

# A Look Inside the New York City Correction Budget

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May 2021

**B**udgets are moral documents. They illustrate what we care about, who we care about, and how we will care for communities. In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder and a string of other police killings, nationwide calls for reallocation of law enforcement budgets forced elected leaders to consider the values underlying their budgetary choices. But discussions remained largely limited to policing expenditures. Few major U.S. cities took a hard look at the billions of dollars invested in our cities’ increasingly vacant jail systems. Meanwhile, corrections spending surged.<sup>1</sup>

New York City represents the country’s most glaring example. The Big Apple spends far more than any other city to incarcerate its citizens, despite tremendous strides to safely shrink its jail population. The city’s proposed fiscal year 2022 budget details a \$2.6 billion corrections allocation, more than \$1 billion above the nation’s second most expensive jail system.<sup>2</sup> Although city leaders last year voiced commitments to reduce the New York City Police Department budget and reallocate investments to communities most harmed by overpolicing and mass incarceration, they have remained mute on Department of Correction (DOC) bloat.<sup>3</sup> If New York City truly cares about creating a fair, equitable, and effective justice system for the people impacted by it, the city council must:

- 1) reign in and reallocate the DOC budget;
- 2) right size and transition jail staff; and
- 3) close and repurpose the Rikers Island jail complex.

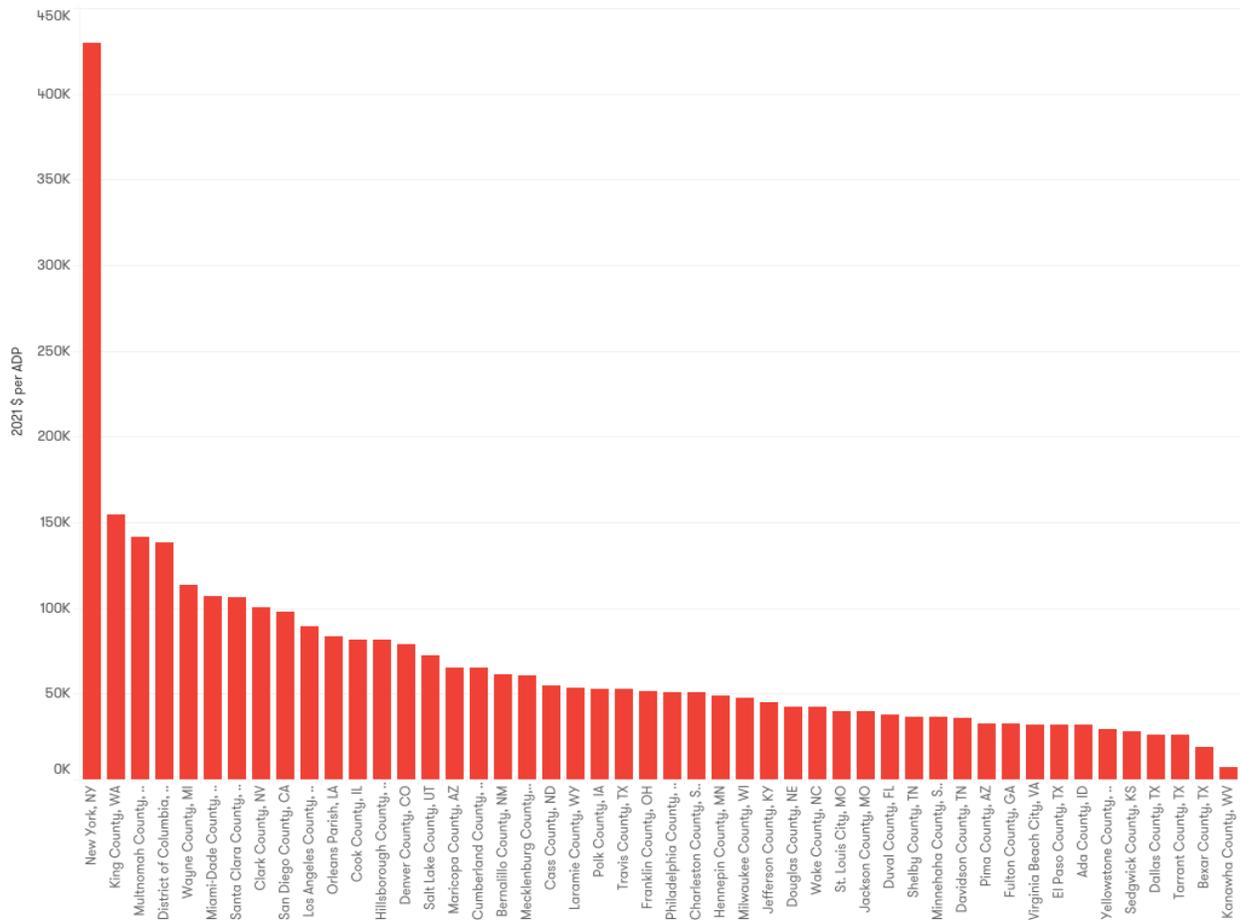
## **NYC spends more than any other big city in the country to incarcerate far fewer people**

