

American Civil Liberties Union's Human Rights Program, September-December 2015

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I was fortunate enough to spend nearly four months with the American Civil Liberties Union's Human Rights Program, generously funded by a bursary from the Human Rights Lawyers' Association.

The American Civil Liberties Union is the preeminent civil rights organization in America. Most of its work focuses on domestic civil rights advocacy and litigation, such as voting rights, immigrants' rights, criminal justice reform, and reproductive rights. The ACLU has been involved with every major US civil rights case in living memory, from *Obergefell v. Hodges*, last year's landmark equal marriage judgment, to *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended racially segregated schools), to *Roe v. Wade* (which upheld a woman's right to have an abortion).

A decade ago the ACLU set up its 'Human Rights Program' (HRP), a small but dynamic department that works both independently and with other ACLU departments to hold the US government to account for violations of international human rights law. No easy task. Louis Henkin famously commented that the US has a 'flying buttress' mentality to human rights, promoting human rights internationally but not engaging with them domestically.

At the HRP I worked on a project advocating for police reform, specifically police use of force against people with mental illnesses. The project looked at international human rights law standards on police use of force, and how the US could and should change its policing strategy to uphold those standards during interactions with mentally ill people.

As the HRP is a small department I was given significant responsibility. I liaised with the ACLU's disability rights, racial justice, and criminal justice programmes to devise a strategy for the project. I identified incidents where police used excessive force against mentally ill people. I identified police departments with bad track records but also identified police departments that had developed effective approaches to responding to individuals in mental health crisis. This involved conducting an assessment of the effectiveness of Crisis Intervention Training, a relatively new mental health training programme for officers that has seen some positive results. I also conducted a comparative study into how other countries train their police officers. I spoke to experts in Canada, the UK, and across Europe to assess the effectiveness of policing strategies to respond to people in mental health crisis.

There were some obvious overlaps between this advocacy project and the Black Lives Matter movement. A disproportionate number of victims of police excessive use of force are black men. There is also evidence that a disproportionate number of black people, particularly those living in indigent areas, do not receive proper mental health treatment and are at increased risk of suffering from mental health crises. Working on the project made me appreciate the importance of an intersectional approach to discrimination, which I will continue to apply in my career in the UK.

Working on the project inspired me to look more closely at police use of force against mentally ill people in the UK. I submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the Home Office for the statistics on police use of Tasers against mentally ill people in England & Wales. The results were quite alarming- [2/3rds of people Tasered by the police are identified as mentally ill](#). [The Independent on Sunday](#) published the findings, which prompted a debate on police Taser policy in the UK.

I was also very lucky to be part of the HRP's team that went to the Human Rights Council in Geneva during the US government's response to its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in September sat in on meetings between civil society and Mark Harper, the US Ambassador to the Human Rights Council, and met delegates from a wide range of human rights organizations, from Human Rights Watch to a group advocating for the rights of the Kingdom of Hawaii. The session with the US ambassador

My experience at the ACLU was a very positive one. I worked with and learnt from some of the best civil rights lawyers in the US, and I plan to continue working on issues involving police and mental health in the UK. I am grateful for being given this opportunity and I recommend everyone eligible and interested in working on human rights issues applies for a Human Rights Lawyers Association bursary.