

[How Eugenics Legislated Sterilization Around the World](#)

Hakeem Smith, *Medium*, January 12, 2017

In his 1883 work, [Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development](#), [Francis Galton](#) coined the term, *eugenics*. Galton defines the term as deriving from “Greek, *eugenes* namely, good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities”¹. Galton subsequently established the first research fellowships in [Eugenics at University College London](#), the first eugenics laboratory at the [Eugenics Record Office](#), inspired the German Society for Racial Hygiene in Berlin ([Deutsche Gesellschaft für Rassenhygiene](#)), and popularized the phrase “[nature versus nurture](#)”. However, Galton’s colleagues and peers [disagreed on methodology and philosophy](#), and various eugenics theories gained popularity throughout Europe—promoting [diverging eugenics ideals](#).



A 1913 eugenics cartoon by [Louis M. Glacken](#).

Although eugenics theories and practices have existed since [Ancient Greece](#), Galton’s theories established a (*pseudo*-)scientific foundation for [the modern eugenics movement](#). The first modern eugenics theories proposed limiting childbearing and marriages between “inferior” and impoverished people; *negative eugenics*. Galton’s research eventually shifted toward a different field that promoted and encouraged breeding and marriage of the intellectually and physically “[superior](#)” to improve

¹ “That is, with questions bearing on what is termed in Greek, *eugenes* namely, good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities. This, and the allied words, *eugeneia*, etc., are equally applicable to men, brutes, and plants. We greatly want a brief word to express the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had. The word *eugenics* would sufficiently express the idea; it is at least a neater word and a more generalised one than *viriculture* which I once ventured to use.” (Galton, 1883, p.17)

humanity through reproduction; [positive eugenics](#). Eugenics propaganda alternated between negative and positive as eugenics societies [spread internationally](#) from the UK and Germany.

THE OLIVER
T H E A T E R

Two Days and Matinees Beginning **Nov. 13th**

For Humanity's Sake **THE** The Sex Problem of Today

BLACK STORK

Six reels of sensational, thrilling story of actual happenings—Everyday—Everywhere. Handling a Subject of Vital Importance to Every Man, Woman and Child in the World.

"Every Child has a Right to be Well Born"
BUT
Thousands and Thousands are Not.
WHY?

If you see "THE BLACK STORK" you will know. DR. HARRY J. HAISELDEN, the noted Chicago surgeon, who refuses to operate hopelessly deformed, defective infants at their birth, and thrust upon them an inheritance of woe and suffering, appears in one of the leading roles, and is supported by an exceptionally strong cast.

FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR CHILDREN AND ALL FUTURE GENERATIONS, SEE THIS PICTURE.

Admission 10c & 15c Plus War Tax

Children under 16 years of age will not be interested, but all over that age should not fail to see it.

Matinees With Lecture and Slides—For Ladies Only

Dr. Harry J. Haiselden

Advertisement for [The Black Stork](#), a 1917 film promoting negative eugenics. South Bend News-Times, November 9, 1917

As the twentieth century progressed, [eugenics societies](#) became more prevalent and [politically active](#). The proliferation of eugenics as a science continued throughout World War One and "[b]y the 1920s eugenics societies could be found in the Soviet Union...Mexico, Scandinavia, Brazil, Japan, and many other countries"². Most national eugenics societies converged on negative eugenics theories and focused on preventing the [mentally handicapped, criminal, impoverished and otherwise unfit](#) from breeding. In the United States, [the Eugenics Research Association](#)—employing both positive and negative eugenics—successfully influenced [Congress](#) to pass [the Immigration Act of 1924](#) that excluded U.S. immigration from Asia while increasing the number of immigrants from Western Europe.

² "Anxiety about the social effects of bad heredity led to the formation of eugenics societies in a considerable number of countries. These included the Eugenics Education Society of London in 1907, the German Society for Race Hygiene in 1905, the American Eugenics Society in 1912, and, in the same year, the French Eugenics Society. By the 1920s eugenics societies could be found in the Soviet Union (a legacy from Tsarist times), Mexico, Scandinavia, Brazil, Japan, and many other countries." (Jones, 1992, p.81)



Eugenics Society Archives. Norfolk, N.C. (c. 1935?)

