The Other Side of the Gate

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As the Close Rikers movement advances, correction officers who work on Rikers Island and deal with dangerous inmates feel forgotten.

The movement has painted a grim picture of life on Rikers Island for its inmates, but officers say assaults on guards get little media attention and fear the impact closing Rikers might have on their jobs and their communities.

“I’ve been spit on, kicked, had liquid thrown on me and I didn’t even know what it was,” said Manuel Feliz, 27, who has been on the job for three years.

“These Close Rikers people don’t ask how our families are doing,” said Michael Fields, 50, of Queens, a 16-year-veteran of the New York City Department of Correction. “If they close Rikers, you know they’re going to start cutting jobs.”

A Rikers shutdown would hurt the communities where officers live, he said. “Where these Close Rikers people putting these inmates at,” asked Fields. “You want them in your neighborhood? They’ll be going right into minority neighborhoods.”

Officers feel invisible as they watch and read press coverage of Rikers injustices.

“You never see our stories on the news,” said Feliz. “Everything is always focused on the inmates. We have stories to tell too.”

There are 9,000 correction officers on Rikers Island and the average daily population of inmates as of December 2017 is 9,183 — down from 13,000 in 2009 and 21,000 in 1992, during the crack epidemic. The officers, 43 percent of whom are women, are overwhelmingly nonwhite, as are the inmates they guard. Black and Hispanic inmates make up 87 percent of the population.

Officers’ salaries and benefits rose under the leadership of former Correction Officers Benevolent Association head Norman Seabrook, but they still feel they don’t get the respect that police and firefighters receive. Their sense of grievance has increased with the growing impact of Close Rikers, a movement spurred by the death of Kalief Browder, a teenager from the Bronx who was jailed at Rikers for three years on charges for stealing a backpack, with time in solitary confinement, and killed himself after his release.

Fields says he doesn’t know why Close Rikers advocates like to make inmates seem like angels when they are criminals, in his view. Among the total Rikers population, 76 percent of inmates are detainees waiting for a trial.

“We come to work to support our families, not to beat up inmates,” he said. “These dudes are crooks, but when they come to the Island, they want us to treat them like they’re tax-paying citizens.”
Michael Fields (center) with his three sons.

Fields says when he first joined the department, he didn’t feel threatened in the same way.

“You know we were in control of the inmates,” he said, “Majority of them weren’t disrespectful. It was an older generation.”

When Joseph Ponte became commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction in April 2014, he vowed to make Rikers a safer place for inmates and officers alike. He allocated money for equipment and more training for incoming and seasoned officers, but still there is a problem.

Officers think the issue stems from the de Blasio administration and the way that they want them to deal with inmates and also how inmates perceive Rikers Island even before they become inmates.

Jeff Mellow, an expert in corrections and the evaluation of criminal justice programs from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, says that training and other procedures should benefit officers and inmates alike.

“Policies, procedures and directives vary depending on issues,” he said. “Of course safety of the officers, staff and the inmates is the most important when running a facility.”

A factor in the high burnout rate for officers by their second year on the job is the challenge of dealing with mentally ill inmates, officers say. Department statistics show that mentally ill inmates make up 44 percent of the average daily population at Rikers. Of those 44 percent, 74 percent of them are involved in jail incidents, which include assaults on officers and other personnel.

Martin Horn, commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction from 2003-2009, said that assaults on officers seem to have gone up tremendously since he’s left, but what the department counts as assault has also changed.

“To an inmate throwing urine at an officer is an assault now,” said Horn. “But it wasn’t back when I was in charge.”

Horn thinks that assaults on officers can be combated with increased hiring. He noted that many experienced officers have retired in recent years.

“They need a sufficient amount of COs watching inmates and they also need adequate training,” he said.

The current Correction commissioner, Cynthia Brann, spoke before the City Council committee on Fire and Criminal Justice Services in October and focused on reforming Rikers.
“We have identified several populations with unique needs and developed management models to address those needs,” she said. “In particular, we developed tailored programming, treatment and staffing models to meet the unique needs of adolescents, young adults, women, those with mental health issues, and the most persistently problematic or violent.”

The department has started to recruit and hire officers who are “interested in and are best suited to work with specific population,” she said. Before this new initiative, officers didn’t have to necessarily have a degree in a criminal justice field to be an officer. Until 2000, only high school diplomas were required, said Tanezia Vargas, 35, who graduated from the correction academy that year.

“I have no degree in anything,” she said.

The department is also trying to limit the use of force. In September, it sent out a directive stressing “the Department’s commitment to apply force in the most reasonable manner possible to minimize injuries to both Staff and Inmates and to achieve the Department’s objective of resolving potential physical confrontations between Staff and inmates through methods other than the use of force whenever possible.”

Brann told the Council that the use of force dropped 65 percent from the first to the last quarter of fiscal year 2017. Officers say they don’t use force because they don’t want to risk going to jail or losing their jobs.

“Inmate could break your jaw, but if you give him a black eye you’d go to jail,” said Fields.

Feliz said he has encountered many problematic inmates, especially in his months working in the Emergency Services Unit.

