

**RAISING *AMERICAN SON*:**  
**A DISCUSSION GUIDE**



The Opportunity Agenda created this Discussion Guide with the generous support of the Ford Foundation. The Opportunity Agenda is a social justice communication lab working to build public support for greater and more equal opportunity. To learn more, and to access our free communications resources, go to [www.OpportunityAgenda.org](http://www.OpportunityAgenda.org).

## **ABOUT AMERICAN SON**

A Florida police station in the middle of the night. Two parents, Kendra Ellis-Connor and Scott Connor, are searching for answers about their 18-year-old son, Jamal Connor.

The play, by Christopher Demos-Brown, is a gripping tale about who we are as a nation and how we deal with family relationships, love, loss, and identity. It delves into the tensions within police-community relations, interracial relations, and families. At a time when this nation is deeply divided, this story provides an invitation to thoughtfully discuss the critical issues of the day.

## **THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE**

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 guide proves useful in helping to foster productive conversations, better understanding, and concrete solutions after viewing the play 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**

Open and respectful dialogue allows us to grow as individuals and as a nation. While many of us have long-held views about race, relationships, and police, it is important to be open to hearing different perspectives and experiences. As community members, we share many of the same values: family, fairness, due process, community safety, and equal justice. Ensuring that everyone experiences the ideals behind these values requires that we all be open to having sometimes uncomfortable conversations about race and policing. Open dialogue also allows us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and understand how their experiences affect the way they view the world, breaking down barriers.

We encourage you to enter the discussion about this play with an open mind and to share your experience with others who may benefit from watching the play.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

What word would you use to describe how you feel after watching this play?

Is there a person or group of people in your community who would benefit from watching?

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

### *Police Violence 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 solutions do you think would 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 impacts 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 the Play*

We never see Jamal, but in many ways he is the play's most important character. What do we know about him? How do the various characters on stage describe him and to what aspects of Jamal do they attach meaning?

What is the hierarchy of power between the characters in the play and where do those power differences come from? Do these dynamics ever shift? If so, how and why?

### **CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION:**

We hope you will bring this conversation to friends and neighbors who may not have seen *American Son*. Consider these ideas for talking to people who may have a different perspective than you do:

Start the conversation with 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:

- [\*Transforming the System\*](#), The Opportunity Agenda
- [\*Opportunity for Black Men and Boys\*](#), The Opportunity Agenda
- [\*Criminal Justice Phrase Guide\*](#), The Opportunity Agenda

## Get Involved:

Invite friends and family to your home to discuss the play and facilitate honest conversations about race, policing, and the state of our country. Some tips for hosting uncomfortable conversations while sharing a meal with others: <https://opportunityagenda.org/explore/insights/five-tips-surviving-holiday-conversations>

Discuss your thoughts about the play with your social media friends and followers. Use the following hashtags: **#AmericanSonPlay** **#FutureOverFear**

Learn more about your local police. Contact your local police department to learn more about their initiatives to work with the community.

Go to [www.opportunityagenda.org/americansonplay](http://www.opportunityagenda.org/americansonplay) to connect with organizations working for a more equitable criminal legal system.

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