OVERVIEW
For generations, parents of black boys across the U.S. have rehearsed, dreaded and postponed “The Conversation,” but as their children become increasingly independent, parents must decide how to tell their black sons that they may be targets of racial profiling by the police. To keep the child they love safe, they may have to tell him that he risks being targeted by the police, simply because of the color of his skin. Is it possible for parents to frame this discussion in a way that both informs and empowers their boys? Can black boys and men rely on the police to “protect and serve” them while also recognizing that the institutional bias of our justice system presents a direct risk to their safety? How has the history of policing in the United States contributed to this need for “The Conversation” today? What lessons can we learn from our past that can inform our actions in the future?

Through the short film A Conversation with My Black Son (originally published by The New York Times as one of its Op-Docs) by directors Geeta Gandbhir and Blair Foster, students will hear from parents who have personally struggled with the burden of “The Conversation” and compare/contrast their stories and strategies for keeping their children safe. Students will then research and analyze the history of policing in America from the colonial era to the present as it relates to the African-American community and identify how that history produced the need for black parents to have “The Conversation” today.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:
• Discuss the impact of racial profiling by police on black boys, their parents and the African-American community
• Research the history of policing in the United States and develop timelines that illustrate significant events during eras of American history
• Describe how the changing models, missions and priorities of law enforcement throughout U.S. history have influenced the fraught relationship between African Americans and law enforcement today
• Explain how a greater understanding of the historical relationship between African Americans and law enforcement can help people better understand how their communities work and how relationships with law enforcement are historically determined
• Students will be able to understand the history behind modern racial profiling

GRADE LEVELS: 9-12+

SUBJECT AREAS
Black History
Civics
Social Studies
U.S. History

MATERIALS
• A Conversation with My Black Son and equipment on which to show it
• Student Handouts:
  o Student Handout A: Viewing Notes
  o Student Handout B: Group Discussion
• White board
• Pens, markers and writing paper
• Chart paper

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
Two 50-minute class periods, with homework

FILM
A Conversation with My Black Son by Geeta Gandbhir and Blair Foster

PREPARATION
Viewing and Discussing Sensitive Material
This lesson and the accompanying film address sensitive social issues: teachers should screen the film and review all of the related materials prior to the lesson. Some of your students may also have a personal relationship with these topics and their perspectives and sensitivities should inform how the lesson is presented. Before the lesson, it would be helpful to connect with a school social worker for resources specific to your school community’s needs and guidelines.

Remind the class that this is a supportive environment and review your classroom’s tools for creating a safe-space, including class agreements. These might include guidelines like no name-calling, no interrupting, listen without judgment, use
respectful language, share to your level of comfort or you have the right to pass. And remind students that when they talk about groups of people, they should be careful to use the word *some*, not the word *all*.

Visit Teaching Tolerance (http://www.tolerance.org) for additional resources and strategies for tackling challenging topics in the classroom. Below are three particularly apt resources:

- Teaching Tolerance: “Let’s Talk! Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics with Students” [http://www.tolerance.org/lets-talk](http://www.tolerance.org/lets-talk)
- Teaching Tolerance: “Teaching at the Intersections: Honor and Teach About Your Students’ Multiple Identities” [https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/teaching-at-the-intersections](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/teaching-at-the-intersections)

**ACTIVITY**

**Introduction: Do Now, Think-Pair-Share**

In preparation for the lesson, give students five minutes to brainstorm as many responses to the following prompt as they can: What words, phrases and feelings come to mind when you hear “police officer”?

Have each student share their list with a partner and discuss their responses using the following prompts:

- What are the similarities in your perceptions of police? What are the differences?
- What experiences have influenced your point of view?
- Note: Students can respond to this question in broad strokes, such as personal experience, family, friends, the media—but will have the opportunity to share more detailed responses, if they wish, later in the lesson.
- How do your perceptions of police officers compare to representations you have seen in the news, films, television and elsewhere?

