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ABOUT THE FILM

During one weekend in 2008, 37 people were shot in Chicago, seven of them fatally. It was the year Chicago became the emblem of America’s inner-city violence and gang problem.

The Interrupters is the moving story of three dedicated “violence interrupters”—Ameena Matthews, Cobe Williams and Eddie Bocanegra—who, with bravado, humility and even humor, work to protect their Chicago communities from the violence they themselves once employed. Their work and their insights are informed by their own journeys, which, as each of them points out, defy easy characterization.

From acclaimed producer-director Steve James (Hoop Dreams) and best-selling author-turned-producer Alex Kotlowitz (There Are No Children Here), The Interrupters is an unusually intimate journey into the stubborn persistence of violence in our cities. The New York Times says the film “has put a face to a raging epidemic and an unforgivable American tragedy.”

The “violence interrupters” work for CeaseFire, the brainchild of Gary Slutkin, an epidemiologist who for 10 years battled the spread of cholera and AIDS in Africa. Slutkin believes that the spread of violence mimics that of infectious diseases, and so the treatment should be similar: Go after the most infected, and stop the infection at its source. In 2004, CeaseFire’s Tio Hardiman created the Violence Interrupters program which hires individuals who because of their pasts have respect on the streets.

Shot over the course of a year out of Kartemquin Films in Chicago, The Interrupters follows Ameena, Eddie and Cobe as they attempt to intervene in situations before those situations turn violent: two brothers threatening to shoot each other; an angry teenage girl just home from prison; a young man heading down a warpath of revenge. The film captures not only the interrupters’ work, but reveals their own inspired journeys from crime to hope and, ultimately, redemption. As they venture into their communities, they confront the destructive cycle of poverty, incarceration and joblessness -- and reveal the importance of economic opportunity, community cohesion and family ties.

Ultimately, this is a story of the power we all possess to make a positive difference in our community.
HOW TO USE THE FILM AND COMMUNITY RESOURCE GUIDE

Educators, community organizers, faith-based leaders, policy makers and parents can use The Interrupters to engage audiences and communities – young people in particular - in reflection and discussion around the issues in the film. Whether you use excerpts or the entire film, your screening can be a springboard for dialogue or the centerpiece of a strategic community action plan. While there are many ways to use the film, most organizations will use a screening to:

- Highlight successful examples of local violence prevention efforts
- Help audiences explore the historical context and root causes of urban violence
- Brainstorm creative approaches for interrupting the cycle of retaliatory violence
- Encourage young people to reflect on the choices they make and their role as change-agents in their communities

“YOUTH VIOLENCE IS NOT A CHICAGO PROBLEM. IT IS SOMETHING THAT AFFECTS COMMUNITIES BIG AND SMALL, AND PEOPLE OF ALL RACES AND ALL COLORS. IT IS AN AMERICAN PROBLEM.”

– Eric Holder, U.S. Attorney General

The film has already been used to spur dialogue and action in communities across the country. The screenings have brought together a wide array of people working within public health, law enforcement, education, juvenile justice reform, economic development, re-entry programs and job training, all themes that are reflected in the film. The most successful events tend to involve a cross-section of the community; from policymakers and police officers to community organizers, artists and young people embroiled in conflict.

We encourage you to use this Community Resource Guide as a tool to help you craft events using the stories in the film. We have included discussion questions, background reading, resource organizations, sample exercises and practical ways to take action. We hope that these resources help you to develop productive and meaningful events, build relationships with new organizations, and engage those directly impacted by violence and those eager to make a difference.
CHARACTER PROFILES

Ameena Matthews – Mother, Wife, Violence Interrupter
Ameena, daughter of Jeff Fort, one of Chicago’s most notorious gang leaders, was herself a drug ring enforcer. But having children and finding solace in her Muslim faith pulled her off the streets and grounded her. In the wake of Derrion Albert’s death, Ameena becomes a close confidante to his mother, and helps her through her grieving. Ameena, who is known among her colleagues for her fearlessness, befriends a feisty teenaged girl who reminds her of herself at that age. The film follows that friendship over the course of many months, as Ameena tries to nudge the troubled girl in the right direction.

