

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.

“After I visited the first time, I knew it was going to be a whole day no matter what.”
Anonymous visitor⁸

“It smells like sewer, mixed with fertilizer, mixed with death.”
Candie Hailey-Means¹¹

Toxic land - [Rikers Island was only 87 acres](#) 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.¹² **It is often reported that [officers who work there don't drink the water](#).**¹³

“We had sewage that used to come up in the day room, and the officers would just lock us in our cells.” Kandra Clark¹⁴

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 jail beds, to lock up New Yorkers.¹²

“I was on Rikers Island when the population was over 20,000. New York City could use that 400 acres of toxic land to incarcerate a hundred thousand people.” Darren Mack¹⁵

“The law on that infamous island is made by correction officers depending on their daily moods.” Anna Pastorella¹⁹

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

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.

2 State Commission on Corrections. The Worst Offenders Report: The Most Problematic Local Correctional Facilities in New York State. February 2018.

3 Moseley, Mariya. Rikers Island Was Named After a Judge Who Was Eager to Uphold Slavery. April 6, 2017.

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.

6 Per JailVizNYC, updated daily. Accessed October 28, 2020.

7 Boucher, Rebecca. Hell is Trying to Visit My Jailed Client. The Marshall Project. July 27, 2017.

8 NYC Jails Action Coalition. “It Makes We Want to Cry”: Visiting Rikers Island. NYC JAC. January 2018.

9 To Build A Bigger Jail. New York Times. September 20, 1886.

10 Deutsch, Kevin. Correction officers’ suit says Rikers Island is built on ‘toxic’ landfill, causing cancer. NY Daily News, January 10, 2011.

11 Rakia, Raven. A sinking jail: The environmental disaster that is Rikers Island. Grist. March 15, 2016.

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.

14 The Path to Closing Rikers [video]. Trinity Wall Street. Accessed November 2, 2020.

15 Testimony to New York City Council, September 5, 2019.

16 Weiser, Benjamin, et al. U.S. Plans to sue New York City over Rikers Island conditions. December 19, 2014.

17 Ninth Report of the Nunez Independent Monitor. May 29, 2020.

18 Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011-2012, US Department of Justice, May 2013.

19 Testimony to the New York City Council, September 2019.

20 Of approximately 14,700 jail beds on Rikers, about 4,100 are occupied. Per Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, Biannual Report on Progress Towards Closing Jails on Rikers Island Local Law 192, September 9, 2020.

21 Schulberg, Jessica. Rikers Island Workers Blows Whistle On COVID-19 Risk In Infamous New York Jail. Huffington Post. July 31, 2020.