**Headline:** This Chicago Community Envisions a World Without Prisons and Police

**Teaser:** The #LetUsBreathe Collective offers a hub for art, activism, and healing to those impacted by mass incarceration.

By Damon Orion

**Author Bio:** Damon Orion is a writer, journalist, musician, artist, and teacher in Santa Cruz, California. His work has appeared in Revolver, Guitar World, Spirituality + Health, Classic Rock, High Times, and other publications. Read more of his work at [DamonOrion.com](https://damonorion.com/).

**Source:** Local Peace Economy

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Local Peace Economy*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/)*.*

**Tags:** Social Justice, Activism, Community, Food, United Nations, North America/United States of America, Opinion

**[Article Body:]**

Often referred to as the most segregated city in the U.S. by media outlets like [WBEZ Chicago](https://www.wbez.org/race-class-communities/2023/06/19/chicago-remains-the-most-segregated-big-city-in-america) and [14East](http://fourteeneastmag.com/index.php/2023/11/03/americas-most-segregated-city-how-covenants-and-other-policies-made-modern-chicago/), Chicago, Illinois, is riddled with [redlining](https://interactive.wbez.org/2020/banking/disparity/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=sendto_localnewslettertest&stream=top) and [racial profiling](https://abc7chicago.com/chicago-police-traffic-stops-racial-profiling-black-driver/14454575/). A May 2024 [report](https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28835) by a team of United Nations experts outlined a history of racist police brutality in the Chicago area, while a 2019 New York University School of Medicine study [found](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2019/06/06/chicagos-lifespan-gap-streeterville-residents-live-to-90-englewood-residents-die-at-60-study-finds-its-the-largest-divide-in-the-us/) that Chicagoans in the [predominantly white](https://www.niche.com/places-to-live/n/streeterville-chicago-il/residents/) neighborhood of [Streeterville](https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/Illinois/Chicago/Streeterville/Race-and-Ethnicity#google_vignette) live an average of 30 years longer than the residents of the [largely Black](https://www.niche.com/places-to-live/n/englewood-chicago-il/residents/) neighborhood of Englewood. [The Chicago Sun-Times](https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/6/7/18656669/life-expectancy-chicago-segregation-streeterville-englewood-health-care) and [journalist Linda Villarosa](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/27/magazine/life-expectancy-racial-gap.html) have attributed this disparity to segregation, disinvestment, and exploitative government-sanctioned policies.

The Prison Policy Initiative [notes](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/IL.html) that “With [an incarceration rate of 433 per 100,000 residents [as of July 2024],](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2024.html) Illinois locks up a higher percentage of its people than almost any democratic country on earth.” [Most](https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/illinois.html) of the state’s prisoners are Chicago residents. Meanwhile, Black Illinois residents “[are incarcerated](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/IL.html#:~:text=Black%20people%20in%20Illinois%20are,over%20the%20age%20of%2055.) at a rate [7.5 times higher](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/09/27/updated_race_data/#compare) than white people.”

The Civic Federation [reported](https://civicfed.org/node/4249#:~:text) a nearly $2 billion budget for the Chicago Police Department (CPD) for the 2024 fiscal year. It further noted that the CPD budget “has grown steadily over the years to keep up with increases in personnel costs. CPD appropriations within the Corporate Fund have increased by nearly 40 percent since 2018.”

A group comprising artists and activists in the Chicago region called the [#LetUsBreathe Collective](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/) (#LUBC) is imagining what the world would look like if those investments were rechanneled into efforts like healing, organizing, and creating.

“By bridging creative placemaking and community-led mutual aid, we are able to provide an access point for those who are most impacted by mass incarceration and invite them into dialogue about what an abolitionist future looks like,” the group’s website [states](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/model).

The collective’s [vision](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/about-us) is “a world without police, without prisons, and without global systems of oppression.” The group nurtures artists, who are seen as being at the forefront of this revolution, to work on “imagining and designing that world.”

