

City Life

The Big Idea

The rapid growth of cities in the late 1800s created both challenges and opportunities.

Main Ideas

- Crowded urban areas faced a variety of social problems.
- People worked to improve the quality of life in U.S. cities.

Key Terms and People

Jacob Riis
settlement houses
Jane Addams
Hull House
assimilation
Florence Kelley

If YOU were there . . .

You live in a fast-growing city in 1895. When you walk the streets, you meet families who are packed into run-down apartments in crowded, filthy neighborhoods. You meet immigrants who want to study English but have no money for classes. You are determined to help these city residents improve their lives.

What would you do to help improve life in your city?

Urban Problems

In cities of the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a shortage of affordable housing. This forced many poor families to squeeze into tiny tenement apartments, which were frequently unsafe and unsanitary. Journalist and photographer **Jacob Riis** became famous for exposing the horrible conditions in New York City tenements. Riis wrote about one typical tenement family:

“There were nine in the family: husband, wife, an aged grandmother, and six children . . . All nine lived in two rooms, one about ten feet square that served as parlor, bedroom, and eating-room, the other a small hall-room made into a kitchen.”

—Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*

Overcrowding caused sanitation problems. Most cities did not have a good system for collecting trash, so garbage often piled up outside apartment buildings. An article in the *New York Tribune* described the garbage in front of one tenement as a “mass of air poisoning, death-breeding filth, reeking in the fierce sunshine.”

Unsafe conditions were also common in tenements. Before 1900 most cities did not have laws requiring landlords to fix their tenements or to maintain safety standards. A fire on one floor could easily spread, and fire escapes were often blocked or broken.

Overcrowded city tenements caused problems such as disease, fire, and crime.

Quick Facts

Tenement Life

Causes

- Overcrowding
- Unsafe buildings
- Unsanitary conditions
- Scarce running water
- Poor ventilation

Effects

- Diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera
- High child death rates
- Fire
- Crime



Tenement rooms had few or no windows to let in fresh air and sunshine. Comfort was also scarce, with so many people crowded into such small spaces. Running water and indoor plumbing were also scarce. So was clean water. Cities often dumped garbage into local rivers that were used for drinking water.

Disease-causing bacteria grew easily in these conditions. Diseases such as cholera, typhoid, influenza, and tuberculosis spread quickly in crowded neighborhoods. Children were the most vulnerable to these diseases. For example, babies born in Chicago in 1870 had only a 50 percent chance of living to the age of five.

Air pollution was also a serious environmental problem in many growing cities. This was a time when many business leaders were building huge oil refineries, steel mills, and other factories. The steel mills of Andrew Carnegie, for example, helped make Pittsburgh the nation's steel-making center in the late 1800s. Steel mills brought jobs and wealth to Pittsburgh. But they also caused some of the nation's worst environmental issues. "Every street appears to end in a huge, black cloud," said one writer. "Pittsburgh is smoke, smoke, smoke—everywhere smoke." The air was so polluted at times that the city had to turn on outdoor lighting during the day.

The work of many city governments slowly helped to lessen some of these urban problems. By the late 1800s new sewage and water purification systems improved city sanitation. Many major cities began hiring

Reading Check

Summarize

What challenges did many city residents face in the late 1800s?

full-time firefighters and police officers. Police officers in cities were typically placed in one neighborhood. They knew the local residents and were frequently involved in local activities. They could spot local problems and, in many cases, provide help to immigrants.

Improving City Life

Jacob Riis hoped his book *How the Other Half Lives* would shock many Americans—and it did. A reformer named Lawrence Veiller helped lead the effort to improve conditions in tenements. Describing the effects of tenement living on children, he wrote:

“A child living its early years in dark rooms, without sunlight or fresh air, does not grow up to be a normal, healthy person . . . It is not of such material that strong nations are made.”

