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Youth of Color and California's Carceral State: The Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility

Miroslava Chávez-García

The Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility, originally known as Whittier State School when it opened in 1891, lies dormant as a result of massive California state budget cuts in the early 2000s. Though the facility is closed, its history remains alive, intimately tied to the early practices of the emerging carceral state in California. Beginning in the 1910s, with the support of Gov. Hiram Johnson and under the guidance of the progressive reformer and newly appointed facility superintendent Fred C. Nelles, Whittier State School used a rigorous science- and scientific-research-based approach in determining the causes of delinquency among its young incarcerated population. Relying on leading thinkers and practitioners in the nascent fields of psychology, education, social work, and eugenics, state officials implemented the latest tools and techniques—namely, intelligence testing and fieldwork—to understand and contain the sources of juvenile crime. To aid in the interpretation of the research, officials also drew on the latest ideas about and ideologies of race, intelligence, heredity, and crime. Those Whittier State School residents classified through this process as “normal” and “borderline normal” remained in the institution and received individualized attention, while those considered beyond the assistance of the program were labeled “feeble-minded” and “defective” and farmed out to alternative sites of imprisonment or simply returned home, leaving Nelles with what he considered a group of pliable juvenile inmates. Nelles’s winnowing process proved successful. Within a few years of its founding, Whittier State School became known nationally and internationally as a premiere site of rehabilitative confinement.¹

Nelles’s achievement in implementing the new policies and practices took a toll, though, on the most vulnerable inmates: the impoverished and poorly educated racial and ethnic minorities (in particular Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans). In poking and probing juvenile inmates’ intelligence, heredity, and environment, state officials labeled a generation of youths of color as “feeble-minded delinquents” whose biology or race linked them to criminality. That most Mexican youths who took the in-

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¹ For a work that extends the themes covered in this essay, see Miroslava Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System* (Berkeley, 2012).

telligence tests or responded to the fieldwork questionnaires often had little command of English or that most of those who performed poorly had received a substandard education or no schooling at all did not matter. Scientific thought of the day held that low intelligence and related physical deficiencies or “dysgenic traits” resulted from inherited and genetic differences, not from cultural biases inherent in the investigative process. To deal with many of these young people, state officials imprisoned them in state hospitals where they faced permanent care and sterilization.²

Using scientific research methods to identify, predict, and suppress crime is not unusual today in the fields of criminology, penology, crime mapping, and statistics. One century ago, however, the use of science-based investigations was the latest innovation in the fight against rising deviance in an increasingly urbanized, industrialized, and ethnically and racially diverse society. Public leaders, prison officials, judges, lawyers, intellectuals, social workers, and other progressives viewed science—especially its use in the containment of criminals and the eradication of crime—as the cure for society’s ills. In embracing and harnessing the power of scientific thought, state officials nurtured the emerging carceral state, giving rise to a complex, research-based criminal justice system in California.

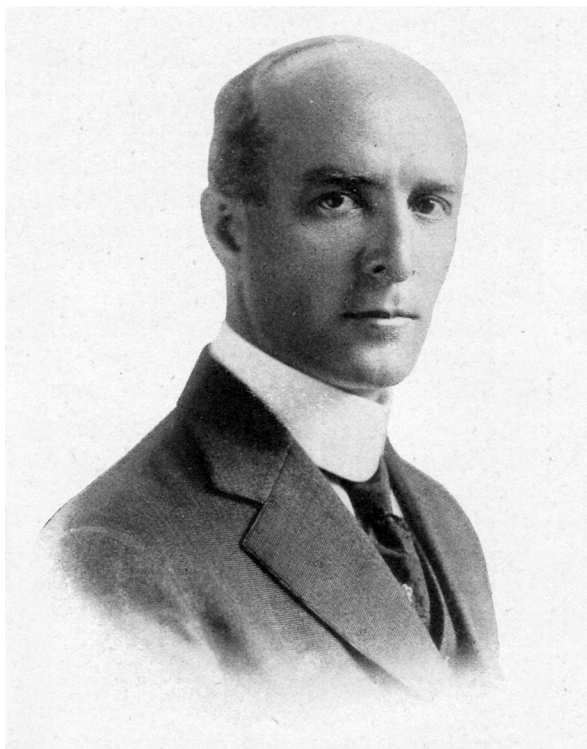
To explore the roots of that development, this essay relies on more than two hundred case histories for Mexican, Mexican American, and African American youths, detailing the role of eugenics-based fieldwork in linking notions of intelligence, crime, heredity, and race. I begin by tracing the origins and development of eugenics in Europe and the United States and its impact on nonwhite immigrant people. Next, I examine the role of East Coast-trained fieldworkers in carrying out the study at Whittier State School, paying specific attention to those employed by the California Bureau of Juvenile Research (CBJR), which oversaw the study. Finally, I look at the ideologies and practices that fieldworkers and other scientific researchers used in their investigations and how these scientists racialized, criminalized, and pathologized Mexican, Mexican American, and African American youths. Ultimately, pervasive and deep-rooted beliefs about race, science, and crime—powerful seeds in the development of the carceral state in California—kept youths of color vulnerable to confinement.³

