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New York City Jails Were Safest Ever in 2007

From 1,000 Slashings and Stabbings in 1995 to Only 19 Last Year

New York City jails were safer in 2007 than they have ever been since data on inmate violence was first reliably tracked, as most categories of violent jail incidents declined significantly from the prior year and continued the trend to greater safety and security in the city's jails since 2002, Commissioner of Correction Martin F. Horn announced today.

“New York City is not only the safest big city in the nation but it also has the safest big-city jails in the nation,” Commissioner Horn said.

Slashings and stabbings—considered the key measure of jail violence because they involve an assault, possession of a contraband weapon and the possibility of serious injury—were reduced by more than 50 per cent, from 44 such incidents in 2006 to just 19 last year, the greatest single-year decline on record. The 2007 total was also a significant drop from the 31 slashings and stabbings in 2002, when the jails recorded their previous lowest total in the time since the Department began tracking such data in 1995.

“To put this achievement in context, there were more than 1,000 slashings and stabbings in New York City's jails in 1995 and just 19 in all of 2007,” Commissioner Horn said. “Safe jails are just as important to the community as the increasingly safe streets of our city. Jails and prisons will never be totally free of violence, but we know that with hard work, vigilance and a commitment to best practices, our jails can continue to be safe.

“Our jails admit more than 100,000 people every year. They are the sons and daughters and mothers and fathers of our community, and their basic right—and the right of our employees as well—is to be safe in their environment. Our officers do a remarkable job of maintaining the care, custody and control of the men and women in our jails. The

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commitment, professionalism and decency with which they perform their duties should make every New Yorker proud of them,” Commissioner Horn said.

Once again, there were no escapes from city jails during 2007.

For the third consecutive year there were no inmate homicides in the city jails during the year, and just two suicides. (Suicides in NYC jails have averaged three to four per year for the past six years among the more than 100,000 annual jail admissions, compared to a suicide rate of 47 per 100,000 in other jail systems nationally (according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics) and a suicide rate of 12 per 100,000 among New York City residents (according to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene).

Commissioner Horn cited other key measures that also reflect improved security in the jails. Serious inmate-on-inmate injuries dropped 13 per cent from 209 in 2006 to 181 in 2007. Overall injuries resulting from inmate-on-inmate assaults also declined, as did inmate infractions resulting from altercations.

Serious assaults on staff dropped by nearly 40 per cent last year, from 78 such incidents in 2006 to just 48, which approached the record low of 39 in 2005. Less serious assaults on staff dropped 4.5 per cent from 375 to 358.

Incidents involving the use of force by staff—which is permitted by jail regulations when necessary and appropriate—increased by 8 per cent in 2007. However, use-of-force incidents resulting in more serious injuries decreased by 25 per cent last year, from 113 to 84. Commissioner Horn noted that an emphasis on less forceful intervention methods, particularly the use of pepper spray to quell inmate fights and attacks on staff, was the reason for both the increase in overall use-of-force incidents and the decrease in serious use-of-force incidents.

He also noted several other steps taken to improve safety and security in the jails. Intelligence Units were strengthened in the five largest jails on Rikers Island, so that better information is being developed about particularly troublesome inmates and housing areas where gang activity and fights are more frequent. The jails also more frequently utilize “special search teams” that are better trained to locate contraband weapons and drugs in housing units and other areas.

“We analyze jail incident and contraband data the same way the police department identifies high-crime neighborhoods and assigns patrols,” Commissioner Horn said.

Furthermore, the Department has widened the use of cameras in jail corridors, reinforced a policy of re-arresting inmates for violent offenses committed while in jail and provided correction officers with state of the art protective equipment that allows them to intervene in disturbances. In the past two years the Department also instituted procedures to ensure the jails have a wider range of options for housing potentially vulnerable inmates and inmates believed to pose a threat to other inmates, themselves or staff.