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# **RIKERS: THE CASE FOR CLOSURE**

For decades, Rikers Island has been marked by violence and corruption. Stories regularly emerge documenting the abuse, brutality, and death in the institution. The #CLOSErikers campaign was formed in 2016 to break political gridlock and achieve solutions guided by directly impacted communities. Led by JustLeadershipUSA, in partnership with the Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice, the #CLOSErikers campaign includes community groups, researchers, business leaders, faith and human rights leaders, criminal justice experts, health and housing service providers, advocacy and legal groups, and more. Through the campaign, more than 125 organizations across New York City have joined the call for Mayor Bill de Blasio to close Rikers Island. Its very existence violates New Yorkers' belief in equality, humanity, and fairness. By closing Rikers, New York City can focus on healing and rebuilding the communities where Rikers has brought suffering. The campaign to #CLOSErikers is calling for New Yorkers to boldly reimagine the city's failed criminal justice system and become a national leader in ending mass incarceration.

*This is the second of four briefs in a weekly series designed to highlight the persistent dysfunction on Rikers, a penal colony defined by its resistance to reform. The first [brief](#) focused on the isolation of the jails. This brief describes the “culture of violence” at Rikers, and the entire series can be found on the [CLOSErikers.org website](#).*

# THE VIOLENCE OF RIKERS

Violence has characterized Rikers Island for generations, earning it the nickname “Torture Island.” The “culture of violence” is in the very DNA of the jails. Gruesome stories have spilled out of Rikers and into the public consciousness, from the ghastly deaths of Bradley Ballard and Jerome Murdough while housed at Rikers, to the tragic suicide of 22-year-old Kalief Browder after his release. The heartbreaking and appalling treatment of people held at Rikers continues despite reforms intended to improve conditions.

*I went to Rikers when I was 16, and that was the toughest time I probably ever had in my life. I have like, three stab wounds that came from spending time in what they call the ‘gladiator school...’*

— **Glenn E. Martin. Founder and President of JustLeadershipUSA**

Individuals held in U.S. prisons and jails experience high rates of violence and assault. For generations, this violence has been a way of life at Rikers. Insufficient staff training, excessive isolation, insecure facilities, mistreatment of individuals with mental health issues, and poor accountability create an environment where violence is rampant. Rikers

“culture of violence” permeates every aspect of daily life – not only for those held there, but also for the people who work on the Island. A 2017 story reported medical staff were afraid to do their job because of violence in the facility.<sup>i</sup>

- Rates of violence have increased on Rikers every year from 2008 to 2016.<sup>ii</sup>
- The suffering of women is extraordinary. Women at Rikers report sexual harassment and abuse at rates far higher than the national average.<sup>iii</sup>
- According to the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, a truly staggering 100% of transgender and gender non-conforming people surveyed on Rikers reported experiencing sexual violence in 2015.<sup>iv</sup>
- Correctional staff contribute to the “culture of violence” either by directly engaging in assaultive behavior or by allowing and sometimes encouraging violent behavior by others.

Rikers is unfixable. Violence prompted a 2015 plan from the Mayor’s office to “aggressively combat violence and promote a culture of safety on Rikers Island.”<sup>v</sup> The Mayor’s reforms have been unsuccessful. A 2016 report from Comptroller Scott Stringer revealed an increased rate of assault or fight infractions at Rikers, increasing 25% from 2015, and nearly 50% from 2014.<sup>vi</sup>

The case of Jahmal Lightfoot is a testament to the violence that plagues Rikers Island. Lightfoot was assaulted by a group of correction officers in 2012. He was tackled to the ground and kicked until both eye sockets were fractured and his nose broken.<sup>vii</sup> In June 2016, a Bronx jury convicted five of the correction officers who assaulted Lightfoot.<sup>viii</sup> The charges resulted from an 11-month investigation by the Bronx district attorney’s office and the NYC Department of Investigation. One convicted individual, Eliseo Perez Jr., was the assistant chief of security, the third-highest ranking officer, at the time of the assault. Mr. Perez was accused of instructing officers to “knock his f—teeth out” after Lightfoot allegedly gave him a “glance.” The officers then tried to cover up the assault, resulting in another charge for those involved.

## **Sexual Assault: An Invisible Epidemic**

Sexual assault and rape are a part of life at Rikers. Shockingly, one City official referred to the sexual violence at Rikers as inevitable.<sup>ix</sup> Rates of violence and sexual abuse are far

more common at Rikers than at the national level, particularly for female and LGBTQI individuals. Data from the U.S. Department of Justice showed that 8.6% of individuals held at the Rose M. Singer Center - the women's facility on Rikers – reported being sexually harassed or abused, compared to 3.2% of people in jails nationwide.<sup>x</sup> Both these numbers are believed to grossly underrepresent the actual number of assaults.