Cobe Williams – Husband, Father and Violence Interrupter
Scarred by his father’s murder, Cobe was in and out of prison, until he had had enough. His family – particularly a young son – helped him find his footing. Cobe disarms others with his humor and his general good nature. His most challenging moment comes when he has to confront a man so bent on revenge that Cobe has to pat him down to make sure he’s put away his gun. Like the other Interrupters, he gets deeply involved in the lives of those he encounters, including a teenaged boy just out of prison and a pair of brothers who are in rival gangs. During the course of filming Cobe mediated 50 conflicts, more than any other interrupter had ever accomplished.

Eddie Bocanegra – Art Teacher and Violence Interrupter
Haunted by a murder he committed when he was seventeen, Eddie views his work with CeaseFire work as a part of his repentance for his past actions. Eddie is most deeply disturbed by the aftereffects of the violence on children, and so he spends much of his time working with younger kids in an effort to both keep them off the streets and to get support to those who need it – including a 16-year-old girl whose brother died in her arms. Soulful and empathic, Eddie, who learned to paint in prison, teaches art to children, trying to warn them of the debilitating trauma experienced by those touched by the violence.
LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR DIALOGUE

The Interrupters takes viewers inside a city plagued by violence and uncovers the social conditions that breed violence. These conditions – poverty, underemployment, poor education, broken families, and over-incarceration - were not created overnight, but are the results of government policies, law enforcement trends, and economic priorities that date back decades.

RESOURCES

Below you will find a list of resources – essays, reports and videos - to help you explore the root causes to violence and the disproportionate impact of violence on communities of color. By reviewing these resources as you plan your event you can better place the film, and your conversations about the film, within historical and political context.

America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline Report

The Children’s Defense Fund, a premiere child advocacy organization founded by Dr. Marian Wright Edelman, developed this report to document America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline, an urgent national crisis at the intersection of poverty and race that puts Black boys at a one in three lifetime risk of going to jail, and Latino boys at a one in six lifetime risk of the same fate.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Online resources from the CDC’s national program to reduce violence that include fact sheets, reports on bullying and gang activity.

Drug War Racism Lecture by Michelle Alexander

This video features a speech by litigator-turned-legal-scholar Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow. Her provocative book challenges the civil rights community—and all of us—to place mass incarceration at the forefront of a new movement for racial justice in America. As the United States celebrates the nation’s triumph over race with the election of Barack Obama, the majority of young black men in major American cities are locked behind bars or have been labeled felons for life. Event at Demos February 18, 2010.

History Is A Weapon

An online anthology of readings that offer a critical analysis of U.S. history.

The Black Youth Project

The Black Youth Project (BYP) began in 2005 as a national research project exploring the attitudes of black youth ages 15-25 that has developed into a multi-dimensional organization focused on promoting the voices of black youth, providing them with culturally relevant information and news, and facilitating their political and civic participation. At the center of their work is a website which functions as a cyber-resource center for black youth and all those who are committed to enriching the lives of black youth. Visitors can access research summaries, read blogs about and by black youth, search an extensive rap database, access black youth social justice organizations, and download social justice curricula to teach.

“THESE CHILDREN DON’T EXPECT TO LIVE PAST THIRTY. THEY COME TO THESE FUNERALS, AND I WATCH THEM AND THEY PUT THEMSELVES IN THE PLACE OF THE PERSON IN THE CASKET.”

- Spencer Leak, Funeral Home Director
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The questions below can be used to spark conversations after a film screening among your membership, students, staff, community or family. Consider the goals for your event, the audience, the length of your event, and your comfort level as a facilitator when choosing discussion questions.

Violence in our Communities

- Violence in mainstream films, television shows, news programming, video games, music and YouTube videos has become increasingly graphic and prevalent over the last two decades. Do you think the consumption of violent imagery desensitizes people to violence in their public and private lives? Is the entertainment industry creating more violent content or simply reflecting an increasingly violent American culture?

