Section I
The goal of my project was to empower local residents and catalyze positive change for the greater Englewood community by (1) providing educational workshops aimed to promote job retention and job readiness, and (2) fostering economic agency by providing legal guidance in expungement and sealing records. In doing so, this project sought to arm returning citizens with the tools necessary to jump the residual hurdles they faced from the criminal justice system after release.

For the past few years, I have been heavily involved within the sphere of criminal justice reform. One of the major ways I was engaged in this area was through the Northwestern Prison Education Program (NPEP). Within this organization, I was not only able to see the effects of the vicious cycle of mass incarceration, but also the power behind education, especially its capacity to promote stability after incarceration.

My perspective on the effects of mass incarceration was further expanded when I started interning for a legal nonprofit and had the opportunity to facilitate client transition into the community after release. During this internship, I was struck by the astronomical barriers of reentry that our clients faced. The economic issues did not disappear outside the prison walls—in fact, the harmful prison experience seemed to exacerbate the myriad concerns of returning citizens. Whether it was through the lack of alignment with community resources preventing stable return or additional obstacles of unemployment due to their criminal records, the obstacles were endless. Ultimately, through these experiences, I realized that one of the major steps in dismantling the toxic cycle of mass incarceration was the need to address the reentry problem and support returning citizens.

This reentry problem—affecting more than 600,000 Americans each year—stems from biased government and social policies that have disproportionately impacted communities of color. Although the government has spent almost $600 million in attempts to stop the cycle of incarceration, little has been invested in reentry initiatives, with 77 percent returning to incarceration within five years. So not only does this cycle of mass incarceration arise from systemic and structural disparities, but it also ensures that those leaving prison stay economically disenfranchised.

The tragic fact is that many overlook and underestimate the impact of issues that persist after incarceration. With the deleterious effects of incarceration inevitably bleeding into life after release, the scarcity of resources often takes a massive toll. Whether they end up back in prison, entrapped in the cycle of mass incarceration, or in their communities fighting hard to attain basic opportunities, it is no secret that ex-offenders are constantly and severely neglected—making it only that much more imperative to provide these populations greater care and attention.

I conducted my project with Teamwork Englewood, a nonprofit organization contracted by Chicago to be a reentry call center. Because it sits right in the middle of Englewood, a historically marginalized community that has high crime and unemployment rates, along with more than 2000 residents involved within the criminal justice system, I believed that this project could have the most positive impact at this site.

My hopes for this project did not fall short; working in Englewood was both eye-opening and enriching. Throughout the project, I had the privilege of meeting many amazing people and learning their stories. Each encounter I had allowed me to deepen and expand my understanding of the many obstacles that returning citizens face—constantly reminding me of why I was doing the project while also reaffirming my decision to choose Englewood as the site.
Throughout the project, I never had any doubts that it was going to work. However, I did have to incorporate many changes to the curriculum to better address issues that the returning citizens faced. For example, I had initially included lessons on financial literacy and conflict resolution. After getting feedback, I realized that many clients were primarily lacking more important skills, such as time management and workplace etiquette. From then on, I emphasized certain sections of the curriculum more.

As for communication, I did experience some issues with clients. Due to the structure of the project, we had scheduled three days each week for the workshops. These three sessions were meant to supplement each other and cover new content. However, I soon found that many clients who had committed to all three sessions or had come to previous sessions were unable to attend future sessions for various reasons. To encourage these clients to come to future sessions on what they had missed, I attempted to reach out. Sometimes, this was hard, but generally, after following up multiple times, I was able to contact them!

For me, there are two major components of peace. One that is often thought about is interpersonal peace, consisting of a state of stability and tranquility among people. This aspect of peace also includes cultural humility—realizing that the only way one will learn about others is through willingly listening and understanding them. The other component of peace encompasses feelings within oneself. Being at peace in this sense requires a level of empowerment and strength that allows people to be confident with who they are.

I believe these components of peace were addressed through the project this summer. This project was able to foster internal peace by giving Englewood residents the knowledge and power to be self-reliant. With the educational workshops, not only were they able to learn skills critical for their professional growth, but they were also able to grow as individuals with their newfound sense of self-assurance. Furthermore, the expungement and sealing-records workshops were able to improve employability and ensure that residents did not have to be concerned about wrongfully denied opportunities. In this sense, record clearing contributed to the first step of interpersonal peace, as it served as a stepping-stone to eliminate human judgment and stigma around incarceration. As for long-term goals, I see this project continuing to impact residents of the Englewood community through the same, consistent series of workshops.

My project was definitely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We had originally planned for the sessions to be all in person, but we ended up having to shift some workshops to an online format. Because some residents did not have access to certain technology and stable internet connection, this posed a problem of general inaccessibility. This was tough to navigate at first, but we invested in technology at the host site, making it easier for residents to participate.

This project significantly transformed the way I think about disparities in our communities and the roles of nonprofit organizations. I’ve learned that anyone has the power to inspire change, and that advocacy means addressing issues from multiple avenues and perspectives. Through this project, I not only grew to truly understand the residual effects of incarceration after release, but I was also able to see the immense impact education and laws have in shaping the health and peace of our communities.

“This project made me realize that knowledge is power—even more so for vulnerable populations like returning citizens. Through this opportunity, I was able to learn their stories, harness the power they hold, and advocate for change.” - Shreya Budhiraja
Section II