



**THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER  
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REMARKS AS PREPARED  
“RIKERS ISLAND: REFORM IT – OR SHUT IT DOWN?”  
THE CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS AT THE NEW SCHOOL

November 18, 2015

Thank you, Professor Smith, for that kind introduction—and for inspiring young people to improve our criminal justice system.

And thank you, Glenn, for your advocacy on behalf of those who are incarcerated, as well as their families.

Glenn – you’ve been a guiding light for so many of us over the years, both at the fortune society and today at Just Leadership USA... And you are always a tough act to follow!

Prison reform has been a struggle for decades, as so many of you in this room can attest. Twenty years ago, I was a member of the New York State Assembly at a time when prison construction was seen as economic salvation for upstate communities.

Back then, republicans were using prisons as their central economic development tool. You pour the concrete, put up the razor wire, and 18 months later you can start shipping more black and brown children from down-state to upstate jails.

That was the plan.

The problems that resulted – including over-incarceration -- didn’t concern these folks. But down here in New York City some of us had another vision back then. We knew the better course was more education, more jobs and an action plan to help people live productive lives.

Because building prisons is easy. Investing in our children and ensuring that they have the tools they need to succeed—that’s the hard part.

Which is why at this moment in our history, we must get this right. This is not a new conversation. The battle to reform the prison-industrial complex actually goes back nearly a hundred years.

80 years ago, correction commissioner Austin MacCormick made a surprise visit to New York City’s Blackwell Island Penitentiary, describing it as:

- “the *worst* prison in the world...”
- “the most corrupt prison in the *country*...”
- “*a vicious* circle of depravity....”

That visit helped to galvanize public support for bringing the correction system into *the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. It replaced the city’s outdated facilities with a new jail on Rikers Island.

The vision, according to *The New York Times* in 1886, was to build a “model penitentiary .... Which in all its plans and parts should be the most perfect prison in the world.” Sadly, that vision was never realized. Practically before the paint was dry, concerns were being raised about Rikers, even back then.

- Inspectors warned of health hazards associated with fires at the nearby dump.
- And violence, gangs, and corruption took hold.

The dream of a model penitentiary had quickly turned into a nightmare for inmates, correction officers, and the city as a whole.

Today, we once again stand at a crossroads in the battle to reform our criminal justice system. In July, a sitting president visited a federal prison for the first time *in history*.

States across the country are enacting meaningful bail reform, ensuring that people are not imprisoned solely for the crime of being poor. Here in New York City, we are beginning to implement reforms at Rikers through the *Nuñez* settlement agreement.

- Developing a new use-of-force policy.
- Providing prompt reporting of every use-of-force incident
- Adding 8,000 video cameras within two years
- And seeking an alternative site off rikers for the placement of juveniles

The settlement agreement is a major accomplishment. We as a city have many people to thank for it—from:

- The legal aid society, and the city law department....
- To U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara, whose groundbreaking report on violence at Rikers helped propel the case to settlement.

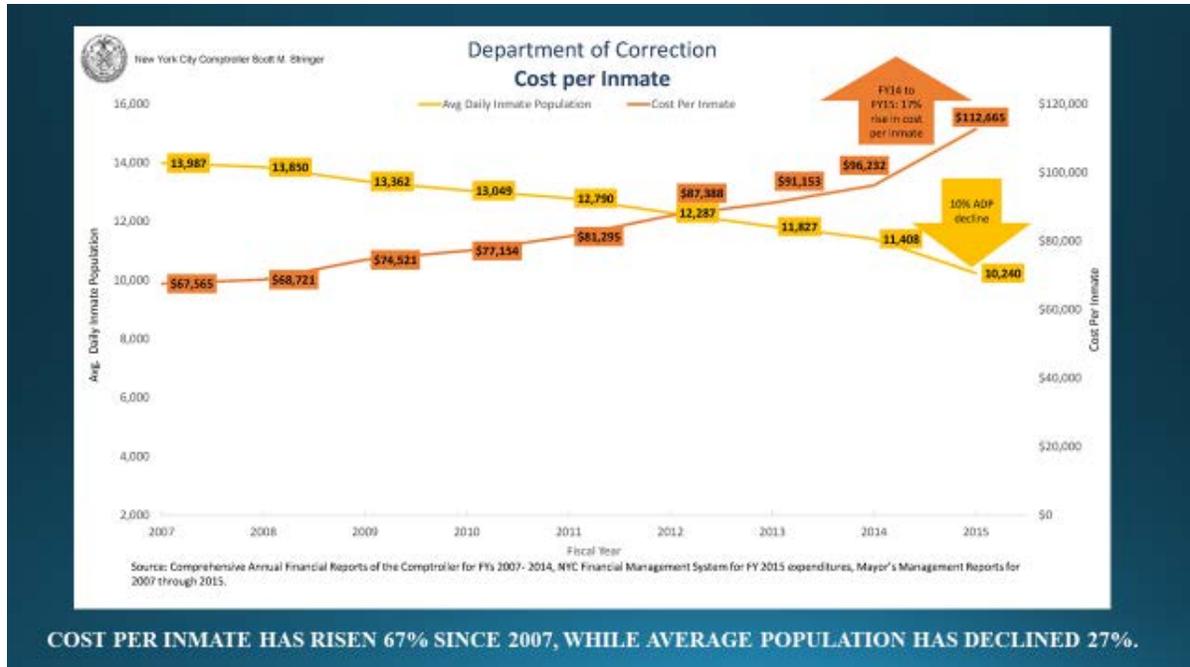
Clearly we have a long journey ahead. As Comptroller, it’s my job to monitor the finances of all city agencies, and to measure their performance.

