

# A MORE JUST NYC

## **Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform**

Testimony of Zachary Katznelson, Executive Director  
New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addictions  
February 25, 2022

I am Zachary Katznelson, Executive Director of the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, often known as the Lippman Commission after our chair, former Chief Judge of the State of New York Jonathan Lippman. Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify.

The Lippman Commission works to close the dangerous, dysfunctional, decrepit jails on Rikers while safely lowering the jail population. People with mental illness make up 48% of the people in Rikers. 16% of the people in Rikers have a serious mental illness. And on average people with mental illness stay in the awful conditions at Rikers at least 60% longer than others.

So, our first order of business is trying to prevent people with mental illness from entering Rikers at all, though I would note that people with mental illness are much more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators.

Far too often, the first time someone is properly diagnosed with a mental illness is in jail. That is especially true for teenagers and young adults. We need a coordinated plan to deliver services in the communities most impacted by crime and by Rikers, with adequate funding, paid on time. And we need to make sure people know how to access those services. A key focus should be on people who suffer violence themselves, so trauma does not beget further trauma.

We also need more supportive housing, which will better lives and prevent crime before it happens. In 2019, as part of the plan to close Rikers, the prior administration committed to creating 380 new supportive housing beds for people involved in the justice system. Not a single one of those beds has yet come on-line, because in the DOHMH RFP that was issued, the City failed to provide enough money for non-profits to actually operate the beds. We very much hope that with your help, that will be rectified shortly.

But we also know the need for supportive housing is significantly greater than 380 beds. A recent study by the Corporation for Supportive Housing calculated that over 2,500 people who need supportive housing cycle in and out of Rikers each year. At a cost of \$42,000 per year, a supportive housing bed is a far better investment than the over \$500,000 the City spends to keep someone locked up on Rikers for a year.

Finally, I want to note a more hidden issue, namely the lack of adequate mental health care for people who work at Rikers. Uniformed and civilian staff frequently experience violence in the jails. People carry that trauma back home to their families, leading to greater incidents of alcohol and drug use and domestic violence. Even as we work to improve the dire conditions in the jails, we need adequate support for jail employees to cope with the current reality.

Thank you again for the chance to testify.