

This is my testimony about Rikers. See, Rikers was the best thing that could have happened to me. Rikers made me appreciate life and never take anything for granted. My experience – good or bad – taught me how to have self-control and channel my energy. Thank you Rikers for everything you taught me – you have definitely made me a better person. But it's time for me to get out.

I am 23 years old and grew up in Brooklyn. I was arrested in December of 2019 and have been incarcerated since then. I've been housed at Horizon, RNDC, OBCC, RESH, and GRVC. I have been in restricted housing five to seven times, each time for 60 to 90 days. Restricted housing used to be called TRU, then Second Chances, then Secure, and now it's called RESH, but it's all the same. Since 2019, the only thing that has changed in solitary is the number of hours outside your cell. When I first was in restrictive housing, we only got 1 hour of outside-cell time and now we get 4 hours. They also haven't changed how long it takes to go from Level 1 to Level 2 once you're in RESH. The minimum is 30 days in Level 1, and you have to be on your best behavior to go to Level 2. The officers will extend your time in RESH for small things, and any infraction an officer writes automatically gets you 7 extra days in RESH or will get you sent back to Level 1. There is no transition after RESH – you go from Level 1 to Level 2, and after that you're sent back to general population.

The cells are the same in general population and restricted housing. The main differences between general population and restricted housing are you have to be strip searched in front of a camera every time you come out of your cell and they limit your social out-of-cell time. For the strip search, you are taken to a room called a 3 point and they cuff you. You are strip searched in front of the officers: the officer desk is right there, so there are multiple officers walking by. There are rules that a person isn't supposed to get strip searched if there is a body scanner, but

the officers don't follow this rule because a lot of them don't know about it. The officers shouldn't be strip searching people every single day. No one wants to be strip searched and chained to a chair early in the morning. I understand you have a job to do, but we shouldn't be strip searched every single day. People aren't animals.

After getting searched, the officers put a cuff on your arm and your legs and chain your foot to a chair. The only time you get to socialize is when you are in the chair for 4 hours. People used to stab each other, so they put up little barricades. It's like a gate — you can see through it, it's seat-level high, and you can't get over it because you are cuffed. You can't stand up straight because you are cuffed. There's no programming in RESH: during the 4 hour out-of-cell time, you're with program facilitators but they don't actually do any programming. You're free to just talk and there's nothing that helps you learn from the stuff you did. There's never any structure. There was only one counselor who was helpful and tutored me for the GED, but other than that the facilitators aren't doing anything. There's just unstructured talking with the other people. We never got any kind of behavioral or therapeutic programming.

There are also huge problems with the schedule for lock-out hours in RESH. The officers make you wake up at 5am for out-of-cell time just to go back in your cell at 10am. Not a lot of people are morning people. If you say at 5am that you don't want to come out, then you won't come out all day. Changing the schedule would improve things a lot, maybe changing it to 8am to 12pm or 10am to 2pm.

I've had a disciplinary hearing each time I've been in restrictive housing. A couple of times I was found guilty without getting any hearing. If you try to ask for a hearing when they're not giving you one, they think you're riling them up and will punish you by not giving you a hearing. I've never had representation, and I've never even had a chance to represent myself.

Hearings are biased — once you go, you are automatically guilty. You don't have any second chances, and they never hear your side of the story. For example, during one hearing, they only showed the part where I was being aggressive, not the part where the officer had instigated the altercation. Hearings are just people telling you what you did. Hearings should be like a debate — everybody should be able to share their side of the story. Men and women lie but cameras don't. Match the testimony to what the cameras are showing to see if people are lying. Give me an opportunity to fight for my rights — they don't give you chances to fight for what you believe in.

During your orientation to restrictive housing, you are taken to the clinic and asked if you want to talk about mental health. If you say no, they won't ask anymore. Every morning at 6 to 7, the doctor asks if you want to go for a sick call and if you want someone to talk to. If they asked you one time, they won't give you another chance to change your mind. Your first week there, they ask, but after that you don't see anybody. I didn't take them up on the mental health because I'm already in the system. Sometimes if I ask to go to mental health, I just want to take a walk. It's up to them if they want to call for you. If they don't want to, they won't do that. Mental health treatment should be available 24/7 whenever a person requires. Even the lowest request should be taken seriously because you don't know what that person is feeling. When a person is asking to speak to someone, don't just brush it off. Make sure they get the care that they need.

