Reflection on 2018 Summer as a Research Assistant at the College of Law:

When I started my 2018 summer employment with the College of Law, and before I began working for four months on access to justice topics, my understanding of accessible justice was very rudimentary. I knew access to justice included the financial difficulties that many face in order to hire their own lawyer, as well as the way that legal text is written and the confusing nature of ‘legalese’. As my summer work progressed, however, I began to realize that access to justice runs much deeper and really gets to the core of both community and individual states of health.

‘Social determinants of justice’[[1]](#footnote-1) as they are called, are those that affect not only our day-to-day lives, but also shape our interactions with the justice system itself. There are a variety of these social determinants, including: one’s own mental health and the prevalence of mental illness, prevalence of addictions, social development (such as availability and affordability of gym memberships and rec halls), victim services, and support when actually *interacting* with the justice system. For those living healthy lifestyles, such as working out, eating healthy, a strong familial support structure, and living in a healthy community, the chances of interacting with the justice system will decrease. This is a ‘strong’ case of accessibility to justice, even though there is no mention of the affordability of a lawyer. On the other hand, for those struggling with food security, in a community where crime is more prevalent, and where there are limited opportunities for productive leisure time (no pool tables, rec halls, sports, etc.), there will be a ‘weak’ case of accessible justice.

The ability to afford a lawyer is often on the far end in the access to justice ‘spectrum’. On the other end of this spectrum, we find food security, social programs, and familial structure. It is important to understand and keep in mind that access to justice involves much more than having an accessible court room and legal counsel. It is affected by our own ability to lead a healthy lifestyle, and the social supports that are in place to help us lead a life of minimal interactions with the law. It is no wonder that marginalized and disadvantaged people, unfortunately, interact with the law much more than high-income earners ever will.

-Mason Stott

1. Ryan Meili, “Stopping crime upstream: the social determinants of justice,” *upstream*, accessed August 14, 2018, http://www.thinkupstream.net/sdoh\_justice. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)