The Origins of Eugenics Fieldwork in the United States

Training in eugenics fieldwork occurred as part of the rapid expansion of eugenics-based ideologies and practices across the United States in the early twentieth century. The field of eugenics was developed in the late nineteenth century in England by Charles Darwin’s

² On contemporary beliefs about the inheritance of dysgenic traits and for discussion of eugenics in the criminal justice system, see Amy LaPan and Tony Platt, “‘To Stem the Tide of Degeneracy’: The Eugenic Impulse in Social Work,” in *Mental Disorders in the Social Environment: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Stuart A. Kirk (New York, 2005), 139–64; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley, 2004); Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America* (New York, 2001); Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); and Philip R. Reilly, *The Surgical Solution: A History of Involuntary Sterilization in the United States* (Baltimore, 1991).

³ Fieldworkers completed at least 400 inmate case studies at Whittier State School in the late 1910s through the early 1920s, but only 203 studies survive. Of those, 127 are studies of Euro-American male youths, 44 are studies of Mexican and Mexican American male youths, and 33 are studies of African American male youths. See Series VII: Field Worker Files, Mss. Ms. Coll. 77, Eugenics Record Office Records, American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia, Pa.). I thank Alexandra Minna Stern for pointing me to these sources. I have provided only first names and surname initials for Whittier State School youths mentioned in this essay, and I have redacted other personal details that might reveal their identities.



Fred C. Nelles, a progressive leader in juvenile reform across the United States, was superintendent of the Whittier State School from 1912 (around the time of this photo) until his untimely death in 1927. *Courtesy California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento.*

cousin Francis Galton, a statistician and the founder of the biometrics movement. In 1883 Galton coined the term *eugenics*, literally meaning “well born,” but which he used to denote “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race” and develops them to “the utmost advantage.” Eugenics borrowed from contemporary theories emerging in plant and animal biology, such as Neo-Lamarckism, which argued that the environment could alter human heredity and affect any offspring, and Mendelian theory, which posited that human traits or characteristics were passed directly from parents to offspring. The rise in popularity of Mendelian beliefs dovetailed with Galton’s research on talented men and led him to argue that certain traits were innate, not acquired. Galton’s work eventually popularized the definition of eugenics as better breeding through selective reproduction of those deemed “fit” while preventing the reproduction of those seen as “unfit.” By the 1920s Galton’s research into eugenics as the science of better breeding was accepted around the world, developing into a scientific movement—albeit with significant variations across time and place—in at least thirty-five countries.⁴

In the United States Galton found an ardent supporter in Charles Davenport, a professor of biology at the University of Chicago. In 1899 Davenport traveled to England

⁴ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 11, 14, 16, 87, 90; Mark B. Adams, Garland E. Allen, and Sheila Faith Weiss, “Human Heredity and Politics: A Comparative Institutional Study of the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor (United States), the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics (Germany), and the Maxim Gor'ky Medical Genetics Institute (USSR),” *Osiris*, 20 (2005), 232–62, esp. 233–35.

to study biometrics under Galton and became a proponent of Mendelian theories of inheritance. Upon returning to the United States, Davenport worked to establish his own research laboratory. He successfully lobbied the newly established Carnegie Institution of Washington for funding, and in 1904 he opened the Station for Experimental Evolution in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Davenport set his sights on applying Mendelian theories to human beings, believing that a rising number of socially and racially inadequate peoples threatened the nation's moral and social fabric. When the opportunity arose for securing private funding for an institute dedicated to the study of human genetics and eugenics, Davenport launched the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), also in Cold Spring Harbor, in 1910; in 1920 the office would join the Station for Experimental Evolution to create the Carnegie Institute of Washington's Department of Genetics.⁵

Soon after its founding the ERO quickly became a hotbed of eugenics advocacy, research, and publication in the United States. To gain wide support, Davenport and his assistant, Harry Laughlin, an ardent biological determinist and immigration restrictionist, focused their energies on advocating their social and legislative agenda and gathering scientific research on the inheritance of human traits. Beginning in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Laughlin worked diligently at the state and national levels to draft and support legislation advocating the sterilization of those labeled "unfit": primarily poor, white southern European immigrants. In 1920 Laughlin wrote a model law on eugenic principles and sent it around the country to legislators for use in drafting compulsory sterilization laws. Thirty states, including California, ultimately adopted aspects of Laughlin's work to pass similar legislation that resulted in the compulsory sterilization of thousands confined in state prisons and mental hospitals, effectively strengthening the emerging power of the carceral state.⁶

