

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Last Look

No Exit

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LAST LOOK

IMAGES THAT INSPIRE



Freedom sometimes means entering an inferno. For inmate firefighters, walls of concrete are replaced by fire. The agony of the inmate firefighter's expression betrays an inescapable feeling of exchanging one prison for another. As the world's climate scientists continue to warn us of the dire consequences of global warming, including a documented increase in wildfires, climate change is revealing new ways of how little we invest in and value humanity. Inmates in the California prison system have been fighting fires since before World War II; currently, there are about 4,000 inmate firefighters in the state. Yet, only recently have they become touchstones of a national conversation about the prison industrial complex. Capitalizing on the loophole of the US Constitution's 13th Amendment—the unpaid labor of incarcerated people—means that

No Exit

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JOSH EDELSON,
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at \$2 a day, firefighter jobs, which provide a respite from stifling concrete conditions, are highly coveted by inmates and are worth the risk of injury and death, despite paying a fraction of what is earned by professional firefighters. According to data acquired by *Time* magazine through the Freedom of Information Act, inmate firefighters suffer injuries at four times the rate of professional firefighters; from 2013 to 2018, more than 1,000 inmate firefighters required hospital care. Considering the historical foundations of the US prison system in racism and slavery—recent statistics, for example, show that the percentages of black and Latino men in prison are nearly twice those of their respective demographic populations—what the images of inmate firefighters expose is how systemic oppressions are compounded when multiple forms of injustice collide. —MARCIE BIANCO