



Film and Interfaith Discussion Guide

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Introduction

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) is a coalition of more than 300 religious organizations including representatives from the Catholic, evangelical Christian, mainline Protestant, Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Buddhist, and Sikh communities. Members include national denominations and religious organizations, regional councils and local houses of worship. From the time of NRCAT's founding in 2006, members have worked together for human rights, human dignity and an end to torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment in U.S. policy, practice and culture.

As a part of NRCAT's work to end torture in U.S. prisons, jails and detention centers, NRCAT collaborated with filmmaker Matthew Gossage to produce ***Breaking Down the Box***, a 40-minute documentary for communities of faith, to expose the torture of solitary confinement in the context of mass incarceration in the United States. The film examines the mental health, racial justice and human rights implications of the systemic use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons. It is a call to action for communities of faith to engage in the growing nationwide movement for restorative alternatives to isolated confinement that prioritize rehabilitation, therapeutic interventions, and recovery. Interviews include movement leaders with first-hand experience of solitary confinement, as well as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Prof. Juan Méndez; religious community leaders; Marc Mauer of The Sentencing Project; and Lance Lowry, President of AFSCME Local 3807, Texas Correctional Employees Union.

Suggestions for Using this Film

This documentary is designed to be shown and discussed in faith communities, and in public forums hosted by religious and community organizations. Below is a discussion guide for a one and a half hour session that is appropriate for a variety of settings. If your schedule requires a shorter gathering, you may find that abbreviating the discussion or breaking it into multiple, shorter sessions is useful. We encourage you to adapt it to your context and the religious or spiritual tradition of your own community.

Ideas for where this resource could be used

- An interfaith gathering
- An event about mass incarceration and the new Jim Crow
- Accompanied by a panel discussion featuring returning citizens and experts who are formerly incarcerated, mental health practitioners, religious and community leaders
- A college group or classroom
- An adult education class
- A religious community forum
- A social justice committee gathering
- A prison ministry meeting or re-entry forum
- A prayer group
- A screening at which legislators are invited to attend
- A supplement to a study of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander.

Recommended supplemental reading

Along with screening *Breaking Down the Box*, we recommend engaging in a group study of one or more of the following:

- ✓ *Building a Movement to End the New Jim Crow: An Organizing Guide*, by Daniel Hunter, Foreword by Rev. James Lawson, available for purchase online at: www.newjimcroworganizing.org
- ✓ *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, by Michelle Alexander
- ✓ *Beyond Prisons: A New Interfaith Paradigm for Our Failed Prison System*, by Laura Magnani and Harmon L. Wray
- ✓ *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, by Bryan Stevenson

Preparing for the Discussion

Facilitators should preview the film and read through the discussion guide before hosting a screening to map out how you would like to present the material. Remember to incorporate your experiences, ideas, questions, and prayers into the discussion. There may be a variety of opinions expressed during the conversation, and respect, openness and honesty will be key to constructive learning.

Here is a quick preparation checklist:

- ✓ Publicize the upcoming film screening and discussion session early and often within your faith community. Announce it in worship. You'll find sample promotion materials at www.nrcat.org/breakingdownthebox
- ✓ Become familiar with the "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)" at the end of this Discussion Guide and consider printing the FAQs for distribution during your group discussion.
- ✓ Go to www.nrcat.org/prisons to see if NRCAT is collaborating with campaign partners in your state. If there is a state campaign, read about the status of any legislation and other advocacy efforts underway so you can share these opportunities with your group.
- ✓ Invite experts who are formerly incarcerated and who have experienced solitary confinement first-hand, and their family members, to speak at the film viewing.
- ✓ Consider using masking tape to mark out a space on the floor that is 6'x9' in size to help participants visualize a typical solitary confinement cell.
- ✓ Determine who will participate in leadership and the reading of questions/meditations.
- ✓ Test the film with the equipment (DVD player and TV or Computer and Projector) you will be using for the session.



- ✓ Print the petition version of the NRCAT statement against solitary confinement (included at the end of this discussion guide and available at www.nrcat.org/end-solitary). For other resources and the latest information about NRCAT participation in state legislative campaigns to end solitary confinement, go to www.nrcat.org/prisons.
- ✓ Occasionally, participants will ask for the definition of torture that is being used. The definition from the Convention Against Torture is included in the “Frequently Asked Questions” about solitary confinement included in this discussion guide.

