

## One Historical Justification for Institutions

[Note: During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, misunderstandings about the new science of genetics led some scientists and policy-makers to believe that there was a particular “germ plasm” that caused moral and intellectual weaknesses and that preventing the spread of this genetic weakness could be addressed by keeping individuals with disabilities and others believed to carry this negative gene separate from society and by sterilizing anyone who might be carriers of the gene.]

### Excerpt from “The Burden of Feeble-Mindedness”

*by W.E. Fernald (1912)*

In the light of our present knowledge, the only way to reduce the number of the feeble-minded is to prevent their birth. The perpetuation of defective family stocks should be inhibited. This would be possible to a great extent if every feeble-minded person and potential "carrier" of the defective germ plasm could be prevented from parenthood. There is already a strong popular demand for the logical and thorough application of our present knowledge of the laws of morbid heredity in the way of prevention. Massachusetts has begun the policy of the segregation of the feeble-minded, especially those of childbearing age. This segregation carried on thoroughly for a generation would largely reduce the amount of feeble-mindedness. The high-grade female imbecile group is the most dangerous class. They are not capable of becoming desirable or safe members of the community. They are never able to support themselves. They are certain to become sexual offenders and to spread venereal disease or to give birth to degenerate children. Their numerous progeny usually become public charges as diseased or neglected children, imbeciles, epileptics, juvenile delinquents or later on as adult paupers or criminals. The segregation of this class should be rapidly extended until all not adequately guarded at home are placed under strict sexual quarantine. Hundreds of known cases of this sort are now at large because the institutions are overcrowded.

Only 2,000 feeble-minded persons are now cared for in institutions in Massachusetts, and over 1,000 applicants are awaiting admission to the institutions. There is an urgent demand for greatly increased institutional provision for this class. The cost of this provision will be great, but not as great as the present cost of caring for these same persons, to say nothing of their progeny, in future generations. It would cost less money, be more economical in social life and of immense value morally. These people are never self-supporting, but are eventually supported by the public in some way. From the economic stand-point alone no other investment could be so profitable, not even in canals or railroad or factories. The present generation is the trustee for the inherent quality as well as for the material welfare of future generations.

In a few years the expense of institutions and farm colonies for the feeble-minded will be counterbalanced by the reduction in the population of almshouses, prisons and other expensive institutions. When the feeble-minded are recognized in childhood and trained properly many of them are capable of being supported at low cost under institution

supervision.

Not that we regard the institution as the panacea for feeble-mindedness. If adequate institution provision were available today, it would not be feasible to secure the detention of large numbers of defectives, and those the most dangerous class, where parents or friends are unable or unwilling to see the necessity for such segregation. We have no laws compelling this action. The Anglo-Saxon respect for the liberty of the individual would make it difficult to enact laws compelling such custody. This difficulty could be approached by the suggested registration of the feeble-minded which would afford a basis for some sort of extra-institutional supervision and control. The observed misconduct and incapacity of many of these people would soon show the need of legal provision for their forcible segregation.

*Retrieved from The Disability History Museum: [Text of The Burden of Feeble-Mindedness 1912.](#)*