Rikers' culture of sexual assault and rape is not only pervasive, but also invisible. In 2014, Department of Correction (DOC) staff failed to report 98% of sexual abuse allegations to the New York Police Department (NYPD).<sup>xi</sup> In May 2015, a lawsuit was filed against the City and Benny Santiago (Rikers Correctional Officer) for the abuse, harassment and rape of two women. The petition details repeated acts of rape and other sexual abuse during their incarceration, along with experiences of torture and harassment.<sup>xii</sup> This was not an isolated incident. Hundreds, and most likely thousands, of either currently or formerly incarcerated individuals at Rikers, as well as female correctional officers have made allegations of rape, sexual abuse and assault.

## Power and Violence: Correctional Staff Contribute

*Rikers Island is a broken institution. It is a place where brute force is the first impulse rather than the last resort.*

**—Preet Bharara, Former US Attorney for the Southern District of New York**

The Santiago case is far from the only example of correctional staff abuse.<sup>xiii xiv</sup> New York City has been sued by dozens of individuals who have survived beatings and violence at the hands of correction officers, as well as violence instigated by officers.<sup>xv</sup> In one instance, an officer unlocked the cell of Camillo Douglas to let three gang members enter. Douglas was beaten with brooms and metal shanks. In 2008, Bronx prosecutors charged a Rikers officer with ordering six individuals to beat two other individuals. One survivor was hurt so severely he had to be hospitalized due to a collapsed lung. In January 2009, the Bronx District Attorney's office shed light on the systematized violence that occurs on Rikers when two officers were charged with enterprise corruption for recruiting individuals to become "managers, foot soldiers and enforcers" to uphold order in a housing unit for male adolescents.<sup>xvi</sup> The officers were accused of teaching restraint and assault tactics and allowing individuals to coordinate the time and location of attacks against others. The

lawsuit was brought forward following an investigation into the death of 18-year-old Christopher Robinson, who was beaten to death upon refusal to cooperate.<sup>xvii</sup> A lawyer for the Legal Aid Society, co-counsel on the 2009 lawsuit stated “these are institutions where inmate activity is monitored 24 hours a day, and it’s astonishing that this kind of behavior should go on for so long unchecked.”<sup>xviii</sup> According to the *New York Times*, the pattern of legal cases filed suggests DOC officials have long been aware of Rikers corrections officers encouraging and facilitating violence.<sup>xix</sup> This violent pattern has had a tremendous cost to taxpayers. In 2015 alone, New York City spent more than \$ 13,000,000 dollars settling claims of wrongful death and injury.

The current DOC Commissioner, Joseph Ponte, has declared that “the excessive use of force, unnecessary and unwarranted use of punitive segregation and corruption of any kind are absolutely unacceptable and will not be tolerated under my watch.”<sup>xx</sup> The Commissioner’s words do not generate optimism. Unfortunately, even genuine efforts at reform have not been enough to reduce the violent culture that defines Rikers.<sup>xxi</sup>

## Reimagining Justice

Rikers presents a number of challenges for New Yorkers who care about fairness and justice, challenges exaggerated by the brutal, violent nature of the jails. However, it is of the utmost importance that efforts to repair the failure of Rikers Island not be separated from the broader context of criminal justice reform. Rikers Island is the physical manifestation of the failed policies and practices that have led to mass incarceration. Attempts to reform Rikers Island consistently fail to address the issues that have led to the creation of this failed institution, in one of the most progressive cities in the US: lack of investment in low-income communities and communities of color; the criminalization of poverty, addiction and mental health issues; and systemic racism that helped propel the War on Drugs. Decades of attempts at reform prove that there is no way to simply “fix” Rikers Island - it must be closed. To truly support *all* New Yorkers and advance public safety, we must shift our resources and priorities toward investment in people and communities, not isolated physical structures that attempt to hide away public health problems. With the support of New Yorkers, and under the leadership of people who have suffered on Rikers, we can close Rikers and create a smaller, fairer, more humane criminal justice system in NYC.

To get involved in the #CLOSErikers campaign, check out our [website](#) and follow us on social media.



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## Additional Resources

Two signatories to the CLOSERikers campaign have emphasized the need to reduce community violence. **The Center for NU Leadership on Urban Solutions** has created a new justice and public safety paradigm that emphasizes a human centered approach. **Gangsta’s Making Astronomical Community Change, Inc. (G-MACC)** works to change lives by focusing on individuals and providing them with tools to reduce violence, including positivity and activism.

Additional allies working to reduce violence through community and peer driven programming, include the **Crown Heights Mediation Center's Save Our Streets (SOS) program** and **Common Justice**. **SOS** implements a powerful violence interruption model, training community leaders known and respected in their neighborhood, engaging in preventative trainings and responding to immediate crises to address violence and harm in a holistic way. **Common Justice** focuses on data-driven, restorative justice practices, which address harm, and achieve accountability and healing for all parties.

