

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/breaking-point/replacing-fear-with-science-for-effective-nyc-justice-reform>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

New York City's extraordinary drop in crime best evidenced by murders plummeting from 2,245 in 1990 to 332 last year and jail incarceration being reduced by nearly half since 1991 is certainly something to be proud of, yet we still face challenges in effectively addressing the needs of New Yorkers with behavioral illness. Even as the jail population declined, the absolute numbers of those with mental health issues in jail has remained steady, taking up a larger and larger proportion of the total population behind bars.

Today, the seriously mentally ill account for 7 percent of the city's jail population, those with some mental health disorders make up 38 percent of the total jail population, and those with substance use problems, more than 85 percent of the total jail population. Individuals with behavioral health needs are more likely to be detained after arrest, to stay in jail longer, and to return to jail repeatedly. A study by the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene found that 400 individuals with behavioral health issues accounted for 300,000 jail days during a five-year period. Without smart intervention, these frequent flyers serve a life sentence a few days at a time.

Despite our successes, we must hold ourselves accountable for our failure to provide appropriate responses for the behaviorally ill who enter the criminal justice system, to identify who presents a danger and who does not, and to provide options other than jail or hospitalization.

Last year, Mayor Bill de Blasio convened [a task force](#) that I co-chaired with the deputy mayor for health and human services to reduce the number of people with behavioral health needs cycling through NYC's criminal justice and health systems. Recognizing that the systems are interrelated, the task force took a first-ever stem-to-stern look at what works and what doesn't. Over 100 days, the task force engaged more than 400 leaders and justice practitioners from across the city and nation and proposed reforms systemic where possible and pilots where not. Several of those reforms are listed below.

Before arrest Creating options and providing expertise

We are providing first responders with training to identify the range of behavioral health issues, and creating community drop-off centers which police can utilize when they come into contact with an individual with behavioral health needs as alternatives to arrest or hospitalization.

In the courts Controlling risk with programming, not jail

We are creating risk assessment instruments that will help service providers and other system players identify where programming can interrupt cycles of reoffending, and we will be keeping people out of jail where appropriate by **tripling** the number of options for supervised release.

In jail Changing culture

We are training crisis intervention teams staffed by specially trained corrections officers and health workers to de-escalate conflicts, as well as implementing policies to reduce punitive segregation. We have also taken steps to enhance programming, including increasing vocational training, expanding programs that help individuals to plan for their life after returning to the community, and convening substance use disorder education and support groups.

Back in the neighborhood

Teams of correctional and health workers are focusing on ensuring that every person leaving jail is connected to Medicaid, Health Homes, and social service benefits. And with the aim to address the frequent flyers we are creating supportive housing options, which are proven to reduce jail, hospitalization, and shelter stays.

Critically, the task force is now turning its attention to ensuring that we are as focused as possible in identifying both risks and needs and in matching the right services to the right people at the right time. Science needs to replace fear when addressing those with mental health issues, and we are committed to reforming our criminal justice system so that it both reduces crime and meets the needs of vulnerable New Yorkers more effectively and more efficiently.

Vera is pleased to complement the WNYC broadcast, *Breaking Point: New York's Mental Health Crisis*, with [a blog series](#) that features the voices of experts from a range of fields as they examine how the nexus of poverty, mental health, and the criminal justice system affects nearly every aspect of New York City life.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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