

# The Body Politic

A FILM BY GABRIEL FRANCIS PAZ GOODENOUGH



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE







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# Film Summary



*The Body Politic* is a harbinger of hope in a country plagued by gun violence. In Baltimore, Brandon Scott, an idealistic young leader with an ambitious plan to stop chronic violence in the city, is elected mayor. Throughout his first year in office, we follow him as he fights powerful political forces to save lives in Baltimore and reveal a pathway toward healing for the nation.

# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *The Body Politic* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities in conversations about the importance of navigating community violence as a public health issue. The film may also spark discussions about approaches to community healing, and what's needed for building community to address complex social issues. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Remember to avoid judgment about the type of action taken, even internal narratives that include self-judgment. Be open to trusting that every action birthed from love is one that matters, and no action of this type is too small or too large. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult. The experiences shown in the film are likely to cause intense emotion, so please consider having healing activities and/or practitioners available after viewing the film and for the duration of the discussion.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

## A NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to screen and facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *The Body Politic*. Before you facilitate, please prepare yourself for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of a community, and people, impacted by gun violence, loss, grief, mental and emotional health, and political landscapes in the U.S.

These conversations require facing realities about society, culture, and political motivations that typically have not been taught in schools. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the well-being and safety of people in your community. We recommend that this includes taking time to notice and nurture your own beliefs about the power of the human spirit to do what is deemed impossible. Importantly, this film shares experiences through a lens of healing and resilience, rather than focusing on trauma, and we hope this guide will aid you in conversations that expand understanding while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection.

### Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

## Share Community Agreements

### Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

### Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- Pass around sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- Allow time for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- Go around in a circle and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include and/or include with revisions. Chart this in front of the room where all can see. Be sure to write exactly what is being said without adding your own twist on how revisions were worded. Keep in mind that ownership of the agreements is most likely to happen when agreements are in the participants' own words. If something said needs to be worded differently from what was suggested, participants will let you know.
- Go around two to three times to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- Read the list aloud.
- Invite questions or revisions.
- Ask if all are satisfied with the list.



## COMMON CONCEPTS AND LANGUAGE

### Public Health Issue

A problem or concern that affects the health and well-being of a significant portion of a population. It is typically characterized by:

1. Prevalence: A significant number of individuals or communities are affected;
2. Impact: The issue has a negative impact on health outcomes, such as disease, injury, or mortality;
3. Social determinants: Factors such as poverty, access to healthcare, education, and environmental conditions contribute to the issue;
4. Collective action: Requires coordinated efforts from individuals, organizations, and government agencies to address the problem.

### Classism

Differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups. It's the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class.

Policies and practices are set up to benefit more class-privileged people at the expense of less class-privileged people, resulting in drastic income and wealth inequality—and the culture that perpetuates these systems and this unequal valuing.

### Community Violence

Violence that happens between people who may or may not know each other, and typically happens in public spaces. This can include physical, verbal, psychological, or sexual violence and some examples are bullying, shootings, and have lasting impacts on witnesses of violence.

### Institutional Racism

Institutional racism refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. Institutional policies may never mention any specific racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for Whites and oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color.

### Racism

The relegation of people of color to inferior status and treatment based on unfounded beliefs about innate inferiority, as well as unjust treatment and oppression of people of color, whether intended or not.

### Systemic & Structural Racism

Systemic and structural racism are forms of racism that are pervasively and deeply embedded in and throughout systems, laws, written or unwritten policies, entrenched practices, and established beliefs and attitudes that produce, condone, and perpetuate widespread unfair treatment of people of color. They include current, ongoing, and historical injustices.

**A LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER,  
GABRIEL FRANCIS PAZ GOODENOUGH**

*This film is the story of my home—the city where I was born and where I proudly continue to live. It’s also my first feature documentary as a director. Before embarking on this journey, I spent twenty amazing years as a cameraperson on documentary films and television programs. During this time, I had considered directing my own film, but I was scared to take that step. Cancer removed that fear. In 2019, I was diagnosed with bone cancer, and treatment left me disabled and physically unable to continue my career as a full-time vérité cameraperson. As I began my own healing process, I decided to dedicate whatever time I had to the healing of Baltimore City—the place that gave me life, the place I love. My hope was to make a film that could shine a light on the challenges and opportunities for healing in Baltimore and beyond.*

*In making *The Body Politic*, it has been an honor to partner with a group of amazing Baltimoreans, all with equally deep connections to the city, to give a voice to a new story about our hometown. Like many places across the United States, Baltimore has been affected by decades of gun violence. We hoped that by better understanding the challenges facing Baltimore—and the opportunities for change—we could help other communities as well. For us, in crafting this film, it was important not to exploit the theme of violence or add to the trauma. We committed to not showing footage of violence in the film. While violence is discussed by participants and heard in audio-only, the goal of these uses is to better understand the issue without adding to the pain.*