Tell us how it went! NRCAT is compiling a journal of stories about the screening of *Breaking Down the Box* as communities of faith share it nationwide. Please let us know the details of your screening, and send along some pictures. Email your update to: campaign@nrcat.org

Session Outline

Welcome, introductions, and key information (10 minutes)

Open with prayer, if that is your tradition, and invite participants to introduce themselves.

Then introduce the film *Breaking Down the Box*. The following is introductory background to share before starting the film:

“Each of us comes to this discussion session on torture and our criminal justice system with a variety of beliefs and experiences. Many of us carry heavy burdens unknown to others, and some of us may have direct experience with the pain of incarceration or other histories of trauma. Please join me in committing to a time of mutual respect and listening as we learn together.

The purpose of this discussion is for us to learn about the use of solitary confinement, a form of torture that is widespread in our prisons and jails, yet hidden from public view. Together we will look at the use of solitary confinement within the context of mass incarceration in the United States. We will consider these realities through the lens of our faith. We will hear first-hand from people who have survived long-term solitary confinement and their loved ones, as well as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Prof. Juan Méndez, religious community leaders, Marc Mauer, Executive Director of The Sentencing Project, mental health experts, and correctional staff. *A few key things to consider before we begin the film:*

What is solitary confinement? Solitary or isolated confinement is the practice of confining incarcerated women, men and children in a small cell, alone or with another person, for 22-24 hours a day. Meals are shoved through a slot in a solid steel door. Deprived of all meaningful human contact, natural sunlight, programming, and education, those who have survived the experience describe it as being “buried alive.” Incarcerated people are held for months, years, even decades, in these conditions. The practice has a variety of labels including isolation, Segregated Housing Units (SHU), segregation (or “seg” for short), “the hole,” “the box,” “the bing,” “restricted housing,” and the list goes on.

The context: On any given day, more than 80,000 incarcerated adults and youth are held in solitary confinement. The U.S. incarcerates more of its people than any other nation globally, as a result of mandatory sentencing, lack of mental health treatment, and racial and religious profiling. U.S. immigration enforcement policies are replicating this model, increasing the detention of migrants. More than 50 percent of people incarcerated in prisons and jails in the U.S. today have a diagnosed mental illness.

More than 15 days? That's torture. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Professor Juan Méndez, stated in a [2011 report](#) that solitary confinement in excess of 15 days should “be subject to an absolute prohibition” based on scientific evidence of its psychological damage, noting that some of the psychological effects caused by isolation become irreversible after 15 days. Further, he called for an absolute prohibition against the use of solitary confinement for the most vulnerable, including individuals with mental illness and youth.

Film Screening (40 minutes)

Insert DVD and select “Play ***Breaking Down the Box*** Full Film” from the main menu. The film will begin playing immediately.

Discussion (30 minutes total)

Now you can facilitate a discussion about some of the issues raised in this film. You may not have time to cover all of the topics below in discussion. If so, decide ahead of time what elements of the conversation are a priority and begin with those.

1. In the film, we heard stories from people who have experienced the horror of solitary confinement first-hand. What reactions did you have while listening to their stories?
2. In the film, Marc Mauer of The Sentencing Project spoke about the ways in which decades of a “tough on crime” emphasis on punishment have led to mass incarceration and the spread of brutal practices like solitary confinement. As people of faith, how do we support an emphasis on restorative justice, rehabilitation and recovery? In what ways might our faith tradition have been used to justify a “tough on crime approach”? In what ways might our faith tradition instead be a rich resource for supporting a restorative alternative?
3. In the film, several people interviewed talk about the moral cost of allowing the torture of solitary confinement to continue. How do you think solitary confinement impacts the morality of our society?
4. People are placed in solitary confinement at the discretion of correctional staff. The film includes a list of documented reasons given for placing incarcerated people in solitary confinement. What were your reactions to learning about how someone can end up in solitary confinement?
5. The film describes some of the ways people of faith are joining in the nationwide movement to end the torture of solitary confinement. What are the next steps you can commit to take in our community?

Isolation Cell Demonstration (5 minutes)

Consider marking off a 6’x9’ space on the floor of the room with masking tape. Invite participants to step into the space one at a time or simply observe the size of the space from where they are seated. Ask them to take a few moments to imagine themselves confined to that space for 22-24 hours per day for months or years on end. Ask them to consider what they would miss most in such conditions of sensory deprivation and extreme isolation.

