



Solitary Confinement: Torture in Your Backyard

Film Transcript

<http://vimeo.com/35284207>

On screen:

Prolonged solitary confinement is not only cruel and inhumane, under certain circumstances it can amount to torture.

Today, the United States is a world leader in holding prisoners in prolonged solitary confinement.

The United States has 45 Supermax prisons designed to hold inmates only in solitary confinement.

Heather Rice [*National Religious Campaign Against Torture*]: The National Religious Campaign Against Torture is a coalition of over 300 religious organizations united to abolish torture without exception, including torture in US prisons. Prolonged solitary confinement of prisoners qualifies as a form of torture because of its destructive, psychological and physical consequences. It destroys people from the mind outward.

Michael Cole [*2 Years*]: In total I spent just over two years, I believe – it was either just under or just over 2 years continuously in SEG on high risk.

Julia [*Mother of prisoner*]: During this time in Maine State Prison my son which I prefer to call was put in the hole instead of segregation. It was horrendous. He has been beaten. He has neck and back vertebrae injuries. He can't use his hand to write anymore. He's in pain mentally. He was in the hole – segregation – for months and months. And I'll tell you, I have spoken to people that were not mentally ill but were left in segregation cells and came out mentally ill.

Essie [*Grandson in solitary*]: The thing that concerns me is that I find solitary confinement to be one of the most inhumane things you can do to a person. They say that it's 23-7 lock down. I call it 24-7 lock down because one hour you get to go outside. You're in a cage not the size of an animal cage. You do not get any activity with another person. You can walk around in your cage.

Michael James [*4 years*]: I can't really explain it, you have to be there because when they do tours you know they clean the place up real nice and so they make it look real good. They don't really let you have interactions with the tour people so you can't really explain to them what's really happening.

Sarah Shourd [*14 months*]: My name is Sarah Shourd and I'm a writer and a political activist and a teacher and I was held as a political hostage in Iran for 14 months in solitary confinement.

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Heather Rice [*National Religious Campaign Against Torture*]: The National Religious Campaign Against Torture created this film to tell people of faith in all 50 states about prolonged solitary confinement. At any given point 36,000 people in this country are held in prolonged solitary confinement. That means that prisoners are held in small cells for 22 to 23 hours per day without seeing any other human beings. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture's general work on this issue is nationwide. However we also have specific legislative campaigns in several states including California, Colorado, Oregon, Maine, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Texas. We've created a statement against solitary confinement which we invite you and other people of faith across the country to sign on our website.

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Rich Killmer [*National Religious Campaign Against Torture*]: In the early 1790's there was a great amount of concern by religious people, especially, about the conditions of prisons in Philadelphia and elsewhere in the country. Dr. Benjamin Rush, who was a physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, invited people to his home to begin to talk about what could be done. Benjamin Franklin attended as did a number of Quaker leaders. So, the idea that they came up with was to have a prison with just solitary confinement cells. And in those cells people would have a chance to think about the crimes that they committed and to make plans for making sure that they never did those crimes again. It was a time for people to become penitent and hence it was called a penitentiary. Of course what happened was that people were held in solitary confinement for a long period of time and they were deeply hurt emotionally. In fact many people went insane. A number of people tried to commit suicide. And it just was a destructive, harmful time. Soon after the penitentiary was created and soon after it was clear that it wasn't working, in fact it was causing harmful. The Quakers apologized.

Heather Rice [*National Religious Campaign Against Torture*]: The detrimental effects of solitary confinement are overwhelming. Take a look at what at what psychiatrist Stuart Grassian and reporter Lance Tapley had to say about their years of observing prisoners in solitary confinement. And you'll hear from the real experts. Listen to former prisoners tell their stories about how they endured and survived solitary confinement.

