

Solitary Confinement: Torture in Your Backyard

A NRCAT Video and Mainline Protestant Discussion Guide

Introduction

Since January 2006, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), a coalition of more than 300 religious organizations, has worked to ensure that U.S.-sponsored torture ends forever. Although NRCAT was founded in response to the use of torture on post-9/11 detainees, recognizing the severe harm caused by prolonged solitary confinement, the NRCAT Board voted in 2009 to expand NRCAT's work to include ending torture in U.S. prisons.

NRCAT created this 20-minute video, "Solitary Confinement: Torture in Your Backyard," to describe the harm caused by prolonged solitary confinement and to tell the story of how the religious community in Maine took action that helped secure a seventy percent reduction in the number of prisoners held in solitary confinement. You will hear from a variety of perspectives, including former prisoners who experienced solitary confinement, religious leaders, Commissioner Joseph Ponte of the Maine Department of Corrections, and psychiatrist Stuart Grassian, M.D., a national expert on the psychological effects of solitary confinement.

Suggestions for Using this Video

This video is designed to be shown and discussed in congregations and religious organizations. It best lends itself to a small group discussion or an adult education setting. If your congregation has an adult class that meets weekly to address a variety of issues, you might consider asking if the video could be shown in that setting.

Below is a discussion guide designed for a one hour session for Christian congregations or groups. Please feel free to adapt it according to your own congregation or group.

This resource could also be used in:

- An older youth or college group
- A women's or men's organization
- A social justice committee or prison ministry meeting
- A prayer group
- An ecumenical Christian setting

Preparing for the Discussion

We suggest that facilitators preview the video and read through the discussion guide to decide how you would like to present the material. Think through your own feelings and responses, so you are not surprised during the discussion. Feel free to incorporate your own thoughts, questions, and prayers into the discussion. There may be a variety of opinions expressed during the discussion, and openness and honesty should be encouraged.

Here is a quick preparation checklist:

- ✓ Publicize the upcoming discussion session early and often within the congregation. Announce it in worship. You'll find sample promotion materials at www.nrcat.org/backyard.
- ✓ 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 has a state campaign 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.
- ✓ Consider inviting former prisoners who have experienced solitary confinement or prisoner family members to speak at the film viewing. You may also consider inviting a prison chaplain.
- ✓ Consider using masking tape to mark out a space on the floor that is 8'x10' 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 video 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 prolonged 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's state legislative campaigns to end prolonged 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.

It would greatly help NRCAT if you would fill out a brief survey about the viewing and discussion held in your congregation. We will be reporting on the number of showings of the film and we would like to include your screening(s) in that count. **The survey link is available at www.nrcat.org/backyard.**

Session Outline

Welcome, introductions, and preliminary information about solitary confinement (10 minutes)

Open with prayer, if that is your tradition, and ask participants to introduce themselves, as needed.

Then introduce the video “Solitary Confinement: Torture in Your Backyard.” The following is introductory background information to share with this group before starting the film:

“Each of us comes to this discussion session on torture and our criminal justice system with many thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. We may have conflicting views. I ask that you keep an open mind to one another’s opinions and an open heart to the Holy Spirit during this session.

The purpose of this discussion is for us to explore the use of prolonged solitary confinement in U.S. prisons through the lens of our faith. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture equates the term ‘prolonged solitary confinement’ with torture — the point when the use of solitary confinement results in severe mental or physical pain or suffering.

Solitary confinement has a variety of labels including isolation, Segregated Housing Units (SHU), segregation (or “seg” for short), “the hole”, etc. Regardless of the label, the conditions share common features. Prisoners are held in small cells alone for 23 hours per day and are permitted one hour of exercise alone. Some prisoners have been held for months, years, even decades, in these conditions. Many studies have documented the severe detrimental effects of solitary confinement on prisoners’ mental health, such as hallucinations, panic attacks, and paranoia.

In the film, it is stated that the number of U.S. prisoners in solitary confinement is at least 36,000. However, there is a growing consensus among experts that at least 80,000 people in the U.S. criminal justice system are in fact held in solitary confinement.

Some argue that the use of solitary confinement is a necessary management tool used for only the “worst of the worst” prisoners. However, prisoners sometimes end up in solitary confinement or are unable to move out of isolation due to non-violent prison rule infractions. This is especially the case for mentally-ill prisoners, who often have great difficulty following prison rules.

This video tells the story of people of faith in Maine who advocated for limits to the use of prolonged solitary confinement. Their efforts helped secure a 70% reduction in 2011 in the number of prisoners held in prolonged solitary confinement in Maine.”

Video Screening (20 minutes)

Insert DVD and select “Play” from the main menu. The video will begin screening immediately.

Discussion (25 minutes total)

Now you can facilitate a discussion about some of the issues raised in this video. We recommend asking the first four questions below and if there is time, ask any of the other questions that you wish.

