



# Child Welfare during the Progressive Era: Origins of Reforms in New York and its International Impact

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**Abstract.** The Progressive Era was a pivotal period in American history, especially in the realm of child welfare. With the rapid industrialization, children's living conditions in New York City deteriorated significantly, and issues related to child labor, health, and education became increasingly severe. The growing societal concern over these problems led to a series of reforms, particularly in child labor protection, compulsory education, and public health services. New York City became a hub of reform, driving legislation and policies that not only influenced other American cities but also sparked international attention and responses regarding children's rights. Through these reforms, Progressives sought to create a fairer environment for children, laying the foundation for modern child rights protection.

**Keywords:** Progressive Era, child welfare, New York City, reform, international impact

## 1 Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, New York City, as the largest urban center and industrial hub in the United States, faced severe social challenges, with child welfare issues being particularly prominent. The industrialization process brought about child labor exploitation, educational deficits, and health threats that significantly impacted children's survival and development. Against this backdrop, guided by Progressive Era ideologies, New York City initiated a series of reform measures aimed at improving child welfare. These reforms not only influenced New York City's social development but also provided valuable experiences for other American cities and international communities.

This study aims to systematically examine the child welfare reforms in New York City during the Progressive Era, exploring the theoretical foundations, social context, primary measures, and impacts of these reforms. By analyzing New York City's reform experiences, we can better understand the social transformations of this crucial historical period while also providing historical references for contemporary child welfare policy formulation. This paper will focus on New York City's specific measures in child labor legislation, educational reform, and health welfare from the 1890s to the 1920s, analyzing the effectiveness and limitations of these reforms, and

discussing their influence on other American cities and international society. This research not only helps us understand the social changes of an important historical period but also allows for in-depth reflection on critical issues such as children's rights, social responsibility, and the role of government, providing an important historical perspective for understanding the formation of modern child welfare systems [1].

## **2 Child Welfare Conditions in New York City in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries**

### **2.1 Children's Living Environment in the Context of Industrialization**

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, New York City underwent rapid industrialization and urbanization. The influx of large numbers of immigrants led to a surge in urban population and the expansion of slum areas. Under these circumstances, children's living conditions were extremely poor. Many families resided in overcrowded tenements, buildings with poor ventilation and sanitation that became breeding grounds for disease. According to Jacob Riis's investigation, in the 1890s, some neighborhoods in New York's Lower East Side had population densities exceeding 290,000 people per square mile [2]. Impoverished children in the city often roamed the streets, facing threats of crime, disease, and hunger. The environmental pollution brought about by industrialization also severely affected children's health, with factory emissions and wastewater causing a deterioration of the urban environment. Furthermore, due to the lack of an effective social security system, many families fell into poverty, forcing children to prematurely take on family responsibilities and enter factories or seek work on the streets. In 1900, approximately 100,000 children under the age of 14 were working in New York City [3]. These harsh living conditions seriously affected children's physical and mental health and normal development, becoming a focal point of concern for Progressive Era reformers.

### **2.2 Child Labor Issues and Educational Deficits**

The issue of child labor in New York City reached a critical point in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The rapid industrial development created a substantial demand for cheap labor, with children becoming the most easily exploited group. According to statistics, in 1900, one-third of factory workers in the southern United States were children, and one-fifth of children aged 10 to 15 were employed in factories. In New York City, children not only worked in factories but were also commonly seen selling newspapers, shining shoes, or doing odd jobs on the streets. These working conditions were poor, with long hours and low wages, severely jeopardizing children's physical and mental health. Florence Kelley, in her investigation, found that many children worked for over 12 hours a day, earning less than \$3 per week. Concurrently, the child labor issue directly led to educational deficits. A large number of children were

unable to receive regular schooling due to work commitments, which not only affected their personal development but also hindered long-term social progress. Although New York City had begun implementing a public school system in the mid-19th century, by the early 20th century, a significant number of children still could not receive a complete education. In 1900, only about 60% of children under 15 in New York City were attending school. The lack of education not only limited children's future development opportunities but also exacerbated social inequality, becoming an urgent issue for Progressive reformers to address.

### 2.3 Children's Health and Public Health Challenges

New York City faced severe public health challenges in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, posing significant threats to children's health. The rapid urban expansion led to infrastructure lagging behind population growth, with serious problems in waste disposal, drinking water supply, and sewage systems. Sanitary conditions were particularly poor in slum areas, where diseases were rampant. Infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid, and cholera were widespread among children. Table 1 illustrates the health conditions of children in New York City. According to statistics from the New York City Health Department, in 1900, the mortality rate for children under 5 in New York City was as high as 136 per 1,000, far exceeding the national average for that period [4]. Malnutrition was also a prevalent issue, with many children from impoverished families unable to obtain sufficient food and essential nutrients. Robert Hunter estimated in 1904 that "in New York City alone, there are still thousands—possibly sixty or seventy thousand children—who often go to school hungry". The environmental pollution brought about by industrialization also posed threats to children's health, with air pollution leading to an increase in respiratory diseases. The scarcity and uneven distribution of medical resources further exacerbated this problem, with many impoverished families unable to access basic medical services. These public health challenges not only affected the quality of life for children at the time but also sparked widespread concern in society about improving children's health conditions, driving subsequent public health reforms.

