

Lessons from
A Eugenical Survey
of
Vermont

A Preliminary Report

BY
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1st Annual report, 1926-7

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LESSONS FROM A EUGENICAL SURVEY OF
VERMONT

1st annual report

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FOREWORD

This leaflet comprises the material presented in a paper read by the writer at the Legislative Forum of the Vermont Conference for Social Work, held at Montpelier, Vermont, January 19, 1927. A few changes and additions have been made but the bulk of the paper, as presented, is covered by the material of this leaflet.

Attention should be emphatically called to the statement, repeatedly made in the course of this paper, that the facts and figures make no pretense of completeness. It is furthermore true that revision of the data is being carried on and it is not unlikely that in one or two instances the statements will be qualified in the final report of the Survey. The material is presented in the present form and at this time for the reason that it has been thought by some of those who were present at the Forum that it might have a bearing upon matters that are likely to come up before the Legislature. Since the purpose of the Survey was primarily to gather information that might be useful in social legislation here in Vermont, it has been decided that the material gathered during the fifteen months since it began ought to be available at once. Whatever errors of statement may be discovered are therefore accountable to such a purpose which it is hoped the charitable reader will accept as sufficient excuse.

The report is printed through the generosity of Mr. Clarence Morgan, Representative from Shelburne, and at his suggestion.

January 26, 1927.

The Plan

The new Vermont was not a new state. It was a new number of men and women of human life in the state. It was a new life to be given, based on what was.

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The Plan

The need of exact information in regard to conditions in Vermont was the motive underlying the establishment of the present Eugenics Survey. This need was apparent from the large number of inquiries that came to the writer in regard to the facts of human heredity and about defective and degenerate families in the state. The questioner was apt to be rather insistent that he be given exact and definite answers to his questions, answers based on what was known about conditions here in Vermont.

It seems entirely right that those who have the responsibility of making and administering laws covering the social conditions in Vermont should have as much definite knowledge as possible upon which to base their opinions and their judgments. Thanks to the great amount of interest in such work, it has been possible to organize and carry on a study calculated to bring out many such facts.

A generous native of Vermont responded immediately to a proposal that she contribute a sufficient amount of money to enable the University of Vermont to make a Eugenic Survey of the state. She added a second gift half as large as the first as the work progressed. At the close of the first year's study in September 1926 another generous Vermonter agreed to contribute five thousand dollars for a second year's work. The National Committee for Mental Hygiene in New York City has set aside, from funds entrusted to it for such purposes, a sum considerably larger than that generous private donation. This appropriation is now being used to cover the cost of a special Psychiatric Unit, consisting of four trained workers, headed by Dr. Chamberlain, which is now bringing its work in Vermont to a close.

This work is being done at the request of the Eugenics Survey and in cooperation with it, and the Governor officially invited the National Committee for Mental Hygiene to make the study. The State Department of Education has endorsed and aided the study to the fullest extent imaginable.

Previous Work

A worker employed by the Department of Public Welfare made an excellent beginning some years ago in a study of the families of a few girls and boys, then in the Industrial School. Their ancestry and relatives were looked up as accurately as possible in order to find out what sort of heredity-background they had. Charts had been made by Mr. C. W. Wilson and under his direction, from the information thus gathered and these charts were quite startling in their revelations.

Sources

Taking our cue from these records, our field worker, Miss Harriett E. Abbott, studied the admission records of the Industrial School. She also visited each of the other state institutions and the Brattleboro Retreat. The records of the various offices of the Vermont Children's Aid Society were already familiar to Miss Abbott but they were gone over again and found very valuable.

The purpose of the visits to the institutions was to get track of some families conspicuously detrimental in the communities—"undesirable citizens," to use an expression of Theodore Roosevelt. This was on the strength of the well-known fact that in almost every community some one or two families, degenerate or criminal in tendency, cause that particular community or town more trouble and expense than the rest of the population. Poor-masters have frequently been heard to remark that if they could get rid of the _____ family their annual budget would be very much smaller and that for generations the town had been suffering from a steadily increasing rabble of undesirable human beings in this family.

