Chillicothe Federal Reformatory Study Background Information

Dr. Albert B. Sabin, a scientist at the University of Cincinnati, developed a vaccine to help prevent the spread of poliomyelitis, a disease that causes fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, stiffness, and can lead to paralysis.\(^1\) In the early 1950’s, approximately 60,000 cases of polio were reported in the United States, and almost 3,000 deaths occurred each year.\(^2\)

During the mid-1950’s, Dr. Sabin began testing attenuated (weakened) virus strains of the poliovirus on prisoners in the federal reformatory in Chillicothe, Ohio.\(^3\) Volunteers for this experiment were given $25 and promised free days.\(^4\) A total of 30 men, all consenting adults, were chosen for this study.\(^5\)

**The Federal Reformatory, Chillicothe, Ohio\(^6\)**

“The Federal Reformatory at Chillicothe, Ohio is the outgrowth of a dawning recognition on the part of those concerned with the treatment of criminals that imprisonment should reform as well as punish. […] [T]he reformatory plan reflected a further awakening of social conscience and a practical acknowledgment that young offenders might be prevented from becoming habitual criminals if an effort were made to improve their attitudes and train them in useful occupations.”\(^7\)

**Prison Statistics/ Information**

- Average age when entering – 19 years old
- Between 1100 and 1200 male inmates
- Live in dormitory style quarters
- Average grade level – 5.9 (majority left school at 9th or 10th grade)
- Have opportunities to become better educated, learn “earning skills,” and earn wages and “good time credits”
- Prisoners have access to 70 bed hospital
- Research projects carried out at prison by United States Public Health Service. Prisoners can volunteer to participate in experiments and studies
- Prisoners are rarely religious when entering the prison, but have access to chaplains
- Between 3000 and 4000 meals are prepared every day

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\(^6\) Prison statistics were taken from the pamphlet: United States. Bureau of Prisons. *The Federal Reformatory, Chillicothe, Ohio*. Washington: Bureau of Prisons, Department of Justice, [1954]. The Albert B. Sabin Archives has a copy of this pamphlet in Series – Oral Poliovirus Vaccine, Subseries – Studies, Box 17, Folder 8 – Chillicothe (Ohio) Tests, 1954. Please contact chhp@uc.edu for more information about pamphlet.

\(^7\) Ibid., 1.