

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

**<https://www.vera.org/blog/opportunities-for-improving-mental-health-treatment-and-rikers-island-jail>**

## Public Facing Advocacy Writing

An upturn in violence at New York City's Rikers Island Jail has been the focus of recent [media attention](#), most notably in the February [death](#) of veteran Jerome Murdough in an overheated cell and the [arrest](#) of a correction officer charged in the August 2012 death of another inmate with a history of psychiatric needs detained in the jail. Mayor Bill de Blasio has subsequently promised reform at Rikers Island, one of the nation's largest jails at a capacity of nearly 15,000 people.

According to data from the New York City Department of Correction, in the past decade the use of force by correction officers at Rikers Island has increased nearly 240% despite a decline in jail population. Simultaneously, the department reported that the percentage of inmates diagnosed with a mental health condition has doubled in the past eight years from 20% to 40%, an increase common in other major cities that is causing criminal justice and mental health leaders to push for stronger community-based behavioral health services to curtail the influx of this population into jail cells.

To facilitate a discussion on the intersection between those with behavioral health needs and the justice system during a new mayoral administration, Vera hosted a panel of experts on March 12 for an event entitled, Cops, Courts, and Corrections: Can NYC's Justice System Help Those with Mental Illness?

Panelists were Steve Coe, Chief Executive Officer, Community Access; Judge Matthew D'Emic, Brooklyn Mental Health Court; Jim Parsons, Director of the Substance Use and Mental Health Program at Vera; and Homer Venters MD, Medical Director for NYC Department of Health and Mental Health at Rikers Island. The panel was moderated by Robert Lewis of WNYC.

The panelists spoke on a range of issues, including:

The panelists were unanimous in their belief that the next big front in terms of advocacy and reform in the NYC justice system is bringing the focus to the front-end of the justice spectrum, and even to points before the system starts. Parsons said that he's already seen a shift from the traditional discussion on reentry to one about diversion: We're starting to move further upstream. While grappling with difficult questions such as the extent to which mental health prognosis in corrections facilities are the result of the environment, panelists agreed that the best thing we can do is narrow the net and keep people, especially those with mental health needs, out of jail and prisons and in their communities.

We invite you to [view the trailer](#) and [full video](#) of this event.

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