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Since I Been Down

A film by Gilda Sheppard

General Discussion Guide

@sincebeendown



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How To Use This Guide

- This discussion guide encourages **reflection with honesty and emotional transparency**. If you are hosting or leading this discussion, we recommend that you read all questions beforehand and identify any that might be particularly relevant to your group.
- Before you begin the conversation, we recommend reminding participants that **it's okay to feel uncomfortable when discussing these intense subjects**. Be kind to each other. This conversation is meant to be a dialogue and not about reaching consensus.
- Lay the groundwork that it's important to **honor the perspectives of other participants** regardless of whether or not you agree with their viewpoints. *You* are instrumental in making this space **safe and inclusive for everyone**.
- Feel free to **pause after each question** to give yourself and others time to process.



Meet Kimonti Carter.



Former president and current member of an over 40-year Washington State prisoner-initiated program, the Black Prisoners' Caucus (BPC). At 34, Kimonti founded BPC TEACH (Taking Education and Creating History), a remarkably innovative prisoner education program. Kimonti and a group of his peers maneuver through a non-negotiable pathway to join gangs as early as 11-years-old.

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This is a community profoundly impacted by our policies in the 1990s which label kids super-predators leading to outcomes of poverty, dead-end prospects for thriving in school and in life, and to outcomes such as committing violent crimes and spending life in prison. The film, told by the people who have lived these conditions, unravels intimate stories from interviews brought to life through archival footage, cinema verité discussions, masquerade, and dance, unravelling why children commit



violent crime and how these children – now adults – are breaking free from their fate by creating a model of justice that is transforming their lives, our humanity and a quality of life for all our children.



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Incarceration:

- America's incarceration system is **discriminatory**. According to The Sentencing Project 2021's Criminal Justice Factsheet, **Black men are 6 times more likely to be incarcerated than their White counterparts**. Similarly, Latino men are 2.5 times as likely to be convicted compared to Caucasian prisoners.
- Though many more men are in prison than women, **the rate of growth for female imprisonment has been twice as high as that of men** since 1980. There are currently 1.2 million women under the supervision of the criminal justice system.
- **African American and Native girls are much more likely to be incarcerated than Asian, white, and Hispanic girls**. African American girls are more than three times as likely as their white peers to be incarcerated and Native girls are more than four times as likely.
- **Black youth are overly prosecuted**. As reported by the NAACP's 2021 Criminal Justice Fact Sheet nationwide, Black children represent 32% of juveniles who are arrested, 42% of children who are detained, and 52% of children whose cases are judicially waived to criminal court.



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- **Juvenile laws should embrace new scientific research.** According to 2018 research from the University of Rochester Medical Center, the rational part of a teen's brain does not fully develop until age 25.
- **Violent crime is declining.** The Sentencing Project's study also reveals that the number of people serving life sentences for violent crimes has been declining for the past 20 years.
- **Lengthy sentences** aren't resulting in public safety benefits. Instead, they're **causing prison populations to nearly quintuple** since 1984. Currently, 1 in 7 people in prison are serving life sentences or essentially life sentences (50 years or more).
- The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 established 5 year prison sentences for getting caught with 5 g of crack. On the other hand, getting caught with **500 g of powder cocaine can lead to probation.**



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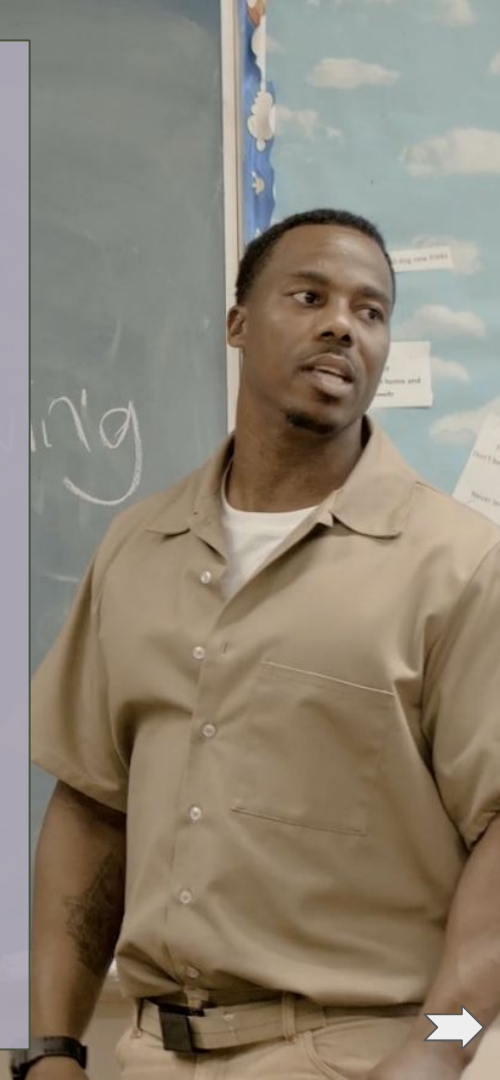
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Education:

- **Providing quality education includes setting all students up for success.** According to a study in the Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, New York City public schools who implemented free meals for every student increased classroom participation by as much as 11%.
- **School disciplinary policies fuel systemic racism.** A large 2020 UCLA study analyzed nationwide expulsion day trends among enrolled students in middle and high school. Overall, Black students lost 103 instruction days per 100 students enrolled—an amount significantly higher than their White peers, who on average lost 21 days per 100 students enrolled.
- **Native Americans are most impacted by lower graduation rates.** In a 2019 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, 74% of Native Americans graduate from high school. This is lower than any other ethnicity.



