

Eugenics: Legislated Discrimination

Origins of the Term

The term *Eugenics* was coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883 to describe a scientific interest in using selective breeding to “improve” the human race. The field of genetics was itself very new and eugenicists took this still-developing understanding of genetics and made further assumptions, arguing that a person’s genes meant that all of their characteristics were permanently set by their parentage. They believed this meant that a society should control who was allowed to have children to ensure that future generations were as genetically “superior” as possible.

This field of study was shockingly popular in the early 20th century, particularly in the United States. The belief that there was a scientific and rational basis for discriminating against those with “inferior genes” led to numerous laws being passed that codified the practice of forced sterilization, as well as limiting immigration based on a migrant’s perceived genetic desirability. The determination of whose genes were undesirable was usually based on race and class, but also had broad implications for the populations that we now describe as “disabled.”

“The aim of modern eugenics was to rid society of the characteristics that dominant groups consider to be disabilities in the broadest sense and, often by extension, people with disabilities. What counts as disability and who counts as disabled change over time and across cultures, as do the social or governmental initiatives mustered to eliminate them.”

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson,
from “Eugenics” in *Keywords for Disability Studies*

This poster describes some of the laws in place throughout the 20th century that helped motivate the need for the disability activism (discussed in other posters in this exhibit), and the passage of acts such as Section 504 that strove to limit some of the discrimination which had previously been legal.



Carrie Buck and her mother Emma.
Encyclopedia of Virginia.

Note: The primary sources on this poster include outdated and offensive language used to label and describe people with disabilities that reflect the attitudes and biases of their time.

CHAPTER 53.

[H. B. 190.]

PREVENTION OF PROCREATION.

AN ACT to prevent the procreation of feeble minded, insane, epileptic, habitual criminals, moral degenerates and sexual perverts, who may be inmates of institutions maintained by the State, authorizing and providing for the sterilization of persons with inferior hereditary potentialities and providing for appeals to the Superior Courts in certain cases.

H. B. 190 from Chapter 53 of Washington State's Session Laws, 1921

Forced Sterilization in Washington

Washington State’s first “Prevention of Procreation” law was passed in 1909, as part of the criminal code, and allowed for forced sterilizations as a punitive measure. This law was only very recently repealed, in the 2023 legislative session.

Washington State’s second “Prevention of Procreation” law was passed in 1921. This law required state institutions to regularly report on individuals in their care with “inferior or anti-social traits” that may have children, and then for each institution’s Board of Health to investigate all of the reported individuals to determine whether they should be sterilized. This law was eventually overturned by a 1942 state Supreme Court decision, but an estimated 685 sterilizations were performed before that, many without the knowledge of the patient.

Sec. 3. The purpose of said investigation, findings and orders of said board shall be for the betterment of the physical, mental, neural, or psychic condition of the inmate, or to protect society from the menace of procreation by said inmate, and not in any manner as a punitive measure;

Purpose.

Section 3 of the 1921 law

National Eugenics

Buck v. Bell is a 1927 Supreme Court decision which ruled that “compulsory sterilization” of the “feeble-minded” is constitutional. This case has never been overturned.

Skinner v. Oklahoma is a 1942 Supreme Court decision which did rule that “compulsory sterilization” as a punishment for crime is unconstitutional.

Eugenics was also a highly motivating factor in many immigration decisions. Visibly disabled migrants would be turned away for fears that they and their children would become a “burden on the state.”

Additional Information

University of Washington Disability Studies Program’s History of Eugenics Resource Guide.
<https://disabilitystudies.washington.edu/history-eugenics-resource-guide>