Laughlin would join Washington State representative Albert Johnson, the nativist head of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, in March 1924 to address the immigration restriction debates in Congress. Laughlin testified as an "expert eugenics witness," speaking on the dangers of continued immigration from countries with degenerate peoples. His testimony helped pass the Immigration Act of 1924, which curtailed immigration from southern and eastern Europe and debarred Asian immigration completely. The law also targeted Mexican immigrants, not by imposing quotas but by increasing the enforcement of restrictions. Concurrent with the passage of anti-immigration legislation, Davenport launched the research arm of the ERO to train fieldworkers in gathering evidence to support the study and use of eugenics across the United States.⁷

The growing demand for research on the personal and family histories of patients and prisoners confined to the institutions of the expanding carceral state prompted Davenport to open a summer training institute for eugenics fieldwork in 1910. There students learned the latest theories on and methodologies in the study of such topics as feeble-mindedness, criminality, and insanity. Davenport also taught students how to use various instruments, including intelligence tests, and supplied them with *The Trait Book*, a manual he developed at the ERO, containing hundreds of codes representing various "physical,

⁵ Adams, Allen, and Weiss, "Human Heredity and Politics," 236–37. Garland E. Allen, "The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910–1940: An Essay in Institutional History," *Osiris*, 2 (1986), 225–64.

⁶ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 9, 57–81; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004), 7, 9.

⁷ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 57–81. *The Eugenic Aspects of Deportation: Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives, Seventieth Congress, First Session, February 21, 1928. Including Statement of Dr. Harry H. Laughlin* (Washington, 1928). Immigration Act of 1924, 43 Stat. 153 (1924).

mental, and social characteristics, behaviours, and diseases.” Though biased and open to subjective interpretation, the book enabled Davenport to maintain a semblance of scientific objectivity. To enable students at the institute to learn how to apply eugenics theories in the development of family or social case histories, Davenport trained them in “interviewing subjects, conducting investigations, preparing pedigree charts, and interpreting results.”⁸

Between the summer institute's establishment in 1910 and closure in 1924 the ERO trained over 250 fieldworkers or “health officers of the race”; 85 percent of those trainees were women. Davenport assumed that women best fit the criteria for fieldwork because of their “feminine tactfulness” and ability to engage family members—primarily other women—in conversation. Most of the women he hired were young, single, middle class, and had been educated in eastern U.S. women's colleges. Davenport required all of his fieldworkers to have college or university training in related science fields such as biology, zoology, or psychology. He also expected his students to be “industrious, loyal, discrete,” “accurate, confident, systematic,” and to have favorable social and interview skills.⁹

To legitimize the purpose of the ERO, Davenport ultimately sought to create efficient and productive fieldworkers who had the skills to get their clients—patients, prisoners, and their families—to reveal their knowledge (of personal, familial, and medical histories), with all of its perceived limitations, and any family secrets. He knew, however, that fieldworkers would encounter resistance from inmates and their families. He encouraged fieldworkers to overcome any unwillingness by aggressively seeking out a range of family members, friends, and neighbors for their opinions and insights on an inmate's character, despite the possibility of tainting the research with rumor and suspicion. Davenport also believed that researchers had the right to “go to the homes of . . . people . . . to make intimate inquiries about their behaviour.” Such an invasion of privacy, he concluded, was a small price to pay to improve and ultimately save the northern European race.¹⁰

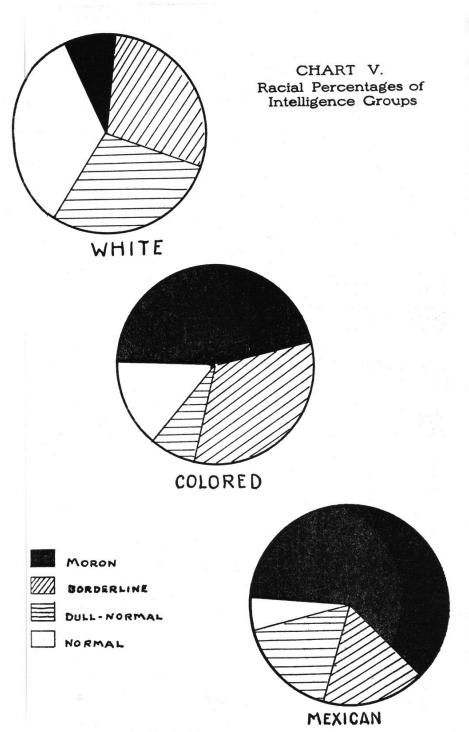
Eugenics Fieldworkers and the California Bureau of Juvenile Research

In 1915 J. Harold Williams, a doctoral student of the pioneering educational psychologist Lewis M. Terman, welcomed the first fieldworkers to the California Bureau of Juvenile Research at Whittier State School. As the director of the bureau, Williams touted the research unit as the western representative of the ERO in that it closely mirrored the office's scientific practices and procedures for carrying out eugenics research on the boys confined to the institution (which ceased to be coeducational in 1913). Guided by the *Whittier Social Case History Manual*, developed by Williams at the CBJR, fieldworkers created reports that included family trees or pedigree charts to identify the transmission of dysgenic traits, such as feeble-mindedness (capacity not beyond a twelve-year-old child),

⁸ C. B. Davenport, *The Trait Book* (Cold Spring Harbor, 1912). On the codes contained in *The Trait Book* and on the application of eugenics in creating case histories, see Amy Sue Bix, “Experiences and Voices of Eugenics Field-Workers: ‘Women's Work’ in Biology,” *Social Studies of Science*, 27 (Aug. 1997), 625–68, esp. 644, 627–28.

