

Overview

First published in 2016 by The New Press, *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement* was 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 both activism and art.

This reading guide, which was written with social workers and social work students in mind but can be used in a wide variety of settings, 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.

Reading Guide written by Nicole Capozziello

for Solitary Watch and Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement

Introduction by Jean Casella and James Ridgeway

Discussion Questions

1. Prior to reading this, had you read, heard, or seen anything on 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 practice continues in most U.S. prisons and jails. What do you think perpetuates the use of solitary—policy-wise, procedurally, and philosophically?
4. Casella and Ridgeway make the argument that solitary confinement is a violation of human rights, and thus should not be inflicted on any individuals. However, in the years since this book was released, some advocacy campaigns have sought to limit or ban the use of solitary confinement specifically for vulnerable populations such as pregnant women, youth, and people with mental illness. Why do you think campaigns of this type have been pursued? What might be the strengths of this tactic? What might be the shortcomings?

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?”

Individually, take a few minutes to reflect on these questions and write down your thoughts.

With a partner, discuss how you think we can make these arguments understood by and persuasive to the general public. As social workers, how can we use our perspective to add to this discussion?

“A Sentence Worse than Death” by William Blake**Discussion Questions**

1. In the introduction, the editors 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 first 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 prisoners, as well as the treatment of incarcerated people with serious 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 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? How could social workers use their training and experience to help develop policies and programs that expand mental health treatment during and after prison sentences?
3. Imagine you are a social worker in a supermax prison. How might you be challenged, ethically and personally, by providing care in this setting? What would you do to navigate this?
4. 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 this outlook (personal and/or societal) has fueled policy?

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 WWII), 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. What are the strengths of the program? How does a restorative justice approach impact the program’s conceptualization, design, and implementation? How do you think it affects evaluation?

“On the Verge of Hell” by Judith Vasquez

Discussion Questions

1. When Vasquez emerges from solitary and becomes part of 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 women in prison? How could gender impact an incarcerated person’s experience?
3. Among others, environmental psychologist Ming Kuo 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 people 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, poverty, and racism, 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?

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. Write or draw how this space would look, feel, and sound. Then, share your design and explain your choices to a partner.

“Invisible” by Five Mualimm-ak**Discussion Questions**

1. Mualimm-ak outlines the various slight, nonviolent infractions, often spurious and arbitrary, that regularly lead to time in solitary confinement, as well as 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, consists of formerly incarcerated people supporting the re-entry of others, particularly those who have survived solitary confinement. What practices and gaps in service in the prison system and other government entities make an organization such as this necessary? What are the benefits and challenges of this model?

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?

For More Information

To learn more about solitary confinement, visit 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.

To learn how social workers are resisting the use of solitary, visit socialworkersasc.org.

To find out about advocacy work in your state, visit unlocktheboxcampaign.org.

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