

# ISSUE BRIEF #1: RIKERS ISLAND IS A TOXIC PENAL COLONY

**Rikers is neither a single prison nor a single jail.** It is the last remaining penal colony in the United States. It remains a stain on New York City and must be closed forever.



Rikers Island, a complex of ten jails (6 active, 4 vacant)<sup>1</sup> with [over 14,700 jail beds](#),<sup>2</sup> has been used to incarcerate people since the 1930s. Before that, the island was owned for over 200 years by [the Ryker family](#) [later changed to Riker] - the most notorious member of whom was Richard Riker. Through his position overseeing the City's criminal courts, Riker led a group of officials who came to be known as the Kidnapping Club. They conspired to sell free Black men, accused of being fugitive slaves, to the South without due process.<sup>3</sup> The entire 413 acre island is controlled by the New York City Department of Correction, which at one time detained over 20,000 people there. In 2016, when the #CLOSERikers campaign launched, Mayor de Blasio was planning to build [another jail on Rikers](#).<sup>4</sup> Almost all of the more than 4,700 people held in the custody of the New York City Department of Corrections (as of November 2020) are held on Rikers Island.<sup>5</sup> [Approximately 94%](#) of people jailed there are awaiting trial or a parole hearing. 87% are Black or Latinx.<sup>6</sup>

**The problem with Rikers is Rikers.** Rikers cannot be reformed. It must be closed. Every day that it remains open, New Yorkers are subjected to more harm.

**Isolation** - Rikers Island is accessible by only one long bridge and one City bus line. This isolation means public defenders and social workers, juggling many cases, struggle to make time to travel to Rikers to [meet with their clients](#).<sup>7</sup> Family members must devote an entire day for a brief visit to their loved ones due to difficulty getting to the island, the multiple security processes they must go through, and the wait for shuttles and escorts to move people around the island. They may also arrive at the island only to learn that their loved one's housing unit is on lock-down. Banishing people who are accused of crimes to a distant island fuels the idea that they should be harshly punished and kept far away from their families and communities.

**“After I visited the first time, I knew it was going to be a whole day no matter what.”**  
**Anonymous visitor<sup>8</sup>**

**“It smells like sewer, mixed with fertilizer, mixed with death.”**  
**Candie Hailey-Means<sup>11</sup>**

**Toxic land** - [Rikers Island was only 87 acres](#) when it was first designated to become New York City's primary jail site.<sup>9</sup> It was expanded to over 400 acres using garbage - and prison labor from Blackwell's Island. Today, the decomposing landfill emits toxic methane gas that threatens the health of the people who are held there and [who work there](#).<sup>10</sup>

**Condition of the buildings** - The jails on Rikers Island are decades old, and even the ones that are newer are in poor condition. Because the buildings sit on decomposing landfill, the ground underneath them shifts, causing cracks in the walls and ceilings. Most contain asbestos and mold. Most cell blocks lack air conditioning, or adequate electrical wiring to install it. People incarcerated at Rikers frequently report insect and rodent infestations, and faulty plumbing including discolored water and broken toilets.<sup>12</sup> **It is often reported that [officers who work there don't drink the water](#).**<sup>13</sup>

**“We had sewage that used to come up in the day room, and the officers would just lock us in our cells.”** Kandra Clark<sup>14</sup>

**Capacity** - As long as Rikers Island remains in the control of the Department of Correction, New York City will have over 400 acres devoted to incarceration, and the ability to build more jails or expand capacity there with little public approval required. New York City does not need an entire island, with almost 15,000 jail beds, to lock up New Yorkers.<sup>12</sup>

**“I was on Rikers Island when the population was over 20,000. New York City could use that 400 acres of toxic land to incarcerate a hundred thousand people.” Darren Mack<sup>15</sup>**

**“The law on that infamous island is made by correction officers depending on their daily moods.” Anna Pastorella<sup>19</sup>**

**Culture of violence** - The isolation of Rikers has thwarted oversight efforts, and has enabled a culture of impunity to take hold. In 2014, [Federal prosecutors sued the City of New York<sup>16</sup>](#) over what a Justice Department investigation called a “pervasive and deep-seated culture of violence.” In May 2020, a Federal Court-appointed Monitor reported that there has been a [105% increase since 2016](#) in incidents of use of force<sup>17</sup> by New York City correction officers against people in their custody. Women on Rikers are subjected to rates of sexual violence [nearly three times higher](#) than the national average.<sup>18</sup>

