

THE CENTRAL PARK FIVE

A FILM BY KEN BURNS & DAVID MCMAHON & SARAH BURNS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

This guide was developed for high school and college students as well as general audiences. The audience can view the documentary in its entirety and then address the questions, or they can view the program in segments following the approximate introduction and exit times. For high school teachers, many of the culminating questions can be used in debates or essay-writing activities.

NOTE TO TEACHERS: At times, some of the discussions might become controversial as different perspectives are aired. Sensitivity to individual opinions and perspectives is important. For ideas and guidance, refer to the [Discussing Controversial Issues](#) handout.

Teachers are strongly advised to first review the film, materials, and related resources to make sure they are appropriate for their students.

BEFORE YOU VIEW

Tell your audience they are about to watch a film that chronicles the arrest, conviction, and eventual exoneration of five New York City youths caught up in the swirling issues of race, tabloid media, and seemingly uncontrolled crime during the late 1980s. Ask your audience whether they remember the high crime problems in many American cities during this time. Do they remember the circumstances surrounding the Central Park Five case? Have they heard of similar cases in the past or more recent times?

While they view, ask your audience to consider issues such as how the backdrop of high crime, tense race relations, and sensational media coverage played a role in the arrest of the five youths, the actions of the police and prosecutors, the impact of a videotaped confession, and the difficulty in turning public sentiment even when a conviction is overturned.

SECTION 1: The City/The Crime

Video cue: Start of film through Raymond Santana: *“don’t say nothing; it’s taken care of”* (approximately 36:49).

Synopsis: New York City in the late 1980s is a city beset by violence and deepening rifts between races and classes on account of tense race relations, intense poverty, and high crime. On April 20, 1989, the body of a woman barely clinging to life is discovered in Central Park. Within days, Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Raymond Santana, Korey Wise, and Yusef Salaam confess to her rape and beating after many hours of aggressive interrogation at the hands of seasoned homicide detectives.

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. Think back to the news clips shown at the beginning of the film and the comments made about New York City. Quickly brainstorm what you saw and heard, then compose a one- or two-sentence statement that describes New York City in the 1980s. What seems to be on most people's mind about New York City at this time?
2. Review the Central Park Five's description of their home lives. Overall, how do their backgrounds compare with the descriptions of living in New York City in question one?
3. Summarize the views of several long-time New Yorkers when they describe the city in the late 1980s. What factors do they attribute to this condition? How do people in the city seem to cope with the problems? Why was coping especially difficult for some residents once crack cocaine entered the community?
4. Why do you think New York City's officials have such a difficult time making the city a safer and better place to live? If you were a city official, what reforms or changes would you make?
5. For what reason did members of the Central Park Five go to the park on the night of April 19, 1989? In their own words, how involved do they seem to be with the large group's actions in the park? What is your feeling about their involvement in the larger group of teenagers who attacked the two joggers, the bicyclists, and the homeless man? What evidence gives you this impression?

SECTION 2: Public Reaction, Media Frenzy, and False Confessions

Video cue: Jim Dwyer: *"In those days, there were probably six murders a day"* (approximately 36:51) through Saul Kassin *"...confessions are irresistibly persuasive and almost the effects can't be reversed"* (approximately 1:10:43).

Synopsis: The police announce to a press hungry for sensational crime stories that the young men have been part of a gang of teenagers who were out "wilding," assaulting joggers and bicyclists in Central Park that evening. The ensuing media frenzy is met with a public outcry for justice.

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how the circumstance of a white woman allegedly attacked by black and Hispanic teenagers played into the existing fears and prejudices of New Yorkers at the time.

2. Why was the successful prosecution of this case so important to the New York Police Department at this time in 1989? What was at stake for New York City's criminal justice system?
3. Why did the police and prosecutors feel so confident that they had the perpetrators and that conviction was guaranteed?
4. Discuss the different reactions within the African American community. Did many blacks see this case differently than whites? How so? How did they see it in similar terms? Explain why many saw similarities to other infamous cases such as Emmett Till, the Scottsboro Boys, and lynchings of the early 1900s. Explain whether you feel this comparison is fair.
5. Review the following terms used by the media in reporting about the case:
 - Characterizing the suspects: "Wilding," "Rampaging in Wolf Packs," "Wolf Pack's Prey"
 - Characterizing the victim: "Lived a Dream Life," "Golden Girl," "Female Jogger near Death after Savage Attack by Roving Gang"
 - Characterizing the crime: "Central Park Horror," "Nightmare in Central Park," "Wolf Pack Ignored Her Cries, Called It Fun"

Discuss whether using such terms to refer to the suspects, the victim, and the crime itself represent objective news reporting or editorializing. Why do you think the media chose to use these terms? What kinds of conclusions does the public draw from such terms? Do you feel the media coverage further fueled the public's anger over the crime?

6. Initially, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, and three other teenagers were taken to the Central Park Precinct on the night of April 19, 1989, for unlawful assembly. They were told they would be given a ticket to family court and sent home. Upon hearing that a woman had been raped and beaten in Central Park, however, the police began to aggressively question the teens with accusations of their involvement. Why do you think the police believed these boys were involved? Do you feel the police were out of line or just doing their job and following the investigation?
7. The decision in *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) states that "The person in custody must, prior to interrogation, be clearly informed that he has the right to remain silent, and that anything he says will be used against him in court; he must be clearly informed that he has the right to consult with a lawyer and to have the lawyer with him during interrogation, and that, if he is indigent, a lawyer will be appointed to represent him."