**Table 1.** Children's Health Conditions in New York City

| Indicator                                                  | New York City | National Estimate |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Mortality rate for children under 5 (per 1,000)            | 136           | 100-120           |
| Proportion of malnourished children                        | ~30%          | Data unavailable  |
| Proportion of children vaccinated against smallpox         | 40-60%        | 50-70%            |
| Proportion of children receiving regular medical check-ups | <10%          | Data unavailable  |

\*Based primarily on surveys in slum areas, may not represent the entire city.

### **3 Theoretical Foundations and Social Background of New York City's Child Welfare Reforms**

#### **3.1 Progressive Ideology and the Evolution of Children's Rights Concepts**

Progressive ideology served as a crucial theoretical foundation for New York City's child welfare reforms. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as social problems became increasingly prominent, a group of social reformers began to reflect on the negative impacts of industrialization and proposed a series of reform initiatives. Regarding children's issues, Progressives emphasized the special nature and vulnerability of children, asserting that society and government had a responsibility to protect children and ensure their healthy growth. John Dewey's educational philosophy, which emphasized children's initiative and the importance of experiential learning, had a profound impact on children's education reform. G. Stanley Hall's child development theory provided a scientific basis for understanding children's psychological and physiological characteristics. Progressives believed that child labor was not only a form of exploitation but also hindered children's education and development. They advocated for protecting children and improving their living conditions through legislation and social reform. These ideas provided important theoretical support for New York City's child welfare reforms, promoting the implementation of a series of specific reform measures. As these concepts spread and were put into practice, the notion of children's rights gradually formed and evolved, laying the ideological foundation for subsequent child welfare policies.

#### **3.2 The Special Role of New York City as a Reform Center**

New York City played a central role in child welfare reforms during the Progressive Era, closely related to its special status and background. As the largest city in the United States and a primary destination for immigrants, New York City epitomized various social problems brought about by industrialization and urbanization, particularly in terms of child welfare. Simultaneously, New York City attracted a large number of intellectuals, social activists, and philanthropists, providing strong intellectual support and social resources for reform. The relatively open political environment in New York City offered reformers space to exercise their talents. For example, during Seth Low's tenure as mayor (1902-1903), he actively supported child welfare reforms and promoted the implementation of several important policies [5]. As the economic and cultural center of the United States, New York City's reform experiences easily garnered national and international attention and emulation. The media power of New York City also provided an important platform for promoting reform ideas, with newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The New York Tribune* frequently reporting and discussing child welfare issues, sparking widespread social concern. These factors collectively established New York City's special position as a center for child welfare reform, enabling many important reform measures to be first piloted in New York City before spreading nationwide.

### **3.3 The Role of Social Organizations and Charitable Institutions**

Social organizations and charitable institutions played a key role in New York City's child welfare reforms. During this period, numerous organizations dedicated to improving child welfare were established and became active in New York City. The Children's Aid Society, founded in 1853, provided shelter and education for homeless children, with its founder Charles Loring Brace initiating the "Orphan Train" program, finding new homes for tens of thousands of children. The National Child Labor Committee, established in 1904, was dedicated to eliminating child labor through legislation and public opinion campaigns. These organizations not only directly provided services to children but also promoted institutional reforms through research, policy advocacy, and other means. Charitable institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation also provided important financial support for child welfare causes. Additionally, social workers, doctors, educators, and other professionals participated in the reforms through these organizations, contributing professional knowledge and practical experience. For instance, Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement not only provided services to impoverished children but also promoted the establishment of a public health nursing system. The efforts of these social organizations and charitable institutions not only supplemented government deficiencies in child welfare but also promoted the enactment of relevant legislation and policies, becoming an important force in driving child welfare reforms in New York City and across the United States.

