

Reading Guide

Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement

Overview

First published in 2016 by The New Press, *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement* is the first book to feature firsthand accounts—both writing and oral history—about the experience of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers. It includes pieces by 16 currently and formerly incarcerated men and women.

Two of the book's three editors, Jean Casella and James Ridgeway, co-direct Solitary Watch, a watchdog project dedicated to investigating, publishing, and disseminating information on what was until recently a hidden part of the criminal justice system. Its third editor, Sarah Shourd, was herself held in solitary confinement in an Iranian prison, and has since addressed the issue through activism, writing, and art.

This reading guide provides discussion questions and activities for four of the pieces in the book.

- The book's introduction, which provides a brief history of solitary confinement and a summary of its effects.
- "A Sentence Worse Than Death," written by a man held in solitary confinement for 25 years.
- "On the Verge of Hell," by a woman who experienced years of solitary confinement while also contending with other abuse.
- "Invisible," by a man recently released from prison who finds that the scars of solitary follow him into the outside world.

Other firsthand accounts in the book deal with solitary confinement from a variety of perspectives, including a young man placed in isolation while still a child, a transgender woman held in solitary in immigrant detention, and incarcerated people fighting back against their inhumane treatment. The book concludes with essays by experts that provide psychological, legal, and ethical perspectives on solitary.

This reading guide is intended for use by educators and students at the high school, college, and continuing education levels; for community, faith-based, and prison reading groups; and for anyone who wishes to enter the hidden world of solitary confinement to listen to the voices of people who live there.

Reading Guide Written by Nicole Capozziello

for Solitary Watch

PDF available at solitarywatch.org/facts/reading-guide/

Introduction by Jean Casella and James Ridgeway

Discussion Questions & Activities

1. Prior to reading this, had you read, heard, or seen anything about the issue of solitary confinement? In the introduction, what stood out to you or surprised you?
2. What factors led to the extreme rise in the prison population in the 1980s? How did solitary confinement fit into the “total control” approach discussed by the authors?
3. Despite ample evidence showing not only the damage that solitary confinement does to individuals but also its ineffectiveness and high monetary cost, the use of solitary confinement in the United States has for the most part continued. What do you think perpetuates this practice—policy-wise, procedurally, and philosophically?
4. In the introduction, Casella and Ridgeway present solitary confinement as a violation of human rights, which as such should not be inflicted on any individuals. However, in the years since this book was released, several states have introduced legislation that limits or bans the use of solitary confinement specifically with vulnerable populations such as pregnant women and youth. Why do you think legislation of this type has been pursued? What might be the strengths of this advocacy tactic? What might be the shortcomings?

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY:

In the introduction, Casella and Ridgeway cite philosopher, writer, and activist Lisa Guenther, who asks, “what does it mean to share the world with millions of people in cages?” They add, “how does it affect our humanity to dehumanize others to such an extent that we allow them to live in conditions unfit for any animal—and do so in the name of our own safety and well-being?”

Reflect on these questions, taking into account anything that the book brought up for you, and write down your thoughts.

GROUP ACTIVITY: In a group, discuss your own feelings on solitary confinement, as well as the arguments that the authors present for ending this torture. What ideas do you have for making these arguments understood by and persuasive to the general public?

“A Sentence Worse than Death” by William Blake

Discussion Questions & Activities

1. In the introduction, the editors Casella and Ridgeway discuss the myriad detrimental effects of solitary confinement. What issues of the mind, body, and spirit does William Blake talk about grappling with during his more than 25 years in solitary confinement? What about his experience particularly stood out to you?

2. Throughout his essay, Blake talks about the impact he's seen solitary have on the mental health of fellow incarcerated people, as well as the treatment of individuals in prison with underlying mental illness. In the introduction, Casella and Ridgeway say that “prisons and jails have become the nation’s largest inpatient psychiatric centers,” housing more than 350,000 people with serious mental illness. On a policy level, what needs to be done to correct this? As long as people with serious mental illness are in our prisons and jails, how can facilities best serve people inside and prepare them for successful reentry to society?

3. Blake writes, “to folks who have an insatiable appetite for vengeance against prisoners who have committed terrible crimes . . . no amount of remorse would matter, no level of contrition would be quite enough, only endless retribution would be right in their eyes.” Do you understand and/or empathize with the perspective of the judges to whom Blake is referring? Why or why not? How do you think that this outlook (personal and/or societal) has fueled policy?

4. “Your options as to what to do to occupy your time in SHU [the Special Housing Unit] are scant, but there will be boredom aplenty,” Blake writes. “You probably think that you understand boredom, know its feel, but you really don’t . . . There is a pretty good list of options available to you, if you think about it . . . you take them for granted because they are there all the time, but if they were all taken away from you, you’d find yourself missing even the things that right now seem so small and insignificant.” In the time since COVID-19 measures were put in place, what little things have you come to miss? Has what you miss surprised you? Thinking of Blake, what do these things tell us about our shared humanity?

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY:

When dealing with past atrocities, Archbishop and leader of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission Desmond Tutu has said that we have several choices in how we confront hurtful situations and their perpetrators: with retribution and revenge (as favored by the American prison system), victor's justice (as seen in the Nuremburg trials after World War II), amnesia (such as the United States' approach to the genocide of the Native Americans), or reconciliation and restorative justice.

Research a prison or program, in the United States or abroad, that applies a restorative justice model. Alternately, design your own program. How does a restorative justice approach impact the program's conceptualization, design, and implementation? What do you see as the program's strengths? What are the potential impacts of restorative justice, in the short-term and long-term, at an individual and a societal level?

