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L162
Tenement Housing Conditions

in

Twentieth Ward, Chicago

Report of Civics Committee

of

Chicago Woman’s Club

1912
To the Chicago Woman's Club:

The following report of the investigation of housing conditions in the Twentieth Ward of Chicago, made by the Civics Committee of the Club during the past year, is respectfully submitted.

The object of the inquiry was to secure accurate and valuable first-hand information, and to come into practical acquaintance with certain administrative departments of the city.

A combination of elements made the undertaking possible: the generosity of the Club, the aid given by Club departments, the contributions of individual members of the committee and of the Club, and donations made by outside organizations interested in the work. For these the Civics Committee makes grateful acknowledgment.

The indispensable factor, however, in the success of the undertaking was the personality of the investigator, Miss Rose Zwihilsky, whose command of the half-dozen tongues spoken in the district studied, united with sympathy, tact, and a scientific attitude, comprised an equipment without which a thorough and trustworthy investigation of this kind would have been impossible.

The work was carried on for a period of eight and one-half months during the year 1911-12. As the present rule of the City Health Department limits the wearing of official stars to those regularly employed by the city, our investigator conducted her inquiry without this desirable aid, yet she was refused admittance to premises in only one instance, though in another the very danger of the environment forbade her to enter. At times the chairman of the committee accompanied the investigator on her tours, and the committee kept in close touch with the work through frequent detailed reports and by attending to cases of personal relief.

Facts obtained, showing vital living conditions, were recorded upon tabulated cards, one to each house visited,
with explanations on the back often of tragic interest. All this material, together with copies of records of city bureaus showing action upon complaints lodged as a result of the investigation, are on file in the office of the Woman’s Club for reference by any one interested.
This work of investigation and relief was not undertaken to amass newer or more detailed facts than had been gathered in previous investigations along the same line. It was rather prompted by the steady increase in housing evils, notwithstanding past efforts to check them, and from a resolve that such efforts should not have been in vain, and a conviction that the energies of social organizations, however slight by themselves, should continue to be put forth persistently and unitedly until tenement evils should be abated, and the slum wiped out.

This aim is not impracticable. Within a very few years great improvements in building and sanitary laws have been made in Chicago. Indeed if all the buildings and houses now standing conformed to these modern codes, there would now be light and air for the poorest of our population.

Consequently the question before the Civics Committee was. To what extent are these laws and ordinances enforced, and if they are not enforced, what is the reason? And again what can this committee and what can the Woman’s Club do to secure their enforcement?

Half the time spent would have sufficed to answer these questions. But the value of an extended inquiry for eight and a half months was shown in securing through municipal agency relief for numerous grievances otherwise unattended to, and also in the extent to which the city responded when appealed to; and this answered part of our main question.

The district chosen for study was that part of the Twentieth Ward lying between Clinton and Morgan streets and extending north and south between Taylor and Sixteenth streets, which includes the heart of the Ghetto.

Here the typical dwelling is the dilapidated frame house originally built for one family and now partitioned up to contain from three to six families. This compression is usually aggravated by the presence of a still older structure pushed back on the lot forming a rear tenement more unlivable and more lived in than the front building. Here and there is the later solid tenement, worse because more permanent and erected before the enactment of the present ordinances for insuring light and air. These buildings are monuments to the unhindered readiness of some landlords to capitalize misery and disease.
Tenements in this district are often sought because of their dilapidation; and the poorer the tenant the more welcome is their dilapidation. Many tenants, as the inquiry revealed, object to improvements because of the sure raise in rent. Poverty also tempts the tenant to share his rent with lodgers to the limit. Immigrants, empty handed, follow the trail unerringly to the cheapest quarters in their national colonies, pouring in continually upon the same locality.

