

Research Highlights

Topic: Disability Policy

Wehmeyer, M.L. (2003). Perspectives and sterilization in the heartland. *Mental Retardation*, 41(1), 57-60.

BOTTOM LINE

This article summarizes the major events and individuals that influenced the rise of eugenics in the United States (the forced sterilization of people with developmental disabilities, mental illness, intellectual disabilities or those considered harmful to society).

KEY FINDINGS

- The man most closely aligned with the rise of the American eugenics movement was Charles Davenport, founder of the Eugenics Foundation. Other leading proponents were Ezra Gosney and Paul Popenoe, both affiliated with the Human Betterment Foundation in California.
- Many states launched sterilization programs before they were legal.
- The Supreme Court ruling of *Buck vs. Bell* in 1927 represents a watershed in the history of eugenics. This ruling upheld Virginia's 1924 law permitting sterilization of people with mental illness, developmental disabilities, and other disorders.
- By 1938 several states enforced involuntary sterilization programs for people with developmental disabilities, mental illness, and/or other disabilities. These states included (shown with the number of individuals sterilized): California (12,180); Virginia (2,916); Kansas (1,915); Michigan (1,815); Minnesota (1,459); and Oregon (1,218).

KEY FINDINGS cont.

- On May 2, 2002, Virginia Governor Mark Warner formally apologized for Virginia's participation in eugenics, an involvement he called "a shameful effort in which state government never should have been involved." His statement was issued on the 75th anniversary of *Buck vs. Bell*.

METHOD

- The article was researched through a review of literature, state and federal law, and historical documents.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

- Barr, M.W. (1987). President's address. *Journal of Psycho-Asthenics*, 2(1), 4.
- Biesold, H. (1988), *Crying hands: Eugenics and deaf people in Nazi Germany*. Washington, DC: Gullaudet University Press.
- Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200, 47. S. Ctr., 584 (1927).
- Davenport, C.B. (1910). Application of Mendel's law to human heredity. *Journal of Psycho-Asthenics*, 2(1), 4.
- Dybwad, G. (2000). Mental retardation in the 21st century. In M.L. Wehmeyer & J.R. Patton (Eds.), *Mental retardation in the 21st century* (pp. 431-433). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Gosney, E.S., & Popenoe, P.B. (1929). *Sterilization for human betterment: A summary of results of 6,000 operations in California, 1909-1929*. Pasadena, CA: Human Betterment Foundation.
- Human Betterment Foundation (1937). *Human sterilization today*. Retrieved May, 5, 2002, from http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?rbpebib:2:/temp/~ammem_CvyM.
- Human Betterment Foundation (1938). *Report to the Board of Trustees of the Human Betterment Foundation for the year ending February 8, 1938*. Retrieved May, 5, 2002, from http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?rbpebib:2:/temp/~ammem_CvyM.
- Kevles, D.J. (1995). *In the name of eugenics: Genetics and the uses of human heredity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Landman, J.H. (1932). *Human sterilization: The history of the sexual sterilization movement*. New York: Macmillian.
- Popenoe, P., & Johnson, R.H. (1918). *Applied eugenics*. New York: Macmillian.
- Smith, J.D. (1994). Reflections on mental retardation and eugenics, old and new: Mensa and the human genome project. *Mental Retardation*, 32(3), 234-238.

RELATED
PUBLICATIONS
cont.

Smith, J.D. (1995). The Bell Curve and Carrie Buck: Eugenics revisited. *Mental Retardation*, 33(1), 60-61.

Smith, J.D. & Polloway, E.A. (1993). Institutionalization, involuntary sterilization, and mental retardation: Profiles from the history of the practice. *Mental Retardation*, 31(4), 208-214.

Tanner, B. (2000, April 3). Eugenics not Kansas' proudest moment. *Wichita Eagle*, p. B1.

Virginia apologizes for sterilizations (2002, May 3). *The Kansas City Star*. p. A4.

For more information, contact the Beach Center on Disability at 1200 Sunnyside Avenue, 3111 Haworth Hall, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-7534. Phone: 785-864-7600. Email: Beachcenter@ku.edu. Website: www.beachcenter.org.

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