

RIKERS

AN AMERICAN JAIL

INTERFAITH
DISCUSSION GUIDE

PBS.ORG/RIKERS

RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL is an absorbing new documentary from Bill Moyers, that brings you face to face with people who have endured incarceration at Rikers Island Jail.

Mass incarceration is at an epidemic level in our country. More than 2.3 million people are in prison in the United States. Even though our crime rates mirror many industrial nations, America incarcerates more people than any other nation. The incarceration rate of many countries is less than twenty percent of the U.S. incarceration rate.

What ethical, moral and spiritual questions should our country's incarceration rate—and the human toll it represents—raise for us? And what does the answer to those questions require?

This guide offers ideas for hosting a screening and discussion event to explore these questions. We asked a variety of faith leaders how RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL might help people to consider these issues and we share their insights and their references to help you shape an event that will be most meaningful for your congregation and community.

This Viewer Guide for faith-based organizations emerged from the vision of religious leaders in New York City, their commitment to criminal justice reform and their appreciation of RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL as a catalyst for change. In particular, we want to thank the Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis, senior minister of Middle Collegiate Church, for her passionate leadership as well as Christina Fleming, director of communications at Middle Church, for her generous help in preparing this resource.

During the 18 months we worked on the documentary *RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL*, I kept thinking of what the Hebrew prophets and Jesus of Nazareth might say about the conditions we were learning about in New York City's largest and most notorious jail—one of the ten worst in the country. Among those prophetic exhortations and judgments are some of the most inspiring texts from scripture:

“Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court.” (PROVERBS 22:22)

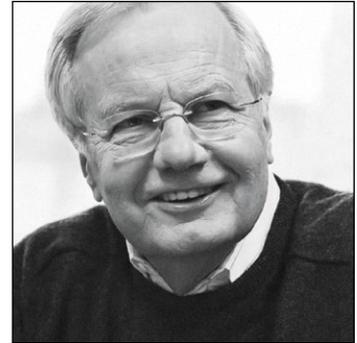
“I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” (ISAIAH 42:6-7)

“‘For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” (MATTHEW 25:35-40)

How relevant those messages are in America today! With five percent of the world's population we contain roughly a quarter of the world's prisoners—2.3 million people locked up out of sight and out of mind. Approximately one million are people of color, prompting the scholar Brian P. Jones to describe our criminal justice system as “the sharpest edge of American racism.” Surely this is one of the greatest moral and racial justice issues of our time. Communities of faith must rise up to grapple with it.

As those of you know who have seen the film, our witnesses are men and women who have spent years

of their lives behind bars. They take us inside the experience of mass incarceration. The film is raw, because life in prison is raw. And it is not just the experience of detainees on one island jail in the East River of New York. At

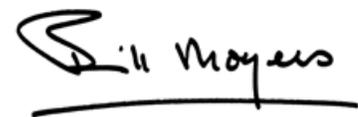


our very first screening of the film at Union Theological Seminary, a former inmate told the overflow audience: “Rikers is every jail, every jail is Rikers.”

In a major study a team of criminologists, lawyers, and statistic researchers at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's School of Law determined that approximately 39% of America's prison population is behind bars unnecessarily. They are no threat and could be released without endangering public safety. As we report in the film, 80% of the detainees at Rikers Island have not been convicted of a crime. Yet some are held there for years. Seventeen-year-old Kalief Browder, for one, was arrested for allegedly stealing a backpack. He was held at Rikers awaiting trial for years, including long periods in solitary confinement, where he was brutalized by guards. At age 20 he was released. One year later he committed suicide.

A bi-partisan movement has been growing to bring an end to the abuses of our criminal justice system, but reform will not come without the prophetic voice of faith communities, moving Americans of conscience to “open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

May this guide and your efforts help America achieve justice and redemption.



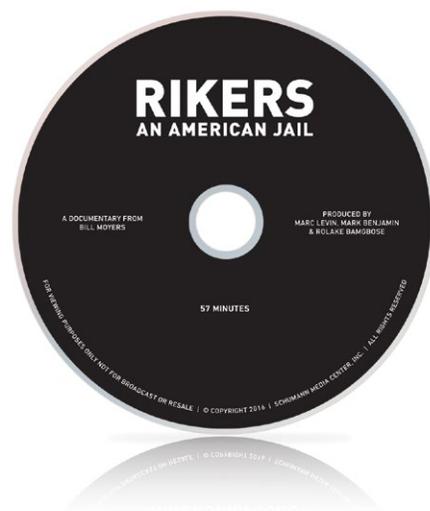
HOSTING A SCREENING

A free DVD is available by contacting doctor@publicsquaremedia.org or you can use the streaming version of the film at pbs.org/rikers.

