



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 first of four briefs in an ongoing series designed to highlight the persistent dysfunction on Rikers Island, a penal colony defined by its resistance to reform. The briefs are released weekly and the entire series can be found on the [CLOSErikers.org website](https://closerikers.org).

THE ISOLATION OF RIKERS

Located in the East River, between LaGuardia airport in Queens and Hunts Point in the Bronx, the Rikers Island Correctional Center (Rikers) contains 10 jails, holding approximately 8,000 individuals, over 80% of them waiting for their cases to be tried. For generations, the jails on Rikers have been characterized by geographic isolation, poor conditions, inadequate services, overcrowding and violence. The isolation of Rikers reduces the quality of life for the justice involved, correction officers and civilian staff, and limits access to a range of services for NYC's most vulnerable. The island's isolation has allowed a toxic culture to take hold since its very inception.

- The location of the island makes it difficult to access, separating individuals from their families, social services, loved ones, and communities.
- Cases are more difficult to defend, as lawyers refuse to travel to Rikers, and court services prove inaccessible.
- Individuals are disconnected from community supports that prove useful, including bail funds, treatment, and medical services.
- Punitive segregation and solitary confinement create more severe forms of isolation, and have negative behavioral and mental health effects.¹

An Island Apart from New York City

New York City has long invested in the physical separation of those in need of rehabilitation. Before Rikers, Blackwell’s Island—currently known as Roosevelt Island—was home to New York City’s physically sick, mentally ill, and local jail population, a deliberate plan to keep the City’s most vulnerable out of sight and out of mind. Rikers Island continues that approach today.ⁱⁱ

One bridge connects Rikers Island to New York City, nicknamed the “Bridge of Pain.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Island’s separation from the five boroughs leads to unnecessarily excessive costs and difficulties. Travel to Rikers Island from parts of Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Staten Island takes several hours. The single route between the Island and the boroughs creates transportation problems, negatively impacting court date transit and specialty medical visits. Every day, more than 800 people held on Rikers Island are bussed to court. Delays are more likely because foot traffic is disallowed on the Island. These mobility restrictions and limitations deter individuals from wanting to visit, including family members and loved ones as well as legal representation and social workers.

The isolation not only inconveniences those traveling to Rikers Island, but in some circumstances, can prove deadly. In 2014, an individual died after experiencing a seizure and waiting twenty-five minutes for an ambulance.^{iv} In 2014, the average city response time of emergency ambulance services was six and a half minutes.^v This was not an isolated incident. In January 2016, an individual died on the Island because his ambulance was delayed in a snowstorm.^{vi}

Stay Home: Rikers Island’s Restrictive Visitation Policy

If Rikers Island’s remoteness did not make family visitation difficult enough, the DOC’s visitation policy further isolates individuals. Two days of the week have no visitation, and four days of the week restrict visits by last name. Only on Friday are all those being held eligible for visitation. Needless to say, due to the difficulties of reaching the Island, and the time commitment necessary, those on Rikers receive fewer visits than individuals held in other New York City facilities. In 2017, the visitation rate at Rikers was roughly half that at the borough facilities.^{vii}

Getting to Rikers is frequently described as complicated, overwhelming and oppressive. When the Q100 bus arrives at Rikers from Queens Plaza, it is boarded by corrections officers who frequently communicate instructions with raised voices and a gruff tone. There are numerous reports of detection dogs boarding these buses and surveying visitors before they are transported to their destination.^{viii} Visitors go through numerous metal detectors, where they report corrections staff often express frustration, yell and make disrespectful comments. The rules and limitations regarding attire for visitors is not clearly stated and, according to interviews, may change depending on the day and the officer.^{ix} At any point, an officer can delay or deny access to visits. Furthermore, there have been reports of visitors being required to endure strip searches to continue their visit after setting-off metal detector sensors.^x The experience of visiting those held at Rikers is, at best, inconvenient and time consuming, and at worst, traumatizing and offensive.

In addition to existing barriers, the DOC proposed additional limitations to visitation in 2015. The proposal included measures to eliminate most physical contact—allowing for only brief contact at the beginning and end of a visit—as well as the installation of Plexiglas dividers at visitation tables. Such practices damage the mental health of both individuals held at Rikers and family members by weakening existing bonds between the justice involved and community. The resulting disruption to lives and support systems can have a lifelong impact that hinders families and communities from thriving.

