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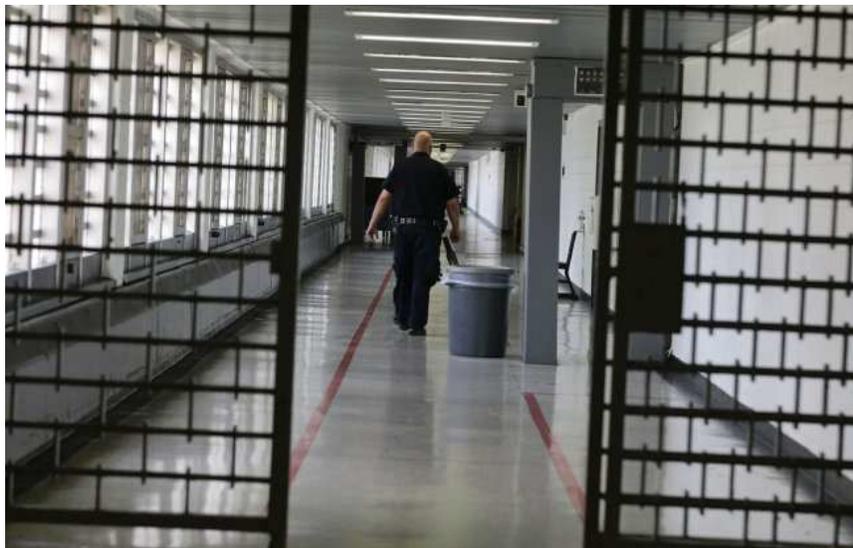
Economic Intelligence

Insights, perspectives and commentary on the economy.



Break the Prison to Poverty Pipeline

Reforms at Rikers Island are a decent start, but more must be done.



Rikers Island isn't the only jail in need of serious reform.

By [Clio Chang](#)

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The New York City Department of Corrections has decided to eliminate solitary confinement for inmates age 16 and 17 by the end of the year. This resolution is a response to [public criticism](#) of abusive conditions at Rikers Island, which houses more than 12,000 of the city's inmates.

The jail made headlines this summer after the federal government released a [report](#) stating that the city was violating inmates' civil rights. Stories of abuse have been as numerous as they have been bleak — an inmate [beaten for falling asleep in class](#), a culture of [distorting data on violence](#), and a [16-year-old boy who](#), accused of stealing a backpack, waited three years for a trial that never happened.

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Preet Bharara, New York's federal prosecutor, [states he is ready](#) to pursue legal action against the city if it does not achieve reform soon.

Eliminating solitary confinement is one of the more concrete improvements that Correctional Commissioner Joseph Ponte outlined in his recent memo to New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. Other changes include an expansion of educational programs and a better ratio of guards to adolescent inmates.

The fight for "[Rikers Reform](#)" is important for the welfare of inmates behind that particular set of bars, but it also shines a light on the issue of the other 7 million people under correctional control in America. The

way we treat prisoners while they are locked up, after all, directly affects how they fare when they re-enter society.

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The problems at Rikers have brought into sharp focus the fact that incarceration has become largely punitive in the United States. Rehabilitation increasingly has been put on the back burner—only 6 percent of corrections spending is used to pay for prison programming. In 2012, the waiting list for drug abuse treatment in prison was 51,000 people long. And since 1994, inmates have been [ineligible for Pell Grants](#), which would allow them to take college classes while in prison; even a mere [drug conviction](#) can suspend a person's eligibility for such grants for years after release.

Given that [evidence shows](#) prison education reduces recidivism and offers a high rate of return on the government's investment, it is strange that as a country we ignore this method of reducing crime and boosting the economy. And to make matters worse, while in many European countries, such as Denmark and Finland, prison records are wiped clean within five years of release, convicts in America are often are marked for the rest of their lives.

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In essence, we are taking our least educated, least socially mobile and most drug addicted citizens and making it even harder for them to obtain education and employment upon release from prison.

So this is the real tragedy of incarceration in America: not that prisoners have to suffer beatings and solitary confinement (horrific though that is), but that they are punished long after they've left their jail cells.

The combined effects of how we treat prisoners in and out of prison is harmful, not only to them, but also to our society as a whole. Our alarming rate of recidivism should come as no surprise when you consider that eight out of 10 employers conduct criminal background checks upon hiring. It is estimated that [5 percent of black males](#) and 6 percent of all males without a high school diploma are excluded from the labor market due to their criminal record.

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Among black males born after the mid-1970s who did not finish high school, almost 70 percent have prison records. This group only has a [one in four chance](#) of rising out of the bottom income quintile, locking both them and their children in poverty.

It is neither economically sound, nor beneficial to society, to trap offenders in this prison-to-poverty pipeline. Our country [spends](#) more than \$70 billion on corrections, and it is [estimated](#) that we lose another \$60 billion per year in lost economic output because we under-employ the ex-offender population.

The focus of our prison system should be to improve society, not make it worse. As such, we should rededicate ourselves to reducing recidivism, and implementing the evidence-based policies that do so, such as increasing educational and vocational investment in prisoners. We should also make it easier to expunge prison records, and promote initiatives like [Ban the Box](#), which eliminates questions about an individual's conviction history on job application forms.

Reforms at Rikers are a good step, but the truth is that, to be effective, reform shouldn't stop at the prison gates. Neither should it stop at New York. Although it may be too little, too late for many of the inmates currently at Rikers, the potential of a lawsuit levied against the city should serve as a shot over the bow for other cities, a warning that they should [implement their own reforms](#), and soon.

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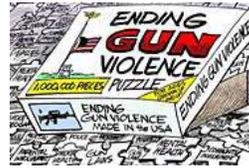


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