The guide could be used in:

- An adult education class
- A study group of your faith tradition's holy texts
- An older youth group, college level, or young adult gathering
- A social justice or racial justice group
- A prison ministry group
- An interfaith group
- A civic organization
- An educational series or conference on racism, social justice, or mass incarceration

Viewer discretion is advised. This documentary contains stories of sexual abuse, violence, and profanity, and is not appropriate for all age groups. Please note there is a version of the film available with the profanity edited out that you are welcome to request.



Rev. Andrew Wilkes

ASSOCIATE PASTOR OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
AND YOUNG ADULTS, GREATER ALLEN
A.M.E. CATHEDRAL OF NEW YORK

RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL uses the power of testimony to expose the abhorrent living conditions of former detainees on Rikers Island Jail. It is a pioneering and sacred mosaic of survivors telling their own story, in their own idiom. I screened the film at my church and found it to be not only a resource of political education, but also public art of the highest order. I defy you to watch it and remain unmoved. Jewish communities committed to exercising what Rabbi Abraham Heschel calls moral grandeur and spiritual audacity before injustice can show this film and take subsequent action. Christian communities concerned about what Jesus calls the weightier matters of mercy, faithfulness, and justice should do likewise. Muslim communities inspired

by the moral courage of faith leaders like Linda Sarsour and the Ishmali ideal of planting hope where despair would dominate have reasons to organize a screening. Those committed to the right, the common good, and the bruised but resilient notion of perfecting our union have ethical cause to do the same.

CONSIDER THESE READINGS

- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (the title is from a telegraph that Heschel sent President John F. Kennedy).
- Matthew 23:23.
- His Highness, The Aga Khan, *Where Hope Takes Root*

PLANNING A SCREENING

» Location

Locate a venue that has AV resources so that you can show the film on a good quality screen or TV and have space for discussion following.

» Duration

Plan on two hours for the event to include introductions, viewing the film, and discussion.

» Guest Speakers

If possible, invite individuals working on criminal justice reform from your local or state organizations to come to your event and participate in the discussion after the screening. To identify organizations who might be able to provide speakers, research your city, county or state's resources for criminal justice reform including "speedy trial reform," "bail reform," "jail diversion" and "restorative justice." The local bar association may be able to offer suggestions. Also, consider the resources provided at pbs.org/rikers.



Professor Omid Safi

DIRECTOR, DUKE ISLAMIC STUDIES CENTER, NORTH CAROLINA

A love for God begins with a passionate and urgent concern for the wellbeing of the 'least of God's children.' The Bible and the Qur'an identify these as widows, orphans, strangers, refugees. Today, we'd have to add the millions of disenfranchised human beings in the criminal justice system to the list of the marginalized. We have to make the suffering and vulnerability of these sisters and brothers visible again, if we want to be right with God.

CONSIDER THIS READING

- The righteous are those who, out of love, feed the needy, the orphan, and the captive, saying: We only do this for the sake of beholding the Face of God. Qur'an 76:7-8.

Ideally, start publicizing your screening and discussion three weeks to a month before the event.

It can be particularly meaningful to include participants at your event who have direct experience with incarceration, either through their own criminal justice involvement or that of a family member or neighbor. Those closest to the problem often have valuable insights about what is needed to improve the system and conditions. Also, incarceration can carry a stigma and an opportunity to share these experiences in a welcoming space can be a helpful step in reducing this sense of stigma.

If you want to include people beyond your own group, publicize the screening widely in your community's announcements, bulletins, newsletters, website, and social media. You will find promotional resources at [pbs.org/rikers](https://www.pbs.org/rikers) including a trailer of the film and promotional graphics. Ideally, start publicizing your screening and discussion three weeks to a month before the event.

It is recommended that leaders of the discussion view the film beforehand and visit [pbs.org/rikers](https://www.pbs.org/rikers) to review *Incarceration FAQ* in the *LEARN* section. In particular, it might be helpful to check out regional incarceration statistics for your state and county using these three resources:

PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE STATE RANKINGS

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2016.html>

THE SENTENCING PROJECT STATE BY STATE DATA

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2016.html>

VERA INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE PRETRIAL INCARCERATION RATES

<http://trends.vera.org/incarceration-rates?data=pretrial>

» Materials for the Screening

- Blank index cards and pens or pencils
- Chart paper and marker



Rabbi Rachel Timoner

SENIOR RABBI OF CONGREGATION
BETH ELOHIM, BROOKLYN, NY

In the book of Deuteronomy, we are commanded: "You must not remain indifferent." The great Medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, teaches that this verse means, "Do not avert your eyes as if you did not see." Those of us who have never been to Rikers Island or any jail can live our lives without seeing the suffering of those inside, unaware of the cruelty human beings are enduring in our name. But God and Torah demand that we look and that we see, so that we do not remain indifferent.

RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL gives us a window into the experience of those who've been to Rikers Island and made it out alive. We see in their faces, and hear in their voices, what it's like inside. Once we've seen, we can never be the same. We can never again be indifferent, we can never again avert our eyes and pretend that we did not see. And that is the beginning of taking responsibility, which is what we must do now.

AT THE SCREENING

» Welcome & Introductions

Open with a prayer, if it is your tradition. Poll the audience to create a list of “community agreements” to ensure a space for learning and listening after the film, and write them on chart paper. Examples include: be respectful of the diversity of the opinions and emotions in the room; seek to listen to one another; speak for yourself using “I” statements; invite the extroverts to share the space with those who have not yet spoken so your group may hear many perspectives.

Distribute the index cards and writing tools. Ask people to write their best estimates to these questions before they watch the film. This is an exercise only, so tell people not to feel that they should already know the answer. Plan to share the answers with the audience after viewing the film.

1. Guess what percentage of people in jail have not been convicted of the crime they are charged with?
2. What percentage of the detainees in New York City cannot afford bail?
3. Guess the ratio of correction officers to inmates at Rikers Island Jail?
4. What do you think it costs to keep a person in jail in New York City?
5. Imagine how much we spend as a country for all jails?



**The Rev.
Dr. Jacqui Lewis**

SENIOR MINISTER OF MIDDLE
COLLEGIATE CHURCH, NEW YORK, NY

When Rabbi Jesus begins his ministry, the Gospel of Luke (4:16-22) reports that Jesus went to the temple, as was his custom, and he read from the scroll of Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” When Jesus was finished reading, he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

There has always been something so powerful to me in the urgent proclama-

tion of “today.” It echoes through time, calling women and men to the business of liberation. There are none so in need of liberation as those oppressed incarcerated souls languishing in our prisons. And the violence and unbearable conditions at Rikers Island Jail shame those of us who believe that each human being is awesomely and wonderfully in the image of God. We can scarcely bear to look at these horrific scenes, to hear these terrible stories. But see and hear we must; we must have our hearts broken so that we will engage in the ministry of Rabbi Jesus, the liberating ministry of the Christ.

» **Show the Film (56 minutes)**

» **Discussion after the Film**

In groups of three, share what you are feeling and an insight that you gleaned. (Allow the groups 10 minutes.) Ask one person in the group to make notes.

Share the answers to the questions posed before watching the film. To stimulate participation, you might ask for a show of hands on guesses. For example, on the first question you might say: “How many of you guessed 10-20%? How many guessed 30-40%? How many thought about half?” before you reveal the correct answer. This exercise can establish how many common misconceptions there may be. Ask “Which answers surprised you?” and “Why?”

Guess what percentage of people in jail have not been convicted of the crime they are charged with?

CORRECT ANSWER: Over 60% nationally have not been convicted— at Rikers 78% have not been convicted.

What percentage of the detainees in New York cannot afford bail?

CORRECT ANSWER: 89% cannot afford to post bail, and in almost 40% of cases bail is set at \$1,000 or less.

Guess the ratio of correction officers to inmates in NYC Jails?

CORRECT ANSWER: The ratio is 1 to 1. There is one uniformed officer for every detainee.

What do you think it costs to keep a person in jail in New York City for one year?

CORRECT ANSWER: It costs over \$200,000 dollars per prisoner in New York City jails each year.

Imagine how much we spend as a country for all jails?

CORRECT ANSWER: Local government expenditures for jails total \$22 billion dollars.



**The Rev.
Dr. Serene Jones**

PRESIDENT AND JOHNSTON FAMILY PROFESSOR FOR RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY, UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL is a gripping portrayal of all that is wrong with the system of incarceration in the United States. Cinematically superb, the film grabs our attention from its first frame to the last, through the unscripted but powerfully packaged testimonies of men and women who have been incarcerated inside this infamous New York City jail.

The prophets remind us that if we want to get close to God, then we need to get close to those who are imprisoned and respond to their circumstances with compassion and justice. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus—a convicted criminal—was accompanied by a convicted thief into the eternal fold of his Creator. RIKERS reminds every believer of the task our God has set before us, and of the dire consequences that result when we fail to answer God’s call to care for the prisoner and “to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

CONSIDER THIS READING

- Luke 23:32-43

» **Questions you might explore**

Ask members of the group which of the personal stories resonate most. Or ask the small group leaders to share from their group discussion.

How did the filmmakers’ decision to include only stories directly from former detainees and not government officials, lawyers or other commentary impact your experience of the film?

Rikers Island Jail has been called one of the 10 worst jails in America. Do you think the stories of what goes on there are also true in your community?

