J.D. Vance, White Supremacy and the Public's Health

Racism, xenophobia and stigma—exemplified by false claims about Haitian immigrants spreading HIV—are detrimental to public health.

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After the debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President J. Donald Trump on September 10, Taylor Swift endorsed Harris for the 2024 election on Instagram. Swift signed her endorsement as "Childless Cat Lady," mocking Trump's running mate, Senator J.D. Vance from Ohio, who went viral last month when a video resurfaced of him on Fox News joking that "childless cat ladies" lead the Democratic Party. Swift's endorsement of Harris will engage large swaths of young voters concerned about LGBTQ and reproductive rights. Vance's unserious engagement with memes about pets not only poses political costs, but it also poses serious threats to the public's health.

During an interview with CNN's Kaitlin Collins in the spin room after the debate, Vance amplified a false and racist claim that Haitian migrants eat the pets of local residents in Springfield, Ohio. In that same interview, Vance amplified a second false and racist claim that new cases of HIV have surged because of migrants who "ravaged" the local community. Vance said that "communicable diseases, like HIV and TB, have skyrocketed in this small Ohio town. This is what Kamala Harris' border policies have done." These mistruths aired on national television against a backdrop of Trump previously calling Haiti and African nations "shithole" countries. City officials in Springfield, Ohio, journalists and fact-checkers debunked these claims and clarified that no evidence for them exists. Haitian parents worry about sending their children to classrooms after public schools and offices in Springfield received bomb threats.

We write as queer scholar-activists who know all too well the dangerous consequences of racism, xenophobia and stigma on the public's health. Attacks on Asian American and Pacific Islander communities in the United States increased after Trump called COVID-19 the "China virus." Travel bans and discrimination in employment, housing and health care prevented an adequate response to HIV and AIDS, which researchers first labeled as "Gay-Related Immune Deficiency." Stigma about tuberculosis limits access to health care services for prevention, testing and treatment. At the start of the mpox outbreak in 2022, queer and trans New Yorkers were called "monkeypox" while commuting on sidewalks. False and racist claims from Trump and Vance about serious threats to the public's health, like COVID-19, HIV and TB, became even more worrisome as the World Health Organization and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention declared

mpox a public health emergency last month.

The authors do not assert that the Biden-Harris administration has a perfect record on matters of public health. With dozens of queer and trans scholar-activists, we established Rapid Epidemiologic Study of Prevalence, Network, and Demographics of Mpox Infection (RESPND-MI), a project that, in part, developed briefs to help improve city, state and federal public health agencies' response to the virus in 2022. This administration was slow to release much needed vaccines to prevent mpox during the prior public health emergency. If elected, Harris must correct this record on public health with policy changes.

This concern is not just about hurt feelings about the response to mpox on the part of queer activists. It is about the stigma that prevents the government from devoting resources for care to vulnerable populations, like migrants. It is about not allowing cowards to have someone to bully, targeting violence against marginalized communities.

The 2024 election is a vote for health and human rights because white supremacy is on the ticket again at the ballot box. We must imagine public health that is resourced and researched, not one that is guided by fear mongering, political power, white supremacy and misinformation.

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