

### Feeble-minded Children Withdrawn from Randall's Island

In Table C is given a statement of the reasons assigned by 43 parents for desiring to remove their children from the custody of the authorities at Randall's Island. They indicate,

- (1) That there is crying need to develop Letchworth Village to its full capacity as soon as possible in order to have another institution near at hand for the reception of custodial cases;
- (2) That parents are unstable in their attitude toward institution care for their afflicted children and that, both for their protection, and for the good of the child and of the community, a law giving the state proper jurisdiction over the feeble-minded is a necessity.

The facts in Table C were supplied very kindly by Miss Taber of the Visiting Committee of the State Charities Aid Association. They were gathered through visits to the homes of the children.

TABLE C  
FEEBLE-MINDED CHILDREN WITHDRAWN FROM RANDALL'S ISLAND  
FORTY-THREE CASES

Case	Sex	Age	Personal and family characteristics	On Randall's Island	Reason assigned for withdrawal
1	f	3	Child is uncontrollable; cannot talk.	Dec. 10 to Dec. 16, 1908.	Parents could not stand child's absence.
2	f	1	Father insane, dead; mother tb, dead.	Jan. 17 to Oct. 19, 1908.	Aunt objected to having child treated as if she were fm.
3	m	9	Mother dead; child has sore eyes.	Aug. 12, 1908 to Aug. 9, 1909.	Father wanted child at home but now wishes to send him back to Randall's Island as he is married again.
4	m	12	Father dead; child has sore eyes.	April 2 to July 11, 1908.	Mother dissatisfied with treatment; boy now in Grove Street School.
5	m	10	Child is blind, deformed.	May 13 to July 25, 1908.	Parents dissatisfied, thought boy neglected and hurt by other children; sent back to Randall's Island

TABLE C—Continued

Case	Sex	Age	Personal and family characteristics	On Randall's Island	Reason assigned for withdrawal
6	m	13	Child was hit with stone.	Oct. 11, 1907 to J'ly 27, 1908.	Ran away; parents charge that orderly was unkind.
7	f	16		Five months.	Improved; in Catholic boarding school for a time; now at home.
8	m	5		July 21 to Dec. 23, 1908.	Parents did not wish to have him put with defectives.
9	m	5	Child is deaf and dumb; father immoral.	May 13 to July 25, 1908.	Parents claim that he was neglected.
10	f	5	Child has meningitis; skin disease; mother epileptic, alcoholic.	May 7, 1907 to Jan. 26, 1909.	Only child, mother did not want her sent to Syracuse; will be sent back to Randall's Island.
11	m	9	Father drinks; 9 children supported by 3 oldest girls.	Oct. 9 to Oct. 30, 1908.	Parents dissatisfied because put with idiots; Syracuse too far; now in ungraded class.
12	m	18		Sept. 4, 1907 to Mar. 11, 1908.	Worked out doors; taught nothing; afterwards worked on wagon; lost his job.
13	f	8		Dec., 1908 to Jan., 1909.	Did not improve; now in Rhinelander School.
14	f	10	Child is microcephalic; father tb; charity.	Jan. 25 to Feb. 4, 1909.	Mother missed her; now in public school.
15	m	21	Picked up on street in fit and sent to R. I.	Jan. 2, 1908 to Jan. 25, 1909.	Parents did not want him sent to Rome; took him home as soon as they found him.
16	m	12		One month.	Thought him able to leave.
17	m	4	Can't talk; mother tb; brother tb; 9 children.	April 30 to July 7, 1908.	Thought him worse after contact with other fm children.
18	m	15		— to Oct., 1908.	Ran away from home; whereabouts not known.

The number in institutions, or on the waiting list of institutions, in New York State, have been approximately determined as follows:

In State institutions about.....	4,000
In almshouses about.....	1,800
On waiting list of State institutions about.....	1,000

The indefiniteness of information regarding the total number of mentally defective persons, their location in the State, their tendency to move from locality to locality, their cost to society, their marriage relations and offspring, makes it highly important that somebody, official or unofficial, should undertake the task of securing further data.

### **Provision Made for the Care of the Feeble-minded**

In New York State five institutions for the care of the feeble-minded have been established:

Syracuse State Institution for feeble-minded children,  
 Rome State Custodial Asylum for feeble-minded persons and idiots,  
 Newark Custodial Asylum for feeble-minded women of child-bearing age,  
 Craig Colony, Sonyea, for epileptics,  
 Letchworth Village for feeble-minded persons (in process of construction).

In addition, the Department of Public Charities, New York City, has established a Custodial Asylum and School for the Feeble-minded on Randall's Island.

Inmates are admitted to these institutions by order of the Superintendents of the Poor of the State and of the Commissioner of Charities of the cities, and upon the voluntary application of parents or guardians. They are discharged by order of the Superintendents of the Poor, or of the Commissioner of Charities, or of the State Board of Charities, or by a judge after a hearing, or by the Board of Managers of the Institution. Parents may therefore secure the discharge of their children at any time.

