

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](#).¹ **We can and should divest from the NYPD and DOC operations [budgets](#)² 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](#).³ 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](#).⁴ **Maintaining the crumbling facilities on Rikers (as well as transportation to court from them⁵) 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.