

# SOLITARY



INSIDE RED ONION STATE PRISON

VIEWING GUIDE

**HBO** DOCUMENTARY FILMS

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## ABOUT THE ISSUE

The use and abuse of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons is widely considered one of the most pressing domestic human rights issues in the United States today. Until recently, it was also a nearly invisible one.

At least 25,000 individuals are being held in long-term solitary confinement in "supermax" facilities like Virginia's Red Onion State Prison, where the film takes place. According to available data, the total number of men, women, and children living in solitary confinement among all state and federal prisons exceeds 80,000, with tens of thousands more in isolation in local jails, juvenile facilities, and immigration detention centers.

For the people who endure it, life in solitary confinement means spending 22 to 24 hours a day in a cell that measures, on average, 6 x 9 feet, inside supermax prisons or prison units that have made a science out of isolation. Meals generally come through slots in solid steel cell doors, as does any communication with prison staff. Exercise may be permitted for one hour a day, alone, in a fenced or walled "dog run." Individuals in solitary confinement may be denied visits, telephone calls, television, reading materials, and art supplies.

People are sent to solitary not by a judge or a jury, but by correctional staff, as punishment for prison rule violations or because they are considered high-risk. They can remain in isolation for months, years, even decades. A man named Albert Woodfox spent more than 43 years in solitary at Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola, before his release in 2016. In Virginia, people have spent 15 years or more in solitary confinement.

"MY CHEST WAS  
CONSTRICTED  
WATCHING THE FILM. I  
CAN'T BREATHE. I'M  
SORRY, I'M AT A LOSS  
FOR WORDS"

- Glenn E. Martin, Founder,  
JustLeadershipUSA

Far from being reserved for the “worst of the worst,” solitary confinement has become a control strategy of first resort in many prisons. Individuals can be placed in complete isolation for months or years not only for violent acts and escape attempts, but for possessing contraband, testing positive for drugs, ignoring orders, or using profanity.

Still others have ended up in solitary because they have untreated mental illnesses, are children in need of “protection,” are gay or transgender, have unsavory political beliefs, or report rape or abuse by prison officials. In Virginia, a dozen Rastafarian men spent 10 years in solitary because they refused to cut their hair on religious grounds.

Numerous studies have found evidence of the psychological and neurological damage caused by solitary confinement. Symptoms can be similar to those of physical torture, ranging from anxiety, paranoia, and depression to visual and auditory hallucinations, from weight loss and heart palpitations, to headaches, insomnia, and lower levels of brain function.

For those already suffering from or prone to mental illness—which in some prison systems make up nearly half of all people held in solitary—the consequences of isolation can be even worse. Cutting and other forms of self-harm are common, and about 50 percent of all prison suicides take place among the approximately 5 percent of incarcerated individuals held in solitary confinement.

Use of solitary confinement grew over the past 40 years, along with a rise in mass incarceration, despite the fact that solitary confinement has never been shown to decrease prison violence. But in the last five years, a movement against solitary confinement has grown across the country, and the practice has been denounced by figures ranging from President Barack Obama to Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy to Pope Francis, as well as by the United Nations.

“AT NO POINT DOES JACOBSON SUGGEST THESE PRISONERS SHOULD BE SET FREE, THAT THEY'RE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR ACTIONS... BUT IT'S HARD TO WATCH SOLITARY AND COME AWAY BELIEVING THIS SYSTEM DOES ANYONE ANY GOOD.”

*-The Hollywood Reporter*

In the face of mounting evidence against the use of solitary, a number of prison systems—including Virginia's—have begun to reduce their dependence on long-term isolation. Yet for the vast majority of individuals held in solitary confinement, change has yet to come, and their world remains limited to four gray walls.

## THE SOLITARY CELL

AVERAGE SIZE OF A SOLITARY CONFINEMENT CELL:

**6 X 9'**

AVERAGE SIZE OF A PARKING SPACE:

**8 X 16'**

HOURS A DAY PEOPLE IN ISOLATION SPEND INSIDE THEIR CELLS:

**22 - 24**

## FILM SYNOPSIS

100,000 U.S. citizens spend 22 to 23 hours a day in solitary confinement. Hundreds are confined to 8 x 10 foot cells in Virginia's Red Onion State Prison. With unprecedented access, director Kristi Jacobson offers a revealing and moving portrait of life inside solitary confinement, including stories from correction officers who are working to reduce the number of inmates in segregation and intimate reflections from men who are locked up in isolation.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### For Everyone:

- Had you heard, read, or watched anything about the issue of solitary confinement before seeing this film? Considering how frequently it is enforced, why do you think more attention has not been paid to the issue or to people held in solitary?
- In his opening speech, Randall describes his childhood and concludes, "All I've ever known was violence." After seeing the rest of the film, do you think this introduction to Randall affected the way you felt about him and how you judged his subsequent actions? Should it affect those things? Why or why not?

