

## **Bre Anne Briskey**

**Title:** “‘The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions:’ Eugenic Advocates in Indiana”

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**Bre Anne Briskey** is a third-year Chapman Scholar, majoring in history and psychology. She is a member of Alpha Sigma Alpha, Phi Kappa Phi, Psi Chi, The National Society of Leadership and Success, and the current president of Phi Eta Sigma. Bre Anne is participating in the Honor Program at IPFW where she has earned the Honors Pin and is a member of its student group, the HonorDons. Bre Anne presented her statistics research project at the 2015 Student Research Symposium along with presenting at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Undergraduate History Conference. Her historical interests consist of a wide array of topics, including Tudor England, Mexico, and the history of science and medicine. After graduating from IPFW, Bre Anne plans on attending graduate school.

### **Abstract**

During the twentieth century, the ideology of eugenics – improving the population either through restricting certain groups from reproducing and/or encouraging the reproduction of other groups – became popular worldwide. In the United States, Indiana led this movement. On March 9, 1907, the sixty-fifth regular session of Indiana’s General Assembly voted and passed the first sterilization law in the United States. The policy’s makers wanted to restrict the reproduction of society’s “undesirables,” i.e. the “mentally defective” and criminals. Despite one’s initial reaction to this law, that lawmakers wanted to punish and oppress certain members of society from reproducing, this is not the case. The advocates behind Indiana’s 1907 sterilization law, which included people in the medical field and clergy, did not view the law as punishment, but rather as a tool to help society’s downtrodden and society in general. They believed that cycles of poverty and neglect would be prevented. Potential children would be spared from inheriting their parents’ genes for crime or mental deficiencies. Advocates believed that sterilization benefited the patients. Harry Sharp asserted that after sterilization, “you improve both his [the patient’s] physical and his mental condition. Is there any brutality in this? Is it cruel or inhuman?” Even though advocates of the 1907 Sterilization law viewed it as beneficial to society and constitutional, the Indiana Supreme Court ruled it as unconstitutional in 1921. However, the age of eugenics in Indiana did not end with this ruling; Indiana passed multiple sterilization laws over the course of the twentieth century. Only in the 1970s were the sterilization laws repealed. Indiana’s main sterilization law, passed in 1927 after the repeal of the 1907 law, received several amendments that allowed for its longevity. Indiana finally revoked the 1927 sterilization law in 1974 due to the emergence of new viewpoints regarding people’s rights. Eugenics in Indiana resulted from eugenicists’ genuine belief by that they were helping society’s downtrodden.

### **Bibliographical Note**

This project utilized a combination of primary and secondary sources. A majority of the primary sources focused on contemporaries’ perspectives regarding Indiana’s early eugenic policies; positions opposing Indiana’s eugenics policies were analyzed along with advocates’ viewpoints.

Additionally, included in this project are the original eugenic laws in Indiana, along with the rationale and medical procedures behind these sterilization laws. Several of the secondary sources analyzed the historical origins of Indiana's eugenic policies along with the general context of eugenics in the United States during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Along with examining the motivation behind the advocacy for eugenic policies by various groups, several of the secondary sources examined the groups impacted from Indiana's sterilization laws.