

## **Standing Together: Interfaith Work to End the Torture of Solitary Confinement**

**The context:** The United States incarcerates more of its people than any other nation globally, disproportionately communities of color and the poor. People of color and individuals with severe mental illness are disproportionately impacted by incarceration in U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers as a result of the pipeline from school to prison for youth of color, racial profiling in policing, the rise in for-profit incarceration, unjust sentencing laws and barriers to just re-entry following incarceration. African Americans constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population in U.S. prisons, and are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. Together, African American and Latino/as comprised 58% of all prisoners in 2008, even though African Americans and Latinos make up approximately one quarter of the US population. If current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime. 1 in 100 African American women are in prison nationwide.

**What is solitary confinement?** The U.S. confines more incarcerated people in solitary confinement than any other democratic nation. On any given day, roughly 80,000 incarcerated adults and youth are held in solitary confinement, 25,000 of whom are held in supermax prisons facilities made up solely or mostly of solitary cells. Of individuals confined in supermax prisons, 45 percent have "serious mental illness, marked by symptoms or psychological breakdowns."<sup>i</sup> Incarcerated people are confined to a cell (alone, or with one other person) for 22-24 hours per day, with an hour alone in a cage or dog run. Those who have survived it describe the experience as being "buried alive." Many studies have documented the detrimental psychological and physiological effects of long-term segregation.<sup>ii</sup> The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture (UN SRT), Juan Mendez, stated in a 2011 report<sup>iii</sup> 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.

### **Interfaith Community: Working for Human Rights and Human Dignity**



The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) is a national interfaith organization comprised of more than 300 religious organizations including T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. NRCAT's membership includes national denominational and faith groups, regional entities such as state ecumenical agencies, and local religious organizations and congregations comprising the evangelical Christian, Roman Catholic, Orthodox Christian, mainline Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, Bahá'í, and Buddhist traditions. NRCAT works closely with interfaith partners to mobilize a moral voice for human rights and an end to the torture of solitary confinement. Here are a few highlights from that work over the past year. We invite you to share these resources to educate and inspire future action.

### **Recent Highlights from 2014**

**February 2014** On February 25, 2014 the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights hosted the second Congressional hearing on solitary confinement, "[Reassessing Solitary Confinement II: The Human Rights, Fiscal, and Public Safety Consequences](#)," to

**February 2014 (cont.)** discuss the on-going widespread use of isolation. [View video of the hearing.](#) The hearing enabled a national spotlight to again be shown on the torture of solitary confinement and conveyed the growing political will for addressing solitary confinement at the state and federal level.

A [gathering](#) of national faith leaders, survivors of solitary confinement and their families, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, and human rights activists met in advance of the hearing, to spotlight the continuing national human rights crisis faced by tens of thousands of adults and children held in conditions of isolation. Video of the gathering and national and state religious statements submitted for the record are available for sharing [here](#).

**June 2014** During Torture Awareness Month in June, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, California Families Against Solitary Confinement, the American Friends Service Committee, issued a national call for people of faith to compose prayers for all who remain in conditions of isolated confinement, in remembrance of the significance of one year anniversary of the **historic peaceful prisoner hunger strike** throughout California prisons which began July 8, 2013, with more than 30,000 participating. The national response to the call for prayer was moving and overwhelming, with more than one hundred prayers submitted in a matter of days. On **June 26, the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture**, an interfaith clergy delegation met with the California Department of Corrections to express support for the prisoner-led call for an end to the torture of solitary confinement, and to deliver the prayers to be shared with those who remain in solitary confinement in California. Download and share the [prayers here](#).

**August 2014** On Tuesday, August 26, 2014, NRCAT and T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, co-sponsored an interfaith delegation of thirty faith leaders to visit the NYC Rikers Island jail complex. Clergy visited solitary confinement units for men and women at Rikers and met with the recently appointed Commissioner Joseph Ponte to discuss the urgent need for change. The [New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement](#) (NY CAIC) is a state-wide campaign of organizations and concerned community members, including formerly incarcerated persons and family members of loved ones in isolated confinement. We invite colleagues in New York to join the [NY CAIC](#), and to support passage of the [HALT Solitary Confinement Act](#) which would end long term solitary confinement in New York. Learn more [about the legislation here](#).

**Sept 2014** This fall, the United Nations Committee Against Torture will review the U.S. government under the Convention Against Torture (CAT). In preparation, NRCAT has submitted an **Interfaith CAT Shadow Report** [available here for download](#). The report spotlights the human rights and moral implications of the torture of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, jails and detention centers, particularly the disproportionate impact on people and communities of color. We invite you to read and share [this report](#).

**Upcoming** Human Rights Shabbat provides an opportunity to engage your community in calling for restorative alternatives to incarceration and torture in our prisons, jails and detention centers.

**Here are a few steps you can take in your community today:**

- **Join or Start a State Campaign.** To learn more, visit [www.nrcat.org/prisons](http://www.nrcat.org/prisons)
- **Study and Share: Worship Resources** on solitary confinement and an interfaith response, visit <http://www.nrcat.org/torture-in-us-prisons/nrcat-resources>

<sup>i</sup> Correctional Association of New York, "States That Provide Mental Health Alternatives to Solitary Confinement," [http://www.correctionalassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Out\\_of\\_State\\_Models.pdf](http://www.correctionalassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Out_of_State_Models.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> See e.g., Stuart Grassian & Nancy Friedman, "Effects of Sensory Deprivation in Psychiatric Seclusion and Solitary Confinement," 8 International Journal of Law and Psychiatry 49 (1986); Craig Haney & Mona Lynch, "Regulating Prisons of the Future: A Psychological Analysis of Supermax and Solitary Confinement," 23 New York University Review of Law and Social Change 477-570 (1997); Craig Haney, "Mental Health Issues in Long-Term Solitary and "Supermax" Confinement," 49 Crime & Delinquency 124 (2003).

<sup>iii</sup> The Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment, Interim Report, 15, delivered to the General Assembly, U.N. Doc. A/66/268 (Aug. 5, 2011).