"I KNOW OF NO OTHER FILM  
THAT BRINGS US CLOSER TO  
THE LIFE OF A SUPERMAX  
PRISON AND THE PEOPLE WHO  
LIVE AND WORK THERE."

-Amy Fettig, Senior Staff Counsel for the  
ACLU's National Prison Project and Director  
of its Stop Solitary campaign

- Many of the shots in the film focus on the physical details of the interior of a supermax prison unit, and on the sounds inside it. How did this concentration on physical space and sound make you feel? Why do you think the filmmaker chose to focus on these details?
- Vito says that anyone who says, “I would love to be alone” has not truly experienced being alone—not in the way people in solitary confinement experience it. What do you think of this statement? Are solitude and isolation the same or different? Did seeing the film change the way you think about these terms?

## SOLITARY AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Maximum days a person should be in isolation, according to the UN:

**15**

Days before isolation begins to cause lasting psychological damage:

**15**

Longest period of time a person has been held in solitary, in years:

**43**

- Quincy says that being held at Red Onion is like “being buried alive under the ground,” and supermax prisons have been described as domestic “black sites,” off-limits to the public and the press. Do you think it would change perceptions of and policies about solitary confinement if more people were able to see what went on inside these spaces and talk to the people held there? If so, how and why would it change these things?

# THE NUMBERS

The number of states – plus the federal government – that have dedicated “supermax” prisons to hold entire prison populations in solitary confinement:

**44**

States that practice solitary confinement:

**50**

Estimated number of individuals held in isolation in U.S. prisons and jails:

**80,000 +**

Approximate number of individuals held in long-term solitary in the entire UK:

**50**

- Preliminary research shows that working in, not just imprisonment in, supermax prisons and solitary confinement units can also have harmful effects, though correctional officers don't live in isolation. Why do you think this might be?
- A few scenes in the film show a man who appears to suffer from mental illness, banging his head against the window of his cell door. Do you think people with mental illness belong in solitary confinement? Should they be treated differently from other incarcerated people? Why or why not?



- Neuroscientists have found that the part of the brain that feels loneliness is the same part of the brain that controls physical pain, and Randall says that the extreme loneliness of solitary confinement “hurts like hell.” How do you think the pain of extreme, prolonged isolation compares to physical pain? If you had to be subjected to one or the other, which might you choose?

## THE COST

Housing a prisoner in solitary confinement can cost **2-3** times what it would cost to house them in general population.

Average cost of keeping a person in prison for a year:

**\$25,000**

Average cost of keeping a person in solitary for a year:

**\$75,000**

- Many incarcerated individuals have been placed in solitary for nonviolent prison rule violations. Others are in solitary because they have committed violent acts in prison or tried to escape from prison. Do you think any or all of these people belongs in long-term solitary? Do you think the people featured in the film belong there? Can you explain your responses?

- The 8th Amendment to the Constitution bans “cruel and unusual punishment,” but most federal courts have failed to find the practice of long-term solitary confinement unconstitutional. Do you agree or disagree with this decision? Why?
- In 2011, the United Nations’ leading expert on torture, Juan E. Méndez, stated that more than 15 days in solitary confinement can amount to torture. After seeing the film, do you believe that prolonged isolation constitutes torture? Why or why not?
- There are about 80,000 people in solitary confinement in U.S. prisons on any given day, and at least 25,000 are in long-term isolation. In most European countries, only a few dozen people are held in long-term solitary. What reasons can you think of for the difference in how often solitary is used in the United States as opposed to other Western industrialized nations?
- People in solitary are often denied phone calls, visits, television, radio, and sometimes reading materials and art supplies. Do you believe this is appropriate? Why or why not?
- The film begins with beautiful footage of the tranquil Virginia woods, and it returns to the woods near the end—only to abruptly cut back to the supermax. Why do you think the filmmaker made the choice to end the film this way? What impact did this sequence have on your thoughts and emotions?
- Solitary confinement has been linked to higher rates of recidivism—people returning to prison—especially when they have been released directly from solitary to the streets. Why do you think this might be the case? How might solitary confinement affect the families and communities of previously incarcerated people?

- Virginia is one of a number of states that has instituted a “step-down” program to transition people from solitary back into the general prison population. Do you think step-down programs are a good idea? Why do you think some individuals, such as Michael from the film, might end up back in solitary?
- The film makes clear that many people who work at Red Onion do so because the local coal mines have shut down and jobs are scarce. Why do you think being a correctional officer might not be someone’s first choice for a job? What makes the job a particularly difficult one?

