

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR JUSTLEADERSHIPUSA



**RIKERS**  
AN AMERICAN JAIL

[RIKERSFILM.ORG](http://RIKERSFILM.ORG)



**JLUSA**

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



My first experience at Rikers Island was at the age of 16. I was arrested for shoplifting, and the judge thought that spending 48 hours in jail would teach me a lesson. It did. During those two days, I was stabbed four times. The lesson I began to learn at Rikers was that our criminal justice system was essentially a human grist mill, churning people through its vicious machinery.

This new perspective was solidified when, in my early 20s, I spent a full year at Rikers before being transferred to a prison in Upstate New York to finish my six year sentence. A counselor at the prison encouraged me to go to college—something no one had suggested before—and that ultimately changed my trajectory. When I was at my lowest, both in terms of my circumstances and my own self-esteem, someone saw promise and potential in me.

While serving my sentence, I completed a rigorous academic program and earned a degree. I also met some of America's best and brightest minds, all being caged behind bars, unable to make contributions to their communities and the larger world. I made a promise to myself when I was released that I would not forget the people I was leaving behind and would do something to change our failed criminal justice system.

Those six years taught me that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from resources and power. It's the premise on which I've built JustLeadershipUSA, an organization dedicated to cutting the US correctional population in half by 2030 by empowering people most affected by incarceration to drive policy reform.

At a cost of \$85 billion annually, more than 2.3 million people in the US are locked away, out of sight and largely out of mind. There are an additional 5.6 million people subjected to an often invisible apparatus of correctional supervision. Mass incarceration and criminalization is the most significant domestic threat to the fabric of our democracy.

RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL puts a human face on the experience of mass incarceration, just as you do when you share your story. It empowers people to give voice to their own experiences. Those of you who have been incarcerated at other jails around the country will see your own truth reflected in the stories told. As we say in our #CLOSErikers campaign, "Rikers is every jail, and every jail is Rikers."



We launched our #CLOSErikers campaign because we knew from the people most harmed by the notorious penal colony that it was beyond reform. The only solution was to shutter it once and for all, while making the criminal justice system in New York City smaller, fairer, and more humane. Screenings of this film have produced an extraordinary shared experience and have helped propel our message about the horrors of Rikers into the public consciousness.

As you continue your own advocacy work in your local communities, I invite you to utilize the film as a tool to organize and mobilize people. The power of it transcends the geographic boundaries of New York City. It is my hope that our movement to #CLOSErikers will as well. Together we can imagine a decarcerated America.



**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 political 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 JustLeadershipUSA Leading with Conviction Fellows from across the country as well as members of the #CLOSErikers campaign in New York City how **RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL** might help people to consider these issues and we share their insights to help you shape an event that will be most meaningful for your community.

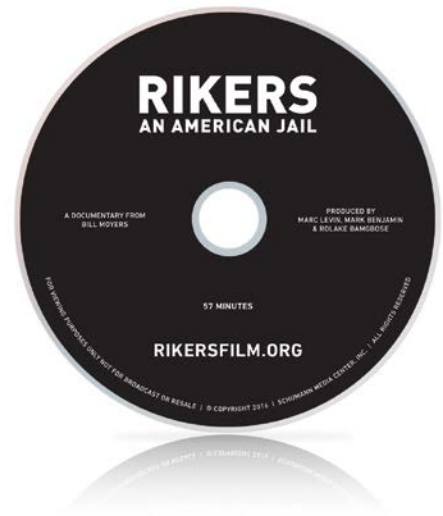
# HOSTING A SCREENING

A free DVD is available by contacting [doctor@publicsquaremedia.org](mailto:doctor@publicsquaremedia.org) or you can use the streaming version of the film at [RIKERSfilm.org](http://RIKERSfilm.org).

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.

