

The Tenements of New York

Jacob Riis learned about the slums of New York City while working as a newspaper reporter there during the late 1800's. His photographs and writings about the living conditions of the poor helped bring about social reform. The account which follows describes the rundown tenement section of the city. Similar conditions were found in other urban centers across the United States.

In the July nights, when the tenements are like fiery furnaces, men and women lie restless in sweltering rooms, panting for air and sleep. Then every truck in the street, every crowded fire-escape, becomes a bedroom, preferable to any the house affords. A cooling shower on such a night is hailed as a heaven-sent blessing.

Life in the tenements in July and August spells death to an army of little ones whom the doctor's skill is powerless to save. Sleepless mothers walk the streets in the gray of the early dawn trying to stir a cooling breeze to fan the brow of the sick baby. Fifty "summer doctors," especially trained to this work, are then sent into the tenements by the Board of Health, with free advice and medicine for the poor. Devoted women follow in their track with care and nursing for the sick. Fresh-air excursions run daily out of New York on land and water; but despite all efforts the gravediggers work overtime, and the little coffins are stacked mountain high on the deck of the Charity Commissioners' boat when it makes its semi-weekly trips to the city cemetery.

Under the most favorable circumstances, an epidemic, which the well-to-do can afford to make light of as a thing to be got over or avoided by reasonable care, is excessively fatal among the children of the poor, by reason of the practical impossibility of isolating the patient in a tenement. An epidemic of the measles ravaged three crowded blocks in Elizabeth Street on the heels of the grippe last winter, and when it had spent its fury, the death-maps in the Bureau of Vital Statistics looked as if a black hand had been laid across those blocks. There were houses in which as many as eight little children had died in five months.

I am satisfied from my own observation that hundreds of men, women, and children are every day slowly starving to death. Within a single week I have had this year three cases of insanity, provoked directly by poverty and want. One was that of a mother who in the middle of the night got up to murder her child, who was crying for food; another was the case of an Elizabeth Street truck-driver. With a family to provide for; he had been unable to work for many months. There was neither food, nor a scrap of anything upon which money could be raised left in the house; his mind gave way under the combined physical and mental suffering. In the third case I was just in time with the police to prevent a madman from murdering his whole family. He had the sharpened hatchet in his pocket when we seized him. He was an Irish laborer; and had been working in the sewers until the poisonous gases destroyed his health. Then he was laid off, and scarcely anything had been coming in all winter but the oldest child's earnings as cash-girl in a store, \$2.50 a week.