I interned this summer for the National Advocates for Pregnant women located in New York City. Becoming part of an office culture of social justice-minded lawyers was really a great experience. There were 3 other interns in the office and they were all currently law students. I learned so much about how the law works being in that environment surrounded by such intelligent and thoughtful women. Everyone in the NAPW office was very friendly and approachable. I learned a lot from assisting the different staff members with their projects. One woman I worked with was an NAPW Board Member and professor. She was working on the final stages of a forthcoming book and I helped complete the Index of terms for the end notes section. I ended up reading and re-reading the comprehensive notes and learned a ton of interesting information.

Another woman was the primary lawyer working to finish a huge report documenting the hundreds of stories of women being arrested for reasons relating to their pregnancies. Everyone in the office kept saying that women were getting arrested because they were pregnant and at first that idea was not clear to me. Soon I realized, however, that pregnant women were specifically being targeted for the harshest penalties for using drugs. Most cases are about women who either used drugs or were suspected of using drugs but there are also different cases concerning abortion, breastfeeding and court-ordered caesarian sections. I learned a ton about the issues that NAPW addresses by simply reading through some of the files. This was one of my favorite parts because the files included press clippings about the women and court transcripts of their trials and
other interesting details.

It was a good introduction to their work because I could see what cases were consistently being brought and against whom. Most of the women are African American and nearly all of them are poor. The hospitals did not have a written policy to test all pregnant women for drugs but they used their biased judgment to test the women they found “suspicious.” Suspicious women include those who don’t have adequate or any pre-natal care, which given the state of healthcare in this country means poor women - who are disproportionately women of color. It was clear from newspaper articles that were included in the files that these women were also being targeted based on racist myths regarding the existence of “crack babies” and “meth babies.”

I had the opportunity read a lot of court cases and briefs to familiarize myself with the specifics of major decisions as well as to better understand the general logic and format of legal documentation. I’ve written some summaries of both cases and briefs to update the database as well as to get a feel for legal writing.

Another ongoing project was finding news articles relating to the work that NAPW does, specifically incidences of women being arrested for reasons relating to their pregnancy. The legal interns contacted the lawyer assigned to the women’s cases (almost all qualify for public defenders) and offered them information, guidance and general support in defending these women. This is important because often the defenders are not aware of the specific laws pertaining to these issues and most women plea down to a lesser charge even though the prosecution does not have a strong (or any) case. Providing this support is one of the main purposes of NAPW.
I compiled a list of organizations that would potentially sign on to future amicus briefs regarding the public-health implications of arresting and incarcerating pregnant women. My task was to think of creative connections between different movements and get contact information for the organizations. A few people from NAPW were invited to attend a pre-release screening of an independent film called “America the Beautiful.” Although the film was highly problematic [!] another intern and I attended a networking reception after and talked to other NYC women’s organizations about NAPW’s work. The most interesting connection we made was with a woman who runs eating disorder treatment centers. As soon as we said we were from NAPW she said, “Do you want to know something about pregnant women?!” and, of course, we did. She told us that for many women becoming pregnant can be a turning point for seeking help with their eating disorders because they want to be healthy for their babies. Interestingly, pregnancy is also a time when women reach out for help with their addictions. I have never thought of this before but it is the kind of connection that NAPW is looking for when searching for potential allies in their work.

Although it was fine to be working in an office, I realized that I probably want to work somewhere that is more community organizing based where I can interact and form relationships. This work, while I recognize how tremendously important it is, seems to be rather removed from the people we are advocating for.

I really loved the people that I was working with and having intense debates with the other interns about difficult issues. I also enjoyed going on little weekly field trips to other organizations in the city to see what they were working on or to have discussions about pressing social and reproductive justice issues.
I spent a lot of time synthesizing information and making connections between other social justice issues and realized more than ever that every issue is connected. The main skill I developed in this internship was learning how to discuss the very contentious and nuanced issues that NAPW deals with. Discussing the fact that arresting women because they were pregnant is unconstitutional is sometimes surprisingly hard for people to get on board with. I found that when I told people where I worked and what NAPW does the most frequent response was “But crack is bad for babies!” Most people I know have “learned” so much incorrect and unscientific information about drugs and alcohol. Figuring out how to handle very defensive and outraged responses was an ongoing process.

I would have liked to actually do the NYC RRASC intern lunches that I heard were very successful last year. It seemed that once the summer started everything went so quickly and it was hard to pick up the project of organizing all the different internship sites. I think that would be great but might need to be arranged at the very beginning to accommodate scheduling issues.

My academic interest in intersectional analysis was very important for understanding the work the NAPW does. The field of American Studies borrows heavily from U.S and world history, women’s studies, sociology, literature, cultural anthropology, etc. Through American Studies methodology I’ve learned that no matter what you are studying you can’t really understand the topic or issue without situating it in the broader cultural context.

The organization brought together many issues that I am interested in. I have studied issues regarding the prison-industrial complex, War on Drugs, Prejudice against
poor women and women of color and it connected them with other reproductive justice issues like the right to choose an abortion, to have a home birth and to refuse a cesarean section, and generally when, where and how you want to reproduce.

I’m not sure what my larger career goals are going to end up being but working with NAPW definitely put going to law school on my list of possibilities. I learned however that I definitely want to be in an organization though that has more direct interaction with the people who are using their services.

At first I did not really know what to expect from the organization. I was not even sure what the major issues facing pregnant were and how they were connected to other issues. This internship ended up being an invaluable experience for me. NAPW’s work addresses all the ways that women’s bodily integrity is being taken away, from limiting access to abortion, being unable to choose to have a home birth, or being targeted for being poor and non-white.

I had a really great time working with NAPW this summer and I hope that the RRASC program continues to send interns to the organization. Thank you for the opportunity to intern there.