The Feeble-Minded: The Need of Research

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Eight years ago, in concluding my address before the Minneapolis session of this Conference, I stated:

Feeble-mindedness produces more pauperism, degeneracy and crime than any other one force. It touches every form of charitable activity. It is felt in every part of our land. It affects in some way all our people. Its cost is beyond our comprehension. It is the unappreciated burden of the unfortunate. It is a burden we are compelled to bear; therefore, let us bear it intelligently, to the end that the chain of evil may be lessened, the weak cared for, and the future brighter with hope because of our effort.

"Ye who are strong must bear the infirmities of the weak."

We know more now. We need to know still more.

The increase of our knowledge concerning the feeble-minded has served only to emphasize the points made. From home and school, from country and city, come additional appeals for help for these unfortunates. The demands upon our overcrowded institutions have become more importunate, until those of us who are connected with this branch of the public service are greatly troubled as to what can be done. No state has made provision for the larger part of its feeble-minded population. Some have done nothing at all. None has done its full duty toward these needy ones.

The urgent necessity for more institutions is clear. At the same time there is ground for serious concern in the steady demand for additional provision, not only for mental defectives, but for all classes of public wards. Just how many persons are now on public support we do not know, but the number is undoubtedly more than one million. We have the Bureau of the Census as authority for the statement that five years ago there were, in round numbers, 136,000 persons in penal and correctional institutions, jails and workhouses; 187,000 in hospitals for the insane; 20,000 in institutions for the feeble-minded; 84,000 in almshouses; 412,000 in various kinds of benevolent institutions.

Heavy as is this institution burden, there is an equally heavy one outside. The general public, unfortunately, has not under-

1 Bulletin 121, page 8.
3 Ibid., page 80.
4 Paupers In Almshouses (1910), page 47.
5 Benevolent Institutions (1910), page 68.
stood this. Lacking the statistics, it is not surprising that the institution population has been taken, largely, as the measure of our burden of dependence, defectiveness and delinquency.

Take the single problem of pauperism. In Indiana, if I may use my own state as an illustration, there has never been a time since poor asylums were established (1821) that it was not easily possible to learn the number of inmates. It was not until 1896, however, that we had even the slightest idea of the number of persons who received public aid in their own homes. That we had 3,000 persons in our asylums aroused little interest. That for every person in an asylum there were at least twenty-five on the lists of the overseers of the poor, which we discovered from the first reports under our outdoor relief law of 1895, caused our leading newspapers to print column after column, with big headlines: “Is Indiana a State of Paupers?”

The same thing is true of our penal and correctional institutions. They deal with but a handful, compared with the enormous number of offenders who pass through the courts, to say nothing of those who go undiscovered and unpunished of law. Our institutions for mental defectives are crowded, yet they are caring for but a small proportion of that class.

There is no one thing to which we can point as the cause of all this anti-social condition. Certain it is, however, that feeble-mindedness is back of a very great amount of it.

In the presentation of a scientific proposition it is essential that one know his problem and state it correctly before proceeding with its discussion or solution. Do we know the problem of the feeble-minded? In some of its aspects we do; in others we do not. We know something of what feeble-mindedness is its conditions, causes, results; we understand some things that can be done to prevent it; we have learned how to educate, train, improve and care for its progeny.

There is much that we do not know, chiefly, perhaps, its extent and gravity. True, we have the results of valuable studies in several directions by competent investigators. The work of untrained, inexperienced persons in this field is valueless. In fact, a considerable amount is published that is inaccurate, therefore harmful. What we need is a thorough investigation in every state, and data that are accurate and reliable.

The operations of the compulsory school attendance law have brought forcibly to our notice both the community and the educational problem involved in feeble-mindedness. Children within a prescribed age have been forced into school and the regular schools are not able to care properly for them. The feeble-minded boy or girl, unrestrained in a community, particularly in a town, threatens the home. A single feeble-minded girl among a group of young boys becomes a plague-spot, the con-
sequences of which are frightful. The spread of venereal disease by mental defectives is well known. Feeble-minded boys become the butt of the neighborhood. They are led into pranks, frequently into vices, and often find their way to a state institution. Of 229 boys who entered the Indiana Boys' School in 1914, 141, or 62 per cent., when tested by the Binet system and the Goddard form-board, were found to be feeble-minded to a greater or less degree.

Many orphans' homes know the trouble caused by this class of children and the injustice to others of forced association with them. From their records helpful knowledge is often to be had of personal and family histories.

Of the close relation between feeble-mindedness and pauperism, there is conclusive evidence. Statistics of Indiana poor asylums indicate a percentage of 26.9 of feeble-mindedness, while feeble-mindedness, insanity or epilepsy is reported in 43 per cent. of the inmates. In Missouri as investigation of almshouse conditions resulted in the conclusion that nearly half the almshouse population is mentally defective and that is the opinion expressed also by Dr. H. H. Goddard.

