



## These jail fixes matter much more than closing Rikers

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Last week, Mayor Bill de Blasio unveiled the details of his plan to close the jail complex at Rikers Island within a decade. As part of the plan, smaller jails already operating in four boroughs would be replaced or upgraded and expanded to house detainees that would have previously been sent to Rikers.

Some community leaders and the corrections officers' union oppose the plan, instead calling for various reforms to the existing facilities. But Rikers' notoriety for cruelty, abuse and mismanagement is well-earned and, as a result, Rikers Island has become a symbol of systemic failure and mistreatment.

The prospect of rehabilitating or reforming the place is far less appealing than closing the book on the Rikers era and using the change as a springboard to reform not one jail complex but how New York City handles its incarcerated population.

Most important would be reforming the cash-bail system and ensuring adequate mental health treatment outside jail complexes like Rikers, which are ill-equipped to deal with such problems and serve mostly to incubate and exacerbate them.

In recent weeks, the Corrections Officers' Benevolent Association has called on de Blasio to better protect its officers after several were injured in assaults by inmates. That's reasonable, but the union simultaneously calls for reinstating the use of solitary confinement against inmates under 21, which a growing number of advocates, commentators, academics and health care professionals oppose, some considering it tantamount to torture.

According to an independent commission report in 2017, Rikers Island "functions as an expensive penal colony" that suffers from a "culture of violence and neglect" ranging from "daily humiliations" to "shocking brutality."

The Kalief Browder case, which brought renewed national interest in conditions at the facility, typifies the problems not just with Rikers itself, but New York City's criminal justice system writ large — especially the problems wrought by dependence on cash bail.

Browder was awaiting trial for three years after his arrest for misdemeanor theft when he was 16, but he couldn't afford cash bail. While incarcerated, he was attacked by both correctional officers and inmates, and suffered the psychological horrors of almost two years in solitary confinement, which may have contributed to his suicide after his release.

It's impossible to think of Browder's time at Rikers as anything but a cruel punishment despite never getting his day in court. Most people who are arrested don't need to be held in jail until their court date. Cash or "money" bail punishes the poor by keeping individuals in jail before they've ever been convicted of a crime.

New York City has instituted some bail reforms, but more can be done. Washington, DC, ended cash bail decades ago, with roughly 90 percent of arrestees released with some monitoring or agreement to check in with authorities after an overnight stay and processing. High-risk offenders are held over until trial.

Regardless of whether Rikers remains open, the city should move further toward a system that holds fewer individuals who would be free but for their inability to pay money bail.

Then there are the offenders who need mental health treatment, not a jail cell on Rikers or anywhere else. Former corrections leaders have publicly criticized the city's lack of adequate mental health resources.

Specifically, former state Correction Commissioner Brian Fischer and former city Correction Commissioner Martin Horn suggest creating new residential treatment centers to address chronic mental health problems rather than having the jails house and triage individuals after episodes resulting in arrest.

Putting the mentally ill in cages can endanger the individual as well as fellow inmates and corrections officers. This, too, should change regardless of Rikers' fate.

Fixing New York City's criminal justice system will require more than swapping facilities. The city should eliminate money bail and put resources into mental health and other diversion programs to get offenders the help they need, and the corrections officers all over the city deserve safer work environments. Meaningful and achievable reforms will be better for the city, offenders and corrections officers — and it's hard to imagine those reforms relying upon a new and improved Rikers Island.

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