—Lawrence Veiller, quoted in *Readings in American History*, Vol. 2

Veiller worked with an organization called the Charity Organization Society (COS) to get changes made to New York laws. In 1900 he and the COS sponsored an exhibit of photographs and maps graphically showing the conditions of New York tenements. More than 10,000 people visited the exhibit, and they were shocked by what they saw. The work of Veiller and the COS helped pass the 1901 New York State Tenement House Act. This law required new buildings to have better ventilation and running water. It became a model for housing reform in other states.

Because there was little government aid available in the 1800s, private organizations generally took on the task of helping the urban poor. Some individuals set up **settlement houses**, or neighborhood centers in poor areas that offered education, recreation, and social activities.



Hull House

Neighborhood children attended kindergarten at Hull House. Their parents typically had low-paying jobs, and many were children of immigrants. Children like these had few other options for education.

How did Hull House try to improve the lives of children?

Jane Addams 1860–1935

Jane Addams was born in Cedarville, Illinois. Like many upper-class women of the era, she received a college education but found few jobs open to her. In 1888, on a visit to England with classmate Ellen Gates Starr, she visited a London settlement house. On their return to the United States, Addams and Starr opened a settlement house in Chicago. They started a kindergarten and a public playground. Addams also became involved in housing safety and sanitation issues, factory inspection, and immigrants' rights. In 1931 she shared the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Summarize

How did Jane Addams try to improve the lives of workers?



Settlement houses were staffed by professionals and volunteers. Many were educated women who came from wealthy families. In 1886 Charles B. Stover and Stanton Coit established the first settlement house in the United States. It was called Neighborhood Guild and was located on the Lower East Side in New York City. In 1889 **Jane Addams** and Ellen Gates Starr moved into a run-down building in a poor Chicago neighborhood and turned it into **Hull House**, the most famous settlement house of the period.

The Hull House staff focused on the needs of immigrant families. By 1893 Hull House was serving 2,000 people a week. Some families went through a process of **assimilation**, in which they adopted some American beliefs and aspects of American culture. The Hull House staff helped to assimilate the immigrants by providing English classes, day care, and cooking and sewing classes. Children and adults took part in club meetings, art classes, plays, and learned American sports.

Jane Addams and the staff at Hull House also worked for reforms. They studied the problems facing immigrants and poor city dwellers, then searched for ways to improve conditions. **Florence Kelley** was one important reformer at Hull House. She visited sweatshops and wrote about the problems there. Her work helped convince lawmakers to take action. Illinois passed a law in 1893 to limit working hours for women and to prevent child labor.

Kelley became the state's chief factory inspector and helped enforce the law. Although she believed more reforms were needed, she did report some improvements:

“Previous to the passage of the factory law of 1893, it was the rule of [a candy] factory to work the children . . . from 7 A.M. to 9 P.M., with twenty minutes for lunch, and no supper, a working week of eighty-two hours . . . Since the enactment of the factory law, their working week has consisted of six days of eight hours each, a reduction of thirty-four hours a week.”

– Florence Kelley and Alzina P. Stevens, from *Hull House Maps and Papers*

As Hull House gained recognition, the settlement house movement spread to other cities. Most settlement houses continued to provide programs and services for city dwellers through the early 1900s. Some, such as Germantown Settlement in Pennsylvania, remain active today.

Summary and Preview Reformers in the late 1800s worked to solve urban problems. In the next module you will learn how Progressives pushed for further reforms.

Reading Check

Draw Conclusions

How did Hull House help improve city life?

Lesson 3 Assessment

Review Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Describe** What were conditions like in tenements?

b. Summarize What problems resulted from the rapid growth of cities?

c. Draw Conclusions Why do you think people lived in tenements?
- a. Define** What is a settlement house?

b. Explain How did settlement houses help city dwellers?

c. Evaluate Do you think settlement houses were successful? Why or why not?

Critical Thinking

- 3. Categorize** In this lesson you learned about urban problems. Create a chart similar to the one below and identify the responses to those problems.