Recent studies of official outdoor relief have given additional information regarding feeble-minded persons and families receiving public aid. Of 199 cases recently studied in Missouri, 37 per cent. gave evidence of mental defectiveness either in the beneficiaries or in their dependents and the conclusion was reached that county money encourages such persons to live at large and propagate their kind, or at least makes it possible for them to do so."

That feeble-mindedness enters largely into the problem of commercialized vice is becoming more and more apparent. Miss Miner characterizes it as the most important individual cause of that great evil. Many competent judges estimate that 50 per cent. of prostitutes are mentally abnormal.

It is from institutions for the feeble-minded that most of the evidence has come. For example, there are two children in the School for Feeble-Minded Youth at Fort Wayne, members of a degenerate family whose history is one of crime and immorality, alcoholism, disease, mental defectiveness, illegitimacy, paup-

2Report Ind. Bd. State Char., 1914, p. 149.
3Rect. St. Ed. Char. and Cor., 1911-12, p. 70.
5Warfield: Outdoor Relief in Missouri, p. 84.
6Ibid, p. 4.
7N. Y. State Char. Aid. Asm.: Outdoor Relief in Dutchess County.
perism. We have information, more or less extensive, regarding 477 members of this one family, representing seven generations.

The mentality of delinquents, also, is being studied, with valuable results. Dr. Goddard estimates that from 25 per cent. to 50 per cent. of the people in our prisons are mentally defective and incapable of managing their affairs with ordinary prudence\(^1\). Of 374 men examined at the Indiana State Prison, 90, or 24 per cent., gave a personal history and 111, or 29 per cent., a family history of mental defect\(^2\). There are some who go to the extent of saying that from 70 to 95 per cent. of prisoners are feeble-minded. We do not know the definitions and standards used by those who reach these conclusions. One thing, however, I think is sure,—we are not doing our cause any good by publishing extreme statements. On the contrary, we are hindering it. Already the courts are beginning to question. Some say, "You would have us believe that every person who commits a crime is irresponsible." I want to say emphatically we must have the courts with us in this work.

Every accurate piece of work in this field is worth while. Valuable material is accumulating, the result of studies by trained and experienced investigators in schools and universities, in institutions for mental defectives and delinquents, and in different laboratories. The laboratories at Cold Spring Harbor and at Vineland represent the best we have. The information which has been collected from these different lines of social activity but emphasizes the need of research. It should extend to all parts of our land, and the net result should be a mass of facts that will form the basis for future study and proper action. The whole public must realize its burden and awaken to its responsibility.

The latest expression on this subject, prepared by our friends at Vineland, was presented at a meeting at the residence of Mrs. E. H. Harriman in New York, a few weeks ago. The meeting was called to consider whether the time was ripe for a nationwide propaganda for their care. The importance of this was recognized and for the present the Training School at Vineland was asked to undertake the work\(^3\). I give in substance the statement referred to:

The most conservative estimate of the number of feeble-minded in this country is one in every five hundred of the population. This means 200,000. About one-tenth of this number are receiving proper care. At least two-thirds of the feeble-minded have inherited their feeble-mindedness\(^4\). The average number of children born in a family is four, whereas in these degenerate families we find 7.3 each, and if the still-born children are included, the disproportion is still more striking, as the average number of children born in each family is brought up to 8.4\(^5\).

\(^2\)Ind. State Prison: Report, 1913, p. 34.
\(^3\)The National Committee on Provision for the Feeble-minded has since been organized and the work turned over to it.
Sixty-two per cent. of all cases committed to our inebriate homes are either insane or mentally defective. Of 300 prostitutes fifty-one per cent. were feeble-minded. All doubtful cases were recorded as normal. Not more than six of the entire number seemed to have really good minds. It is highly probable that at least fifty per cent. of the inmates of our almshouses are feeble-minded. One study of the mentality of truants shows upwards of eighty per cent. of them feeble-minded. Many different studies show from forty-six per cent. (Rahway, N. J.) to eighty-nine per cent. (Geneva, Ill.) of reformatory inmates to be feeble-minded. If these statements should be taken at only half their value, they still show a condition important enough to need prompt action.

These things we believe. The evidence gathered shows they are probably understated. They serve as a basis for our work. They offer a just cause for our appeal to the public. But of the highest importance is more facts, greater knowledge, scientific research. With a modification of emphasis this is as true of the insane and epileptic as of the feeble-minded.

When we view the number of the feeble-minded, their fecundity, their lack of control, the menace they are, the degradation they cause, the degeneracy they perpetuate, the suffering and misery and crime they spread,—these are the burden we must bear. We cannot escape. We should bear it aright. We need more strength, more wisdom, more help, more light.

\[\text{Author's Note: Since writing the above, I have had the privilege of reading the excellent report of the New Hampshire Commission, prepared by Mrs. Frank S. Streeter. I feel that special attention should be called to it to the end that other states may be inspired by it to similar activities.}\]

Membership in the Conference: Since its organization in 1874 this leading national association of social workers has sought to raise the standards of social service. Its annual meeting lasts a week and has an attendance of 2,000 to 2,500 and more delegates. All those interested in the high purposes of the Conference are cordially invited to join. Annual dues $3.00. Members receive all publications free.

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