*And right now Rikers Island is a case study in poor outcomes.*

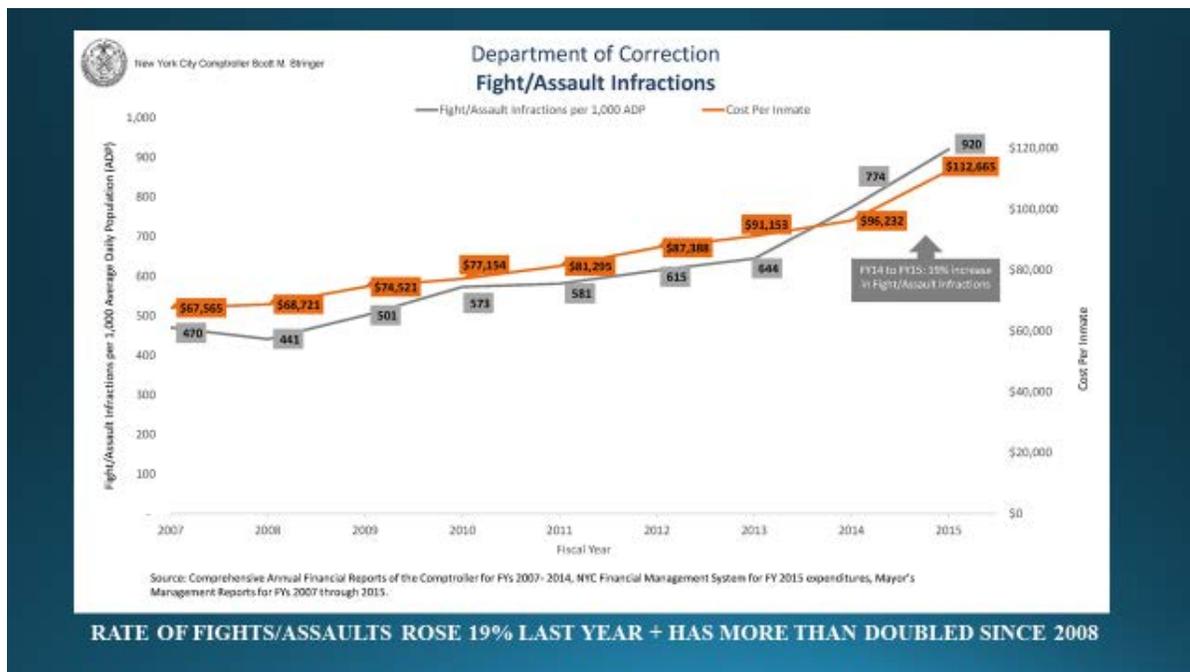
Take a look at these slides....

A recent analysis by my office found that:

- The cost per inmate has soared 67 percent since 2007, as this orange line shows.
- Meanwhile, the inmate population – as shown in the yellow line here -- has dropped 27 percent since 2007.