*Initially, when we first began filming, we planned to make an election film about candidates in a mayoral race, where reducing gun violence was the central issue. Each candidate had a different approach: some focused more on policing, while others emphasized public health. With violence on the rise in Baltimore at that time, it was uncertain who would win, but it was clear that things were not working. Then, George Floyd was murdered, and everything changed. Centuries of systemic, institutional, and structural racism were laid bare and exposed for our nation and the world to see. This brutal event altered the conscience of our country and shifted the focus of our film. Amid this societal reckoning, a new generation of leaders was emerging. We realized that the core of our story was about what happens after these new leaders take office. In Baltimore specifically, could this new leadership not only reimagine policing but also reduce gun violence? Could they change the status quo? If so, what would that change look like? We wanted to see this all from inside the local government, inside the system.*

*I’m proud of the film we made and that it honors our original intentions and focuses on the healing of our city—a story we hope can serve as a pathway to healing for the rest of the nation. Personally, what I also discovered is that making *The Body Politic* and sharing its message of hope with audiences has become a key part of my own process of healing.*

# Participants

## **Brandon Scott**

A Black man elected to Mayorship of Baltimore during a global pandemic. He comes in with a goal of addressing violence as a public health issue, which has, historically, not been a popular approach in city government.

## **Shantay Jackson**

Hired as the Director of the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE). This is a newly formed office under Mayor Scott, tasked with running city government's efforts.

## **Dante Johnson**

Site Director of the Belair-Edison Safe Streets site. Safe Streets is a violence intervention program that relies on credible messengers who have previously been involved in violence. Safe Streets is overseen by MONSE.

## **Erricka Bridgeford**

Community activist, Alternative Dispute Resolution expert, and healer. Erricka is Executive Director at Baltimore Community Mediation Center and a Founding Member of Baltimore Peace Movement (named Baltimore Ceasefire 365 in the film).



# Key Issues

*The Body Politic* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Approaching Violence as a Public Health Issue
- Building Relationships Between Government and Community Groups to Address Societal Injustices Together
- Humanizing People Who Are in the Public Eye
- Navigating Political Agendas & Media Narratives While Addressing Social Injustices

# Background Information

## Root Causes of Community Violence in Baltimore

*Chattel Slavery:* The legacy of chattel slavery - the practice of treating human beings as property that can be bought, sold, or inherited and that was practiced in the United States in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries - has profoundly influenced the social and economic fabric of Baltimore, Maryland. These historic conditions created lasting conditions that have perpetuated contemporary cycles of violence. By 1664, Maryland had codified slavery into law, ensuring that African Americans and their descendants were subjected to lifelong servitude. This legal framework not only dehumanized Black individuals but also laid the groundwork for systemic racial inequalities. The abolition of slavery did not dismantle the entrenched racial hierarchies established during the chattel slavery era. Formerly enslaved individuals and their descendants faced systemic discrimination, limiting access to education, employment, and housing. These disparities have contributed to concentrated poverty in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Studies have shown that areas with high poverty rates often experience increased violence, as economic hardship can lead to crime and social unrest.

*Systemic & Structural Racism:* Structural racism in Baltimore has profoundly influenced patterns of violence, with historical and contemporary practices creating and perpetuating disparities across the city. In the 20th century, policies like redlining systematically denied Black communities access to mortgages and investment, leading to concentrated poverty and disinvestment in predominantly Black neighborhoods. These areas were marked as high-risk for investment, resulting in economic stagnation and limited opportunities for residents. Recent studies have highlighted the ongoing impact of these historical injustices. Research analyzing Baltimore's census tracts from 2015 to 2019 found that neighborhoods subjected to both historical redlining and high levels of contemporary subprime lending experienced firearm violence rates eight times higher than areas without such disadvantages. Also, an analysis of nonfatal shootings between 2015 and 2019 revealed that these incidents were disproportionately concentrated in neighborhoods with a legacy of structural racism and ongoing disinvestment.

*Poverty:* Poverty is a significant factor contributing to the high levels of violence in Baltimore. The city's poverty rate stands at 20.3%, notably higher than the national average. Neighborhoods plagued by low incomes and high residential instability often lack the social cohesion necessary to deter criminal activity, leading to elevated crime rates. Poverty is increasingly recognized as a form of trauma due to its profound and pervasive impact on individuals' psychological and physiological well-being. The chronic stressors associated with economic hardship can lead to long-term adverse effects and impact brain function and development. Consequently, people living in continuous and/or generations of poverty are more likely to experience being victims and perpetrators of violence.



