

[Human Betterment Foundation \(1928-1942\)](#) ^[1]

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In 1928 Ezra Seymour Gosney founded the non-profit Human Betterment Foundation (HBF) in Pasadena, California to support the research and publication of the personal and social effects of eugenic sterilizations carried out in California. Led by director Gosney and secretary Paul Popenoe, the HBF collected data on thousands of individuals in California who had been involuntarily sterilized under a California state law enacted in 1909. The Foundation's assets were liquidated following Gosney's death in 1942. In 1943, Gosney's daughter donated the remaining assets to the [California Institute of Technology](#) ^[4] (Caltech) in Pasadena, California to establish the Gosney research fund for biological research. Between 1928 and 1942, the HBF published extensively on what they believed to be the benefits of [sterilization](#) ^[5] to both patient and society. The HBF and its members existed within the larger context of the American [eugenics movement](#) ^[6] and scientific institutions, including the Eugenics Record Office at [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory](#) ^[7] in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, which bolstered the movement's goals of the control of human reproduction and human heredity. Moreover, the model [sterilization](#) ^[5] legislation written by the HBF was disseminated throughout the world to [eugenics](#) ^[8] enthusiasts eager to pass laws limiting the reproduction of people they considered to be unfit.

The impetus for the creation of the HBF came from Gosney, a citrus magnate who had become interested in the benefits of selective breeding through his work in the Arizona Wool Growers Association, then in Flagstaff, Arizona, and in the development of lemon and orange groves around Los Angeles, California. During the mid-1920s, after reading the 1922 [Eugenical Sterilization in the United States](#) ^[9], written by Harry Laughlin from the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, Gosney met with Laughlin to get advice on forming an [organization](#) ^[10] in California to promote eugenic [sterilization](#) ^[5]. Laughlin advised Gosney to recruit a scientist to help stay abreast of recent developments in human genetics. In 1925, Gosney invited biologist Paul Popenoe to contribute his ideas to the [organization](#) ^[10]. Popenoe, a former student of David Starr Jordan, who worked at [Stanford University](#) ^[11] in Stanford, California, managed the [Journal of Heredity](#) ^[12] and served as a health officer at the US-Mexican border during [World War I](#) ^[13]. In addition, Popenoe shared Gosney's view that charity was counterproductive, as it allowed those perceived as less fit to reproduce and pass on their poor traits. Popenoe suggested that the HBF publish reports on the data collected from the four to five thousand people who had already been sterilized in state institutions under a 1909 California state law.

The HBF was incorporated in 1928 with a founding membership that included Californians from a wide range of professions. [Stanford University](#) ^[11] president and ichthyologist David Starr Jordan and Sacramento philanthropist Charles Goethe were members of the first Board of Directors. Later members of the Board included Robert Millikan, a Nobel Prize winner and Chair of the Executive Board of nearby Caltech, and Lewis Terman, a psychologist from [Stanford University](#) ^[11]'s School of Education who developed intelligence tests. These leaders helped to initiate the California branch of the [American Eugenics Society](#) ^[14] and the American Institute of Family Relations, with the direction of Popenoe. The HBF also produced numerous public lectures and articles written in daily newspapers, helping to disseminate their message of better breeding and controlled reproduction.

The research on human heredity at the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor, with the leadership of Charles Davenport, supported the HBF's advocacy of eugenic [sterilization](#) ^[5]. Beginning in 1910, summer researchers from the ERO had travelled across the US to collect data on family lineages by conducting house-to-house surveys and looking through records from prisons, almshouses, and institutions for the deaf, blind and mentally deficient or ill. Researchers who studied human behavior and intelligence at that time used categories that later became widely discredited, commonly referring to various groups as imbeciles, feeble-minded and mentally deficient. They argued that intelligence tests, including the Binet IQ test, were accurate measures of both intelligence and character, and that these traits had a genetic, and not an environmental origin. Davenport and ERO director Laughlin further argued for the heritability of traits like criminality, promiscuity, and mental deficiency. During the 1920s, their arguments, and Laughlin's own public advocacy of eugenic [sterilization](#) ^[5] and immigration quotas, supported the claims of the HBF that involuntary [sterilization](#) ^[5] was both scientifically sound and humane.

Prior to the official [organization](#) ^[10] of the HBF, Popenoe, with the financial support of Gosney, had traveled throughout California visiting the state's institutions for what he considered to be the mentally ill and defective. During his trip, he collected case histories, and statistical and demographic information about the patients. He reported that as many as twenty-five percent of the female inmates at Sonoma State Hospital had been sterilized as a condition of their release back into society.

This research set the HBF's agenda for the next decade, during which Popenoe published dozens of articles in scientific journals. This work culminated in the 1929 *Sterilization for Human Betterment: a summary of results of 6000 operations in California, 1909-1929*, co-authored by Popenoe and Gosney and published by the HBF. Historian Alexandra Minna Stern argues that this text of the HBF communicated the urgency of [sterilization](#) ^[5] to a national and international audience, claiming that at least five percent of the population needed eugenic [sterilization](#) ^[5] due to feeble-mindedness or mental illness. The HBF's leaders

argued that [sterilization](#)^[5] should never be conducted as punishment for crimes, contrary to many state laws that used [sterilization](#)^[5] on prison inmates incarcerated for sexual crimes. Rather, building from the justification laid out by the US Supreme Court Justice [Oliver Wendell Holmes](#)^[15] Jr. in the 1927 case *Buck v. Bell*, they argued that eugenic [sterilization](#)^[5] should be viewed as a preventative measure similar to vaccination.