Ask for volunteers to share their responses with the class, then conclude the activity by having the students copy and complete the following sentence. (Note: Responses can be discussed as a class or in small groups or can be written individually and shared with a partner. Students can review and reflect on this sentence throughout the lesson.)

- The words I most associate with the police are (choose up to 3 words) ______________________ because (what has influenced your opinion?) _____________________________.

**The Conversation**
Note: This is a good time to review your classroom agreements, tools for supportive listening and sharing and the Teaching Tolerance resources.

Using the Popcorn Share* method, have students respond to the following question: What are some reasons that opinions about police officers might differ from one community to another?

*Popcorn Share: After you pose the question, give the class time to think about their responses. When you call “popcorn,” the students should quickly and voluntarily pop up from their chairs one at a time to share responses, while seated students record the responses and prepare feedback. Follow with a brief discussion.

Introduce the film A Conversation with My Black Son and explain that students will be exploring the unique and often painful discussion that millions of American parents of black sons must have about racial profiling (which, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, “refers to the discriminatory practice by law enforcement officials of targeting individuals for suspicion of crime based on the individual’s race, ethnicity, religion or national origin”) with a focus on the risks they will likely face in their interactions with police officers.

Film Summary: For generations, parents of black boys across the U.S. have rehearsed, dreaded and postponed what is often referred to as “The Conversation,” but as their children become increasingly independent, these parents must decide how to tell their sons that they may be targets of racial profiling by the police. In the film A Conversation with My Black Son by directors Geeta Gandbhir and Blair Foster, parents share their personal stories about “The Conversation” and how they explained to their children that they risk being targeted by the police, simply because of the color of their skin.

Distribute Student Handout A: Viewing Notes and review the handout with the class before playing the short film A Conversation with My Black Son. When the film ends, allow students about five minutes to reflect on the stories they heard and draft/refine their follow-up questions.

Check in with a brief class discussion using the prompts below before breaking out into smaller discussion groups:

• What surprised you most when you heard the parents’ stories?
• Which story stood out for you? Why?
• Were you familiar with this issue before seeing this film? If so, how did the parents’ stories compare with what you already knew?
Have students organize into small discussion groups to compare their viewing notes and pose and discuss each student’s follow-up questions.

Distribute Student Handout B: Group Discussion and have students discuss their responses to each prompt, then develop one question about the film they would like to pose to the class. (Alternately, each group can draft a sentence or two describing one important lesson they learned from the parents’ stories.)

Reconvene the class and have a member of each group share the group’s questions/lessons. Have the class discuss and provide feedback on each question/lesson and have a volunteer take notes on the board or chart paper to revisit as needed.

*Facilitation Note: Each classroom culture is different, so students may or may not be comfortable sharing specific personal experiences. If students express the need to discuss their personal stories, it is important to make time for that conversation.*

Explain that students will have the opportunity to share their experiences in more detail through a journaling assignment at the end of the lesson. Students may choose to keep their journal entries private or share them with the class (through an oral presentation or by displaying it in the classroom or posting it on the class blog/website).

It may also be advisable to connect students with school counselors/advisors and/or community organizations challenging racial profiling, including local chapters of the NAACP and ACLU. See the Resources section for additional information.

**The Film in Context: A Timeline of Policing and Race in the United States**

Pose the following questions to the class in preparation for the timeline activity:

- What have you learned about the history of policing in the United States before today? (When was the first police force founded? How have the mission and model of law enforcement changed since the colonial era?)
- How has the relationship between African Americans and law enforcement changed throughout U.S. history?

Explain: The police force as we know it today is a relatively recent development. The first publicly funded, organized police force was founded in Boston in 1838 in response to the growth of an increasingly diverse urban population and pressure from wealthy merchants who wanted city government to cover the cost of protecting their property. Prior to that, law enforcement was managed by a succession of informal, for-profit, volunteer and conscription patrols, as well as the military. The mission of each of these early policing forces was generally driven more by the priorities of local communities, political leaders and financial patrons than by a
mandate to enforce the law. The transition to city, state and national police forces was influenced in part by previous law enforcement models, as well as the complex social and political transformations that followed.