Through this district, chiefly with Jews and Italians, with some Bohemians, Lithuanians and other late arrivals, the investigator made house to house visits, recording housing facts, applying herself to the human problem and appealing to the city to remedy civic ills discovered. In this way useful information was collected, a bit of friendly help offered to the sorely needy, and the activity of city bureaus assisted, perhaps, stimulated. Griny doors to gloomier abodes here opened to her. Suspicion of her mission yielded to confidence that revealed the human as well as civic problem. This opportunity called out many a lesson in domestic sanitation, which had the advantage of being adapted specifically to the case in hand, and of reaching women whose lack of English or whose home obligations deprived them of the help offered by social settlements. Hundreds of such women fall into apathetic slovenliness, which drags heavily upon the overtaxed health and cleaning bureaus of the city, from sheer confusion and sense of helplessness in a strange land.

To teach the house-mother to heed the garbage man's bell, to remove food from the table between meals, to put refuse out of baby's reach, to find a hospital for a sick working girl, free milk for the pedlar's blue children, coal for the sick man's family found fireless and huddled in bed on a winter day, and clothing for the gypsy's bangle-strewn but naked offspring, perhaps work for some member,—this only hints at the human phase of the work which served as a substitute for the coveted official star.

A table will be given later showing one hundred and twenty-five cases in which serious distress found help in philanthropic or social institutions appealed to.

The privilege of entering into conversation, which obviously has its objection in case of a city inspector, brought out circumstances and past events, material to intelligent statement of a situation.
Four hundred and thirteen buildings and premises were thoroughly examined. No specialized or technical attempt was made in this, but the plain provision of the sanitary and building codes, and the city garbage and ash cleaning rules and requirements furnishing guidance and tests. These four hundred odd buildings were found to contain seventeen hundred and five apartments, and to house ten thousand and one hundred and eighty-two persons.

In this report the chief and apparent evils only which enter into the menace of the slums can be dwelt upon.

The one which immediately strikes the eye and assails the nostrils is garbage. The wonderment is, how people with presumably no surplus food can produce such quantities of garbage. Strewn through hallways, scattered along the streets, heaped in alleys in overflowing pails or piles—garbage is king.

A garbage nuisance on the premises is subject to the penalties enforceable by the Health Department; on streets and alleys it is referable to the Bureau of Streets and Alleys. The conditions, inside and out, can be best and

Street heaped with rubbish and snow eight feet high.
briefly described by typical notes from over one hundred complaints lodged with these departments on this subject:

Garbage dumped in hall; no cans nor pails supplied by landlord.

Alley filled with foul smelling mud a foot deep bounded on each side by walls of garbage, ashes and rubbish.

Nine families throwing all household waste into alley. No cans provided.

Alley in horrible condition from dumping of offal from butcher shops.

No garbage cans, not even a box, for large tenement.

Awful condition in alley. Piles of decaying garbage from overturned cans. Stench overpowering.

Alley itself only garbage receptacle for tenants of five buildings who throw out all refuse.

Manure boxes broken and coverless, swarming with flies, lining alley.

Alley littered with manure and garbage from lack of boxes; offensive from dead animal.

Decayed body of dog lying for weeks in alley opposite rear entrance of house.

Ash and garbage collections, at two or three weeks' intervals; according to eight tenants.

Ashes and garbage collected once a week or less often.

Loads of ashes and refuse lying in front of every house, blown about by wind. Alley at rear lined up with garbage.

Six cans for twelve families. Cans crowded into narrow little hall strewn with garbage and filth and swarming with flies.

Hall in building housing one hundred people—a disease breeder from garbage filth—cans never well emptied. Yard filled with garbage, rubbish, dead rats and one dead cat.

It should be said that every complaint sent to a city bureau was received with unfailing courtesy. Garbage complaints brought such assurance as "have notified owner to provide cans," or explaining deplorable street and alley conditions by delays in collection caused by severe weather, etc. The collector also maintains that no sooner is a block cleaned than a window flies up and a pail of "swill" flies out into the street. The menace to health is great. That of the front door can is surpassed by the hall can with its countless vermin and rat invasions. While permanent reform must come from no less than three sources—the tenant, the landlord and the city, it is a coincidence that a few weeks after the committee work be-
gan, waste collections from the district almost doubled; and calls came from residents of the adjoining ward to clean up that ward also.

