

Educator | Resource OF THE MONTH

Q&A: Educator Pedagogical Approach

Shedding Light on Solitary Confinement

Moya Atkinson, MSW

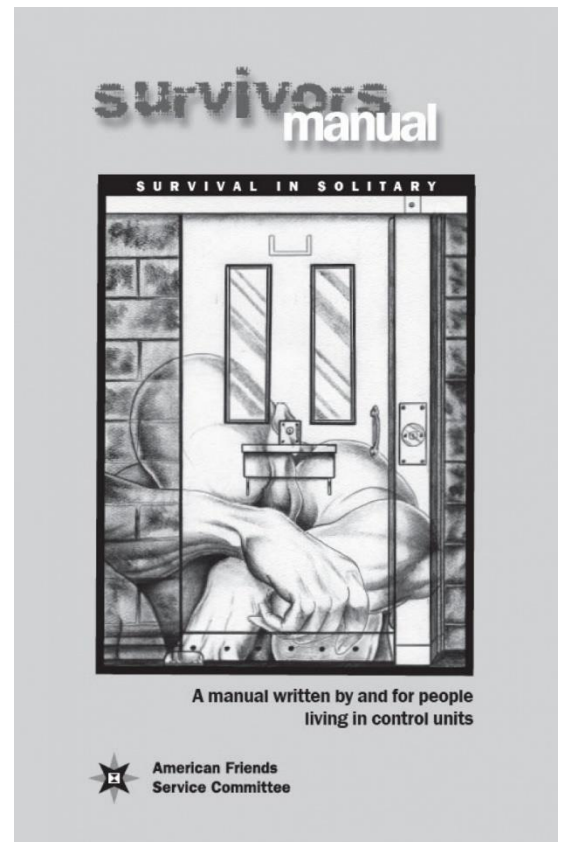
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What approach to teaching about solitary confinement, and incarceration more broadly, do you recommend?

The most powerful teaching approach is experiential, namely involvement in relevant activities coupled with reflection. Following are some learning opportunities for students that we recommend.

Involvement and Observation

1. Witness the prison environment. Take part in a correctional facility tour: visit a prison, jail, or detention center. Some jails offer educational tours to college and university classes at the request of the professor. See, for example, information from the [Orange County Corrections Department](#) in Florida, and the [Strafford County Department of Correction](#) in New Hampshire.
2. Write letters to incarcerated people. See [Letters from Solitary](#) by Solitary Watch. Another excellent resource is the [Prison and Justice Writing Program](#), which is part of PEN America, an organization that promotes the intersection of literature and human rights. Set up opportunities to interview returning citizens who were formerly incarcerated.
3. Experience solitary confinement virtually. *The Guardian* offers [6x9: A virtual experience of solitary confinement](#), which places you inside a U.S. solitary confinement prison cell.
4. Get involved in efforts by organizations that advocate for issues of solitary confinement and for the improvement of the justice system:



- [American Civil Liberties Union](#)
 - [The Vera Institute of Justice](#)
 - [The Center for Constitutional Rights](#)
 - [The Marshall Project](#) (Abolition Resources)
 - [Prison Policy Initiative](#)
 - [Center for Prison Reform](#) (Explore their extensive [list of organizations](#), including those for currently and formerly incarcerated people and for their families.)
5. Seek internships with organizations that work toward justice, some with stipends, such as the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), [Solitary Watch](#), the [American Friends Service Committee](#), and the [Correctional Association of New York](#).
6. Learn first-hand how the judicial system works. The Constitution and court tradition give citizens a right of access to court proceedings. Visit a federal court and observe a court in session. Check the court calendar online or at the courthouse and watch a proceeding.

