

Why New York City Needs a Blueprint to Rightsize the Department of Correction

New York City already has a plan to close Rikers Island by 2027 and replace it with a smaller, more humane borough-based jail system. City leaders now have a unique opportunity to rightsize the Department of Correction: recalibrating its budget and reshaping its workforce to meet the needs of a significantly smaller jail system and unlocking millions of dollars in savings that could be reinvested in communities.

New York City's borough-based jail plan will require DOC to evolve

In 2019, the New York City Council voted to close Rikers Island jail complex and replace it with a borough-based system consisting of four facilities. Jails in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens will have a combined capacity of 3,300, significantly lower than the current citywide jail population, which has hovered between 5,500 and 5,600 throughout the first quarter of 2022.¹ To support the borough-based jail plan, New York City now needs a plan to rightsize the Department of Correction (DOC) by 2027, or the department's existing expenses, driven by already bloated personnel rolls, will become even more disproportionate to the jail population.

As of January 2022, DOC employed 7,700 corrections officers (COs).² Over the first eight months of FY 2022, the net attrition rate was approximately 120 COs per month, or 1,440 annually. If this rate continues, it will take New York City more than three years to downsize DOC to 3,300 COs, which would match the borough-based jail system's maximum capacity, translating to a 1:1 ratio of staff to people in detention. Of course, DOC's historical attrition rate has been much lower, ranging from 6 to 11 percent over the last 12 fiscal years, meaning the workforce is likely to shrink at a much slower pace.³

Best practice dictates that there should be significantly fewer uniformed officers than people in detention. The Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, for example, recommends a ratio of 0.73 officers for every person in detention, or approximately 2,410 officers in total.⁴ Once the borough-based jails' layouts and designs are finalized, experts should undertake a thorough staffing analysis, paying particular attention to roles that must be filled by uniformed officers as opposed to those more suitable for other professionals. In the meantime, however, it is clear that a reasonable staffing model will constitute significantly fewer than 3,300 uniformed officers.

Natural attrition alone is not fast enough, nor is it targeted enough; DOC's uniformed workforce should not be composed simply of whomever is left after the majority of COs leave. To most effectively seize this opportunity to rightsize DOC's workforce and budget, New York City must focus not just on how many COs the borough-based jail system needs, but also who fills these roles. In practice, this means overhauling job descriptions, redesigning training, and introducing stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that uniformed officers have the skills they need to provide humane and therapeutic environments for people in detention.

Mass layoffs, however, are not a viable option to achieve such a drastic headcount reduction. Being a CO is one of too few good-paying jobs for New Yorkers without post-secondary degrees: the average annual salary, before overtime, for a CO in 2021 was \$77,363.⁵ Among all jobs for which a worker without a postsecondary degree qualifies in New York City, such as being a CO, only 385,989 (15 percent) pay at least the average salary for a CO.⁶ Moreover, as of 2020, nearly 60 percent of COs were Black and 24 percent Latinx.⁷ In rightsizing the DOC, New York City must not trade one harm to feed another,

remedying bloat and mismanagement while leaving thousands of New Yorkers of color unemployed and with limited other employment options.

Now is the time to create a blueprint to rightsize DOC's spending, which must include reducing headcount in a just and equitable way. Most immediately, that means retaining the necessary workforce to keep jails safe for everyone while helping transition others to opportunities in new departments or sectors. More broadly, that means creating more well-paid employment opportunities for New Yorkers without postsecondary degrees.

Despite an enormous budget, conditions for both staff and people in detention are abhorrent

New York City spends nearly \$2.7 billion on jails, over \$1 billion more than the nation's largest local jail system, Los Angeles County. Overstaffing is, in large part, the cause of DOC's astronomical costs; Vera analysis shows that 89 percent of Mayor Eric Adams's FY 2023 executive budget is devoted to personnel-related expenses.⁸ COs outnumber people in detention by nearly 2,000. It is no surprise, therefore, that the annual cost of detention for a single person in New York City was more than \$556,000 last year.⁹

Despite this high price tag, however, conditions in the jails are horrible. People lack access to basic medical care and sanitation, violence is rampant, and the buildings themselves are crumbling.¹⁰ A key reason for these conditions is the high rate of absenteeism among COs. According to the Mayor's Management Report, in the first four months of 2022, the absence rate for DOC was 26.6 percent, more than double the rate for the fire department (9.8 percent) and more than five times higher than the rate for the NYPD (5 percent).¹¹ According to the Nunez federal monitor's special report in March 2022, every day approximately 30 percent of COs either call in sick or are placed on restrictive duties that preclude them from working with the jail population.¹² In other words, taxpayers are funding salaries for a significant number of COs who either do not show up to work or are listed as unable to perform the core of their duties: to work with people in detention.