## **4 Major Areas and Measures of New York City's Child Welfare Reforms**

### **4.1 Child Labor Legislation and Labor Protection**

Reforms in child labor legislation and labor protection were core components of child welfare reforms during the Progressive Era in New York City. In 1902, the New York Child Labor Committee was established, marking the beginning of systematic attention to child labor issues. In 1903, under the committee's promotion, New York State passed new child labor laws, setting an example for other states. This legislation stipulated minimum employment ages, limited working hours, and required employers to provide safe working environments. In 1904, with the support of President Theodore Roosevelt, Congress approved a nationwide survey on child labor conditions. These efforts culminated in the passage of the first federal child labor law, the Keating-Owen Act, in 1916. Although this law was later declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, it laid the foundation for subsequent federal-level child labor legislation. In New York City, the enforcement of child labor laws was also strengthened. A factory inspection system was established to ensure employers' compliance with relevant regulations. Simultaneously, labor unions and social organizations actively participated in the monitoring process, advocating for child workers' rights. These measures not only significantly reduced the number of child laborers but also improved children's working conditions, creating opportunities for

them to receive education. However, these reforms also faced strong opposition from business owners, encountering numerous difficulties in implementation. Nevertheless, New York City's child labor legislation and labor protection measures set an example for the entire country, promoting progress in this field nationwide.

## **4.2 Compulsory Education and School Reforms**

The implementation of compulsory education and school reforms was another crucial aspect of child welfare reforms in New York City. Although New York State had passed compulsory education laws as early as 1874, it wasn't until the early 20th century that these laws were effectively enforced. In the early 1900s, New York City began large-scale construction of public schools to accommodate the growing number of students. Concurrently, school curricula underwent reforms, placing greater emphasis on practical skills and civic education. New York City's educational reforms also included expanding preschool education, improving teaching quality, addressing special education needs, and increasing vocational education courses. John Dewey's progressive education ideas were put into practice in some New York City schools, such as his experimental school at Columbia University. New York City also began to focus on students' health conditions, introducing a school nurse system and initiating school lunch programs. These reform measures significantly increased student enrollment and retention rates. By the 1920s, compulsory education had become widely implemented in New York City, providing children with better development opportunities. However, issues such as uneven distribution of educational resources and language barriers for immigrant children persisted, becoming focal points for subsequent reforms. Nevertheless, New York City's educational reform experiences provided important references for national educational development.

## **4.3 Children's Health and Welfare Services**

In terms of children's health and welfare services, New York City's reform measures primarily focused on public health reforms, child healthcare services, nutrition improvement programs, child protection, and social work services. New York City strengthened sanitation efforts in slum areas, improved water supply and sewage systems, effectively reducing the incidence of infectious diseases. The visiting nurse system established by the Henry Street Settlement was promoted citywide, greatly improving community health conditions [6]. In 1908, New York City began piloting a lunch program in public schools, providing nutritious meals for impoverished students. By the 1920s, this program had been implemented citywide. In terms of child protection, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, established in 1875, was dedicated to preventing child abuse and neglect, promoting the enactment of relevant laws. New York City also began large-scale construction of parks and playgrounds, providing safe recreational spaces for children. The settlement house movement flourished in New York City, offering comprehensive social services for children in impoverished communities.

**Table 2.** Changes in New York City's Educational Conditions (1900-1920)

| Indicator                                 | Around 1900      | Around 1920    |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Enrollment rate for children aged 6-14    | ~60%             | 80-85%         |
| Number of public schools                  | >500             | 750-800        |
| Average class size                        | 45-55 students   | 35-40 students |
| Literacy rate for those aged 14 and above | Data unavailable | ~90%           |

Table 2 clearly demonstrates the significant effects of educational reforms in New York City between 1900 and 1920. The substantial increase in enrollment rates (from 60% to 80-85%) reflects the effective implementation of compulsory education policies and the growing social recognition of the importance of education. The increase in the number of public schools (about 50%) indicates significant government investment in educational infrastructure. The reduction in average class size is conducive to improving teaching quality, reflecting the improvement in educational resource allocation. The literacy rate of about 90% for those aged 14 and above is a significant achievement, indicating that educational reforms were markedly successful in improving overall cultural literacy. However, these data also reveal some potential issues. For example, even by 1920, 15-20% of school-age children were still not enrolled, possibly reflecting difficulties in accessing educational opportunities for certain groups (such as immigrants and extremely impoverished families). Moreover, the potential significant differences between regions and schools suggest an imbalance in the distribution of educational resources. These findings provide important references for subsequent educational policy formulation.

## 5 The Impact and Dissemination of New York City's Child Welfare Reforms

### 5.1 Impact on Other American Cities

New York City's child welfare reforms had a profound impact on other American cities. As the largest and most influential city in the United States at the time, New York's reform experiences quickly became a model for other cities to emulate. New York City's child labor laws and child protection legislation provided legislative templates for other states and cities. For example, the factory law passed in Illinois in 1903 clearly drew from New York's experience. Some institutional models created in New York City, such as the Children's Aid Society's foster family system, were widely adopted by other cities. New York City's settlement movement and social work methods were studied and applied by social workers in other cities, promoting the development of the social work profession nationwide.

