



RAISING AMERICAN SON: A DISCUSSION GUIDE

Purpose

As we strive to improve conversations about race, racism, and the criminal legal system in this country, the environment in which we're speaking seems to be constantly shifting. Yet these conversations are more important—and more complicated—than ever. We hope this discussion guide proves useful in helping to foster productive conversations, better understanding, and concrete solutions after viewing *American Son* and in other settings. It should be considered only the beginning of a conversation that must be thoughtfully continued in our communities.

Social Issue Background

To work for all of us, policing should enhance community safety while respecting our nation's commitment to equal justice under law. The color of your skin should not determine how police treat you.

At the same time, police officers often must make snap judgments about how to respond in potentially dangerous situations. Many officers put their lives on the line to protect the community, so it is critical to ensure that they receive the best training possible to do their jobs in a fair, respectful, and safe manner.

For Discussion

As community members, we share many of the same values: family, fairness, due process, community safety and stability, and equal justice. Ensuring that everyone experiences the ideals behind these values requires that we all be open to having sometimes uncomfortable conversations that will allow us to grow as individuals and as a nation.

We encourage all to enter the discussion about *American Son* with an open mind, willing to put yourself in other's shoes and to share your experience with others who may benefit from watching this story. Please go to www.opportunityagenda.org/americanson for the full-length Discussion Guide and further resources.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What word would you use to describe how you feel after watching *American Son*?
- Is there a person or a group of people in your community who would benefit from watching?

- Did this story challenge previously held assumptions that you had about race, policing, or police-community relations?

Implicit Bias: The Police and the Family

- How do Kendra's desperate attempts to contact her son demonstrate her fears about raising a Black boy in the United States?
- How do Kendra and Scott's personal racial and class identities influence their differing assumptions about the treatment their son likely received at the hands of the police?
- *Systemic Bias*: Research shows that Black and Latinx communities historically experience racial profiling and other disadvantages within the criminal legal system even when they are less likely to commit certain crimes. However, in many communities, Black and Latinx officials administer the criminal legal system and are the primary faces of the criminal legal system (e.g., Black police officers, Black judges, Black corrections officers).
- Does the fact that Lieutenant John Stokes is Black eliminate the possibility that his interactions with Kendra and Scott Connor reflect a bias against Black people who are arrested?
- Should it matter whether a police officer who harms an unarmed person of color is also a person of color?
- Do you think Lieutenant John Stokes would have treated the Connors differently if both of them, and their son, were White?

Police-Community Relations

- Do you think that everyone is treated equally by the police? Do you think that everyone is treated fairly by the police? Is there a difference?
- How do the interactions at the police station between Officer Larkin, Lieutenant Stokes, and the the Connor family illustrate these differences?
- What steps would you take to ensure that police officers who act inappropriately are held accountable?
- What steps could be taken to improve police–community relations?

- *The Dangers of Policing*: Police officers often risk their lives to protect the safety of the community. They are often in dangerous environments and must make snap judgments about how to respond to unexpected situations. And, like all of us, police officers have unconscious biases against different groups that impact their daily interactions with people. These biases are called implicit biases. They cause all of us to judge certain groups unfairly, although we do not deliberately intend to do so. They also cause us to unconsciously favor certain groups.
- How do you think biases influence snap judgments that can cause police officers to use force?
- How do you think we should consider both the dangers of conducting police work and the importance of protecting everyone's rights?
- *Redefining Safety*: The experiences that different people have with safety in their community impact how they relate to the police.
- What does a safe community look like?
- What role should police play in contributing to public safety?
- Are there ways police and communities can work together to make safer communities?

The World of *American Son*

- We never see Jamal, but in many ways he is the story's most important character. What do we know about him? How do the various characters describe him, and to what aspects of Jamal do they attach meaning?
- What is the hierarchy of power between the characters and where do those power differences come from? Do these dynamics ever shift? If so, how and why?

Continue the Conversation

Consider these ideas for talking to people who may have a different perspective than you do:

Start the conversation with a statement of shared values, such as Opportunity, Community Safety, Equal Justice, and Due Process, which can serve as points of connection for diverse audiences. Uplift these values before jumping into statistics and facts.

Highlight how racial inequality holds all of us back as a nation. It's not just one group that's affected by racial injustice. We are all impacted, and it is important to work together to advance solutions for addressing inequality.

Learn More

Go to www.opportunityagenda.org/american-son for resources and tools on racial and criminal justice such as [Transforming the System](#), [Opportunity for Black Men and Boys](#), and [Criminal Justice Phrase Guide](#).

Get Involved

Invite friends and family to discuss *American Son* and facilitate open and honest conversations about race, policing, and the state of our country. Here are some tips for effectively hosting uncomfortable conversations while sharing a meal with others: www.opportunityagenda.org/explore/insights/five-tips-surviving-holiday-conversations.

Support organizations working for equitable and accountable policing, including [Dream Defenders](#), [Color of Change](#), [Latino Justice](#), [Movement for Black Lives](#), [Center for Constitutional Rights](#), [Black-Led Movement Fund at Borealis Philanthropy](#).

Learn more about your local police. Ask them what they're doing to work with the community.

#AmericanSonPlay #FutureOverFear

www.opportunityagenda.org/american-son

American Son is based on the acclaimed play by Christopher Demos-Brown, which opened on Broadway at the Booth Theatre on Nov 4, 2018. The Television Event debuts Nov 1, 2019 on Netflix.

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