No other local jail system costs as much as New York City’s. The Los Angeles County jail system is the only other U.S. system that invests more than \$1 billion annually, at \$1.3 billion.<sup>4</sup> But its average daily jail population is three times larger than New York City’s.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Los Angeles has three times as many people in jail, yet a budget half the size of New York’s. Every other jail system invests less than \$500 million in its jails—a fraction of New York City’s \$2,276,133,447.<sup>6</sup>

New York City is also an outlier with respect to the cost of incarcerating a single person. In 2020, the city spent \$438,000 per year to incarcerate a single person.<sup>7</sup> By comparison, in 2021, the District of Columbia averages an annual cost of \$138,000 per person. Detroit’s Wayne

County follows at just under \$114,000 per person. And other large cities to which New York City is often compared lie even farther down the line of comparison. Los Angeles County spends about \$89,500, and Chicago’s Cook County approximately \$81,000.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 1: National comparison of the cost per incarcerated person, 2021**



Source: The Vera Institute of Justice analyzed corrections budget data from the 50 largest cities in the United States and used their average daily jail population (ADP) to calculate the cost of incarceration per person. For more complete information on jail budgets, see Vera Institute of Justice, *What Jails Cost: A Look at Spending in America’s Large Cities* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/S2VF-V3WE>.

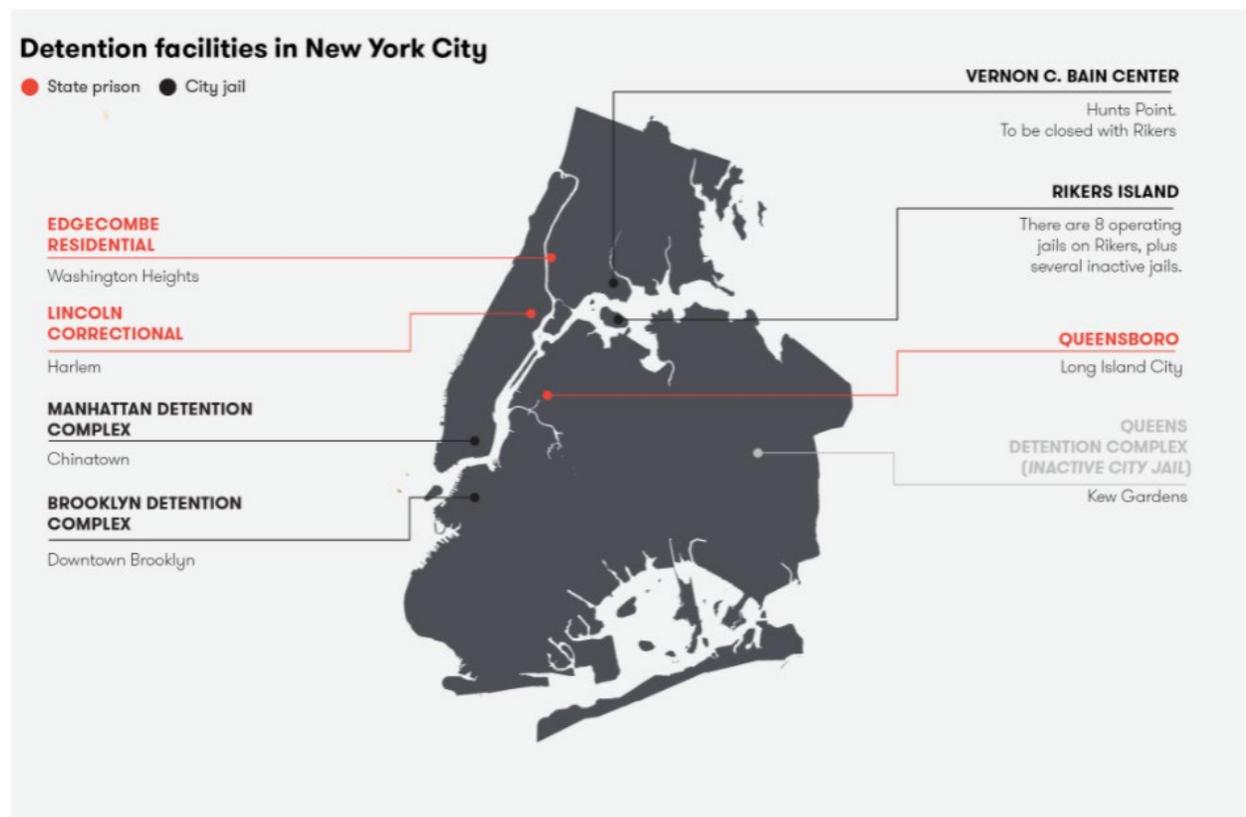
With the exception of Orleans Parish, Louisiana, New York City has seen the largest jail population declines of major cities over the last 10 years, both in percentage points (-58 percent) and hard numbers (7,400), yet it has not readjusted its corrections budget.<sup>9</sup>

