

# Solitary Confinement in an Age of Mass Incarceration

## Action & Advocacy

*We call upon our sisters and brothers of faith to stand together for human rights, human dignity and an end to torture.*

### What the Faith Community Can Do

#### **Sign and Distribute NRCAT's Statement Against Prolonged Solitary Confinement**

Ending long-term solitary confinement starts with your signature. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) gathers endorsements from people of faith nationally for a statement calling on government officials all across the country to take steps to end the use of prolonged solitary confinement. To receive the latest on efforts to end torture in your state, add your signature online, or download the hardcopy for distribution in your congregation or community, at [www.nrcat.org/solitary](http://www.nrcat.org/solitary).

#### **Host a screening of the NRCAT Film, *Breaking Down the Box***

NRCAT created a 30-minute film, *Breaking Down the Box* to engage religious communities in confronting solitary confinement across the country. The film spotlights the human rights, racial justice, and mental health implications of solitary confinement in the context of mass incarceration in the U.S. Hear from survivors of solitary confinement leading campaigns nationwide to end this torture.

For more information and to download the film and other resources, visit:

[www.nrcat.org/breakingdownthebox](http://www.nrcat.org/breakingdownthebox)

#### **Join a State Campaign to End Prolonged Solitary Confinement**

NRCAT supports state partner organizations in their work to educate the faith community about the abusive use of solitary confinement and to advocate for legislation to end its use. In states where NRCAT does not have a designated local partner, but legislation or other significant efforts to limit solitary confinement are underway, NRCAT informs people of faith about these efforts and provides advocacy tools. For more information on state campaigns, go to [www.nrcat.org/states](http://www.nrcat.org/states).

#### **Organize a Reading or Production of "If the SHU Fits"**

"If the SHU Fits" shares voices of survivors of solitary confinement and their loved ones. This resource powerfully weaves together excerpts of letters, blog entries, government reports, and speeches of family members and survivors, all organized into a one-hour Reader's Theatre Format. To learn more and download the script, go to [www.nrcat.org/if-the-shu-fits](http://www.nrcat.org/if-the-shu-fits).

#### **Want to learn more?**

Visit [www.nrcat.org/stoptorture](http://www.nrcat.org/stoptorture)

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## Key Facts

With 5% of the world's population, the U.S. accounts for **25% of the world's incarcerated**. The United States holds **more incarcerated people in long-term solitary confinement** than any other nation.

On any given day, more than **80,000 incarcerated people**, including women, men and youth, are held in solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, jails and detention centers. Of these, **25,000 are held in supermax prisons**- facilities made up solely, or mostly, of solitary cells.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last 30 years, the size of the federal prison system has **increased nearly 800 percent**, largely due to the overrepresentation of those convicted of drug offenses, many of whom are low-level and non-violent. The combination of "harsh sentences for drug possession, three-strikes laws that greatly increase the imposition of life terms, and the 'supermax' system of long-term, solitary confinement" have coalesced to produce the bloated prison system we face today.<sup>2</sup>

**UN Special Rapporteur on Torture**, Juan Méndez, stated in his 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. Yet incarcerated adults and youth in the U.S. remain in isolation for months, years, even decades.

**Half of all prison suicides** occur in conditions of solitary confinement. Isolation fundamentally [alters the brain](#), [creates and exacerbates mental illness](#), denies opportunity for community, and violates inherent human dignity. It creates toxic environments for incarcerated people, correctional staff and administrators.

**Forty-five percent** of those held in supermax prisons have "serious mental illness, marked by symptoms or psychological breakdowns."<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> According to *Unlocking America*, if African Americans and Latinos were incarcerated at the same rates as white individuals, today's prison and jail populations would decline by approximately 50%. If current trends continue, **one in three** African American males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime.

Though there are outright bans on the punitive solitary confinement of juveniles in Alaska, Connecticut, Maine, Oklahoma and West Virginia, **youth in most states are not protected** from placement in solitary confinement.

The U.S. Supreme Court first attempted to declare solitary confinement unconstitutional **in 1890**.

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch (2003). "Ill-Equipped: US Prisons and Offenders with Mental Illness." July 16, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> "The Resistible Rise and Predictable Fall of the U.S. Supermax" by Stephen F. Eisenman, *Monthly Review*, 2009, Volume 61, Issue 06 (November).

<sup>3</sup> Correctional Association of New York, "States that Provide Mental Health Alternatives to Solitary Confinement."

<sup>4</sup> NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet: <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>