### **DOJ Report**

"CRIPA Investigation of the New York City Department of Correction Jails on Rikers Island,"  
The United States Department of Justice, May 18, 2015.

<https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/usao-sdny/legacy/2015/03/25/SDNY%20Rikers%20Report.pdf>

### **Kalief Browder Series**

Gonnerman, Jennifer. "Kalief Browder." The New Yorker. 2014-2016

<http://www.newyorker.com/topics/kalief-browder-in-the-new-yorker>

### **Public Advocate Report on Sexual Violence**

Public Advocate Letitia James. "Sexual Assault on Rikers Island."

<http://www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov/rikers-island>

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- <sup>i</sup> Blau, Reuven. "Medical Staff Afraid to Treat Rikers Island's Worst Inmates." March 14, 2017. <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/medical-staff-afraid-treat-rikers-island-worst-inmates-article-1.2998118>.
- <sup>ii</sup> Comptroller Scott M. Stringer. "NYC Department of Correction FYS 2007-2016 Operating Expenditures, Inmate Population, Cost Per Inmate, Staffing Ratios, Performance Measure Outcomes, and Overtime." November 28, 2016. <http://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/nyc-department-of-correction-fys-2007-16-operating-expenditures-inmate-population-cost-per-inmate-staffing-ratios-performance-measure-outcomes-and-overtime/>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Public Advocate Letitia James. "Sexual Assault on Rikers Island." <http://www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov/rikers-island>.
- <sup>iv</sup> Sylvia Rivera Law Project. "Reducing Sexual Violence on the Road to Abolition." March 29, 2016. <https://srlp.org/reducing-sexual-violence-on-the-road-to-abolition/>.
- <sup>v</sup> "Mayor de Blasio, Commissioner Ponte Announce 14-Point Rikers Anti-Violence Agenda." March 12, 2015. <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/166-15/mayor-de-blasio-commissioner-ponte-14-point-rikers-anti-violence-agenda#/0>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Stringer, "NYC Department of Correction FYS 2007-2016 Operating Expenditures, Inmate Population, Cost Per Inmate, Staffing Ratios, Performance Measure Outcomes, and Overtime."
- <sup>vii</sup> Hu, Winnie. "Trial of 10 Rikers Officers Charged in Inmate Beating is Set to Begin." The New York Times. March 12, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/nyregion/trial-of-10-rikers-officers-charged-in-12-inmate-beating-is-set-to-begin.html>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Ramey, Corinne. "Five Rikers Officers Convicted in Beating of Inmate." The Wall Street Journal. June 7, 2016. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/five-rikers-officers-convicted-in-beating-of-inmate-1465333102>.
- <sup>ix</sup> Malinowski, Nick. "NYC Official Says Rape is Inevitable at Rikers Island." June 26, 2016. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nick-malinowski/nyc-official-says-rape-is\\_b\\_10600320.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nick-malinowski/nyc-official-says-rape-is_b_10600320.html)
- <sup>x</sup> Public Advocate Letitia James. "Sexual Assault on Rikers Island." <http://www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov/rikers-island>.
- <sup>xi</sup> James, "Sexual Assault on Rikers Island: Exhibit 1." October 9, 2015. [http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/sites/advocate.nyc.gov/files/james\\_declaration\\_exhibits.pdf](http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/sites/advocate.nyc.gov/files/james_declaration_exhibits.pdf).
- <sup>xii</sup> United States District Court Southern District of New York. [http://www.legal-aid.org/media/193137/05.18.15\\_complaint\\_jane\\_doe\\_version.pdf](http://www.legal-aid.org/media/193137/05.18.15_complaint_jane_doe_version.pdf).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Schwartz, Michael. "Corruption Sweep at Rikers Island Leads to 22 Arrests." June 24, 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/25/nyregion/2-officers-and-20-inmates-are-arrested-in-corruption-sweep-at-rikers-island.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/25/nyregion/2-officers-and-20-inmates-are-arrested-in-corruption-sweep-at-rikers-island.html?_r=0).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Hu, Winnie and Kate Pastor. "Rikers Island Guards and a Cook Took Bribes, Officials Say." May 19, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/nyregion/rikers-island-guards-and-a-cook-took-bribes-officials-say.html>.
- <sup>xv</sup> Weiser, Benjamin. "Lawsuits Suggest Pattern of Rikers Guards Looking Other Way." February 3, 2009. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/04/nyregion/04rikers.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/04/nyregion/04rikers.html?_r=0).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xx</sup> Meredith Clark and Rachel Kleinman, "DOJ: Violence Rampant against Teen Prisoners at Rikers Island," Msnbc.com, August 05, 2014, accessed June 19, 2016, <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/doj-violence-rikers-island>.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Neil Barsky, "Shut Down Rikers Island," The New York Times, July 18, 2015, accessed June 19, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/opinion/shut-down-rikers-island.html>.