“[Visitors] should be informed that an underwire bra or any metal inside your body will cause the metal detectors to ring. When it rings the visitor is sent to a body search by untrained officers who invade privacy by asking you to unzip pants, show undergarment, expose body parts, have the bra squeezed, the hair searched when it’s curly or in an hairdo, be touched in private parts and be embarrassed in front of other people.”

— Anna Pastoressa

One story illustrates the difficulties many visitors face. Anna Pastoressa’s son spent six years on Rikers Island awaiting trial, and because of the experience, she is intimately familiar with the restrictions and restraints that characterize visitation. Pastoressa believes “visitors should be informed that the whole process from leaving your home to leaving Rikers Island after a visit can take 5, 6, 7 hours. It is time consuming, mentally deteriorating and expensive when you visit each week. I had to endure it every weekend of my life for almost 6 years of my son being detained on Rikers while waiting for trial. Six years with no trial?”^{xi} The experience of visiting a loved one in jail is traumatic enough without the added inconvenience of transportation delays and restrictive conditions.

Visits are so important because we are so disconnected. Just thirty or forty-five minutes can change your whole perspective.

Maria Elena Morales, JLUSA Fellow, Underground Scholars Initiative Ambassador^{xii}

Maintaining contact with friends, family and a supportive network while detained is vitally important to overall well-being, as well as the safety of the jail. Research on those returning home from jail and prison demonstrates that family members are a valuable source of support, both during and after incarceration.^{xiii} Individuals who maintain contact with supportive family members are more likely to succeed after release.^{xiv} These opportunities are reduced by Rikers' isolation, limiting occasions for community connection and reducing public safety.

Reimagining Justice

Beyond its location, Rikers presents a number of challenges for New Yorkers who care about fairness and justice, challenges exaggerated by the jails' geographic isolation. 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.

Additional Resources

For more on the issues of visitation on Rikers Island, see the work of the **Jails Action Coalition (JAC)**, a signatory to the #CLOSERikers campaign. The organization has also produced a guide to visitation, linked [here](#).

A number of other organizations, including the **Legal Aid Society, the Urban Justice Center, Brooklyn Defender Services, and the Bronx Defenders**, have addressed the isolation of the facility and limited access to services, visitation, resources, medical facilities individuals experience, through legal representation.

ⁱ Grassian, Stuart. "Psychiatric Effects of Solitary Confinement." *Washington University Journal of Law and Policy*. January, 2006. http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1362&context=law_journal_law_policy

ⁱⁱ "Across the Bridge of Pain." *PacificStandard*. July 27, 2015. <https://psmag.com/across-the-bridge-of-pain-9985b40bf581>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Small, Eddie. "Rikers Inmate Dies After Ambulance Takes Half-Hour to Arrive, Reports Say." *DNAInfo*. October 3, 2014.

<https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20141003/hunts-point/rikers-inmate-dies-after-ambulance-takes-half-hour-arrive-reports-say>

^v The Associated Press. "DeBlasio Aims to Improve Medical Response Times." *New York Times*. February 8, 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/09/nyregion/de-blasio-aims-to-improve-medical-response-times.html?mtrref=www.google.com>

^{vi} Gartland, Michael. "Rikers Island inmate dies during Winter Storm Jonas staffing chaos." *New York Post*. February 1, 2016.

^{vii} "Visitation Quarterly Report." Department of Correction. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doc/downloads/pdf/INTRO_706_FY17_1-30-17.pdf.

^{viii} Public Testimony, Board of Correction Meeting, June 14 2016

^{ix} Maria Elena Morales, Personal Communication, May 2016.

^x Public Testimony, Board of Correction meeting, June 14, 2016

^{xi} Public Testimony, Lippmann Commission, January 27, 2017.

^{xii} Maria Elena Morales, Personal Communication, May 2016.

^{xiii} "The Family and Recidivism." Vera Institute of Justice. September, 2012. <http://www.vera.org/files/the-family-and-recidivism.pdf>

^{xiv} *Ibid.*