**A note on jail capacity and Covid-19: While New York City operates a jail system with thousands of empty beds,<sup>20</sup> Covid-19 still poses a great risk to people on Rikers, and all NYC jails.** Decades of grassroots organizing in New York City have moved us to the point where there are about 10,000 empty jail beds on Rikers, and filling them is not politically viable. But the congregate settings of jail dorms, shared bathrooms, dayrooms, and mess halls, combined with limited access to PPE and cleaning supplies, and negligence by the Department of Correction, means people in custody are still very much at risk. Releasing more people continues to be urgent.<sup>21</sup>

1 The four vacant jails on Rikers Island are the James A. Thomas Center, the George Motchan Detention Center, the Eric M. Taylor Center, and (as of November 2020) the Otis Bantum Correctional Center.  
 2 State Commission on Corrections. The Worst Offenders Report: The Most Problematic Local Correctional Facilities in New York State. February 2018.  
 3 Moseley, Mariya. Rikers Island Was Named After a Judge Who Was Eager to Uphold Slavery. April 6, 2017.  
 4 New York City Breaks Ground on a New Jail on Rikers Island. December 18, 2013.  
 5 New York City jails adjacent to each county courthouse have all been closed over time. See Issue Brief #2 for more.  
 6 Per JailVizNYC, updated daily. Accessed October 28, 2020.  
 7 Boucher, Rebecca. Hell is Trying to Visit My Jailed Client. The Marshall Project. July 27, 2017.  
 8 NYC Jails Action Coalition. “It Makes We Want to Cry”: Visiting Rikers Island. NYC JAC. January 2018.  
 9 To Build A Bigger Jail. New York Times. September 20, 1886.  
 10 Deutsch, Kevin. Correction officers’ suit says Rikers Island is built on ‘toxic’ landfill, causing cancer. NY Daily News, January 10, 2011.  
 11 Rakia, Raven. A sinking jail: The environmental disaster that is Rikers Island. Grist. March 15, 2016.  
 12 Per analysis conducted by New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, 2018, using data from complaints made to the Board of Correction, obtained by FOIA request.  
 13 Why this former Rikers Island inmate fought for years to close the infamous jail. CBC. October 29, 2019.  
 14 The Path to Closing Rikers [video]. Trinity Wall Street. Accessed November 2, 2020.  
 15 Testimony to New York City Council, September 5, 2019.  
 16 Weiser, Benjamin, et al. U.S. Plans to sue New York City over Rikers Island conditions. December 19, 2014.  
 17 Ninth Report of the Nunez Independent Monitor. May 29, 2020.  
 18 Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011-2012, US Department of Justice, May 2013.  
 19 Testimony to the New York City Council, September 2019.  
 20 Of approximately 14,700 jail beds on Rikers, about 4,100 are occupied. Per Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, Biannual Report on Progress Towards Closing Jails on Rikers Island Local Law 192, September 9, 2020.  
 21 Schulberg, Jessica. Rikers Island Workers Blows Whistle On COVID-19 Risk In Infamous New York Jail. Huffington Post. July 31, 2020.

## ISSUE BRIEF #2: THE EXISTING BOROUGH JAILS IN NYC ARE UNFIT FOR HUMANS

Aside from the 10 jails on Rikers, NYC operates 4 jails in the boroughs. While not as isolated, **all existing borough jails are as decrepit as the jails on Rikers. The City must not leave people detained in existing borough jail conditions** while we work toward eliminating all forms of confinement. Conditions of confinement matter.

**The Vernon C Bain Correctional Center also known as “the Boat”** is an 800-bed floating jail docked in Hunts Point in the Bronx. The City purchased The Boat in 1992 to expand jail capacity, and it [was supposed to be temporary](#).<sup>1</sup> While it is air-conditioned (when the ventilation system works), the only natural light comes through tiny portholes that cannot be opened, and there is little air flow. There was a Bronx House of Detention near the courthouse that was closed in 2000 and [later demolished](#) to build a shopping mall.<sup>2</sup> The planned Bronx borough jail would have about the same capacity as The Boat (886 beds).



