

Children of Poverty in New York

Charles Loring Brace



OVERVIEW

Charles Loring Brace, religious leader, humanitarian, and founder of the Children's Aid Society, devoted his life to helping the poor of New York City. His book *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872) describes conditions in the city. Passages from it appear here.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why is the poverty in New York City not as deeply rooted as in European cities, according to this author?
 - What are some of the factors that might lead someone to a life of crime during this time?
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NEW YORK is a much younger city than its European rivals, and with perhaps one-third the population of London; yet it presents varieties of life among the "masses" quite as picturesque and elements of population even more dangerous. The throng of different nationalities in the American city gives a peculiarly variegated air to the life beneath the surface, and the enormous overcrowding in portions of the poor quarters intensifies the evils, peculiar to large towns, to a degree seen only in a few districts in such cities as London and Liverpool.

The *mass* of poverty and wretchedness is, of course, far greater in the English capital. There are classes with inherited pauperism and crime more deeply stamped in them in London or Glasgow than we ever behold in New York; but certain small districts can be found in our metropolis with the unhappy fame of containing more human beings packed to the square yard and stained with more acts of blood and riot, within a given period, than is true of any other equal space of earth in the civilized world.

There are houses, well known to sanitary boards and the police, where fever has taken a perennial lease and will obey no legal summons to quit; where cholera—if a single germ seed of it float anywhere in American atmosphere—at once ripens a black harvest; where murder has stained every floor of its gloomy stories, and vice skulks or riots from one year's end to the other. Such houses are never reformed. The only hope for them is in the march of street improvements, which will utterly sweep them away.

It is often urged that the breaking-up of these "dens" and "fever nests" only scatters the pestilence and moral disease but does not put an end to them.

The objection is more apparent than real. The abolishing of one of these centers of crime and poverty is somewhat like withdrawing the virus from one

diseased limb and diffusing it through an otherwise healthy body. It seems to lose its intensity. The diffusion weakens. Above all, it is less likely to become hereditary.

One of the remarkable and hopeful things about New York, to a close observer of its "dangerous classes," is . . . that they do not tend to become fixed and inherited as in European cities. But, though the crime and pauperism of New York are not so deeply stamped in the blood of the population, they are even more dangerous.

The intensity of the American temperament is felt in every fiber of these children of poverty and vice. Their crimes have the unrestrained and sanguinary character of a race accustomed to overcome all obstacles. They rifle a bank, when English thieves pick a pocket; they murder, where European *prolétaires* cudgel or fight with fists; in a riot, they begin what seems about to be the sacking of a city, where English rioters would merely batter policemen or smash lamps. The "dangerous classes" of New York are mainly American-born but the children of Irish and German immigrants. They are as ignorant as London flashmen or costermongers. They are far more brutal than the peasantry from whom they descend, and they are much banded together in associations, such as "Dead Rabbit," "Plug-ugly," and various target companies. They are our *enfants perdus*, grown up to young manhood. . . .

We may say in brief that the young ruffians of New York are the products of accident, ignorance, and vice. Among a million people such as compose the population of this city and its suburbs, there will always be a great number of misfortunes; fathers die and leave their children unprovided for; parents drink and abuse their little ones, and they float away on the currents of the street; stepmothers or stepfathers drive out, by neglect and ill-treatment, their sons from home. Thousands are the children of poor foreigners who have permitted them to grow up without school, education, or religion.

All the neglect and bad education and evil example of a poor class tend to form others, who, as they mature, swell the ranks of ruffians and criminals. So, at length, a great multitude of ignorant, untrained, passionate, irreligious boys and young men are formed, who become the "dangerous class" of our city. They form the "19th Street Gangs," the young burglars and murderers, the garroters and rioters, the thieves and flashmen, the "repeaters" and ruffians, so well known to all who know this metropolis. . . .

There are thousands on thousands in New York who have no assignable home and "flit" from attic to attic and cellar to cellar; there are other thousands more or less connected with criminal enterprises; and still other tens of thousands, poor, hard-pressed, and depending for daily bread on the day's earnings, swarming in tenement houses, who behold the gilded rewards of toil all about them but are never permitted to touch them.

All these great masses of destitute, miserable, and criminal persons believe that for ages the rich have had all the good things of life, while to them have been left the evil things. Capital to them is the tyrant. Let but law lift its hand

from them for a season, or let the civilizing influences of American life fail to reach them, and, if the opportunity offered, we should see an explosion from this class which might leave this city in ashes and blood.

To those incredulous of this, we would recall the scenes in our streets during the riots in 1863, when, for a short period, the guardians of good order, the local militia, had been withdrawn for national purposes and when the ignorant masses were excited by dread of the draft.

Who will ever forget the marvelous rapidity with which the better streets were filled with a ruffianly and desperate multitude, such as in ordinary times we seldom see—creatures who seemed to have crept from their burrows and dens to join in the plunder of the city—how quickly certain houses were marked out for sacking and ruin, and what wild and brutal crimes were committed on the unoffending Negroes? It will be recalled, too, how much women figured in these horrible scenes. . . . It was evident to all careful observers then that had another day of license been given the crowd, the attack would have been directed at the apparent wealth of the city—the banks, jewelers' shops, and rich private houses. . . .

The true preventives of social catastrophes like these are . . . Christian reformatory and educational movements. . . .

Of the number of the distinctively homeless and vagrant youth in New York, it is difficult to speak with precision. We should be inclined to estimate it, after long observation, as fluctuating each year between 20,000 and 30,000. But to these, as they mature, must be added, in the composition of the dangerous classes, all those who are professionally criminal, and who have homes and lodging places. And again to these, portions of that vast and ignorant multitude, who, in prosperous times, just keep their heads above water, who are pressed down by poverty or misfortune, and who look with envy and greed at the signs of wealth and luxury all around them, while they themselves have nothing but hardship, penury, and unceasing drudgery.