⁹ Bix, “Experiences and Voices of Eugenics Field-Workers,” 632, 636. On Charles Davenport's desired fieldworker characteristics, see “Qualities Desired in a Eugenical Field Worker,” 1921, C-2-4: 9 “Eugenics Fieldworker—Material Used in Classes—1921” box, Harry H. Laughlin Papers (Special Collections, Pickler Memorial Library, Truman State University, Kirksville, Mo.), <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/static/images/1101.html>.

¹⁰ Bix, “Experiences and Voices of Eugenics Field-Workers,” 626, 641, 650. For Davenport's views on the responsibilities and rights of fieldworkers, see “Meeting Notes,” June 23, 1915, pp. 331–39, esp. 334, box 1, Series VII: Field Worker Files, Mss. Ms. Coll. 77, Eugenics Record Office Records.



J. Harold Williams developed these pie charts around 1915 based on his doctoral research on intelligence, race, and delinquency among 150 boys at Whittier State School. The research was believed to provide evidence of differences in intelligence across members of the three main racial groups housed at the reformatory. *Courtesy California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, Calif.*

excitability, and nomadism, across at least three generations. These reported results came from intelligence tests and a laundry list of details in the boys' personal and family histories, including their mental and physical health, moral character, education, employment, and household and neighborhood conditions. Fieldworkers' reports also included summaries of the causes of delinquency and a prognosis, which raised the possibility of confinement and sterilization. The reports were sophisticated analytical interpretations, but they were also biased, judgmental, and detrimental to the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of youths in and outside of the emerging carceral state in California.¹¹

Despite fieldworkers' claims to scientific objectivity, much of their research rested on biological determinism, cultural biases, and a host of unverified criteria. Undoubtedly, most of the scientific misconceptions surrounding inheritance and genetics stemmed from the field of eugenics, as reflected in the ERO's guides and training manuals. Williams and his CBJR fieldworkers regularly invoked *The Trait Book* to evaluate the presence of

¹¹ For an example of Lewis M. Terman's work, see Lewis M. Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence: An Explanation of and a Complete Guide for the Use of the Stanford Revision and Extension of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale* (Boston, 1912). For evidence of Eugenics Record Office (ERO) influence on the California Bureau of Juvenile Research (CBJR), see J. Harold Williams et al., *Whittier Social Case History Manual* (Whittier, 1921), 16, 36. On what the fieldworkers' reports included, see *ibid.*, 17–38; and J. Harold Williams, "Individual Case History Outline," *Journal of Delinquency*, 5 (May 1920), 71–82, esp. 72.

dysgenic traits—a difficult task, according to researchers. Most high-grade defectives or the feeble-minded, they argued, often looked normal and passed undetected among the general population. This ability made them an acute social menace, for they could easily attach themselves to normal individuals and eventually marry and reproduce, which they did at an alarming rate. “They are the most prolific breeders and constitute the gravest social and moral offenders,” affirmed a leading psychologist.¹²

Fieldworkers not only harbored misguided notions of inheritance but also had sparse knowledge of the boys’—and their families’—cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of Williams’s staff knew almost nothing about the ethnically and racially diverse peoples they met on the West Coast, particularly the growing population of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, because the researchers and their subjects came from such different social worlds. Moreover, the fieldworkers operated in an ideological framework that privileged Euro-American values and customs, and the authority of science and scientific research, and that scorned the beliefs and practices of poor, nonwhite clients (reserving particular antipathy for Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans). In fact, Williams’s research for *The Intelligence of the Delinquent Boy* had established a race-based, hierarchical intelligence order, with whites at the apex, African Americans or “negroes” in the middle, and “Mexican-Indians” on the bottom. Fieldworkers were well aware of Williams’s conclusions and used them to inform their research in the process of criminalizing, racializing, and pathologizing youths of color and confining them to the institutions of the growing carceral state.¹³

Racializing, Criminalizing, and Pathologizing Youths of Color

Eugenics fieldworkers at the CBJR invoked long-held assumptions about biological differences—understood as racial differences—among Mexican, Mexican American, and African American boys to develop a system of race-based “typologies.” They described male youths of Mexican descent using labels such as “Mexican type,” “cholo type,” and “Mexican-Indians.” Typologies used in these researchers’ fieldwork refer to boys of African origin as “negro type,” “nigger type,” or “big coon type”—similar to epithets established decades earlier to keep African Americans in slavery and neoslavery (that is, subservient to and fearful of whites). Fieldworkers also used these typologies to describe a host of perceived cultural and biological characteristics shared by boys of color and their families. Researchers rarely invoked similar typologies to refer to Euro-Americans, though they occasionally made special references to some subjects of eastern and southern European ancestry. In dealing with boys of Mexican and African origin, researchers most commonly used race-based typologies to infer subnormal intelligence, as determined on the intelligence scales and through interviews and on-site research with families and friends. The research process often confirmed what they already knew or believed they knew about youths of color at California’s state prison for boys.¹⁴

