EMERGING ADULTS INCARCERATED AT RIKERS ISLAND
AN OVERVIEW

Columbia | Justice Lab
Emerging Adult Justice Project

eajustice.org
EMERGING ADULTS INCARCERATED AT RIKERS ISLAND: AN OVERVIEW
LAEL CHESTER, SORA YA SHRI-PATHMAN, MAYA SUSSMAN*

THERE HAVE BEEN NUMEROUS OFFICIAL REPORTS DOCUMENTING THE EXTREME VIOLENCE AND NEGLECT AT NEW YORK CITY’S RIKERS ISLAND JAIL COMPLEX (“RIKERS” OR “RIKERS ISLAND”).¹ NOT ONLY DO PEOPLE INCARCERATED AT RIKERS WITNESS AND EXPERIENCE HARM, BUT PEOPLE HAVE DIED AS A RESULT OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT.² OVER THE COURSE OF 2021, 15 PEOPLE DIED WHILE INCARCERATED AT RIKERS ISLAND,³ AND AS OF SEPTEMBER 30, 2022, ANOTHER 16 PEOPLE HAVE DIED WHILE IN DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION (DOC) CUSTODY.⁴ THIS CRISIS IS ESPECIALLY CONCERNING FOR THE YOUNGEST PEOPLE INCARCERATED AT RIKERS: EMERGING ADULTS. YOUNG PEOPLE, FROM AGES 18 TO 25, ARE IN A DISTINCT DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE CALLED “EMERGING ADULTHOOD,” DURING WHICH THEY ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO THE VIOLENT, TRAUMATIZING ENVIRONMENT AT RIKERS, WHICH IMPEDES THEIR HEALTHY TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD.⁵ IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT ALMOST ALL OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE HELD AT RIKERS ISLAND ARE BEING HELD WHILE A CASE IS PENDING; THEY HAVE NOT BEEN CONVICTED AND ARE PRESUMED INNOCENT.⁶ ALSO, A LARGE MAJORITY OF EMERGING ADULTS IN DOC CUSTODY ARE BLACK AND A SMALL MINORITY ARE WHITE,⁷ DISPROPORTIONALITY THAT REFLECTS THE SYSTEMIC RACISM THAT IS THE FOUNDATION OF THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM. PRESENTLY, THE DATA COLLECTED AND/OR PUBLICLY SHARED BY THE CITY REGARDING THE YOUNG PEOPLE INCARCERATED IN DOC CUSTODY ARE LIMITED, DO NOT INCLUDE ETHNICITY, DO NOT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN PEOPLE INCARCERATED AT RIKERS ISLAND AND THOSE IN OTHER DOC FACILITIES, AND DO NOT EXAMINE EACH YEAR OF AGE OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD.⁸ WHAT IS AVAILABLE IS HIGHLIGHTED BELOW, ALONG WITH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION.

* This paper was authored by Lael Chester, Director of the Emerging Adult Justice Project, Soraya Shri-Pathman, Research Associate of the Emerging Adult Justice Project, and Maya Sussman, Senior Manager of Research and Policy of the Emerging Adult Justice Project. The authors would like to thank Columbia University Justice Lab colleagues Sam Plummer and Vincent Schiraldi: for their guidance and feedback. Sincerest gratitude to the Data Collaborative at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and to Juan Gomez, Tracey Wells-Huggins, Alex Frank, and Nel Andrews for their thoughtful input. Finally, our appreciation goes to everyone who kindly offered feedback and input on earlier drafts of this report.

Emerging adults, ages 18 to 25, make up almost one-quarter of the people incarcerated at Rikers Island and are, as an age group, overrepresented. The 2020 census estimates, the most recent available, indicate that 18- to 24-year-olds made up 8.4% of the general New York City (NYC) population, while as of July 22, 2022, emerging adults (ages 18-25) made up 23.2% of the population incarcerated in New York City Department of Correction (DOC) facilities.

Profile of the Emerging Adults at Rikers Island

Emerging Adults (Ages 18 to 25) as a Percentage of the Total NYC Population Versus as a Percentage of People in NYC DOC Custody

On July 22, 2022

Total NYC

NYC DOC

Source data: U.S. Census Bureau (2020), Age and Sex, American Community Survey; NYC Department of Correction, analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College (personal communication, July 22, 2020).
The vast majority of people incarcerated at Rikers are male, and this is also true among the emerging adult population. On July 22, 2022, of the 5,642 people incarcerated of all ages across NYC’s DOC facilities, 5,304 (94%) were male and 338 (6%) were female. Amongst the 1,312 emerging adults in DOC custody on the same date, 1,249 (95%) were male and 63 were (5%) female.

Overall, Black and Indigenous emerging adults, ages 18 to 25, are starkly over-represented at Rikers. On July 22, 2022, out of 1,309 emerging adults in DOC custody, 845 were Black (64.5%), 374 were Other (28.5%), 69 were White (5.3%), 19 were Native American (1.5%), and 2 were Asian (0.15%). In the general population (of all ages) in New York City, 24% of people identify as Black, 29% Hispanic or Latino, 32% White (not Hispanic or Latino), 0.4% Native American, and 14% Asian.

Source data: NYC Department of Correction, analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College (personal communication, July 22, 2022)
In terms of legal status, the vast majority of emerging adults are being detained (pre-trial) and are presumed innocent. On July 22, 2022, 90% of the people in DOC custody were detained (with only 10% convicted). According to Rikers’s court-ordered federal monitor, the current overall length of stay for an incarcerated individual is about 100 days, which is three times the national average (30 days) and significantly exceeds most other large jail systems.

According to inmate discharge data, for emerging adults incarcerated as of September 13, 2022, the median length of stay is 141 days, compared to 133 days for non emerging adults. On July 22, 2022, a total of 201 emerging adults had been in DOC custody for 1 to 2 years, and 112 for more than 2 years. Black and Asian emerging adults appeared to have the longest median lengths of stay among the 18- to 25-year-old age group, as shown in the chart below.

![Median Length of Stay of Emerging Adults (Ages 18 to 25) Versus Adults (Ages 26+) in NYC DOC Custody, by Race](chart.png)

On September 13, 2022

- **White**
- **Black**
- **Asian**
- **American Indian**
- **Other**
- **Unknown**

**Emerging Adults (Ages 18 to 25)**

**Adults (Ages 26+)**

Victimization And Harm

Exposures to harm and violence during the distinct developmental stage of emerging adulthood leaves an indelible mark on the life course, as young people are impacted by exposure to violence into adulthood. Encounters with violence, as both victims and perpetrators, tend to peak during emerging adulthood; the criminal legal system, and particularly carceral settings such as Rikers Island, perpetuates and concentrates exposures to violence. Emerging adults are made victims of harm and violence by staff at Rikers Island at extremely high rates. The most recent publicly available data are limited to younger emerging adults, ages 18 to 21, but show that from January 1 to June 30, 2021, these younger emerging adults comprised only 8% of the Department’s average daily population but were involved in 22% of the reported uses of force by staff. While not all uses of force are necessarily excessive or result in physical harm, this high frequency of force on the emerging adult population is trauma-inducing and reflects a highly chaotic and violent environment. Further, witnessing violence in prisons has been found to be a frequent experience even in facilities less notorious for chaos and violence, and causes victimization of people regardless of age. The rate of use of force against 18-year-olds (in RNDC) was particularly high at the most recent reporting, the highest level since July 2018 and more than twice as high as that experienced by 19- to 21-year-olds.
In addition, emerging adults at Rikers Island are frequently forced into situations of extreme isolation, experiencing numerous “lockdowns” or “lock-ins” that often extend for multiple days.\textsuperscript{30} Social isolation and lack of stimuli have been shown to be extremely detrimental to young people,\textsuperscript{31} and, as noted in the federal court-appointed monitoring reports, is compounded by the absence of appropriate programming and support provided to young people, and insufficient recreation time.\textsuperscript{32} These lack of services and opportunities cause further harm to this population, as discussed in more detail below.
Research and Experience Show Emerging Adults Need Developmentally Appropriate Supports and Services in the Community