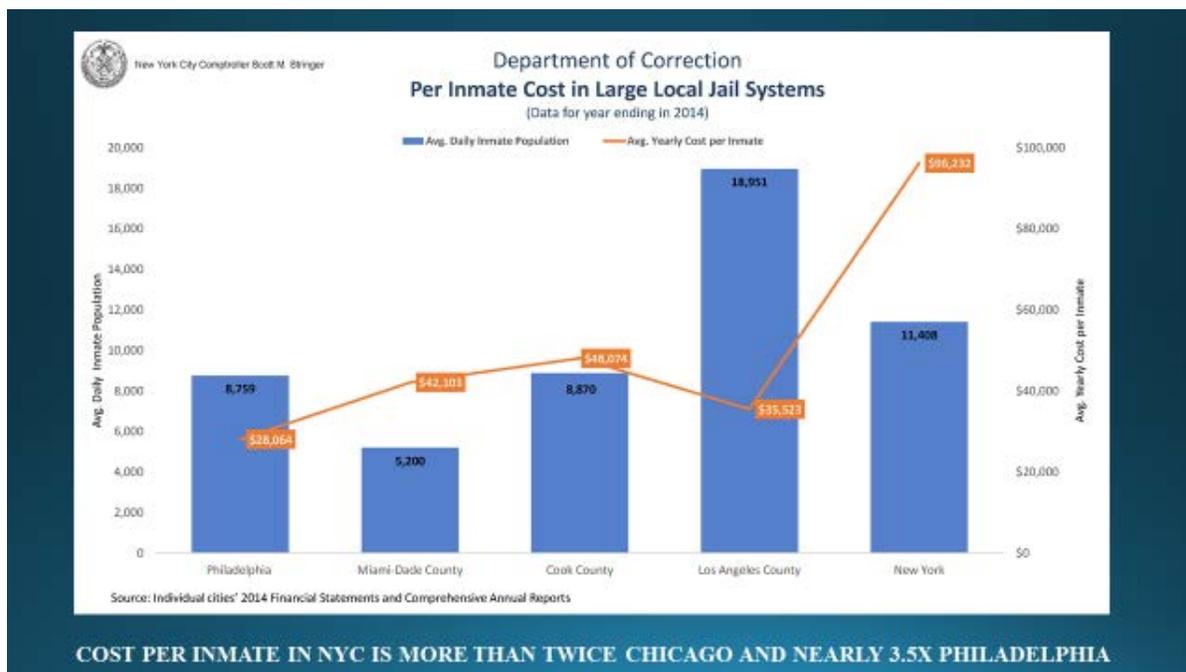
At the same time, as we see in this next slide, the rate of assaults increased by 19 percent in FY 15. That's the gray bar.



Meanwhile, the cost per inmate at Rikers has climbed to over \$112,000 annually.

\$112,000 a year!

That's more than twice the cost in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Cook, and Miami-Dade counties.



So, we need to keep a laser focus on how the Mayor and Commissioner implement the *Nuñez* settlement. Because we can't have history repeating itself.

In 1980, Rikers was under a Federal Court mandate to address concerns about overcrowding. By the late 1990s, a federal monitor had been appointed to supervise solitary units and staffing decisions.

There were significant reductions in violence, but the improvements were short-lived. As former Commissioner Horn—who is with us today—has said, “a monitor calls balls and strikes. A monitor can't make things happen.”

So while the settlement may help to end the “culture of violence” identified by the U.S. Attorney, I believe we should be looking even further down the road.

We need to create a 21<sup>st</sup> century corrections system that is a *national model*, rather than an urban shame.

As we implement the consent decree, I believe we must also plan for the day when Riker's Island can be safely and responsibly closed.

Because part of the problem at Rikers is Rikers itself.

Last November, on a visit there, I saw the antiquated classrooms that pass for schools. I visited the gymnasium of the juvenile facility, where floor boards destroyed by hurricane sandy were never replaced.

These signs of decay are apparent to anyone who has spent time at Rikers. The crumbling physical plant undermines safety and security, putting our correction officers in harms' way. And it sends a troubling message about how we believe people should be treated.

For years, the idea of closing Rikers would have been a non-starter. But thanks to a declining jail population, closing Rikers for good is a goal that must be studied.

- By working to get juveniles off the island, as *Nuñez* demands, we can begin to chip away at the headcount.
- By finding more humane settings for mentally ill prisoners, we can improve lives *and* take another step toward closure.
- And by enacting bail reform, we can stop sending many non-violent offenders to Rikers in the first place.

What we need is a system that delivers justice and security, so that New York remains the safest large city in America. And the only way to do that is to create a system that recognizes the difference between violent, non-violent, mentally ill and child.

That's how you build a safe city, as well as a just city for all.

None of these changes will happen overnight. It will take years of planning. But the benefits to our city could be significant. The challenge is great, but the opportunity is even greater.

- Let's work together to figure out how to shut rikers once and for all.
- Let's transform our jail system from an aging embarrassment to a 21<sup>st</sup> century success.
- And let's set an example for cities across the country and the world.

Thank you very much.