



The Interrupters Discussion Guide

Director: Steve James

Year: 2011

Time: 127 min

You might know this director from:

Hoop Dreams (1994)

Stevie (2002)

Head Games (2012)

FILM SUMMARY

From acclaimed director Steve James, *THE INTERRUPTERS* is an intimate journey into the stubborn persistence of violence in our cities. It captures a period in Chicago when the city became a national symbol for urban violence due to numerous high-profile incidents, most notably the brutal beating of Derrion Albert, a Chicago high school student whose death was caught on videotape.

The film highlights the work of an innovative organization called CeaseFire. Founder and epidemiologist, Gary Slutkin, believes that the spread of violence mimics the spread of infectious diseases, and so the treatment should be similar: go after the most infected and stop the infection at its source. A cornerstone of the organization is developing Violence Interrupters, people have credibility on the streets due to their own personal histories, but who can also intervene in conflicts before they explode into violence.

THE INTERRUPTERS tells the moving and surprising stories of three Violence Interrupters—Ameena, Cobe, and Eddie— as they aim to protect their Chicago communities from the violence they once employed. Meanwhile, their own inspired journeys of hope and redemption are revealed. The film attempts to make sense of what CeaseFire’s Tio Hardiman calls, simply, “the madness.”

* This Discussion Guide was made in collaboration with the filmmakers of *THE INTERRUPTERS*.

FILM THEMES

THE INTERRUPTERS is an intimate look into the persistent violence that plagues our communities. The film does not just look at the negative effects of violence, but focuses on the complex nature of the issue, particularly highlighting the value of communication and mentorship within a community.

VIOLENCE IS AN INFECTIOUS EPIDEMIC

The film's main subjects work for an innovative organization called CeaseFire. It was founded by an epidemiologist, Gary Slutkin, who believes that the spread of violence mimics the spread of infectious diseases, and so the treatment should be similar: go after the most infected, and stop the infection at its source. From this perspective, violence is an epidemic disease that spreads within a community at a particular time. Urban violence in the U.S. is historically rooted in poverty and racial disparities. There is a culture of punishment, rather than prevention and early intervention.

SECOND CHANCES

Society is built around the idea of "second chances," and it is a fundamental principal of forgiving, accepting, and ultimately moving forward. It is difficult for a community to rebuild itself and grow if it doesn't allow people to become productive, contributive individuals. Those with ex-offender status often experience stigmas and other challenges as they re-enter society. What empowers people to change their lives is job readiness, employment placement, and supportive community resources that promote family and social stability.

COMMUNICATION AND MENTORSHIP

Communication between people is crucial for understanding and empathizing with others in any situation. Good communication strategies can transform outcomes and prevent conflict. It is essential for communities to raise up and support mentors who can serve as positive role models. In this film, Ameena, Cobe, and Eddie are powerful peacekeeping mentors who are trying to use their communication skills to resolve, reduce, and prevent conflicts.

HOPE AND REDEMPTION

Research proves that hopeful people are likely to be more motivated to initiate a task and are better equipped to envision the path to achieving positive goals. Despite the conflicts at hand, it is important that individuals can preserve their sense hope and redemption. Chicago's Violence Interrupters work to instill hope, confidence, self-worth, and redemption with both victims and perpetrators of violence in order to move forward and heal.

“I want people to realize that there’s a bigger thing that needs to be accomplished to save these communities than stopping violence, but that the power of the individual to effect change can be profound.”

Director Steve James

“What is true of the individual will be tomorrow true of the whole nation if individuals will but refuse to lose heart and hope.”

Gandhi

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What are your own experiences with urban violence? Has it touched your life personally, or someone you know? What impressions have these experiences left you with?
2. Do you think it's possible to reduce violence without addressing the social and economic conditions that breed it?
3. Restorative justice is a system of justice based not on punishment or legal principles, but on rehabilitating both victims and offenders in hopes of rebuilding trust in the community. What do you think of this concept? Are reconciliation and forgiveness necessary elements of a justice system?
4. Who do you think is best positioned to enforce restorative justice? Someone on the inside of violence, or someone on the outside?
5. How do you define "second chances", and why are they important? Have you ever been given a second chance in your life? Even a small one? If so, what did you do with this second chance? Did it alter your life in some way?
6. Consider the kind of support you need most from friends and family. What kinds of support services and resources do you think someone with ex-offender status needs in order to re-enter society and begin contributing in positive ways?
7. Which factors are helpful in preventing further conflict in neighborhoods and communities? What are some ways you have learned to deal with conflict in your own life?
8. How would you define mentorship? How would you define peacekeeping?
9. Have you ever had a mentor? If so, how did they make a difference in your life? If not, have you ever needed or desired a mentor, someone who could help you navigate the flux of life, whether personally or professionally?
10. What are your impressions of ex-offenders of violence? Do you think that people can change? Do you think it is difficult for ex-offenders to feel welcomed back into society?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- In 2009, 7.2 million Americans (3.1 percent of all adults) were under the jurisdiction of the U.S. correctional system, including 1.6 million Americans who were incarcerated in a state or federal prison.
- Of that population incarcerated in U.S. prisons, nearly 40 percent were black, even though black Americans make up only 13 percent of the American population.
- Black people are 6 times more likely to be in prison than white people, and 3 times as likely than hispanic people.
- Nationwide, the unemployment rate for black workers at 16.2% is almost double the 9.1% rate for the rest of the population. A stagnant economy, under-resourced communities and lack of opportunities are all factors. The failure to obtain work skills at an early age can be an economic disadvantage for a lifetime.
- In Los Angeles, 67% of low-performing schools are in neighborhoods with the highest incarceration rates, while 68% of the city's high-performing schools are in neighborhoods with the lowest incarceration rates.
- In 2003, the youth population made up 65% of the secure detention population.
- According to the Children's Defense Fund, incarceration rates have climbed so high that more young black men have spent time in prison than have earned college degrees.
- For 25 years, homicide has been the leading cause of death among black males between the ages of 15 and 34, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which has analyzed data up to 2005.
- A 2001 study showed that only 11% of Hispanics own guns, compared to 16% of blacks and 27% of whites. Yet Hispanics are murdered with firearms at rates second only to blacks.
- According to a Pew survey, 57% of white people say that state and local governments should not be allowed to pass laws prohibiting handguns, while a majority of black and Hispanic people say that lawmakers should be allowed to pass these laws. Moreover, 67% of Hispanics and 64% of blacks say that controlling gun ownership is more important than protecting gun rights, compared to 39% of whites.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to learn about the spread of violence and how it can be stopped.
2. Donate to THE INTERRUPTERS [outreach campaign](#), and if you think the film sheds new light and nuance on the issue of violence then consider purchasing a copy for your local school, or community center.
3. Get informed. An informed citizenry is an empowered citizenry. When you encounter a sensational or simplistic story about violence in the media consider challenging that narrative in a letter to the editor.
4. Advocate for change. Contact your city, state, and national community leaders when decisions are being made and suggest prevention over prosecution based solutions to violence like the [Youth PROMISE Act](#).

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.