Understaffing is a huge issue at Rikers. Sometimes there are no officers on the floors. Imagine 50 people in a house and no officers – anything could happen. You could get cut, stabbed, and no one is there to help. Every building at Rikers operates differently – some buildings have more officers than others. GRVC is barely staffed right now. RNDC got good

staff, and OBCC got good staff. RESH has no staff on the weekends at all, so you just stay in your cell all day. Even if there is staff, it's all up to them if they want to work. Officers can just stay in their bubble, and then you stay in your cell. It's all up to how officers feel.

Officers are also antagonizing a lot of situations. Officers know who you have conflicts with and send them to hurt you. The officers need to stop putting people in danger by forcing people to go places they don't feel safe. At the end of the day, they will get hurt. I've experienced this every time – that's why I'm always in trouble, because they put me with people who cause trouble. You have PTSD and paranoia on Rikers, so the issue is that people are trying to protect themselves by hurting other people before they get hurt.

The thing that messes you up the most in restrictive housing is the officers — they play mind games that make you go crazy. The officers make people suffer based on their own personal preferences. There could be multiple people in RESH stressing and an officer can say, "I like the person in 10-cell so I'll give them food, but I don't like the person in 13-cell so I'm going to leave them hungry." On top of that, there's no one to complain to when you're mistreated, unlike in general population. There's no way to hold officers accountable. For example, if you need water, you have to ask the officers, and sometimes they don't give it to you. If you aren't polite to them, they starve you, and they don't give food to you. You have to be strong-minded, because the officers will play mind games. Everything you need is through them. They can go in your cell and do all types of stuff with you, and you can't do anything about it. I've been way more than mistreated by officers on Rikers. I've been beaten, concussed, and I have nerve damage in my right hand because of these people. I went to the clinic on Rikers and am supposed to go to Bellevue to see a specialist. To this day I haven't been to a specialist and I can't feel nothing in my right hand.

Another big problem is the officers will take personal items from people. This has happened to me multiple times. The officers have taken my personal photos of family and friends and ripped them up in front of me. They have ripped up the discovery I have for my case and have thrown lotion on my clothes. I've learned my lesson and never got mail again because they are going to destroy it. The officers have also taken my commissary and given it to other people. These things have happened the entire time I've been at Rikers.

Another thing that happens is Rikers Island's famous World Tour, where inmates go to multiple houses in less than 24 hours. Whenever you get too comfortable, the officers do this to you. They bring you to rival houses you have issues with and pay people in the rival house to cut you. The officers watch through the cameras to see how long it takes for you to get cut in the rival house and make bets on this. Welcome to Gladiator School.

The officers need to get better training on how to deal with people in jail. They see us only as delinquents and not as human beings. They get to go home and be with their families every day, but the majority of us are miserable since we haven't seen our families in years. Officers are trying to be equal and relate to me, but they can't relate to me. They have better opportunities, and they are meant to inspire me to do better so I can come home. But instead, officers get mad because you don't say good morning or other petty stuff like that. If the officers learned how to improve their communication skills and not get involved in petty disputes, things will be much better.

Rikers is changing, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad. You are not supposed to be comfortable in jail, but different buildings could copy the "4 building" RNDC model. RNDC gives you the opportunity to improve as a person. They offer you school programs that could

benefit you. Other jails don't have nothing, so all people do is talk all day, talking leads to arguments, and arguments lead to slashings and fights.

The only thing Rikers can never fix is how they treat inmates. Us inmates enemies are the officers. The officers are corrupted, like seriously corrupted. They talk to you crazy, they put bounties on your head, they take your stuff. See, most violence in Rikers is done out of fear – people don't want to get hurt so they strike first, especially when you have officers betting on the outcome of fights. Don't get me wrong, Rikers definitely has gotten better, but corruption still goes on. It needs to stop because people are tired of the violence, we just want to go home.