

Testimony of
Alison Wilkey, Director of Public Policy
on behalf of
John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity
before
The Council of the City of New York
Committee on Women and Gender Equity
Committee on Criminal Justice

April 27, 2021

The John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity’s mission is to create opportunities for people to live successfully in the community after involvement with the criminal legal system by addressing structural racial and economic inequalities.

In 2017, we issued [a report on women incarcerated in New York City](#). Many of the report’s findings are as relevant today as they were four years ago. Our report found that most women incarcerated at Rikers were being held pre-trial. We reported that the incarceration of women has lasting impacts on children and families. We found that most incarcerated women were Black and Latinx. And we reported on the harm that comes to women while incarcerated, particularly the alarming rates of sexual and physical assault.

While the number of women held at Rikers Island has dropped since we issued that report, there remains much to do. The current average daily population is approximately 280 women and gender expansive people. However, with the right policy changes and investments, it is feasible for New York City to come close to eliminating the incarceration of women.

To achieve this, the City must address the housing needs of those impacted by the criminal legal system. Upon admission to Rikers, 21% of women identified as being homeless or having unstable housing. 32% identified as being homeless or having unstable housing upon release from Rikers.

Overall, [formerly incarcerated women are more likely to be homeless than formerly incarcerated men](#). This is also a racial justice issue. [Black women experience the highest rates of sheltered homelessness](#)—nearly four times the rate of white men and twice as high as the rate of Black men.

Lack of access to housing is relevant to reducing incarceration at Rikers in two ways. First, when people are released from jail, lack of stable housing makes it difficult for people to reconstruct their lives, achieve economic stability, and care for their families. Too often, this puts people in

the precarious position trying to meet basic survival needs. Second, many alternatives to incarceration and treatment programs are difficult to access and complete successfully without a stable home.

City Council can take a tremendous step toward addressing the housing needs of formerly incarcerated women and reduce the number of people held at Rikers by passing [Intro 2047, the Fair Chance for Housing Act](#). The bill would eliminate the use of conviction records in housing. This would increase access to housing for the [117,199 New York City women who have a conviction](#). Passage of the bill would increase access to housing, help women exiting Rikers, and allow more women and families currently living shelter to find their own housing—all without cost to the City.

The City administration supports Intro 2047, and the Council must act now to move it to a vote at the next stated meeting. Passage of this bill is critical to continued reduction the number of people incarcerated at Rikers, to addressing the City's housing crisis, and to achieving justice for women.

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