

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/why-were-working-to-reduce-the-number-of-women-incarcerated-at-rikers-island>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Even with a dramatic decline in the number of people incarcerated at Rikers Island, about 600 women are in jail each day many of whom have been there before. The time for establishing better alternatives that can disrupt the cycle of jail and trauma for women is now.

New York's local government, residents, and advocates alike are currently engaged in a robust dialogue about the future of Rikers Island, the city's jail complex. The backdrop of this debate is a significant public safety success story: the jail's population has decreased by more than half since its [peak of more than 21,000 people incarcerated](#) in 1991. Amidst this reduction in the use of our city's most punitive and expensive resource, New York has become much safer; [felonies have declined 87 percent](#), for example. With public safety at a historically high level, momentum for improving our local justice system [continues](#).

Due to [local](#) and [statewide](#) system reforms, NYC's rate of female jail incarceration is much lower than the national average. Yet jail still plays a large, and often destructive, role in the lives of many New York women. Nearly 6,000 women and girls (under state law, 16- and 17-year olds are automatically tried as adults) are sent to Rikers Island every year. The vast majority are detained because they cannot afford their bail. Most don't stay very long. Half of all women on the Island are there for less than a week, generating questions about the public safety rationale for why they are brought to jail in the first place. Moreover, just a few days behind bars is likely to jeopardize any preexisting connections a woman has to housing, mental health care, and employment, reducing her chances of returning to a healthy life in the community. For these reasons, some organizations, including Vera, have emphasized the importance of paying particular [attention to women](#) in justice reform efforts.

To this end, Vera has convened an advisory group of more than 30 leaders who represent an impressive cross-section of organizations and viewpoints: nonprofit leaders, local philanthropic foundations, and city agencies such as the Department of Correction. The group's goal is to develop additional off ramps for diverting women from jail and into more effective community-based options, ultimately reducing the number of women held at Rikers Island each day. The off ramps will be at multiple points in the justice system, including law enforcement encounters, police precincts, arraignment (a defendant's first appearance in court), and from the jail itself.

There's no doubt that the advisory group's aims are ambitious. NYC's overall decline in the use of jail means that many women charged with low-level offenses or first-time charges have their cases resolved without spending any time at Rikers; of the [57,119 women arrested](#) across the five boroughs in 2014, less than 12 percent were detained. The women who do end up in jail often have lengthy criminal justice histories or open warrants from past cases. More than half are facing felony charges. But [recent research](#) has shown that jail doesn't always equal public safety. In fact, just a few days in jail can have the opposite effect and increase a defendant's likelihood of being arrested in the future. Accompanying their legal issues, the women who enter Rikers, statistically, have long trauma histories, mental health issues, and multiple social service needs, which are difficult to adequately and thoroughly address in correctional settings. The alternatives we develop will have to be multifaceted and able to support women facing a complex set of challenges in making long-term and sustainable change.

Traditionally, diversion options have only been offered to people facing lower-level misdemeanor or first-time nonviolent felony charges. To seriously reduce the number of women in jail at Rikers, new programming will have to push the boundaries of our traditional models to include those who have been cycling in and out of the justice system for a long time. Most of the participants will be women who have seen the inside of jail more than once. Once in operation, police, prosecutors, public defenders, and judges will be equipped with less disruptive and more effective community-based options for women in the justice system. This will further reduce the presence of Rikers Island in the lives of all New Yorkers, including women with deep system involvement, making our communities safer places for all.

Through the [Gender & Justice in America](#) blog series, Vera will explore issues facing justice-involved women and girls in the fields of adult corrections, youth justice, immigration, victimization, substance use, and mental health.

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