Reflection and Discussion

1. Use the [Five-part Toolkit created by Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement \(SWASC\)](#), which provides contemplation points, resources, and calls to action:
 - [Toolkit #1: What is Solitary Confinement?](#)
 - [Toolkit #2: Psychological, Physical and Societal Consequences of Solitary Confinement](#)
 - [Toolkit #3: Dual Loyalty in Solitary Confinement](#)
 - [Toolkit #4: Alternative Policy to Solitary Confinement](#)
 - [Toolkit #5: Do We Have a Right to Torture Prisoners and Violate their Human Rights?](#)
2. Read first-hand accounts and stories of those affected by solitary confinement and incarceration and examine the issues that affect them:
 - [Survivor's Manual—By and For People Living in Solitary Confinement](#), a collection of letters, poetry and practical advice on surviving solitary confinement in prisons. It is edited by social worker Bonnie Kerness, coordinator of the American Friends Service Committee's [Prison Watch Program](#). About 1,000 copies are sent to prisons every year.
 - [Hell is a Very Small Place](#), considered the first major trade book on solitary confinement, brings together first-hand accounts of life in solitary with analyses by leading experts. The book is edited by [Jean Casella](#) and [James Ridgeway](#), co-directors of [Solitary Watch](#), and [Sarah Shourd](#). (See the companion [reading guide](#).)
 - [Prison Legal News](#) (PLN), a project of the [Human Rights Defense Center](#), is produced by and for U.S. current and former prisoners. PLN is an independent monthly magazine that provides reviews and analyses of prisoners' rights, court rulings, and news.

3. Watch the three-video series, *Shedding Light on Solitary Confinement* and form discussion groups using the companion [discussion guide](#).

Video 1: [Solitary Confinement as Torture](#) (13:45)

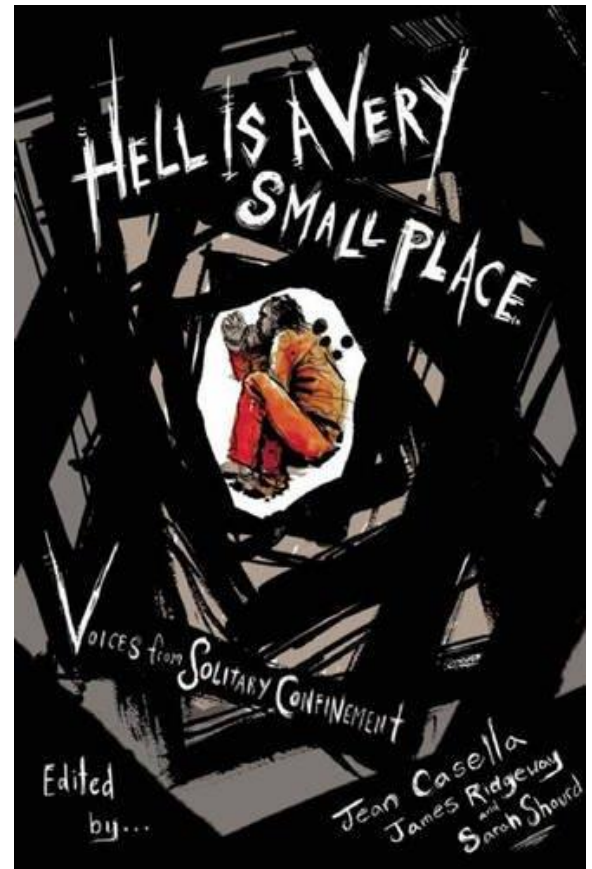
Video 2: [The Dual Loyalty Conflict for Healthcare Professionals](#) (20:01)

Video 3: [The Limits of Reform, the Need for Abolition](#) (17:44)

4. Discuss issues of [ethics and dual loyalty conflicts](#) for social workers and health professionals who work in solitary confinement settings, in which, from a human rights perspective, the treatment of prisoners is considered a form of torture. According to [Physicians for Human Rights](#), dual loyalty conflicts arise from their professional duties to the patient and subordination of the patients' interests to the state, thus risking violating the patient's human rights. Helpful resources:

