

## **City Must House Youth Separately at Rikers; Meet Their Immediate Needs in Detention and in the Community; and Invest in Youth and Families.**

*Members of the Youth Justice Research Collaborative Testify before the New York City Board of Correction on the Findings of a Survey of Youth Justice Service Providers*

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### **Contact:**

Maya Williams, Youth Justice Research Collaborative, Research Assistant. 917.685.9731 / [mwilliams@youthrepresent.org](mailto:mwilliams@youthrepresent.org)

*New York, NY*

Today, there are over 400 young adults on Rikers Island.<sup>1</sup> Based on [results from our survey of youth justice service providers](#) conducted over the Summer of 2020, we know that they have significant needs -- both on Rikers Island, and in the community. Unfortunately, because of Covid-19 there have been no community-based service providers working with youth detained on Rikers Island since the Spring of 2020. At the same time, the DOC is resistant to housing all young adults together, making it harder for some youth to access the limited programming and supports that are still available.

[Our research released this week](#) reveals the specific needs of young adults in DOC custody. Specific findings include heightened anxiety and mental health needs among young adults as well as fewer in-person connections and supports because of Covid-19. One respondent said, *“They need us now more than ever. During this time, it’s them trying to navigate how to survive. How to stay safe, they need our support.”*

**These findings underscore why the Board of Correction should require DOC to serve all 18-21 year olds and to house all young adults together. They should also embrace mentoring models with older detained people in light of the limited access community-based service providers have to Rikers Island now.**

Members of the Youth Justice Research Collaborative will testify at today’s hearing to highlight the findings from our study and to call for immediate action to reduce the harmful impact of COVID-19 on NYC youth involved in the justice system.

“Young people need to be together, which is why Young Adult housing – and the programs they get – is so important. They can be put anywhere on the Island, when they need to be in housing areas that are for them. Many young people on Rikers Island have history in the child welfare system, many don’t have parents, or don’t have connection to their families. To work with them,

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<sup>1</sup> December 2020 Census: 58 18-year-olds, [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/18\\_yo\\_dec\\_2020\\_breakdown.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/18_yo_dec_2020_breakdown.pdf) and 360 19-21-year-olds, [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/19\\_21\\_yo\\_dec\\_2020\\_breakdown.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/19_21_yo_dec_2020_breakdown.pdf).

you need to get to know them, learn their history, and find out who they are. This only happens when they are treated like the youth they are. That is the point of the Young Adult Plan.” Ray Ortega, Youth Justice Research Collaborative Research Assistant

“While COVID has affected a lot of our emotional and mental wellbeing throughout the past year due to the loss of physical contact and physical interaction, it has affected young adults detained in Rikers and across all jails even more so. This is more urgent than ever before – our research shows just how fragile young people are, and the current limitations on in-person services available inside. Regardless of where the City’s young people are – in the community or behind the walls – they deserve to get the care and support they need.” Adilene Sierra, Youth Justice Research Collaborative Research Assistant

“The lack of in-person connection, and interaction with loved ones and support systems, makes it harder to survive and navigate the criminal justice system – especially now. Young clients need effective programs, services, and advocacy while they are incarcerated. Service providers recommend investing in youth of color, who have been impacted by the criminal justice system. Nowhere is this more pressing than on Rikers Island, where hundreds of young adults should be living in dedicated units with access to robust services and programs.” Kateryn Plasencia, Youth Justice Research Collaborative Research Assistant

“We call on the Board of Correction to require that DOC house young adults together to increase access to age-appropriate services and support. Because of limited access to in-person services on the Island from community-based service providers, we also support the creation of a mentor plan, working with older detained people, to support Young Adults in these dedicated housing areas. This is the time for creative solutions that recognize the unique needs of Young Adults. Until we can end detention for youth, we must do everything possible while they are detained to meet them with the dedicated programming they need and deserve.” Maya Williams, Youth Justice Research Collaborative Research Assistant

Based on the findings of the survey, we call for immediate action to reduce the harmful impact of COVID-19 on NYC youth involved in the justice system:

- **Protect Essential Services and Supports for Vulnerable and Justice-Involved Youth.** We call on policymakers to reject cuts and commit to a just budget that is not balanced on the backs of vulnerable and justice-involved youth.
- **Restore Services and Programs to Youth in Juvenile Detention and Those Held on Rikers Island as Soon as Possible.** As soon as it is safe to do so, in-person programming and services must return to juvenile and adult facilities. In the meantime, ensure that robust remote programming is available.
- **End Detention for Youth and Increase Avenues for Release.** We must sustain the urgency around keeping more youth in the community with the supports they need, and investing in community resources instead of incarceration.
- **Invest in Youth-Serving Community-Based Organizations During the COVID Crisis and Recovery.** In the face of the large-scale disruption, loss of life, and economic depression, youth-serving organizations require more resources and capacity than they had before the pandemic began.

- **Develop Accessible Youth Training and Employment Strategies as Part of State and City COVID Recovery Planning.** The city and state must center young people in their COVID-response plans by establishing dedicated economic recovery programs that offer vulnerable and justice-involved youth education- and career-related supports.
- **Expand Emergency Access to Technology and Financial Supports for Youth.** Youth and their families need immediate access to technology and related supports, as well as cash assistance to address food insecurity, housing and other basic needs.
- **Work Toward Legal System Reforms.** There is much more to do legislatively to remove more adolescents and young adults from the punitive adult criminal justice system. We are calling for New York to expand the Youth Offender (YO) protections to those who are 25 or younger and to end prosecution of young children, who are better served through services and supports outside the legal system, by raising the age of Juvenile Delinquency to age 12.