In this activity, you will explore the history of law enforcement and policing in the United States with a focus on its impact on the African-American community. Working in small groups (two to three students), you will research a specific era and identify events and people that illustrate how the history of law enforcement intersected with African-American history during that period. Each group will organize its research into a timeline that highlights the events in the era assigned to it. When viewed in sequence, the completed timelines will provide an overview of policing history stretching from the colonial era through today. We will then analyze our combined timeline to try to better understand the relationship between African Americans and law enforcement today.

Divide the class into groups of two to four students and assign each one of the following eras in American history to research:

1. Colonial Era and Revolutionary Era 1600s–1790s
2. Independence, Slavery and Civil War 1800s–1860s
3. Reconstruction and Jim Crow 1860s–1890s
4. Turn of the Century, the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance 1900s–1920s
5. The Great Depression and World War II 1930s–1944
8. September 11, Obama Era and Today 2001–Present

Groups should attempt to examine a variety of sources for their research, including contemporary newspaper articles, personal letters, oral histories/traditions and state and local laws, as well as the resources below.

**Research Resources**
Chicago Prison-Industrial Complex Teaching Collective: “Policing and Resistance in the U.S.”

Constitutional Rights Foundation: “Civics on Call: Youth and Police”
http://www.crf-usa.org/police/civics-on-call-youth-and-police

Eastern Kentucky University Police Studies Online: “The History of Policing in the United States, Part 1”
http://plsonline.eku.edu/insidelook/history-policing-united-states-part-1
Encyclopædia Britannica: “The History of Policing in the West”

Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia: “Jim Crow Era”
https://ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/timeline/jimcrow.htm

Library of Congress, Law Library: Research & Reports
https://www.loc.gov/law/help/index.php

Library of Congress, Law Library: U.S. States & Territories

NAACP: “Useful Resources Addressing Racial Profiling”

New Georgia Encyclopedia: “Slave Patrols”
https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slave-patrols

Policing: A Text/Reader
https://books.google.com/books/about/Policing.html?id=2r_kk4e_tQwC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false

Teaching Tolerance: “The Color of Justice,” Chapter 3 from The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander
https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/The%20Color%20of%20Justice.pdf

http://time.com/4779112/police-history-origins/

Once groups have completed research on their eras, have each group organize significant facts, events and historical figures into a timeline. Timelines can be drawn on chart paper or created using an online multimedia programs such as the following:

- Sutori: https://www.sutori.com/
- TimeGlider: https://timeglider.com/
- TimeToast: https://www.timetoast.com/

Have groups present their completed timelines and explain the significance of each event in the history of policing and why they selected it. Discussion prompts:

- How are these events connected to/reflective of the stories told by the parents in A Conversation with My Black Son?
• What has your research on this era revealed about the current fraught relationship between African Americans (especially men and boys) and law enforcement?

Reflection
Conclude the presentation with a class discussion:
• What did you discover through this activity that you didn’t know before?
• How has the relationship between African Americans and law enforcement changed throughout U.S. history?
• How could this knowledge benefit and empower black boys and their parents when they have “The Conversation” about modern racial profiling?

Have students reflect on the lesson using the one or both of the prompts below. Students can discuss the questions with a partner and/or write their responses as journal entries:
• What is unique about the historical relationship between African Americans and law enforcement? How has that history influenced race relations today? How would you incorporate this knowledge into “The Conversation” with a black youth? What is your biggest take away from this lesson?
• What personal connections, if any, did you make with the film? Did it remind you of past experiences, people or events in your life? In what way? How would you incorporate this knowledge into “The Conversation” with the younger generation? What is your biggest take away from this lesson?

