Worksheet 3. 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, Ohio6

“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

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 chlp@uc.edu for more information about pamphlet.
7 Ibid.,1.

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