## An inverse relationship: NYC’s ballooning budget and shrinking jail population

In a historic 2019 vote, the city council pledged to shutter the Rikers Island jail complex, cap the citywide jail population at 3,300 people, and replace the city’s four dilapidated jails—one in each borough—by 2026.<sup>10</sup> The city council also committed to invest in community-based services and alternatives to incarceration. The vote marked a turning point in the city’s history of prioritizing carceral responses to public safety concerns and reflected a decade-long trend in declining crime, arrest, and jail incarceration rates. But the city’s corrections budget tells a different story.

Although New York City’s jail population declined 52 percent between 2012 and 2020, the city’s Department of Correction operating budget grew 24 percent.<sup>11</sup> The average daily number of people detained in New York City jails shrank from 12,287 in 2012 to 5,841 in 2020.<sup>12</sup> Jails experienced a 26 percent population decrease from 2019 to 2020 alone, and all but three active DOC jails were below 60 percent capacity in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the DOC’s budget reached \$2.56 billion in 2020.<sup>14</sup>

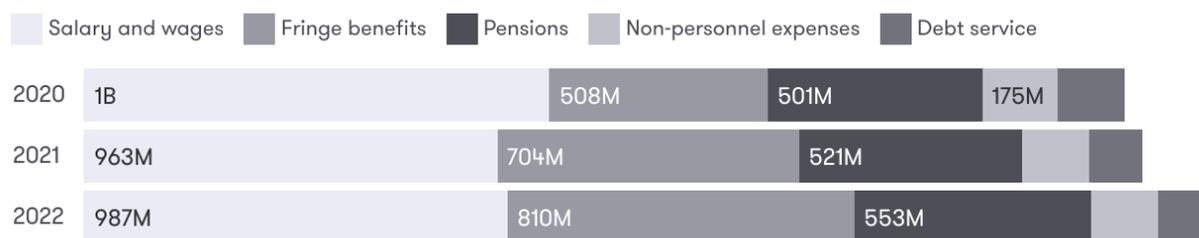
Figure 2: Detention facilities in New York City



New York City’s Department of Correction maintains 14 jails across the city, 10 on Rikers Island and four in each borough except Staten Island. The jail complex on Rikers Island detains a broad range of New Yorkers, including youth and adolescents, people with acute medical needs and disabilities, suspected gang members, people held in protective custody, and people without special classifications. The city’s sole women’s facility sits on the island.

1. **Rikers Island:** The Rikers Island jail complex includes 10 jails—eight are active, and the other two remain vacant.
2. **“The Boat” in the Bronx:** The 800-bed Vernon C. Bain Center floats on a barge docked at Hunts Point.
3. **“The Tombs” of Manhattan:** Located next to the Manhattan Criminal Court, the Manhattan Detention Complex contains 898 beds.
4. **“The Brooklyn House”:** The Brooklyn House of Detention, also near the local courthouse, maintains 759 beds.
5. **The Queens House of Detention:** This 467-bed jail was closed in 2002 but will be rebuilt as part of the city’s borough-based jail system replacing the Rikers complex.