**“We were in a cargo hold of a slave ship — a modern -day slave ship owned by the City of New York.” Marvin Mayfield**

**The Manhattan Detention Complex (also known as The Tombs)** is located next to the Manhattan Courthouse. It contains 898 jail beds<sup>3</sup> and was opened - in its current form - [in 1983](#), though several previous iterations of jails and prisons existed in the same location.<sup>4</sup> It lacks adequate personal space, program space, visiting space, and natural light. The planned Manhattan borough jail would have about the same capacity as The Tombs (886 beds).

**“Everybody [in the Tombs] is so closed in. There’s no true ventilation in that facility. It contributes to a build-up of mold - our health was at risk.”  
Victor Herrera**





**The Brooklyn Detention Complex (also known as The Brooklyn House)** is located next to the Brooklyn Courthouse. Built in 1957, it contains 759 jail beds. The cells there are so small that they do not meet State minimum standards. The planned Brooklyn borough jail would have a capacity slightly more than current the Brooklyn House (886 beds).

**“Spent this afternoon at the boiling-hot Brooklyn House of Detention, touring as part of a surprise inspection w/staff from the Board of Corrections. Short story: Cruelly hot conditions, for the 450 detainees there (in pre-trial detention, remember), and for Corrections staff too.”**  
**Council member Brad Lander<sup>7</sup>**



**The Queens House of Detention** is located next to the Queens Courthouse and was built in 1961. It contains about 467 jail beds,<sup>8</sup> but has been closed since 2002. It does not meet State minimum standards for square feet per person detained. The planned Queens borough jail would be the only one of the four borough facilities with a detention capacity (886 beds) significantly greater than the one it is replacing - while eliminating 14,700 jail beds on Rikers Island.

**“The cells in there are so narrow and asphyxiating, it’s as if you were taken back in time.”**  
**Angel Tueros**



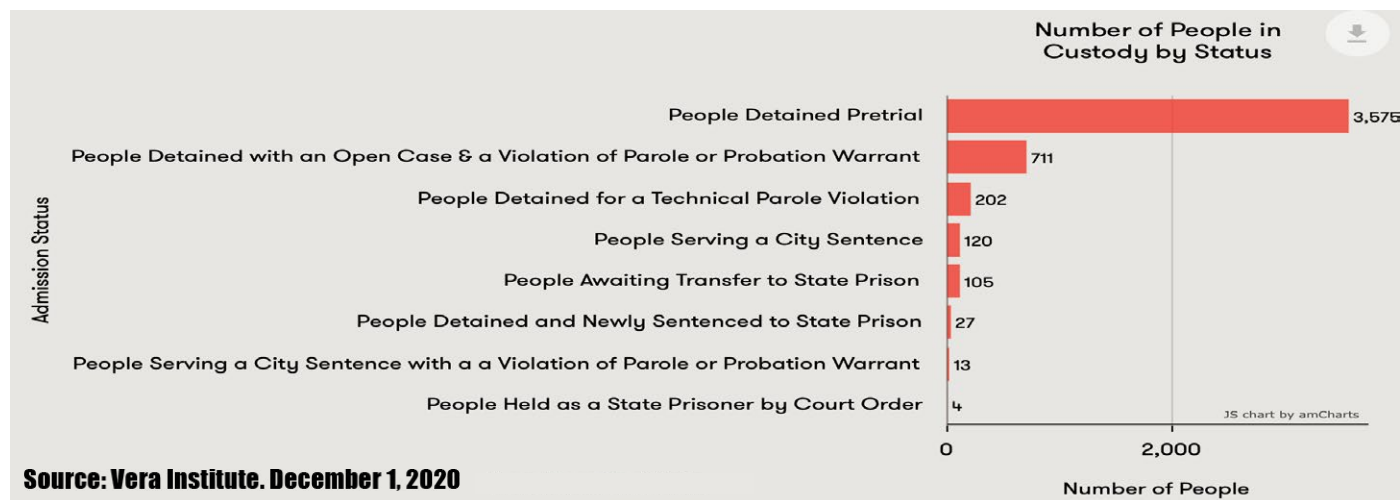
1 Haag, Matthew. A Floating Jail Was Supposed to Be Temporary. That Was 27 Years Ago. New York Times. October 10, 2019.  
2 Bronx County Jail (demolished). The Living New Deal. Accessed October 28, 2020.  
3 Department of Correction records.  
4 The Tombs, Wikipedia. Accessed October 28, 2020.  
5 ibid  
6 Per statements by representatives of the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice.  
7 July 21, 2019 Twitter post  
8 Department of Correction records.

