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## Rikers Revisited

Violence Declines With New Security Measures

Jan. 9, 2001

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A phalanx of officers on tap to quell violence at Rikers today (CBS)

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(CBS) When New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani had to pick a new police commissioner to run the N.Y.P.D. - the world's largest, frequently embattled police department - he looked to a former cop, Bernard Kerik.

Kerik had turned one of the toughest jails in the country, Rikers Island, into a place with something approaching law and order.

To appreciate this accomplishment, review the record of Rikers a decade ago, when inmates there said the jail was more dangerous than the New York City streets and the officers there told **Mike Wallace** that Rikers made running a maximum security prison look easy.

Click here to read the two-part "Classic" report:

- [December 1991 Report](#)
- [January 2001 Update](#)

### December 1991 Report

Across the river from Manhattan, next to LaGuardia Airport, is Rikers Island. Actually, it's a complex of nine separate jails that house 15,000 inmates. With an average stay of just two months, about 100,000 inmates pass through Rikers each year. But the constant turnover makes it a hard place hard to run.

Veteran officers Mike Melendez and John Reyes lay down the law.

**This is my ----- jail,"** Melendez told some prisoners. **"You don't come in here and ---- around. Listen, you guys, cut the bull----. Cut it out. You guys play around with somebody, I'm going to be on you."**

When officers assign beds, they try to group inmates so that an accused shoplifter won't end up next to a murderer. But Rikers is so overcrowded, just finding a bed for an inmate can be a problem.

At the time of **CBS News'** visit, Reyes said, **"Right now we've got 40 inmates, and we have one bed."**

Where do the inmates sleep? On benches or floors.

Most of the men are awaiting trial. They are innocent until proven guilty in a city that gives its jail population a lot of rights. So they wear their own clothes and keep stockpiles of fancy footwear. Even jewelry is allowed. Inmates are entitled to a six-minute daily telephone call out. But they talk longer. Fights over who uses the phones are common.

And all this leaves officers with an attitude. They say inmates get better treatment than they do.

Officers also say these rights breed violence. In one 10-hour stretch, **CBS News** watched the emergency response team gear up six times; this was the only time officers can carry weapons. In 1990, there were more than 2,500 violent incidents at Rikers. Blood is a common sight.

One inmate was cut in the eye and stabbed in the back while being robbed of his jewelry. After any violent attack, officers search the cells for weapons. In one case, they found four makeshift knives, called shanks. **CBS News** learned almost every inmate has one.

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"They have plenty of weapons. They make weapons,"/b> Reyes said. "We have shanks that are a foot."

Inmates don't hesitate to use these weapons on officers, Reyes said. "They'll cut an officer just as fast as they'll cut an inmate."

Reyes said not a day goes by that he isn't afraid.

And Reyes' fear came from personal experience. A year before when a gang sought revenge against a rival, Reyes raced down a hallway with an emergency response team. "All you saw was blood - officers' blood," he recalled.

He came upon the scene; nobody was with him. "I was in the middle of the confrontation when they came behind me," Reyes said. "One guy stabbed me in the eye."

He hit the floor and was stabbed in the head. As he went to the ground, another inmate came behind him, stuck him twice with an ice pick in his lung. He carries a photo of the bloody scene to remember.

Even after a brutal attack, officers must follow a strict policy about using force. They can use force to stop violence, but never to retaliate.

But on that particular day, though, the officers took care of those that hurt the officers, Reyes said.

This is a tough job for officers. For Officer John Manning, who works in punitive segregation, the jail within a jail, it means being ready to fight.

When inmates stab other prisoners or attack officers, they end up there, locked down 21 hours a day. Whenever they go out, they're strip searched.

When men are searched, they must open their mouths and pull back their cheeks. "To see if they have any razors," double-edged or single-edged, Manning said.

Manning also said inmates hide weapons up their backsides. One inmate hid a knife, about 8 inches long, in his rectum area, he said. The only way that it was found was through an X-ray.

Another reality of life at Rikers involves the house leaders, as inmates like to call them. Men like Tony Vasquez tell other inmates what they can and cannot do. They pay him for protection and for favors.

And if another guy came in and insisted he was going to run the house? "There's going to be a little battle," Vasquez said. "I don't let no one take nothing from me."

Not long after this segment of *60 Minutes* aired, the battle between inmates and officers for control of Rikers got even worse. Members of gangs like the Bloods and the Latin Kings were going there in record numbers, and the violence inside got even more cut-throat.

By 1994 officials were bracing for a riot when Bernard Kerik arrived. A hard-edged former cop, Kerik was moved up to corrections commissioner in 1998. And he began to run Rikers with an iron fist.

