

Urban Problems

The swelling tide of immigration to U.S. cities in the late 1800s led to deplorable living conditions and almost unbearable congestion. By 1890, more than two-thirds of New York's 1.5 million residents lived in overcrowded apartment buildings called tenements. On the Lower east Side, one of the most densely populated areas in the world, people frequented vibrant outdoor markets in such places as Hester Street, for goods from eggs to rugs to pots and pans. Gossip, haggling, and cries of street peddlers—mostly in Yiddish in this Jewish neighborhood—echoed down the street from dawn to dusk.

With ... one dollar a day [our mother] fed and clothed an ever-growing family. She took in boarders. Sometimes this helped; at other times it added to the burden of living. Boarders were often out of work and penniless; how could one turn a hungry man out? She made all our clothes. She walked blocks to reach a place where meat was a penny cheaper, where bread was half a cent less. She collected boxes and old wood to burn in the stove...." Zalmen Yoffeh, a journalist in *How We Lived*.



Hester Street, New York City

City living posed threats such as crime, violence, fire, disease, and pollution. The rapid growth of cities only made these problems worse. Minor criminals, such as pickpockets, swindlers, and thieves, thrived in crowded urban living conditions. Major crimes multiplied as well. From 1880 to 1900, the murder rate jumped sharply from 25 per million people to more than 100 per million people. In comparison, the murder rate in 1999 was 57 per million people.

Native born Americans often blamed immigrants for the increase of crime and violence. In reality, the crime rate for immigrants was not significantly higher than that for other Americans.

Alcohol contributed to violent crimes, both inside and outside the home. In the extract below, Jacob Riis accused saloons of “breeding poverty,” corrupting politics, bringing suffering to wives and children of drunkards, and fostering “the corruption of the child” by selling beer to minors.

“Where God builds a church the devil builds next door - a saloon, is an old saying that has lost its point in New York. Either the devil was on the ground floor first, or he has been doing a good deal more in the way of building. I tried once to find out how the account stood, and counted to 111 Protestant churches, chapels, and places of worship of every kind below Fourteenth Street, 4,065 saloons. The worst half of the tenement population lives down there, and it has to this day the worst half of the saloons. Uptown the account stands a little better, but there are easily ten saloons to every church today. I am afraid, too, that the congregations are larger by a good deal; certainly the attendance is steadier and the contributions more liberal the week round, Sunday included. Turn and twist it as we may, over against every bulwark [barricade or fortification] for decency and morality which society erects, the saloon projects its colossal shadow, omen of evil wherever it falls into the lives of the poor”.

Extracted from: Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*.



Temperance Movement poster and cartoon from the late 1800's against alcohol

Written Assignment based upon the above article

1. What facts did you learn from the above extract from *How the Other Half Lives*?
2. Based on the facts given, what conclusion can you make about the causes and effects that take place in the city?
3. Find an article from a local, New York newspaper that is about today's version of *How the Other Half Lives*. Write two short paragraphs about your article. The first being an overall description of the events that are currently taking place in your article. The second being how today's urban life compares to urban life from 1880 to 1900 in New York City.