Taking Action! and Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

Distribute copies of the petition format of NRCAT’s statement against the use of solitary confinement and ask those who wish to sign it to do so (Petition is last two pages of this document). Inform the participants that once 500 endorsements are collected in a particular state, the petitions will be sent to the governor, all state legislators, and top corrections officials.

In addition, share information about local and statewide campaigns in your area to confront the use of solitary confinement.

Please send the NRCAT petitions with the collected names to:

National Religious Campaign Against Torture
110 Maryland Ave. NE, Suite 502
Washington, DC 20002

Spend a few moments in prayer or in silence, for:

- those who are enduring conditions of solitary confinement,
- for their loved ones,
- for those who work in prisons and jails,
- for their loved ones,
- for our legislators,
- for our religious leaders and communities of faith,
- and for the courage to build community and end the torture of solitary confinement together.

End with a closing prayer or the way that your class or group typically closes its session.

Want to learn more? Read on.

How Solitary Impacts Youth, read [Growing Up Locked Down](#)

For Stories of People in Solitary, visit [Solitary Watch](#) and read [Survivors Speak](#)

How Solitary Impacts LGBT incarcerated persons, read [Standing With LGBT Prisoners: An Advocate's Guide to Ending Abuse and Combating Imprisonment](#)

How Solitary Impacts Women, read [Worse Than Second Class](#)

Alternatives to Solitary and Myth Busting, read [Solitary Confinement: Common Misconceptions and Emerging Safe Alternatives](#)

More about the HALT (Humane Alternatives to Long Term) Solitary Confinement Act, supported by the New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement, [nycaic.org](#)

More about the [California Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition](#)

More about how faith communities can get engaged: [nrcat.org/stoptorture](#)

Download the reader's theater piece featured in the film, "[If the SHU Fits](#)"

Frequently Asked Questions about Solitary Confinement

What is solitary confinement? Solitary or isolated confinement is the practice of confining incarcerated women, men and children in a small cell, alone or with another person, for 22-24 hours a day. Meals are shoved through a slot in a solid steel door. Deprived of all meaningful human contact, natural sunlight, programming, and education, those who have survived the experience describe it as being “buried alive.” Incarcerated people are held for months, years, even decades, in these conditions. The practice has a variety of labels including isolation, Segregated Housing Units (SHU), segregation (or “seg” for short), “the hole,” “the box,” “the bing,” “restricted housing,” and the list goes on.

Who is impacted by solitary confinement? The U.S. incarcerates more of its people than any other nation globally, driven by the [cradle to prison pipeline](#), [mandatory minimum sentencing](#), [lack of mental health treatment](#), and [racial and religious profiling](#). In addition, U.S. immigration enforcement policies are replicating this model, increasing the [detention of migrants](#). More than 50 percent of people incarcerated in prisons and jails in the U.S. today have a diagnosed mental illness. On any given day, more than 80,000 incarcerated adults and youth are held in [solitary confinement](#), at least 25,000 of whom are held in supermax prison facilities made up solely or mostly of solitary cells. Source: Human Rights Watch (2003). “Ill-Equipped: US Prisons and Offenders with Mental Illness.” Online: <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2003/10/21/ill-equipped-0>

According to the [Drug Policy Alliance](#), the “drug war has produced profoundly unequal outcomes across racial groups, manifested through racial discrimination by law enforcement.” Though “rates of drug use and selling are comparable across racial lines, people of color are far more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and incarcerated for drug law violations than are whites. Higher arrest and incarceration rates for African Americans and Latinos are not reflective of increased prevalence of drug use or sales in these communities, but rather of a law enforcement focus on urban areas, on lower-income communities and on communities of color as well as inequitable treatment by the criminal justice system.” Source: Drug Policy Alliance, “Race and the Drug War,” <http://www.drugpolicy.org/race-and-drug-war>

People of color are disproportionately impacted by incarceration and solitary confinement. African Americans constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated in U.S. prisons, and are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. Source: NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet: <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

What is the history of solitary confinement in the United States?

Dr. Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin and several Quaker leaders first instituted solitary confinement at Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia in the late 18th century, believing that total isolation would lead to penitence (hence, the term ‘penitentiary’ was coined). That led to the opening of the Eastern State Penitentiary in 1829 in Philadelphia, which only had solitary confinement cells. Those confined soon began to lose their sanity. In 1842, Charles Dickens visited the prison and said, “I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.” The practice was dispensed with as a failure. Bonnie Kerness and Bissonette Lewey explain that, according to an 1890 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, “isolation was so harmful that a person who had murdered and was sentenced to die should be freed and escape his death sentence because the additional burden of one month’s incarceration

in solitary confinement was so onerous as to demand redress.” Source: Bonnie Kerness & Jamie Bissonette Lewey (2014) Race and the Politics of Isolation in U.S. Prisons, *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 22:1, 26.

