

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 Criminal Justice
Hearing on Reducing Violence Among Young People at Rikers
March 28, 2022

Good morning. 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.

We know the inputs that lead young people to Rikers, and that underlie so much of the violence there. Things like trauma and often repeated exposure to violence. Undiagnosed and unmet behavioral and mental health needs. Poor foster care experiences and all too little support when young people age out. And of course, the brutality and awful pressures and frustrations of incarceration on Rikers.

And we know what succeeds in reducing violence and bringing about better outcomes. Credible messengers. Targeted, evidence-based therapy and mental health treatment. Robust programming to occupy and challenge people. Positive incentives and rewards for good behavior. Officers and staff who want to work with young people and who receive specialized training to do so. Critically, they must be permanently assigned to the same young adult units to facilitate building relationships.

All of that has worked in other systems, and even at times at Rikers. But to date, each time we've seen progress, it has been devoured and spat out by the dysfunction of Rikers.

I'll give one example. A couple of years ago, the then-warden of RNDC, Joseph Caputo, tried to set up a mentoring program where a handful of older incarcerated people – credible messengers – would work with some of the most challenging young people to head off violence. When word got out, some at Rikers opposed the idea, and Warden Caputo was shunted out of RNDC to transportation. Now maybe this program wouldn't have worked, but I walked around RNDC with Warden Caputo last year – after his transfer – and in my 20-plus years working in jail systems around the country, I have almost never seen a uniformed officer greeted so genuinely warmly by incarcerated people, let alone young incarcerated people, who are hard to please. We need to boost up people like Warden Caputo, and give them a chance to try.

Meanwhile, we need to get as many young people as reasonably possible out of Rikers and into better settings. What if the City could secure the three empty or underused state prisons in Manhattan and convert them into secure therapeutic units that meet the specific needs of young people?

We could start with young women. Of the 46 women at Rikers aged 24 or under, 41 have a mental illness. They should be somewhere far better than Rikers so they can get the treatment they need.

Thank you.