GROUP ACTIVITY:

Desmond Tutu says, "Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies . . . is not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing." Take a few moments to reflect on this passage and write down your thoughts. Then, in a group, discuss your reaction to Tutu's beliefs. How would you begin the process of forgiveness with someone who has wronged you? How can these learnings be applied at a systems level—to our criminal justice system?

“On the Verge of Hell” by Judith Vasquez

Discussion Questions & Activities

1. When Vasquez emerges from solitary and is put into the general population in prison, what issues come up for her physically, mentally, and socially? How does she deal with them?
2. What challenges does Vasquez discuss that are specific to female prisoners? How might gender impact one's experience in the criminal justice system, from crime through reentry?
3. Environmental psychologist Ming Kuo, among others, has shown that the greater the presence of nature in a person's environment, the better their health and well-being. How does nature and her relationship to it come up for Vasquez in this essay? What message does denying incarcerated people access to nature send to them? What effect does this have on individuals such as Vasquez?
4. In her essay, Vasquez mentions many traumatic experiences, occurring at different points in her life and incarceration. While the experience of prison is in itself traumatic, incarcerated people, at a higher rate than the unincarcerated, have experienced trauma—such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, loss of a loved one, and poverty—before even beginning their prison sentence. Does this impact your feelings about people in prison? How so? How does the experience of solitary confinement create new trauma for Vasquez and others?

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY:

Social worker Mary Gamble encourages her colleagues to zoom out from the undertaking of providing individual care to look at the bigger picture, saying that “social workers cannot practice ethically in a correctional system where solitary confinement exists.” At the same time, Raphael Sperry, the president of Architects / Designers / Planners for Social Responsibility, a group that unsuccessfully lobbied the American Institute of Architects to institute a rule banning members from creating supermax prisons, says, “You can’t fix mass incarceration by putting prisoners in nicer cages.”

Take some time to think about and write down the many roles that others play (including architect, social worker, and citizen) when it comes to incarcerating an individual. In regards to

the practice of solitary confinement, what effect does the complicity of these various individuals have? How do you believe that individuals, whatever their role, can use their insight and power to effectively challenge and ultimately change this system? How can you?

GROUP ACTIVITY:

The American criminal justice system's goal of punishment influences every aspect of the prison, from sentencing to treatment of incarcerated people to the physical design of the prison itself. This has led to many of the purposely hostile design elements discussed throughout the book, including harsh 24/7 lighting, a lack of windows in cells, and a dearth of natural elements in recreation cages.

Imagine a prison that was designed with the goal of rehabilitation instead of punishment. Individually, take a few minutes to write or draw your ideas of how this space would look, feel, and sound. Then, in a group, share your ideas and work together to reimagine and design a new kind of facility for criminal justice.

“Invisible” by Five Mualimm-ak

Discussion Questions & Activities

1. Mualimm-ak outlines the various slight, nonviolent infractions, often spurious and arbitrary, that regularly lead to time in solitary confinement, and shows how these “sentences-within-sentences” are entirely controlled by prison officials, who act as prosecutors, witnesses, judge, and jury. What actions need to be taken to correct this loophole in the justice system?
2. In a particularly powerful passage, Mualimm-ak writes about his experience of being released directly from solitary and finding himself at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. When he comes to a yellow line on the ground, he automatically associates it with his prison experience and stops. What other ways has solitary impacted Mualimm-ak’s ability to function in the world after his release?
3. “One of my greatest comforts has come from meeting other people who had been in solitary or had worked with people coming out of solitary,” Mualimm-ak writes. *“[They] took the time to say, There’s nothing inherently wrong with you. It’s the system that creates people like you. I’ve seen a thousand people act the same way you’re acting.”* What roles can advocates who’ve never experienced solitary play in the movement and what might they need to be aware of? How can advocates work in solidarity with survivors of solitary confinement?
4. Mualimm-ak’s organization, the Incarcerated Nation Corporation aims to develop reentry resources specific to survivors of solitary confinement. What practices and gaps in service in the prison system make an organization such as this necessary? What are the benefits and challenges of this model?

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY:

Mualimm-ak writes that people in solitary “become so desperate for contact with another human being that they find ingenious ways to make contact,” going on to say that “the very essence of life is human contact, and the affirmation of existence that comes with it. Losing that contact, you lose your sense of identity. You become nothing. That’s what I mean when I say I became invisible even to myself.”

Do you agree that “the very essence of life is human contact?” In writing, reflect on how connection has shaped you. Do you have a memory in which you felt invisible? How did this experience make you feel?

GROUP ACTIVITY:

Stay-at-home and social distancing orders in response to COVID-19 have forced many people to grapple with isolation as they never have before, with some people even comparing it to solitary confinement. In actuality, what similarities does this experience share with solitary confinement? How has the global pandemic affected your understanding of connection? Does this impact how you think about the ethics of solitary confinement?

For More Information

To learn more about solitary confinement, visit Solitary Watch at solitarywatch.org.

- The FAQ, available in both English and Spanish, provides a comprehensive overview.
- The Voices from Solitary series includes dozens more firsthand accounts of solitary confinement.
- Two special projects, Lifelines to Solitary and Photo Requests from Solitary, offer ways to connect with people living in solitary confinement.
- Donations to Solitary Watch allow this work to continue.

You can also follow Solitary Watch on social media @solitarywatch.

Contact: info@solitarywatch.org or PO Box 11374, Washington, DC 20008.

To find out about national and local advocacy work to end solitary confinement, visit Unlock the Box at unlocktheboxcampaign.org.

Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement is available from local bookstores, IndieBound, and Amazon. Instructions for educators who wish to request discounted examination copies can be found at thenewpress.com/academic.