# ISSUE BRIEF #3: WE CAN REDUCE - AND EVENTUALLY END - JAIL INCARCERATION IN NEW YORK CITY

Thousands of New Yorkers have begun to voice their support for defunding and dismantling oppressive and ineffective carceral systems. Organizing efforts to close Rikers started with the idea that we could drastically reduce use of incarceration and improve safety without relying on law enforcement. The past few years have proven that - there were over 10,000 people in New York City jails when the #CLOSERikers campaign launched, and as of as of December 1, 2020 there were about 4,800 people.<sup>1</sup> **For more than 20 years, crime rates in New York City have dropped along with incarceration rates.** New York City is experiencing a rise in shootings this year, compared to last year’s historically low crime rates, but [data has proven](#) this is not connected to bail reform, or emergency jail releases during Covid - a connection NYPD leadership has falsely tried to make.<sup>2</sup>

We believe we can and must continue to reduce the number of people incarcerated, and eventually eliminate incarceration. Strategies for doing that must address both the continued excesses and injustices of the criminal legal system, and a new approach to public safety. **Our vision to invest in community resources<sup>3</sup> to meet people’s needs - needs for housing, healthcare, employment, and more - is probably the most important part of reducing incarceration, by reducing crime and incidents of harm.** While it may be harder to predict the exact impact this will have on reducing the jail population, it does not take a mountain of data to understand that communities that have the most resources often have the most safety, and that Black and Brown communities have largely been denied those resources. This will require serious commitments to ending our reliance on law enforcement - for example, funding [successful community-based violence prevention programs](#) to scale, and building more supportive housing that is adequately funded.

**Plans to reduce New York City’s jail population must be based on a commitment to invest in communities, and a clear analysis of the ways the legal system currently functions to jail New Yorkers, including:**



**People who are awaiting trial.** This is the largest category of people detained - over over 3,600 people as of December 1, 2020. We believe that everyone deserves the presumption of innocence, regardless of what they are charged with. Releasing only people facing “petty” or “non-violent” or “low-level” charges will not empty City jails, since over 70% of people currently held pretrial are facing charges legally defined as violent.<sup>4</sup> Charges categorized as violent may include incidents that did not involve physical harm ([like allegedly stealing a backpack](#)),<sup>5</sup> or may be drastically inflated charges brought by prosecutors, but still, people serious about reducing the New York City jail population must support different methods for addressing more serious charges. Ending money bail is one strategy that we support, but doing so will not empty City jails - currently over 1,600<sup>6</sup> people are remanded<sup>7</sup> or have bail set over \$500K (cases for which judges would probably order remand if bail were not an option). With its commitment to shrink total jail capacity to less than 3,300, New York City has signaled an intention to continue reducing pretrial detention. **To reduce pretrial detention much further, or eliminate it, we would have to successfully pursue strategies beyond what elected officials or most candidates have proposed.**

- Prosecutors, for example, could commit to never seek bail or remand (although judges could still remand people or set bail). ‘Progressive’ prosecutors could go further by declining to charge anyone with a detention-eligible offense.
- The Mayor and City Council could make further investments in service-based alternative-to-detention programs, like those that have helped to [reduce the number of women incarcerated pretrial](#), regardless of the charges they face.

- The Mayor and City Council could defund District Attorneys, so they cannot bring charges through the criminal legal system.
- State legislation would be required to restrict judges' ability to jail people pretrial, though some gains can be made by holding judges accountable to implementing new [State pretrial laws](#) (passed in 2019 and amended in 2020). Those laws require them to utilize the least restrictive means of ensuring return to court, and to consider ability to pay when setting bail.

**People accused of a technical violation of parole.** As of December 1, 2020, there were just under 200 people held in City jails because their parole officers accused them of violating a rule of parole, like missing an appointment or being late for curfew. This number decreased significantly in the spring of 2020 in response to Covid-19, but has begun to rise again.

- New York State should urgently pass the [Less is More NY Act](#) to overhaul parole supervision and further reduce the number of people who could be incarcerated for a technical violation of parole.
- We could achieve further decarceration than NYC has already committed to by eliminating all parole supervision.