Dr. Stuart Grasian [*Psychiatrist*]: Basically solitary confinement as it's practiced generally has a prisoner in a cell anywhere from 60-80 square feet, small cell, for about 23 hours a day or more. They're by themselves. They have virtually no human contact whatsoever, very little in the way of environmental stimulation, no occupational stimulation, no opportunity for religious worship, at least not congregant religious worship. They're by themselves and have very little to distract them from their own increasingly paranoid and increasing confused thoughts. People go into a kind of fog, a stupor. And when they're in that kind of state any stimulus becomes noxious, makes them jump. That happens a lot. The other thing that happens is that people become obsessed. They start hearing the flushing of the toilet above them or the dripping of a faucet and that's 100% of what they

focus on. They can't get away from it and it starts to drive them crazy. Over time they become increasingly jumpy, increasingly intolerant of stimulation, increasingly paranoid, fearful, unable to maintain any kind of normal sleep - wake cycle.

Michael Cole [*In solitary confinement for two years*]: For me when I did the two years straight, when they finally allowed me out into general population it was profound. I would - Somebody would come up and be like, "Hey, man" and I'd jump and I'd break into sweats for no reason. I was very alert, like I was overly sensitive to lights and sounds and people talking.

Sarah Shourd [*In solitary confinement for 14 months*]: After two months alone my mind started to slip. I was constantly terrified of what was happening to my mother. Most of the time I sat in my cell and I tried to stay strong and I told myself that every day was the last day. I started to have symptoms that were very distressing and I started to become very afraid that I would lose my mind. You spend a lot of time trying to reassure yourself, but you actually can't ward off your deepest fears. So I was constantly battling insomnia and I had terrible nightmares and I started to have symptoms. I would hear things like footsteps coming down the hallway and realized they weren't real. Or I would see flashing lights and jerk my head around and nothing was there. I lost track of time. I lost track of the days, and the weeks and the months. At a certain point I completely lost control and started screaming and it was almost like I didn't know that I was the one that was screaming until the guards came into my room and tried to calm me down and stop me from screaming and I realized that I had been screaming and beating at the walls. I beat at the walls until there was blood on the walls and on my knuckles were bloody.

Michael James: I get so frustrated and I never used to do this until I went into prison. And I've got cuts on my arm from self-inflicted. I collapsed an artery there. I cut myself all the way up there. It was a stress relief and I didn't want to kill myself but I did try.

Lance Tapley [*Freelance Reporter*]: People can show signs of mental deterioration within a matter of days. Certainly any long term solitary confinement has a very, very bad effect on the mental health of people. It drives them into psychosis, in some instances it frequently makes them paranoid. They have hallucinations. They of course become very depressed. It has a huge variety of symptoms but it's really a syndrome.

Shaheed Omar [*Social Advocate, son was in solitary confinement*]: He's writing, he says I am afflicted with the overpowering illness of depression, mania, impulsivity, which at times leave me crippled with suicidal ideation tendencies. Prolonged isolation in his cell tears at my soul, mind and ability to cope. The cell collapses on top of me. I don't breathe. I can't breathe from crushing anxiety, literally. I utilize all coping mechanisms I know, and some I conjure up all to no avail. The end result is self-mutilation to escape or an attempt on my life. I can do fine for 5, 6, 8 months. Then all hell inside my head breaks loose. I'm not choosing to be suicidal. It's an unseen force that compels me to try to escape by any means. It's scary. Intelligence has nothing to do with it. You know, and this guy wrote me a 6 page letter that I had typed up, in this case of mental health. He's a mental health patient. He's a patient, person who went into system cool, no mental problem but has developed some mental problems as the result of being in the system.



Julia [*Mother of son with mental illness in prison*]: I started when I founded at six years old, well I started when he was born, but when he was 6 years old I started trying to get help and look where he ended up, in the worst place of all. Society doesn't like 3 categories of class, say a people: One is inmates, the second is the mentally ill and mentally retarded. If they can put them away, get rid of them so to speak, they will. And there's very few people, except for people like us that call up for help and attention because you know what, those people can't be heard by no one except through people like you and I.

Heather Rice [*National Religious Campaign Against Torture*]: Why should you care about prisoners held in solitary confinement? Well, as people of faith there are a number of theological teachings that compel our concern and inspire our advocacy.

Laura Markle Downton [*United Methodist Church*]: And we see from the very beginning that each and every person is endowed with the image of God within them. So all living persons and all living things are called good.

