ISSUE BRIEF #1: RIKERS ISLAND IS A TOXIC PENAL COLONY

Rikers is neither a single prison nor a single jail. It is the last remaining penal colony in the United States. It remains a stain on New York City and must be closed forever.

Rikers Island, a complex of ten jails (6 active, 4 vacant)\(^1\) with over 14,700 jail beds,\(^2\) has been used to incarcerate people since the 1930s. Before that, the island was owned for over 200 years by the Ryker family [later changed to Riker] - the most notorious member of whom was Richard Riker. Through his position overseeing the City's criminal courts, Riker led a group of officials who came to be known as the Kidnapping Club. They conspired to sell free Black men, accused of being fugitive slaves, to the South without due process.\(^3\) The entire 413 acre island is controlled by the New York City Department of Correction, which at one time detained over 20,000 people there. In 2016, when the #CLOSErikers campaign launched, Mayor de Blasio was planning to build another jail on Rikers.\(^4\) Almost all of the more than 4,700 people held in the custody of the New York City Department of Corrections (as of November 2020) are held on Rikers Island.\(^5\) Approximately 94% of people jailed there are awaiting trial or a parole hearing. 87% are Black or Latinx.\(^6\)

The problem with Rikers is Rikers. Rikers cannot be reformed. It must be closed. Every day that it remains open, New Yorkers are subjected to more harm.

Isolation - Rikers Island is accessible by only one long bridge and one City bus line. This isolation means public defenders and social workers, juggling many cases, struggle to make time to travel to Rikers to meet with their clients.\(^7\) Family members must devote an entire day for a brief visit to their loved ones due to difficulty getting to the island, the multiple security processes they must go through, and the wait for shuttles and escorts to move people around the island. They may also arrive at the island only to learn that their loved one's housing unit is on lock-down. Banishing people who are accused of crimes to a distant island fuels the idea that they should be harshly punished and kept far away from their families and communities.

Toxic land - Rikers Island was only 87 acres\(^8\) when it was first designated to become New York City's primary jail site.\(^9\) It was expanded to over 400 acres using garbage - and prison labor from Blackwell's Island. Today, the decomposing landfill emits toxic methane gas that threatens the health of the people who are held there and who work there.\(^10\)

Condition of the buildings - The jails on Rikers Island are decades old, and even the ones that are newer are in poor condition. Because the buildings sit on decomposing landfill, the ground underneath them shifts, causing cracks in the walls and ceilings. Most contain asbestos and mold. Most cell blocks lack air conditioning, or adequate electrical wiring to install it. People incarcerated at Rikers frequently report insect and rodent infestations, and faulty plumbing including discolored water and broken toilets.\(^11\) It is often reported that officers who work there don't drink the water.\(^12\)

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**Capacity** - As long as Rikers Island remains in the control of the Department of Correction, New York City will have over 400 acres devoted to incarceration, and the ability to build more jails or expand capacity there with little public approval required. New York City does not need an entire island, with almost 15,000 jails beds, to lock up New Yorkers.12

**Culture of violence** - The isolation of Rikers has thwarted oversight efforts, and has enabled a culture of impunity to take hold. In 2014, Federal prosecutors sued the City of New York16 over what a Justice Department investigation called a “pervasive and deep-seated culture of violence.” In May 2020, a Federal Court-appointed Monitor reported that there has been a 105% increase since 2016 in incidents of use of force1⁷ by New York City correction officers against people in their custody. Women on Rikers are subjected to rates of sexual violence nearly three times higher than the national average.18

A note on jail capacity and Covid-19: While New York City operates a jail system with thousands of empty beds,2⁰ Covid-19 still poses a great risk to people on Rikers, and all NYC jails. Decades of grassroots organizing in New York City have moved us to the point where there are about 10,000 empty jail beds on Rikers, and filling them is not politically viable. But the congregate settings of jail dorms, shared bathrooms, dayrooms, and mess halls, combined with limited access to PPE and cleaning supplies, and negligence by the Department of Correction, means people in custody are still very much at risk. Releasing more people continues to be urgent.21

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1 The four vacant jails on Rikers Island are the James A. Thomas Center, the George Motchan Detention Center, the Eric M. Taylor Center, and (as of November 2020) the Otis Bantum Correctional Center.
4 New York City Breaks Ground on a New Jail on Rikers Island. December 18, 2013.
5 New York City jails adjacent to each county courthouse have all been closed over time. See Issue Brief #2 for more.
12 Per analysis conducted by New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, 2018, using data from complaints made to the Board of Correction, obtained by FOIA request.
13 Why this former Rikers Island inmate fought for years to close the infamous jail. CBC. October 29, 2019.
15 Testimony to New York City Council, September 5, 2019.
19 Testimony to the New York City Council, September 2019.