

New paper examines disproportionate effect of eugenics on North Carolina's black population

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Sandy Darity. Credit: Duke University

A sordid element of North Carolina's history is its eugenics program, which authorized sterilization of many citizens throughout much of the 20th century.

A new Duke University study shows that the eugenics program's

disproportionate effect on Black citizens was no accident: Instead, the program was designed explicitly to "breed out" nonworking Black residents.

"This suggests that for Blacks, eugenic sterilizations were authorized and administered with the aim of reducing their numbers in the future [population](#)—genocide by any other name," the authors state.

The authors studied reports from the North Carolina Eugenics Board from 1958 to 1968, a period in which more than 2,100 authorized sterilizations occurred across the state's 100 counties.

They found that sterilization rates were much higher in counties with higher numbers of nonworking Black residents.

Economists sometimes refer to citizens who are not part of the labor force and who may require government assistance as "surplus population."

The authors found between 1958 and 1968, local rates of sterilization increased with the size of a county's "surplus population"—but only if that population was Black. This pattern did not hold true for other [racial groups](#), suggesting that only the Black population was presumed by the eugenics program to be inferior.

"The United Nations' official definition of genocide includes 'imposing measures to prevent births within a (national, ethnically, racial or religious) group,' " says co-author William A. Darity Jr., a professor of public policy, African and African American Studies and economics at Duke University. "North Carolina's disproportionate use of eugenic [sterilization](#) on its Black citizens was an act of genocide."

The article appears online in the American Review of Political

Economy. Darity was one of its three co-authors, collaborating with Gregory N. Price, the paper's lead author and an economics professor at the University of New Orleans, and Rhonda V. Sharpe, the founder and president of the Women's Institute for Science, Equity, and Race.

In a 2010 paper, Price and Darity demonstrated that eugenic sterilizations in North Carolina disproportionately targeted Blacks. This article advances that prior analysis, shedding light on the mechanics by which the program worked, and the motives behind it.

"Controlling Black bodies and their reproductive choices is nothing new," says co-author Sharpe. "Our study shows that North Carolina restricted reproductive freedom, using eugenics to disenfranchise Black residents."

More information: Gregory Price et al., Did North Carolina Economically Breed-Out Blacks During its Historical Eugenic Sterilization Campaign?, *American Review of Political Economy* (2020). DOI: [10.38024/arpe.pds.6.28.20](https://doi.org/10.38024/arpe.pds.6.28.20)

Provided by Duke University

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