For Correctional Staff:

- Have you ever worked in a supermax prison or a solitary confinement unit? Did the film reflect your own experiences of working in this environment? How was it similar or different?
- Working in a supermax can be the source of physical and psychological difficulties for staff. Can you describe some of the challenges of working in this environment? Are there changes to be made that might make your work less difficult?

For Currently or Formerly Incarcerated People:

- Have you spent any time in solitary confinement? Did the film reflect your own experience? How was it similar or different?
- Did you find it difficult or painful to watch the film? What impact do you think solitary confinement had on you personally? How would you change the system to make it less damaging to people in prison?

For Advocates:

- Even advocates working on the issue of solitary confinement are seldom allowed to see the inside of a supermax prison. How did the film add to or change your understanding of what that environment is like?
- What did you take away from the film that you might want to convey to the public, to policymakers, and to the press about the issue of solitary confinement?

“REFUSING TO SHY AWAY FROM HARSH TRUTHS...*SOLITARY* OFFERS A COMPLICATED PORTRAIT OF 21ST-CENTURY CRIME AND PUNISHMENT.”

*-Variety*

# HOW TO GET INVOLVED

## **Sign and share [this statement against prolonged solitary confinement](#)**

### **Visit a prison in your community**

Prisons are among the least transparent institutions in the United States, despite the fact that they are supported by taxpayers and return approximately 95 percent of their residents to our communities. Check out [Vera Institute of Justice's Prison Visiting Week Initiative](#) and contact a prison in your region to learn more about conditions of confinement in your community.

### **Join a solitary event**

Join in coordinated actions on the 23rd of every month, representing the 23 or more hours people spend in their solitary cell every day. Get involved by participating in and hosting events in your community on the 23rd of the month. For ideas and information on past and future events, or to submit your event, visit [www.togethertoendsolitary.org](http://www.togethertoendsolitary.org).

### **Organize a screening and discussion.**

Get together with friends, neighbors, or colleagues to show and discuss SOLITARY or plan a screening for your organization, school, or faith community. For information on screening the film, contact the filmmakers at [solitaryfilm@catalyst-films.com](mailto:solitaryfilm@catalyst-films.com). To arrange for an expert or a survivor of solitary confinement to speak at your screening, contact Jean at [jcasella@solitarywatch.com](mailto:jcasella@solitarywatch.com) or Amy at [afettig@aclu.com](mailto:afettig@aclu.com). To learn how your faith community can get involved, contact Laura at [ldownton@nrca.org](mailto:ldownton@nrca.org).

### **Learn more about solitary confinement.**

Explore the resources provided in this guide. For weekly updates on the issue with news, commentary, and the voices of people held in solitary confinement, sign up to receive emails from Solitary Watch at [www.solitarywatch.com](http://www.solitarywatch.com).

### **Join—or start—a campaign in your state.**

The American Civil Liberties Union's "Stop Solitary" project has a National Campaign Strategist who can refer you to existing solitary confinement reform efforts and organizations in your state or can help you join with others to lay the groundwork for a state-based campaign to reform solitary confinement. Contact Amy at [afettig@aclu.org](mailto:afettig@aclu.org) for more information.

### **Write to someone in solitary.**

Solitary Watch's "Lifelines to Solitary" program connects volunteer pen pals with people in solitary confinement, for whom letters are a life-sustaining connection to the outside world. For more information about becoming a correspondent, visit [www.solitarywatch.com/about-lifelines/](http://www.solitarywatch.com/about-lifelines/) or contact Marlies at [marlies@solitarywatch.com](mailto:marlies@solitarywatch.com).

### **Make a donation.**

All of the advocacy organizations listed in the Resources section of this guide depend upon donations from concerned citizens to support their work.

### **Sign up**

Sign up to receive news, event invites, and action alerts from the Prison Fellowship advocacy team about justice reform in your state and Congress [here](#). You can also find out how to become an advocate in your state [here](#).

“THE FILM GIVES MORE INSIGHT INTO THE DAILY ROUTINE OF PRISONERS AND HOW THEY VIEW THEIR SITUATION THAN ANY OTHER FILM I HAVE EVER SEEN”

- Jamie Fellner, Senior Advisor, US Program at Human Rights Watch.

