Recently, Mayor de Blasio announced that the City of New York would end punitive segregation in the nation’s second-largest municipal jail system, citing the death of former inmate Layleen Polanco, who died from a seizure last year, as the catalyst for change.

While the death of any inmate in our custody is a tragedy, it’s disingenuous for policymakers, driven by their ideology, to create a false narrative insinuating that correction officers were somehow responsible for her death, or that Polanco was placed in punitive segregation without a valid reason.

While the media often highlights the fact that Polanco was arrested for misdemeanor prostitution charges and drug possession, there is no mention whatsoever that while incarcerated, Polanco was placed in punitive segregation for fighting with another inmate and assaulting a correction officer.

The hard-working officers of the New York City Department of Correction do not write the laws or create the policies that place inmates in our custody, but once they’re there, it is our job to protect them. We don’t carry firearms in the jails and we are locked in with the most violent members of society, many of whom belong to gangs. Many of these inmates are skilled at manufacturing deadly weapons which they regularly use on one another and unarmed officers.

The fact that people are not regularly dying on Rikers is a testament to the professionalism of our officers. However, our officers are routinely blamed for the violence that exists without being given credit for the lives we are saving. When correction officers must use physical force to intervene in an inmate on inmate incident or to defend ourselves from an assaultive inmate, we reflexively come under scrutiny from politicians and advocates.
Politicians cite an increase in use of force by correction officers to make the case that we are intentionally abusing inmates.

This narrative is patently false. If violent incidents increase inside jails, it’s inevitable that we will use force more frequently as well. The most recent Mayor’s Management Report reveals that the rate of serious injury associated with use-of-force incidents declined by 4.6% from 2018 to 2019, and episodes in which force was used with no injury to either officer or inmate, increased to nearly 67.7% of all use-of-force incidents, meaning that in the vast majority of these incidents, correction officers responded appropriately.

It is true that despite a shrinking jail population, inmate violence has risen steadily in each of the past four years. Most recently, from 2018-2019, the rate of violent incidents among inmates rose by 24.5% and the rate of serious injuries to individuals as a result of these incidents rose by nearly 24%. During that same period inmate stabbings and slashings rose 10%.

That’s bad for inmates and it’s bad for the correction officers I represent.

What accounts for the recent spike in jail violence over the past several years? In October 2016, without consultation from COBA, Mayor de Blasio eliminated punitive segregation for all inmates 21 and under. These weren’t “at risk” or “vulnerable populations”; these were repeat, violent offenders, who preyed on vulnerable inmates and our officers.

De Blasio took away an important tool we had to tamp down jail violence, and the violence got worse. Now we’re going through a fresh round of handwringing about levels of violence in our jails, including the use of force by correction officers. I will participate in a panel the mayor has formed to address his new plans to end punitive segregation entirely. My presence should not be taken as our approval for ending this policy entirely. Instead, I plan to vigorously lobby the administration to re-evaluate the serious dangers this policy change poses to the safety and welfare of everyone in our jails.

If reforms need to be made, then policy changes that directly impact human lives must be driven by data, not by political ideology. Our lives and the lives of everyone in our jail facilities depend on it.

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