# Philadelphia in the 19th Century: Poverty

## Topic Overview

Excerpt from Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia article: “Poverty,” by Paul A. Jargowsky, Christopher A. Wheeler, and Howard Gillette. Paul A. Jargowsky is Professor of Public Policy and Director of the Center for Urban Research and Education at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey. Christopher A. Wheeler is a research economist and manager of data analysis at the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. Howard Gillette is Professor of History Emeritus at Rutgers-Camden.

See the full article for sources and suggested reading.
["Poverty" article from Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia](https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/poverty/)

Urban areas in the United States have always attracted destitute persons, including immigrants and internal migrants fleeing even worse poverty and harsher conditions elsewhere. Philadelphia and its environs were no exception, having had a reputation as “the best poor man’s country” reaching as far back as the city’s founding in 1682. Despite the area’s vibrant economy and opportunities for social mobility, however, poverty remained very much a part of its history, even as both the nature and extent of the problem shifted over time.

Pennsylvania was an early leader in developing legislation to provide and regulate public support for the poor. The Pennsylvania Poor Law of 1705 authorized counties to establish overseers of the poor, who could collect taxes for poor relief, and prison workhouses for “felons, thieves, vagrants, and loose and idle persons.” The stigma and harshness of workhouses provided an effective deterrent to seeking public relief. Subsequent laws limited immigrants except for those of unquestionable health, established strict residency requirements for public aid, and allowed Philadelphia to expel vagabonds and paupers from other colonies. The Poor Law of 1771, passed again in substantially the same form in 1778 after statehood, reaffirmed residency requirements (“law of settlement”) and the primary responsibility of grandparents, parents, and children for the care of poor family members.

### Uncertain Employment

Working was no guarantee of escaping poverty. Employment was seasonal and subject to economic gyrations. In years that the Delaware River froze in the winter, many were thrown out of work. Those who could not support themselves through market employment or who had debts they could not pay would often be auctioned off as indentured servants, a condition that in practice was little better than slavery, the chief difference being that it was not permanent. Indentured servants could be assigned or leased by their master, could be beaten or whipped for punishment, and needed their master’s permission to quit, marry, or have children. Indentured servitude flourished in Pennsylvania and persisted until the 1830s.

An influx of immigrants in the 1750s and armed conflict—most notably the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763)—boosted the number of poor and forced additional measures to manage the consequences. In Philadelphia, the number of asylums for the poor expanded. Confirming a shift in attitude toward blaming poverty on personal failure rather than the economy, those who turned to institutions for relief faced increasingly unappetizing work requirements. However, such measures did nothing to reduce the number in need. According to figures compiled by historian Gary Nash, the city’s poor rose from 3 percent of the taxable population in the 1720s and 1730s to between 5 and 6 percent by 1759. By the time of the Revolution, one in four free men in Philadelphia were living in poverty.

Immigrants could be counted among the poorest of area residents. To combat their hardships, they formed mutual aid societies, starting with the Welsh Society in 1729. The German Society of Pennsylvania, formed to protect German immigrants who traveled to the colony as indentured servants, followed in 1764. The Hibernian Society and the French Benevolent Society were among other such groups formed for similar purposes.

Although the Revolution bolstered Philadelphia’s status as the nation’s richest city by boosting the market economy, prosperity was not widely shared. As agriculture commercialized and manufacturing intensified at accelerated rates inside and outside the city limits, wage laborers endured extended periods of unemployment and hardship. Winter weather cut off many occupations, leaving those who did not plan sufficiently well ahead dependent on a growing number of charitable institutions in the city and surrounding hinterland. As the largest occupational group in Philadelphia, mariners faced particular hardship at the bottom of the income scale together with laborers, but even lower sorts of artisans, notably shoemakers and tailors, struggled to sustain their households. Women, whether living independently or with a husband, were often compelled to work in occupations that did not exclude them where they earned half the wages of men at best.