After World War One, the work of eugenics societies soon became the legislation of states. The United States proves an excellent case study for this interwar period as well. [By 1930 punitive forced sterilization](#) laws existed in three US states—California, [Nebraska](#), and [Washington](#), and eugenic sterilization laws were enacted in 24 states. That number increased to [32 just seven years later](#). In that [interwar period, California](#) performed more forced forced sterilizations than any other US state.

Forced sterilization programs in the United States mainly targeted the mentally ill, physically handicapped, minorities, women, and criminals; sterilizing over 60,000 people by 1936³. However Germany, under the Nazi regime, implemented forced sterilization laws that resulted in an estimated [300,000–400,000 sterilizations](#). Under Hitler, German forced sterilization laws primarily targeted [mental patients](#) and [Asoziale \(asocial\) Roma](#), but forced sterilizations were also [practiced on Jews](#) in concentration camps, and secretly, on mixed race [Afro-Germans](#). Though not nearly at the same scale, forced sterilizations continued globally [after World War II](#).

³ "Specifically, by 1936 when both England and the U.S. genetic scientific communities finally condemned eugenical sterilization, over 60,000 forced sterilizations were already performed in the United States on mostly poor (and often African-American) people confined to mental hospitals. The practice of forced sterilizations for the "unfit" was almost unanimously supported by eugenicists. The American Eugenics Society had hoped, in time, to sterilize one-tenth of the U.S. population, or millions of Americans." (Farber, 2008, p.244)

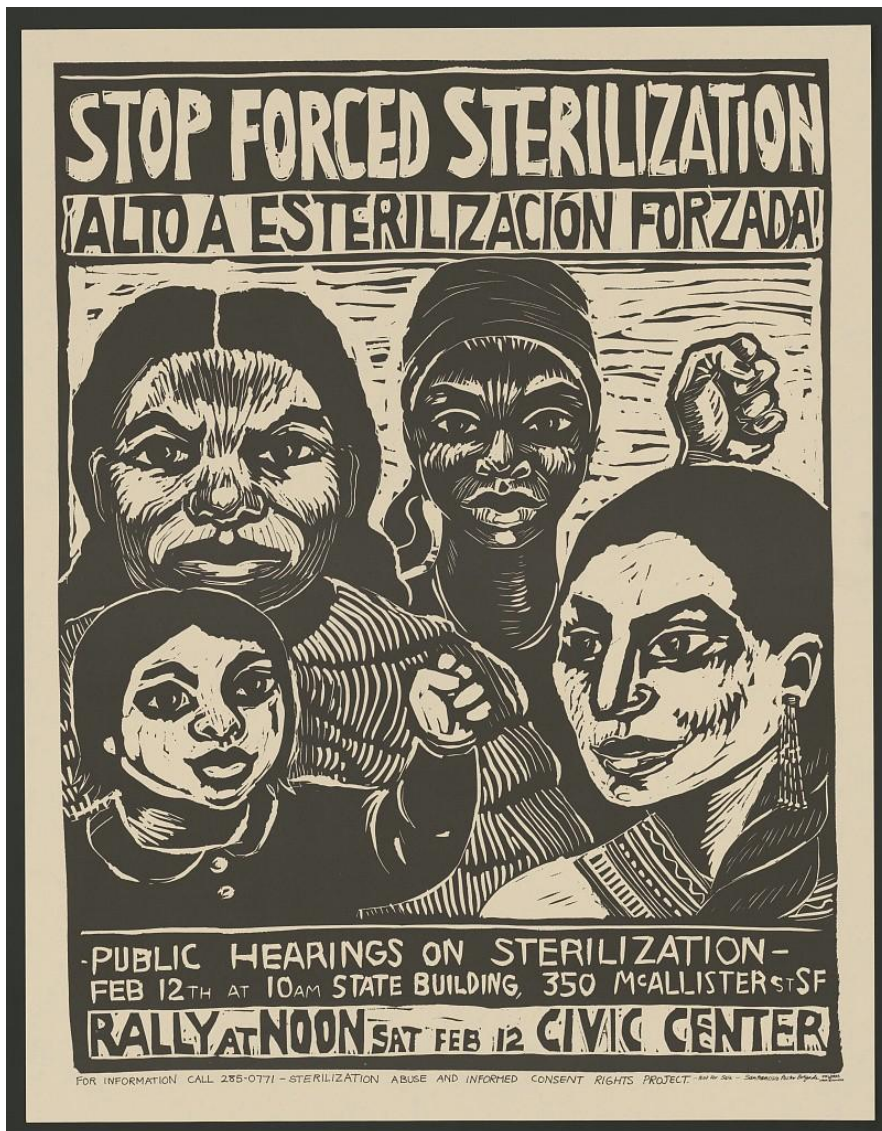


"If inferior people have 4 children while higher-quality people have 2, this is what will happen."
Nazi eugenics poster from [Volk und Rasse](#), August 1936.