In the 20th century, some U.S. prisons had a limited number of solitary confinement control units within their facilities. However, in 1983 a prison in Illinois instituted a permanent ‘lock down’ of their entire facility, in which all inmates were confined alone in their cells for 23 hours per day. The use of solitary confinement has increased dramatically since then. In 1989, California built Pelican Bay State Prison to house prisoners exclusively in isolation (the first “supermax” prison). Today, supermax prisons are run by 44 states and the federal Bureau of Prisons.

What are the psychological effects of prolonged solitary confinement on prisoners?

Isolation fundamentally [alters the brain](#), [creates and exacerbates mental illness](#), and creates toxic environments for incarcerated people and correctional staff. Many studies have documented the severe detrimental effects of solitary confinement on the mental health of people who are incarcerated. Symptoms include hyperresponsivity to external stimuli, hallucinations, panic attacks, difficulty with thinking and memory, paranoia, and increased risk of suicide. Half of all suicides in prisons occur in solitary confinement.

How much does solitary confinement cost compared to other forms of confinement?

Due to increased construction and staffing costs, state data suggests that the cost of solitary confinement is 2-3 times that of housing an incarcerated person in general population. Source: Daniel P. Mears & Jamie Watson, *Towards a Fair and Balanced Assessment of Supermax Prisons*, 23 *JUST. Q.* 233, 260 (2006).

Incarceration in a federal supermax facility costs 153% more than incarceration in general population in 2013. Source: Alison Shames, Jessa Wilcox & Ram Subramanian, *VERA Institute of Justice, Solitary confinement: Common Misconceptions and Emerging Safe Alternatives* 25 (2015).

What does the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture have to say about solitary?

The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture (UN SRT), Juan Mendez, stated in a [2011 report](#) that solitary confinement in excess of 15 days should “be subject to an absolute prohibition” based on scientific evidence of its psychological damage, noting that some of the psychological effects caused by isolation become irreversible after 15 days. He called for an absolute prohibition against the use of solitary confinement for individuals with mental illness, pregnant women and youth.

What is the definition for torture?

Torture is defined in Article I of the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Convention came into force on June 26, 1987 and was signed by the U.S. in 1988, and ratified by the U.S. Congress in 1994. Here is the definition of torture from Article I of the United Nations Convention Against Torture, which has the weight of U.S. law:

“For the purposes of this Convention, the term ‘torture’ means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”

Mail Petition to:

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

110 Maryland Ave., NE, Suite 502; Washington, DC 20002

End Prolonged Solitary Confinement Now

Recognizing that prolonged solitary confinement can cause serious harm to prisoners, it has long been considered a form of torture. As a person of faith, I oppose the use of prolonged solitary confinement.

Experts estimate that tens of thousands of prisoners in the U.S. criminal justice system are currently being held in solitary confinement. The vast majority of these inmates are detained in state prison facilities. Prisoners held in solitary confinement are often detained in a cell by themselves for 23 hours a day. Some prisoners are kept in these conditions for months, years, or even decades. Medical experts have stated that prisoners held in isolation for extended periods experience symptoms akin to delirium, and the impact on mentally ill prisoners is especially damaging. Alarming, these prisoners are sometimes released from solitary confinement units directly to their communities when they complete their prison sentence.

We need to invest in humane alternatives that address the mental health needs of prisoners in a way that effectively contributes both to their rehabilitation and to their successful transition back into society. Because holding prisoners in solitary confinement units is significantly more expensive than keeping them in the general prison population, instituting humane alternatives makes sense, both financially and morally.

We must end the use of prolonged solitary confinement in all 50 states and the federal prison system. It is costly, inhumane and ineffective; it harms prisoners and our communities. I call upon state legislators and departments of corrections to begin now to take steps to end prolonged solitary confinement.

Name — PLEASE PRINT	E-mail*	Phone #	City & State	ZIP Code

** Thank you for your support. When you provide your email address, we'll add you to our mailing list to receive regular updates on ways to make your voice heard for a torture-free future. You can unsubscribe at any time.*