Fieldworkers’ convictions about the links among intelligence, race, heredity, and delinquency were so firmly ingrained that when youths of color challenged those beliefs—

¹² On the importance of *The Trait Book* and other ERO studies as foundational to the CBJR, see Williams et al., *Whittier Social Case History Manual*, 44. J. E. Wallace Wallin, “The Hygiene of Eugenic Generation,” *Psychological Clinic*, 8 (Oct. 1914), 121–37, esp. 124.

¹³ J. Harold Williams, *The Intelligence of the Delinquent Boy* (Whittier, 1919).

¹⁴ On nineteenth-century racial terminology and epithets, see, for example, Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), esp. 252–55.

mainly by performing well on intelligence tests—researchers found ways to dismiss the results. The CBJR psychologist Julia Mathews could not believe that the eleven-year-old Mexican American Victor R. had performed exceedingly well on the intelligence examination; his intelligence quotient (IQ) of 1.15 or 115 percent (on a scale with an IQ of 1.0 or 100 percent defined as normal) rated him superior. “That fact that he is classified so high,” Mathews said, “was due to the effect of practice and probably coaching, which his test showed,” though she failed to explain how she knew this. Moreover, she continued, “it is interesting to note that in spite of his fluent English and talkative tendency he has a vocabulary only equal to that of a 9 year old child.” Mathews clung to her line of reasoning even though the staff members she interviewed at the juvenile prison believed that Victor was “clever” and “brighter than the average boy.” To explain his performance in scientific terms, Mathews rationalized that he was not a typical Mexican. Rather, she said, “Victor is on the whole an American type rather than a Mexican-Indian type.”¹⁵

In interviews with families of Mexican and Mexican American youths at Whittier State School, the fieldworker Mildred S. Covert, like Mathews, discounted evidence of extraordinary intelligence, believing that parents, siblings, and even distant relatives of such delinquent boys had low intelligence levels, at best, or were defective, at worst. After briefly meeting with the family of John A., a Mexican American youth classified as “feebleminded,” Covert decided that John’s younger sister, Irene, who refused to speak with her, was “probably of moron intelligence.” The girl’s “reasoning,” the fieldworker wrote, is “very poor.” Covert did admit, however, that Irene had redeeming qualities: “quiet and quite clean in her personal appearance, although lacking in ordinary courtesy and refinement.” Apparently Irene did not demonstrate the decorum expected of Euro-American middle-class girls.¹⁶

Low intelligence did not place Mexicans and Mexican Americans at a decided disadvantage, Covert and her fellow researchers concluded, as long as those groups stayed among their own kind. Negotiating Euro-American society, however, was another matter. In evaluating and predicting the future of Henry P., a thirteen-year-old Mexican and English boy rated as “moron” or “feebleminded” (with an IQ of 0.54), the fieldworker George Brammer warned of the pitfalls that Henry would face in Euro-American society. “A complication is brought in by this boy being a half-breed,” Brammer stated. “If he remained under Mexican competition, he should be able to succeed fairly well, but if he attempts to live with white competitors, his inadequate mental endowment will place him at a decided disadvantage. He is definitely feeble-minded according to the standards of our [Euro-American] society.”¹⁷

CBJR fieldworkers held many of the same beliefs about African Americans that they did about Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Covert described Nathan M., a sixteen-year-old African American boy who had scored in the “moron” or “feebleminded” range on the intelligence test, as being “of average intelligence for his race.” Nathan’s defective powers, however, posed no disadvantage, she reasoned, because many African American men led their lives as unskilled workers. “Although we believe in our classification of this boy (moron) is justified by his low mental level, there are nevertheless men of his race (negro) and

¹⁵ “Family of Victor R., No. 322,” pp. 2, 3–4, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (microfilm: reel 1822219), box 57, Field Worker Files, Eugenics Record Office Records.

