

A MORE JUST NYC

Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

Testimony of Zachary Katznelson, Policy Director
NYC Council, Committee on Criminal Justice Hearing re: Solitary, December 8, 2020

Good afternoon. I am Zachary Katznelson, Policy Director at the Lippman Commission. Our formal name is the Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform. Thank you for the chance to testify.

We are appreciative that alongside the Board of Correction, the City Council is tackling solitary. Everyone's attention to this issue is critical – we need consensus in this City to ensure that whatever follows after solitary is faithfully implemented.

Because solitary confinement is a scourge that must end as soon as possible. I have worked for 20 years in jails and prisons, during which time I have met with easily over 500 people in solitary. I have seen the damage it inflicts. It breaks people. There are much better, smarter, safer, more humane ways to hold people accountable and reduce violence.

If solitary confinement were the answer to violence in our jails, they would be remarkably safe places already. Instead, the federal *Nunez* monitor recently reported that the rates of violence are at their highest yet.

Please think about that for a moment. When the *Nunez* case started almost a decade ago, the jails were marked with violence so egregious that it violated the US Constitution. Now, five years after the federal court's order in that case, an order that required reforms that were meant to greatly reduce the violence, it has gotten only worse.

For the sake of everyone in the jails, including correction officers and staff, we need to try something different – drastically different. It is time for everyone to take a hard look at how the jails are operated and managed, and develop a way out of the mess we are currently in.

This is not something that can wait for the new jails to be built and Rikers to be closed. It must be done now.

Solitary is one piece of the puzzle and an important place to start. But ending solitary has to be in the context of changing the vision for and the culture of the Department of Correction. Because changing what's on paper means all too little without changed mindset and accountability.

Thank you.