1. Scripture tells us to imagine that we are in captivity with prisoners. Hebrews 13:3 states: “Remember those in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” After viewing this video, what do you imagine it would be like in solitary confinement? What reactions did you have while listening to these stories from former prisoners?
2. Solitary confinement severely restricts the ability to grow and develop spiritually through fellowship with others. It reduces the prisoner’s interaction in prison ministry programs. Hebrews 10:24-25 states, “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Do you think solitary confinement is an impediment to experiencing healthy community?
3. Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” As Christians, we believe this means that each person should be treated with dignity. In light of this teaching, what do you believe the Christian faith has to say about the treatment of prisoners? What does your faith lead you to conclude about prolonged solitary confinement?
4. The film describes the success of people of faith and others in Maine in advocating for a reduction of the number of prisoners in solitary confinement. Is educating people of faith about this issue or working for legislation that will end prolonged solitary confinement a task that the Christian community in our state should consider? If so, what specific steps can you take to initiate such an effort?

Additional Questions

5. In Romans (12:19, 21) Paul states that we should not take revenge against those who do wrong. “Do not be overcome with evil,” he says, “but overcome evil with good.” How can we encourage prisons to stress rehabilitation instead of vengeance?
6. Maine Department of Corrections Commissioner Joseph Ponte discusses the major hurdle of convincing his staff that the use of solitary confinement was not the only way to safely manage prisoners. Are you surprised to hear Commissioner Ponte say that the Department’s data shows there are fewer incidents of violence in Maine prisons now that they have successfully transitioned 70 percent of the prisoners in solitary confinement back to the general prison population?
7. Prisoners are sometimes released from solitary confinement units directly to their communities when they complete their prison sentence. Knowing the impact of solitary



confinement on prisoners' mental health, what implications do you think this could have for community safety?

8. Do you agree that prolonged solitary confinement can amount to torture? Why or why not? *See the definition of torture on page 7 of this Discussion Guide. If you are going to use this question, please print out the definition and give a copy to each participant.*

Thought Experiment: Isolation Cell Demonstration (5-10 minutes)

As an optional activity, consider marking off an 8'x10' space on the floor of the room with masking tape. You could 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 23 hours per day for weeks or months on end.

Distribution of the NRCAT Statement Against Prolonged Solitary Confinement 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. 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. Ask for ideas on how to collect signatures from other members of the congregation. Please send the petitions with the collected names to:

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

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

Frequently Asked Questions about Prolonged Solitary Confinement

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 and silence would lead to penitence (hence, the term ‘penitentiary’ was coined). That led to the building of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary in 1829, which only had solitary confinement cells.

However, instead of becoming penitent, the prisoners developed serious mental health problems and many went insane. In 1842, Charles Dickens, the novelist, visited the Southeastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary and said, “The system here is rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe it...to be cruel and wrong. ... I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.”

The Quakers also recognized that solitary confinement caused severe psychological harm and apologized for their use of prolonged solitary confinement.

Unfortunately, the U.S. has let history repeat itself. 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 Prison to house prisoners exclusively in isolation (the first “supermax” prison). Today, there are 44 state-run supermax prisons and one federal supermax prison. The United States has become a world leader in holding prisoners in prolonged solitary confinement.

What does ‘prolonged’ solitary confinement mean?

It depends who says it. For the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), the term ‘prolonged solitary confinement’ is equated to torture — the point when the use of solitary confinement results in severe mental or physical pain or suffering. Torture is defined by the United Nations Convention Against Torture, which has the weight of U.S. law (see below).

In a 2011 report, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mendez, cited 15 days as ‘prolonged solitary confinement,’ noting that some of the psychological effects caused by isolation become irreversible at that point.

The American Bar Association Standards for Criminal Justice defines ‘long-term isolation’ as 30 days or more, for the purpose of setting a deadline by which prisoners in solitary confinement are given increased due process protections.

What about prisoners who voluntarily request to be placed in solitary confinement for their own protection, for example?

NRCAT recognizes prolonged solitary confinement as torture, which by definition “is *intentionally inflicted* . . . at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.” Therefore, prisoners who voluntarily request to be placed in

solitary confinement are not included in this definition or NRCAT's targeted work on this issue.

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

Many studies have documented the severe detrimental effects of solitary confinement on prisoners' mental health. Symptoms include: hyperresponsivity to external stimuli, hallucinations, panic attacks, difficulty with thinking and memory, paranoia, etc. One study showed that prisoners held in solitary developed psychopathologies at a rate nearly twice as great as those held in general prison population. Dr. Stuart Grassian, a psychiatrist, notes that many prisoners held in long-term solitary confinement experience perceptual disturbances (e.g. objects appearing to 'melt' or get smaller or bigger). These symptoms are commonly associated with neurological illnesses, such as brain tumors and seizure disorders, rather than mental illnesses.

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

Experts have found housing a prisoner in solitary confinement can cost as much as \$50,000 more annually compared to general prison population housing. The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons 2006 report states that solitary confinement can double the cost of housing prisoners.

Does solitary confinement 'work'?

No, solitary confinement is an ineffective tool to rehabilitate prisoners, and its consequences affect us all. One study found that prisoners who were released *directly* from segregation into their community had a much higher recidivism rate than individuals who spent some time in a general population prison setting before returning to the community: 64% compared to 41%.

What is the definition for torture?

NRCAT uses the definition of torture included 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, following ratification by the 20th nation. The Convention 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."

Additional Resources

Visit www.nrcat.org for more information about:

Torture in U.S. prisons:
www.nrcat.org/prisons

Statements by denominations and faith groups:
www.nrcat.org/religious_statements

Information about NRCAT:
www.nrcat.org/about

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 – We must have an email address for your name to be registered	Phone #	City & State	ZIP Code

