



In 1928, New York City was about to tear down an old, notorious jail and build a new, state-of-the-art institution. The old jail, on Roosevelt Island (which was then called Welfare Island), was overcrowded, overrun with rats, and lacked plumbing. The new jail would have a proper hospital, and each inmate would get their own sunny, well-ventilated cell. This jail, located on a 413-acre patch of land in the East River between the Bronx and Queens called Rikers Island, would correct the evils of its predecessor, *The New York Times* wrote.

Last summer, New York unveiled its plan to close down Rikers' notorious jail complex. Over the next few years, the city will shift inmates into four new jails and "put some humanity back" into incarceration, Mayor Bill De Blasio said.

New York's plan is part of a long, ahistorical tradition — the U.S. has been reforming its penal system for centuries and, each time, it ends up torturing people anew. One common thread is an insidious principle of American governance: incarceration must be worse than even the bleakest freedom. No matter how hungry or cold or disrespected or afraid someone feels on an American street, it's reliably better than they'd feel locked up.

In the late 1700s, the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham codified the idea that the living conditions of people sentenced to punishment should be worse — "less eligible" — than those of their poor but free fellow citizens. A few decades later, 19th-century English workhouses put Bentham's cruel common sense into practice. Desperate people could enroll themselves to get free nutrition and a roof, but in exchange they had to suffer in other ways. Because the food and shelter in a workhouse were often better than what an independent laborer could afford, those "comforts" had to be counterbalanced, the thinking went.

Workhouse residents were separated from their families, forced to give up their possessions, and compelled to follow joyless routines. Anything better, and the state