Inside the old dwellings, sunken from rotted foundations, fitted with antiquated plumbing, darkened by subdivisions, with walls defaced and begrimed, plaster falling and roof leaking, it is difficult to specify single features for improvement. The sink with its decayed trim and often leaky pipes dripping upon a rat-hole in the broken floor, furnishes a definite starting point. The windows which may be immovable or too decayed to open, or are caulked to hold the heat, afford a second feature for municipal regulation. If the dark, disorderly bedroom, containing as many beds as it will hold, has no window, it also is subject to official order. The absolute absence of sunshine from rooms, where children are obliged to be present, and many other roots of squalor and wretchedness, are beyond municipal remedy under present laws.

Many exceptions were found to this condition, but that the sketch is not overdrawn the following summary will attest.

This table shows the number and ground of complaints sent to the Sanitary Bureau of the Health Department:

Number of houses visited................................................. 413

Subject of Complaints.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toilets</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinks</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcimining necessary</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defective means of ventilation</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filth dangerous to health</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repair of house necessary</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flats having entirely dark rooms</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filth in yards</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defective plumbing</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses unfit for habitation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total complaints to Sanitary Bureau.................1666

The following notes from these complaints show more precisely the conditions for which civic aid was invoked:

Sink and toilet pipes leaking until floors were rotted. Bed room of children so defaced, dark and filthy, it should be closed.

Four rear rooms, a damp, dark, unventilated den.

Window frames too decayed to open. Court outside heaped up with rubbish.
Kitchen and bed room not calcimined for two years. Toilet, used by two families, broken.

Two flats in rear of building crowded with Italian adults sleeping in every room. One water closet under steps without water.

Every flat black with dirt. Chicken coop in second hall. Smell awful.

Bed room window opens into filthy toilet shed. Boys sleep in room.

Pipes of water closet behind grocery clogged. Yard littered with fecal matter.

Bed room containing two beds, only opening being into kitchen. House overrun with rats.
Ceiling plaster falling. Yard toilet pipes broken.

No water in basement toilets. Basement littered with toilet filth.

Windowless dark closet used as sleeping room. Other sleeping rooms dark.

Four story building with two totally dark rooms in every apartment. All rooms gloomy. No iron fire escape.

Yard and water closet vile and out of order; rear building, unit for habitation, used as shop employing four women.

Awful dump in yard and basement; decayed floor and leaking pipes. Rusty sinks full of bugs. Vile stench, rats in numbers, forty people.

Storing and washing of fish barrels in yard, to use for pickles, causing sickening smells.

Filthy toilet under street pavement, used by public.

Ten families in one building using six toilets, without water for four weeks.

Flats dark, airless and filled with stench from basement. No yard; alley lined with disgusting manure boxes. Ninety people, fifty of them children.

Tenement building housing twenty-eight families without water in any toilet during whole severe weather. Water closets on second floor frequently inundated from toilet bowls on third floor. Rear porches and stairways heaped high with ashes and refuse.

Building containing five stores and several stands; tenants using sewer in basement (where fish, vegetables, fruit, etc., are stored) for toilet purposes.

Huge tenement building with thirty to forty occupants living in dark, dirty basement, near toilets too foul to approach.

Lot covered by two buildings, except a ten foot square yard, filled with junk and filth. Twelve flats, all horrible. Sixty people, twenty-five children. Sickness prevalent, diphtheria cases in hospital. Children suffering from skin irritation caused by vermin and filth.

Three-room apartment, all windows sealed, bed room without window, all surfaces filthy beyond description.

Two adults and two children sleeping in dark bed room containing 600 cu. ft.

Two-story knitting factory with women’s toilet in one corner of store in bad repair. Shocking toilet for men down broken slippery stairs.

Basement apartment, all rooms dark and damp. Bed room of mother and two children totally dark. Toilet in same basement used by three families, most of time without water.
One-room basement apartment, used also as doughnut bakery. Bags of flour piled on wet rotted floor, oil barrels, jelly pails, utensils, ton of coal, and folding bed for two, all in one dark, damp den with front window full of doughnuts for sale.

Family of eight in apartment used by father as chicken slaughtering place. Clotted blood mixed with feathers and dirt deposited everywhere from reeking stairs to last room. Kitchen floor deep with feathers. Only one window in apartment can be opened. Ceilings seven feet. Tenant claims to have used kitchen in this way for eight years.