# RESOURCES

## Advocacy Organizations

ACLU Stop Solitary Project

[www.aclu.org/stop-solitary-dangerous-overuse-solitary-confinement-united-states](http://www.aclu.org/stop-solitary-dangerous-overuse-solitary-confinement-united-states)

Center for Constitutional Rights

[ccrjustice.org/solitary-factsheet](http://ccrjustice.org/solitary-factsheet)

Incarcerated Nation Corporation

[incarceratednation.org/inc/](http://incarceratednation.org/inc/)

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

[www.nrcaat.org/torture-in-us-prisons](http://www.nrcaat.org/torture-in-us-prisons)

New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement

[nycaic.org/](http://nycaic.org/)

California Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity

[prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/](http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/)

Solitary Watch

[solitarywatch.com/](http://solitarywatch.com/)

Prison Fellowship

[www.prisonfellowship.org/](http://www.prisonfellowship.org/)

Vera Institute of Justice

[www.vera.org/](http://www.vera.org/)

Stop Solitary for Kids Campaign  
[www.stopsolitaryforkids.org/](http://www.stopsolitaryforkids.org/)

Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative  
[www.safealternativestosegregation.org/](http://www.safealternativestosegregation.org/)

Uptown People's Law Center  
[uplcchicago.org/](http://uplcchicago.org/)

### Articles

Rachel Aviv (2017). "How Albert Woodfox Survived Solitary." *The New Yorker*, January 16: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/16/how-albert-woodfox-survived-solitary>

Katie Rose Quandt and Jack Denton (2016). "At Virginia's Supermax Prisons, Isolation and Abuse Persist Despite Reforms." *Solitary Watch*, August 4: <http://solitarywatch.com/2016/08/04/at-virginias-supermax-prisons-isolation-and-abuse-persist-despite-reforms/>

Jean Casella and James Ridgeway (2016). "A Brief History of Solitary Confinement." *Longreads*, February 9: <https://longreads.com/2016/02/09/a-brief-history-of-solitary-confinement/>

Barack Obama (2016). "Why We Must Rethink Solitary Confinement." *Washington Post*, January 26: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/barack-obama-why-we-must-rethink-solitary-confinement/2016/01/25/29a361f2-c384-11e5-8965-0607e0e265ce\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.bba5c138b38e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/barack-obama-why-we-must-rethink-solitary-confinement/2016/01/25/29a361f2-c384-11e5-8965-0607e0e265ce_story.html?utm_term=.bba5c138b38e)

Christie Thompson (2015). "From Solitary to the Street." *The Marshall Project*, June 11: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/06/11/from-solitary-to-the-street/>



Shane Bauer (2012). "Solitary in Iran Nearly Broke Me. Then I Went Inside America's Prisons." Mother Jones, November/December 2012 issue: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/10/solitary-confinement-shane-bauer>

Colin Dayan (2012). "Destroying the Soul." Washington Post, July 5: [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-07-05/opinions/35489456\\_1\\_solitary-confinement-prisoners-supermax](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-07-05/opinions/35489456_1_solitary-confinement-prisoners-supermax)

Andrew Cohen (2012). "An American Gulag: Descending into Madness at Supermax." The Atlantic, June 18: <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/06/an-american-gulag-descending-into-madness-at-supermax/258323/>

James Ridgeway and Jean Casella (2010). "Locking Down the Mentally Ill: Solitary Confinement Cells Have Become America's New Asylums." Crime Report, February 17: <http://thecrimereport.org/2010/02/18/locking-down-the-mentally-ill/>

Atul Gawande (2009). "Hellhole: Is Long-Term Solitary Confinement Torture?" The New Yorker, March 30: [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/30/090330fa\\_fact\\_gawande](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/30/090330fa_fact_gawande).

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams (2016) "The Link Between Race and Solitary Confinement" The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/race-solitary-confinement/509456/>

## Books

Keramet Reiter (2017). *23/7: Pelican Bay Prison and the Rise of Long-Term Solitary Confinement*. Yale University Press: <http://yalebooks.co.uk/display.asp?k=9780300211467>

Jean Casella, James Ridgeway, and Sarah Shourd, editors (2016). *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. The New Press: <http://solitarywatch.com/new-book-hell-is-a-very-small-place-voices-from-solitary-confinement/>

Sharon Shalev (2008). *Sourcebook on Solitary Confinement*. London School of Economics/Mannheim Centre on Criminology: <http://solitaryconfinement.org/>

## Videos

"6 x 9: A Virtual Experience of Solitary Confinement" (2016). The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2016/apr/27/6x9-a-virtual-experience-of-solitary-confinement>

*Breaking Down the Box* (2015). National Religious Campaign Against Torture: <http://www.nrnat.org/torture-in-us-prisons/breaking-down-the-box>

*Solitary Nation* (2014). PBS Frontline: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/solitary-nation/>

*The Gray Box* (2012). Susan Greene/The Ochberg Society: <https://vimeo.com/35551708>

