

New reports of inmate deaths from beatings at New York's Rikers Island prison

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Two recently revealed incidents at the Rikers Island prison in New York City confirm that the horrific conditions, already documented in a number of previous reports, at the city's largest prison are the result of systematic, institutionalized brutality, not isolated aberrations.

In one incident, documents obtained by the Associated Press reveal that inmate Angel Ramirez, 50 years old, was beaten to death by prison guards using night sticks (police batons) in July of 2011. Ramirez was reportedly suffering hallucinations during withdrawal from alcohol and heroin, and had earlier been denied his prescribed medication. In this impaired state, he attempted to hit an officer, but missed. Several officers then took him out of view of surveillance cameras and inflicted a severe beating, resulting in Ramirez's death.

The news account states, based on information provided by the family's lawyer, that Ramirez "died of numerous blunt-impact injuries that included a ruptured spleen, shattered ribs and a stomach filled with blood." This contradicts the statements of the officers, who were interviewed eight months later, that the inmate was struck only once, and only in self-defense.

So far, three inmate deaths due to beatings by guards are reported to have taken place over the last five years, without a single conviction of the officers involved. Given the difficulty in obtaining information on these cases, the actual number of such incidents is likely to be much higher. And that does not include other forms of abuse, in some cases leading to death, which have also come to light in recent years.

One recent case of death by neglect that has come to light is that of 19-year old Andy Henriquez. He died at Rikers in April 2013 after being locked in solitary confinement for days without necessary medical

assistance. Henriquez died of a ruptured aorta after complaining of chest pains and breathing difficulties over a prolonged period. His mother is suing the city for "wrongful death."

Last August another inmate, Carlos Mercado, 46, was allowed to go into diabetic coma and eventually died from lack of treatment while incarcerated at Rikers. He was denied assistance despite pleas from him and fellow inmates as his condition worsened. Again, the city is being sued for wrongful death.

In yet another case, Jerome Murdough was found dead in a 100-degree cell on Feb. 15. The family plans to sue the city for \$25 million,

Corizon Health, the private company hired by the city to provide medical services to inmates at Rikers, has been sued over two dozen times since 2002 for incidents at the prison. Corizon had revenue of \$1.2 billion last year. This profit-making business takes in tens of millions of dollars annually from the city while health care for inmates remains criminally inadequate.

The pervasive use of violence and abuse against inmates by authorities, without any significant consequences for the perpetrators, was further documented by a federal study of the juvenile section of the prison that was issued earlier this month (see: Federal report exposes "culture of violence" in New York City's Rikers Island prison). It found that adolescent inmates are subjected to a "systematic culture of violence." Many of the inmates are placed in solitary confinement for up to 60 days. The study demonstrated that extremely loose supervision, systematic falsification of incident reports, and long drawn out investigations have created an environment in which such behavior can be carried out with impunity. This is only the latest in a long series of investigations and news accounts documenting

conditions at Rikers, stretching back at least a decade.

This city is in full damage control mode. The new Department of Correction Commissioner, Joe Ponte, appointed earlier this year by Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio, has made a series of statements intended to give the impression that abuses will be addressed. However, only cosmetic changes have been implemented. Last week, the de Blasio administration enacted new legislation intended to increase reporting of the use of solitary confinement, a practice that is documented to increase the rate of suicide and self-abuse by inmates. The law does nothing to actually curtail the practice or any of the associated brutality perpetrated by staff.

In a sign of growing crisis, the chief investigator at Rikers, Deputy Commissioner Florence Finkle, resigned her position last week as the revelations of inmate abuse and neglect mounted. Ms. Finkle is likely playing the role of a “sacrificial lamb” whose departure is an attempt to defuse the growing scandal.

Only last May, de Blasio’s Corrections Commissioner Ponte promoted two senior Rikers administrators to higher positions in the department.

The regime of abuse and brutality at Rikers, a virtual concentration camp on an island in the East River, as well as elsewhere in the prison system, is not the result of a few “bad apples,” as claimed by the city, but part of a system-wide, institutionalized policy which creates inhuman conditions for both inmates and staff, and is protected and condoned at the highest levels.

The horrific treatment of inmates at Rikers is made even more egregious by the fact that it is technically a jail, since it primarily holds individuals awaiting trial, rather than convicted prisoners. Legally, therefore, these inmates should be considered innocent until proven guilty. Instead, those incarcerated are subjected to unrestrained brutality and some are, in effect, sentenced to death before they are even tried.

In the few cases in which legal prosecution of inmate deaths is pursued, the city has pursued the practice of making a monetary settlement to the family of the deceased, sometimes for millions of dollars, thus effectively burying the crime and allowing the perpetrator to go free. In all three known cases of inmate deaths due to beatings by guards at Rikers over the last five years, the lack of convictions came despite the fact that the city’s medical examiner had ruled the deaths to be homicides. These settlements represent

what amounts to the “cost of doing business” for the city, allowing it to carry on with systematic brutality and legally condoned murder. Those few guards who have been convicted in non-lethal cases of abuse received little more than a slap on the wrist.

The use of extreme force by police agencies against the working class, whether in cities such as Ferguson, Missouri or in the prison system, expresses the deep-seated fear of the ruling class of growing social unrest, which leads it to respond with ever-increasing violence.



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