## January 2001 Report

Today that message is delivered by a huge SWAT team that not only cracks down on riots, but conducts daily searches of inmates for weapons. Officers use pepper spray and stun shields to quell violence, and the most violent inmates are handcuffed in nylon tubes so they cannot slash anyone. All this has helped transform one of America's most notorious jails into a model of order and efficiency.

"There's a pretty clear message out there. We're not going to tolerate criminal activity inside just like you don't tolerate it on the outside," Kerik says.

In 1991 if an inmate slashed a fellow inmate or assaulted an officer, he was not even charged with a crime.

"And the New York City jail system, it was sort of a safe haven for criminals," Kerik says.

Now a revamped Gang Intelligence Unit routinely arrests inmates for crimes committed inside the jails. Since this began in 1997, more than 3,000 inmates have been arrested.

What happens to an inmate who commits a crime inside?

"They're arrested by the Gang Intelligence Unit," Kerik says. "If they're indicted, they go to trial. If they're convicted, I hope to get consecutive sentences on those crimes."

And this get-tough on crime stance appears to be working. Last year there were just 70 inmate slashings and stabbings - a dramatic drop compared to the more than 1,000 such incidents a decade ago.

Reyes insists things are much better. "We have a commissioner that has given us the tools to do the job now, do it more efficient, much better," Melendez says.

Today the Body Orifice Scanning System or BOSS chair makes it almost impossible for inmates to hide weapons inside them.

"Once the individual is stripped down, he sits on the chair," Reyes says. "If he has something hidden inside his cavity, the machine will ring."

"It was dangerous to walk in here," says Reyes, who once feared going to work. "Your chances of leaving this place the same way you came in was a 50/50 chance."

Melendez, who used to wake up mornings wondering if he would be assaulted that day, claims the inmates are different.



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"A lot of them are much different now because they know that we are properly equipped now wit- they call it 'the thing,'...which is the immobilizing shield," Melendez says. "And they also know we have pepper spray."

Of all the changes at Rikers today, the pepper spray and stun shields have generated the most controversy. Ten years ago if an inmate acted up or refused to come out of his cell, officers with little or no protection went in to get him out.

Safety at What Cost?

See prisoner advocacy groups' critique of security measures such as those used at Rikers: The American Civil Liberties Union cites the dangers of pepper spray. Amnesty International raises concerns about stun equipment.

"And it was basically fisticuffs, until they got the inmate outside," Kerik says. "Today that's not the case. It's very supervised; it's very organized." he says.

An electronic stun shield may be used. "When it touches the inmate, the officer has the ability to burst the trigger of the shield that sends off 50,000 volts of electricity, which stuns the inmate," Kerik says.

While 60 Minutes II recently visited, officers had to use the shield on an inmate who refused to leave his cell to go to court.

The device incapacitates the inmate for 30 seconds, says Kerik. "It gives the officers the ability to go in, put the handcuffs on the inmate, take him out."

The inmate is not injured, Kerik insists.

While officials will tell you neither device has any lasting effect nor does any physical damage to the inmate, critics are not so sure. They say these devices can not only be harmful, but can lead to abuse of inmates by officers.

"My answer to that is, if you catch an officer abusing the equipment, then either discipline them, or fire them. It's pretty simple," Kerik says.

Do the inmates feel safer now?

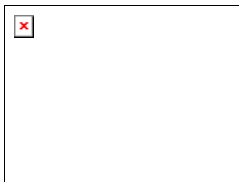
"If you find an inmate in the system today that was here back in 1991, it's going to be pretty close to impossible for that inmate to say it's not a different system," Kerik says.

But Maynard Archer, who has been in and out of Rikers five times since 1988, claims, "They don't use pepper spray. They use sticks. You know what I mean? They use sticks and the threat of fear."

While 10 years ago, shanks and violence was the rule, Archer points out an important difference: "Now, if you get caught with a shank, you get time."

Excessive Force

In fiscal 1999, nearly one-third of the 30 new cases of unnecessary use of force at Rikers resulted from officers abusing inmates with pepper spray. There was one case involving the stun shield. As a result, one officer was fired; several others were suspended.



Inmates laughed when asked by Wallace who among them had a weapon.

"We don't carry them here in this house," one inmate said.

An inmate cited the new rules, adding, "There's less violence than before."

"There has been a decline, but it's not because of the equipment that they got," Archer maintains. "The decline is due to the fact that they're getting one and a half to three if you get caught with it."

CBS

At Rikers today

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