### Crowding on the Fringe

In the first part of the nineteenth century, when pedestrian traffic predominated, the most desirable housing remained at the urban core, close to primary sources of employment. Those lacking the financial resources to buy or rent preferred housing were compelled to find marginal accommodations in courts, lanes, and alleys in the central city or in built-up suburbs immediately adjacent to the city limits–Southwark and Moyamensing to the south and Kensington, Northern Liberties, and Spring Garden to the north—where crowding and inadequate services combined to tarnish their presence. A surge of Irish and German immigrants joining native-born workers in these areas roused concern among Philadelphia’s ruling elite as rising budgets for poor relief failed to reverse the presence of widescale economic distress. Seeking first to impose oversight through the moral suasion of temperance campaigns, Philadelphia’s leadership ultimately imposed administrative control, first by extending the area’s newly formed professional police force to the suburbs and, shortly thereafter in 1854, consolidating all of Philadelphia County with the city. What had once been an effort to assure the deference of the lower classes to those of higher wealth through the assertion of status and position now materialized in new means of administrative control.

Increasingly marginally poor neighborhoods were associated with immigrants, with Germans congregating first in the northern precincts, while Irish concentrated in the area’s least desirable locations at the city’s edges: Moyamensing, Southwark, and Grays Ferry. By the end of the nineteenth century, Russian Jews and Italians joined earlier streams of poor immigrants hoping to gain an economic foothold in the region’s robust industrial economy. Mixing in the precincts south of the central city, these newcomers settled near the growing presence of African Americans—some eighty-five thousand in total by 1910—a great number of whom were themselves poor migrants from the South. As the competition for jobs intensified, thereby depressing wages, African Americans too had to settle for inferior housing as they crowded into “blind alleys and dark holes,” as the sociologist W. E. B. DuBois (1868-1963) described them in his groundbreaking The Philadelphia Negro (1899), where they filled “trinities,” tiny houses “with three rooms one above the other, small, poorly lighted, and poorly ventilated.” According to DuBois, fully 90 percent of the black families he studied in the city’s Seventh Ward fell below the line set by what he described as the “minimum adequacy budget.” Wary of established institutional forms of relief, he reported, African Americans devised their own network of mutual benefit societies to get by.

Echoing earlier responses to people marginalized in the modern economy, these clusters of poor, but largely working people prompted calls for reform—in schools promoting Americanization and in homes through instruction brought by settlement and later social workers. Reflecting a growing confidence among reformers that environmental intervention constituted an effective means of lifting the poor out of poverty, Progressive era reformers sought to improve both housing and adjacent infrastructure in neighborhoods where the poor congregated in unsanitary and often physically dangerous conditions. Their research, often buttressed by dramatic photographic evidence, roused public conscience to induce both new philanthropic and government investments in areas considered slums. […]

## Selected documents at the Presbyterian Historical Society

### Item 1

Jenkins, John, Rev.

Pauperism in great cities : the duties which it imposes, with suggestions for its cure : a discourse, preached in the Third Reformed Dutch Church .. January 11, 1857 : on behalf of the Northern Home for friendless children.

Philadelphia : Ashmead, 1857.

23 p.

(Call number: PAM BV 885 .P491 J4 1857)

See especially: page 9 (last paragraph) to page 11 (first paragraph)

### Item 2

Rogers, Thomas, 1792-1856.

Report of the committee appointed at a town meeting of the citizens of the city and county of Philadelphia, on the 23rd of July, 1827 : to consider the subject of the pauper system of the city and districts, and to report remedies for its defects.

Philadelphia : Clark & Raser, 1827.

28 p.

(Call number: PAM HV 99 .P491 R6 1827)

See especially: pp 3-4 and one of the 8 points addressed in the pamphlet (for example, point VIII, pages 9-11)

### Item 3

Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

The present state and condition of the free people of color, of the city of Philadelphia and adjoining districts : as exhibited by report of a committee of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, &c. : read first month (Jan.) 5th, 1838.

Philadelphia : The Society, 1838.

40 p.

(Call number: PAM F 158.9 .N3 P4 1838)

See especially: pages 12-15, “On Pauperism”

### Item 4

Union Benevolent Association.

Constitution and report explanatory of its object ; also, Constitution, &c., of the Ladies' Assistant Society, Nov. 1831.

Philadelphia : Harding, 1831.

12 p. ;

(Call number: PAM HV 4046 .P491 U5045 1831)

See especially: pages 3-7, introduction and “Report”

### Item 5

Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor (Philadelphia, Pa.)

The third semi-annual and second general report to the managers of the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor.

Philadelphia : Stavely, 1831.

9 p.

(Call number: PAM HV 4028 .A54 1831)

Pages 3-9, “Report”