central Valley. Black's aim with his photo project, "The Geography of Poverty," was to put marginalized communities in the Central Valley on the map. He used Instagram as a platform to publish these photographs and in 2014, he was named Time Magazine's Instagram photographer of the year. One of the most popular social media channels for teens today, Instagram has over 300 million users worldwide.

Ask how many students use Instagram. What is the purpose of Instagram? Some answers may include entertainment or friendship. Photojournalists around the world are capturing and reporting news and information on Instagram. Ask students to imagine themselves as photojournalists. What is one issue you care about or believe is unfair? Could Instagram be a tool to make it better? How?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Direct students to view the photo essay in pairs or small groups. Read, or have students read, the short description of the photo essay by the photographer, Matt Black. This text explains Black's point of view and his intention, which is to raise awareness about poverty and inequality in Cal-



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ifornia's Central Valley. He describes that some of the highest unemployment and hunger rates in the country are in this region, in the heart of the richest state in the country. Ask students to write down their observations and impressions.

Ask students how they decide which photos to post on Instagram. Why do they choose what they choose? Black only posted 73 images on Instagram during one year. In a *Time Magazine* interview, Black described that his goal wasn't to create a daily journal, but rather to build a portrait of images. Each image, he describes, should contribute and advance this portrait. While students view the photo essay, ask the following questions: How do you think this photo essay builds a portrait of images about poverty? Do you think Black achieved his intention of raising awareness about poverty and inequality in the Central Valley? If so, how? In what ways does Matt Black get California's Central Valley on the map?

Delving Deeper

Lead a discussion with such questions as:

- Ask students what they noticed from the photo essay. What were their first observations? Ask students to list three adjectives to describe the photos. What details from the photographs support their decisions?
- How does photographer Matt Black define the words "poverty" and "marginalized" in the photo essay's description? What evidence from the photo essay supports these definitions? (Some answers include the following: residents living in homeless camps, water contamination, air pollution, and high unemployment and hunger rates.)
- According to the captions, which city in the Central Valley, in 2006, had the highest rate of concentrated poverty in the nation? What makes this city unique, as described in the photo's caption? (Answer: Fresno, which is the richest agricultural county in the U.S., producing over \$6 billion in crops annually.)
- The photographer includes geolocations, including latitude and longitude coordinates, in each of the photo's captions. What might have been his intention with this choice? Do you think it serves the viewer? Why or why not?



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- How do the black and white images influence you as a viewer? Do you think these images could be effective in color? Why or why not?
- Photojournalists use Instagram to cover breaking stories, such as hurricanes or conflict zones around the world. Do you think Instagram can make photojournalism and the world news more accessible? If so, how? What can photos reveal that print media, like an article, cannot?
- If you were to create a comment for one of these images, as you would on Instagram, what would you write?

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the photo essay to justify their reasoning.)

1. Photograph number five highlights a woman carrying firewood to a makeshift home she built in an empty lot outside of Fresno. In 2006, Fresno was documented with the highest rate of concentrated poverty in the nation. Write a short narrative for this woman's life story to this point. Use the imagery of the photograph, the photo's caption, and the photographer's description to set up your narrative. (CCSS.ELA.W.9-10.3 and W.11-12.3)
2. "When I first started in photography, my goal was to get out of the Central Valley. But it quickly became clear to me that if I had a significant thing to say, it would be about the place I'm from," said Black in an interview with *Time Magazine*. Imagine you are entering a photography contest for a CNN story titled, "Getting Your Home on the Map." They are looking for photographs that capture people living in their hometown communities and neighborhoods in the U.S. What would you photograph and what story does your image tell about the cultural, social, or economic elements of your neighborhood? What elements would you choose to highlight? Why? If a person who lives outside your community would photograph your neighborhood, do you think he or she would have a different perspective? Why or why not? Write a caption to accompany your photo. (C3.D2.Geo.2.9-12)



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3. View this infographic, [Mapping Poverty in America](#), from *The New York Times*. It provides a map of the U.S. with poverty statistics from the Census Bureau. Using this infographic, select a county in the U.S. where the percentage of people living below the poverty line is high. You will write a grant proposal for \$100 million. What are the statistics of the county you selected? Based on what you learned from the photo essay, what are some of the basic needs of people living in poverty? How would you define the needs in your proposal to convince the board to approve the grant? Do you think this grant could revitalize and empower the people living in this county? Why or why not? (C3.D2.Geo.2.9-12)
4. Photographer Matt Black focuses on issues such as migration, the impacts of drought, and poverty. All of these issues deal with alienation, or the experience of being isolated. Which photographs, in your opinion, exemplify alienation or isolation? Why? How do the poverty statistics listed in the captions relate to the photos you selected? Do you think the photographer has a part to play in the lives of those living the Central Valley? If so, how? (NGSS.HS-LS2-8)

Resources

Matt Black, [The Geography of Poverty](#).

Olivier Laurent, "[Matt Black is TIME's Pick for Instagram Photographer of the Year 2014](#)." *Time Magazine*, December 18, 2014.

Peter Edelman, "[Poverty in America: Why Can't We End It?](#)" *The New York Times*, July 28, 2012.

Whitney Richardson, "[Bringing Invisible Stories to Instagram Followers](#)." *The New York Times*, June 26, 2013.

Matthew Bloch, Matthew Ericson, and Tom Giratikanon, "[Mapping Poverty in America: Data from the Census Bureau show where the poor live](#)." *The New York Times*, January 4, 2014.