

Rikers Island officers fired for hog-tying and beating prisoner

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New York City Corrections Commissioner Joseph Ponte announced Wednesday that he would fire a captain and five prison guards for hog-tying and beating Rikers Island inmate Robert Hinton in April 2012.

The firings, announced Wednesday, came in response to a ruling by administrative law judge Tynia Richard, who called for the officers to be fired for their “brazen misconduct.” No criminal charges have been filed against the officers.

The beating was so savage that, shortly afterwards, Hinton’s mother Parys Johnson, said, “His nose is broken, his lips are broken and bruised, his tongue is cut, he has two loose front teeth. You pull up his eyelids and you see nothing but blood.” Video footage from the prison shows guards carrying a bound Hinton to a location off-camera where he received this treatment. Hinton is schizophrenic and takes medication for his condition.

The judge ruled on the case three years after the incident took place, allowing the captain, Budnarire Behiri, to be involved in another act of sadistic violence in 2013, in which two inmates were handcuffed to gurneys and beaten in a room without video surveillance until their blood splattered the walls.

In August, the US Attorney’s Office for Southern Manhattan, headed by Preet Bharara, released a report, the result of a two-year investigation, which described New York City Department of Corrections (DOC) guards’ treatment of juvenile prisoners as “a deep-seated culture of violence.” In December the office joined a class action lawsuit, Nunez et al. vs. City of New York, which seeks to implement reforms for the treatment of thousands of young people exposed to violence and torture at the 12,000-inmate complex.

These actions came on top of an expose of the

violence by the *New York Times* and the high-profile deaths at the hands of prison guards in the adult sections of Rikers. On February 5, inmate Jerome Murdough, a homeless veteran, died of heat exposure after neglect by guards, and in May, Bradley Ballard, a mentally ill inmate, died after he was left alone in a cell for seven days without his medication.

On Tuesday, the *Times* leaked an internal report by New York State’s Commission of Correction from last month that recommended the Justice Department investigate the details of Ballard’s death for possible civil rights violations. The *Times* observed, “The commission’s report makes clear that blame for the death lies squarely with the city’s correction and health agencies, as well as the private jail health contractor, Corizon Inc.”

Other recent press reports have highlighted the fact that prison guards were hired with little or no vetting process by the DOC. A review by the city’s Department of Investigation showed that 35 percent of guards hired last year “presented significant red flags that should have either precluded their hiring outright or required further follow-up.” These included affiliation to gangs, criminal records, and psychological issues. All but five of the guards are still employed by the DOC.

In an effort to staunch the public anger over violence and abuse by law enforcement agencies, both in the prison system and by the New York Police Department (NYPD), the de Blasio administration has made much ado about banning solitary confinement for inmates 21 years old and younger in Rikers Island. The ban, however, will not take place until January 2016, and is contingent on funding, meaning that the barbaric practice of throwing teenagers into solitary confinement will continue for at least another year.



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