All young people need supports and services to help facilitate the transition to healthy adulthood. Access to developmentally appropriate education, health, mental health, workforce development, and other opportunities to learn and grow, which take emerging adults' unique developmental status into account, are necessary for the transition towards increased independence. At the same time, young people need access to community connections to provide vital relationships that serve as a foundation for growth and development. Establishing these healthy relationships with their family, friends, and community members provides stability and support as young people experiment and make mistakes on their way to adulthood.\textsuperscript{33} Research shows that more developmentally appropriate responses to emerging adults lead to healthier outcomes than traditional punitive approaches and, consequently, increase public safety.\textsuperscript{34}
Jails, and particularly Rikers Island, do not provide these necessary supports and services, but instead focus exclusively on punishment and isolation, and cut young people off from critical relationships, services, programs, and opportunities. As just one example, many young people in contact with the legal system require special education services, and although the legal right to an academic education extends to age 22, few are informed of the opportunities available to them and adult carceral facilities like Rikers Island often lack proper programming.

Emerging adults in contact with the criminal legal system are highly likely to have experienced trauma, and continue to experience trauma within the system; they therefore need access to age-appropriate mental health and medical care, which the American Academy of Pediatrics says can extend through the pediatric system until at least age 21. The carceral system is rooted in isolation and degradation, which impedes healthy development. Emerging adults are best served through networks and organizations that provide supports and services in their communities.

"NO ONE SEEMS TO KNOW HOW IS IT THAT YOUNG ADULTS FINISH UP IN THESE AWFUL SPACES, 23 HOURS A DAY, CONFINED BEHIND PLEXIGLASS WITHOUT NO HUMAN CONTACT AT ALL, NO PROGRAMMING AND ACTUALLY NO CLARITY ON HOW THEY CAN GET OUT OR WHAT THEY NEED TO GET OUT OF THOSE PUNITIVE SEGREGATION SPACES"

Felipe Franco, Senior Fellow for Young Adult Practice at The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Member of the New York City Board of Correction

We know from a long list of official, well-documented reports that the experience of being incarcerated at Rikers Island is traumatic and that this can be particularly harmful for the youngest and most vulnerable people at Rikers, emerging adults, the large majority of whom are Black. There have been some attempts to improve the conditions of confinement and make Rikers Island more habitable and safer for young people, including during the 7-month period in 2021 when Vincent Schiraldi was Commissioner of DOC. Commissioner Schiraldi designated staff and hired expert consultants to design specialized correctional units for 18- to 21-year-olds. Establishing developmentally appropriate solutions, as special units, is a heavy lift and requires a significant investment from leadership (which has since changed to resume a more traditional and less developmentally tailored approach that relies more on isolation and suppression). Countering the traditional culture from within jails runs contrary to a developmentally appropriate approach and can be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain.

To better understand the challenges experienced and resources needed to instead build a robust system of community-based responses to alleged lawbreaking by emerging adults, the City should more effectively collect, focus on, and publicly share data specific to incarcerated individuals in the critical life stage of emerging adulthood, from age 18 to 25. Data transparency and, thereby, systemic accountability, are woefully inadequate at Rikers Island.
It is not possible to change Rikers Island to be fully developmentally appropriate. Instead, the priority should be to aggressively reduce the population of Rikers Island in preparation for its planned closure by 2027. This includes an immediate and significant investment in providing effective alternatives to detention. Elected prosecutors should adopt a policy that bail should not be requested in cases involving emerging adults except in only a handful of cases that could not be appropriately handled by the Alternative to Incarceration Courts and/or using resources available in the community.

In the rare cases when young people are going to be held, it should not be at Rikers Island. Instead, the administration should look to best and promising practices within juvenile models that are framed around positive youth development. For example, New York City recently (2012) instituted the Close to Home Initiative to use more developmentally appropriate responses to juveniles, moving young people from far away carceral facilities to more developmentally appropriate, home-based and home-like alternatives in the City. Ultimately, young people are best served in their communities. Relying on the vast array of community providers and other models, including restorative justice practices like Common Justice, or the Arches probation model which relies on “credible messengers” to deliver services, can eschew reliance at Rikers Island.
KEY TAKEAWAYS - NYC SHOULD IMMEDIATELY:

- EXPAND THE DEFINITION OF “YOUNG ADULTHOOD” TO INCLUDE 18-25-YEAR-OLDS.