- [“The Ethical Conflicts of Working in Solitary Confinement,”](#) by Dr. Ali Winters
- [Working in Prison, I Witnessed the Inhumane Conditions of Solitary for Incarcerated Women,](#) by Dr. Ali Winters
- [Dual Loyalty & Human Rights In Health Professional Practice: Proposed Guidelines & Institutional Mechanisms,](#) a project of Physicians for Human Rights and the School of Public Health and Primary Health Care, University of Cape Town, South Africa
- *Double Bound: Dual Loyalty Dilemmas of Prison Health Professionals* (20 min. video), produced by Martha Davis, Ian Hansen, and Alice LoCicero, available May 15, 2020, at [PsySR.com](#)
- [Usual Cruelty: The Complicity of Lawyers in the Criminal Injustice System,](#) by Alec Karakatsanis, a related resource on professional conflicts involving incarceration

As you discuss these ethical dilemmas, consider the structural conditions that generate them. Read [Understanding Mass Incarceration: A People's Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time](#), by James Kilgore, which describes the massive injustices inherent in the U.S. incarceration system, and the article in *The Nation*, [What Is Prison Abolition?](#) which covers the movement toward the total dismantling of the prison system “to break the self-perpetuating cycle of violence and imprisonment.”



Tell us about the organization that you helped found, Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement.

[Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement](#) (SWASC) aims to combat and abolish the use of solitary confinement in the United States and seeks the support of social workers in its fight against this social injustice. Visit the SWASC [Web page](#) for extensive resources and information on the organization's education and advocacy work.

SWASC was co-founded by social worker [Mary Buser](#), LCSW and myself in October 2014 and is now a chapter of the [Social Welfare Action Alliance](#). SWASC was prompted by an Op-ed written by Mary, titled "Solitary's Mockery of Human Rights" and published in the *Washington Post* in 2014. Mary was formerly an assistant mental health chief on Rikers Island and is the author of [Lockdown on Rikers: Shocking Stories of Abuse and Injustice at New York's Notorious Jail](#). Here are a few stories related to SWASC's advocacy:

[From Solitary to Sunshine—A Ray of Hope in a Rocky Mountain Prison](#)

By Mary Buser, 1/22/2019

In early December 2018 a group of SWASC advocates and Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement members from New York—Mary Buser, Victor Pate, Moya Atkinson, and Ali Winters—journeyed to Colorado to observe the publicized reforms to solitary confinement that the state has implemented over the past few years. As guests of Rick Raemisch, the reform-minded executive director of the Colorado Department of Corrections, the 2-day excursion included visits to several correctional facilities.

["Opinion | Why We Ended Long-Term Solitary Confinement in Colorado"](#)

Rick Raemisch, Op-ed Contributor, *The New York Times*, Oct. 12, 2017

For years, the Colorado corrections system had a ready answer for inmates it wanted to punish. For almost any reason—smuggling drugs, talking back to a corrections officer, assaulting another prisoner—it would send an inmate to a cell the size of a parking spot. The inmate would stay there, alone, at least 22 hours a day, for 2.5 years on average, but sometimes for decades. This is called "administrative segregation," and shortly after I became Colorado's head of corrections in 2013, I began to ask why we were doing it.

[Prison Rights Advocates on Isolation: 'This Is Torture' \(Video\)](#)

January 23, 2018

Bonnie Kerness, SWASC partner and coordinator of the Prison Watch Program, American Friends Service Committee, and Ojore Lutalo, a former prisoner at the New Jersey State Prison are interviewed by Truthdig columnist Chris Hedges on the U.S. prison system and the abuse of inmates through solitary confinement. Kerness explains that her investigation into Lutalo's case, after he reached out to her in 1986, led her to realize that isolation is often used not just as punishment but as a "personal dungeon." Lutalo spent 22 years of his 28-year sentence in solitary confinement.

Contributor



[Moya Atkinson](#), MSW, co-founder and steering committee member of Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement, served as liaison with the Council on Social Work Education in the production of this resource. Now retired, she was the executive director of the NASW-Maryland Chapter for nearly 10 years (1993–2002). Ms. Atkinson holds a master's in social work equivalent from Queen's University in Northern Ireland, where she also did her undergraduate studies in German language and literature.

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For a full list of SWASC members, please visit [SWASC: Who We Are](#).

To learn more, please visit [Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement](#) or contact SWASC999@gmail.com.