- Many of the Interrupters and the people they help trace their descent into criminal behavior at least in part to their problematic or absent relationships with their fathers. Why do you think the father-child relationship is such a prevalent factor in this issue? How can our communities support young people who lack positive male role models?

- Ameena’s confession of physical and sexual abuse shows that abused and neglected children often fall into circumstances that lead them into crime, creating a thin line between perpetrator and victim of violence. What would it look like to shift our public policies and aim funding to prevent future perpetrators of violence, instead of simply prosecuting them once a violent act has been committed?

- Eddie Bocanegra talked about the tense relationship between police and his community. Studies show that Latinos, both documented and undocumented, are reluctant to report crimes for fear of exposing their immigration status, or of being discriminated against, or out of a distrust of authorities based on experiences from their home countries. How do these cultural factors contribute to violence in Latino neighborhoods?

- Talk about a time you witnessed an act of violence. How did it make you feel? How did you react? Did your presence make a difference in escalating or deescalating the conflict? What could you have done differently to change the outcome? How should one decide when and how to intervene?

The Role of Violence Interrupters

- The Violence Interrupters leverage mediation skills, cultural knowledge and street credibility to gain the respect and confidence of people in conflict. Could someone with mediation training but without a similar background and experience be as effective as the Interrupters?

- What unique role can women play in conflict mediation?

- For Cobe, Ameena and Eddie, being an Interrupter is about more than just stopping fights; it is about interrupting the status quo and making a positive difference in their community. What does being an Interrupter mean to you? In what ways have you acted as an Interrupter in your community?

“LOOK, THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY AND THE LATINO COMMUNITY HAVE BEEN BEATEN DOWN SO LONG WITH POOR SCHOOLS, LACK OF JOBS, HOPELESSNESS, DESPAIR. A LOT OF PEOPLE CAN’T STICK WITH PEACE IF THEY DON’T HAVE A STICK THAT THEY CAN HOLD ON TO.”

– Tio Hardiman, Creator of Interrupters Program, CeaseFire
Finding Solutions

• Consider this quote from an article in the **Chicago Reporter**:
  “Community members, youth advocates and youth themselves consistently say that it is nearly impossible to curb youth violence without addressing the underlying social conditions: extreme racial and economic segregation, a lack of job opportunities, limited access to higher education, violence-plagued and under-funded public schools, broken families and a general feeling of hopelessness and marginalization among many Chicago residents.” Is it possible to reduce violence without addressing the social and economic conditions that breed it?

“WE NEED TO HONOR AND RESPECT OUR CHILDREN. WE CAN’T JUST THROW ‘EM OUT THERE AND THROW ‘EM AWAY.”

-Madea, Ameena Matthews’ grandmother

• In the film the Violence Interrupters discuss the delicate balance of sometimes threatening violence to prevent violence and withholding information from law enforcement in order to gain the confidence of the people they are trying to help – actions that could be considered criminal offenses. Should groups like these be allowed to operate above the law for the greater good of the community? Why or why not?

• Former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger noted in his 2010 State of the State address: “Spending 45 percent more on prisons than universities is no way to proceed into the future. ... What does it say about any state that focuses more on prison uniforms than on caps and gowns?” These statistics are mirrored in many states across the nation. Do you see a relationship between underfunded public schools and violence? What do these numbers say about our priorities as a society?

• Mikey’s story illustrates an approach to justice that emphasizes reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of violent crimes known as “restorative justice”. Do you think reconciliation and forgiveness is a necessary step to rehabilitate violent offenders and rebuild trust in the community? Who is best positioned to enforce restorative justice – the courts, clergy or community-based organizations like CeaseFire?

