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OCTOBER 15, 2014

## Rikers report raises new questions about systemic abuse in juvenile corrections

 September 26, 2014 by [stevenyoder](#)  [Leave a Comment](#)



*Aerial view of Riker's Island and Jail October 10, 2012  
Flickr: Rikers Island Jail – Tim Rodenberg*

In April 2012, several adolescent inmates held at a juvenile jail on New York City's Rikers Island got into an argument and started throwing a storage bin at each other. When a corrections officer came into the room to restore order, he tried to handcuff one of them. The young man stood up, and the officer hit him in the face, delivering multiple roundhouse punches while two other officers stood by—the boy suffered multiple injuries to his head. The officer later filed a false report claiming that the teen had pushed him and that he'd defended himself by hitting the boy in the chest. But the

whole episode had been captured on video.

The teen was just one of almost 800 youth who suffered injuries at Rikers Island in 2012. often

### FEATURED VIDEO

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at the hands of abusive staff, according to a scathing August 4 report from U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara. That those and other forms of abuse show up frequently in juvenile facilities around the country has some reformers calling for the abolition of juvenile jails entirely.

Bharara's report found "rampant use of unnecessary and excessive force" by Rikers Island corrections staff against teens held there. It also concluded that the facilities use solitary confinement at an "alarming" rate: on any given day in 2013, between 15 and 25 percent of the teen population were in solitary, often for nonviolent conduct. What's worse, many of the teens in the facilities suffer from mental illness and are pre-trial detainees—they haven't yet been adjudicated, says the report.

Bharara concluded that the adolescent facilities have become "a corrections crucible that seems more inspired by Lord of the Flies than any legitimate philosophy of humane detention." He also found that teens' treatment violates their rights under the 8th and 14th Amendments. New York is one of two states—along with North Carolina—that charges all youth 16 and older as adults.

Critics of the juvenile justice systems say it's all too easy to blame problems at Rikers Island on individual rogue officers or to point to a single facility that's out of control. State systems were designed with the goal of rehabilitating adolescents, not punishing them—their purpose from the beginning has been to be to help kids get back on the right track. But that hardly squares with accounts of young people being brutalized at juvenile lockups around the country.

In July in Las Vegas, a family court judge ordered an inquiry into the Nevada Youth Training Center after staff were reported to have hobbled juvenile inmates by linking their handcuffs and ankle shackles. "If a parent did that, it would be child abuse—probably charged criminally," the judge told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

In two juvenile facilities in San Diego, staff are alleged to have used pepper spray on youth 461 times in 2012, including on a girl who refused to strip in front of guards because she was being placed on suicide watch, according to a complaint filed in July with the U.S. Justice

Department



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Department.

In 2013, two boys won a lawsuit against New Jersey’s Juvenile Justice Commission—one of them had spent 178 days in solitary confinement at age 16 and the other 50 days at 15. One of two had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar disorder, attempted suicide, and mutilated himself several times while in custody, according to the ACLU.

And a 2010 Justice Department study found that 13 percent of kids in state lockups are sexually abused, most often by staff. Detainees also get few of the services they need: another 2010 department study found that though 70 percent have experienced trauma and that more than one in five have tried to commit suicide—fewer than half get any mental-health evaluation. According to 2003 Justice Department survey data, one-third of youth in custody that year were held in isolation at some point, over half of them for more than 24 hours.

Bharara’s August 4 report gave the city 49 days to “develop specific policies and procedures that will implement ... remedial measures,” though it noted that the brutal conditions on Rikers developed under the previous mayoral administration of Michael Bloomberg. But now that grace period has elapsed, and on September 22, Bharara released a statement noting that “all options are available to us, [and] we stand ready to take legal action to compel long-overdue reforms at Rikers....”

New York mayor Bill de Blasio has [called](#) Rikers Island “profoundly broken” and said this week that he wants to change the civil service laws so that he can bring in uniformed officers from outside the Correction Department to replace staff at Rikers. And his correction commissioner, Joseph Ponte, has announced a program to reduce the number of juveniles in solitary confinement, according to the *New York Times*. But one member of an oversight board at the Rikers facility told the paper that her staff at the adolescent jail tell her that “nothing significant has changed.”

Elsewhere around the country, juvenile jail reform efforts are underway in some states. Many are moving delinquent youth out of huge juvenile jails and into smaller local facilities or, even better, into alternative treatment programs.

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October 12,  
2014 By

[joanoleck](#)

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September 27, 2014 By [Patrick R. Romain](#)  
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But some reformers say those changes are far too spotty and cautious, given states' multiple attempts to fix their systems over the years and evidence that juvenile jails may actually increase crime. A [study](#) last year found that young offenders who were incarcerated were 67 percent more likely to be reincarcerated by age 25 than a group of matched offenders who weren't put into the corrections system.

Nell Bernstein, author of an exhaustive [book](#) released this summer on the failures of the juvenile justice system, has [concluded](#) that we'd be better off just closing juvenile prisons altogether. "Given the growing body of research that tells us that juvenile incarceration fosters criminality," she said in an interview, "simply shutting these places down would, I believe, improve public safety significantly."

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September 23, 2014 By [Liz Fields](#)

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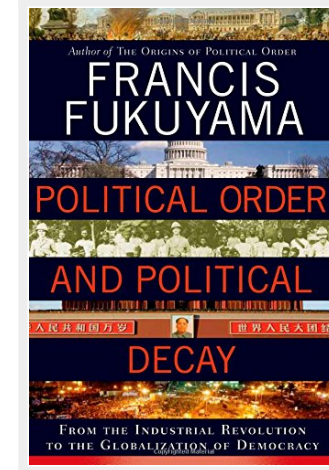
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