Families Selected

The families that were finally selected for thorough study after considerable preliminary work had been done, number in all sixty-two. Twenty-two of these families are quite large, not only because there were many children in each generation but because it has been possible to get the histories of a large number of persons in direct line and collateral branches.

We have been exceedingly fortunate in our field worker. She has proven highly efficient in doing the kind of tactful detective

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work essential to success. She has in several instances been able to get fairly satisfactory information in regard to as many as three hundred or four hundred persons belonging in a particular family group. This includes only the direct lineal descendants of the person who is taken as the starting point of study in that family, with the addition of those who are brought in by marriage. A pedigree chart showing in graphic form the descent and relationships has been prepared for each of the sixty-two families.

Family Characteristics

One of the first discoveries that was made during the study was that pauperism figured pretty largely in a considerable number of the families, although most of them were selected for the reason that they were characterized in other ways. Whether feeble-mindedness or some other tendency stood out as the particular trait for which the family was studied, the poormasters' records revealed the names of first one family and then another, almost all of the sixty-two falling at one time or another in this undesirable class. An attempt is being made to compute the cost of some of the families to the community through the poormasters. We have had state and town paupers at every period of our state's history. Inadequate records make it impossible to compute the totals with much accuracy and it will be impossible to get the total cost to the tax payers of Vermont for maintaining these sixty-two families through poor relief. The total amount will run into very substantial figures.

Not only poverty, which in many cases is no fault of the unfortunate person, (at least many of us are glad to believe that this is true) but various other defects frequently mingle with the original key defect. It is this first and outstanding trouble that we have used in our characterization of the several families.

Characteristics of the Families

Each of the several families upon which most of the work has been done was characterized by some defect or trait of an undesirable sort that stood out prominently in the record of the family as a whole, and we have nicknamed each family to bring out this noticeable trait.

The "Pirate" Family

These people are given this nickname because they were found on water fronts living in house boats, or in some shanty not very far from Lake Champlain or some river. Living in the utmost squalor and destitution, they appeal to the sympathies of charitable people generally, who make them presents of food and clothing, and there is a good deal of reason to suspect that they find ways of turning most of these gifts into money. They are the terror of people who own boats or other property in the neighborhood because of their thieving habits. As soon as things get too hot for them in one locality they pull up stakes and move to the next town or port. Disease and feeble-mindedness are always conspicuous in the children. They manage pretty successfully to keep out of prison, although frequently arrested for petty larceny and various other minor offenses.

The "Gypsy" Family

These people usually spend the winters in some rural settlement not far from the city. They rarely go back to the same house that they occupied the former year and they busy themselves making baskets and fattening the horses that they have become possessed of, by fair means or foul, during the wanderings of the previous summer and fall. Their only claim to the term "gypsy" is their dark skin due to an admixture of negro and Indian blood. They make the most of this feature, however, and pass themselves off for genuine gypsies. As soon as the cold weather is over they pack their belongings into typical gypsy wagons and start off, a roving band, picking up what they can by swapping horses, selling baskets, telling fortunes, and helping themselves rather generously to whatever produce or useful articles the inhabitants are careless enough to leave lying around within easy reach.

Four hundred and thirty-six of this family have found their way into the records of our Survey. There have been seventy-eight paupers in this big family. They have contributed liberally to the population of prisons and other institutions of Vermont, New York and Massachusetts. Their criminal tendencies are more pronounced than in many of the other families in our list, and they are looked upon with wholesome fear by the people who

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The "Chorea"

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The "Chorea" Family

Here we have another very large group, two hundred and thirty-eight persons. Seven generations have been studied and twenty of the lot have been definitely insane. The dreadful form of insanity known as Huntington's Chorea with its degeneration of mental powers and loss of muscular control has been responsible not only for most of these twenty cases of insanity, but for a great deal of misery to mind and body because many who are not actually tainted have the fear that they are going to become insane sooner or later. Suicide not infrequently results. Fortunately, the disease seems to be dying out in this case, and as a matter of fact, the family itself is becoming smaller and smaller. This seems to be partly due to the debilitating factor that goes along with the disease.