An important distinction of forced sterilization legislation following World War II, is that the policies usually posit a focus on [demographic factors and state welfare](#), rather than negative eugenics. Nonetheless, forced sterilization laws to prevent [undesired peoples](#)—e.g., mentally disabled or diseased—from breeding continue to exist despite a steady decline in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, the stated intent of most forced sterilization policies is for bureaucratic population control or to limit diseases, not to preserve an idealized racial superiority—though [perhaps, a national one](#).

Another important factor is that the targets of forced sterilizations often shift from a strict adherence of the law to include additional victims using a more nuanced interpretation. For example, "feble-minded women sterilized in North Carolina between 1950 and 1968 were less and less likely to be mentally ill or handicapped. Instead, they were increasingly likely to be single women who were sexually active or who were feared to become so in the future"⁴. In recent years, forced sterilization legislation has shifted again to target [transgender people](#).

⁴ "A second trend makes clear that mental illness was no longer the primary reason a woman was singled out for sterilization. Of the people sterilized between 1950 and 1968, a growing proportion were women deemed to be feble-minded. In 1954–56, 111 sterilized women had been diagnosed as mentally diseased and 392 as feble-minded. By 1966–68, when as many as 250 sterilized women were still characterized as feble-minded, only sixteen were diagnosed with a mental illness. Even in the 1920s, many eugenicists acknowledged that feble-mindedness was not a biological concept but rather a catchall term applied to behaviors seen to be antisocial or immoral. By the 1950s, the scientific validity of "feble-mindedness" would have been even more in doubt. The feble-minded women sterilized in

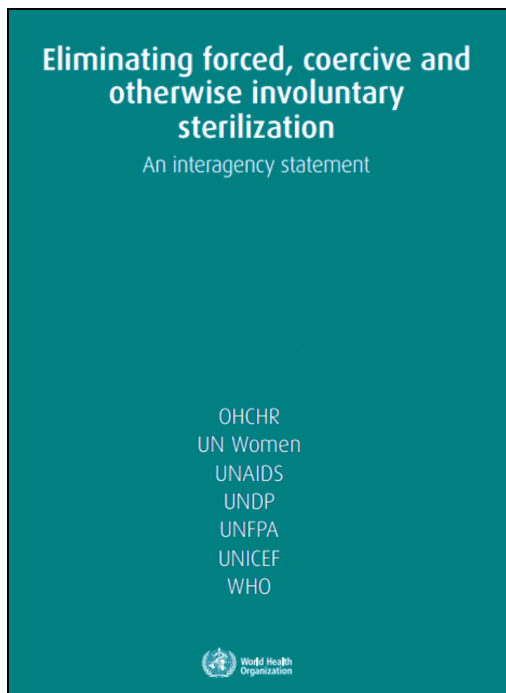


A poster by [Rachael Romero](#) for the San Francisco Poster Brigade in 1977.

The 1927 U.S. Supreme Court opinion, [Buck v. Bell](#), upheld the state of Virginia's legal right to forced sterilization; effectively legitimizing the practice throughout the United States. The United Kingdom, despite being the birthplace of eugenics, enacted [no forced sterilization policies](#). [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), in 1948, codified fundamental human rights for all people. Internationally, forced sterilization policies are losing any legal foundation as newer international agreements and charters continue to identify protections and violations of human rights: [UN](#)

North Carolina between 1950 and 1968 were less and less likely to be mentally ill or handicapped. Instead, they were increasingly likely to be single women who were sexually active or who were feared to become so in the future. In 1954–1956, there were *348 139 married sterilization patients in North Carolina and 364 unmarried patients. By 1966–68, there were only 27 female married patients, and the number of unmarried female patients remained as high as 244. Doctors could sterilize a disproportionate number of unmarried women who were not obviously handicapped or ill by claiming that the women themselves wanted to be sterilized. It is worth asking whether these sterilizations were truly voluntary.” (Ziegler, 2008, p.16)

[Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People](#), [Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disability](#), [Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women](#), [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), [Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court](#).



