This New York City Guide is featuring The Rikers Island Jail Complex. The Rikers Island Jail Complex is an interconnected detention facility located on Rikers Island, an Island located in the East River between The Bronx and Queens and politically affiliated with The Bronx, New York. This New York City Guide will give you the history of the physical island, it will walk you through its transition from private ownership to its current jail complex as well as to discuss the political processes and legislation that affected its creation and projected closure.

The primary research methodology used for the content of this New York City Guide was Archival Research via the Internet. Citation for all major sources of this guide is listed on the Bibliography page using the Modern Language Association (MLA) format.

The Rikers Island Jail Complex is New York City’s largest jail complex in the state.
There are ten separate jails and infirmaries on the island that serve as housing facilities for those in pretrial confinement, pending transfer to another facility or serving sentences less than a year. The complex is identified as a jail complex as it houses inmates serving terms of one year or less, while prisons house inmates serving sentences of more than a year.

The Jail complex is located on Rikers Island and bears the island's name. Rikers Island is a 413.17 acre island located in the East River between The Bronx and Queens Boroughs. Rikers Island is politically apart of the Bronx, however it’s only method of access is the Francis Buono Bridge, which originates in Queens, with the complex holds an East Elmhurst, Queens mailing address. The island is said to be named after a Dutch Settler, Abraham Rycken, who purchased the island in 1664 and was owned by his descendants until its purchase from the city of New York in 1884. The Island was originally less than 100 acres in size but was expanded with the use of prison labor. Prior to the New York City Department of Correction’s establishment of the Jail complexes on Rikers Island, the Island was used as a Union Military training area during the Civil War and is notable for establishing the first three regiments of all African American Army Service Member’s, the 20th, 26th and 31st Infantry Regiments. Following the Civil War, on August 4th 1884, the NYC Commissioner of Charities and Corrections purchased the island from the Rycken family for $180,000 and the Island was briefly used as a Quarantine Facility, a Boy’s Reformatory and a Potters Field, or burial place for paupers and strangers. Eventually Hart Island was converted to a Potters Field and Rikers Island was designated as a Charity Workhouse and Corrections Facility while also being used as a Refuse Landfill for the City.

There were no significant pieces of legislation or ordinances created for the establishment
and construction of the Rikers Island Jail Complex, however there was contentious political squabbles between Long Island, Queens and Manhattan representatives regarding the island’s rightful borough ownership. During the initial purchasing of the island from the Rycken family, the physical location of the island was in the original locality of Long Island, which was not yet apart of Queens and not a part of Manhattan proper. The geographical location of the Island could pose as a benefit or a financial burden, which was why regional jurisdiction needed to be identified. The Island was eventually sold to the Commission of Charities and Corrections in 1884 after New York State Senator, Fredrick S. Gibbs, introduced a Bill requesting for the Commission to be granted permission to purchase the island and in May of that same year Governor Grover Cleveland establishing a price of no more than 180,000. Rikers Island was later identified to serve as the primary location for a jail to replace the dilapidated jails of Blackwell Island, now known as Roosevelt Island, in 1925 with its official establishment occurred in 1932.

Understanding the political climate of New York City and The Bronx may prove to be crucial in understanding the Rikers Island Jail Complex in its totality. During the Jail Complex’s year of establishment, 1932, the Bronx Borough President was a Democrat named Henry Bruckner. Bruckner was a Machine Politician born of Tammany Hall where he began his career as a State Legislature. His support of Rikers Island seemed to align with the Tammany Hall Machine. President Bruckner’s political career ended in 1933 when the Bronx Democratic Leader, Edwin J. Flynn, refused to endorse his re-election campaign. The Mayor of New York City was James. J. Walker, a liberal Democrat and Tammany Hall Politician whose political views on Rikers Island also aligned with that of the Tammany Hall Machine. Mayor Walker was
accused of accepting bribes and forced to resign office on September 1st 1932. The Governor of New York was Franklin D. Roosevelt who had no direct political connection to Tammany Hall. Governor Roosevelt began a corruption investigation on New York City politicians which led to several politicians being ousted from office. During the time of Rikers Island’s establishment all major politician’s in office were democrats, many of whom Tammany Hall Machine built politicians and several being forced out of office for corruption. It is reasonable to assume that the Tammany Hall Machine supported the establishment of the Rikers Island Jail Complex as it combined all local prisoners into one location, which resulted in other city jails to close with those facilities being repurposed, as well as dumping the trash from the rest of New York on Rikers Island to expand its land.

