

**Voices From the Box: Solitary Confinement at Rikers Island
Executive Summary**

Voices From the Box: Solitary Confinement at Rikers Island chronicles the day-to-day suffering and abuse experienced by 59 Bronx Defenders clients held in solitary confinement between July 2013 and August 2014. The goal of the report is to bring the voices of individuals who have experienced solitary confinement firsthand into the conversation regarding reforms to this practice. Although The Bronx Defenders' ultimate recommendation is for the Department of Correction to end the use of solitary confinement, the report includes a number of intermediate reforms that the Department can implement in the meantime.

Key Areas of Concern

- **Duration of Confinement:** The median amount of days in solitary to which clients were sentenced was 90. Clients received infraction tickets totaling as many as over 1,000 days. Many clients spent over 23 hours in their cells on a typical day, leaving only to take showers.
- **Age:** Over half of the clients interviewed were between the ages of 16 and 20 years old; twenty (37%) were teenagers. The median age for clients placed in solitary was 20 years old.
- **Mental Health Treatment:** At least 72% of the clients interviewed were diagnosed with and/or treated for mental health issues. Most clients with mental health issues received grossly inadequate treatment while held in solitary confinement.
- **Basic Services:** Clients faced considerable obstacles and delays when they sought to access basic services such as food, showers, phones, and medical care. When clients acted out in response to being denied these services, they often received infraction tickets for additional time in solitary.
- **Due Process & Other Legal Issues:** The hearing and appeals processes for placements in solitary confinement are unfairly stacked against inmates. Placement in solitary confinement also presents serious challenges to communication between clients and their attorneys.
- **Outdoor Recreation:** Clients in solitary confinement rarely were able to venture outdoors.
- **Impact on Clients' Families:** Family members of clients held in solitary confinement were treated with a lack of respect by correction officers during visits to Rikers and suffered from depression and anxiety as a result of clients' placements in solitary confinement.

Recommendations

- Solitary confinement should be restricted to 15 days per ticket, 60 days in total duration, and 20 hours per day.
- People under the age of 25 and people with mental illnesses must be excluded from solitary.
- The hearing, appeals, and notification processes for solitary confinement must be reformed.
- Increased mental health treatment and group programming must be made available to all individuals held in solitary confinement.
- Access to basic services must improve, including longer phone calls and access to commissary.
- The Department of Correction should continue to explore alternatives to solitary confinement.
- Training for correction officers must emphasize mental health issues and deescalation techniques.