Inquality, justice, and human rights

Objectives

- Define the digital poorhouse
- Identify government programs utilizing computational tools to administer social welfare programs
- Assess government's goals in deploying these programs
- Analyze the disparate impact these programs have on the population
- Identify disadvantaged groups most effected by these programs and assess the intersectionality of the most at-harm groups
- Discuss methods for utilizing computational tools to administer social welfare programs in a fair and equitable manner

Assigned readings

- Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. St. Martin's Press.

Optional readings

- Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. NYU Press.
- O'neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. Broadway Books.

Response paper prompt

Virginia Eubanks's *Automating Inequality* showcases numerous inequities in high-tech approaches to distributing government benefits, namely their systematic discrimination against the poor and distadvantaged. Many of these systems are designed in an effort to operate within a constrained set of resources and capabilities for government agencies, yet even those with the best of intentions (such as the Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth and Families [CYF]) fall prey to these inequities. Eubanks suggests the solution lies not with technological approaches, but instead with a fundamental shift in how government thinks about and acts on poverty. Regrettably such a shift requires a massive social change which may not come in the United States for many years.

Consider the goals and responsibilities of government bureaucrats such as those in CYF. They do not have the ability to substantially alter government policies, but instead are charged with implementing them in a way as to maximize their limited resources and enable the greatest good. How should they consider the usage of technological approaches in their work, even with the potential harm inflicted on the poor? Think back to many of the theories of ethics we discussed in the first week. What is the ethical role of data-driven decisionmaking in administering government programs?