

EXHIBIT I

Inside Rikers: Dysfunction, Lawlessness and Detainees in Control

With a staffing emergency disrupting the basic functions of the jail system, detainees have had free rein inside.

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When a detainee decided to hijack a bus inside the Rikers Island jail complex, little was in place to stop him.

All he had to do was rise from where he sat with a half dozen other handcuffed men and walk to the front of the unguarded vehicle: A gate that should have confined him was left unsecured. The keys were in the ignition.

Putting the bus into gear, he rammed a jail building and then backed up and rammed it again, this time with enough force to shake the walls and scatter bricks.

To outsiders, the details of the Sept. 16 incident, which have not been previously reported, might sound alarming. But to anyone who has spent time on Rikers Island in the past year, such breakdowns are business as usual.

Much has been made of the crisis gripping Rikers, New York City's main jail complex — the pandemic and a subsequent staffing emergency have taken a brutal toll on incarcerated people and jailers alike — but the sheer lawlessness inside the compound is difficult to fathom.

Detainees in some buildings have seized near total control over entire units, deciding who can enter and leave them, records and interviews show. In other buildings, they have wandered in and out of staff break rooms and similarly restricted areas, with some flouting rules against smoking tobacco and marijuana. Sometimes they have answered phones that were supposed to be manned by guards. Several have stolen keys and used them to free others in custody, who went on to commit slashings and other acts of violence.

The chaos was not limited to incarcerated people. Correction officers have participated in beatings or failed to intervene in hangings and other urgent situations. Last week, a guard was charged with providing a razor blade to a detainee who planned to use it as a weapon.

City officials have accused jail officers of abusing generous sick leave policies — hundreds have been out of work — while the officers' labor union has said guards are not going to work because conditions in the jails are unsafe and inhumane.

Both sides have cast the situation as an acute crisis. But the troubles on Rikers Island trace also to physical grounds that have been neglected for decades, leading to doors that do not lock properly, cells that are too deteriorated to contain detainees and aging objects like radiators that can be ripped apart and turned into weapons. The jail complex is also reliant on guards who — thanks to years of mismanagement and ineffective training — sometimes fail to follow rules meant to keep them and incarcerated people safe.



Mayor Bill de Blasio after touring the Rikers Island jail complex on Sept. 27. His focus has been on closing Rikers entirely rather than overseeing long-term improvements. Uli Seit for The New York Times

The result has been a steady beat of violence and dysfunction — and also bizarre scenes not likely to play out in other correctional centers.

One man awaiting trial in August grabbed keys from a correction officer, freed another detainee and then used a knife to slash the guard's face and neck. Bleeding from his wounds, the jailer escaped by locking himself in his attacker's cell.

Less than three weeks later, another man discovered that a metal grate in the wall of his cell was so rickety he could kick it down. He climbed through the opening and stabbed his neighbor.

In September, detainees kept an open flame burning on a mop string in a staircase, using it to light cigarettes and joints.

Accounts of such incidents have proliferated despite a jail population that has fallen to some of the lowest levels in decades, the result of changes to state bail laws and the city's push last year to release hundreds of detainees amid concerns over the pandemic.

Spread across eight jail buildings on an island in the East River, between the Bronx and Queens, Rikers houses more than 4,800 detainees on a given day, a majority of whom are awaiting trial and have not been convicted of a crime. Most do not commit violent acts, and a significant number struggle with mental illness.

Twelve detainees, most on Rikers, have died this year, making 2021 the deadliest in New York City's jail system since 2016. Four captains and eight correction officers have been punished for failing to perform their jobs properly in connection with those deaths.

Last month, more than a dozen New York Democrats called on the federal government to intervene at Rikers, expressing doubt that the city could solve the problems on its own.

New York State Senator Jabari Brisport visited the jail complex on Sept. 13. Some New York Democrats called on the federal government to intervene at Rikers. Juan Arredondo for The New York Times

City officials said the Department of Correction is focusing on cutting absenteeism among jail officers to address the disorder on the island, adding that it has made progress. At the height of the staffing crisis, about a third of the jails' roughly 8,000 guards were failing to show, forcing those who remained to work double and triple shifts that could last 24 hours or more. Now, the officials said, that number is closer to about a quarter of the jails' work force.

"We expect and demand further improvement in the weeks to come," Vincent Schiraldi, the jails commissioner, said in a statement Friday. "We won't rest until conditions improve and everyone who lives and works in our facilities feels safe."

Things are unlikely to improve dramatically before the next mayor takes office in January, with the crisis presenting an immediate test. A spokesman for Eric Adams, who won the Democratic mayoral primary and is likely to become New York City's next mayor, did not respond directly to a request for comment about Rikers Island, but pointed to Mr. Adams's previous statements in favor of steering more money and resources to the jails.

As city officials struggle to respond to the problems in the jails, a sense of futility has taken hold, according to interviews with seven current and former detainees and seven jailers, most of whom spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss workplace problems. One said he has stopped confiscating weapons — even though stabbings have doubled compared with last year — because doing so would require him to use force in an area where he is likely to be alone with dozens of detainees, with no guarantee of immediate backup.