- COLLECT DATA ON THIS DISTINCT POPULATION AND ESTABLISH DATA TRANSPARENCY.

- INVEST IN AND USE ALTERNATIVE TO INCARCERATION COURTS AND OTHER PROGRAMS TO STOP DETAINING (AND SENTENCING) EMERGING ADULTS AT RIKERS.

- REMOVE ALL EMERGING ADULTS FROM RIKERS AND FOLLOW SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY-BASED MODELS AND THOSE IN ALTERNATIVE SETTINGS TO IMPLEMENT MORE EFFECTIVE, DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE RESPONSES TO EMERGING ADULTS.

(2) Some of the people who have died at Rikers are amongst the population with which this brief concerns itself: emerging adults, ages 18 to 25. This includes: Brandon Rodriguez, age 25, who died by suicide when placed in what was essentially unofficial solitary confinement in a cramped shower cell (August 10, 2021); Esias Johnson, age 24, who was held on $1 bail, reportedly missed a court date because the DOC failed to transport him to the Court as scheduled, and then died from methadone (September 7, 2021); and Stephan Khadu, age 24, who had lymphocytic meningitis and died by seizure when medical attention arrived nearly two hours after being called for (September 22, 2021). See Broyard, B. and Seville, L.R. (December 27, 2021). Rikers: The Obituaries New York Magazine; Wilson, M. and Marcius, C.M. (January 28, 2022). 16 Men Died in New York City Jails Last Year, Who Were They? The New York Times; Bromwich, J.E. and Ransom, J. (June 22, 2022). 16 People Have Died in New York City Jails in 2022 New York Times; Bryant, E. (Sept. 30, 2022). 16 People Have Died in New York City Jails in 2022 New York Times. 16 Men Died in New York City Jails Last Year, Who Were They? The New York Times.

(3) Broyard, B. and Seville, L.R.


(6) In July 2022, 90% of the “young adult” population (ages 18 to 21) at Rikers was being held pre-trial, and therefore presumed to be innocent. City of New York, Young Adult Housing Monthly Progress Report: July 2022

(7) The authors chose July 22, 2022 at random for the data collection for this report. The DOC data come primarily from the NYC Department of Correction (analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College (personal communication, July 22, 2022)), City of New York (Open Data: Daily Inmates In Custody), and Vera Institute of Justice (NYC JailViz 2.0 Application: People in Jail in New York City: Daily Snapshot). On this date, 845 out of 1309 emerging adults (65%) identified racially as Black. Although this dataset refers to all people in DOC custody, most people in DOC custody are incarcerated at Rikers.
(8) The discharge data in the City’s Open Data portal includes year of age, as does its [Daily Inmates in Custody] file.


(10) NYC Department of Correction, analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College (personal communication, July 22, 2022). Although this dataset refers to all people in DOC custody, most people in DOC custody are incarcerated at Rikers Island.

(11) Vera Institute of Justice (July 2022). NYC JailViz 2.0 Application: People in Jail in New York City: Daily Snapshot. This data, which uses City of New York (Open Data: Daily Inmates In Custody) as its source, provides the best approximation of the general population at Rikers Island.

(12) Vera Institute of Justice (July 2022). NYC JailViz 2.0 Application: People in Jail in New York City: Daily Snapshot. The public dataset likely does not accurately represent people who are gender nonbinary, as each person is coded either female or male.

(13) NYC Department of Correction, analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College (personal communication, July 22, 2022). Although this dataset refers to all people in DOC custody, however, most people in DOC custody are incarcerated at Rikers Island.

(14) Vera Institute of Justice (July 2022). NYC JailViz 2.0 Application: People in Jail in New York City: Daily Snapshot. In the text of this paper, we use the term Indigenous, as per Gomez, J., Wells-Huggins, T., Frank, A. and Andrews, N. (2022). Truth Telling and *Palabra: A Project at Rikers Island. MILPA Collective. However, when referring to available data, we preserve categories as measured by their original sources.