**Figure 3: New York City Department of Correction budget, FY2020–2022**



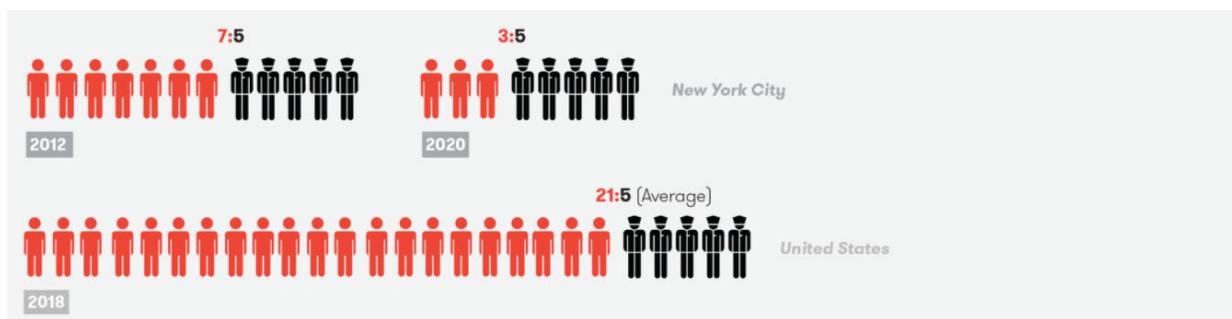
Source: Mayor’s Office of Management and Budget, *The City of New York Executive Budget Fiscal Year 2022: Message of the Mayor* (New York: Mayor’s Office of Management and Budget, April 26, 2021), 107, <https://perma.cc/Y8UH-EM4T>.

**Misplaced priorities: NYC’s enormous corrections budget is driven not by programming, rehabilitation, and services for incarcerated people but by a jail staff that far eclipses the jail population**

In the last several years, New York City’s average daily jail populations decreased more rapidly than the number of active uniformed personnel, especially on Rikers Island. In 2020, the Department of Correction spent 86 percent of its budget on staff wages and benefits.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, out of the \$438,000 spent to jail a single New Yorker for one year, \$379,216 went to personnel costs. Less than 5 percent of the DOC’s annual expenditures are allocated to programming, nutrition, substance use treatment, and other services. Notably, in his April 2021

executive budget for fiscal year 2022, Mayor de Blasio proposed a 400-officer and \$160 million budget increase, despite consistently low jail population, crime, and arrest rates.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 4: Ratio of incarcerated people to corrections staff, NYC vs. United States**



1. In 2020, the incarcerated person-to-corrections officer ratio was 3:5 in New York City.<sup>17</sup>
2. In 2012, the incarcerated person-to-corrections officer ratio was 7:5 in New York City.
3. By comparison, in 2018, the national average for the incarcerated person-to-corrections officer ratio was 21:5.<sup>18</sup>
4. In 2020, the DOC’s uniformed staff headcount was 9,237.<sup>19</sup>

**A right-sized budget and limited footprint: to realize cost savings and fulfill the city’s pledge to close Rikers Island, the city must reduce staff and shutter facilities**

**Significant staffing reductions**

New York City cannot effectively reduce its DOC budget without addressing the department’s outsized staff, which predominantly consists of uniformed corrections officers. Staff downsizing cannot rely solely on natural attrition, retirements, and hiring freezes. Only 450 uniformed employees will be eligible for retirement in 2021.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the DOC’s attrition rate is 11.6 percent and 17.7 percent for uniform and civilian staff, respectively.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, if the city is to reduce jail staffing in line with current jail populations and the city’s pledge to build a borough-based jail system with a 3,300-person maximum capacity, it must consider staff reductions and redistribution—if possible—among other city departments.

To determine the appropriate number of corrections staff, the city should consider:

1. the national average ratio (in 2018, it was 4.2:1);<sup>22</sup>
2. current staff composition;
3. building design and sight lines;

4. spectrum of classifications among the incarcerated population within each facility;
5. programming and service needs;
6. regulations and court orders; and
7. state, national, and international best practices.

