

Shedding Light on Solitary Confinement  
Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement (SWASC)

**Online Video Series and Discussion Guide**

Tucked away and out of public sight, an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people are being held in solitary confinement cells in our nation's jails, prisons and border camps, many for years on end. In a practice described by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor as coming "perilously close to penal tombs," the psychological and physical suffering of the people inside these solitary cells is incalculable.

In this engaging three-part video series, created by Moya Atkinson, co-founder of Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement (SWASC), and narrated by Dr. Patrick Bond, this hidden practice is brought into the light of day. Atkinson offers a comprehensive overview of solitary confinement that ranges from hearing the voices of those who've been impacted by it, to the moral dilemma of those who work in these units, and finally, to humane alternatives.

**Video 1:** [Solitary Confinement as Torture](https://vimeo.com/368879108) (13:45)

<https://vimeo.com/368879108>

**Video 2:** [The Dual Loyalty Conflict for Healthcare Professionals](https://vimeo.com/368886476) (20:01)

<https://vimeo.com/368886476>

**Video 3:** [The Limits of Reform, the Need for Abolition](https://vimeo.com/368888512) (17:44)

<https://vimeo.com/368888512>

Each of the three videos is between approximately 15 and 20 minutes long. They can be viewed as one of three sections, or individually; the third section offers opportunities for advocacy and action. For the PowerPoint files, to which you can add or remove slides, and/or for lesson plans, please email requests to [atkinsonmoya@gmail.com](mailto:atkinsonmoya@gmail.com).

## **Video 1: Solitary Confinement as Torture Discussion Questions**

1. Prior to watching this, had you seen, read, or heard anything on the issue of solitary confinement? In this introduction, what particularly stood out to you or surprised you?
2. The introduction argues that solitary confinement has been shown to be ineffective for a host of practical reasons: it increases recidivism, carries a high monetary cost, destroys protective factors for those subjected to it, and is linked to higher suicide rates. Despite this, as many as 80,000 people are in solitary confinement in the U.S. right now, with a fifth of prisoners subjected to solitary at some time during their incarceration. What are some of the physical, social, and psychological effects that solitary confinement inflicts on individuals, in the short and long-term? What do you think has perpetuated and continues to perpetuate this harmful practice—policy-wise, procedurally, and philosophically?
3. Minority populations, including people with serious mental illness, and Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ individuals, are disproportionately subjected to solitary confinement by the criminal justice system and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). What might lead to this? On the systems level, what needs to be changed on the outside to eliminate the disproportionate representation of these populations in our prisons? What needs to be done inside institutions to correct this issue?
4. The practice of solitary confinement has been denounced as inhumane throughout history, as early as the 1840s by Charles Dickens and more recently by Nelson Mandela, Pope Francis, and President Obama. Despite these admonishments, and more talk of criminal justice reform than perhaps ever before, solitary has remained an issue largely hidden from public view. Why do you think that solitary has not been more of a subject of interest or discussion? As social workers, how can we make the argument that solitary confinement is a human rights violation heard by and persuasive to the public and policymakers?

**Video 2: The Dual Loyalty Conflict for Healthcare Workers Discussion Questions**

1. Black Panther and political prisoner Jalil Muntaqim writes, “The question to be contemplated is not the asking of the prisoner/slave how he or she is doing; rather the question needs to be asked of the person(s) (prison guards/administrators/society) who lock other human beings in cells 23 or 24 hours a day—are they okay? Don’t ask the enslaved, ask the enslaver; for it is the choice of one’s humanity or lack thereof, that cultivates, grants and permits this kind of brutal soul-snatching treatment that needs to be questioned.” What is your reaction to this? What societal values are reflected by solitary confinement and incarceration in general? How do you personally shoulder this burden? And how might you want to change?
2. As defined by Physicians for Human Rights, dual loyalty is “the potential conflict between clinicians’ duties to their patients and their obligations to their employers, particularly governments. Acting in the patient’s best interest is the most fundamental tenet of medical [and social work] ethics, yet systems often put pressures on health professionals which make it hard for them to perform their jobs ethically.” How has dual loyalty come up in your education or career thus far? How have you navigated this reality, or imagine you might in the future?
3. While social work education provides a strong foundation of evidence-based practice interventions, social worker Mary Gamble says that, “there are no clinical interventions in the world that can mitigate the harmful effects of isolation.” Do you agree with this? What are some gaps you’ve experienced in social work education and how would you like to see them addressed? With social workers’ unique experience and engagement with on-the-ground challenges and social justice issues, how can they contribute to policy change and advocacy?
4. In the video, two opposing viewpoints around social workers’ relationship to solitary confinement are presented: 1) that by participating in the system, social workers are indirectly legitimizing the process and 2) social workers should return to a more central role in criminal justice, essentially improving the process from within. SWASC makes the argument that in order for social workers to take on a more central role in the criminal justice system without merely amplifying dual loyalty, they would need more support from the NASW. What support for social workers do you believe is lacking on a micro level? On a macro level?

**Video 3: The Limits of Reform, the Need for Abolition Discussion Questions**

1. This video acknowledges the positive, though limited, impacts of recent criminal justice reform, including the FIRST STEP Act. However, it also spotlights e-carceration, or the use of electronic monitoring and other forms of oft-privatized surveillance. Had you heard of e-carceration before? What are similar examples of injustice and abuses of privatized control in our justice system (that you know of or could envision)? Who loses in these practices, and how? Who benefits?
2. There are currently 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States, with approximately another 7 million under community supervision. In both the short and the long-term, who benefits from keeping incarceration rates in the United States high? How have these parties exercised their power? What impact does this have on individuals, families, and communities impacted by the criminal justice system?
3. House Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez states that “discussions of reforming our criminal justice system demand us to ask philosophical and moral questions. . . what should be the ultimate goal of sentencing and incarceration?” What do you believe the answer to this question is? How does this answer differ from how our criminal justice system was designed and currently operates? How can criminal justice reform and reinvention reflect the shift of this ultimate goal?
4. Writer, advocate, and professor Michelle Alexander says that with current prisons “we create and maintain sites that are designed for the intentional infliction of needless suffering.” Legal scholar and professor James Forman goes on to say, “when I identify myself as a prison abolitionist, this is what I have in mind—the idea that you imagine a world without prisons and then you work to try to build that world.” How does this make you feel? Do you consider yourself a prison abolitionist? Why or why not?