The Peace Corps: Traveling the World to Live, Work, and Learn

**Topic:** International Relations

**Grade Level:** 4-6

**Subject Area:** Geography, US History

**Time Required:** 1 - 2 class periods

Download a pdf of this lesson plan.

**Goals/Rationale**

The Peace Corps, a government agency launched during John F. Kennedy’s presidency, promotes intercultural understanding and provides service to interested countries. In this lesson, students learn about the purpose of the Peace Corps, gather information about the early projects, and reflect on the impact of the program.

**Essential Question:**

How might living, working, and learning alongside people in other countries help make a more peaceful world?

**Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- identify countries on a world map: specifically, the first ten countries to receive Peace Corps volunteers
- describe the purpose of the Peace Corps
- describe the projects that took place in the countries
- explain what a volunteer can learn by serving in the Peace Corps

**Materials**

- World Map
- Document: 1/1/62 #80 Press Release
- Testimonies from recent Peace Corps Volunteers ([https://www.peacecorps.gov/stories/](https://www.peacecorps.gov/stories/))

(See Assessment for specific links)
Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National Standards for Civics and Government
K-4, Standard 4: What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?

National History Standards:
Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

Common Core State Standards
Gathering evidence from literary and informational texts to support a claim.

NCSS C3 Framework
Gathering relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, structure, and context to guide the selection.

Massachusetts History and Social Studies Frameworks
Grade 2 Topic 1: Reading and Making Maps
Grade 2 Topic 2: Geography and its Effect on People
Grade 4 Topic 4: Civics in the Context of Geography: Countries and Governments
Grade 6 Topic 4: Sub-Saharan Africa
Grade 6 Topic 5: Central America, the Caribbean Islands, and South America
Grade 7 Topic 1: Central and South Asia
Grade 7 Topic 2: East Asia
Grade 7 Topic 3: Southeast Asia and Oceania

Prior Knowledge and Skills

It is helpful for students to have basic knowledge of maps and continents.

Historical Background and Context

The idea for a program that would send US volunteers to serve in countries abroad originated in Congress in the late 1950s. In 1960, Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota and Representative Henry S. Reuss of Wisconsin proposed legislation to establish a federal volunteer program for service abroad. In the fall of 1960, during his presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy called for “a peace corps of talented men and women” who would dedicate themselves to the progress and peace of developing countries. His inaugural address challenged all citizens, especially young Americans, to contribute in some way to the greater good, including his call to serve abroad.

Encouraged by thousands of letters from interested citizens, especially young people, the new president took immediate action to make the campaign promise a reality. Kennedy launched the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961 by Executive Order 10924 and asked his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, to direct the organization.

By January 1, 1962, the Peace Corps had trained and placed 580 volunteers in ten countries located in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and South America. Serving only at the request of host countries, volunteers worked alongside community members in teaching, road surveying (planning roads), health (providing medical care), agricultural extension (farming), and rural development (construction and developing the local economy). There were 7,000 volunteers in forty-four countries by the end of 1963.
The “people-to-people” approach of the Peace Corps prepared volunteers to enter communities with cultural sensitivity. Developing relationships with people very different from themselves enabled volunteers to see their lives and their own culture through a different lens. The original mission of the Peace Corps remains the same:

To promote world peace and friendship by fulfilling three goals:
1) To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
2) To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the people served.
3) To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

In the past five decades, more than 240,000 Peace Corps Volunteers have served in 142 countries. Today, the Peace Corps is still growing and continues to serve a vital and relevant mission. In a world where cultural and religious differences have led to devastating violence, fear, and oppression, the Peace Corps continues to offer a unique vision of a government agency committed to intercultural understanding.

Note to teachers: The archival material is from the early 1960s and has outdated language that would not be acceptable today. Specifically, in the newsreel, the countries are referred to as “backward and depressed” which, at the time, meant they were less developed in terms of the economy, industry, and agriculture. Also, the document refers to “peacecorpsmen” as a generic term for Peace Corps Volunteer. People of all genders have served in the Peace Corps, including those who served in 1961.

Procedure
1) Ask students if they have lived in or visited another country or state. What was similar to where they live now and what was different? Explain that learning about another country or culture is called intercultural understanding.
2) Introduce the video, explaining that in the first two months of his presidency, John F. Kennedy announced the formation of the Peace Corps, a government service organization that would arrange for US citizens to travel to another country and work alongside people there to learn about each other, provide training and education to communities, and in so doing, work toward peace. As they watch the video, listen for the following information:
   ○ What work will Peace Corps Volunteers do in another country? (teaching, agriculture or farming, health care)
   ○ Will they get paid? (they will not receive a salary)
   ○ For how long will they stay in the country? (about two years)
   ○ What might Peace Corps Volunteers learn from the experience? (a new language, how to live in a culture that is different than their own, new skills including problem-solving skills.)

   Discuss how sending Americans to serve in other countries might help work toward world peace.
3) Show the map of the world and explain that in 1961, Sargent Shriver, the first director of the Peace Corps, worked hard to arrange for ten countries to accept Peace Corps Volunteers. (Students might be interested to know that Sargent Shriver, known as “Sarge” was John F. Kennedy’s brother-in-law.) They will use evidence from an historical
document to identify the countries and learn information about the first Peace Corps projects.