The guide could be used to host a screening with:

- A civic organization
- An educational series or conference on racism, social justice, or mass incarceration
- An advocacy organization
- A student group
- A social justice or racial justice group
- A prison ministry group
- An interfaith group



**Romarilyn Ralston**

2017 JLUSA LEADING WITH CONVICTION  
FELLOW, LOS ANGELES, CA

As a “returning citizen” who was released six years ago after serving 23 years in the California Institution for Women, I periodically struggle with overt-sensory stimulation: certain sounds remind me of the prison and activate my fight or flight response. As someone who now works with college students with an incarceration history, the film *RIKERS* reminded me of the many invisible challenges of reintegration—the way that prison stays with you long after your release.

The film is a teaching tool for people who do not have an incarceration experience.

It exposes them to the traumatic and often long-term effects of isolation, violence, and hypersensitivity to sound and smell. *RIKERS* also reminds us that mass incarceration and the American penal system as a whole remains rooted in violence and is therefore inherently inhumane. It exposes the dehumanization of people that takes place in the name of public safety. These stories prove that incarceration is a traumatizing event that chips away at one’s humanity and sanity. But I am also reminded that the human spirit is resilient and those of us who have been through the system can fight to change it.

# PLANNING A SCREENING

## » Location

Locate a venue that has AV resources so that you can show the film on a good quality screen 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 other individuals and groups working with you on criminal justice reform to your discussion after the screening.

It can be particularly meaningful to include other 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. We know that 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, especially on social media. You will find promotional resources at [RIKERSfilm.org](http://RIKERSfilm.org) including a trailer of the film and promotional graphics. Ideally, start publicizing your screening and discussion three weeks to a month before the event.



**Mark Rice**

2017 JLUSA LEADING WITH CONVICTION FELLOW, MILWAUKEE, WI

Several of the stories that I heard while watching *RIKERS* resonated with me. The state of Wisconsin forced me to spend two years in its state prison system. I have also been incarcerated in several jails. My experience was similar in many ways to the experiences of those who have been incarcerated at Rikers. The conditions in many of the institutions I was at were also cruel and unusual. Fights, suicide attempts, self-mutilation, and abuse from corrections officers were not uncommon in these facilities.

I am currently working as an organizer for EXPO (EX-Prisoners Organizing), an organization led by formerly incarcerated people that is working to end mass incarceration in Wisconsin. *RIKERS* has the potential to be a valuable tool for convenings that could move a variety of audiences in Wisconsin into action to transform the penal system. I have been involved with several screenings of the *53206* documentary which examines how mass incarceration has negatively impacted people in this Milwaukee zip code. The screenings of this documentary have helped to build the movement for change in Wisconsin just as *RIKERS* could in NYC and beyond.

*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 [RIKERSfilm.org](http://RIKERSfilm.org) to review “Incarceration FAQs” in the LEARN section. In addition to statistics you already have, 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



**Colette Payne**

2016 JLUSA LEADING WITH CONVICTION FELLOW, CHICAGO, IL

After watching *RIKERS*, I thought about my many experiences in Illinois Cook County Jail. There is one in particular that I will never forget. I was so sick from withdrawal that I could barely stand up. I was so cold. I had a jacket with a hood attached, but an officer yelled, “No hoods!” I heard her, but in that moment that the order was given, I could only think about how cold I was. Before I knew it, my jacket was snatched off of me and tossed in a corner, and I was thrown in a separate cell from the other ladies and had to wait until the officers changed shifts to be processed and fed.

This film can be used as a tool to challenge assumptions and offer a new perspective. Most importantly, it can be used to mobilize people to create positive policy changes. As we continue to recruit people in Illinois to become involved in our legislative agenda to improve laws that impact people with criminal records, the film humanizes the very people we are fighting for in a powerful way.

# AT THE SCREENING

## » Welcome & Introductions

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. 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 detainee in jail in New York City?
5. Imagine how much we spend as a country for all jails?



**Darren Mack**

#CLOSERIKERS CAMPAIGN MEMBER,  
NEW YORK CITY

It’s been over two decades since I was incarcerated on New York City’s notorious penal colony, Rikers Island. While I was viewing the documentary *RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL*, it triggered all the dehumanization I encountered there as a teenager. This film unveils the core of what is rotten, not only in the Big Apple, but in every major city jail in our country. The fear, pain, and brutality that exists on Rikers is conveyed through the voices of its survivors.

