

My summer as an Intern Investigator with the Legal Aid Society did not change the way I saw the criminal justice system, but rather intensified those previous beliefs. Before this summer, I had never spent any time working with the criminal justice system in any capacity – the extent of my involvement in any kind of legal system was limited to my filing my taxes and conducting research on regulation for the Penn Law School, both of which were done from the comfort of my desk. But this summer forced me out of that comfort into communities and onto cases that seemed to belong to an entirely different world than mine. I always have considered myself passionate about social justice, especially as it manifests itself in the legal sense, and have wanted to attend law school to practice public interest law since the first day of my freshman year. This summer actually forced me to engage with what that vision looks like – not just what kinds of charges these are or what an actual courtroom looks like as opposed to ones on TV, but rather the kinds of people, social circumstances, and lack of access to opportunity that produces these cases in the first place. It was a sobering summer in that sense, insofar as I was daily forced to probe into extremely personal aspects of the lives of people for whom crime was more or less an accepted constant and, usually, the result of much darker constants, such as gangs or addiction or abuse. Consequently, I feel even more motivated than I did before to enter into public interest law, as that motivation is now coming from a much more visceral place, one grounded in my own experiences as opposed to my vague perceptions of others'. Of course, a few months spent working on these cases does not even approach what it is like to grow up in a community that is heavily policed and has high rates of crime, but I do feel that I have a much better sense of the kinds of things I formerly professed to care about with no firsthand experience. I am intensely grateful to the Legal Aid Society and to the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation for crucially allowing me outside my comfort zone and confirming what I want to dedicate my career to.