

## **1. Introduction and Project Definition**

Peace is not the absence of violence, but the presence of justice. It is the steadfastness that enables people to move forward in a positive direction, in a society that will provide accountability without abandonment.

Today, it is estimated that about 20 million Americans<sup>1</sup> have felony criminal convictions. Incarceration disproportionately destabilizes low-income and minority communities by removing and isolating family members, increasing mental health risks for children and adults, eliminating economic security, and increasing crime rate<sup>2</sup>. A criminal record is a stigma that outlives a defendant's sentence, increasing the likelihood of recidivism and lowering chances of successful reintegration into society<sup>3</sup>.

The expungement of records for non-violent crimes is a meaningful way to address this issue. But tens of thousands of eligible Michiganders remain saddled with a criminal record even after many years of good behavior; it is estimated that only 6.5%<sup>4</sup> of those eligible actually obtain an expungement. The cause of this underutilization is twofold: lack of awareness and cost. This lack of awareness, which has only increased during the pandemic, places an unnecessary burden on incarcerated people to proactively clear their name through what should be an automatic process. Furthermore, the cost of expungement<sup>5</sup> is an immense obstacle to freedom and places individuals of lower socioeconomic status at the greatest disadvantage.

In 2020, Michigan enacted a new Clean Slate Michigan law<sup>5</sup>, which provides an automatic expungement of up to two non-violent felony convictions after ten years; reduces the period to apply for an expungement before the ten-year automatic expungement period runs; and streamlines the process for people with marijuana misdemeanors that would no longer be crimes following the drug's adult-use legalization in 2018. Studies show that the expungement of these criminal records allows for higher wages for returning citizens without negatively impacting public safety<sup>6</sup>. While this law carries hope of a fresh start for many people, the concern of underutilization and cost, particularly in minoritized communities, remains. The law goes into effect on April 10th of 2021, and it is imperative to initiate the expungement process shortly thereafter for as many people as possible.

## **2. Project Objectives & Activities**

The Washtenaw County Expungement Coalition annually hosts a free, in-person expungement clinic and subsequent program where eligible persons are guided through the expungement process, including forms, background checks, and fingerprinting from the Sheriff's Office. Legal Services of South Central Michigan provides a copy of the application; the information is sent to the Michigan state police department; the \$50 application filing fee is subsidized and follow-up attorney work is completed pro-bono by local attorneys. Unfortunately, the impact of this effort has historically been muted due to a lack of awareness and resources.

Our project aims to aid this coalition by spreading awareness and expanding their efforts to facilitate reintegration into society after incarceration. A critical piece of reintegration is a supportive social environment that practices equal opportunity and mercy. Our project would work to contribute to this supportive social environment. This contribution to peace, as previously defined, is three-fold:

1. We will support and contribute to Washtenaw County Expungement Coalition efforts to diminish the financial burden of the record expungement process, including subsidizing costs for: fingerprinting, application filing fee and associated fees for record expungement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Eberstadt, Nicholas. "America's Invisible Felon Population: A Blind Spot in US National Statistics." AEI Paper & Studies, The American Enterprise Institute, 2019, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> "U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Public Briefing: 'Collateral Consequences: The Crossroads of Punishment, Redemption and the Effects on Communities.'" Politics & Government Business, NewsRX LLC, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Adams, Ericka B., et al. "Erasing the Mark of a Criminal Past: Ex-Offenders' Expectations and Experiences with Record Clearance." Punishment & Society, vol. 19, no. 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 23–52, doi:10.1177/1462474516645688.

<sup>4</sup> Beth LeBlanc. "Whitmer Signs 'Clean Slate' Legislation Aiming to Expand Expungement Opportunities." Knight-Ridder/Tribune Business News, Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.american.edu/spa/jpo/toolkit/upload/barriers-to-employment-2-8-20.pdf>

## **Redemption Through Record Expungement: A Student-led Campaign Initiative**

### **Washtenaw County, Michigan, USA**

Peggy Randon, Katharine Boasberg, Ashley Hayes, University of Michigan

June – September 2021

2. We will work with partners to create a streamlined platform for incarcerated people to pre-register for expungement screenings and assistance, which will assess eligibility under the new law before coming in-person to the clinic. This will decrease the frustration and demoralization for people unsure of their eligibility status and provide time for them to plan productively for permanent reentry.
3. We will create targeted marketing for university students, especially with many students with criminal records eligible for expungement unable to pass background checks and engage in meaningful learning opportunities<sup>6</sup>. We will develop easy-to-understand flyers, yard signs, and self-help videos that explain the multi-bill package and garner community support.

### **3. Campus & Community Partners**

As representatives of the UM's Carceral State Project, Parole Preparation Project, and the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), we are solidifying partnerships with other campus and community organizations missioned to help those affected by the carceral state. Thus far, we have connected with the Washtenaw County Prosecutor, UM Law School, Criminal Law Society, Student Rights Project, UM School of Social Work, M-Mates, The Alba Project, Prison Birth Project, American Friends Service Committee, Humanity for Prisoners, and Washtenaw County Jail (Reentry Program directors and Learning Center). We are in direct contact with Project Clean Slate, a Detroit At Work and Law Department initiative, that provides free expungement screenings and resources to all City of Detroit residents, the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office, and the Washtenaw County Expungement Coalition. These collaborations will enable us to expand our connection to eligible individuals who can leverage our resources, and recruit volunteers as individuals and/or representatives of the organization.

In our conversations with potential partners, we are planning for this work to continue beyond the summer of 2021. To ensure project sustainability, we will be in regular communication with partners to continue planning for the expansion of the level of local accessibility for record expungement.

### **4. Timetable & Plans for Continuity**

*Preparation for Fieldwork: May 17 to June 18, 2021* We will continue working with current and potential partners, leverage their recommendations to establish a satellite office, and develop plans for publicizing our project to individuals eligible for record expungement.

*Fieldwork: June 21 to August 20, 2021* Fieldwork includes working with individuals eligible for record expungement and increasing accessibility to get their records expunged.

*Close Out: August 23 to September 19, 2021* We will close out existing cases, finalize drafts of reports and write-ups, and finalize the implementation of a clinic based out of Project Clean Slate and the Washtenaw County Expungement Coalition to sustain our project's purpose and efforts.

The project will be in collaboration with multiple prison-reform organizations who have been working to simplify the process for eligible incarcerated individuals. Our intended impact is to streamline the processes of record expungement from start to finish, and to make these peace efforts sustainable through providing financial support of reentry work and establishing networks of previously incarcerated individuals, who can serve as mentors and share advice about their successful reentry processes.

### **5. Our Team**

Peggy is a Microbiology major, who has led PCAP visual art workshops at Spectrum Juvenile Justice Services and SoundSmith Studios in her hometown of Detroit. Ashley is an Afroamerican and African Studies and Education major. As a Carceral State Project researcher and affiliate in various offices, programs, and organizations, she advocates for systemic reform in education and other everyday systems. Katharine is leading a new organization, Parole Preparation Project, and has implemented trauma-informed practices with youth through U-M's *Telling It* and PCAP.

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.communityalternatives.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/use-of-criminal-history-records-reconsidered.pdf>