¹⁶ “Family of Arthur and John A., No. 305,” p. 25, *ibid.*

¹⁷ “Family of Arthur and Henry P., No. 295,” p. 14, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822577), box 58, *ibid.*



Jonny G., shown here upon his admittance to Whittier State School in 1920, was one of dozens of Mexican boys identified as “feebleminded” through the scientific-based research carried out at the reformatory. *Courtesy California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento.*

his intelligence who are able to make their living and support families.” Farm work was best suited for “one of his mental level.”¹⁸

When the researchers encountered African American boys who defied race-based hierarchies, they described these youths as anomalies, just as they did the boys’ Mexican counterparts. Among the highest-scoring boys in the juvenile prison’s history was twelve-year-old John W. P., an African American boy with an IQ of 1.27 or 127 percent. “This is the highest intelligence quotient ever found at Whittier State School,” Williams informed the fieldworker who investigated the case. “The vocabulary . . . is nearly superior adult . . . higher than many college students attain.” Not everyone agreed, however. The staff called the results “erroneous,” but a second test two years later confirmed the earlier findings. “He is still one of the brightest boys in the School of any race and has developed intelligence since the last test,” Williams remarked. The testing, he wrote, “indicates genuine superior intelligence and should denote superior development and ability.”¹⁹

Despite John’s intellectual superiority, researchers identified a dysgenic trait in him that they often associated with African Americans and, to some extent, with Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The boy, they found, suffered from “racial inertia” (laziness). John’s sluggishness is “evident in both mental and physical reactions and has led to the

¹⁸ “Family of Nathan Tom M. (Negro), No. 268,” pp. 1–2, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822219), box 57, *ibid.*

¹⁹ “Family of John W. P. (Negro), No. 221,” pp. 2–3, 5, 8, 13, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822575), *ibid.*

notion that he is mentally weak.” “He is not a keen thinker, but slow and lazy intellectually,” Williams noted. “He is, however, more tractable and less conceited than the average negro. Neither has he the average negro’s idea of self-importance.” “He should be taught to cultivate a mental ‘drive’ of which he is fully capable,” Williams concluded.²⁰

John’s racial inertia fit neatly with the race-based typologies developed at the CBJR: the temperaments of African American youths were often characterized as phlegmatic or slow and lazy. Covert characterized Douglas W., a twelve-year-old boy in a similar way. He is a cruel, mischievous, “no account, shiftless nig[g]ler.” It is “impossible to get any work out of him.” “He was just born lazy,” she said. His chief supervisor agreed but tempered his views on the boy’s potential for violence, saying, “he is just the swamp niger type, not malicious and not good for much.” The boy’s home fared no better under review: it was the “usual shiftless negro type of home.”²¹

Covert also described eleven-year-old Oscar K., an African American boy with a near-normal IQ of 0.99, as not only “probably above average for his race” but also “a little more lazy than average for his race.” According to the disciplinarian at the juvenile prison, Oscar K. wasted time and engaged in frivolity while working in the print shop. Covert remarked that fourteen-year-old Joe F., also an African American boy, had the “perpetual darky grin” and “worked only the way the average darky boy does. He was rather lazy and had to be watched.”²²

Fieldworkers’ views of African American boys were not surprising given the long-held, gender-specific, race-based stereotypes dating back to slavery. Black males in particular were considered inherently lazy, stupid, inferior, and animalistic, and proponents of the slave system used these designations to justify their enslavement and inhumane treatment. Later, following emancipation and the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, southern whites used those same ideologies, the convict lease system, the courts, violence, intimidation, threats, and many other dehumanizing tactics to dismantle Reconstruction, control the freed black population, and segregate and disenfranchise African Americans in employment, schools, public institutions, and many other sectors of society. Jim Crow segregation and many of those same beliefs about African Americans persisted into the twentieth century and were used to explain blacks’ menial position in all facets of society as well as their increasing presence in adult and juvenile prisons in California and throughout the United States.²³

Researchers in the twentieth century described the temperament of “Mexican-types” or “Mexican Indians” as similar to that of African Americans. In addition to being phlegmatic, slow, stubborn, and lazy, Mexican boys had “inferior energy.” Drawing on decades-old ideas and ideologies about Mexican peoples in the southwestern United States, most Euro-Americans viewed them as a racially mixed—of Spanish, Indian, and African ances-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 31–32.

²¹ “Douglas W. (Negro), No. 278,” pp. 5–6, 11, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822219), *ibid.* For similar social case histories in which African American youths were labeled “slow,” “lazy,” or “shiftless,” see “Family of Carl H., No. 249,” p. 3, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822577), box 58, *ibid.*; and “Family of Joseph M., No. 277,” p. 4, *ibid.*

²² “Family of Oscar K., No. 137 (Colored),” pp. 1–2, 7, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822219), box 57, *ibid.*; “Family of Joe F., No. 312,” pp. 4, 12, *ibid.*

²³ For studies examining the dominant Euro-American views of African Americans in slavery, see, for example, George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York, 1971). For studies of African Americans in Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, see, for example, Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1999); and David M. Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York, 1997).

tries—"mongrel" people. In the dominant Euro-American narrative, the seemingly swift conquest of Mexico in the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846 underscored the racial and cultural inferiority of Mexican peoples in relation to the superior Anglo-Saxon race. These understandings influenced eugenics researchers' views of Mexican and Mexican American boys and their families.²⁴

