

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/shrinking-the-financial-and-human-cost-of-jail-in-new-york-city>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Rikers Island, the infamous 85-year-old jail in New York City, is out of sight and out of mind for many New Yorkers.

Housed on an island accessible only by a single bridge, with its own bakery, high school, and power plant, and a disturbing history of violence, Rikers is a world unto itself.

Yet Mayor de Blasio [recent vow](#) to shrink the number of people held in jail, close Rikers, and house people in smaller jails throughout the city has brought increased attention to the island. A deep understanding of both the jails population and the resources used to operate the jail is a key precursor to reform. [Jail in New York City](#), a report released by the Center for Court Innovation and the Vera Institute of Justice in March, examines the citys jail population in depth, and specifically scrutinizes the high financial cost of jail. Indeed, Rikers costs New York City taxpayers [\\$2.4billion annually](#), or more than \$208,000 for each person incarcerated there.

Recognizing the high human and financial cost of jail, New York City has been on the forefront of criminal justice reform in the United States for the past two decades. A falling crime rate, changes in law enforcement practices, and an expansion of alternatives to incarceration have driven the jail population into decline for the past 25 years. Today, the jail population stands at 9,790 half the size it was in 1992. And just as remarkable is the continued pace of the decline. In just the past three years, the citys [jail population](#) has declined by 18 percent.

As the mayor plans to reduce the citys jail population further, shrinking it by half over the next 10 years, policymakers also have the opportunity to downsize jail operations, freeing up resources for other city priorities such as education and workforce training. This would mean closing housing units and reducing staffing levels. For safe and effective downsizing, these steps need to be completed in tandem. Reducing the jail population without downsizing operations will produce only modest savings, because personnel costs make up the bulk of jail expenses. But slashing spending without reducing the population might result in fewer services or a higher inmate-to-officer staffing ratio, both of which can negatively impact jail safety.

Jail in New York City provides a means to explore the opportunity for savings by revealing the many different paths that cases take through the citys criminal justice system. Of the more than 300,000 arrests that take place in a year in New York City, most are for misdemeanors: less serious crimes such as drug possession and petty theft. People arrested for these charges made up 84 percent of all the arrests in 2013, but make up just 22 percent of the costs of the jail, because they tend to have much shorter lengths of stay and often spend no time in jail at all. Indeed, decades of reforms have ensured that most people arrested for low-level offenses are diverted from Rikers entirely. Thus, most of the beds in the jail are now occupied by people arrested on felony charges, which include more serious crimes such as robbery and sale of a controlled substance.

This means that in order to substantially reduce the size of the jail and the amount of jail spending, the city needs to address felony cases. This would require new and bold approaches to both reduce admissions to jail for those people who have been accused of more serious charges and to shorten their often long lengths of stay. The recent [report](#) from the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform recommends a number of potential strategies, such as expanding crime prevention initiatives, drastically reducing the use of cash bail in favor of pretrial supervision, and reducing case processing delays for all cases.

Because employee salaries and benefits make up the vast majority of jail spending, jurisdictions also must reduce staffing levels to achieve significant cost savings. In New York City, this has proven difficult in the past. Even as the population in New York Citys jail declined by 54 percent since 1992 (from more than 21,000 to less than 10,000), the number of corrections officers decreased by only 17 percent over the same period. This means that, although there was approximately one corrections officer for every two people held in the jail in 1992, there were actually *more* corrections officers than people held in the jail by 2016. In addition, corrections spending has also increased in recent years. Since 2001, the Department of Corrections operating budget has grown by 17 percent, despite the dramatic drop in the jail size and the decline in jail employment.

Many jurisdictions find it challenging to downsize their operations despite a decrease in the number of people held in the jail. The aging infrastructure of Rikers Island, as well as persistently high rates of violence in the jail, may have made the city hesitant to downsize in lockstep with the decline in the jail population. But the proposed closing of Rikers offers a significant opportunity to achieve true savings by carefully rethinking all operations decisions that would fit the new, smaller jail population. And as it seeks to reform the violence that dogged Rikers for so many years, now is a prime moment for the city to reexamine not only what it spends on jails, but the results it receives for its spending.

New York City has successfully dropped its jail population over several decades, running contrary to the trend towards greater local incarceration in many parts of the country. The mayors recent proposal to close Rikers has created an opportunity for the city to reduce the size of the jail even further, in particular through tackling felony and more serious cases that are often overlooked in reform conversations. The move to downsize also creates an opportunity for the city to reevaluate its operations and make different choices regarding staffing and infrastructure. By tackling both the jail population and operations in tandem, the city can reduce the human toll of

jail incarceration while freeing up city resources for other crucial priorities.

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