In addition to DOC's high absence rate, a lack of support for COs has also contributed to the horrible conditions on Rikers Island. According to the federal monitor, COs do not receive the managerial support, guidance, or coaching they need to do their jobs. In practice, this means they are exhausted, stressed, and consequently more likely to use violence against people in detention. According to the report, both over- and under-staffing "have been consistent contributing factors to the unnecessary and excessive use of force and violence" in the jails.¹³

Beyond their devastating impact on people in detention, DOC's personnel issues cost taxpayers an enormous amount of money every year. According to the New York City Comptroller, DOC paid out \$34.4 million in settlements in FY 2020, or nearly \$6,000 for every person in detention. In FY 2019, DOC paid a stunning \$36.5 million in settlements.¹⁴ Lawsuit settlements from FY 2020 alone could have funded supportive housing for 822 New Yorkers.¹⁵

The borough-based jails need a smaller, better supported workforce in which uniformed officers both show up to work and have the relevant training and support to do their jobs effectively. Such a workforce will improve conditions in the jails, both for staff and people in detention. In addition, it will save New York City a significant amount of money, which could be invested in community-based violence interruption, mental health services, substance use treatment, and other services that help communities thrive without relying on criminalization and punishment.¹⁶ In this way, rightsizing DOC will reinforce community health and safety for DOC staff, people in detention, and New York City as a whole.

DOC needs a new blueprint now

As the transition to a borough-based jail system draws nearer, DOC needs to rightsize and reinvent itself rather than simply export the current dysfunction on Rikers Island to new locations. To facilitate this departmental evolution in time for the transition from Rikers to borough-based facilities, New York City leaders must start planning now.

Longer term, DOC must be part of a citywide effort to rethink how New York City maintains community health and safety through support and investment, not simply detention and punishment. As New York shifts its resources from jails to housing, mental health services, substance use treatment, and restorative justice, it will need a workforce different from what it has now. Although not all of these roles can or should be filled by former COs, a blueprint for the future of DOC represents an opportunity for New York City to think about what sort of public safety workforce it needs and how to start developing such a workforce now.

Ultimately, New York City's leaders must create this blueprint now to provide DOC and other relevant agencies with adequate time and guidance to phase in new policies and practices before the completion of the borough-based jail system in 2027.

At a minimum, a blueprint for the future of DOC should address the following:

1. how many uniformed officers DOC will need to safely and efficiently staff the new borough-based facilities, and what the role of those officers will be alongside other trained professionals when it comes to providing a therapeutic environment for people in detention;
2. how DOC can reduce the number of extraneous uniformed personnel—in turn reducing the overall departmental budget—while connecting current COs to new professional and economic opportunities;
3. how DOC can amend job descriptions, provide new training, and introduce new accountability mechanisms to make sure that the culture of violence pervasive on Rikers Island does not continue in the borough-based jails; and
4. what kind of public safety workforce New York City needs now and in the future, and how to recruit, train, and retain that workforce to address communities' multifaceted health and safety needs.

Conclusion

This moment in time is a unique opportunity for New York City's leaders to reimagine DOC's workforce and rightsize its budget. New Yorkers should not expect DOC's problems to disappear on their own in the transition from Rikers Island to borough-based facilities. City leaders must address the issues at DOC head-on, finding a way to fix the management and staffing issues that have contributed to the current humanitarian crisis.

Now is the time to lay the groundwork for an agency that can realize the vision of the borough-based jails: smaller, more humane facilities that maintain health and safety for New York City's diverse communities through support, not trauma and punishment.

About

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The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and community organizers working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera's headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org.

Endnotes

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