In the early 1990s, when the population peaked at 23,000 detainees, I spent 19 months on Rikers. With crime in New

York City now at record lows, and a more than 50% reduction in its jail population, the question that kept crossing my mind as I watched this film was: how could the same inhumane conditions and brutality continue to exist? It’s why our #CLOSERikers campaign is demanding that the jail complex be shuttered—not in ten years, but now. This film has helped us to propel that idea into the consciousness of people in New York City and across the country. If *RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL* doesn’t shock, anger, or move your heart in some manner, then check your pulse.

» **Show the Film (56 minutes)**

» **Discussion after the Film**

Ask your group to gather into smaller groups of three, to share what they are feeling and an insight that they gleaned with one another. (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?”

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**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.

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**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.

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**Guess the ratio of correction officers to inmates at Rikers Island Jail?**

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

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**What do you think it costs to keep a detainee 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.

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

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



**Anna Pastoressa**

#CLOSERIKERS CAMPAIGN MEMBER,  
NEW YORK CITY

On October 25, 2010 my son was incarcerated on Rikers Island where he spent six years waiting for trial. During those long years of pre-trial incarceration he endured physical and mental abuse, torture, violence, depression, and despair. As a visitor I witnessed and was subjected to some of the abuse—enough to get a taste of the system of violence on Torture Island. While watching *RIKERS* and the stories of the people featured in it, I saw my son’s own story reflected.

Tens of thousands of people—mostly people of color—cycle through Rikers every year, and they are treated like substandard humans, being provoked, mistreated, humiliated, punished with all sorts of abuse. The buildings, the cells, and even the visiting rooms on Rikers Island are falling apart. There are roof leaks dripping dirty water and debris while mold grows on the walls and ceilings, causing breathing and health problems.

This film has helped to shine a light on these abuses that have for too long been hidden from the outside world. It has helped us to increase the visibility of our #CLOSErikers campaign and build the power to demand that it is time to close Rikers Island!



» 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?

» Share your background

Take a few minutes to describe your own experience with incarceration, how it was similar and/or different from the stories in the film. Explain your local activism and how you became involved with JustLeadershipUSA.

The stories in *RIKERS: AN AMERICAN JAIL* describe mental illness, poverty, racism, violence, sexual assault, solitary confinement, and re-entry. What are some ways that our community could better address these issues?

Based on the stories you heard, what types of reform do you think is needed?

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.
- 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 religious institutions in your community to explore hosting an interfaith screening event.



**Lewis Conway, Jr.**

2017 JLUSA LEADING WITH CONVICTION FELLOW, AUSTIN, TX

The film *RIKERS* reveals the routine brutality experienced by people in jails and prisons across the country. Sanctioned violence is woven into the fabric of Rikers Island as it is in every jail, in every city in America. The voices of those who were caged on that godforsaken island speak to the atrocities that are tucked away in the shadows at every jail across the country.

I was 21 years, 4 months and 3 days old when I was charged with murder. I was housed on a cellblock with other young men my age with similar charges, and the violence was de rigueur. The more violent you were, the more power you had. Like many others in the movie, I resorted to violence as a form of survival; reverting back to the behavior that landed me there in the first place.

*RIKERS* reminded me of the sights, the sounds, the smells of jail and that vast emotional vacuum I languished in for 8 years. The movie tells the story of a jail, an American jail, that is indicative of the work that must be done in Texas and around the country to reform our criminal justice system.

## AT THE SCREENING

Describe your local advocacy efforts and, if relevant, how they connect to JustLeadershipUSA's mission of cutting the US correctional population in half by 2030. Share examples of how audience members can get involved.

## 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>

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## JOIN THE CONVERSATION

#CLOSErikers #RIKERSfilm

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## VISIT

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