What do you think are human, psychological, and spiritual impacts of incarceration that are consistent regardless if the jail is urban or rural or large vs small?

The stories in *RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL* describe mental illness, poverty, racism, violence, sexual assault, the criminal justice system, solitary confinement, and re-entry. Ask what in your faith tradition teaches us how to respond to these issues? You might choose to select one of the suggested readings provided from the faith leaders as a reference for discussion.

In some cultural contexts, the stories of the detainees would be shared as “testimonies.” Are there opportunities in your congregation to share the stories of people impacted by injustice?

In almost every community of faith, there are members or family members who have been or currently are incarcerated, whether we are aware of it or not. Many faith communities reach out to the sick, our elderly or those serving our country. How do you think faith communities could be in relationship with those in jail or prison? How can faith communities be in relationship with the family members of the incarcerated?

Based on the stories you heard, what types of reform do you think is needed? Do you know of organizations in your community that work for reformatory justice, speedy trial reform, or bail reform?

Are there any steps that we as a community could be taking to help? Some suggestions to consider might include:

- Research if there is a local “re-entry program” that assists people who were incarcerated to get on their feet and offer to provide services or help.
- Help to support a family struggling with the impact of incarceration.



Dr. Debbie Almontaser

FOUNDER AND CEO OF BRIDGING CULTURES GROUP INC. • BOARD PRESIDENT OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY NETWORK.

As an American Muslim faith leader and educator, I was horrified and outraged by the timely PBS documentary, *RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL*. We must stand for criminal justice reform, because it is morally and ethically the right thing to do! This film is the call to action for criminal justice reform in the United States.

CONSIDER THESE READINGS

- “O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even if it be against yourselves, our parents, and your relatives, or whether it is against the rich or the poor...” (Quran 4:135)
- “O you who believe, be upright for God, and (be) bearers of witness with justice!...” (Quran 5:8)

AT THE SCREENING

- Find out if there is a “community bail fund” that helps people to make bail while they are awaiting trial. Contribute as a congregation or explore how to start one as a fundraising project.
- Investigate what state or county reform legislation is pending that you could support with a petition drive.
- Reach out to another congregation to explore hosting an interfaith screening event.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you are presenting an ongoing educational series on mass incarceration, here are additional resources:

- Michelle Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*
- Ava Duvernay’s documentary, *13th* on Netflix
- Bryan Stevenson’s book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*
- NPR’s Laura Sullivan’s radio series on the bail industry, “Bonding for Profit”: <http://npr.org/series/122954677/behind-the-bail-bond-system>
- *The New Yorker*’s Jennifer Gonnerman’s reporting on Kalief Browder: <http://www.newyorker.com/topics/kalief-browder-in-the-new-yorker>



Hussein Rashid

FOUNDER, ISLAMICATE, L3C • ADJUNCT PROFESSOR AT BARNARD COLLEGE

As a Muslim, when I hear about prison, I think to the Story of Joseph, told in Chapter 12 of the Qur’an: are we punishing difference, rather than actions, and putting the innocent in jail? Do we seek to turn people to repentance, or are we fulfilling our needs for revenge? One of the clear commandments in the Qur’an is to maintain the balance of justice, and to not give into our own desires and call it justice (55:9, 4:135). We are warned that we can easily corrupt society in the name of public good (2:11). The Qur’an seems to be warning us against our prison industrial complex, exemplified by Rikers Island Jail.



Rabbi Marc J. Margolius

WEST END SYNAGOGUE, NEW YORK, NY • INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH SPIRITUALITY

RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL opens our eyes to the horrific consequences and cruelty of mass incarceration. These

realities violate two foundational Jewish principles. First, every human being is created b’tzelem Elohim, in the Divine Image, and therefore is of inherently equal and infinite value. Second, every human being must engage in a process of teshuvah, usually translated as “repentance” but more literally connoting “turning”—as in turning away from a destructive path and returning to a life of meaning and dignity. Jewish tradition teaches that every person, even one who has made grievous mistakes, must be afforded the opportunity to turn his or her life around. These principles demand a criminal justice system which upholds the innate worth of those who are incarcerated and facilitates the process of turning from destructive behaviors and returning to society as full and equal citizens. Our current system woefully fails

to meet these standards, by demolishing rather than respecting the dignity of the incarcerated, and by perpetuating and deepening rather than stemming cycles of violence. This film introduces us to survivors of this system, whose words and lives offer inspiring models of enduring human dignity and the ever present potential for teshuvah or return.

CONSIDER THESE READINGS

- “A Handbook for Jewish Communities Fighting Mass Incarceration,” edited by Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson and published by T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.
- “Crying Out Against Mass Incarceration,” written for The Jewish Working Group to End the New Jim Crow is a powerful Seder supplement