



RIKERS: THE CASE FOR CLOSURE

For decades, Rikers Island (Rikers) has been marked by violence and corruption. Stories regularly emerge and media accounts consistently document 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 135 organizations across New York City and the nation have joined the call for Mayor Bill de Blasio to close Rikers Island. Its very existence violates New Yorker’s 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 fourth 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. The [second](#) describes the “culture of violence” at Rikers and the [third](#) describes the deprivation of the jails. The final brief describes the environmental and architectural hazards of the facility and the entire series can be found on the [CLOSERikers.org website](#).

RIKERS: A HEALTH HAZARD

“As the violence & human rights violations worsen, so do the environmental circumstances surrounding Rikers.”

— **Raven Rakia, Journalist and fellow at *The Grist***ⁱ

In addition to the violence and deprivation of the jails, Rikers poses an unacceptable environmental risk to the individuals spending time on “Torture Island.” This risk not only impacts those being detained, but also corrections staff, maintenance staff, and healthcare providers. In order to make the Island suitable for development, landfill was transported from Manhattan. This means most of the facilities at Rikers are built on trash. As it slowly decomposes, the garbage releases poisonous methane gas.ⁱⁱ Methane gas is highly

combustible, and in high concentrations, can replace the oxygen in air.ⁱⁱⁱ For a human, even mild oxygen deprivation can result in nausea, headaches and dizziness. The foundation of garbage also creates a foul odor, aggravated by the presence of industrial facilities and wastewater treatment plants.^{iv} In early 2011, lawsuits were filed on behalf of seven Rikers employees against the City. Each of these employees had been diagnosed with cancer they believed was caused by exposure to the toxic landfill of the Island. These employees described a strong, persistent chemical odor. In fact, the release of methane gas from the ground was so frequent, it commonly set off gas detectors.^v The plaintiffs believed jail officials were aware of the danger but did nothing to protect employees.^{vi} The City denied these claims. The cases were consolidated and transferred to Federal court, where they remain today.

Additional environmental issues pose serious health challenges. Rikers sits in the East River nestled between Hunts Point in the Bronx and the LaGuardia Airport in Queens – areas well known for poor air quality and high levels of air pollution. Rates of death from asthma in the Bronx are about three times higher than the national average and hospitalization rates are approximately five times higher.^{vii} Rikers shares nearly the same airspace as the mainland Bronx. Also, Rikers’ proximity to LaGuardia Airport further increases harm, exposing individuals to the emission of volatile organic compounds from jet fuel, substances hazardous to human health. To make matters even worse, Rikers also houses a power plant, providing energy for the Island’s jails. This power plant emits significant amounts of matter known to threaten human health through increased risk of heart disease, lung cancer and asthma attacks.^{viii ix}

“When it’s cold outside, it’s even colder inside, and when it’s hot outside, it’s even hotter inside.”^x

— **Johnny Perez, Reentry Advocate and formerly held at Rikers**

In addition to the environmental hazards of Rikers, the jails also generate extreme temperature conditions, earning it the nickname “The Oven.” These conditions create more than mild discomfort – they can result in death. In 2014, homeless veteran Jerome Murdough died in a Rikers cell on the mental health unit that was over 100 degrees. The medical examiner found the cause of death to be extreme heat exposure.^{xi} In August 2013, Susi Vassallo, a New York University School of Medicine associate professor and national expert on heat-related deaths conducted court mandated temperature monitoring on

Rikers. Vassallo called the temperature situation at Rikers “a serious health threat” and “unsafe for inmates.”^{xii} Individuals with health concerns face severe danger when forced to suffer extreme temperatures. For example, asthma can be exacerbated, and individuals on psychotropic medications—which impair the body’s ability to cool itself by sweating—are at serious risk of overheating.^{xiii xiv}

The Jail Time Passed By

“It’s not that they’re old, it’s that maintenance hasn’t kept up the condition of the physical plant. We do have more money today for renovation, but you can’t rehab a housing unit with inmates in it.”