Summary

Sixty-two families have been studied more or less thoroughly. Twenty-two of them have been gone into quite extensively, twelve individuals being the smallest number in any one of the pedigree charts. The largest number of persons tabulated for any one family is four hundred thirty-six, but new information is coming in constantly and even this large number will probably be increased before the Survey is concluded. The total number of individuals belonging to the twenty-two families most thoroughly studied is nearly twenty-eight hundred, and thirteen hundred fifty others fall into the forty additional families in our schedules—an average of sixty-five persons per family.

One family numbers three hundred ninety-eight; one, three hundred sixty; three, around two hundred fifty; and one numbers one hundred, giving us seven families of more than one hundred persons each. These numbers of course include several generations; five generations in the case of a few, six in others, and seven in two families. The enormous amount of detailed work in covering the territory, investigating records, and making inquiries of town officials can scarcely be realized even in the light of these large numbers unless one has tried to do a piece of work in genealogy.

The total number of persons, four thousand forty-two, are now being tabulated according to the various kinds of defects and undesirable traits that they show, our purpose being to classify them according to the particular way in which each one has been and still is a detriment in the community. Some have been merely a drag on the purse of the taxpayers others have got into trouble with the officers of the law and have found their way into jail and prison, while still others have become a charge to the state in the School for the Feeble-minded, the Vermont Industrial School, or the Hospitals for the Insane.

To give just a few figures which are in process of revision and which should not be taken as the official output of the Survey:

Total number of individuals studied in sixty-two families	4642
Total number of paupers	4766
Total number of feeble-minded	380
Number with prison records or in prison	119
Number of illegitimate children	73
Number of sex offenders	202
Number with serious physical defects:	
Blindness, paralysis, etc.	45

One Great Lesson

The title of this report is "Lessons from a Eugenic Survey of Vermont." The outstanding lesson of the study that has been made of selected defective families is this:

The characteristics which are pronounced in past generations are still plain to be seen in the living members of a family. This is true whether the family has moved from the original section of the state in which we found the records of the earlier members or whether, as has been the case in a few instances, they are still living in the ancestral home. The effect of heredity contrasted with that of environment seems to be very strongly emphasized as a result of our study. Without making too positive an assertion, I think we can safely say that in the sixty-two families that we have studied at any rate, "blood has told," and there is every reason to believe that it will *keep right on* "telling" in future generations.

*These figures are unquestionably very much too low for the various defects. The final report will certainly give much higher numbers, especially for illegitimacy and sex offenders.

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"Running water purifies itself." The stream of germ-plasm does not seem to.

In the Survey we have been studying the past and present conditions of certain defective families. It might be truthfully said that we are also studying their future conditions. Dare any one be so optimistic as to prophesy that they will improve much without radical measures—education, segregation, or if you will, sterilization—that we may expect a lessening of the number of harmful, costly, degenerate people in our population *from these families?*

Besides the more easily classified faults, a very large amount of harm of a far worse sort comes to the community from these families. Their antisocial, immoral, or even criminal tendencies may not for a long time, perhaps ever, get them into an institution or require financial help from a poormaster. Depravity, immorality, loose living, are rampant among them and they serve as a constant menace to the safety and welfare of the community. We wouldn't, any of us, want to have our children forced to associate with people of this low type if we could help it.

These Families Typical

It should be strongly emphasized that the sixty-two families included in the study have not been selected as the worst offenders or most prolific of diseased children that we could find in Vermont. Wherever this study is mentioned in public, some member of the audience almost invariably comes forward with a story of some family of his personal acquaintance in which degeneracy and criminality run higher than in the average of our sixty-two families.

Practically everybody in Vermont knows of some degenerate family like the above. No village is so small but it has a village idiot, and he usually belongs to a family of many children in which immorality, destitution, and feeble-mindedness are all too common. These are the chief economic burden and social menace in many and many a town and village. It is superfluous to multiply cases; they are too familiar to us all.

