

# A Look Inside the New York City Department of Correction Budget: One Year Later

The preliminary fiscal year 2023 budget continues a pattern of overinvesting in corrections, even as the proposed budget cuts funding for supportive housing, education, health, and other key social services proven to reduce involvement in the criminal legal system.

In May 2021, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) published a report, “[A Look Inside the New York City Correction Budget](#),” which analyzed why New York City spends so much more than other U.S. cities on corrections. The report found that in fiscal year (FY) 2020, New York City spent \$2.6 billion on corrections, or \$438,000 per person—significantly more than any other jail system in the country.<sup>1</sup> This report updates Vera’s findings with numbers from FY 2021, the modified FY 2022 budget, and the proposed FY 2023 budget. Ultimately, New York City’s corrections budget remains bloated, driven primarily by high personnel costs and a staffing ratio significantly out of step with the national average.

Since May 2021, conditions in New York City jails—most prominently Rikers Island—have deteriorated significantly, driven mainly by mismanagement and extremely high corrections officer absentee rates. As a result, in 2021, 15 people in New York City jails died, the highest number since 2016, when the average daily population was nearly twice as large.<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite the city’s deepening jail crisis, New York City has continued to invest in corrections rather than supporting communities, providing people with vital services, and keeping people safe through more effective tools than detention. New York City must begin shrinking its corrections spending with an eye toward realizing its plan for a lower-capacity, borough-based jail system.

## The proposed DOC budget remains high while funding for key social services is cut

New York City’s FY 2022 DOC budget, including fringe benefits, pensions, and debt service, was \$2.603 billion. Adjustments midway through the year, mostly related to non-personnel operational costs, pushed the total budget to \$2.697 billion. Mayor Eric Adams’s preliminary budget for FY 2023 is less than 1 percent lower, holding relatively steady at \$2.679 billion.<sup>3</sup>

Although the DOC budget will remain largely the same under the mayor’s proposal, funding will decrease for departments that provide key social services to New Yorkers. For example, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s budget will decrease by 36 percent, the Department of Youth and Community Development’s budget will decrease by 21 percent, and the Department of Homeless Services’ budget will decrease by 20 percent.<sup>4</sup>

## In 2021, the average daily jail population continued to drop while expenditure per capita continued to climb

In FY 2012, there were 12,287 people in New York City jails. Over the next decade, the jail population plummeted; in FY 2020, the average daily population was 5,841, 52 percent lower than in FY 2012. The following year, the average daily jail population dropped another 15 percent, to 4,961 people. The cost per capita, however, skyrocketed. In FY 2012, New York City spent \$162,127 per person per year on jails. In FY 2020, the annual cost per capita rose to \$438,000, and rose again the following year to \$556,539. In fact, cost per capita has increased every year from 2011 to the present.<sup>5</sup>

## **Corrections officer headcount decreased but remains nearly double the jail population**

In FY 2020, there were 9,181 corrections officers working for DOC. The following year, even though the average daily population of New York City jails decreased by 15 percent, the number of corrections officers dropped by only 9 percent to 8,338 officers. The number of uniformed officers has continued to decline, reaching approximately 7,700 by January 2022, according to news reports, and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) predicts a further reduction to 7,460 officers by the end of FY 2022.<sup>6</sup> Of course, these predictions can be wrong. For example, at the end of FY 2021, there were 8,338 corrections officers in DOC although OMB had forecast 7,219.<sup>7</sup>

Mayor Adams's 2023 budget anticipates a further reduction of 400, bringing the number of officers to a low of 7,060.<sup>8</sup> Even 7,060 officers, however, will mean that corrections officers significantly outnumber the jail population.

In 2019, the average ratio of people in jail to corrections officers nationwide was four-to-one.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, in New York City, the number of corrections officers in FY 2020 and 2021 was nearly double the jail population. In FY 2021, there were 8,338 corrections officers compared to 4,961 people in detention, a ratio of 3-to-5.<sup>10</sup> Overstaffing has enormous budgetary implications; personnel costs, including fringe benefits and pensions, represent 88 percent of the entire 2023 preliminary DOC budget.<sup>11</sup> Bringing New York City's ratio more in line with the national average would lead to enormous cost savings.

## **The Department of Correction is facing a crisis of absenteeism**

New York City's continued investment in corrections staff has not translated to better conditions, either for people in detention or officers. The issue is not a lack of funding or personnel, but rather that a substantial percentage of the workforce is not coming to work.

