



The Struggle Against Poverty: 100 Years Ago and Today

By David R. Jones
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More Latino New Yorkers live in poverty – 650,000 - than any other group in the city. Poverty is a reality for 1.6 million New Yorkers - many whom are working low-wage jobs that offer but a glimmer of hope in advancement beyond their present economic status.

Evidence of poverty is all around us. But how many of us are conscious of it? The man on the corner with a paper cup, the boy sitting against a wall with a message scrawled on a piece of cardboard, the figure sleeping in a deserted doorway. Indeed, the majority of those suffering and at risk of falling further behind are young people of color without education and those who have experienced long-term joblessness.

The faces of poverty during the turn of the 20th century in New York City looked quite different – they were mainly faces of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Although they shared a similar lack of political power and influence with their present day contemporaries, their plight nevertheless ignited a movement to assist and study the poor.

A recent photo exhibit at Columbia University's Wallach Gallery, "*Social Forces Visualized: Photography and Scientific Charity, 1900-1920*," captures that period in stark and unforgiving imagery. In many ways, the exhibit illustrated the continuum of poverty and hardship afflicting the poor that has spanned 100 years.

For example, there is the photo of a barefoot mother with a child and a young boy with leg braces hawking newspapers. These are among numerous photographs illustrating harsh life inside New York City's pre-war tenements where tuberculosis and other preventable diseases ravaged families.

More than 125 photographs were selected for the exhibit from Community Service Society (CSS) records at Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library. The rise in social work that these conditions initiated coincided with the emergence of photography as a way of both documenting social problems and spurring reforms to help poor people advance.

CSS's predecessor organizations — the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) – organized in 1843 – and the Charity Organization Society (COS) – founded in 1882 - hired the photographers whose work is displayed in *Social Forces Visualized*. Photography and the media would help seed a tradition of giving and become an integral part of charitable strategies to assist the poor.

Two of the most prominent photographers of the progressive era – Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis – contributed many photos to CSS predecessor organizations. Many of their photographs are displayed in the exhibit. Hine and Riis had a profound effect on how the politicians and the public viewed the

everyday life of the poor. Both individuals were instrumental in the movement to alleviate the worst excesses of poverty in America.

Hine's photographs were widely circulated in magazines, newspapers, and journals by the National Child Labor Committee. His photographs are generally recognized as the most important reason why states began to strengthen child labor laws.

One of America's first photojournalists, Jacob Riis, made his name by publishing photographs depicting the living conditions of the urban poor. Riis would become famous for a book entitled "[How the Other Half Lives](#)," which included some of his most grim photographs of life in poverty.

Today, more than one in five New Yorkers lives in poverty. The immigrant poor of a hundred years ago have been largely replaced by newcomers from Puerto Rico as well as immigrants from the Caribbean and Central and South America, but the struggle to defeat poverty goes on. As New Yorkers of all walks of life experienced this powerful exhibition, we hope they make the connection between efforts to assist the poor one hundred years ago and the efforts needed today to create opportunities for low-income New Yorkers and the working poor to achieve economic security.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.