Between 1932 and the opening of the first prison facility on Rikers Island, a floating correction barge, the Vernon C. Bain Correctional Facility, also known as The Boat, was used to house up to 800 inmates and is still currently in use. The first official incarceration facility on Rikers Island was the HDM, the Housing Detention of Men, later renamed the James A. Thomas Center, and opened in 1935 and immediately began receiving prisoners from Blackwell Island. Rikers Island is governed under the jurisdiction of the New York Department of Corrections and is home to ten of the fifteen correctional facilities operated by the NYCDC. The Rikers Island Jail Complex can accommodate up to 15,000 prisoners and is the world’s largest penal colony. The second largest penal colony is the European Turkish Silivri Prison, a facility that can accommodate up to 10,904 inmates and is 256 acres large.

The Rikers Island Jail Complex houses inmates of all kinds, men, women, juveniles,
those with mental health concerns and physical health concerns. The Complex has ten jail facilities, four of for adult male inmates, one facility for male adolescence and adults, one center for male inmates 18 to 21 years old, one facility dedicated to inmates requiring extreme protective custody, one center for female adolescence and adults, one center for inmates requiring medical care, and one center for inmates who have contagious diseases. The average daily inmate population is 10,000 per day, which increases to 20,000 per day when adding Prison Staff and visitors. The prison boasts of staff of 9,000 corrections officers and roughly 1,500 civilian employees that manages an average admission population of roughly 100,000 per year. The island is relatively self-sufficient as the island includes facilities such as Schools, Medical Clinics, Drug Rehab Programs, Chapels, Gyms, a Running Track Field and Ball Fields, a Grocery Store, a Bakery, a Barbershop, a Laundromat, a Tailor, a Print Shop, a Carwash, Bus Depot, and a large Composting Facility. According to a 2015 study done by the Vera Institute of Justice, the complex has a budget of $860 million per year, with the annual housing cost of one inmate being $209,000 per year.

The demographics of the inmate population of the Jail Complexes on Rikers Island are 56% Black, 33% Latinx/Hispanic, 7.5% White, and 3.5% Mixed Race/Other with roughly 85% of the population in pre-trial confinement. Economically disadvantaged individuals who are unable to pay bail are more likely to be remanded on Rikers Island. According to a 2008 report on the educational expansion on Rikers Island roughly 80% of inmates do not hold a GED, and nearly one third of all 18 to 21 year old inmates do not read past a 5th grade level. There are several schools and vocational training centers on the island and in the jail complexes that are
available to inmates, however 96% of inmates, aged 19 to 24, did not utilize any of the educational services provided to them.

The Rikers Island Jail complex is notable for its inmate violence and accusations of prisoner abuse and neglect. According the investigative magazine *Mother Jones*, Rikers Island is one of the worst prisons in America and has made several news headlines for various suicides, murders, prisoner neglect and gang related violence having occurred. The current Mayor of New York, Mayor Bill de Blasio cited his intentions to close the Complex within 10 years, which he introduced to the New York City Council which was approved. Rikers Island is scheduled to close in 2026 with four smaller detention facilities being established in each borough. In addition to Mayor de Blasio’s Rikers Island Closure Plan, the re-designation and possible redistricting of Rikers Island must occur. This land re-designation must undergo and be approved by the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP). The ULURP is the official legislative method that allows policy makers and the general public to weigh in on major urban development plans.

Since 2011 over 22 states have closed 94 state prisons and juvenile detention facilities in an attempt to implement prison reform. The closure of Rikers Island, the world’s largest penile colony, may heavily influence Prison Reform Legislation, especially within America’s cities. The island itself, its interconnected complex, the civilian and infrastructural support system and its geographical location sets Rikers Island apart from other detention facilities, so the management of its closure may affect the Socio-Economic political environments of New York City, State and America. The United States has an extensive prison system, with a focus on
incarceration and prison labor as opposed to inmate reformation. Formally incarcerated
individuals are placed at a disadvantage once they are released due to the lack of educational and
vocational opportunities available and utilized while incarcerated, these inmates may also face
voting, housing and employment discrimination once released. These factors create a large
population of disadvantaged citizens that can negatively affect the socio-economic and physical
environments of the civilian communities in which they reside. Prison reform should encompass
more than just closing prisons; it should address the racist judicial management of crimes that
poor black people are accused of and attempt to design a management system for providing
effective social rehabilitation and educational and vocational training within Detention Facilities.
Closing prisons is not the solution for Prison reform, actual social reform and education of poor
minorities is the solution.

The Rikers Island Jail Complex is the largest detention facility in the world and is located
in the East River between Queens and The Bronx. The entire island is governed by the New
York City Department of Correction despite it being politically affiliated with The Bronx. This
88 year old complex houses over 100,000 inmates per year ranging from juveniles to adult men
and women who are either in pre-trail confinement or serving terms of a year or less. The facility
costs over $860 million to operate each year and employs over 10,000 tristate residents. Due to
many scandals and accusations of excessive inmate violence and inmate abuse and neglect the
New York City Mayor, supported by the majority of the City Council, has voted to close the Jail
Complex on Rikers Island. Rikers Island is set to close in 2026 to have current inmates
distributed to one of four borough jails located throughout New York City.
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