Dr. Sayyid Syeed [*Islamic Society of North America*]: There is a clear verse in the Qur'an that says that God has invested human beings with dignity and he has given them responsibility of the land and the sea and the air.

Jill Saxby [*Maine Council of Churches*]: For many people who get involved in this issue and have been involved here in Maine, it really comes down to affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person and taking responsibility for ourselves as well. We are the society that has control over these persons' lives during the period of their incarceration. And therefore, we have a moral responsibility to ensure that they are treated with basic human dignity and solitary confinement violates that.

Rabbi Charles Feinberg [*Rabbis for Human Rights, North America*]: We make a distinction between the sin or the crime and the perpetrator of the crime. We don't say that they're the same and we always believe that spiritual renewal is possible even of the person has done the most heinous crime. And so, we believe that if a person is tortured, it is far less like that that person will be able to take a step back and really examine his or her life and come to some sense of that they may have done something terribly wrong.

Dr. Essie Jeanette Delaney Manns [*Grandson in solitary confinement*]: Because God's will says that every man is my brother. And with every man being my brother, how can I allow you to be treated like a dog and walk away. What religion am I really in?

Heather Rice [*National Religious Campaign Against Torture*]: The National Religious Campaign Against Torture's work began in Maine. Although the Maine Corrections System was no worse than many of the state corrections systems in this country, we are going to be showcasing what happened there because of some of the significant reforms that have occurred partly as the result of people of faith in Maine coming together and calling for change. And we hope you, after learning more about prolonged solitary confinement by watching this video, will also join the call in your state.

Lance Tapley [*Freelance Reporter*]: Well over the past few years there has been a prison reform movement building in Maine. And first priority was to do something about the horrible situation in the supermax. So as the legislative session began in 2010, there was a reform minded legislator, Jim Schatz, a house member who introduced LD 1611 which was a bill to reform the supermax scene. Well, the bill became a rallying point for civil libertarians, the American Civil Liberties Union, local unit for example got behind it, of course the prisoner reform folks, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, and Maine Council of Churches which is their local affiliate, and many people from faith communities. But also, spontaneously I think, I'm not sure how much they were approached, the psychiatrists and the psychologists of the state. Their main organizations got behind this bill. In the end it was defeated but there was kind of a compromise measure that came out of the debate which was very vigorous. A study was set forth. The Corrections Department was ordered by the legislature to a study of this issue. That study became the vehicle for the new administration once there was a new governor to reform the supermax and in many ways, reform the prison system. Rather simply in Maine, the new Corrections Commissioner just took people out of the supermax. He's reduced it by 60 to 70 percent, the population there and put them back in the general population of the prison. And there hasn't been any problem.

Joe Ponte [*Commissioner of the Maine Department of Corrections*]: The biggest difficulty for us was you know, we had trained staff for probably twenty years on using segregation a certain way and that they felt strongly that that kept them safe. So then we now had to retrain them and show them that this is a different way to managing inmates and you'll still be safe using this. So it was more of a mindset. People were doing what we trained them to do for twenty years and now we had to say well maybe what we were telling you to do for twenty years wasn't quite right. Let's look at this. So it was a transition of people still thinking that we needed to go back to using segregation and somehow that was keeping them safer. Over time the more data were pulling is showing that what we're doing now is safer than what we were doing before and that's always helpful in convincing people that this is the right way. That what we were doing was less effective.

Jill Saxby [*Maine Council of Churches*]: It is a moral and civic duty for all of us us to look at those other forms of behavior control and population management other than solitary. Solitary is an extreme that doesn't work and doesn't need to be resorted to if there are better, more modern and more effective ways of going about it. Lots of people have heard that message now and now it's time to move forward together including people in the religious community.

Heather Rice [*National Religious Campaign Against Torture*]: We need you to be part of the call to end prolonged solitary confinement. Please, go to our website right now and sign our statement against prolonged solitary confinement. When we reach 500 signatures in your state we'll take the signatures and the statement to your governor, top corrections officials, and all state legislators. Thank you for lifting your voice for the voiceless.

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On screen:

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