Eugenical Sterilization in the United States (1922), by Harry H. Laughlin

By: Gur-Arie, Rachel

**Keywords:** Model Sterilization Law

---

Eugenical Sterilization in the United States (1922) is a 1922 book in which author Harry H. Laughlin argues for the necessity of compulsory sterilization in the United States based on the principles of eugenics. The eugenics movement of the early twentieth century in the US focused on altering the genetic make-up of the US population by regulating immigration and sterilization, and by discouraging inter-racial procreation, then called miscegenation. Published in December 1922 by the Psychopathy Laboratory of the Municipal Court of Chicago in Illinois, the book reports Laughlin’s analysis of how states could benefit from sterilizing their mentally disabled citizens, and it reprinted his model sterilization law, which he encouraged state governments to adopt. Laughlin’s model sterilization law stressed the need for the sterilization of populations that Laughlin deemed inadequate for reasons ranging from physical appearance to socioeconomic status. The document influenced twentieth century legislation in the US about reproduction and compulsory sterilization.

Laughlin was the superintendent and assistant director of the Eugenics Research Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, from 1910 to 1939, when the ERO closed. He collaborated with Charles Davenport, the director of the ERO. Although Laughlin suffered from epilepsy, he advocated for breeding out specific populations from the general population, including epileptics, the physically disabled, the mentally disabled, alcoholics, the blind, and the deaf. Albert Johnson, the chair of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization for the US Congress in Washington, DC, appointed Laughlin as the committee’s expert eugenics agent after Laughlin testified three times between 1920 and 1924 about eugenics. For his forthcoming Eugenical Sterilization in the United States, Laughlin’s congressional testimonies helped contribute to the passage of the US Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which restricted immigration into the United States to one-fifth of what it was before the passage of the bill, with particularly severe restrictions applying to immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.

Eugenical Sterilization in the United States begins with a table of empirical data about past government approaches to sterilization. Laughlin writes that he intended the book to serve as an accessible tool for policy makers, court judges, state administrative officers, and US citizens. The research referenced in the text began in 1911, and it took Laughlin greater than ten years to compile and publish his results.

Eugenical Sterilization in the United States is 502 pages long and has seventeen chapters. Harry Olson, the Chief Justice of Chicago’s Municipal Court, introduced the book, followed by a preface written by Laughlin. Chapters one through seven address sterilization statutes and practices per state. Chapter eight describes the family histories of people subject to sterilization. Chapter nine provides legal opinions from scholars, including Olson, and several attorneys general and lawyers. Chapter ten discusses moral implications when a state limits reproduction in the name of eugenics. While chapter eleven describes how a eugenic diagnosis is administered, chapter twelve describes sterilization procedures in males and females. A collection of anatomical illustrations and human pedigrees, which are genealogical trees of different peoples and families, are dispersed throughout the work.

The book covers subjects related to sterilization laws, ranging from human rights in chapter five, to the physical and mental side effects of sterilization in chapter thirteen, to objections to sterilization laws in chapter fourteen, to Laughlin’s Model Sterilization Law in chapters fifteen and sixteen. Chapter seventeen concludes the work by providing paperwork to state eugenicists, courts, citizens, and prisons to properly execute Laughlin’s Model Sterilization Law.

Chapter five, “Analysis of the Sterilization Laws by Subject,” argues that states should pass sterilization laws in chapter thirteen, to objections to sterilization laws in chapter fourteen, to Laughlin’s Model Sterilization Law in chapters fifteen and sixteen. Chapter seventeen concludes the work by providing paperwork to state eugenicists, courts, citizens, and prisons to properly execute Laughlin’s Model Sterilization Law.

Chapter five, “Analysis of the Sterilization Laws by Subject,” argues that states should pass sterilization laws in chapter thirteen, to objections to sterilization laws in chapter fourteen, to Laughlin’s Model Sterilization Law in chapters fifteen and sixteen. Chapter seventeen concludes the work by providing paperwork to state eugenicists, courts, citizens, and prisons to properly execute Laughlin’s Model Sterilization Law.

The book provides an accessible tool for policy makers, court judges, state administrative officers, and US citizens. The research referenced in the text began in 1911, and it took Laughlin greater than ten years to compile and publish his results.

---

**Sources**

Eugenic Sterilization in the United States is a 1922 book in which author Harry H. Laughlin argues for the necessity of compulsory sterilization in the United States based on the principles of eugenics. The eugenics movement of the early twentieth century in the US focused on altering the genetic makeup of the US population by regulating immigration and sterilization, and by discouraging interracial procreation, then called miscegenation. Published in December 1922 by the Psychopathic Laboratory of the Municipal Court of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois, the book reports Laughlin's analysis of how states could benefit from sterilizing their mentally disabled residents, and it reprinted his model sterilization law, which he encouraged state governments to adopt. Laughlin's model sterilization law stressed the need for the sterilization of populations that Laughlin deemed inadequate for reasons ranging from physical appearance to socioeconomic status. The document influenced twentieth century legislation in the US about reproduction and compulsory sterilization.

**Subject**
- Eugenics
- Involuntary sterilization
- Heredity
- Laughlin, Harry Hamilton, 1880-1943
- Eugenics Record Office
- Immigration
- Johnson, Albert, 1869-1957
- Cold Spring Harbor Biological Laboratory
- United States. Immigration Act of 1924
- Sterilization

**Topic**
- Outreach
- Legal
- Ethics
- Publications

**Publisher**
Arizona State University. School of Life Sciences. Center for Biology and Society. Embryo Project Encyclopedia.

**Rights**
Copyright Arizona Board of Regents Licensed as Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0) http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/

**Format**
Articles

**Last Modified**
Wednesday, July 4, 2018 - 04:40

**DC Date Accessed**
Thursday, August 13, 2015 - 00:40

**DC Date Available**
Thursday, August 13, 2015 - 00:40

**DC Date Created**
2015-08-12

**DC Date Created Standard**
Wednesday, August 12, 2015 - 07:00

- Contact Us

© 2019 Arizona Board of Regents
- The Embryo Project at Arizona State University, 1711 South Rural Road, Tempe Arizona 85287, United States

**Source URL:** https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/eugenical-sterilization-united-states-1922-harry-h-laughlin

**Links**
5. https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=Laughlin%20Work
17. https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?q=Vina%20Sterilization%20Act%20of%201924&hl=en&as_sdt=806&case=1700304772065702914&pg=PA971#v=onepage&q&f=false