## Reports

The Sentencing Project: Race & Justice News: Black Women Overrepresented in Solitary Confinement

Yale Law School: Aiming to Reduce Time-In-Cell: Reports from Correctional Systems on the Numbers of Prisoners in Restricted Housing and on the Potential of Policy Changes to Bring About Reforms

## ABOUT THE FILM TEAM

### **Kristi Jacobson, Director and Producer**

Kristi is a New York-based filmmaker whose films capture nuanced, intimate, and provocative portrayals of individuals and communities. Her film, *A Place at the Table* (Participant Media/Magnolia Pictures), was called “one of the most important...and gripping non-fiction films to debut in some time” by Indiewire. It premiered at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival before its theatrical release in more than 35 U.S. cities. The film examines the shocking paradox of hunger in the wealthiest nation on earth through the very personal stories of three American families who face food insecurity daily. It won the International Documentary Association’s Pare Lorentz Award and was nominated for Best Feature Documentary by the Producers Guild of America. Her previous films include the critically acclaimed *Toots*, which was winner of the National Board of Review’s 2007 Top Documentary Award and was voted 100% Fresh on Rotten Tomatoes, and *American Standoff* (HBO), produced by two-time Oscar winner Barbara Kopple. Jacobson is a member of the Director’s Guild of America, is a member of NYWIFT, and is a two-time Sundance Creative Producing Fellow. She is a recipient of grants from Tribeca Film Institute, Sundance Institute, Bertha Foundation, and many others, and, most recently is a 2016 recipient of the Chicken & Egg Breakthrough Award, which aims to support filmmakers in continuing to be strong advocates for urgent issues.

### **Julie Goldman, Producer**

Julie founded Motto Pictures in 2009. She is an Emmy Award-winning producer and an executive producer of documentary feature films. Julie was producer of *Life, Animated* and executive producer of *Weiner*, which both premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival. *Life, Animated* won the U.S. Documentary Directing Award and will be released by The Orchard. *Weiner* won the U.S. Documentary Grand Jury Prize and was acquired by IFC Films and Showtime. Julie was executive producer of *3 ½ Minutes*, *Ten Bullets*, and *Best of Enemies* which both premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival and were shortlisted for the 2016 Academy Award. Julie also executive produced *The Kill Team* and *Art and Craft*, both released by Oscilloscope and shortlisted for the 2015 Academy Award. She produced three films that premiered in the U.S. Documentary Competition at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival: *Gideon's Army*, *Manhunt*, and the Oscar-shortlisted *God Loves Uganda*, as well as several other films, including *The Great Invisible*, which won the SXSW Grand Jury Prize and was released by RADiUS TWC; *A Place at the Table*, which was released by Magnolia Pictures; and the Oscar-shortlisted *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*. Julie produced *Buck*, winner of the Sundance Documentary Audience Award, which was shortlisted for an Academy Award and was one of 2011's top five highest-grossing documentaries. She consulted on the Academy Award-winning *The Cove* and produced the Oscar-shortlisted *Sergio*.

### **Katie Mitchell, Producer**

Katie is an Australian filmmaker and lawyer based in Brooklyn, New York. Her documentaries have played at festivals across Australia and abroad, including the Raindance Film Festival and the London International Documentary Festival. She has worked for various human rights and arts organizations, including the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, and she was also Director of Film Programming at the Human Rights Arts and Film Festival. Katie graduated from Monash University, Melbourne, with a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Laws with first class honors. She later completed post-graduate studies in documentary filmmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts.

**David Menschel, Executive Producer**

David is a criminal defense attorney and president of Vital Projects Fund, a charitable foundation that seeks to reform the criminal justice system, with a focus on issues such as death penalty abolition, excessive sentencing, police and prosecutorial accountability, solitary confinement, parole, drug policy reform, and post-9/11 civil liberties. Additionally, he has helped to produce Academy Award-winning and Emmy-nominated documentary films such as *citizenfour*, *The Oath*, *Detropia*, and *War Don Don*. Previously, David was an attorney at the Innocence Project in New York City and legal director of the Innocence Project of Florida, where he helped free individuals who were wrongfully convicted. He is author of "Abolition Without Deliverance: The Law of Connecticut Slavery, 1784-1848," published in the *Yale Law Journal*. Before attending law school, he taught American history to high school students. He received a B.A. from Princeton University ('93) and a J.D. from Yale Law School ('02). He lives in Portland, Oregon.

## FILM PARTNERS



## INCARCERATED NATION

Viewing Guide created by Solitary Watch and Picture Motion. Facts and numbers provided by Solitary Watch.