We have tried hard to be fair in the selection in order to give a true picture of the conditions that exist in an average community and of the financial, physical, mental, and moral drag on the community due to the presence at large of such families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Records

One of the first lessons of our study is the exceeding difficulty of getting desired information from the records now existing. In many cases the trouble is due to lack of modern business methods in the various offices and laxness of town officers. The Bureau of Vital Statistics at Montpelier is an excellent organization but lacks both the authority and the number of people on the staff that would be necessary to bring about any material improvement in the old records. A standardized system for institutions of commitment entries and admission cards together with blanks suitable for periodical reports on the records of inmates, would be a comparatively simple and most desirable improvement. If records are worth keeping at all they are worth keeping right. A pretty radical reformation in this regard is most desirable in Vermont, but it means more clerks.

With regard to the town clerk's records we have found that it is almost impossible, under existing conditions, for many of the town clerks to make or file and store under conditions of safety the records that they are required to give. A town clerk is subject to a good sized penalty if he fails to render his reports in proper order to the state officials, but when it comes to the proper custody of early material he is frequently not in a position to take care of it in any adequate way. Old deeds, licenses and other valuable documents lie around on any convenient shelf for dust and mice to damage and with no protection from fire. The result is that a great many important papers are lost beyond recall.

An almost incredible amount of laxness has been found in the matter of marriage certificates and records. New regulations are undoubtedly needed to improve our marriage and divorce laws, but it looks as if the State's Attorneys might find a fruitful field of activity for some time to come in checking up the marital status of the families in their communities. Common law marriages are all too "common." Such conditions are a flagrant ground for criticism of the administering of our laws. There would be no difficulty in supplying from the records of this Survey an abundance of evidence to bear out this charge.

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Institutions

In the Vermont Industrial School modifications have been made in the dormitory to give more room in the dormitory for the state support boys to get along with a view to training the boys for training the boys could with the boys however, demand training, making and these the boys will have to be criticism is intense but the taxpayer they provide in institutions.

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Special Classes

The same children in institutions three or four years intended to take and under specified and extend adequate supervisory special classes in of larger village to adopt this plan

INCREASED FACILITIES FOR TRAINING
SUBNORMAL CHILDREN

Institutions

In the Vermont State School for the Feeble-minded and the Industrial School at Vergennes, as is generally known, the accommodations have long been over-taxed. There is not nearly enough room in the dormitories and cottages. The same inadequacy of state support has made it necessary for the Superintendents to get along with an under-manned staff. Those who are responsible for training the children in the schools have done the best they could with the facilities at their disposal. Modern conditions, however, demand far greater attention to the matter of careful training, making it desirable that additional teachers be employed and these the best that it is possible to secure. Higher salaries will have to be paid in order to get this class of teachers. No criticism is intended of either the superintendents or their helpers, but the taxpayers of the state will fail to perform their duty unless they provide immediately a larger appropriation for these two institutions.

The education and training of subnormal children requires all of the skill and ability that is needed to teach the average normal boy and girl, and, in addition, that special ability and training that are required to bridge the gap that separates the normal mind from the abnormal or subnormal mind. This has only lately come to be recognized as a maxim of the program for training defectives.

Special Classes

The same principles that govern the training of subnormal children in institutions ought to be followed outside. There are three or four "special classes" in Vermont at present. They are intended to take "retarded" or "problem" children by themselves and under specially trained teachers. This plan should be continued and extended as rapidly as it can be without sacrifice of adequate supervising and teaching. There should be at least twenty special classes in Vermont. Every city in the state and a number of larger villages would find it very greatly to their advantage to adopt this plan.

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Reasons

The special training of subnormal children is not an experiment. It has been thoroughly tested and found to be productive of splendid results. The subnormal child in the midst of children of average intelligence is unable to grasp what the teacher is trying to have him learn. He makes slower progress than he does in a special class. He is conscious of his poor scholarship and feels inferior to his mates. This makes him unhappy and morose. He becomes a nuisance to the teacher and a hindrance to his fellows. He calls attention to himself in any way that occurs to him because every child demands attention. He gets into mischief and lays the foundation for life habits of law breaking and immorality.