These recitals grow monotonous from their apparent similarity. Yet each has its own peculiarity. When four hundred and thirteen houses pile up sixteen hundred and sixty-six violations of the sanitary ordinances alone, a sense of monotony should give way to alarm. A volume
would be required to describe these conditions in detail, and their evident effect upon families visited. For instance in one two-room apartment, never reached by the sun, all three children of the family were tubercular, while neither parent had the disease. A seventeen year old boy, with consumption, was found sleeping with two younger brothers; a father, far gone with the disease, slept with his small children. With such feeders of the disease as these how many tuberculosis institutes could take care of the city’s white plague, and of what avail are they?

It was unusual to find a woman in these homes who did not complain of chronic headache. After sealing up what windows may be opened, the family betakes itself to the free dispensary in the vain search for some “cure.” One weakened specimen of fatherhood, tending the children in a basement flat while the mother was out at work, when asked if the bed room window would open, replied he did not know; he had never tried. In another basement, where fifteen adults slept, the proposal to open the one window was objected to because of the worse smells outside.

It would naturally follow from the environment described that a train of personal ills and misfortunes would be encountered from which no humane endeavor could withhold a helping hand. Sickness quickly eats up even small margin of savings. At this point, and the Ghetto is always at this point, the community at large takes notice, and willingly supports agencies for the relief of suffering which in large part is the consequence of the stupidity or neglect of the city itself.

The following table shows the extent to which such agencies came to the rescue of the helpless, upon appeal:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County agent</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Booth Settlement</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxwell Settlement</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Aid</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Service Nurse</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant Welfare department</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Charities</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Aid Society</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Protective Association</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational School</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Tuberculosis Institute</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureau, Personal Service</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory Education Bureau</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman’s Trade Union League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>125</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This list does not include numerous cases in which private assistance was rendered. It shows, however, that bad housing conditions like chickens come home to roost.

However, all efforts, private and public, to care for human wrecks, into which children born and reared in sunless, airless rooms develop, are like settling the bill for human lives with cash.

To return now to the mountain with our pickaxes.

If the garbage can is a serious menace in this district the toilet is equally so. With the arrival of winter weather the yard hopper closet becomes an acute feature. Our two hundred and forty-two premises inspected after winter set in there found two hundred and thirty yard toilets. These were in large numbers frozen during the severe weather, often corroded and, in fact, as unsanitary as the banished vault. To this crying evil is to be added the dangerous one of the use of the same toilet by several families. In the above number of premises there were four hundred and sixty-seven families having no private toilet. Two, three, four and sometimes more families used the same. In one building there was no toilet whatever, the tenants using the neighbors' together with four other families.

The totals of this examination run:

Number of premises inspected.......................... 242
Number of yard toilets .................................. 230
Number of families without private toilet.............. 467

The location of the toilet is another matter demanding reform. Cases were met where the only opening from the toilet was through a door into the kitchen.

A basement apartment contained a toilet used by three families in close proximity to bed rooms.

A strange apathy and ignorance of the effect of noxious air seemed to abound. In addition to the sealed-up exhalations and poisons referred to, powerful emissions of gas from fixtures out of repair were found in apartments where not a window could be opened.

The fact that two hundred and thirty buildings had to be searched to find twelve bath tubs does not mean all it seems to, for there are free baths in reach of the district, which are frequented by many.
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Houses with none or almost no yards, 190 or 47%.

Houses with less than half yard space required by ordinances, 120 or 29%.
Houses with required yard space, but full of rubbish, 40 or 10%.

Houses with yards fairly kept, 55 or 13%.

This shows that eighty-seven per cent of the children, roughly speaking, must take their chances at play with the horse cart, wagon, truck, street car, whirl of dust, alley mud, garbage can, manure box and a thousand other obstructions, or resort to the old mattress, junk pile, accumulations of filth or stagnant pool of the tiny space between the front and rear tenements, foul and reeking with the damp, black deposit of years. One small park furnishes a beautiful play ground, but children do not sleep there, unfortunately. The rear tenement fronts on the tiny space described above and backs on the alley collections. No wonder that the probation officer finds here the grist that is ground steadily through the juvenile court.

