

Conversation Guide: Race and Incarceration

Living Room Conversations offers a simple, sociable and structured way to practice communicating across differences while building understanding and relationships. Typically, 4-6 people meet in person or by video call for about 90 minutes to listen to and be heard by others on one of our nearly 100 [topics](#). Rather than debating or convincing others, we take turns talking to share, learn, and be curious. No preparation is required, though background links with balanced views are available on some topic pages online. Anyone can host using these italicized instructions. [Hosts also participate](#).

I. Introductions: Why We're Here (~10 minutes)

Each participant has 1 minute to introduce themselves.

- Share your name, where you live, what drew you here, and if this is your first conversation.

II. Conversation Agreements: How We'll Engage (~5 minutes)

These will set the tone of our conversation; participants may volunteer to take turns reading them aloud.

- **Be curious and listen to understand.** Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. You might enjoy exploring how others' experiences have shaped their values and perspectives.
- **Show respect and suspend judgment.** People tend to judge one another. Setting judgement aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption or crosstalk.
- **Note any common ground as well as any differences.** Look for areas of agreement or shared values that may arise and take an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others.
- **Be authentic and welcome that from others.** Share what's important to you. Speak from your experience. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.
- **Be purposeful and to the point.** Do your best to keep your comments concise and relevant to the question you are answering. Be conscious of sharing airtime with other participants.
- **Own and guide the conversation.** Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation as a whole. Be proactive in getting yourself and others back on track if needed. Use an agreed upon signal like the "time out" sign if you feel the agreements are not being honored.

III. Question Rounds: What We'll Talk About

Optional: a participant can keep track of time and gently let people know when their time has elapsed.

Round One: Getting to Know Each Other (~10 min)

Each participant can take 1-2 minutes to answer one of these questions:

- What are your hopes and concerns for your family, community and/or the country?
- What would your best friend say about who you are?
- What sense of purpose / mission / duty guides you in your life?

Round Two: Exploring the Topic -- Race and Incarceration (~40 min)

One participant can volunteer to read this paragraph.

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Between 1970-2005 the U.S. population grew by 44% while the prison population grew by a staggering 700%.¹ People of color represent over 60% of state prison populations. Multiple studies of these racial disparities identify three recurrent explanations: policies and practices that drive disparity; the role of bias and stereotypes in decision-making; and structural disadvantages in communities of color which are associated with high rates of offending and arrest.² As a result, Black men are 6 times more likely to be imprisoned than white men and more than twice as likely to be imprisoned than Hispanic men. The Sentencing Project writes that "African Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested; once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; and once convicted, they are more likely to face stiff sentences."³ These statistics paint a bleak picture independent of potential disagreements about which systemic factors contribute to them and why. Is this what we want for our country? Can we do better?

Take ~2 minutes each to answer a question below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group may take a few minutes for clarifying or follow up questions/responses. Continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

- Is the information in the introduction new to you or very familiar? What happens as you read it?
- What comes to mind when you think about incarceration? What mental images do you see? What stories do you remember?
- If you or members of your family have been incarcerated, what have been the implications for your life?
- If you or members of your family have not been incarcerated, have you ever worried about that happening? What experience brings you to that worry or freedom from worry?
- What is your concern for our country in regard to this situation? What is your hope?

Round Three: Reflecting on the Conversation (~15 min)

Take 2 minutes to answer one of the following questions:

- What was most meaningful / valuable to you in this Living Room Conversation?
- What learning, new understanding or common ground was found on the topic?
- How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?

Closing (~5 min)

- *Give us feedback!* Use livingroomconversations.org/feedback-form/ or QR code
- *Donate!* Make more of these possible; give at livingroomconversations.org/donate/
- *Join or host more conversations!* With a) this group by exchanging your emails; b) others in person and/or by video call online. Get more involved or learn how to host at livingroomconversations.org/get-involved/



Thank you!

¹ [ACLU](https://www.aclu.org/)

² [The Sentencing Project](https://www.sentencingproject.org/)

³ [The Sentencing Project](https://www.sentencingproject.org/)