Reflection: *Take a moment to process*

1. For centuries, storytelling has been crucial to passing down learnings and to building collective knowledge. In what ways did the film showcase the importance of personal stories? How did the story of Kimonti Carter impact you?
2. Research indicates that most human brains take 25 years to fully develop. Brain development research needs to be considered during the sentencing process of those under 25 years of age. Do you believe that current juvenile sentencing laws need adjusting? Why or why not?
3. Shannon , a former gang member from East Hilltop, reflects in the film; “*There’s a saying, ‘No love among thieves.’ Well, we had love among thieves. We all loved each other. We looked out for each other. It wasn’t all like a lot of people make it up to be.*” What were some of the circumstances of Tacoma’s underserved youth that led youth like Kimonti to join a gang?
4. Ringer, one of the retired police detectives stated, “*There were so many kids out here running as gang members that we started keeping a notebook on them and we started getting pictures. They found out we had it and they all wanted to see it. Some of them come up and say, ‘My face isn’t in there,’ and pose for their photograph.*” Reflect on why keep a notebook like this?

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5. In the film, Mary, a community anti-racist organizer, says: “*This country is based on fear. When you have a country that is based on or that has grown out of colonization and slavery, people do not rest easy.*” Does this statement resonate with you? Why or why not?
6. The TEACH program featured in the film stands for Taking Education and Creating History. How do you think TEACH is helping prisoners to become better versions of themselves? Did watching the film change your views about the power of education as a transformative tool?



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CONNECT: *Connect the Dots*

1. The mission of the Black Prisoners Caucus and TEACH, is to “create a better version of who we are.” What significance do you think this has in your life, in your community?
2. One of the older members from *The Black Collective*, a community group from Tacoma, stated that the underlying issues affecting low-income communities haven’t changed. Disparities with education, employment, healthcare, and housing lead to an increase in substance abuse, crime and mental health crises. What is the connection between these disparities and their respective outcomes?



3. Tonya talks about what equity means. Do you think racial equity has a place in the educational curriculum in k-12?
4. Gilda Sheppard, the film’s director, employs various symbols and motifs throughout the documentary, such as the forest, youth playing with chalk, colorful masks, and dancing. Why do you think Sheppard chose these cinematic devices and what feelings did they evoke in you?



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5. What does our “culture of punishment” tell us about ourselves? Our values?

6. Transformative Justice addresses the systemic challenges as the root causes of injustice. Restorative justice advocates for reconciliation between incarcerated people and their victims, as well as with the community at large. How do you think transformative and restorative justice could benefit our society? Your community?

7. In what ways do ‘*the war on drugs*’ and ‘*the war on crime*’ impact low-income and/or BIPOC communities?

8. At one point in the film, several TEACH students contemplate what justice means to them. What does justice mean to you? What are some differences between justice and the justice system?



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ACT: Commit to Action

1. What declaration does *Since I Been Down* make about the state of our justice system? How do you define justice? What role do you play in our judicial system? What steps could you take to improve it?
2. The majority of TEACH students don't have academic degrees or were characterized as "problematic" while growing up. A combination of poverty, abuse, and neglect resulted in learning disabilities and trauma for many. How should educators, students and school administrators better equip themselves to help the youth navigate these challenges?
3. During a community event, Mary, a local anti-racist organizer, denounces that "*We have some class issues going on. There are many of us who don't believe that the people in prison can have the answers to our problems.*" Given what you saw in the film, in what ways can you learn from people who are in prison about making a positive impact on our society? Did you identify any personal preexisting bias?



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4. The TEACH program integrates Social Emotional Learning into its academic program (e.g. healthy thinking, cultural contexts, empathy, compassion, etc.) How might you bring the elements of Social Emotional Learning into your community, your schools, and out-of-school or after-school programs?

5. Did Kimonti's story provide you with a better understanding of the impact that racism, poverty, and lack of opportunities had on his life and the lives of others? Is this relevant to your own community? If so, how can you take action to change our country's culture of punishment, starting in your community?



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[The Sentencing Project](#)

[NAACP](#)

[US Department of Justice](#)

[National Center for Education Statistics](#)

[University of Rochester Medical Center](#)

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