Take the child out of the regular classes in school and put him with others of his own mental level, give him a sympathetic specially trained teacher and his improvement is prompt and decided. He finds that he can do some things at least as well as his fellows instead of always being a laughing stock because of his dullness. He learns to do useful things with his hands and picks up the beginnings of a trade or handicraft. Results in Vermont show that in a large proportion of the cases, training in our two institutions and special class work remove the boy or girl from one side of the balance sheet and add them to the other. No longer a drag and a menace, the child very frequently becomes self-supporting. No child can possibly grow up into a useful member of society unless he has his inherent right of self-respect given a chance to develop.

PSYCHIATRIC CLINIC

Many communities and states have adopted the Psychiatric Clinic as a recognized part of the child program. It is expensive if it is adequate. It may be that Vermont is not ready for it on a large scale, but a notable beginning has been made in Burlington, where Dr. George K. Pratt, of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, conducts clinics twice a month by arrangement with the University of Vermont. The results are so real and so helpful that I cannot help expressing the earnest wish that the plan could be greatly extended at once.

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EUGENICAL STERILIZATION

I agree with everything that Dr. Allen has to say on the importance of the state institutions. It is absolutely out of the question for any thinking person to visualize any adequate program that leaves out the state institution. As I have said above with as much emphasis as I could command, we need larger and improved facilities at both Brandon and Vergennes. We are at present taking care of fewer than three hundred feeble-minded, some of whom are beyond the age of childhood. There are undoubtedly nearly five thousand feeble-minded in Vermont according to the best estimates that students of the subject have been able to make. This is not an excessive number in comparison with the other states. We are not trying to make out that Vermont is in a worse plight than her sister states. Now supposing, as we have been told, one third or, for purposes of argument, a full half of the feeble-minded are so through no fault of their ancestors, that leaves us still twenty-five hundred who may fairly be assumed to have inherited that dreadful difficulty. Can you imagine Vermont supporting an institution eight times as large as the school at Brandon? Is it possible that during our lifetime the state could possibly spend as much as that would require? But if it should, that would take care of only those who can be assumed to have come upon their unfortunate condition by accident or childhood sickness. The Psychiatric Clinic, the special class, the carefully supervised institution are all most necessary tools to use in combating defectiveness in the community.

Dr. Allen suggested the use of this expression "tool" and I think it an excellent one. Another tool which is already proving very effective is Eugenical Sterilization.

It is obvious, then, that there is no possible chance during the next decade of increasing the facilities enough to segregate anywhere nearly all of the feeble-minded in Vermont during the next decade, if it is ever possible to do this. There will always be a considerable number for whom there is not room in institutions and who yet are a source of expense and trouble to the communities and to the state. The question is: Why not use another tool that has been found to be effective, and thereby lessen the danger to the community from having these people at large?

There are twenty-three states which have sterilization laws.

In all but one, compulsory sterilization is required under very careful supervision, and in the majority of these states, it is for eugenic purposes and not for additional punishment. Considerably more than six thousand people, nearly equally divided between the sexes, have been sterilized in accordance with these laws.

Of those who have submitted to the working of the sterilization laws, it is very interesting to learn that a very large number—fifty per cent during recent years in California where the bulk of the sterilizing has been done—have either asked for the treatment or submitted to it voluntarily. In a great number of cases it has been asked for.

The person realized his social inadequacy and was unwilling to pass on his defects to future generations. In many cases in which the person was mentally incompetent, his relatives have asked for the operation in order that he might be allowed to remain in the community at large instead of being shut up in an institution.

We are told that in our own school for feeble-minded, as in every such institution, there are adults, particularly women, who are well-behaved and capable perhaps of some measure of self-support. They can not be released on parole for the single reason that they would be a menace to the community because of the danger of their giving birth to defective children. For this reason alone it is thought best to keep them in the institution. They take the places that could be much better turned over to more serious cases, many of whom are always waiting a chance to be admitted.