**People on parole who are also facing a new charge.** As of December 1, 2020, there were 731 people in this situation. This may be the group of people who are most impacted by broken-windows policing, because any police contact can result in incarceration for them. People on parole may be jailed for low-level charges that are not generally detention-eligible under [State reforms](#) passed in 2019 (amended in 2020),<sup>8</sup> only because they are on parole. In the most recent analysis, about half of these detainees were held for parole warrants issued in connection with new charges that they could otherwise not be detained for.<sup>9</sup>

- Less is More NY legislation, changes to pretrial policies and practice, and ending broken-windows policing would reduce the number of people facing incarceration in NYC for this reason.

**People who are serving a City sentence.** As of December 1, 2020, there were 120 people serving a sentence of a year or less in City jails. This number decreased significantly in spring 2020 in response to Covid-19, but has increased recently. New York City could better utilize the [6-A early release program](#),<sup>10</sup> further invest in robust alternatives to incarceration, and urge judges to divert more people from short jail sentences to more effective alternatives. Alternative programs must be designed to address people's needs, not just provide an alternative sentence, and must consider how people can balance participation in these programs with other responsibilities.

**People who are newly sentenced to State prison time, or considered "State Ready."** This is generally a small number of people who have been sentenced to more than 1 year and are awaiting transfer to state prison.

**We must do everything we know works to create safety outside of the carceral system, and we must acknowledge that if we are not able to end all incarceration immediately (or even, all jail incarceration in NYC), conditions of confinement will continue to matter.**

- 1 Data from JailVizNYC
- 2 Shackford, Scott. New York Is Having a Violent Summer But It's Not Because of Bail Reform. Reason.com. July 9, 2020.
- 3 Details of the types of investments we will advocate for are included in the #buildCOMMUNITIES platform, [jlusa.org/buildCOMMUNITIES](http://jlusa.org/buildCOMMUNITIES)
- 4 JailVizNYC. Accessed November 9, 2020
- 5 Santo, Alysia. Stung By Abuses at Rikers, New York City Acts on Bail Reform. The Marshall Project. July 8, 2015.
- 6 As of September 30, 2020, data via NYC Department of Correction Inmate Lookup Service.
- 7 ordered by a judge to be detained during the duration of an open court case
- 8 Further details available in Bail Reform Revisited, Center for Court Innovation. May 2020.
- 9 Compiled by the Center for Court Innovation in April 2020.
- 10 Rikers 6-A Early Release Program: Results After One Month of Operation, Briefing Note April 30, 2020.

## ISSUE BRIEF #4: RENOVATED BOROUGH FACILITIES - ALONG WITH ONGOING ORGANIZING - CAN REDUCE THE HARMS OF INCARCERATION

In October 2019, in response to years of organizing by formerly incarcerated people, the City Council passed a plan to permanently close all of the existing, decrepit jails in New York City (14 jails with approximately 17,500 beds) and establish a much smaller system of four borough-based jails with the capacity to detain no more than 3,300 people, while improving conditions of confinement for anyone who remains incarcerated. **This vote established the location and maximum size of four facilities, but not the design and operation of them - those we can and must still influence, and they must be shaped by the wisdom of people who have experienced incarceration.**

**The only clear result of stopping or stalling this existing plan (rather than improving or amending it) would be the continuation of old structures and systems of punishment and brutality - on Rikers, in the existing borough jails, and at the hands of the Department of Correction.** Anyone advocating to stop this plan must have a viable proposal to immediately end all incarceration in NYC jails.

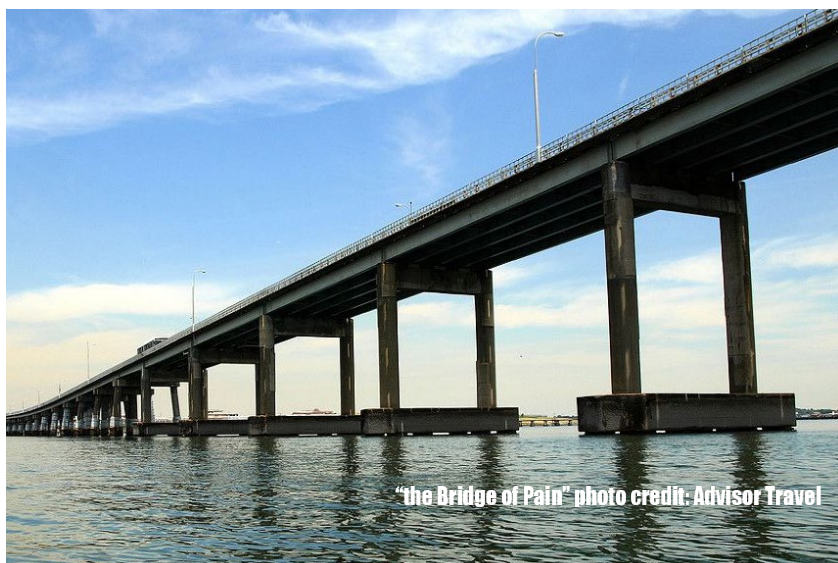
**The purpose of additional square footage in borough facilities is to substantially improve conditions, and will not create more detention capacity.** While the replacement facilities in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens would be significantly taller than the existing jails there, the additional additional square footage will create the space to meet or exceed the [new jail standards](#) passed in October 2019,<sup>1</sup> for more freedom of movement, and for better provision of services, to minimize the harm caused by incarceration. For example, in Manhattan, the detention capacity of the proposed facility is actually less than the facility it would replace - [the existing jail is 15 floors with about 898 beds](#), and the planned facility is 29 floors with 886 beds.<sup>2</sup>