The weakness of the present system lies in the following facts:

- (1) The capacity of the institutions is totally inadequate for the number of feeble-minded in the State. The result is that large numbers of mental defectives are at large, a menace



to themselves and to others, succumbing to poverty, disease and crime, reproducing their kind, filling the prisons, and usurping the place of the aged and feeble in the almshouses.

- (2) Provision is now made only for the indigent; the great middle class who could pay a moderate sum for maintenance often do not care to take advantage of charity and cannot afford the high prices of private institutions.
- (3) There is no law requiring the commitment of the feeble-minded. In many cases the ultimate decision is in the hands of parents or guardians, who are often themselves incapable of deciding what is best for the child or for the community.

### **Cost of Feeble-mindedness**

To support a feeble-minded person in one of the state institutions costs the state, on the average, \$161.20 a year. What it costs to have a feeble-minded person at large is incalculable:

- (1) Primarily, because when the feeble-minded produce children they are very likely to become dependent, delinquent or diseased; these in their turn may produce off-spring of similar character.
- (2) Because they cannot become self-supporting when subjected to present day competition. They are, thus, a drain upon public or private charity, or upon family strength and resources. It is impossible to estimate a cost which must include, not only the actual cost of an individual's support, but the loss sustained by his failure to be productive or by the decrease in productive power sustained by those who must use time and strength in taking care of him.
- (3) Because they make up an appreciable part of the criminal class. Probably 20% (Elmira Reformatory reports 37%) of the prison and reformatory population are feeble-minded. This means, not only the expense of maintaining such persons in a wrong institution with consequent interference with the institution routine, but the expense of trial and commitment, not once, but again and again.

What this means in money may be gathered from following the evidence and proceedings in any case of arson, a common crime among mental defectives.

- (3) If mental defectives are to be properly considered and protected as such, it is necessary to ascertain who they are, and where they are, and to bring them into relation with the local authority.
- (4) The protection of the mentally defective person, whatever form it takes, should be continued as long as it is necessary for his good. This is desirable not only in his interest but also in the interest of the community. It follows that the state should have authority to segregate and to detain mentally defective persons under proper conditions and limitations, and on their behalf to compel the payment of contributions from relations who are able to pay for their support; or should itself provide such care and accommodation as may be necessary either directly or through the local authority.
- (5) In order to supervise local administration of this nature a central authority is indispensable.
- (6) In regard to the protection of property all mentally defective persons should have like privileges.
- (7) It is essential that there should be the closest co-operation between judicial and administrative authorities.

### **Conclusion**

The facts set forth in this study are in harmony with the findings of the Royal Commission, and with all local investigations of the feeble-minded, made in this country.

- (1) They illustrate the inability of the feeble-minded to conform to the laws that govern normal people and to hold themselves to acceptable standards of work and morality.
- (2) They show that the inability of the feeble-minded to assume the responsibility for their own lives renders them a burden to their families and a menace to the public upon whom the burden of their maintenance, of their criminality, of their weakness and of their immorality ultimately falls.
- (3) They indicate that feeble-minded persons respond to training and that under supervision in many cases they become self-supporting, useful individuals.
- (4) They warrant the belief that by the application of vigorous measures the conditions producing feeble-mindedness may be in great measure controlled. The number of the feeble-minded may be reduced to those arising from external, or accidental causes if persons afflicted with neuropathic inheritance are prevented from having children. This preventable source is responsible at present for about 80% of feeble-mindedness.

The State has accepted responsibility for the feeble-minded by establishing institutions for their care and training. The time has come when it must for its own sake and the sake of the next generation worthily discharge this responsibility. Three things are necessary:

- (1) Adequate provision for the feeble-minded in institutions designed for their education and welfare;
- (2) A proper segregation law, involving separation of the sexes, which will prevent propagation of their kind, and ill-advised contact with the world at large;
- (3) A marriage law which will require a clean bill of health and evidence of normal mind before a license is issued.

That the segregation of defectives costs money is remembered; that it saves money is often forgotten. The initial cost of segregation would be great but the saving effected by correcting our present lax methods would be greater. As tax bills are not itemized the ordinary citizen does not realize that he is at present paying for the unrestrained presence of the feeble-minded. An added tax for their segregation would be an apparent rather than a real increase, for through segregation of defectives, the number of criminals, the number of prisoners, the cost of trials, the demand upon public and private charity would be decreased; and as control of hereditary conditions resulted in decrease in the number of defectives, and training rendered many of them self-supporting, the expenditure necessary for their maintenance would from year to year grow less. The feeble-minded at large are as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than persons suffering from contagious disease. No consideration of cost, of parental affection and responsibility, or of personal liberty should be allowed to weigh against public safety.