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The Rikers Island Smuggling Bust

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The Rikers Island Smuggling Bust: What Comes Next?

May 27, 2016

What is Rikers Island?

Rikers Island is [New York City's primary jail complex](#), with a daily inmate population of approximately 10,000. The 400-acre complex consists of ten different jails that can hold up to 15,000 inmates in total. Rikers has come under criticism as a rise in violent attacks, between inmates and against corrections officers, has drawn public attention to perceived [systemic corruption, abuses, and a culture of violence](#) within the complex.

What are the details of the recent smuggling bust?

On Thursday, May 19, 2016, the Bronx District Attorney announced that a grand jury had indicted [17 people](#), including corrections officers, for conspiring to smuggle scalpels, narcotics, and other items into the prison in return for thousands of dollars in bribes. The investigation, led by the [New York City Department of Investigation](#) (DOI), began in November 2015 after corrections officer [Kevin McKoy](#) was caught smuggling scalpels, synthetic marijuana, and prescription painkillers into Rikers. If convicted of the most serious charge, bribe receiving, McKoy and fellow officer Mohammed Sufian will face [up to seven years in prison](#). DOI Commissioner Mark G. Peters described the bust as “[the largest contraband smuggling takedown](#) in more than a decade at Rikers Island.”

What is being done to mitigate smuggling on Rikers Island?

Following systemic reviews of existing policies, DOI has mandated a series of reforms aimed at [curtailing smuggling](#) and improving [officer recruitment](#). Department of Corrections Commissioner Joseph Ponte has outlined “[aggressive steps](#)” taken to curb the flow of weapons and narcotics into the complex. These measures include investing in more X-ray machines, revising officer recruitment policies, and monitoring inmate phone calls more closely. The corrections department has also begun instituting tougher search protocols to discourage smuggling. Between July of 2015 and April of this year more than [2,700 weapons](#) were seized from prisoners. This represents a 50% increase in weapons seizures from the same period the previous year. DOI has arrested [two dozen corrections officers and related staff since 2014](#) on a variety of charges that include smuggling contraband.

What comes next for Rikers Island?

Due to Rikers Island's [increasing notoriety](#), many New York City, State, and Federal officials are working to overhaul the institution. Preet Bharara, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, has [spearheaded a class action lawsuit](#) against New York State on behalf of Rikers inmates that has prompted reforms. Newly-elected Bronx District Attorney Darcel D. Clark has pledged to make [Rikers Island reform a top priority](#). To that end, Clark plans to establish an office on the island to more readily handles cases coming out the complex's ten prisons. While Governor Andrew Cuomo and others have recently called for the closing of Rikers, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio stated that closing the jail complex would be [prohibitively expensive](#).

How do the issues at Rikers Island relate to other recent prison corruption scandals?

The investigations at Rikers parallel recent federal probes into corruption among prisons in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Baltimore. In Atlanta, [46 current and former corrections officers](#) were arrested in February 2016 as a result of a two-year undercover FBI operation. The sweep stemmed from an investigation into [contraband cell phones](#) in Georgia prisons but also led to charges that officers were involved in smuggling narcotics.

In Los Angeles, a federal jury [convicted former Los Angeles County Undersheriff Paul Tanaka](#) for obstruction of justice in April 2016. Tanaka allegedly concealed the whereabouts of an inmate acting as a federal informant in order to subvert an FBI investigation into local prison abuses.

In 2014, state and federal officials uncovered a [large-scale smuggling operation](#) at the Baltimore City Detention Center. By February 2015, 24 corrections officers had been convicted of conspiracy charges related to the smuggling of cell phones and narcotics to a prominent imprisoned gang leader.



(L-R) New York City Department of Investigation Commissioner Mark Peters and Bronx County District Attorney Darcel Clark announcing the indictments.