



## The Central Park Five Discussion Guide

Directors: Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, David McMahon  
Year: 2012  
Time: 119 min

### You might know these directors from:

Baseball (1994-2010)  
The War (2007)  
Jazz (2001)  
The Civil War (1990)

## FILM SUMMARY

On the night of April 19, 1989, a rowdy gang of teens entered New York City's Central Park with the intention of assaulting strangers for fun, or "wilding" as it was later termed in the media. Among the various violent incidents in the park that evening, a 28-year-old jogger named Trisha Ellen Meili was brutally beaten, raped and left for dead. The attack yielded the full attention of a police taskforce who subsequently brought in several black and Latino teenagers from the area and pressured them into confessing to the viscous acts. With pressured coaching from their interrogators, Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Raymond Santana, Kharey Wise and Yusef Salaam - all minors at the time - officially implicated one another in the attack and rape of Meili, despite the fact that none of them took part, nor even saw the crime take place.

With confessions in hand, the prosecutors ran with case and condemned the young men to prison after arduous deliberation and public outcry, due to the mainstream media's decision to print the names, photos, and addresses of the juvenile suspects, despite the lack of DNA evidence or corroborating testimony. In 2002, a convicted rapist and murderer named Matias Reyes confessed that the attack on Meili was in fact of his doing, and DNA evidence confirmed his claim, finally vindicating the accused.

With these facts in mind, THE CENTRAL PARK FIVE seeks to put the facts in order, exonerating the men whose lives were derailed by politically motivated indictments and race baiting media. Originally silenced by shame and public outcry, these men are finally given a voice to speak of their experience, imparting a harrowing word of warning that remains all too relevant in a world still aching with the pains of racial profiling and police prejudice.

## FILM THEMES

THE CENTRAL PARK FIVE looks at the racial injustices that festered within the network of judicial exploitation and media exacerbation that the Central Park Jogger case ultimately became.

### **BAD JOURNALISM IS BAD**

In this case, there was a distinct lack of journalistic skepticism one should expect national news outlets. As a rule of thumb, a journalist's job is to make it harder for everyone else to do their's without morals. Instead, newspapers and television stations acted as tabloids, race-baiting for the sake of continuous fear driven news stories and political power plays that fail to help inform the public of the facts, only stirring the already simmering pot of racial tension that seems to consistently thwart cultural progress.

### **SOCIETAL VICTIMIZATION**

Whether it be the assaulted Central Park jogger herself, the five teens put unjustly behind bars, the public who feared for their lives in the wake of news that heralded terrifying crime waves, or even the police who attempted to do their jobs under immense political pressure, this is a case in which nearly everyone is a victim. For all the effort, money and time spent on this case, neither justice nor piece of mind was achieved.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY HAS BEEN ACCREDITED TO THE POWERLESS**

In this case, the accused were of low-income, uneducated families from Harlem, some of whom suffered from addiction or mental illness. Parents sat in with their children while they submitted false confessions on camera in front of several officers. This is a situation where the police, and subsequently the media, took advantage of people who did not know their rights as citizens and used it to hold them accountable. These kids were blindsided by ignorance on one side and arrogance on the other.

### **WHEN BLINDED BY POWER AND FEAR, TRUTH CAN GET LOST**

Despite finally being vindicated, each of these five men lost a significant amount of their youth, not to mention public reputation, professional potential and much more. No matter how sorry people feel for them or how much money they receive as retribution, they can never get back the time lost unjustly locked away in jail. The judicial system needs to remember that finding the truth is more important than serving a quick conviction, as it holds the power to ruin lives as well as serve justice.

**“We cannot have a just society that applies the principle of accountability to the powerless and the principle of forgiveness to the powerful. This is the America in which we currently reside.”**

Chris Hayes, MSNBC

**“To worry that the state had arrested the wrong people was called knee-jerk and Afrocentric; it was heard as an indictment of the victim, as siding with race over gender, rather than as a concern that the real perpetrator might still be loose.”**

Patricia J. Williams, *The Nation*

**FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:**

1. Do you remember this case happening back in 1989? If so, did you believe these men were guilty? Did reading the news cause you anxiety or fear? If you do not remember this case, can you think of anything happening in the world today that brings up similar thoughts and emotions for you?
2. Have you been a victim of ‘wilding’? Do you know anyone who has?
3. The teenagers’ parents allowed them to go ahead with falsified confessions– do you think they were trapped by their circumstances? What do you think you would have done if you were in their position?
4. Do you believe that detectives often believe false confessions or feel alright about convicting them regardless if it means they can close their case?
5. Do you think race relations played a large part in the outcome of this case? Do you think similar issues are going on within the judicial system today?
6. New York City took it upon itself to subpoena the filmmakers for material regarding the case. How did this strike you?
7. How do you think you would react if someone accused you of a crime you did not commit? Can you imagine how your life would change if you were wrongfully convicted?
8. Do you think that fear inducing stories are played up in the media for attention or are they mostly the tragic results of the day to day routine? How about in relation to this case?
9. Do you think the unjustly convicted should be compensated for having a large portion of their lives taken away from them? If so, how?
10. Have you ever been on a jury? If so, how did it make you feel? Did you feel you were given enough information to make a responsible decision?

**NOTES:**

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## FILM FACTS:

- In April 2003, Meili confirmed her identity to the media, published a memoir entitled *I Am the Central Park Jogger*, and began a career as an inspirational speaker.
- On September 5, 2014, a federal judge finally approved a settlement that sees that Santana, Salaam, McCray, and Richardson will each receive \$7.1 million for their years in prison, while Wise will receive \$12.2 million. The city did not admit to any wrongdoing in the settlement.
- According to New York State Compensation Law, “If the wrongfully convicted person ‘did not by his own conduct cause or bring about his conviction’ and files a claim within two years of his pardon of innocence, he shall receive “damages in such sum of money as the court determines will fairly and reasonably compensate him.”
- THE CENTRAL PARK FIVE won a number of awards after its initial release, including a Peabody Award, the National Board of Review Freedom of Expression Award, and the NYFCC Award for Best Non-Fiction Film.
- In 2002, after being released, Wise changed his first name from Kharey to Korey, stating that he no longer wanted to be associated with all the negative documents that carry his old name.
- According to New York State police reports, reported crimes have gone down 71% since 1990.
- On September 12, 2012, attorneys for New York City subpoenaed Ken Burns and his production company for access to the original footage in connection with its defense of the federal lawsuit brought by some of the convicted youths against the city.
- Sarah Burns, the daughter of Ken Burns, attended Yale, majoring in American Studies with a concentration in race. After graduating, she then spent two years working as a paralegal before writing “The Central Park Five: The Untold Story Behind One of New York City’s Most Infamous Crimes”, a book published in advance of the film that delves into the Central Park jogger case even deeper.
- Elizabeth Lederer, the lead prosecutor of the botched case remains an active prosecutor in the New York County District Attorney’s Office and also teaches law at Columbia University.
- Matias Reyes only came forward about the crime after meeting Kharey Wise in prison by chance, subsequently realizing that he was actually guilty of the crimes Wise and his co-defendants were convicted of.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Consider hosting a screening followed by a discussion.
2. **Contribute** to organizations like the [Innocent Project](#) to help those seeking exoneration.
3. **Donate** to the [Central Park Conservancy](#), the current caretakers of the park, to help keep all 843 acres of New York City’s Central Park safe and beautiful.
4. **Know** your rights. You never know when you might need to protect yourself.
5. **Remember** - if you are ever called to serve as a juror on a court case - the person accused of the crime is in your hands and deserves to be judged justly - for the facts at hand, not the color of their skin.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

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.**