Cover page of the [2014 interagency report](#).

Most countries have [reformed their forced sterilization policies](#), but many continue to impose the practice on marginalized groups. Moreover, so-called voluntary sterilizations are often [coercive](#) (or forced) by the use of incentives such as food, money, or housing. In order to address the practice directly, several UN agencies—[OHCHR](#), [UN Women](#), [UNAIDS](#), [UNDP](#), [UNFPA](#), [UNICEF](#), [WHO](#)—issued a [joint statement](#) deriding forced sterilizations and calling for countries to end any legal protections. [International](#) and national NGOs continually work toward exposing the forced sterilization history in the regions they operate, identifying the victims, ensuring the practice is banned, and fighting for compensation.

Forced sterilizations have historically affected marginalized and disenfranchised groups, but recently have lost many of the undertones of negative eugenics that popularized the practice in the early 20th Century. States are banning forced sterilization policies and issuing apologies to victims, yet few are compensating those victims for the human rights abuses. Those states still practicing forced sterilizations are, generally, focusing on population control or targeting specialized groups—e.g., transgender, HIV positive. This short essay seeks to contribute to original research on forced sterilizations, provide resources as an informal annotated bibliography, and encourage researchers, human rights practitioners, and civil society activists to pursue an end to forced sterilization in all its forms.

Resources

- Alemdaroğlu, Ayça. "[Eugenics, Modernity, and Nationalism](#)". in *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity*, edited by David Turner and Kevin Stagg, London: Routledge (2006)
- Benedict, Susan and Jane M. Georges. "[Nurses and the Sterilization Experiments of Auschwitz: A Postmodernist Perspective](#)". *Nursing Inquiry* 2006. 21 July 2016
- Braund, James and Douglas G. Sutton. "[The Case of Heinrich Wilhelm Poll \(1877–1939\): A German-Jewish Geneticist, Eugenicist, Twin Researcher, and Victim of Nazis](#)". *Journal of Historical Biology*. 18 July 2016
- Breggin, Peter R. "[Psychiatry's Role in the Holocaust](#)". *International Journal of Risk & Safety in Medicine*. 21 July 2016
- Brown, Frederick W. "[Eugenic Sterilization in the United States. It's Present Status](#)". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 20 July 2016
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability. [United Nations](#). 24 July 2016
- Convention on the Rights of the Child. [United Nations](#). 24 July 2016
- Cook, R.J. and B.M. Dickens. "[Voluntary and Involuntary Sterilization: Denials and Abuses of Rights](#)". *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics*. 23 July 2016
- Coutts, Mary Carrington and Pat Milmo McCarrick. "[Eugenics, Scope Note 28](#)". *Bioethical Issues: Scope Notes Archive*.
- Daniels, Rodney J. "[Review—War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race](#)". *Perspectives in History*. 19 July 2016
- de Reyes, Carol Coussons. [Draft Peer Support Implementation Plan](#). Nebraska DHHS: Office of Consumer Affairs. 21 July 2016
- Dikötter, Frank. "[Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics](#)". *The American Historical Review*. 21 July 2016
- Eugenics and Disability: History and Legacy in Washington. [University of Washington, Disability Studies Program](#). 21 July 2016
- Farber, Steven A. "[U.S. Scientists' Role in the Eugenics Movement \(1907–1939\): A Contemporary Biologist's Perspective](#)". *Zebrafish*. 20 July 2016
- Forced Sterilization. [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#). 20 July 2016
- Galton, David J. "[Greek Theories on Eugenics](#)". *Journal of Medical Ethics*. 19 July 2016
- Galton, Francis. *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development*. [Galton.org](#). 14 July 2016
- Galton Collection. [History of the Galton Collection](#). UCL. 14 July 2016
- Glackens, L.M. [Eugenics Makes the World Go 'Round](#). Library of Congress. 24 July 2016
- Graur, Dan. [The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Science, Pseudoscience, and Ideology in Genetics](#). Interdisciplinary Conference of Tel Aviv University and Munich University, Venice. 25 July 2016
- Haas, François. [German Science and Black Racism—Roots of the Nazi Holocaust](#). *The FASEB Journal*. 21 July 2016
- Hansen, Randall and Desmond S. King. "[Eugenic Ideas, Political Interests, and Policy Variance: Immigration and Sterilization Policy in Britain and the U.S.](#)". *World Politics*. 24 July 2016
- Haywood. "Only Healthy Seed Must Be Sown". [Eugenics Society Archives](#). 24 July 2014

