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2025 IHRP Summer Fellowship: Final Report

This summer, I had the privilege of working as an In-House Fellow with the International Human Rights Program (IHRP).

Throughout my first year at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law, I was drawn to the IHRP's mission and advocacy, which spans corporate accountability, Indigenous rights, and climate justice. My role as an In-House Fellow allowed me to bridge my passions for social justice and international human rights with solid work experience in the field. I developed my legal research and writing skills, connected with communities directly affected by human rights abuses, and met a network of incredible international human rights lawyers. These experiences expanded my perception of how a law degree can be used, and cracked open a new world of legal advocacy that I hope to explore further as a future lawyer.

Our Primary Project: US Prison Labour

Though the summer fellows worked on several interesting projects in our term with the IHRP, our primary focus was on US prison labour. We investigated how goods made using US prison labour are quietly making their way into Canadian supply chains, despite clear import bans against forced and prison labour. This project is extremely topical when considering the evolving trade relationship between Canada and the US, tariff threats, and pressure from the US to prevent goods made using forced labour in China's Xinjiang region from entering North America. Despite this concerted effort, a glaring blind spot remains: prison labour within the US itself. Products tainted by exploitative practices are making their way across the border in a process that appears to be largely unchecked.

Relying on publicly available information, we identified goods linked to US forced and/or prison labour that appear to be entering Canada despite the import bans. Our report aims to begin pulling back the veil on these potentially unlawful imports and draw attention to how Canada's economy is entangled with one of the most exploitative forms of labour in the modern world.

Alabama Archives

A highlight from my summer fellowship was travelling to Alabama to witness first-hand how exploitative the prison labour system truly is. While in Birmingham, we met with several community organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Jobs to Move America, and the Centre for Constitutional Rights — all of whom are advocating for more protections for incarcerated workers. Most importantly, we spoke directly to individuals who had worked in the prison system, hearing their lived experiences of coercion, dangerous working conditions, and a cycle of parole denial, despite not being deemed a threat to their communities or themselves.

We also attended a parole board hearing in Montgomery (Alabama is one of the only states where incarcerated individuals are not allowed to attend their own hearings or advocate for themselves), which mirrored the information we heard in our meetings. Some individuals were incarcerated for years over non-violent crimes like marijuana possession, and were consistently denied parole. Organizations like the

Equal Justice Initiative and the Southern Poverty Law Clinic have reported on the sharp decline in parole grants, coupled with the racial inequalities among grantees, to spotlight a flawed system that directly ties into our work on prison labour. [Last summer, over 86% of parole applicants who were assigned to work release facilities were denied parole](#), according to data gathered by the ACLU of Alabama over a 10-week window.



The U of T fellows in Montgomery, Alabama, for a parole board hearing.

Many incarcerated workers would spend their days working for private companies who had partnerships with Alabama prisons — ranging from fast food restaurants to auto suppliers and manufacturing companies — where human rights abuses were prominent. Employers have almost complete control over incarcerated workers, who are not legally considered employees under relevant US legislation. Because of this, minimum wage standards and protection from discrimination, along with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), do not apply to incarcerated workers.

At a community support group for formerly incarcerated individuals, we attempted to explain why we had come to Alabama to investigate prison labour.

“We didn’t plan to focus on Alabama, but all roads seemed to lead us here,” we said.

“Almost all roads here lead to prison,” said a support group member.

His words, concise and poetic, perfectly encapsulated what we had found in our research. Prison labour developed from systems of slavery and convict leasing, evolving into a multibillion-dollar empire that sustains many state economies. No state illustrates the model of mass incarceration and prison labour the way Alabama does. Prisons in Alabama are disproportionately Black, and incarcerated workers often toil under harsh conditions without any worker protections. It was a radically different experience to connect with communities about their lived experiences, than to solely approach the issue from a theoretical, research-based lens. It was this experience that felt the most fulfilling to me, reminding me of the real impact that international human rights law can catalyze.



Art at the Offender Alumni Association community support group in Birmingham.

Barbecue & Bonding

The Alabama experience was meaningful primarily because of the work we were doing, but it also afforded me the opportunity to bond with the IHRP team — trying Southern barbecue, visiting Alabama landmarks, and experiencing the culture of the deep South. Some of my highlights include the incredible food we tried, especially the bread pudding and collard greens, and the dinner conversation debriefs about our days.



An iconic bread pudding, Ted's restaurant, and classic Alabama barbecue.

United Nations CRPD Advocacy

In addition to the advocacy we did on US prison labour, I was also able to support projects that align with my passions and interests. Building upon my interest in women's rights and reproductive rights, I supported the IHRP by conducting research on how reproductive and neonatal care have been violated in current incidents of war and war crimes. I also was fortunate enough to collaborate with another In-House Fellow to prepare a submission to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) for their upcoming session. This is the kind of work I had always dreamed of collaborating on, and to be a small part of such important advocacy at this stage in my legal career was very rewarding.