• According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention a firearm kills a child or teen nearly every three hours, but black teenaged males are nearly four times as likely as their white peers to die from a firearms injury and are six times as likely to be homicide victims. With African Americans and Latinos suffering at a disproportionate rate from gun violence, should the leadership and solutions come from within those communities? Might that encourage others to dismiss urban violence as a black and brown problem?
5 THINGS YOU CAN DO TODAY

The causes of violence are complex, and while there is no “quick fix” to the problem there are clear ways that you can make a difference. This list offers a range of options for those with limited time and resources to others who can make a larger commitment.

1. **GET INFORMED**
   An informed citizenry is an empowered citizenry. Review the list of pre-viewing resources and inform yourself about the issue. When you encounter a sensational or simplistic story about violence in the media consider challenging that narrative in a letter to the editor.

2. **DONATE THE FILM**
   If you think the film sheds new light and nuance on the issue of violence then consider purchasing a copy for your local school, community center or place of worship.

3. **SUPPORT A VIOLENCE PREVENTION ORGANIZATION**
   The organizations in the next section represent some of the best and brightest minds committed to ending violence from the US Dream Academy to CeaseFire. Familiarize yourself with their work and consider making a donation to support their important efforts.

4. **ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE**
   Many of the root causes of violence – lack of job opportunities, cuts to afterschool programs and mental health support, weak gun laws, over-zealous policing in poor communities - are directly influenced by legislation. Contact your city, state, and national community leaders when decisions are being made and suggest prevention over prosecution-based solutions to violence.

5. **MENTOR A YOUNG PERSON**
   We can’t all be as charismatic as Ameena, but we can make a difference a young person’s life by becoming a giving our time and attention as a mentor. There are many excellent programs across the country, or you can contact Big Brothers Big Sisters for local mentorship opportunities.

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**USEFUL STATISTICS**

- In 2009, 7.2 million Americans—or 3.1 percent of all adults—were under the jurisdiction of the US corrections system, including 1.6 million Americans incarcerated in a state or federal prison. Of that population, nearly 40 percent were black, even though blacks make up only 13 percent of the American population. Blacks were six times as likely to be in prison as whites, and three times as likely as Hispanics.

- Nationwide, the unemployment rate for black workers at 16.2 percent is almost double the 9.1 percent rate for the rest of the population. And it’s twice the 8 percent white jobless rate. A stagnant economy, under-resourced communities and lack of opportunities are all factors. Not getting work skills at an early age can be an economic disadvantage for a lifetime.

- In Los Angeles, 67 percent of low-performing schools are in neighborhoods with the highest incarceration rates. By contrast, 68 percent of the city’s high-performing schools are in neighborhoods with the lowest incarceration rates.

- In 2003, 38% of the U.S. youth population was made up of youth of color. Yet youth of color made up 65% of the secure detention population.

- According to the Children’s Defense Fund, incarceration rates have climbed so high that more young African American men have spent time in prison than have earned college degrees.

- For twenty-five years, homicide has been the leading cause of death among Black males 15–34, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has analyzed data up to 2005.

- A 2001 study ([http://www.vpc.org/press/0105hisp.htm](http://www.vpc.org/press/0105hisp.htm)) showed that only 11 percent of Hispanics own guns, compared to 16 percent of blacks and 27 percent of whites. Yet Hispanics are murdered with firearms at rates second only to blacks.

- According to a Pew survey, 57% of whites say state and local governments should not be allowed to pass laws prohibiting handguns, while a majority of African-Americans and Hispanics say 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.
RESOURCE ORGANIZATIONS

The following list represents the range of national and local organizations committed to ending violence and the root causes that breed it. Review the list and consider joining their membership, subscribing to their advocacy alerts, or inviting a representative to your screening event.

Advancement Project

The Urban Peace program at Advancement Project reduces and prevents community violence, making poor neighborhoods safer so that children can learn, families can thrive and communities can prosper.

ASPIRA

ASPIRA works at the grassroots level to provide programs that encourage Hispanic students to stay in school, prepare them to succeed in the educational arena, develop their leadership skills, and to serve their community.

Boys and Girls Clubs of America

Inspiring and enabling all young people to realize their full potential as productive, responsible, and caring citizens.