*Over-Policing & Mass Incarceration:* Over-policing refers to the disproportionate and aggressive law enforcement presence in certain communities, often targeting socioeconomically disadvantaged and minority populations. Mass incarceration involves the extensive imprisonment of individuals, often as a result of stringent policing and sentencing policies. The practices of over-policing and mass incarceration inadvertently contribute to the very issues they aim to mitigate. By undermining community trust, disrupting social and economic structures, and perpetuating cycles of crime, these approaches exacerbate community violence. In Baltimore, significant racial disparities exist in policing and incarceration, disproportionately affecting Black residents. These disparities are evident in arrest rates, use of force incidents, and overall incarceration statistics. For example, Black people constitute approximately 61% of Baltimore's population but represent 84% of those arrested.

## **Approaches Proven to Decrease Community Violence**

Community violence is a multifaceted issue influenced by various social, economic, and environmental factors. Understanding the approaches that can either exacerbate or mitigate such violence is crucial for developing effective interventions. Addressing the root causes of violence through public health initiatives lead to significant reductions in community violence. Strategies include improving economic opportunities, enhancing educational resources, and fostering social connections. Collaborative efforts between law enforcement, public health agencies, and community organizations are essential to create sustainable and safe environments. In Baltimore, decades of collaborative efforts and public health approaches have led to significant decreases in violence. Between 2020 and 2024,

Baltimore experienced a notable decline in homicides, reaching the lowest count in over a decade. In 2024, the city reported 201 homicides, a 23% reduction from the 261 homicides in 2023. This downward trend began in 2023, which saw a significant decrease from the 333 homicides recorded in 2022. Prior to this, from 2019 through 2022, annual homicides consistently hovered around 340. Additionally, the city's efforts have led to a 34% decrease in non-fatal shootings between 2023 and 2024, further emphasizing the effectiveness of Baltimore's violence reduction strategies.

## **Impacts of Using Collective Consciousness to Uplift Peace**

Collective consciousness refers to the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that unify members of a community or society. Collective consciousness is often cultivated when communities become aware of the common conditions they share within their day-to-day lives or under dominant structures. When harnessed positively, it serves as a powerful catalyst for peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Cultivating a collective consciousness that prioritizes peace involves multifaceted strategies, including the development of shared memories, collaborative initiatives, data-informed interventions, psychological healing, and trauma awareness. Empirical evidence underscores that when communities consciously align their collective beliefs and actions towards peace, they create a robust foundation for enduring harmony.

Baltimore's significant reduction in violence is a testament to the power of collective consciousness and community-driven initiatives. At the city government level, Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS), launched in January 2022. GVRS employs a holistic approach, addressing the root causes of violence by offering resources and support to at-risk individuals while ensuring accountability for those who continue violent behaviors. This strategy has been instrumental in fostering safer communities and reducing violent incidents.

Complementing GVRS is the Community Violence Intervention (CVI) ecosystem, established with a \$10 million investment announced in April 2022. This initiative focuses on expanding community-based programs that mediate conflicts, provide mental health services, and support individuals in transitioning away from violent lifestyles. By empowering local organizations and credible messengers, the CVI ecosystem has strengthened the city's capacity to address violence at its roots.

The Baltimore Peace Movement (BPM), formerly known as Baltimore Ceasefire 365, has effectively harnessed collective consciousness to foster peace and reduce violence within the city. In 2023, the organization rebranded as the Baltimore Peace Movement to emphasize the proactive cultivation of peace rather than merely the absence of violence. This shift reflects a deeper focus on nurturing the inherent peace within individuals and communities. While multiple factors contribute to Baltimore's reduction in violence, the sustained efforts of the BPM have played a significant role in shifting the cultural narrative toward peace and collective responsibility. A study analyzing data from January 2012 to July 2019 found that during Ceasefire (BPM) weekends, there was a 52% reduction in gun-related fatalities and a 12% decrease in nonfatal shootings. Importantly, the study found no evidence of a postponement effect, indicating that the reductions were not due to delayed violence but rather a genuine decline during the BPM events.



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## BEFORE VIEWING ACTIVITY

Once you welcome community members, acknowledge that the film may trigger difficult emotions and that this is normal. Invite them to take a moment to participate in a deep breathing or grounding exercise. This allows everyone to clear their minds and feel connected to the experience of being with others in this space.

Use the following example, or feel free to use your own: Close your eyes (if this is uncomfortable, look at a spot on the floor just in front of you). Take a deep breath in through your nose. Sit comfortably and place one hand on your abdomen. Breathe deeply enough that the hand on your abdomen rises. Hold the air in your lungs, and then exhale slowly through your mouth.