(15) NYC Department of Correction, analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College (personal communication, July 22, 2022). Note: There is no ethnicity field in the public dataset, only the racial categories of “Asian,” “Black,” “Native American,” “Other,” and “White.” While the Hispanic/Latinx subgroup is occasionally estimated from those classified in the public data as “Other,” we do not assume this proxy for the purposes of our report.

(16) United States Census Bureau (2021). QuickFacts New York City, New York. Note: This reflects a 2020 population estimate of the general New York City population, omitting those identifying as Native Hawaiian (0.1% of total population) or the 5.6% holding two or more racial identities.

(17) NYC Department of Correction, analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College (personal communication, July 22, 2022). This dataset refers to all people in DOC custody, however, most people in DOC custody are incarcerated at Rikers Island.


(21) NYC Department of Correction, analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College (personal communication, July 22, 2022). Although
this dataset refers to all people in DOC custody, most people in DOC custody are incarcerated at Rikers Island.


(27) id. at 22-23.


(29) The Nunez Monitoring Team. Twelfth Report of the Nunez Independent Monitor, at page 124. These data are limited to RNDC, where the majority, but not all, "young adults" are housed. Per a plan promulgated by the New York City Department of Correction in 2016 and updated most recently in 2018-2019, at least 50% of the 18-21-year-old general population is to be housed in young adult-only facilities. See NYC Board of Correction. Young Adult Frequently Asked Questions: Young Adult Plan (last visited September 1, 2022).

(30) Rayman, G. (September 6, 2022). Rikers officials expand use of lockdowns as security tactic in jail for young detainees – advocates claim overuse. New York Daily News. ("So far this year, so-called "emergency" lockdowns at the Robert N. Davoren Center are up 64% over the same period of 2021 — or 238 through July this year versus 145 last year. That's a rate of just over one lockdown a day, many of which can extend for a day or more.").


(32) The Nunez Monitoring Team. (2021). Twelfth Report of the Nunez Independent Monitor, at 126: “The March audit revealed an excess of unstructured free time and significant failures to provide basic services and programming. For example, recreation was provided only once during the 5-day period, Program Counselors did not provide any group programming, a recreation counselor simply observed youth playing video games rather than leading a structured activity and tablets did not appear to be in use.” While the Department of Correction, in consultation with the federal Monitor, has adopted a policy to place 18-year-olds with serious mental illness (SMI) who commit violent infractions in "an appropriate therapeutic setting," the quality, location, access, and success of these placements in protecting 18-year-olds has not been documented. This mental health programming is not extended to emerging adults aged 19 to 25. The Nunez Monitoring Team. (2021). Eleventh Report of the Nunez Independent Monitor, at 309.

of Young Adults. National Academies, 2015.

(39) These reports have detailed corruption, inadequate leadership, absent staff, the presence of illegal drugs, neglect, and violent victimization of people who are incarcerated. See, for example, Gomez, J., Wells-Huggins, T., Frank, A. and Andrews, N. (2022). Truth Telling and *Palabra: A Project at Rikers Island. MILPA Collective.


(42) See, e.g., Restoring Promise Initiative, a partnership between the MILPA Collective and Vera Institute of Justice serving incarcerated 18- to 25-year-olds through the TRUE Unit at Cheshire Correctional Institution, CORE Unit at Turbeville Prison in South Carolina, and PACT Unit at Middlesex Jail & House of Correction; Frank, A., Lowen, M., Maccioli, K., MacMaster, S.M., and Djokovic, S. (March 2019).


(43) Examples of data that could be of immediate value to researchers,
practitioners, and the general public include a population breakdown by year of age, acknowledgments of gender nonconformity, ethnicities, units and locations in which people are housed, and programming actually received (as opposed to merely offered).

(44) For juveniles in New York City's Family Court system, the City contracts with an array of non-profit organizations that provide home-based alternatives to confinement, reentry services, and secure and staff secure residential facilities throughout New York City. New York Office for Children and Family Services. [Close to Home] Available at https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/rehab/close-to-home.