**The current jails are made torturous both by their physical environment and by the way the Department of Corrections operates them.** The Department is a failed agency, and under a Federal Monitor, use of force by officers and [rates of violence have only increased](#).<sup>3</sup> It is time to disband the Department of Correction, which could be accomplished by amending the City Charter. The agency that replaces them must be one that does not create further harm when someone is detained, but is prepared to, and held accountable to, respond to the needs people may have while incarcerated. New York City must also [end solitary confinement](#) immediately.

**Even with improved conditions, use of these facilities should be the last resort.** New York City's jails have long functioned to strip people of their humanity along with their liberty. We will always fight to protect as many people as possible from incarceration, and yet, we recognize that judges will continue to hold and use the power to jail people. Adequate services must be provided to meet people's needs during any period of incarceration, including individualized healthcare, education, and re-entry services. We do not and will not accept that the replacement facilities will operate in the same way the Department of Corrections operates the current jails.

**People must also be provided much better access to voluntary services completely outside of the criminal legal system.** In the [Roadmap for Mental Health Resources and Diversion](#), and the [#buildCOMMUNITIES platform](#), New Yorkers laid out a vision for investments (in infrastructure, and programs) separate and in addition to replacement borough-based facilities.

**In order to ensure that both the design and operation of these facilities is vastly different from what currently exists, we must keep doing the work.** We must stay engaged and vigilant for the long haul - in any situation of confinement, even with the best design and better management, independent oversight and public accountability is essential.



1 Local Law 194, which requires at least 750 square feet per incarcerated person, and other improvements.  
2 Hilburg, Jonathan. Manhattan's Notorious "Tombs" will close next month as part of Rikers realignment. ArchPaper. October 12, 2020.  
3 Blau, Reuven and Grench, Eileen. Force Use Against Inmates Reached Record as COVID Hit New York City. The City. October 25, 2020.



# ISSUE BRIEF #5: NEW YORK CITY CAN AFFORD TO - AND MUST - INVEST IN COMMUNITIES *AND* ADDRESS CONDITIONS OF CONFINEMENT

When New York City takes a person into the custody of the Department of Correction, at the order of a judge, they take on a serious responsibility for that person's safety - a responsibility the City cannot meet while detaining people on an isolated, toxic island, or in decrepit borough jails that fail to meet State minimum standards. **It is not an option for the City to say it cannot afford to provide humane treatment.** While exorbitant spending on carceral systems should bother all of us, it should bother us because of the overuse of incarceration, and the main cost we should be concerned about is the lost human potential and the impacts on families and society. Use of confinement should be limited as much as possible (and we believe, ultimately eliminated), but we should not aim for improving conditions of confinement to be cheap, because that endangers the lives and safety of people who are incarcerated.



At the same time, what we really want, [and what New Yorkers have laid out a vision for](#), are deep investments in our communities that meet people's needs and therefore make us much safer than law enforcement ever could. But it is false to think that the only way to get the community investments we need is at the expense of addressing brutal conditions for people who are incarcerated. Even after budget cuts that affected all City agencies (though not evenly) in Fiscal Year 2021, the NYPD retains a \$5.2B annual expense budget, and the Department of Correction (DOC) annual expense budget is \$1.2B. Fringes and pension fund contributions amount to an additional \$4.9B allocated to [these two agencies](#).<sup>1</sup> **We can and should divest from the NYPD and DOC operations [budgets](#)<sup>2</sup> immediately to redirect funds to the resources our communities need.**

