Death and horror in New York City's Rikers Island jail

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New York City's infamous Rikers Island, the largest jail complex in the United States, is presently experiencing an escalating crisis of inmate death, sickness, filth and barbaric violence. A significant staff shortage caused by the coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a complete breakdown of basic services and a worsening of the already horrendous conditions at the prison. At least 14 inmates have died since the beginning of the year.

Of these, at least five were suicides. William Diaz Guzman hanged himself in his cell in January, and Javier Velasco was found dead in March with a bed sheet wrapped around his neck. Brandon Rodriguez hanged himself in a shower in an intake area on August 10. The death of inmate Tomas Carlo Camacho, in March, who was found unresponsive, with his head jammed through the small cuffing slot in his cell door, has also been ruled a suicide.

Adding to the toll in New York's jails was the death of Anthony Scott, who was taken off life support on October 18 after he was found hanging in a holding cell in Manhattan Criminal Court, which is not a part of the Rikers complex.

Other recent deaths at Rikers include those of Thomas Braunson III, who died of a drug overdose, and Richard Blake, who had a cardiac arrest. According to other inmates, guards had ignored Blake's requests for medical attention for at least two days before his death.

Most of these men were being held for minor offenses and many were still awaiting their day in court.

A staff shortage, compounded by high levels of absenteeism by corrections officers, has resulted in significant delays in the distribution of food, water, medication and urgent medical care to the inmates. In September nearly a third of the 8,400 Corrections Officers employed at Rikers failed to report for work.

Because of the understaffing, according to the *New York Times*, "Gang members and other detainees have taken to managing the comings and goings of dozens of incarcerated people in jail dormitories, breaking up fights and administering medical care."

The conditions in the jail complex bring to mind the dungeons of medieval Europe. A group of state politicians, city officials and public defenders who toured Rikers last month reported that garbage and urine cover the floors of some sections of the facility. Dozens of prisoners are packed into filthy cells without masks to limit the spread of COVID-19, often with overflowing toilets, and are denied communication with their lawyers. In several of the prison's intake units, inmates are being held in tiny shower stalls for extended periods and are forced to defecate into plastic bags. One public defender described conditions at the prison as "the most horrific thing I've seen in my life."

Hip-hop artist Terrance Ferguson—known by the stage name 2 Milly—who is currently incarcerated on Rikers Island on a gun charge, told the *Daily News* that prisoners are treated "like we're animals." Ferguson said, "There was more than 30 of us, no shower, barely ate. We were subjected to Mace because of other people fighting." When one prisoner attempted to commit suicide, "they came and sprayed him with Mace," he said.

Other media reports describe one facility at Rikers so mismanaged that people were fighting over clean spots on the floor or laying out scraps of cardboard to protect themselves from overflowing sewage while they slept.

In addition to these barbaric conditions, the pandemic continues to rage in the institution. Earlier this month, the Otis Bantum Correctional Center, one of the units at Rikers, was placed under lockdown as a result of the widespread exposure of inmates to COVID-19. Only about 50 percent of staff and just over 40 percent of prisoners have received at least one dose of the coronavirus vaccine. Over 20 percent of the 6,000 total prisoners on Rikers Island are under quarantine.

Last month, Isa Abdul-Karim contracted COVID-19 while being held in the overcrowded intake area for ten days, and was denied proper medical attention. He experienced shortness of breath and collapsed after becoming unconscious. Wheelchair-bound Victor Mercado died from complications of COVID-19 on October 15.

Over the last year and a half, jails and prisons in the United States and internationally have been hubs of coronavirus infections and death. It is estimated that the virus has killed close to 3,000 incarcerated people and infected one out of every three people behind bars in the US. Inmates have been easy targets for the highly infectious and deadly virus.

At Rikers, social distancing is impossible in the crowded

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conditions, and those lucky enough to have received a mask on arrival are not supplied with a new mask if they lose or damage their initial face covering.

In 2020, under pressure of the pandemic, the city released hundreds of people incarcerated at Rikers, bringing the population below 4,000. Now it has risen back to nearly 6,000, however.

A recent report by the Monitor of the New York City Department of Correction, court-appointed in 2015, exposed the escalation of violence at Rikers and other New York City jail facilities over the last year. According to the report, physical force is currently employed by guards against prisoners far more frequently than in prior years. In fact, “the average Use of Force rate in 2020 was 183 percent higher than the average Use of Force rate in 2016,” the report notes.

Confrontational prison staff terrorize the prison population with constant, aggressive searches of cells and regular beatings. Guards often utilize “improper head-strikes, violent body slams and takedowns, violent wall slams, painful and unsafe escort holds, unnecessary use of [pepper] spray, and prohibited holds” on inmates. Emergency Response Teams, squads of heavily armed guards wearing riot gear, are “summoned to handle even the most routine and commonplace management issues.”

These goon squads “behave with impunity,” according to the report. Prison staff often “file incomplete or false reports” on their use of force against prisoners and “fail to properly utilize handheld cameras” during interactions with the prison population. Many acts of brutality against prisoners are not reported and those that are reported go unaddressed for up to a year. The report continues by observing that the number of incidents with Class A (more serious) injuries “has significantly increased (from 74 in 2016 to 178 in 2020).”

The Monitor’s report also notes the failure of Rikers Island and other New York jail facilities to “adequately provide for and/or address requests for basic services.” Prison staff “are not responding in the moment with the necessary urgency and/or are not taking threats and self-harm gestures seriously.”

The conditions at the jail have raised widespread revulsion among New Yorkers. Families of deceased inmates protested last week outside Bronx District Attorney Darcel Clark’s office, carrying signs that read: 'Stop sentencing people to Rikers to die,” and 'How many more?”

Melania Brown, whose sister died in a Rikers solitary confinement unit in 2019 told the media, 'This is the problem that we’re facing today, our leaders don’t care. This whole America is all about money.”

Last month, New York City’s Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio took a staged tour of Rikers Island and defended conditions inside the jail complex. De Blasio reportedly ignored cries for help from inmates as he walked through one of the jail facilities. He met with neither inmates nor corrections officers.

The conditions in Rikers are a matter of policy of the de Blasio’s Democratic administration, not neglect, and are only an extension, during the pandemic, of those reported by the office of Preet Bharara, the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, in 2014, in what it called a “deep seated culture of violence.”

Since that time, Rikers has been the scene of atrocity after atrocity. In 2015, Kalief Browder, who spent three years on Rikers Island after being accused of stealing at the age of 16, committed suicide following his release. Browder had been tortured and starved in solitary confinement without ever being convicted of a crime. Joseph Foster died in 2017 after his cries for medical attention were ignored by guards.

De Blasio subsequently promised to close Rikers and move inmates to six different jails distributed around the city by 2027. How this will change the “culture of violence” so deeply imbued in the jail system is never explained. But little, so far, has been done to facilitate any change.

The inaction of the Democratic mayor in the Rikers crisis has only permitted another faction of the Democratic Party to engage in demagogy and make demands that it knows the ruling establishment will never implement.

Last month, Democratic representative Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, from the Bronx, a leading figure in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), joined with another DSAer in Congress, Jamaal Bowman, and Democratic Representatives Nydia Velazquez and Jerrold Nadler, who chairs the House Judiciary Committee, to call on de Blasio and Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul to release almost all the prisoners at Rikers.

This is nothing but grandstanding from a group of Democratic politicians, Ocasio-Cortez and Bowman in particular, who have seen their popularity flag among hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers because of their insistence on sending children unvaccinated for COVID-19 into school buildings in September, resulting in the infection of thousands of students and staff.

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