Under the auspices of the HBF, Popenoe used his research about involuntary [sterilization](#)^[5] to counter critics' arguments that female salpingectomy, the cutting of the Fallopian tube, and that male vasectomy, the severing of the Vas Deferens, interfered with the sexual desires or personal happiness of patients. The HBF argued in newspaper articles aimed at the Catholic Church and other opponents of these surgeries that the [sterilization](#)^[5] of inmates in state institutions would increase their happiness. Their [sterilization](#)^[5] would nullify the danger of their reproductive capacity in society and allow them to return home. These arguments complimented the interests of many Progressive-era reformers who feared that the state's resources were being overwhelmed by the growing tide of mentally ill and deficient immigrants and poor classes. Relying on Popenoe's research and the support of its Board of Directors, the HBF backed two draft bills in 1935 and 1937 to establish a state [eugenics](#)^[8] board and to extend the [sterilization](#)^[5] procedures to all state institutions.

According to historian Alexandra Minna Stern, the HBF was successful in its aim of spreading eugenic [sterilization](#)^[5]. The number of sterilizations in California peaked at 848 in 1939 and more than fifteen thousand sterilizations were performed between 1909 and 1942, with the majority performed after 1925. Popenoe, using statistics compiled by social workers, argued that foreign-born Californians, especially Mexican immigrants, had the largest families and took a disproportionate amount of state charity. Popenoe here echoed the racist claims of Madison Grant in 1916's *The Passing of the Great Race*. He concluded that Mexicans and other immigrants with large families were not only a drain on state services, but also that they were out-reproducing the Protestant white stock. These ideas fit into the broader context of immigration issues during the Great Depression of the 1930s and heightened immigration control at the US-Mexico border.

The HBF also maintained a close relationship with Germany during the Nazi regime, until the outbreak of World War II. The [organization](#)^[10]'s model [sterilization](#)^[5] legislation and research publications were used by the Nazi's to craft their own Law on Preventing Hereditarily Ill Progeny in 1933. In addition, the HBF corresponded with [eugenics](#)^[8] enthusiasts throughout the world, disseminating their literature to India, Jamaica, Mexico, Japan and other countries interested in eugenic [sterilization](#)^[5].

In 1942, with Gosney's death, the holdings of the HBF were liquidated and transferred to Caltech. The Gosney research fund in the Division of Biology was set up to encourage research on problems of human heredity and welfare and to fund post-doctoral research. By the 1940s, researchers began raising questions about the efficacy of eugenic [sterilization](#)^[5]. In particular, the biologist and statistician Raymond Pearl, who worked at [Johns Hopkins University](#)^[16] in Baltimore, Maryland, used statistical analysis of recessive [genes](#)^[17] to offer an early critique of [sterilization](#)^[5] laws. He argued that a piecemeal approach to the control of reproduction would take hundreds, if not thousands, of years to effect any great change in the character of the population. Later, in 1946, [Theodosius Dobzhansky](#)^[18] and Leslie Clarence Dunn, both biologists working at [Columbia University](#)^[19] in New York City, New York, wrote *Heredity*^[12], *Race and Society*. In 1949, UNESCO produced the *Statement on Race and Race Differences*. Both works critiqued the biological concept of race and aligned the study of human heredity with newer theories in population genetics, undermining any practical use for [sterilization](#)^[5].

The legacy of the HBF continued, however, with Popenoe's second career as a marriage counselor and his popular column in *Ladies Home Journal* titled "Can this marriage be saved?" Popenoe reframed his concern that unfit couples would produce offspring out of wedlock, and he instead encouraged white Americans to get married and create families.

Involuntary sterilizations in California continued to be legally performed, particularly on women of color. For example, in the early 1970s, it was revealed that Mexican-American and African-American women in East Los Angeles had been sterilized without their knowledge at the Los Angeles County General Hospital in Los Angeles, California. In 1978, seventy years after the enactment of [sterilization](#)^[5] legislation in California, the California State Assembly voted unanimously to remove the legislation from the books, and the women who had been sterilized in Los Angeles sued the County Hospital in the case, *Madrigal v. Quilligan*.

The Human Betterment Foundation played a key role in the history of [eugenics](#)^[8] and [sterilization](#)^[5] in California, the US, and many other countries. By basing its claims in the language of statistics and defending the theory that character and behavior were rooted in biological, heritable sources, the HBF spread their agenda of [sterilization](#)^[5] throughout the state and around the world. With the guidance of Popenoe, Gosney and other prominent philanthropists, business leaders and scientists argued that the control of reproduction was crucial to the survival of their vision of society. As a consequence, the HBF encouraged the eugenic [sterilization](#)^[5] of tens of thousands of individuals.

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