**Shrinking the number of people incarcerated, and closing Rikers Island, will save money, even while funds are spent to improve conditions.** While \$8.7B of capital funds is a significant expense, it is a one-time expense, and represents less than 8% of New York City's [10-year \\$116.9B capital plan](#).<sup>3</sup> The Lippman Commission has estimated that shifting to a smaller borough based jail system with renovated facilities will save roughly \$540 million dollars [every year](#).<sup>4</sup> **Maintaining the crumbling facilities on Rikers (as well as transportation to court from them<sup>5</sup>) is incredibly expensive.** The ground that the current jails stand on is composed primarily of garbage. [As the garbage decomposes](#), and the ground shifts, it causes cracks in the walls and ceilings of buildings, including in new facilities, and damages pipes that run below the foundation.<sup>6</sup> Continual repairs, remediation, and capital improvements are needed to keep the Rikers Island jails operating. That is a huge waste of money. If borough facilities are not built, we will likely see [proposals for a new jail](#) on Rikers revived.<sup>7</sup>

Some have argued that we could avoid the costs associated with the borough-based plan by closing Rikers and incarcerating people in the existing borough jails - if we can reduce the jail population that much). As we describe in **Issue Brief: The Existing Borough Jails in NYC are Unfit for Humans**, those jails are also decrepit and inhumane, and spending money to improve conditions there (and in the case of The Boat, to close it entirely) is the right thing to do. **We could reduce - but not completely eliminate - the cost of improving conditions by securing further commitments to decarceration, and reducing the planned capacity of borough facilities.** Ideas for further reducing jail incarceration in NYC are in **Issue Brief: We Can Reduce - and Eventually End - Jail Incarceration in New York City**.

1 City of New York Adopted Budget Fiscal Year 2021. Expense, Revenue, Contract.  
2 As outlined in an April 2020 letter to the Mayor from advocates  
3 Fact Sheet: Mayor de Blasio Releases Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2020. April 25, 2019.  
4 A More Just NYC. Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform. March 2017.  
5 Transportation costs for FY2021 were over \$43M. Via checkbooknyc.com  
6 Rakia, Raven. A sinking jail: The environmental disaster that is Rikers Island. Grist. March 15, 2016.  
7 New York City Breaks Ground on a New Jail on Rikers Island. December 18, 2013.



# ISSUE BRIEF #6: THE FUTURE OF RIKERS SHOULD BE DETERMINED BY THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HARMED BY ITS LEGACY

The bare minimum to start addressing Rikers Island's horrific legacy is to ensure, as the jails there are closed, that the island's future uses benefit and respond to the wishes of the people and communities that have been harmed through its long, painful history.

**After hundreds of conversations with people who've been incarcerated on Rikers and had loved ones there, a consensus emerged: use the island for green infrastructure through the [Renewable Rikers Plan](#).<sup>1</sup> [The Rikers Public Memory Project](#) provides another vehicle to document and address the legacy of Rikers Island. Through this project, impacted people have shared a desire to see a marker or memorial at Rikers Island (which could co-exist easily with the Renewable Rikers Plan), but also want to see a much more active public reckoning with the history of Rikers Island, including mobile exhibits, school curricula, markers in highly visible places throughout New York City, and reparative investments in impacted communities.**

By transferring Rikers Island from the control of the Department of Correction to the control of the Department of Environmental Protection for green infrastructure uses as outlined in three City Council bills currently under consideration (Intros 1591, 1592, and 1593), New York City has the opportunity to further solidify the end of the Rikers Island jail complex. Developing renewable energy and wastewater treatment infrastructure on Rikers Island will enable New York City to close noxious 'peaker plants' and aging wastewater treatment facilities that have [disproportionately burdened](#) communities of color. **Few things could make the end of the Rikers Island penal colony more definitive than actually transferring the land for a positive use.** It will likely take generations to repair the harm Rikers has done to Black, Brown, and poor New Yorkers, but we need to start somewhere, and we will not get another chance to use 400 acres for the benefit of communities that have borne the brunt of mass criminalization, environmental burdens, and disinvestment.