Apparently, so far as sweeping reform is concerned, an earthquake or holocaust seems the only hope.

Fire danger glares from every subdivided ramshackle structure in which families are cooped up and dependent upon one stairway which is sure to be narrow, often dark, and as often unlighted at night. The large tenement is frequently as menacing. One four-story brick building housing fifty people was without fire escape and only one egress. This fire risk is great so long as houses are overcrowded. Fifty complaints of insufficient exits were made to the building department. One rear two-story rookery used as a feather sorting shop, dangerous for human occupancy, was ordered torn down the day following the sending of the complaint. The building commissioners records show that complaints were generally followed by official orders to "provide fire escapes," "erect additional stairs," "make stairs safe," etc.

Inasmuch as the majority of law infractions were reported to the Health Department and were appreciatively received by the Sanitary Bureau, whose official inspectors were practically trailing the footsteps of the committee investigator, it became a matter of inquiry to what extent complaints and consequent official mandates issued to landlord or tenant, accomplished the improvement needed. These mandates issued out by the hundreds from the Sanitary Bureau, and in a most gratifying way.
A second inspection to ascertain results was undertaken. Repeated visits to a single building were not a new feature, but this time results were noted. The following table condenses the results of the committee’s efforts in co-operation with those of the Sanitary Bureau:

No. of houses revisited.................................375

Conditions observed upon second visit, regarding subjects of previous complaint.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Improved</th>
<th>Improvements Pending</th>
<th>Unchanged or Worse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toilets</td>
<td>312</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinks</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcimining</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defec. Ventilation</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous Filth</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repairs Necessary</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flats with dark rooms</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filthy Yards</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defective Plumbing</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses unfit for habitation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>1644</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No intelligent citizen of Chicago can be found who is not proud of the Health Department of the city and of the character of its officials for some years past. This knowledge and the cordial co-operation of the department when called upon is in striking contrast to the revelations of the figures above given.

Certain cases met with swift, sure redress. Where a kitchen, which was the living room of a large family of children, was made uninhabitable, and the children were evidently suffering from the wholesale killing of chickens therein, the head of the Sanitary Bureau himself banished the business upon a moment’s notice. Where a basement bakery was carried on amid the vilest surroundings an order to vacate was effective.

Also a tenement described under one of the illustrations was closed with the third effort to do so. A basement described in the complaint notes, in which the dark bed room of the mother and children was in deadly proximity to a foul closet, was closed permanently.

These effective strokes do not render of less moment the fact that of sixteen hundred and forty-four complaints sent in, and the places revisited, only three hundred and seventy-six improvements were found.
If the three hundred and twenty-three improvements pending be added, the showing is considerably improved; yet the continuance of fifty-eight per cent of these prohibited conditions, in spite of efforts of that branch of the city government charged with abatement of the evils in question, reveals an inherent weakness in this department for which no health officer is responsible, but for which the city as a whole is to blame.

The figures given may be studied for their full meaning, without further extension of the report.

The present head of the Health Department has proclaimed and explained the organic weakness of that department.

So long as this state of the law exists the housing evil will flout the mandates of the sanitary bureau.

What is to be done?

One step toward the reform of the law will be taken when societies and organizations, having good housing at heart, will form a central organization in the interests of good housing. A membership of delegates from those societies and interested individuals, formed for the purpose of disseminating information and awakening public opinion, would constitute a dynamic force in working out this reform.

What civic ideal could be more inspiring than that of comfortable, healthful homes for all citizens and their children. The so-called "City Beautiful" of parks and ornamental water front, and boulevards on the outside, if achieved, with a great rotten core of slums teeming with suffering and misfortune, so far from being beautiful would not even be moral.

Never were so many civic and social organizations wakening to the importance of this reform. It is high time to co-ordinate these energies and turn the impulse to perpetual good and make Chicago in its homes a model city.

On behalf of
The Civics Committee,
Mrs. Edward T. Lee, Chairman.