Do you think the Central Park Five were aware of and understood their rights? What rights and protections should people being interrogated have?

8. After hours of confrontational questioning, the boys began to break down. The police played them against each other, and suggested that if they cooperated they would be able to go home. Do you think these tactics were ethical on the part of the police? Why or why not? Does it matter that the boys facing such aggressive interrogation tactics were between the ages of 14 and 15? Do you feel they were interrogated fairly?
9. Review the section of the videotaped statements conducted by Elizabeth Lederer (approximately 40:25–48:54). Were their rights honored? Did it matter at that point? Does the fact that the teenagers still believed they were going home for cooperating have any bearing on your conclusions about how the videotaped statements were conducted? Explain your answer.

SECTION 3: Trial and Conviction

Video cue: “Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam, and Raymond Santana were tried first, in June of 1990” (approximately 1:10:45) through “In 1998, Raymond Santana was arrested for dealing drugs. As a prior felon, he was sent back to prison for 3 ½ to 7 years, longer than if it had been his first offense” (approximately 1:37:41).

Synopsis: The young men are tried as adults and convicted of rape, despite inconsistent and inaccurate confessions, DNA evidence that excludes them, and no eyewitness accounts that connect any of them to the victim.

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. Assess the press coverage, the taped confessions, the mood of the public, and the qualifications of the defense team as the trial of Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam, and Raymond Santana opened.
2. Did the suspects’ economic and social status have any bearing on their legal defense and how they were perceived by the jury?
3. During the trial, different groups of protesters gathered outside the courthouse. Examine the motives of each group of protesters. What was the message each of these groups were trying to send? What was each side trying to accomplish? Were their messages similar in any way?
4. If you were to experience a trial like this in your community, and you knew as much as the public in New York knew at the time, which side would you be on and why?

5. Examine Trisha Meili's (the victim's) day in court. What impact did her presence in the courtroom have on the jury, the public, and the fate of the young men on trial?
6. During the trial, the defense lawyers' strategy was to attack the credibility of the confessions and the methods the police used to get them. They did not offer the alibi defense. Discuss which strategy you think would have been most effective with the jury and why. Why do you think the defense teams chose to focus on the confessions and not the timeline of the events? If you were on the defense team, would you have done anything differently?

SECTION 4: Exoneration and Aftermath

Video cue: Jim Dwyer "*All of the jogger defendants have gone home...*" (approximately 1:37:43) through end of film.

Synopsis: In 2001, Matias Reyes admits to committing the rape, providing details that directly correlate to the evidence police had gathered during their initial investigation. DNA testing supports his confession. A subsequent examination by New York City District Attorney Robert Morgenthau's office reveals that both the police investigation and prosecution were flawed. In 2002, a judge vacates the original convictions of the Central Park Five. A year later, the men file civil lawsuits against the City of New York, and the police officers and prosecutors who had worked toward their conviction. That lawsuit remains unresolved.

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. Listen carefully to Matias Reyes's confession of the attack and rape of Trisha Meili. Do you believe he is sincere in his statements about it not being right that people were sent to jail for something they didn't do? What might be his motive for making such a statement? What was his message when he said, "I'm to the point where if people don't do something, or what's, if they don't do what's right, then hey, there's nothing else I can do."
2. Review the following quote from Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau:
A comparison of the statements reveals troubling discrepancies...Accounts given by the five defendants differed from one another on the specific details of virtually every major aspect of the crime -- who initiated the attack, who knocked the victim down, who undressed her, who struck her, who held her, who raped her, what weapons were used in the course of the assault, and when in the sequence of events the attack took place...And some of what they said was simply contrary to established fact.

Morgenthau was speaking of statements that came from the teens' taped confessions and accounts they made under interrogation, information the police had before they went to trial. Why do you think it took the confession of Matias Reyes thirteen years

later—and not the contradictory evidence the police had all along—to move authorities to review the case? Why do you think none of these discrepancies made the police and prosecutors stop and think that maybe their case was flawed?

3. How could the press have reported on the Central Park jogger attack differently during the investigation and trial period in 1989 and 1990, and how might doing this have created a different outcome? Why do you think some people and media outlets were resistant to the new facts of the case?
4. From all indications, including the report from the District Attorney, the police and prosecutors erred during the investigation and trial procedure. According to Jim Dwyer, “the result of prosecuting the wrong people for the Central Park jogger case was that Matias Reyes continued to hurt, maim, and kill.” Why do you think the investigation led by Mike Armstrong cleared the police of wrongdoing? Do you feel the police broke any laws or committed racial profiling in this case?
5. Carefully review historian Craig Steven Wilder’s statements toward the end of the film:
I felt ashamed, actually, for New York and I also felt extremely angry because their innocence never got the attention that their guilt did. The furor around prosecuting them still drowns out the good news of their innocence. These were five kids who we tormented, we falsely accused, we pilloried in the press, we attacked, we invented phrases for the imagined crimes that we’re accusing them of. And then we put them in jail. We falsely convicted them. And when the evidence turned out that they were innocent, and they were released, we gave a modest nod to fairness, and we walked away from our crime.

I want us to remember what happened that day and be horrified by ourselves because it really is a mirror on our society. And rather than tying it up in a bow and thinking that there was something that we can take away from it, and we’ll be better people, I think what we really need to realize is that we’re not very good people. And we’re often not.

Summarize the main points of both statements. Do you agree with his conclusions? Are outcomes like this an acceptable level of imperfection in the criminal justice system?

6. Review the members of the Central Park Five’s account of their experience in the criminal justice system. Do you think more needs to be done for them, and if so what? If not, why not?