We have also heard impacted people emphasize over and over again that Rikers should not be redeveloped for affordable housing, mental health treatment centers, homeless shelters or 'services'. Rikers Island is and has been a site of torture and historical trauma. For more than 80 years, people the City doesn't want to deal with have been sent to that isolated and toxic island, and it's been a human rights disaster for 80 years. **People do not belong on Rikers.**

Though the Correction Officers union has stoked rumors of luxury development on Rikers [to undermine closure efforts](#),<sup>2</sup> there are a number of reasons that such development is impractical. The land that makes up Rikers Island is composed primarily of garbage. As it decomposes, the ground that buildings sit on shifts, causing cracks in the walls and ceilings of buildings, while also releasing [poisonous methane gas](#).<sup>3</sup> There are also building height restrictions in place on Rikers Island because it is so close to LaGuardia Airport.<sup>4</sup>

The expansion of LaGuardia airport is another possible use that has been suggested for Rikers Island - but that plan would not address the legacy of the island nor create the benefits for impacted communities that Renewable Rikers would, and would not help to address (but would instead work against) critically important City and State goals for [reducing greenhouse gas emissions](#).



1 Includes Intros 1591, 1592, and 1593

2 Gartland, Michael. Rikers Island closure a "land grab" for developers: union head. NY Post. January 14,

3 Rakia, Raven. A sinking jail: The environmental disaster that is Rikers Island. Grist. March 15, 2016.

4 A More Just NYC. Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform. March 2017. p. 103

## ISSUE BRIEF #7: ONLY CONTINUED ORGANIZING WILL GUARANTEE THE CLOSURE OF RIKERS



In October 2019, in response to years of organizing by people who have experienced Rikers Island, [the City Council passed a plan](#) to permanently close all of the existing, decrepit jails in New York City (14 jails with approximately 17,500 beds) and establish a much smaller system of four borough-based jails with the capacity to detain no more than 3,300 people, while improving conditions of confinement for anyone who remains incarcerated. In November 2020, [the City map was changed](#) to prohibit incarceration on Rikers after August 31, 2027.<sup>1</sup>

Along with this plan, the City also committed to a set of [community investments](#)<sup>2</sup> that responded to some of [our demands](#), but represented just the beginning of what the City needs to do to repair the harm done to communities through decades of mass criminalization. [A trio of bills](#),<sup>3</sup> also passed along with the plan, set new minimum standards for detention facilities, new reporting requirements, and established a commission on community reinvestment that will be made up primarily of people who have been impacted by incarceration.

**This is a plan that directly impacted people shaped from the beginning - first by demanding that Mayor Bill de Blasio take swift action to close Rikers, when he was still set on “reforming” it.** When the [first announcement](#) of the borough based jails plan was made, in February 2018,<sup>4</sup> formerly incarcerated leaders engaged in scenario mapping guided by their experiences on Rikers Island and in other jails and prisons; by their commitment to getting as many people free as possible, as fast as possible; by their concerns about the conditions of confinement for anyone who is incarcerated; by their vision for a City and a world that invests in community resources - not law enforcement - to create safety and stability in communities; and by an analysis of the power we’ve built and the work still remaining. Those conversations led them to advocate for a plan that would reduce incarceration much further than the City had planned, do more to transform the way facilities are operated, and secure deep investment in our communities. **Through organizing, directly impacted advocates moved the City much closer to our plan, but the work is far from over.**

**On the commitments the City has made - we must hold them accountable.** That includes closing all of the jails on Rikers Island and the Boat by 2027 at the latest; reducing the number of people in jail to less than 3,300; reducing City jail capacity by at least 75% and ensuring improved conditions for anyone who is still incarcerated; and making investments in areas like supportive housing, mental health resources, and restorative justice.

**Where the City has not met our demands, we must continue to organize and win.** We are still fighting to free more people, to close Rikers faster, to pass the Renewable Rikers Act and begin repurposing parts of the island now, to end solitary confinement and all abuses in City jails, to divest from the Department of Correction, and to achieve reparative justice through deep investments in impacted communities, along the lines of those outlined in the [#buildCOMMUNITIES platform](#).

1 Rikers Island Public Place Mapping. ULURP # C200143MMY. The original date on the proposal (December 31, 2026) was changed due to the delays the Mayor attributed to Covid-19.

2 Borough-Based Jail Plan Points of Agreement. Office of the Mayor, City of New York. October 18, 2019.

3 Intros 1742, 1759, and 1762, voted on in October 17, 2019 Council Stated Meeting

4 Mayor de Blasio and City Council Reach Agreement to Replace Rikers Island Jails with Community-Based Facilities. February 14, 2018.