The principal basis for any argument in favor of sterilization is contained in the last statement. It is not that sterilization will make institutions for the feeble-minded unnecessary. There will always be a need of such institutions and the better they can be made, the better for the community. It is the group of fairly decent subnormal people who are principally affected. There are those who are depraved and vicious who might well be subjected to sterilization were it possible to know certainly that they would pass on these traits to their offspring. However, it is the somewhat startling assurance of specialists that gives the greatest weight to a plea for sterilization. This statement is to the effect that feeble-mindedness is not always accompanied by depravity. Superintendents of institutions for feeble-minded state positively

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that they have among their patients, pupils, or inmates, some boys and girls, men and women, who are no more likely to be guilty of misdemeanors of sex than are the average run of the population at large. This is a surprise to most of us. We had always supposed that a feeble-minded boy or girl was pretty nearly certain to have a strong tendency to commit misdemeanors of that sort.

There is reason to believe that the greatly increased sentiment in favor of modern methods of handling these important questions has brought about a strong feeling in favor of even so radical a step as that of passing a sterilization bill. Wherever this subject is discussed persons come forward and show their intelligent interest in social problems. This becomes increasingly frequent as time goes on. More people are now reading and talking and thinking about social betterment and the improvement of the race than ever before. I believe that the time is ripe for the introduction of a bill permitting voluntary eugenical sterilization in Vermont, and I predict that during this session of the Legislature such a bill will make its appearance.

Rights of the Individual

The rights of the individual cannot be fully safeguarded when he is being compelled to support in the midst of his community the lawless, the immoral, the degenerate, and the mentally defective, unless these people are made a burden upon the community through no fault of their own or of those who make the laws and pay the taxes. We are beginning to know enough about human heredity, about the working of sterilization laws, to have a little courage and to undertake a much-needed reform. To make our state safe for decent citizens, to free the taxpayer from unnecessary burden in the support of the hereditarily defective, to place upon a self-respecting, self-supporting basis the largest possible percentage of our boys and girls,—these are the objects for which constructive social betterment measures ought to be passed.

STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF 22 PEDIGREES, JANUARY, 1927.

Pedigree Number	Number of Individuals	PAUPERS				FEEBLE-MINDED AND INSANE					
		State		Town	Total	Per Cent	In Institutions		Not In Institutions	Total	Per Cent
		Vermont	Other States				Vermont	Other States			
4	436	36	5	42	83	19	6	38	44	10	
2	100	23	2	25	83	83	2	20	23	23	
3	38	21	6	18	45	46	5	6	13	13	
6	233	15		40	55	18	4	11	15	5	
25	27	1		1	4						
13	360	23	6	17	51	14	10	16	26	7	
5	233	5		60	65	27	1	4	5	2	
17	103	6	7	13	13	13	4	5	6	15	
35	34	10		10	20	23					
38	21	10		8	16	31	3	3	6	12	
26	39	5		4	5	13	1	1	3	3	
54	93	17		4	21	23	2	5	7	8	
1	233	9		9	9	4	9	9	4	4	
24	22	6		1	7	32	5	5	23	23	
22	65	9		3	12	18	1	4	5	8	
50	16	2		7	7	46		1	1	6	
40	393	12	1	10	21	31	4	27	31	8	
32	26	7		7	7	27	5	5	19	19	
28	24	11	2		13	54	4	4	4	17	
14	26	9	3		12	21	4	4	4	7	
20	39	4		4	4	13	3	1	4	13	
27	12	4		4	4	33	4	4	4	33	
Totals	2761	255	32	269	556	—	78	7	142	227	

The statistics for the feeble-minded are undoubtedly much lower than they should be, because only those have been called feeble-minded and insane who have been tested or who have been so manifestly feeble-minded or insane that there seemed to be no question about it. There were very many other incompetents who are "not able to manage their affairs with ordinary prudence" and are undoubtedly feeble-minded.