CBJR fieldworkers drew on deep-rooted ideologies and stereotypes to make sense of the histories of Mexican and Mexican American boys and African American boys. For example, Covert characterized Luis A. P., a Mexican American boy, as slow, sly, and untrustworthy. "He has all the characteristics of the Mexican race, is suspicious when among others than his own people," she reported. The trade instructor at Whittier State School agreed, saying, "he is deceitful, sneaky, and not to be trusted out of sight." Willis Clark, another fieldworker, described Xavier V., a thirteen-year-old Mexican boy, in a similar way, noting that he did "everything in a sleepy fashion. He is rather lazy and indolent."²⁵

To the researchers, the Mexican and Mexican American boys' lazy demeanors were also rooted in their biology—specifically their Indian ancestry. In evaluating Jacob V., a thirteen-year-old Mexican American, the fieldworker indicated that he "doesn't take much interest [in work], [and] does not realize the value of learning a trade." He "is just a boy and his mind is more on play than work. The Indian nature is very strong," she concluded; "he would love to roam around the hills with a gun." CBJR fieldworkers often described the parents of Mexican youths in a similar manner. Covert, for instance, depicted the twelve-year-old John A.'s mother, Angelina A., whom Covert had never met, as "a woman of very ordinary ability. Not progressive, but of the negligent, coarse [coarse] type of Cholo." Covert chose a derogatory descriptor reserved for poor, working-class Mexicans.²⁶

When Covert and her fellow researchers met Mexican and Mexican American boys who challenged their ideologies, they explained the findings as atypical—much as they did when describing unusually bright African American boys. Joe M., a fifteen-year-old Mexican American boy diagnosed as "one of our lower grade Mexican boys intellectually," had a "better disposition and more active temperament than characterize[d] his social and racial group," Covert noted. Sixteen-year-old Armando T., like Joe M., surprised Covert as not only "average-normal and unusually intelligent for his race" but also "active; especially noticeable in view of his race and [borderline] intelligence."²⁷

The race-based typologies used in the case histories to affirm the deviancy of boys of African and Mexican descent not only included behavioral attributes but also physical characteristics. In portraying the appearances of many boys, the researchers explicitly described their bodies, particularly their facial features. Covert identified Jacob V., for example, the boy with the Indian tendencies and "a typical Cholo type," as having "straight black hair, brown eyes, [and] thick regular shaped lips." His eyes, she continued, "slant inward to a slight extent; particularly noticeable is the fact that they are usually bloodshot, a condition which he seems to have inherited from his mother." Jacob's nose, too, was

²⁴ On the labeling of inferior energy, see "Family of Johnny G., No. 318," p. 3, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822219), box 57, Field Worker Files, Eugenics Record Office Records. On racial stereotypes, see Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, 1994).

²⁵ "Family of Louis A. P. (Mexican-Indian), No. 227," p. 3, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822219), box 57, Field Worker Files, Eugenics Record Office Records. "Family of Xavier V., No. 333," pp. 1, 10, *ibid.*

²⁶ "Family of Jacob V., No. 231," pp. 1, 8, *ibid.* "Family of Arthur and John A., No. 305," p. 24, *ibid.*

²⁷ "Family of Joe M. (Mex[ican]-Ind[ian]), No. 240," p. 2, *ibid.* "Family of Armando T. (Mex[ican]-Ind[ian]), No. 211," p. 2, *ibid.*

“quite broad and nostrils quite wide open. [His] cheek bones [are] high, suggesting some Indian descent. [And his] ears project outward from the head.”²⁸

CBJR fieldworkers’ descriptions of African American physical types were equally explicit yet more disparaging in their meaning and tone than those used for Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The researchers referred to large—tall and heavy—African American boys as “big negroes,” likely in reference to late nineteenth-century fears of the New Negro and of seemingly oversized African American males who threatened Euro-American society, generally, and Euro-American women, in particular. As Leon Litwack and many other scholars have explained, after African Americans had obtained their emancipation in 1864, images of menacing, sexualized black males circulated in the South and throughout the United States to instill fear of “race rule,” the rape of Euro-American women, and the contamination and subordination of the white race. The threat of the New Negro—in contrast and in reference to the safe “old Negro” bound in chains during slavery—remained in many early twentieth-century American minds, even among those in California, where the African American community remained fairly small, compact, and potentially nonthreatening. The perception of alleged danger was palpable in the fieldworkers’ descriptions of the young black males, most of them the grandchildren of former slaves and the products of Jim Crow segregation.²⁹

Covert described fifteen-year-old Walter J. as “a large strong negro boy, almost of gigantic proportions, although only slightly taller than average” with “the big nigger appearance.” Julius J., another African American boy, also “shows the usual big coon features.” He had “broad nostrils, thick heavy protruding lips and his profile shows strongly the negro type face.” “See [the] photograph” in the report, Covert implored readers. He also had “very dark skin.” Nathan M., a sixteen-year-old African American boy, resembled “the usual big featured negro type—broad nose, big thick lips, [and] chin somewhat receding.” His “eyes [are] inclined to be blood-shot most of the time,” with skin “quite badly pimped,” she said.³⁰