According to a *New York Times* investigation, in October 2021, out of 572 corrections officers on the work schedule for Rikers, 17 (3 percent) had stopped showing up for work, 117 (20 percent) were on vacation or long-term leave, and 136 (24 percent) were on indefinite sick leave.<sup>12</sup> The *New York Daily News* found that on January 17, 2022, approximately 35 percent of the entire corrections officer workforce was out sick, on medical monitoring, or absent without leave. This did not include an additional roughly 1,000 officers—more than 10 percent of the workforce—out on indefinite sick leave.<sup>13</sup>

In FY 2021, DOC's paid sick absence rate was higher than any other uniformed workforce in New York City. The sick absence rate for DOC was 9.59 percent, nearly triple the sick absence rate for the police department (3.21 percent) and more than four times higher than that of the fire department (2.03 percent).<sup>14</sup>

## **Recommendations**

To right-size New York's correction budget, Vera recommends that New York City elected officials do the following:

- Create a plan to decrease the DOC budget over time, in line with the city's plummeting jail population and its current plan to build a smaller citywide jail system by 2027.
- Invest funds saved from a right-sized correction budget in mental health services, alternatives to detention, supportive housing, education, and other community-based programs that maintain community safety more effectively than jails.
- Provide training opportunities and other support services for corrections officers to find new roles, either in other municipal departments or the private and nonprofit sectors.

Reigning in excessive corrections spending will enable the city to invest in services that support communities and maintain community safety. A blueprint to decrease funding over time while investing in current employees will help current

corrections officers find well-paid opportunities in other departments or industries that do not rely on the criminalization and containment of Black and other New Yorkers of color.

## About

For more information about this report, contact Jullian Harris-Calvin, director, Greater Justice New York, at [jharriscalvin@vera.org](mailto:jharriscalvin@vera.org).

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](https://vera.org).

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Vera Institute of Justice, *A Look Inside the New York City Correction Budget* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/X9L9-P7DQ>. Vera's 2021 report does not take inflation into account and therefore concludes that funding for the Department of Correction increased from FY19 to FY20. Adjusting for inflation, however, funding remained steady between these years.

<sup>2</sup> Taiyler Simone Mitchell, "15 Rikers Island Inmates — All Men of Color — Died in 2021, the Largest Number of Deaths Since 2016," *Insider*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.insider.com/15-rikers-island-inmates-died-2021-most-deaths-since-2016-2022-1>; and New York State Department of Criminal Justice, *Annual Jail Population Trends* (New York: New York State Department of Criminal Justice, 2022), 3, <https://perma.cc/2SRY-CKA7>.

<sup>3</sup> New York City Office of Management and Budget, *The Preliminary Budget of The City of New York for the Fiscal Year 2023: Expense Revenue Contract* (New York: NYC Office of Management and Budget, 2022), 39E, <https://perma.cc/QY5Q-A3FZ>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 133E, 66E, 38E.

<sup>5</sup> New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer, *NYC Department of Correction: FYs 2011-21 Operating Expenditures, Jail Population, Cost Per Incarcerated Person, Staffing Ratios, Performance Measure Outcomes, and Overtime* (New York: New York City Comptroller's Office, Budget Bureau, 2021), <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/nyc-department-of-correction/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; Graham Rayman, "Hundreds of Rikers Island Correction Officers Caught Abusing Sick Leave Policies During COVID Staffing Crisis," *New York Daily News*, January 23, 2022, <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/ny-rikers-island-correction-officers-abusing-sick-leave-policies-covid-20220124-24qbfqnuizfzjfjavvvumw2ys4-story.html>; and New York City Office of Management and Budget, *Fiscal Years 2022-2026: Full-Time and Full-Time Equivalent Staffing Levels* (New York: New York City Office of Management and Budget, February 2022), 35, <https://perma.cc/3XKT-R8E9>.

<sup>7</sup> New York City Office of Management and Budget, *Fiscal Years 2021-2025: Full-Time and Full-Time Equivalent Staffing Levels* (New York: New York City Office of Management and Budget, April 2021), 35, <https://perma.cc/6X89-7YQ2>; and Stringer, *NYC Department of Correction: FYs 2011-21 Operating Expenditures*, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> New York City Office of Management and Budget, *Fiscal Years 2022-2026: Full-Time and Full-Time Equivalent Staffing Levels*, February 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Zhen Zeng and Todd D. Minton, *Jail Inmates in 2019* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021), 10, <https://perma.cc/HAK8-VAGG>.

<sup>10</sup> Stringer, *NYC Department of Correction: FYs 2011-21 Operating Expenditures*, 2021.

---

<sup>11</sup> New York City Office of Management and Budget, *Preliminary Budget of the City of New York for the Fiscal Year 2023*, 2022, 39E.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Ransom and Bianca Pallaro, "Behind the Violence at Rikers, Decades of Mismanagement and Dysfunction," *New York Times*, December 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/nyregion/rikers-island-correction-officers.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Rayman, "Hundreds of Rikers Island Correction Officers," 2022.

<sup>14</sup> New York City Mayor's Office of Operations, *Mayor's Management Report, Fiscal 2021* (New York: Mayor's Office of Operations, 2021), 457, <https://perma.cc/H727-BVQY>.