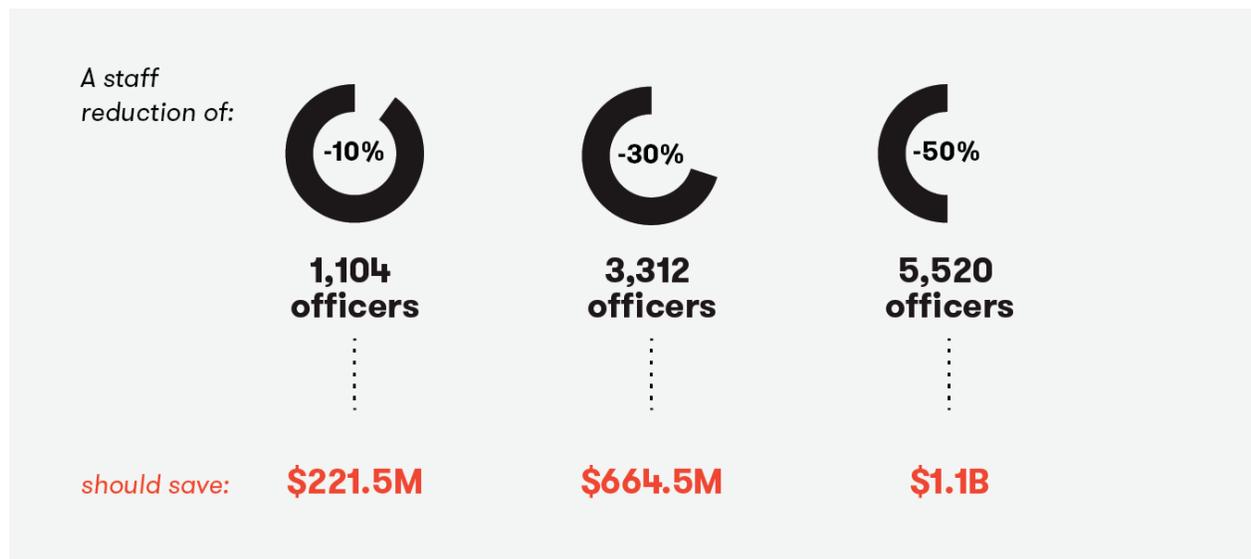
The city must reject the notion that having more corrections officers necessarily leads to safer, less violent jails. The brutal, infamous history of the jails on Rikers Island proves educational. In 2015, the DOC entered into a federal consent decree following investigations and lawsuits over correction officers’ persistently excessive force and culture of violence.<sup>23</sup> As recently as 2020, federal monitors continued to report a culture of violence and “unprofessional conduct and hyper-confrontational behavior by staff,” one in which they “use force more often now” despite a 60 percent population reduction since 2015.<sup>24</sup> There is no causal relationship between swelling corrections staffing expenditures and enhanced public safety.

Shuttering unused, dilapidated, and increasingly vacant facilities will provide an additional source of savings that can be redirected to demolishing, or making otherwise inoperable, individual Rikers facilities, helping New York City move closer to closing the country’s last penal colony.

Based on 2020 spending on staff, a staff reduction of:

1. 10 percent (1,104 officers) should save \$221.5 million;
2. 30 percent (3,312 officers) should save \$664.5 million; or
3. 50 percent (5,520 officers) should save \$1.1 billion.<sup>25</sup>

**Figure 5: Potential savings from reducing staffing in New York City jails**



## ***A just transition and reinvestment***

DOC employees are largely Black and brown New Yorkers whose current employment is a gateway to the middle class. Significant budget cuts will disproportionately harm communities of color if the city fails to integrate a just transition plan. Similarly, continued reliance on an inflated jail economy that trades on the incarceration of poor, Black, and brown people exchanges one harm for another. New York City, therefore, should use cost savings from staffing reductions and facility closures to retrain and divert DOC staff to other jobs and careers within and outside of city government.

The infusion of millions of federal dollars into New York City government through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 presents a unique opportunity for the city to fund transitional support to DOC employees.<sup>26</sup> The city should explore retraining and job placement partnerships with local colleges. Opening new job opportunities through reapplication, retraining, and rehiring will lay the foundation for a budget that values investments that help communities thrive over expenditures that create fiscal waste and exacerbate violence.

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## **Acknowledgments**

The Vera Institute thanks the Citizens Budget Commission for its support in analyzing the New York City Department of Correction budgets from fiscal year 2012 to 2020, including spending and staffing. The data sources used for this analysis included NYC Comptroller Checkbook data feeds for Department of Correction cash expenditures for fiscal year 2012 to fiscal year 2020, the NYC Open Data Payroll for fiscal year 2014 to fiscal year 2019, the New York City Mayor's Management Report for fiscal year 2012 to 2020, and the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice Data to access average daily jail censuses and maximum facility capacity.