Fieldworkers not only developed race-based typologies for evaluating youths of color but also graded harshly the boys’ homes and neighborhood environments, which researchers believed contributed to delinquency. “There is a relation between the social quality of homes and the social quality of the people who live in them,” Williams wrote in the 1920s. Such beliefs doubtless influenced fieldworkers’ views of the homes and neighborhoods they visited, as when Karl Cowdery, one of the first fieldworkers at the CBJR, visited the ten-year-old African American Paul B.’s home. The household, the researcher said, was “not very clean, but [had] fair order and arrangement. [The] front yard [was] well kept, but back-yard [appeared] disorderly with boxes, rubbish, etc., and a poor excuse for a garden in one corner.” The “care given [to the household was] probably average for [a] negro home,” he concluded. The “Negro section” in which they lived, he continued, included a “few low-grade whites [and] mostly illiterate[s]” with “low moral standards.”³¹

²⁸ “Family of Jacob V., No. 231,” p. 3.

²⁹ On the New Negro and the “old Negro,” see Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 179–216.

³⁰ “Family of Walter J. (Negro), No. 153,” p. 2, California Bureau of Juvenile Research Case Histories (reel 1822219), box 57, Field Worker Files, Eugenics Record Office Records. “Family of Julius J. (Negro), No. 237,” pp. 3–4, *ibid.* “Family of Nathan Tom M. (Negro), No. 268,” p. 3.

³¹ J. Harold Williams, “The Homes They Come From,” in *Whittier Social Case History Manual*, by Williams et al., 15, 17. “Family of Paul B. (Unnumbered), Colored,” p. 7, (reel 1822219), box 57, Field Worker Files, Eugenics Record Office Records.

Cleanliness was, nevertheless, relative across racial and ethnic lines. When visiting the home of a Mexican family whose son was imprisoned at Whittier State School, Covert noted that the “interior of home [was] cleaner than most Mexican homes and yet under our [Euro-American] standards [it] would not be considered clean.” As a result of such observations, Williams concluded that “racial differences were found [in] the median score for the Whites, Negroes, and Mexicans.” Simply put, the belief was that the shabbier the home, the lower the intelligence of its inhabitants. “Home conditions,” asserted Williams, “are affected by race, nativity, and the relationship and occupation to the principal wage-earner.” Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans, fieldworkers believed, simply held lower standards in their household environments than their white counterparts, and those standards were indicative of their degenerate race, intelligence, heredity, and criminality.³²

The results of the scientific research carried out by the fieldworkers led not only to the development of race-based typologies built on long-held ideas and ideologies about youths of color and their families but also to devastating long-term consequences for those identified as menaces to society. Many delinquents deemed “feebleminded” and hundreds of thousands of California youths called “defective” were segregated and transferred to state hospitals where they were sterilized without consent. Though beyond the purview of this essay, the connections of the juvenile prisons to state hospitals throughout California—like the science and scientific research carried out at state institutions of confinement—were eventually key to the strengthening of the burgeoning carceral state in California.

Equally important to the rise of the emerging California carceral state were the prevailing ideas and ideologies of science and scientific research as well as race, intelligence, heredity, and crime. As the social case histories indicate, those theories—coupled with the use of the latest tools and techniques in the nascent fields of psychology, education, social work, and eugenics—worked powerfully to identify delinquent youths of color as defective and deviant members of society who deserved confinement. Indeed, by applying and administering hundreds—more likely thousands—of physical, psychological, and intelligence tests and fieldwork studies on the youths’ families, home environments, and communities of origin, researchers classified juvenile inmates along a continuum from normalcy to degeneracy. In the process, scientist researchers identified a disproportionate number of Mexican, Mexican American, and African American youths as feebleminded and criminally minded offenders whose genetic or racial stock was the root cause of their deficiencies.

Juvenile prison officials used those findings, in turn, to transfer many mentally defective wards to state mental hospitals for their forced confinement, permanent care, and, ideally, sterilization, as state compulsory sterilization laws allowed officials to sterilize patients against their and their families’ wishes. In the process, the juvenile prisons were transformed into laboratories of the embryonic carceral state in which state officials carried out social experiments aimed at dealing with not only delinquency but also race

³² “Family of Armando T. (Mex[ican]-Ind[ian]), No. 211,” p. 10. J. Harold Williams, “Early History of the California Bureau of Juvenile Research,” *Journal of Juvenile Research*, 28 (Oct. 1934), 189–214, esp. 203, 204.

betterment. Ultimately, the process of weeding out defectives and improving the race—largely understood as the European American race—was intimately tied to biological determinism and nation building at home and globally—particularly in the post-1898 era—and served to criminalize, racialize, and pathologize a generation of Mexican, Mexican American, and African American youths. In the end, eugenics-based research and practices played central roles in strengthening the reach and power of the growing carceral state in California.