Brady Campaign

The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence works to pass and enforce sensible federal and state gun laws, regulations, and public policies through grassroots activism, electing public officials who support common sense gun laws, and increasing public awareness of gun violence. The website features a space to honor those lost to gun violence.

Enlace Chicago

This Chicago-based organization is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of the residents of the Little Village Community by fostering a physically safe and healthy environment in which to live and by championing opportunities for educational advancement and economic development.

EveryBlock

EveryBlock is the best way to follow neighborhood news and connect with your neighbors in 16 U.S. cities. EveryBlock is a combination of many different types of local news — from public records like crime reports, to neighbor discussions, to civic information.

NAACP

The nation’s oldest and largest civil rights organization committed to ensuring the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination.

National Urban League

The National Urban League is a historic civil rights organization dedicated to economic empowerment in order to elevate the standard of living in historically underserved urban communities. The Urban League works on a number of issues including workforce development, health and quality of life and education and youth.

Project NIA

Project NIA is an advocacy, organizing, popular education, research, and capacity-building center with the long-term goal of ending youth incarceration.
MAGIC Chicago
Metropolitan Area Group for Igniting Civilization, Inc. (MAGIC) is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit community based organization whose mission is to ensure that all residents have access to information and resources that create opportunities and power for them as a collective.

National Council of La Raza
The National Council of La Raza (NCLR), a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, is the largest national Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. NCLR offers a variety of resources to educate the public and the Latino community about important issues.

STRYVE
STRYVE is a national initiative, led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which takes a public health approach to preventing youth violence before it starts. It features a rich database that provides communities with the knowledge and resources to be successful in preventing youth violence.

UNITY
This website provides information on and resources from the Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY). UNITY is designed to strengthen and support cities in preventing violence before it occurs and to help sustain these efforts. Information on this site includes guidance on fostering effective communication, prevention effort strategies, city perspectives, prevention partnerships, tools, and data and evaluation.

U.S. Dream Academy
Empowers children who are at risk of incarceration to maximize their potential by providing them with academic, social and values enrichment though supportive mentoring and the use of technology.

W. Haywood Burns Institute
The Burns Institute is a leading organization in the field of juvenile justice and ethnic and racial disparities reduction, which helps to protect and improve the lives of youth of color and poor youth by promoting and ensuring fairness and equity in youth-serving systems across the country.

“WE GOT A RESPONSIBILITY TO BRING UP OUR COMMUNITY TO BE VIBRANT. WHATEVER IT IS THAT’S GOING ON, CEASE THE FIRE, CALL A TRUCE.”

– Ameena Matthews, CeaseFire
ABOUT KARTEMQUIN

Kartemquin Films is a home for independent filmmakers developing documentary as a vehicle to deepen our understanding of society through everyday human drama. Focusing on people whose lives are most directly affected by social and political change and who are often overlooked or misrepresented by the media, Kartemquin’s films open up a dialogue, both in communities and between the general public and policymakers.

Kartemquin documentaries are supported by civic engagement strategies that are developed with local and national partners to foster understanding, change thinking, and build support for social change. As a locally and nationally-recognized media arts organization, Kartemquin acts as a trusted bridge between communities and the media, fosters the growth of emerging filmmaking voices passionate about social issues and media policy, and encourages staff and stakeholders to play a role in advocating for a strong public media. Visit Kartemquin at http://kartemquin.com/

Contact Us

To learn more about the The Interrupters’ Community Engagement Campaign please visit: www.theinterrupters.com.

To learn more about The Interrupters’ interactive website featuring live chats, short webisodes and an online space for shrines to those lost in violence, please visit: http://interruptviolence.com/.

You can also friend us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

http://www.facebook.com/ Interrupters

http://twitter.com/#!/theinterrupters

To contact us please email interrupters@kartemquin.com
If you are interested in hosting a community/outreach screening of the film, please email Graham Swindoll at gswindoll@cinemaguild.com. Click here if you are a school or university interested in an educational DVD for classroom use.

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