## AFTER VIEWING: PREPARING FOR DISCUSSION

Open the dialogue with an intention, prayer or reflection which sets the tone for the conversation. Here is one example:

May the Healing Begin in Us  
-Alice Walker

“May we be connected to each other  
May we know the range and depth of feelings in ourselves and in each other  
There is vulnerability, fear, love, rage, hatred, compassion, courage, despair, and hope  
In ourselves, each other and the world  
May we know our most authentic feelings  
And voice them when we speak  
May we tap into soul and spirit when we are silent together  
May we form and become a circle  
Be silent and feel the clasp and connection of hands and heart  
Then each in turn  
Speak for yourself and listen to each other  
Put judgment aside  
Remember that anything voiced that you want to silence may be a silenced part of yourself”

# DISCUSSION PROMPTS

## **Opening Activity: Being Present With Your Body**

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- In anticipation of seeing the film, what emotions did you feel in your body and where did you feel them?
- While watching the film, what emotions did you feel in your body and where did you feel them?
- After watching the film, what do you notice about how it impacted your heart and mind?

## **Starting the Conversation**

- Overall, what did you notice about the way the film presented individuals' stories and experiences?
- Which stories and experiences in the film stood out to you and why?
- What did the film leave you feeling more curious about?
- In what ways did individual stories and experiences intersect and how did people in the film respond to those shared experiences?

## Perspectives

- How did the film confirm or shift your perspectives about cities like Baltimore?
- How did the film confirm or shift your perspectives about the media's role in society?
- How did the film confirm or shift your perspectives about people who are in the public eye like politicians and activists?

## Collective & Personal Power

- What are ways to nurture/build healthy partnerships that are needed in healing social issues?
- What are ways to nurture community members' confidence in their individual power to address and help heal societal issues?
- What are ways to shift narratives that need adjusting in the process of healing social issues?

# CLOSING ACTIVITY:

## PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

After you and your community close out the discussion, invite everyone, based on degrees of individual comfort, to participate in this grounding activity.

This exercise can be used to help settle any anxiety or stress that might arise.

Say: "Sit back in your chair in a comfortable position. For each area of the body listed below, you will tense your muscles tightly, but not to the point of strain. Hold the tension for 10 seconds, and pay close attention to how it feels. Then, release the tension, and notice how the feeling of relaxation differs from the feeling of tension."

Feet: Curl your toes tightly into your feet, then release them. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your feet.

Calves: Point or flex your feet, then let them relax. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your calves.

Thighs: Squeeze your thighs together tightly, then let them relax. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your thighs.

Torso: Suck in your abdomen, then release the tension and let it fall. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your torso.

Back: Squeeze your shoulder blades together, then release them. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your back.

Shoulders: Lift and squeeze your shoulders toward your ears, then let them drop. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your shoulders.

Arms: Make fists and squeeze them toward your shoulders, then let them drop. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your arms.



# CLOSING ACTIVITY (cont.)

Hands: Make a fist by curling your fingers into your palm, then relax your fingers. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your hands.

Face: Scrunch your facial features to the center of your face, then relax. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your face.

Full Body: Squeeze all muscles together, then release all tension. Feel the comfort of all the tension leaving your entire body.

## TAKING ACTION

Here are some ideas for your community to engage with issues that *The Body Politic* explored:

Research root causes of violence (or other issues) in your community. Create awareness and conversation about what you learn by sharing on social media, organizing group discussions, etc.

Search for and contact grassroots organizations who are doing work to address pain in your community. Ask them how to volunteer, share information, donate, etc. Ask them for the best ways to get involved.

Take time to examine your own beliefs about an individual's or small group's ability to cause positive social change. Ask yourself how your beliefs impact how you engage with helping to address social issues that hurt your heart. Find quotes that help you create affirmations to nurture your belief in your personal ability to effect change.

# Resources

## **Baltimore City's Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS in the film)**

This is the website of the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement. It describes GVRS, and the city government's Violence Prevention Plan. [Link is here.](#)

## **55+ Audre Lorde Quotes Every Activist Should Know**

Audre Lorde was a writer, librarian, civil rights activist, and feminist who dedicated her life to fighting against the injustices of homophobia, classism, sexism, and racism. Get inspired to speak your mind and step into your power with this collection of quotes. [Link to quotes, here.](#)

## **Baltimore Peace Movement, formerly Baltimore Ceasefire 365 (in the film)**

[Link to the movement's website.](#)

## **Baltimore Community Mediation Center (in the film)**

[Link to the center's website](#)

# TEACHING GUIDE

The following are potential questions educators could use to engage students in discussion or activities following a screening of *The Body Politic*.

## Essential Questions

- Why is it important for youth to be involved in making their communities more peaceful?
- How do you think Mayor Scott's experiences as a child helped to make him become the leader he is today?
- What are things you want to make better in your communities? What are some things you could do to help?

# Credits & Acknowledgments



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