

Poverty and Suffering Today and as It Looked 100 Years Ago

A third of all low-income single mothers in New York City, who have among the highest poverty rates in the city, reported going hungry in 2011 because they lacked sufficient money to buy food. Nearly half of them fell behind on their rent, and 38 percent could not fill a needed prescription. In the richest city in America (55 billionaires), 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 blacks and Latinos, young people 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 photo exhibit which recently opened 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 illustrates 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.

The *Social Forces Visualized* exhibit also includes a film on tuberculosis produced by Thomas Edison's film company in 1912. The film was made in collaboration with the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis, the government, and the Charity Organization Society.

Emergence of Photography

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*.

As immigrants flocked to America in the early 19th century and the effects of the Industrial Revolution brought thousands to New York from rural communities, the city's population exploded. In 1848 alone, 160,000 immigrants entered the Port of New York. Many newcomers crowded into lower Manhattan, living in poverty. New York's entrepreneurs and the media were justifiably alarmed at this influx of destitution. It was in this environment that the AICP was born.

Photography and the media would help seed a tradition of giving and become an integral part of charitable strategies to assist the poor. One of the best examples of this is the New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, which is celebrating its centennial this year.

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. Although there were many organizations and activists working to get child labor laws passed at the time, Hine’s photographs are generally recognized as the most important reason why states began to strengthen child labor laws.

The rapid growth of America’s cities and its urban population was matched by a rise in squalor and poverty that shocked many people. 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.

New Poor, Same Struggle

While the most wretched conditions of sanitation and housing represented in the exhibition have been somewhat alleviated over time, poverty still engulfs a large portion of city residents. Today, more than three million New Yorkers live in low-income households and one in five lives in poverty. The immigrant poor of a hundred years ago have been largely replaced by newcomers from Latin America and Asia, but the struggle to defeat poverty goes on.

As New Yorkers of all walks of life experience this powerful exhibition – particularly those in positions of power and leadership - 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.

“[Social Forces Visualized](#)” will be at the Wallach Art Gallery, 826 Schermerhorn Hall, Columbia University, until December 17. Gallery hours are 1-5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday. The exhibit is free.

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. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS’s website: www.cssny.org.

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