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"Eugenic" Sterilizations in the United States in the 20th Century: A Comparative Analysis.

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Abstract

"Eugenics," once defined as the science of improving the hereditary qualities of a nation, led to the sterilization of at least 70,000 individuals in the United States. Thirty-two states had eugenic sterilization laws; however, few comparative analyses of the similarities and differences among states in the U.S. exist. My research presents such an analysis, focusing on the sterilization programs of California, Virginia, North Carolina, Minnesota, and Iowa. It identifies the context in which eugenic sterilization programs emerged, the demographic profile of their victims, the infrastructure of state hospitals and asylums that served as “feeder” institutions to state eugenics boards, as well as how the sterilization programs and their victims have been remembered in these states.

Slide 2: Before sterilization laws were enacted, a variety of family studies had been carried out. Over time, the studies tended to focus increasingly on traits that were believed to be passed on biologically from one generation to the next

Slide 3: The family studies informed a biological – eugenic model of intergenerational transmission of disability and deviance

Slide 4: “Positive Eugenics” – improving the hereditary stock by encouraging better breeding; here: winner, “fitter families” contest and evaluation form to account for “defects”

Compare to “negative eugenics” focused on preventing unfit from reproducing

Slide 5: Comparison between U.S. state eugenic laws and Nazi sterilization laws

Slide 6: Sterilization patterns, in CA: early onset, steady, petered out in the early 1950; MN: onset later, jumped in the early 1930s, then continued until early 1950s

Slide 7: VA: even later onset, steady, last much longer, all the way until 1970s

Slide 8: IA, GA, NC: late start, almost acceleration after WWII and in early 1950

Slide 9: Different foci and outcomes of state sterilization laws led to different patterns

Victims: men/female and % intellectually disabled / mentally ill / length of program, peak sterilization per 100,000 residents per year

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **% female victims** | **% mentally****ill** | **% intellectually****disabled** |
| **National**  | *61%* | *44%* | *52%* |
| **CA** | 49% | 58% | 37% |
| **MN** | 78% | 18% | **82%** |
| **VA** | 61% | 49% | 48% |
| **IA** | 71% | 44% | 50% |
| **GA** | 55% | **77%** | 22% |
| **NC** | **83%** | 25% | 70% |

Slide 10: [www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics.htm](http://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics.htm) website

Slide 11: Structure of web pages (here: for California)

Number of victims

Temporal pattern of sterilizations

Passage of Laws / Groups identified in the law / process of the law

Precipitating factors and processes

Groups targeted and victimized

Other restrictions on targeted populations

Major proponents of eugenics

“Feeder institutions” and institutions where sterilizations were performed

Opposition

Commemoration

Bibliography

Slide 12: brief exploratory comparison between NC and MN

Slide 13: NC historic eugenics marker and Elaine Riddick

Elaine Riddick victim was labeled “promiscuous” and “feebleminded.” Her illiterate grandmother, with whom she lived, marked an X on the consent form, believing that if she did not agree with the procedure, her granddaughter might be sent to an orphanage. She did not know what the procedure was about; nor did the victim.

Developments in 2012: Republication-controlled NC state Senate did not fund $50,000 allocation per victim, only about 10-15% of all living victims have sought to identify themselves as such.