— **Joseph Ponte, Department of Correction Commissioner**^{xv}

Time has passed Rikers by. Its structure is medieval in concept and its physical deterioration makes it an unwise financial investment. It is impossible to design a jail in the 21st century and end up with a facility like Rikers. Height restrictions create long hallways, limiting visibility. The Island’s geographic isolation creates additional transportation costs. For structural reasons, continuing to invest in repairing and reforming the Island’s jail facilities is a waste of taxpayer dollars. The bridge transporting individuals to Rikers needs extensive repair.^{xvi} According to expert reports and interviews with people who have previously been to or are currently held on Rikers, the facilities are falling apart. There are visible cracks in the building’s surfaces and foundations, peeling paint, missing tiles in both the walls and floors, corroded metal walls, damaged doors, and broken window screens. In 2004, then Department of Correction Commissioner Martin Horn explained to the Board of Correction how the Island’s expansion to its present size nearly guaranteed architectural complications. The ground that the jail facilities stand on is comprised primarily of ash and garbage. When garbage decomposes, it creates air pockets in the ground, which lead to the ground “settling.” This shifting and sinking does not occur in a uniform or predictable manner, leading to an unstable foundation. Furthermore, the settling causes cracks in the walls and ceilings of buildings, including new facilities, and damages the water pipes that run below the foundation, impacting the jail’s water supply. Continual repairs, remediation and capital improvements are needed to keep the Rikers Island jails operating. The Fiscal 2018-2027 Capital Commitment Plan included \$1.9 billion for redevelopment and investment.^{xvii} This money could be better spent on a more humane criminal justice system, instead of reinvesting in a broken jail built on garbage.

The crumbling infrastructure also endangers those at Rikers contributing to the “[culture of violence](#).” Improvised weapons constructed from decaying materials found on site are prevalent. A 2014 Board of Correction investigation found that “approximately 79% of the weapons found were shanks, shivs, or weapons fashioned from materials that [were] typically found in, or authorized for use in, the jails.”^{xviii}

Reimagining Justice

Rikers presents a number of challenges for New Yorkers who care about fairness and justice, challenges exaggerated by the environmental problems on the Island and the physical issues with the facilities. 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

“A Sinking Jail: The Environmental Disaster that is Rikers Island.”

<http://grist.org/justice/a-sinking-jail-the-environmental-disaster-that-is-rikers-island/>

“Rikers Island: New York’s Penal Colony Through The Eyes of the People Who Live and Work There.”

<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2015/06/inside-rikers-island-interviews.html>

New Rikers

<https://readymag.com/u11694753/657182/>

ⁱ Rakia, Raven. “A Sinking Jail: The Environmental Disaster that is Rikers Island.” *Grist*. March 5, 2016. <http://grist.org/justice/a-sinking-jail-the-environmental-disaster-that-is-rikers-island/>.

ⁱⁱ “A Sinking Jail: The Environmental Disaster that is Rikers Island.”

ⁱⁱⁱ “Methane.” *Tox Town*. https://toxtown.nlm.nih.gov/text_version/chemicals.php?id=92.

^{iv} Decrausaz, Mark. “New Rikers.” <https://readymag.com/u11694753/657182/>.

^v Wilson, Mark. “Rikers Island Guards File Suit Alleging Cancer-Causing Toxin Exposure.” *Prison Legal News*. February 2012.

<https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2012/feb/15/rikers-island-guards-file-suit-alleging-cancer-causing-toxin-exposure/>.

^{vi} “Robert Barley vs. The City of New York, New York City Department of Corrections, et al.” February 24, 2011.

<http://www.clearinghouse.net/chDocs/public/JC-NY-0057-0001.pdf>.

^{vii} See Ruppel and Ellen Shell. “Does Civilization Cause Asthma?” *The Atlantic Monthly*. May 2000. <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/05/shell.html>

^{viii} “A Sinking Jail: The Environmental Disaster that is Rikers Island.” Includes both 2.5 (PM2.5) and particulate matter 1.0 (PM1.0).

^{ix} “Health Effects of Ozone and Particle Pollution.” <http://www.lung.org/our-initiatives/healthy-air/sota/health-risks/>.

^x “A Sinking Jail: The Environmental Disaster that is Rikers Island.”

^{xi} Schwartz, Michael. “2.25 Million Settlement For Family of Rikers Inmate Who Died in Hot Cell.” *New York Times*. October 31, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/01/nyregion/settlement-for-family-of-rikers-inmate-who-died-in-overheated-cell.html>.

^{xii} “A Sinking Jail: The Environmental Disaster that is Rikers Island.”

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Ibid. The DOC’s 2015,14-Point Anti-Violence Plan will address some of the temperature concerns, and includes plans to renovate and repair buildings, however, even DOC commissioner Ponte admits that sufficient physical repairs cannot be made while occupied.

^{xv} “This is Rikers.” *The Marshall Project*. June 28, 2015. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/06/28/this-is-rikers#.BcsdXO5Qb>.

^{xvi} “NYC Bridges and Tunnel Annual Report.” 2008. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/bridgerpt08.pdf>.

^{xvii} The City Council of New York. “Report on the Fiscal 2018 Executive Budget: Department of Correction.” May 9, 2017.

^{xviii} “Violence in New York City Jails: Slashing and Stabbing Incidents.” April 22, 2015.

http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/Violence%20in%20New%20York%20City%20Jails_Slashing%20and%20Stabbing%20Incidents.pdf.