EXTENSIONS
Legislating “The Conversation”
Have students investigate efforts in several states to bring “The Conversation” into classrooms. New Jersey and Texas have passed laws that require schools to teach K-12 students how they should engage with police. Students should analyze the arguments for and against these new laws. Below are some questions to get started:
• Should we be teaching youth how to interact peacefully with police, or should we be teaching police how to interact peacefully with civilians?
• Do these new policies criminalize age-appropriate behaviors that fail to meet the standards of mutual cooperation? (Examples of children in kindergarten being handcuffed by police when they have temper tantrums.)
• Are the supporters of the legislation correct in stating that citizens of all ages should be empowered with the knowledge of their rights and responsibilities when interacting with law enforcement?
• Should law enforcement professionals also receive training in cultural competency, responsive practices and child development and learn how to recognize and address their own implicit biases and prejudices? Why or why not?
• What are the goals and impact of laws recently passed in New Jersey, Texas and elsewhere? How are they similar/different from one another?
• Do policies like this address the concerns of parents in *A Conversation with My Black Son*? In what ways?
• How could this strategy improve or worsen current police/community relationships?
• Do you support these policies? Why or why not?
• What solutions would you suggest to empower young people and improve police community relations?

**The Responsibility of Law Enforcement**

Build on the timeline lesson by having students consider what the purpose of law enforcement should be today and how it could be reformed to better serve all members of the community regardless of race, gender, origin and so on. Have students research and document oral histories about the impact of policing in their neighborhoods through interviews with community members from a range of generations, parents, community and political leaders, activists and members of the local police force. Their projects can culminate in persuasive essays or multimedia presentations.

Research prompts should include:
• What is law enforcement’s responsibility to the communities it serves? What should it be?
• What is police misconduct and how can we address it?
• What rights do citizens have when we engage with the police? Do people from different communities have different rights? Why or why not?
• What is law enforcement like in your neighborhood? What would you change or improve if you could?

**From the Kerner Commission to the Ferguson Commission**

“Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal,” read the report of the 1968 Kerner Commission.

Have students compare race relations between police and the community during the Civil Rights era and today through the lens of the findings of two commissions charged with evaluating police conduct that sparked periods of protest and civil unrest—the Kerner Commission (formally the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders) of 1967 and the Ferguson Commission of 2014. (Each commission released its report the year after it was formed.) Students should research the causes and aftermath of each uprising, how relationships between the police and communities of color have (or have not) changed over the past 50 years and the conclusions that the commissions reached in their reports.

Research and analysis prompts:
• What were the Kerner Commission recommendations? How did they compare to the Ferguson Commission recommendations?
• What influence did the Kerner Commission have on substantive police reform?
• Which recommendations have improved police/community relations? Which recommendations were still unheeded when the protest in Ferguson, Missouri erupted?
• How did contemporary reporting and media shape the narrative and outcome of each event? Did media coverage use the term “uprising” or “riot”, and how might this language have influenced public perceptions of the events?
• How might contemporary police relations have been improved if the Kerner Commission recommendations had been fully or differently implemented?
• Which aspects of the Ferguson Commission recommendations would most effectively address the issues and concerns raised in A Conversation with My Black Son?
• Which recommendations from the Ferguson Commission have been implemented? Which issues have yet to be tackled?
• What impact do you think the Ferguson Commission will have on police reform in the long term? Resources:
  o Report of the Kerner Commission
    http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6545/
  o Report of the Ferguson Commission
    https://forwardthroughferguson.org/

RESOURCES
POV: A Conversation with My Black Son
http://www.pbs.org/pov/myblackson/
The film’s official POV site includes a discussion guide with additional activity ideas and resources.

