Class Activities for **Chapter 12: Criminal Justice**

**Class activity #1**

Divide the class into 3-4 groups. Provide them the following instructions. Give them the opportunity to reform America’s correctional system, and then have the groups discuss their proposals with the class and choose which they would most like to implement, along with the challenges that might exist to implementing that plan.

Currently, our correctional system is both expensive and ineffective. That is, it costs a lot to keep prisoners incarcerated, and in exchange for that, we still get a very high recidivism rate. Our system doesn’t seem to be ‘correcting’ much of anything.

Can you come up with an alternative plan for our prison system that will save money and still be in line with social work ethics and values? Do not feel constrained by the norms of our system now. Be as creative as you like. If you feel the system should be more punitive, make your case. If you feel it should be more rehabilitative, make your case. Either way, discuss it as a group and talk about what changes you would make that you believe could both reduce costs and recidivism in our correctional system. Be prepared to discuss with the entire class and make the case for your system.

**Class activity #2**

The argument has been made that our criminal justice system is bogged down by too many people who have committed “victimless” crimes—e.g., drug use and prostitution—and that stops the system from accomplishing much in the way of prosecuting violent crimes that society may be more concerned with. Additionally, keeping these activities illegal certainly hasn’t stopped them from occurring (though that is not exactly an argument for legalizing them).

Since it has been proposed that we either legalize some of these crimes or simply make them into ticketable offenses (decriminalization), have your class break up into groups of 4-5 people to discuss what would be the possible pros and cons of legalizing prostitution and drug use. Would the potential ripple effects be worth the positives of freeing up the justice system to pursue more dangerous criminals with a higher percentage of their resources? Discuss as a class. Do they feel drug use should be legalized or decriminalized? Perhaps just for specific drugs? What about prostitution? Are there any other crimes they feel may be justifiably decriminalized or legalized?

**Class activity #3**

Thirty-two states have the death penalty, though some of those states have not executed any prisoner in some time. A few stats that do not have the death penalty still have prisoners on death row from before they abolished capital punishment, and the laws were not retroactive. Public support for capital punishment remains divided. The usefulness of capital punishment is debatable, as it does not seem to have an appreciable impact on crime rates.

Ask your class who is in favor of and who is against the death penalty. If there is a fairly even split, have the class separate into groups based on that split. If not, ask people who are more “on the fence” to join the lesser-populated side.

Have each group spend some time coming up with a list of arguments in favor of their stance. When possible, tell them to back up their points with research or data rather than just feelings or vague beliefs—they may use smart phones or computers (if wi-fi is accessible) to find the necessary information. Instruct them to anticipate their opponents’ points and prepare potential rebuttals for those points in advance. Then encourage a respectful debate on the topic. Remember, declaring a winner is not the point; both sides should strive to understand and respect the point of view of the opposing side. Tell them to aim to exemplify the way social workers should communicate with people with whom they may not agree.