PRESS RELEASE

Emerging adults at Rikers Island overrepresented and subjected to violence, report finds

Public alarm is growing in response to recent reports of the increasingly inhumane conditions at the Rikers Island jail complex in New York City. Reporting and footage of people being held in overcrowded and unsanitary cells has become common knowledge among many New Yorkers and has heightened awareness around ongoing advocacy efforts to accelerate the planned closure of Rikers Island.

A report from Columbia Justice Lab’s Emerging Adult Justice Project (EAJP), released today, examines the population of emerging adults, aged 18 to 25, incarcerated at Rikers and the violent and neglectful conditions they are forced into. The report, Emerging Adults Incarcerated at Rikers Island: An Overview, describes the harmful impacts emerging adults disproportionately face in the violent environment of Rikers Island. Available data show that younger emerging adults, 18 to 21 years old, only accounted for about 8% of the daily average population in early 2021, yet they were disproportionately involved in 22% of the reported uses of force by staff. Exposure to this neglect and violence during the transition to adulthood causes long-lasting trauma, hindering young people’s well being and impeding their healthy development.

According to census data from 2020, the most recent year available, young people between the ages of 18 and 24 made up 8.4% of the total NYC population, but as of July 2022, emerging adults (ages 18-25) comprised nearly one-quarter of the Rikers population. The majority of emerging adults at Rikers are being detained pretrial, presumed innocent, and are there for lengthy time periods compared to the national average. The emerging adult population incarcerated at Rikers Island is majority Black, a disproportionality that is the result of systemic racism—out of the 1,309 emerging adults in DOC custody on July 22, 2022, 64.5% were Black, 28.5% were Other, 5.4% were White, 1.5% were Native American, and 0.15% were Asian.

"The grievous harms suffered by emerging adults on Rikers Island and their impacts on development underscore the need to close Rikers and support people in the community, especially young people." said Bruce Western, Director of the Justice Lab and Bryce Professor of Sociology and Social Justice at Columbia University. "This paper
shows that a disproportionate majority of emerging adults in DOC custody are Black, highlighting the racial
injustice perpetuated by the continued incarceration of young people in the violent and neglectful conditions on
Rikers Island."

Emerging adults at Rikers Island lack access to supportive and developmentally appropriate programming, services,
and relationships. Young people navigating their transition into adulthood need supportive relationships and
connection; they need opportunities. A multifaceted approach, including access to education, physical and mental
health, workforce development and the opportunity to nourish relationships and build social networks is
significantly more likely to foster growth and development than the violence, neglect, and deprivation experienced
on Rikers Island.

“Our report shows that emerging adults are overrepresented at Rikers and they are being disproportionately
harmed,” said Lael Chester, Director of the Emerging Adult Justice Project at the Columbia Justice Lab and
coauthor of the report. “There are effective and safe alternatives to sending young people to Rikers and yet there
has been little to no effort to stop sending them there or to get them out. The City lacks an appropriate sense of
urgency and the well-being of young people are being sacrificed.”

Community-based approaches, rather than incarceration, can have positive, long-term impacts on the overall
stability of emerging adults who are accused of lawbreaking. Rikers, and jail systems in general, fundamentally
restrict access to supports, services, and relationships that emerging adults require.

In response to Rikers not being a developmentally appropriate environment for emerging adults, there have been
proposals and attempts to create specialized units for 18-21 year olds. This approach does not address root
concerns and has proven unlikely to be maintained.

The EAJP calls on lawmakers and officials to decarcerate and act on alternative approaches for this vulnerable age
group. The EAJP’s recommendations include:

1. Expanding the definition of “young adulthood” to include 18-25-year-olds;
2. Collecting data on this distinct population and establishing data transparency;
3. Investing in and using alternatives-to-incarceration courts and programs to stop detaining (and sentencing)
   emerging adults at Rikers; and
4. Removing all emerging adults from Rikers and following successful community-based models and those in
   alternative settings to implement more effective, developmentally appropriate responses to emerging
   adults.

The Emerging Adult Justice Project leads action-research projects focused on 18- to 25-year-olds involved in the justice system. Our mission is
to inform and drive developmentally appropriate and effective justice responses that advance successful paths to adulthood.