The New York Times: A Conversation on Race
The full series from the New York Times features conversations with Native Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans, among others.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films
http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

Independent Lens: American Denial
http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/american-denial/
This film follows the story of Swedish researcher Gunnar Myrdal whose landmark 1944 study, An American Dilemma, probed deep into the U.S. racial psyche. The film
weaves a narrative that exposes some of the potential underlying causes of racial biases still rooted in America’s systems and institutions today.

_The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness_
http://newjimcrow.com/
This recent book by Michelle Alexander has a companion website offering a wide range of educational resources.

_PBS: Africans in America_
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html
_Africans in America_ is a six-hour public television series chronicling the history of racial slavery in the United States from the start of the Atlantic slave trade in the 16th century to the end of the American Civil War in 1865.

_PBS: Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise_
http://www.pbs.org/show/black-america-mlk-and-still-i-rise/
This four-hour series by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. follows African-American history from the Civil Rights era through today.

_PBS: The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow_
https://whyy.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/jcr10/#.WpgSs5PwY3E
Educational resources are provided in conjunction with a four-part PBS series exploring segregation from the end of the Civil War to the dawn of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

**STANDARDS**

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and task.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and evidence and to add interest.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and evidence and to add interest.

Content Knowledge: a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).
• Language Arts Standard 4. Gathers and uses information for research purposes.
• Language Arts Standard 8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
• Language Arts Standard 9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.
• Thinking and Reasoning Standard 1. Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument.
• Thinking and Reasoning, Standard 3. Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Allison Milewski has developed media education resources for a range of award-winning filmmakers and national media organizations, including PBS LearningMedia, Independent Television Service (ITVS), Latino Public Broadcasting, HBO Documentaries and Tribeca Film Institute. She is also the founder of the international media education program, PhotoForward.org.
A Conversation with My Black Son
Student Handout A: Viewing Notes

STUDENT NAME______________________________

Instructions: Watch the film clips and make notes in response to the following questions. In the box, record at least two follow-up questions that you would like to discuss further after watching the film.

1. How do the parents describe the police force? What words, phrases and quotes illustrate their perceptions of police? (Record as many examples as you can.)

2. What personal encounters have the parents had with the police? (Record as many examples as you can.)

3. What advice do the parents give their sons? (Record as many examples as you can.)

Follow-up questions:

1. 

2. 
Instructions: Use the following questions to guide a group discussion about *A Conversation with My Black Son*.

1. Why do the parents in the film believe it’s necessary to have “The Conversation” with their sons?

2. In the film, one parent states, “If you’re Caucasian, when something goes wrong, your first line of defense is to go to the police.” Do you agree? Why do these parents feel that their black children don’t have the same option?

3. Parents in the film explain their perspectives:
   “There’s an unspoken code of racism and white supremacy [in the police force] that says that my life does not matter.”
   “It doesn’t mean that every police officer is inherently a bad person, but what it does mean is that the police force, that institution, does not look out for your best interest.”
   • What evidence do the parents cite to illustrate the fact that their sons are at greater risk when they interact with the police?
   • What stories have you encountered in the news, around school, in books or in the media that relate to this issue? What events/stories/evidence have you encountered that reflect the parents’ perspective?
   • Have you heard arguments that conflict with the parents’ opinions? How would you summarize the opposing positions?

4. What concerns do the parents have about how the “The Conversation” will influence their sons’ self-esteem and how they see the world? How do the parents frame the conversation about racial profiling to address these concerns?

5. There are rules in the form of laws and constitutional rights that define what citizens and police can and cannot do when they encounter each other, yet the parents have conflicting opinions about how to behave during a police encounter. Why do you think that is?

6. One of the parents explains, “You can put your hands up and cooperate and say that ‘I’m choking’ and still be killed... then there’s no repercussions.” How does this illustrate the difficulty the parents face when defining the “right way” for black children to engage with police?

7. Have adults in your life had conversations with you about how to behave if you have an encounter with the police? If so, what advice were you given? How did it compare to the parents’ suggestions in the film?