Heafy Law Library. [International Human Rights Clinic](#). 14 July 2016

Hildebrandt, S. "[Anatomy in the Third Reich: An Outline, Part 2. Bodies for Anatomy and Related Medical Disciplines](#)". Clinical Anatomy. 18 July 2016

J.F. Lehmanns Verlag. Nazi Eugenics Poster. [Volk und Rasse](#). 24 July 2016

Jones, Gretta. "[Eugenics in Ireland: The Belfast Eugenics Society, 1911–15](#)". Irish Historical Studies. 20 July 2016

Kendregan, Charles P. "[Sixty Years of Compulsory Eugenic Sterilization: Three Generations of Imbeciles and the Constitution of the United States](#)". Chicago-Kent Law Review. 25 July 2016

Kevles, Daniel J. "[Eugenics and Human Rights](#)". British Medical Journal. 19 July 2016

Kismödi, Eszter and Tom Shakespeare. "[Eliminating Forced, Coercive and Otherwise Involuntary Sterilization: An Interagency Statement](#)". UN Women. 14 July 2016

License to be Yourself: Forced Sterilization. [Open Society Foundations](#). 24 July 2016

Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada. Eugenics [Archive](#). 14 July 2016

Lockyer, Bill. "[Attorney General Lockyer Issues Apology for Early 20th Century Policy Authorizing Involuntary Sterilization](#)". State of California Department of Justice Office of the Attorney General. 14 July 2016

Lombardo, Paul. "[Three Generations, No Imbeciles: New Light on Buck v. Bell](#)". New York University Law Review. 23 July 2016

Lombardo, Paul. "[Eugenics Laws Restricting Immigration](#)". Eugenics Archive. 20 July 2016

Margalit, Gilad. "[The Uniqueness of the Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies](#)". 21 July 2016

Nixon, Laura. "[The Right to \(Trans\) Parent: A Reproductive Justice Approach to Reproductive Rights, Fertility, and Family-Building Issues Facing Transgender People](#)". William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law. 23 July 2016

Paul, Diane B. and Hamish G. Spencer. "[The Hidden Science of Eugenics](#)". Nature. 20 July 2016

Reilly, Philip R. "[Involuntary Sterilization in the United States: A Surgical Solution](#)". The Quarterly Review of Biology. 20 July 2016

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. [United Nations](#). 24 July 2016

Romero, Rachael. [Stop Forced Sterilization](#). Library of Congress. 14 July 2016

Rose, Nikolas. "[The Politics of Life Itself](#)". Theory, Culture, and Society. 23 July 2016

Schenk, Faith and A. S. Parkes. "[The Activities of the Eugenics Society](#)". The Eugenics Review. 19 July 2016

Scully, Judith M. "[Cracking Open CRACK: Unethical Sterilization Movement Gains Momentum](#)". Population and Development Program at Hampshire College. 25 July 2016

Sparrow, Robert. "[A Not-So-New Eugenics](#)". The Hastings Center Report. 20 July 2016

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. [Eugenics](#). 14 July 2016

Taylor, Stephen J. [The Black Stork: Eugenics Goes to the Movies](#). Hoosier State Chronicles. 24 July 2016

The Galton Institute. [Galton Institute](#). 18 July 2016

The Eugenics Review. [Eugenics Review Vols. 1–60](#). 14 July 2016

The Immigration Act of 1924. [US House of Representatives](#). 20 July 2016

The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act). [US Department of State](#). 20 July 2016

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. [United Nations](#). 14 July 2016

Tredoux, Gavan. [Galton.org](#). 14 July 2016

UCL Archives. [Galton Laboratory](#). UCL. 18 July 2016

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. [United Nations](#). 24 July 2016

Ward, Lester F. "[Eugenics, Euthenics, Eudemics](#)". American Journal of Sociology. 19 July 2016

Ziegler, Mary. "[Reinventing Eugenics: Reproductive Choice and Law Reform After World War II](#)". Cardozo Journal of Law & Gender. 23 July 2016