4) Distribute a hard copy or digitally present the document “Peace Corps, Press Release #80”. Analyze the document with students:
   - When was the document written? (January 1, 1962)
   - Who wrote the document? (Tom Mathews, Chief of Public Information for the Peace Corps)
   - Who is the document for? (Press releases are written to distribute to news media to share information.)
   - What is the document about? (It is an announcement about the number of Peace Corps Volunteers that are currently serving overseas, where they are, and what kind of work they are doing.)
   - Why was it written? (Perhaps to show how many Peace Corps Volunteers are already overseas even though the Peace Corps was launched only nine months before the document was created. It gives the public information about where Peace Corps Volunteers are working and what they are doing.)
   - Are there special markings? What might they mean? There are several handwritten marks:
     - At the top of the page, a handwritten note, “Dear Jack -- Thought this might interest you. Sarge” “Sarge” is Sargent Shriver, the first Director of the Peace Corps, writing a note to his brother-in-law “Jack”, the nickname of the President. Perhaps he wanted to show the President how well the Peace Corps was doing after only nine months.
     - Handwritten note “already overseas” next to the number of volunteers in each country. Perhaps Sargent Shriver made this mark, too. OR the president?
     - The text about additional projects is underlined, perhaps also by Sargent Shriver. OR the president?
   - What questions do you have about the document? Discuss what Peace Corps volunteers might have done for each of the projects.

See The First 9 Peace Corps Projects (https://peacecorpsworldwide.org/the-first-9/) as a teacher resource for descriptions of the Peace Corps projects.

5) Explain that students will use the evidence in the document to make the map into a Peace Corps teaching tool.
   - Discuss the key, using the symbol to explain what the Peace Corps project entailed. (For example, the symbol of a rake for agricultural development shows that volunteers helped with farming.)
   - Have students color the countries listed in the document, using the key to select the color that corresponds to the project(s) that took place in that county. (Some countries have more than one type of project so they will have more than one color. Students may only be able to draw a line or dot on small countries like St. Lucia.)
   - Discuss the map after it is finished: have students notice which continents had Peace Corps volunteers, which projects were most common, and why those particular projects might have been the focus in the first year of the Peace Corps. Additional questions might include: which country had the largest number of
volunteers? Which had the fewest? What work might Peace Corps Volunteers have done in the different projects?

Assessment

Read testimony from a current volunteer (https://www.peacecorps.gov/stories/) and write a paragraph to answer the question, “What can a person learn from being in the Peace Corps?”

There are many stories to choose from but here are some suggested links:


Extension

Students can take the JFK Challenge: [https://apps.apple.com/us/app/jfk-challenge/id957358011](https://apps.apple.com/us/app/jfk-challenge/id957358011) using a free, immersive iPad mobile application from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Users take Peace Corps training to learn Spanish and how to make building materials. They travel to a village in Colombia to build hospitals, dig waterways for clean drinking water, and get to know the local culture. The app features fun, kid-friendly animation combined with primary sources from the JFK Library’s Archives. Includes an Apollo 11 space challenge.

Explore the extensive resources of the Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools: [https://www.peacecorps.gov/educators/resources/](https://www.peacecorps.gov/educators/resources/) program which fosters an understanding of other cultures and global issues by providing online educational resources based on the Peace Corps experience. It also facilitates communication among US learners and current and returned Peace Corps Volunteers.
Dear Jack - Though this might interest you.

Tom Mathews, Chief
Public Information

FOR RELEASE JANUARY 1, 1962

PRESS RELEASE #80
Phone Executive 3-8130
Extensions 744, 745, 2074

On New Year's Day 1961, the Peace Corps was only an idea.

Today fifty Peace Corps Volunteers will board a plane at New York's Idlewild Airport for Sierra Leone, and assignments in that West African nation as secondary school teachers.

With their arrival in Freetown tomorrow night, the number of Peace Corpsmen overseas will reach 580. They are serving in ten countries on three continents in projects ranging from teaching to road building.

Another 147 Volunteers are completing their training in the United States and will go abroad this month. Some will join Volunteers already at work in the Philippines and Nigeria. Others will start new projects in Thailand and Malaya.

The task of training 729 Volunteers was accomplished with the cooperation of 14 U.S. colleges and universities, three private organizations and 15 foreign educational institutions.

At year's end, here is where the Volunteers are assigned overseas and what they are doing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS</th>
<th>TYPE OF PROJECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Secondary school teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Secondary school teaching, university teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanganyika</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Road surveying, geological mapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>50 (arriving Jan. 2, 1962)</td>
<td>Secondary school teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Agricultural extension, industrial education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Agricultural extension, health, education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>Primary education (English and science)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Lucia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Agricultural extension, education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Rural development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Rural development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL = 580

The Philippine group will be joined on Friday (January 5) by 59 additional Peace Corpsmen requested by the Philippine Government.

On January 10, Malaya will receive 38 Volunteers trained for a rural development project, and a week later (January 17) a group of 50 Peace Corpsmen will leave for Thailand and a health-education project.

Even as these Volunteers depart for overseas assignments, scores of candidates for 17 new Peace Corps projects will begin Stateside training.

The first of these new projects gets underway Wednesday (January 3) when some 70 Volunteers will commence studies at the National 4-H Foundation in Washington, D.C. They will prepare for an agricultural extension project in Brazil.
1961 Peace Corps Projects

Key
- Agricultural Extension: Volunteers worked with farming.
- Education, Primary and Secondary School Teaching: Volunteers taught in schools and universities.
- Health: Volunteers worked to help people stay healthy.
- Road Surveying: Volunteers helped plan roads.
- Rural Development: Volunteers helped with community projects like starting a business.