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## **Endnotes**

- 1 Jake Horowitz, Tracy Velázquez & Kyleigh Clark-Moorman, *Local Spending on Jails Tops \$25 Billion in Latest Nationwide Data* (Philadelphia, PA: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2021), <https://perma.cc/W5A4-EKLN>.
- 2 The New York City Correction budget allocation includes \$1.2 billion for department spending, \$776 million for fringe benefits, \$553 million for pensions, and \$124.5 million for debt service. Jacques Jiha, *The Executive Budget of the City of New York for the Fiscal Year 2020: Expense Revenue Contract* (New York: Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, 2021), 101E, <https://perma.cc/R3KJ-K3HS>. By contrast, in Los Angeles, the fiscal year 2022 recommended budget includes \$825.1 million for sheriff custody, \$375.4 million for correctional health, and \$44.8 million for an "inmate welfare fund." Fecia A. Davenport and Arlene Barrera, *County of Los Angeles 2021-22 Recommended Budget: Volume 1* (Los Angeles: County of Los Angeles, 2021), <https://perma.cc/BBE6-P49H>; and Fecia A. Davenport and Arlene Barrera, *County of Los Angeles 2021-22 Recommended Budget: Volume 2* (Los Angeles: County of Los Angeles, 2021), <https://perma.cc/SMP9-GZCP>.
- 3 In June 2020, the mayor and city council committed to \$1 billion in cuts to the NYPD budget for fiscal year 2021. New York City Council, "Joint Statement from Speaker Corey Johnson, Majority Leader Laurie Cumbo, Democratic Conference Chair Robert Cornegy, Co-Chairs of the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus I. DanEEK Miller and Adrienne Adams, Finance Committee Chair Daniel Dromm, Capital Budget Subcommittee Chair Vanessa L. Gibson, and Public Safety Committee Chair Donovan Richards on Proposed Cuts to the NYPD Budget," press release (New York: New York City Council, June 12, 2020), <https://perma.cc/WH7C-TCG6>. However, the fiscal

year 2021 budget was reduced by less than half that amount and the proposed fiscal year 2022 budget maintains police headcount and operations at that level, with some expecting police funding to increase as the economy stabilizes post-pandemic. Fola Akinnibi, "NYC's Violent Crime Is Up; So Is the City's Police Budget," CityLab, May 6, 2021, <https://perma.cc/BSW3-M2EC>.

- 4 Vera Institute of Justice, *What Jails Cost: A Look at Spending in America's Large Cities* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/S2VF-V3WE>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, *The City of New York Executive Budget Fiscal Year 2022: Message of the Mayor* (New York: Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, April 26, 2021), 107, <https://perma.cc/Y8UH-EM4T>.
- 7 Citizens Budget Commission analysis of the NYC Comptroller Checkbook data feeds for Department of Correction cash expenditures for fiscal year 2012 to fiscal year 2020. In fiscal year 2020, New York City spent \$2.559 billion on the Department of Correction. The average daily jail population for fiscal year 2020 was 5,841. To calculate the cost of incarcerating one person for a year, the total budget of the department is divided by average daily jail population. New York City Comptroller, Checkbook NYC Data Feeds (database) (New York: Office of the Comptroller, 2021), <https://www.checkbooknyc.com/data-feeds>; and Mayor's Office of Operations, *Mayor's Management Report: September 2020* (New York: Mayor's Office of Operations, 2020), 73, <https://perma.cc/52QT-7ES8>.
- 8 Vera Institute of Justice, *What Jails Cost: A Look at Spending in America's Large Cities* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/S2VF-V3WE>.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Richard Gonzales, "City Council Votes to Close New York's Notorious Rikers Island Jail Complex," NPR, October 17, 2019, <https://perma.cc/2UVF-2863>. In 2020, New York City delayed the plan to close Rikers Island by one year, promising to shutter the jails by 2027. Kimberly Gonzalez, "A Timeline on the Closure of Rikers Island," City & State, October 20, 2020, <https://perma.cc/T7AB-76LH>.
- 11 Citizens Budget Commission analysis of the New York City Comptroller Checkbook data feeds for cash expenditures, fiscal year 2012 to fiscal year 2020, see note 7.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, *Biannual Report on Progress Towards Closing Jails on Rikers Island Local Law 192* (New York: Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, 2021), 3, <https://perma.cc/5MJ8-VB3U>. New York City's jail population declined after bail reform went into effect in January 2020 and declined further after New York City began to decarcerate in response to the coronavirus pandemic, but it increased again after bail reform rollbacks went into effect and the first wave of the coronavirus passed. Vera Institute of Justice, "Empire State of Incarceration," February 18, 2021, <https://www.vera.org/empire-state-of-incarceration-2021>. The numbers in July 2021 illustrate that the city can reduce its jail population to less than 4,000—and lower.
- 14 Citizens Budget Commission analysis of the 2019 and 2020 Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice Biannual Report on Progress Towards Closing Jails on Rikers Island Local Law 192 (New York: Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice).
- 15 Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, *The City of New York Executive Budget Fiscal Year 2022: Message of the Mayor* (New York: Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, April 26, 2021), 107, <https://perma.cc/Y8UH-EM4T>.
- 16 There is no indication that there is a causal relationship between bail reform and the increase in shootings and murders in New York City in 2020. Overall, in fact, index crimes are still at historic lows on par with rates in recent years. New York City Police Department, "NYPD Compstat 2.0," database, <https://compstat.nypdonline.org/2e5c3f4b-85c1-4635-83c6-22b27fe7c75c/view/89> (showing that, as of May

