

Inmate deaths reveal brutal conditions in New York City's Rikers Island prison

Philip Guelpa
26 May 2014

Two recent deaths at New York City's Rikers Island, including one man who died of an infection after seven days of neglect, and another who died of the heat in his cell, point to the brutal treatment of inmates at the prison. Both cases were recently exposed by the Associated Press.

Bradley Ballard, a 39-year-old mentally ill inmate, died in September after being found near death following seven days of solitary confinement. During that seven-day period he was denied necessary medication or any other assistance, while he was clearly in distress, having covered himself with his own feces, stripped off his clothes, and tightly rubber-banded his genitals. The specific cause of death has reportedly not been determined eight months after it occurred, but is thought to have been sepsis, a systemic infection that spread throughout the body.

Ballard's condition was ignored and allowed to deteriorate during the course of a week despite mandatory periodic cell checks by guards and at least one brief observation by a mental health professional. He had been confined to his cell after reportedly having made lewd gestures at a female guard.

Bradley Ballard was a young worker who had come to New York City from his native Houston, Texas to look for improved job opportunities. He was known to be both schizophrenic and diabetic. He had previously been incarcerated for six years after being arrested in 2004 for allegedly assaulting employees at a New York law firm. His latest imprisonment came as a result of a parole violation related to the earlier conviction.

The city contends that Ballard's treatment by prison staff was the result of insufficient training. A review is reportedly ongoing and some staff members have been transferred to other facilities. Joseph Ponte, Mayor de Blasio's newly-appointed Corrections Commissioner,

stated that "improving coordination and information sharing between security staff and mental health staff" may be needed. Such statements constitute an attempt to whitewash the horrific conditions in the prison system.

Mistreatment of mentally ill inmates in New York City prisons is routine and ongoing. Ballard's death was followed five months later by that of another inmate in a Riker's mental facility who died from excessive heat in his cell due to an equipment malfunction. Jerome Murdough, 56, a homeless former Marine, suffered from bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. He had been arrested for sleeping in the stairwell of a public housing project in Harlem. He too was supposed to have been checked frequently by prison staff, but was only found four hours after his death. His family was only notified about his death a month later, when reporters from the Associated Press contacted them.

The New York City prison system, the largest in the US, houses approximately 12,000 inmates. Forty percent of them suffer from some form of mental illness, and a third of these conditions are considered serious.

Deaths and injuries to inmates are regular occurrences in New York City prisons. The latest reported death occurred only last week. In another incident, a former senior guard at Rikers Island was recently indicted for refusing medical aid to a mentally ill inmate who had swallowed disinfectant in 2012.

Brutality and callousness in the prison system is a chronic condition. At Rikers Island alone, repeated allegations have been made in recent years that guards ignored fights or encouraged inmates to commit violence against each other. The city has settled lawsuits involving payments of hundreds of thousands

of dollars.

Civilian staff who work in the prison complex, mostly health care workers, are also exposed to increasing violence from mentally ill patients. Department of Corrections data shows a 144 percent increase in assaults against these workers since July 2013. As the *New York Times* noted in a recent article, “Correction officers are supposed to provide workers protection, but the workers described a fraught relationship with their uniformed colleagues. Many said the correction officers actually contributed to violence by antagonizing inmates.”

Dr. Bandy Lee, a Yale University psychiatrist who once worked at Rikers Island, told the Associated Press, “Correctional institutions are such a poor substitute for mental hospitals, which is what they’re basically functioning as in our society. The problem is the correction setting is not fit to deliver the proper care, and in fact many of the settings exacerbate their symptoms.”

The reality is, however, that the systemic lack of resources to care for mentally ill inmates leads to the dehumanization of both prisoners and staff. The use of prison facilities to house mentally ill patients is a clear expression of utter disregard for the welfare of those whom the capitalist system considers “disposable.”

This is only one part of the larger brutality of the legal system in the US, which imprisons the highest proportion of inmates per capita of any country in the world. With approximately five percent of the world’s population, the United States houses nearly a quarter of the world’s prisoners. (See, “Report: US targets poor and working class with mass imprisonment”).



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact