

American Eugenics Society (1926-1972) ^[1]

By: Gur-Arie, Rachel Keywords: Eugenics ^[2]

The [American Eugenics Society](#) ^[3] (AES) was established in the US by Madison Grant, [Harry H. Laughlin](#) ^[4], Henry Crampton, Irving Fisher, and Henry F. Osborn in 1926 to promote [eugenics](#) ^[5] education programs for the US public. The AES described [eugenics](#) ^[5] as the study of improving the genetic composition of [humans](#) ^[6] through controlled reproduction of different races and classes of people. The AES aided smaller eugenic efforts such as the Galton Society in New York, New York, and the Race Betterment Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan, and it influenced eugenic policy set by the US Supreme Court in cases including *Buck v. Bell* (1927) and *Skinner v. Oklahoma* (1942). The AES was renamed the Society for the Study of Social Biology in 1972.

Before the formation of the AES, several other eugenic organizations helped lead to the AES. The increasing international interest in [eugenics](#) ^[5] from 1904 to 1926 spurred the Carnegie Institution of Washington in 1904 to create the Station for Experimental Evolution at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Geneticists Albert F. Blakeslee and Charles Davenport had helped establish the [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory](#) ^[7] in 1890. Davenport, the director of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, had connections to the [Eugenics Records Office](#) ^[8] (ERO), and later recruited Laughlin to serve as the ERO's director.

In 1906, John H. Kellogg, a medical doctor, founded the Race Betterment Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan. The Race Betterment Foundation sponsored three conferences between 1914 and 1928, culminating in the 1928 formation of a Eugenics Registry for family biological records. The American Museum of Natural History in New York, New York, financed the Galton Society. The Galton Society took its name after its founder [Francis Galton](#) ^[9], a UK eugenicist and cousin of [Charles Darwin](#) ^[10]. The Galton Society focused on racial anthropology and was involved with the [Eugenics Education Society](#) ^[11] in London, England, which played a major role in the 1908 foundation of the English Eugenics Society.

In 1912, Leonard Darwin, son of naturalist [Charles Darwin](#) [10], held the First International Congress of Eugenics in London. More than three hundred people from England, Europe, and the US attended his conference. The growing support for [eugenics](#) [5] in the next decade prompted the Eugenics Record Office of Cold Spring Harbor and the American Museum of Natural History to sponsor the 1921 Second International Congress of Eugenics in New York, New York. Scientist Alexander G. Bell served as honorary president. During the Second International Congress of Eugenics, Irving Fisher from [Yale University](#) [12] in New Haven, Connecticut, proposed the [American Eugenics Society](#) [3]. Fisher stressed a need for a widespread [eugenics](#) [5] education in the US. With that proposal, Osborn, president of the International Congress, appointed an Interim Committee that worked on the AES until its formal incorporation on 30 January 1926. Fisher served as the society's first president. Davenport, director of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, was the first vice president. Among the Society's presidents, Laughlin, who served as president from 1927 to 1929, promoted eugenical [sterilization](#) [13] in the early twentieth century US.

Multiple committees formed within the AES to target different aspects of eugenic education. Examples of such committees include the Committee on Crime Prevention, whose work pushed the Chicago Municipal Court in Chicago, Illinois, to publish Laughlin's [Eugenical Sterilization in the United States](#) [14]. The credibility of the AES increased due to the involvement of Clark Wister, curator of the anthropology section in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, New York, and Sewell Wright, a US geneticist.

From the 1920s to the 1930s, some of the AES's work was presented at state and local fairs. Contests called Fitter Family contests involved popular competitions between families and couples to determine who would produce the most [viable](#) [15] offspring based on physical appearance, behavior, intelligence, and health. Exhibits had flashing red lights to emphasize statistics of birth rates of able-bodied people compared to what organizers called degenerates. Statisticians claimed that while every sixteen seconds a child was born in the US, they also said that not all children were of the same caliber. According to the exhibits, a capable child was born every seven and a half minutes, whereas a feebleminded child every 48 seconds, and a future criminal every 50 seconds. To display potential economic benefits of adopting [eugenics](#) [5], the exhibits included the statistic that every fifteen seconds, one hundred dollars of taxpayer money went towards supporting mentally ill patients.

The goals and actions of the AES changed over the years, depending on different presidencies of the [organization](#) [16]. Henry F. Perkins, who was president from 1931 to 1933, worked with the Birth Control League, the predecessor of Planned Parenthood and a US sexual and reproductive healthcare center. Margaret Sanger, called Noal Slee at the time of membership, a member of the AES in 1956, established the American Birth Control League in 1921. The American Birth Control League became part of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1942. In the 1960s, president Harry Shapiro claimed that increasing the use of [birth control](#) [17] gave the potential to improve the quality of the US population.

During Perkins's presidency in 1932, the AES held the Third International Congress of Eugenics sponsored by the ERO and the American Museum of Natural History. Unlike the high attendance of the Second International Congress of Eugenics, seventy-three people attended the conference. After that conference, Perkins published *A Decade in the Progress of Eugenics*, and it partly noted that [eugenics](#) [5] theory had no empirical support to promote discrimination based on race and social class. The document also emphasized the study of

hereditary variations focusing on defects such as mental disability. Ellsworth Huntington from Yale University, who served as president of AES from 1934 to 1938, focused on hereditary defects and switched the AES's focus from positive [eugenics](#) [5] to negative [eugenics](#) [5]. Positive [eugenics](#) [5] maintains that superior families should produce more children. In contrast, negative [eugenics](#) [5] claims that degenerates should not have children. In his book *Tomorrow's Children: The Goal of Eugenics*, Huntington described the AES's new focus on negative [eugenics](#) [5].

In October of 1928, the AES launched its monthly journal *Eugenics*. At the time, *Eugenics* was the only journal in the world to promote research-based [eugenics](#) [5]. In 1930, the Galton Publishing Company took over the journal, but when the company closed in 1931, the journal was stopped. Eight years later in 1939, the monthly publication of *Eugenical News* was transferred from the Eugenics Research Association to the AES. From 1916 to 1953, *Eugenical News* was the primary source of eugenic-related events and news in the United States. In 1954, the AES launched *Eugenics Quarterly*, a journal focusing on hereditary defects in scientific research.

Peak membership of the AES was in 1930 with 1,260 members. Although New York, California, and Massachusetts were the states with the highest memberships, every state in the US had at least one member. The 1930 cohort of the AES consisted predominantly of wealthy men and women, and few scientific professionals from fields relating to [eugenics](#) [5]. However, in reaction to the eugenic atrocities of World War II, support for [eugenics](#) [5] and AES membership began to drop. By 1960, the AES has less than 400 members, most of whom were male scientists and medical professionals. After that time, the AES's focus shifted to genetic analysis and to the investigation of the factors driving human [evolution](#) [18].

The five Princeton conferences of 1964 to 1969 in Princeton, New Jersey, demonstrated a shared interest in human [evolution](#) [18] between geneticists and population specialists. From 1960 to 1970, the AES gathered together researchers from different disciplines and provided people with a place to discuss human [evolution](#) [18]. Scientists involved with the group noted that factors in social and physical environments influence heredity and human development. Researchers increasingly studied living conditions and lifestyle habits of people. In many large medical schools, there were facilities for medical genetic research, whereas newly established heredity counseling clinics served as the basis for modern genetic counseling centers. To define a new research focus, in 1969 the official publication of the AES switched its name from *Eugenics Quarterly* to *Social Biology*. In 1972, the AES was renamed the Society for the Study of Social Biology. The society stated that the name change did not align with a change in interest or policy, but better reflected the newfound common emphasis on the study of biological, social, and medical trends that shape human [evolution](#) [18].

As of 2014, the Society of Social Biology is also called the Society for Biodemography and Social Biology. The Society's journal, *Biodemography and Social Biology*, addresses the biological, social, and cultural influences on human population makeup from interdisciplinary fields including psychology, anthropology, genetics, and criminal justice. The Society of Social Biology has distanced itself from the AES.

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