- 9, 2021, there were 1,704 major index crimes reported in the year to date, compared with 1,712 during the same time period in 2019.) Also see Jacques Jiha, *The Executive Budget of the City of New York for the Fiscal Year 2020: Expense Revenue Contract* (New York: Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, 2021), 101E, <https://perma.cc/6UWX-RBHA>.
- 17 In 2020, New York City had 9,789 full-time uniformed corrections officers. Council of the City of New York Finance Division, *Report of the Finance Division on the Fiscal 2021 Preliminary Plan and the Fiscal 2020 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report for the Department of Correction* (New York: Council of the City of New York Finance Division, March 16, 2020), 2, <https://perma.cc/H4BT-EQHT>. The average daily jail population in fiscal year 2020 was 5,841. New York State Division of Criminal Justice Statistics, *Monthly Jail Population Trends* (New York: NYS Division of Criminal Justice Statistics, May 4, 2021), <https://perma.cc/8CSC-WLDK>.
  - 18 Zhen Zeng, *Jail Inmates in 2018* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020), 9, <https://perma.cc/CZ4W-G39W>.
  - 19 City of New York, Budget Function Analysis (New York: City of New York, January 14, 2021), 144, <https://perma.cc/SGZ7-P3B7>.
  - 20 See Citizens Budget Commission analysis of the New York City Open Payroll Data for fiscal year 2014 to fiscal year 2019 to learn how many officers were hired before 2001. Office of Payroll Administration, "Citywide Payroll Data (Fiscal Year)," database, November 13 2020, <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/City-Government/Citywide-Payroll-Data-Fiscal-Year-/k397-673e>.
  - 21 Council of the City of New York Finance Division, *Report of the Finance Division on the Fiscal 2021 Preliminary Plan*, 2020, 2.
  - 22 Zeng, *Jail Inmates in 2018*, 2020, 9.
  - 23 *Nunez v. New York*, Case No. 1:11-cv-05845-LTS-JCF (S.D.N.Y., July 1, 2015) (Consent Judgment: Exhibit A), <https://perma.cc/Z3Q2-NCY7>.
  - 24 Steve J. Martin, Kelly Dedel, Anna E. Friedberg et. al., *Ninth Report of the Nunez Independent Monitor* (New York: Nunez Monitoring Team, 2020), <https://perma.cc/32QU-7QZ3>.
  - 25 In order to calculate savings, Vera added the 2020 costs of personnel services (\$1.1 billion), fringe benefits (\$636 million), pensions (\$467 million) for the Department of Correction. Vera then calculated the per-personnel cost of staff based on the 11,040 full time equivalent (FTE) staff by dividing the total cost of personnel by the FTE staff count. Using the per-personnel cost of \$200,634, Vera then applied percentage cuts to the 2020 total staff count to determine the potential for savings. See Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, *The City of New York Executive Budget Fiscal Year 2022: Message of the Mayor* (New York: Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, 2021), 107, <https://perma.cc/Y8UH-EM4T>.
  - 26 H.R. 1319, American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (117<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2021–2022), <https://perma.cc/27N4-5PEE>.

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## For more information

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