#LUBC operates out of the #BreathingRoom, a 4,000-square-foot space in south Chicago where the collective [combines](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/our-story) “solidarity work with anti-capitalist, abolitionist artistic production.” The #BreathingRoom’s amenities include a community garden, greenhouse, pond, farm, apothecary, and recording studio.

“When people come to this space, it seems like a little fortress—a little Black town and school that nobody knows about,” says E’mon Lauren, #LUBC’s co-director. “You’d kind of miss it if you drove by it.”

#LUBC was formed in 2014 to support uprisings around police officer Darren Wilson’s killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. “Most of us were artists and educators and suddenly found ourselves in the world of community organizing,” the group’s website [notes](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/our-story). “Some of us were already activists, longing for a community to explore new ideas around liberation.”

In 2016, the organization [created](https://www.chicagoreporter.com/video-welcome-to-freedom-square/) an encampment called Freedom Square for protesters of Homan Square, a Chicago police facility that the Guardian [described](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/19/homan-square-chicago-police-disappeared-thousands) as “an off-the-books interrogation warehouse” where detainees—82.2 percent of whom were Black—were tortured. During this 41-day occupation, Freedom Square “grew into a community laboratory for police abolition and divestment,” [according](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/our-story) to #LUBC’s site. “Freedom Square was built on the principle that the resources necessary to keep communities safe are: restorative justice, education, employment, housing, mental health and physical wellness, addiction treatment, access to nutritional food, and art.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the uprisings of the early 2020s, the collective started a “micro-commission program” called the [Stimulus Package for Humanity](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/post/2020/03/23/stimulus-package-for-humanity-open-call-for-submissions) under which creatives were asked to come up with content “at the intersection of justice and pandemic.”

The pandemic also saw the launch of #LUBC’s largest initiative, the #EverybodyEats food justice program, which provided nourishment and shelter for mutual aid groups like [Farm, Food, Familias](https://www.gettinggrowncollective.com/farmfoodfamilias) and the [South Side Food Distribution Network](https://www.fox32chicago.com/video/737010).

As #LUBC’s site [notes](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/programs), #EverybodyEats continues to distribute food “to combat hunger in our communities and support local community events, public actions, and citywide mutual aid efforts. We have built a team of farmers, culinary artists, and volunteer gardeners [who]… responsibly steward one acre of land and cook nourishing meals for the community. Through this program, we seek to build power, food sovereignty, and Black liberatory models of sustainability in our communities.”

Lauren notes that #LUBC also provides a space for art as a healing and community-building source. “What I do as co-director is bring creative programming to this space,” she explains. This includes paid youth apprenticeships, creative writing programs, and an abolitionist healing clinic called Soul Service.

Curated and facilitated by [NurturHer](https://www.instagram.com/nurturher/) and [TBanks](https://www.instagram.com/tbanksmultis/?hl=en), Soul Service focuses on mental and physical healing and self-care, especially “[for Black and Indigenous folks](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/programs).” Lauren says participants learn “self-defense moves in [case] they come into confrontation with the police or any kind of violent situation.” The program also includes sliding-scale reiki clinics, lessons in nervous system regulation, and tea parties with partner [Freedom Fighter Herbs](https://dirtandfree.world/freedomfighterherbs) that impart methods of healing oneself through the body and mind.

Lauren also facilitates the summer program Pod Squad, whose teaching artists help five youth apprentices develop artistic portfolios. “Having so many new, young, fresh faces in this space—that’s about generational work,” she says. “It continues even after we [are no longer here].”

Meanwhile, the [#BreathingRoom Event Series](https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/programs) provides a forum for performers, scholars, activists, and healers “to build coalitions, raise consciousness, and support healing among artists, activists, and neighbors most directly impacted by mass incarceration,” the website states.

Lauren glows as she describes the #BreathingRoom. “It’s lit up and gorgeous, from our farm to garden to all of our community partners who break bread here and make herbs and potions upstairs in our apothecary.”