“There are people with mental issues in here, people would get assaulted, inmates would slash other inmates,” he said.

The department formerly put those disruptive and violent inmates in punitive segregation. They would be in a cell by themselves for days or months, but Brann said that’s not safe for inmates or officers.

“The impacts of long-term segregation can actually increase violent tendencies which is actually detrimental for the staff, inmates, facilities and our communities,” she told the Council.

Officers say the elimination of punitive segregation has made the jails unsafe. “In that era working in a male inmate facility was not as fearful as it is now,” said Tanezia Vargas. “Inmates who disobeyed rules were infracted and if found guilty were sent to punitive segregation.”

Now, she said, it’s a different story. “The inmates have taken full advantage of this and do not hesitate on taking part in violent acts towards staff and one another,” she said. “They know that there will be no consequences or repercussions.”
Old-time officers recall when former commissioner Dora B. Schriro, who held the position from 2009 to 2014, wanted inmates to call officers by their first name and for officers to call the inmates clients.

“There’s no respect, no line, when you have inmates calling us by first name,” said Fields. He said when you try to discipline them and they get angry and assault you, you can’t fight back. “I believe they are trying to destroy us because we’re the only law enforcement in the country with the biggest minority.”

Genesis Guerrero, 23-year-old self-named revolutionary, is a big supporter of the Close Rikers movement, but not because she thinks that the officers are bad people.

“The city needs to do something about the way that Rikers is set up,” she said. “There are detention centers in other cities and states that help the inmates get back on their feet and even while they’re there they have enrichment classes.”

Guerrero says that Rikers doesn’t offer those programs and so inmates get released, get in trouble and come back to do more time.

“If the city allocated money to Rikers to have these programs a lot of the inmates, who 10 chances to one are there on small charges, they could change their lives around.”

Correction Officers start their process in The Academy, where they train for five to six months. They learn the rules and regulations of the department and jail procedures, but many of the soon-to-be officers know that when they get in the jail it’s going to be different.

“A lot of my classmates from the academy left once they saw how hard it was,” said Feliz. “You know it’s a good job with good benefits and a great pension when you retire, but you know that’s not enough.”

Officers say they wish people knew how hard they work in those jails to keep everyone safe.

“I wish people knew the sacrifices we’ve made, but they’re so quick to judge,” said Fields. “We are really the unsung heroes.”

The job of a correction officer also takes a toll on their personal lives outside of the jail. They deal with stress and trauma while on the job, come up with health issues and their family lives take a back seat.

“The job life is stressful yes, but you don’t want to bring that home to your family,” said Feliz. “You have to learn to balance that out.”

When Fields takes his sons to the barbershop, he stops his car two blocks away and tells them to get out and walk the rest of the way without him, in case a former inmate recognizes him.
“My neighborhood, you see Crips and Bloods so I didn’t know who might be at the barbershop and a few times I went I saw a couple of criminals,” he said. “You have to take precautions too when you have children. Going to the mall I always let them walk in front of me. You don’t know what these crooks are going to do.”

Alyssa Rodriguez, 23, the daughter of an officer, remembers how it was growing up with her dad.

“I respect the sacrifice he made to provide for his family, but at the cost of him never being home I resented it,” she said. “There were always broken promises and only two real family vacations.”

Although she felt like there were things that her father missed out on, she still feels a sense of pride being the daughter of a correction officer.

“Knowing the kind of things he goes through and knowing how people feel about COs makes me proud,” she said. “I’ve seen him on the news about five times when they do specials in Rikers and he’s all suited up in his gear and I always have that thought in my head, wow that’s my dad, and it feels awesome to know he’s doing something for almost 20 years that most give up in one year.”

A study from the Journal of Law Enforcement by Dr. Olivia Johnson and Scott Barthelmass says that law enforcement officers, including correctional officers can end up having mental issues, but because a lot of them think that mental illness is a sign of weakness they don’t like to talk about it or get treated.

“Often, law enforcement training concerning mental illness mainly focuses on identifying defects and deficiencies of the mentally ill individual, contributing to the increased stigmatization attached to mental illness,” the study said. “With the high number of yearly law enforcement suicides, many officers are forced to suffer silently for fear of being labeled by their communities, and more importantly their peers.”

“It’s very stressful and we officers don’t take care of ourselves,” said Fields. “We have health problems, a lot of females have thyroid problems, we don’t eat well so we’re overweight.”

Significant others of these officers also have concerns. “I’m very concerned about my boyfriend,” said Shana Pereira, 27, and a new mother. “In most professions you’ll hear from your loved one via text a few times a day or something close to that.”

She recalls a time when she didn’t hear from her boyfriend and when he came home he told her that he was assaulted by an inmate. She worries about getting that call about his being hurt.

“It scares me that anything could happen at any moment,” she said.
As the Close Rikers movement progresses and the New York City Department of Correction keeps changing their policies to combat violence in their jails, the officers on the other side don’t want to be forgotten.

“None of us go to work and say we’re going to assault an inmate,” said Fields. “We come to work to make sure they are safe, we are safe and we can go home to support our families.”