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## Prison Labor, Human Experimentation, & The BP Oil Disaster

By Zannie Carlson

Amidst the myriad of corporate responsibility and ethics controversies that arose from the BP oil spill, one issue recently reported by *The Nation* that I find particularly compelling is that BP hired [prison labor to clean up the spill](#).

Some individuals outside of the prison system may argue that prison labor programs encourage strong work ethics, ties to community, and values that may contribute to deterrence. I have also heard the argument that because prisoners are consuming government resources while being imprisoned that they might as well contribute to society in some way before getting out. Although the health effects of daily exposure to crude oil is fairly unknown, the fact that "[the chemicals in crude oil can damage every system in the body, as well as cell structures and DNA](#)" suggests that corrections agencies should consider the impact of prison labor on prisoners, rather than corporate bottom lines. It almost goes without saying that the majority of prisoners are individuals who are marginalized in society, who are disproportionately non-white and poor, with already limited access to healthcare before incarceration.

The American penal system has a long history of using prisoners' bodies for [research purposes](#) or [profit](#). Ironically, several months after the publication of *The Nation*'s BP article published in late July, the US government officially [apologized](#) to Guatemala for implementing a [Tuskegee](#)-like experiment on Guatemalan prisoners, in which officials intentionally infected prisoners with syphilis in the name of scientific progress.

Urban studies professor, Allen M. Hornblum's book, [Acres of Skin: Human Experiments at Holmesburg](#), details human experimentation in a prison where mostly topical products were tested on prisoners. Although some commentators, including a [review](#) in *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, emphasize that prisoners ultimately consent, clearly prisoners' consent is not fully voluntarily as it is constrained by state power. I guess it makes you think twice about the "no animals have been tested" label on the shampoo bottle when prisoners have been there and done that, with about equal opportunity to object.

Likewise, in terms of the BP clean-up and current "work programs," Louisiana prisoners who choose not to work release programs are punished by being assigned to work with toxic chemicals, like oil, as "[\[i\]nmates can't pick and choose their work assignments and they face considerable repercussions for rejecting any job, including loss of earned "good time."](#)" The increased probability that offenders who do get an opportunity to re-enter society with compromised health or fatally-ill condition should give us pause. Is this the kind of "rehabilitation" we want from our criminal justice system? What kind of life are we establishing for them for re-entry? If our goal is to disempower people, then, we've done our work.

Posted by The Modern American at [2:22 PM](#)