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Writing Across the Social Sciences

Soc. 4950-01

Fall 2020

Disposable Population

"The mood and temper of the public with regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country."¹

— Winston Churchill (1874-1965)

The prison-industrial complex is structurally incapable of social distancing, and prison inmates, especially those with pre-existing health conditions, cannot evade the crosshairs of this sharpshooting virus. Over 125,000 prisoners in the U.S. have been infected, and more than 1,000 have died.² These numbers are projected to surge now that the second wave is upon us. Fortunately, a vaccine is promising. However, the potential for inequities in its distribution are high for this particular demographic, considering this new Jim Crow era of mass incarceration which suggests that prison inmates are disposable populations.

¹ Frankel, Martin E., *Criminal Sentences: Law Without Order* 9 (1973).

² Cahon, Eli. *From the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences: Ethical or exploitive — should prisoners participate in COVID-19 vaccine trials?* Sept. 14, 2020. p. 1.

History demonstrates the clandestine bestialization of prisoners; experiments on the incarcerated include deliberately infecting them with diseases, not limited to gonorrhea, syphilis, chancroid, and testicular implants in Guatemala, and San Quentin, respectively, in addition to the Nazis counterfeit research on prisoners in Germany.³ White supremacy—as usual—has facilitated these racialized human rights violations. Thankfully, prison inmates are now fortunate to have advocates, especially for prioritizing their vaccination.

Lauren Brinkley-Rubinstein, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and George Annas, a lawyer and bioethicist at Boston University, both suggest that prisoners should be first to receive the vaccine.⁴ However, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine proposes that prisoners "get vaccinated after health care workers, but before the general population,"⁵ which appears to be a healthy and compelling compromise since prisoners are quarantined from society but are regularly exposed to transmission through the influx of correction officers, staff, and visitors. When COVID-19 enters a prison it bolsters its thuggish reputation indiscriminately. Frontline medical personnel in the prison system are additionally threatened by

³ Ibid. p. 2.

⁴ Ibid. p. 1.

⁵ Ibid. p. 4.

way of employment, which warrants their vaccination a top priority; they are a prison's firewall during this global pandemic. Furthermore, inclusion and diversity must guide vaccine distribution to ensure that everyone has access regardless of race, gender identity, or immigration status. High risk groups should be next in line, which includes the elderly, people with pre-existing conditions, and prisoners. COVID-19 should not be a death sentence for the incarcerated!