

Counting the Discounted: Identifying the Population of Insane and Feeble-Minded in the 20th Century United States

Introduction

Medical aspects of historical demography have largely focused on morbidity studies and anthropometric histories of population. Data for these histories is typically gathered from military, and in more recent publications, prison records. These sources offer social, biological, and economic variables include height, weight, income, medical history, and place of birth. This paper will examine issues in calculating the insane population in the United States between 1840 and 1910 by comparing four US censuses (1840, 1880 with physician supplement, 1890, and 1910 special census of the insane and feeble minded) and the patient records of the Minnesota Asylum System. When compared, these records show that early estimates of insane and feeble-minded populations through the US Census were greatly skewed, but later special censuses reported more accurate estimates and profiles of the feeble-minded. Additionally, this paper will describe methods for estimating and evaluating insane and feeble-minded populations in 20th century censuses.

Background and Data

The United States Bureau of the Census added a category titled “Insane and Idiots” to the decennial census in 1840. The inclusion of this category was likely due to developing eugenic ideals in United States medicine. According to this census, the number of “insane and idiots” in the United States was 1 to 990 of population. The US Bureau of the Census summarized the population of insane and idiots among the population by state, which can be seen in Table 1.

The 1840 decennial census figures were highly controversial among academics, physicians, and population researchers. In a letter to the *Journal of Insanity* in 1840, Dr. E. Jarvis stated “the fifth census of 1840 is absolutely worthless as regards any correct enumeration of cases of insanity and idiocy.”¹ These numbers are highly skewed compared to state estimates of insane and feeble minded in the United States. In 1845 the Prison Discipline Society reported that there are 20,000 insane and feeble-minded individuals in the United States.

Attempting to correct statistical and enumeration error in the census, the US Bureau of the census changed their enumeration form to include the following question in the general and slave census in 1850: “Item 13. Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper or convict.” This question endured through the 1890 census of the United States. This question was again expanded in 1880, when a physician supplement was added.² The supplement included a description of the institutionalized population within a specific district, and failed to include any individuals being treated privately. There is great variation across states, as physician participation and detail (e.g. submission of incomplete forms) varied greatly.

These statistics again came under scrutiny from medical and statistical professionals. In a special report of the US Census Bureau in 1880, the Bureau described the resulting statistics as “entirely worthless so far as the calculation of ratios of number

¹ “Letters to the Editor,” *Journal of Insanity*, Vol. 8, p. 269

² *Special Reports, Physicians Schedule, Insane and Feeble-Minded*, US Census Bureau, 1880.

of insane to population is concerned, since the number of insane returned in these censuses was certainly less than half the number actually present.”³

The Bureau of the Census prepared a separate census of the insane in 1904. The Bureau of the Census enumerated patients in asylums, psychopathic hospitals, and other institution for the insane, both private and public. A second census of the insane was done in conjunction with the decennial census in 1910. Table 3 summarizes findings of this census, according to the Bureau of the Census, against the census questions from 1880 and 1890. But, how reliable is the supplementary census data? This can be asessed by comparing to state-level institutional data.

Methods and Results

Patient reports of the Minnesota State Asylum system are available in the Minnesota History Center and are available to researchers on a application basis. Patient forms were digitized for census years and each patient record was entered into a database of Minnesota Asylum Patients, making for a total of approximately 3000 patients. These records include medical history, family history, intake physical forms, diagnostic forms, and physician notes. An analysis of these records in relation to US census statistics can be seen in Table 3. The census records and state records for the same year are not identical. On a number of variables they are significantly different. While the US census statistics are more accurate than previous year, they are not sufficient in identifying the entire population of insane and feeble minded. State-level records are a better indicator of insane patients, and offer more detailed and complete records. Additionally, state level census data offers more variables with which to understand the population from a medical, demographic, and social perspective, which will be explored further in this paper through additional analysis. This paper will also expand upon how to estimate national statistics from state-level records, such as those from the Minnesota State Asylum system.

Selected Bibliography

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³ Report on the Insane, etc., Eleventh Census, 1890, p. 7.

Table 1.
Insane population as enumerated in the 1840 decennial US census by state.⁴

State	Total Population	Public	Private
Arkansas	97,574	9	36
Connecticut	309,987	114	384
Delaware	78,085	22	30
Illinois	476,183	36	177
Indiana	685,866	110	377
Iowa	43,112	2	5
Maine	501,793	207	330
Maryland	469,232	133	254
Massachusetts	737,699	471	600
Michigan	212,267	2	37
Mississippi	375,651	14	102
Missouri	383,702	42	160
New Hampshire	284,574	180	306
New Jersey	373,306	144	225
New York	2,428,921	683	1,463
Ohio	1,519,467	363	832
Pennsylvania	1,724,033	469	1,477
Rhode Island	108,830	117	86
South Carolina	594,398	91	285
Tennessee	829,210	103	596
Vermont	291,948	144	254
Virginia	1,239,797	317	731
Wisconsin	30,945	1	7
Sample Total	17,062,395	4,329	10,179

Table 2.
Number and rate of insane individuals in US population by census year

Year	Insane Enumerated in Institutions	
	Number	Per 100,000 of Population
1880	40942	81.06
1890	74028	118.2
1904	150151	183.6
1910	187791	204.1

⁴ Table shows a randomly selected group of states for purpose of space.

Table 3.
Institutional Population of Minnesota, 1910⁵

Institutional Pop, in MN by Institution	Institution Record	US Census
<i>Public:</i>		
Anoka State Asylum	549	479
Fergus Falls State Hospital	1,297	1,574
Hastings State Asylum	667	478
Rochester State Hospital	1,439	1,201
St. Peter State Hospital	1,554	1,005
Total	5,506	4,744
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Birthplace (by region)	%	
Northeast	19	
Southeast	18.9	
Upper Midwest	35.5	
Lower Midwest	10.5	
International	16.1	
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Race	%	
White	87.7	
African American	10.1	
Other	2.2	
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Time within Institution (as of April 1, 1910)	%	
Less than 12 months	31.1	
13 months to 24 months	28.3	
25 months or more	40.6	

⁵ Birthplace, Race, and Institutional Time are calculated from records of St. Peter Asylum only