"Rikers has long been dysfunctional, decrepit and dangerous," said Zachary Katznelson, executive director of the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, a research and advocacy organization. "What we see today is next level. It is an inability to deliver even the basic services — something we haven't seen in a long time, if not ever."

A 'different world'

To guards, detainees and their lawyers, the most striking aspect of the current dysfunction at Rikers Island is the extent to which incarcerated people seem to run parts of the complex.

The New York Times reviewed thousands of pages of court filings and city records and conducted more than two dozen interviews, and found more than a dozen instances since July alone in which detainees have wandered freely or enjoyed unusual access in the jails.

On five occasions in the past 18 months, incarcerated people who should have been confined or closely supervised were instead free to commit violent acts.

After a fight broke out in one building in June 2020, a detainee left an unlocked housing unit, grabbed a can of pepper spray off a food cart where a guard had left it and used it to spray staff members.

About two months later, a Rikers nurse, Alicia Butler, was working in a secure office in a mental health ward when a detainee opened the security gate and beat her with his fists, inflicting injuries to her hip and knee that were so severe she needed surgery.

A group of men in another housing unit, upset because they said they were not getting enough to eat this summer, blocked two guards in another housing unit from locking a security gate, took keys and a body camera from them and crushed the camera under their heels as the jailers hid in a control station.

The volatility inside the jails has become such that regular visitors to the buildings can never be sure of what they will encounter.

Civilian staff members who arrived at one jail in September were greeted by a group of detainees who offered to escort them through the building to keep them safe.

Moving farther into the jail, the employees were alarmed to see incarcerated people moving about freely, passing them in the halls and milling on staircases, with no guards in sight.

In another area, they watched as an officer in a control station allowed men to move casually from one unit to the next.

As the employees were leaving, they encountered three guards who were taking in the scene without intervening and a captain who ignored their requests to be let out of the housing area. A fourth guard heard the staffers yelling for assistance and opened the gate.

Richard Brown, left, said he went two days without eating because other men in a holding pen controlled the food distribution and would not allow him to have any. Veasey Conway for The New York Times

After an arrest on a probation violation charge, Richard Brown, 49, was brought to an area that he said was run by other incarcerated people last month.

Within two hours of arriving in an intake cell, he was confronted by gang members who tried to steal his sneakers while guards looked on.

He said he went two days without eating because the other men in the holding pen controlled the food distribution and would not allow him to have any.

When guards did try to break up fights, which were constant, they did so by blasting all the cell's occupants with pepper spray, whether they were combatants or not.

Toward the end of his two-week stay, Mr. Brown witnessed a group of men badly beating another detainee in an unguarded housing area.

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Mr. Brown said he is still haunted by the man's screams. "That's worse than any torture chamber," he said of Rikers Island. "No human should ever go through that."

Persistent problems

Persistent failures to repair crumbling infrastructure and train and manage guards effectively have compounded the problems on Rikers.

Abysmal conditions inside the buildings have been flagged repeatedly in court filings, inspection reports and other city records since the 1970s. A city report in 2015 warned that degrading physical conditions inside jailhouses were providing detainees with the "raw materials to fashion weapons," with buildings full of aging pipes, metal radiators and other items that could be broken, beaten or carved into crude blades.

Mayor Bill de Blasio noted two years later that extensive repairs and renovations to the buildings were still needed to ensure that conditions were safe and humane. But his focus by then was on closing Rikers Island entirely rather than overseeing long-term improvements.

Problems with jail staffing have been flagged equally often, especially in the past five years. They were mentioned in federal oversight reports in 2016, when monitors found that staff members continued to escalate violent confrontations with detainees at the mildest provocation. And again in 2017, when the monitor noted repeated "security lapses" by staffers that led to disorder in the jail. The reports' tone grew more critical in recent years, and the monitor noted staff insubordination, lack of basic conflict-management skills and chronic delays in the disciplinary process.

Every time concerns were raised, the city promised to do better — and then largely failed to deliver, records and interviews show.

"Despite years of reform rhetoric," said Mary Lynne Werlwas, the director of the Prisoners' Rights Project at the Legal Aid Society, "the de Blasio administration has been unable or unwilling to make serious changes."

Problems with jail staffing have been flagged often in federal oversight reports over the past five years. Uli Seit for The New York Times

As the crisis intensified this summer, the city made more promises.

Responding to reports of crippling, widespread absenteeism by jail staff in September, the mayor pledged action again, signing an emergency order to impose suspensions on correction officers who did not show up for posts, to open new clinics and intake centers and to hire emergency contractors to repair and clean jailhouses.

Still, the problems continued. A week after Mr. de Blasio signed that order, yet another detainee was out of his cell when he should not have been. Free to wander the row, he paused at a friend's cell, and they were talking through the door when the friend's cellmate approached, clutching a makeshift metal blade.

His arm moved through the food slot, cutting a gash in the face of the wandering detainee.