**Table 3.** Impact of New York City's Child Welfare Reforms on Other Cities (Up to the 1920s)

| Reform Area |  | Major Cities Influenced | Examples of Impact               |
|-------------|--|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Child Labor |  | Chicago, Boston         | Similar laws passed, enforcement |

|                      |                        |                                                              |
|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Legislation          |                        | strengthened                                                 |
| Compulsory Education | Philadelphia, Detroit  | Increased enrollment rates, curriculum reforms               |
| Public Health        | Cleveland, Baltimore   | Improved some sanitary facilities, decreased mortality rates |
| Social Services      | Pittsburgh, Cincinnati | Established similar settlements, but on a smaller scale      |

Note: The degree of influence varied by city and is difficult to quantify accurately. Some cities may have independently developed similar reforms.

Table 3 demonstrates the widespread impact of New York City's child welfare reforms on other major American cities. In terms of child labor legislation, cities like Chicago and Boston emulated New York's approach, not only passing similar bills but also strengthening enforcement, reflecting the increased attention given to child labor issues. The spread of compulsory education reforms to cities such as Philadelphia and Detroit led to increased enrollment rates and curriculum reforms in these cities, indicating that New York's education model had a demonstrative effect. The influence in the field of public health is evident in cities like Cleveland and Baltimore, which improved some of their sanitary facilities and observed a decrease in child mortality rates. This suggests that New York City's public health measures provided valuable experiences for other cities. In terms of social services, cities like Pittsburgh and Cincinnati established settlements similar to those in New York, albeit on a smaller scale, indicating that New York's social work model had a nationwide impact. However, it should be noted that the degree and form of these influences varied from city to city and are difficult to quantify accurately. Some cities may have independently developed similar reforms, reflecting the widespread influence of Progressive ideas across the nation. Overall, New York City's reform experiences provided important references for other American cities, promoting the development of child welfare causes nationwide, but each city adapted and innovated based on its own circumstances.

5.2 International Responses and Adaptations

New York City's child welfare reforms not only influenced the United States domestically but also garnered widespread attention internationally. As an international metropolis, New York's social experiments attracted observers and researchers from around the world. The Progressive Era's concepts of children's rights, as practiced in New York, influenced other countries' perceptions of child welfare. New York's child labor legislation experiences were referenced by European countries such as England, providing important insights for the International Labour Organization in formulating relevant conventions [7]. Some institutional models created in New York City, such as the Children's Aid Society's foster family system, were studied and adopted by social welfare institutions in other countries, promoting the development of international child welfare causes. New York City's social work practices, especially the experiences of the settlement movement, had a significant impact on the development of social work in other countries. Mary Richmond's

casework method and Jane Addams' community work concepts were widely disseminated in the international social work community. New York City's compulsory education practices and curriculum reforms provided references for educational policy formulation in other countries, promoting international trends in education reform. New York City's innovations in public health and urban planning were also referenced by many developing country cities.

However, due to differences in social and cultural backgrounds and levels of economic development across countries, New York City's reform experiences also faced challenges of localization in the process of international dissemination. Nevertheless, New York City's child welfare reform experiences still made important contributions to the development of international child welfare causes, promoting the global process of child rights protection.

### **5.3 Analysis of Reform Achievements and Limitations**

New York City's child welfare reforms achieved significant results. Child labor phenomena were substantially reduced, and children's working conditions improved. By 1920, the proportion of child laborers under 14 in New York City had decreased to below 3%, far lower than the 10% in 1900. The popularization of compulsory education enabled more children to receive education, improving children's cultural literacy and future development opportunities. Improvements in public health significantly reduced child mortality rates; by 1920, the mortality rate for children under 5 in New York City had decreased to 85 per 1,000, a 37% reduction compared to 1900 [8]. The development of child welfare services provided more support for impoverished children, improving their quality of life. However, these reforms also had some limitations. The coverage of the reforms remained limited, with the most impoverished communities and immigrant children often unable to fully benefit. Simultaneously, the implementation of some reform measures faced resistance, such as the frequent opposition to child labor laws from business owners. The reforms mainly focused on urban areas, with the welfare issues of rural children not receiving sufficient attention. The reforms relied to a certain extent on charitable organizations and individual philanthropists, lacking stable institutional guarantees. Despite these limitations, New York City's child welfare reforms still laid the foundation for subsequent national policies, and their experiences and lessons continue to have important implications for today's child welfare work.

## **6 Conclusions**

The child welfare reforms in New York City during the Progressive Era provide a microcosm of American social transformation, reflecting the increasing societal attention to children's rights and the active response to social issues at that time. From child labor legislation to the promotion of compulsory education, from public health improvements to the development of social services, New York City's reforms encompassed various aspects of child welfare, providing important experiences for

later national policy formulation. These reforms not only improved the living conditions of children in New York City at the time but also promoted the development of children's rights concepts and the establishment of child welfare systems. New York City's reform experiences had widespread influence nationally and internationally, promoting the comprehensive development of child welfare causes. However, these reforms also faced numerous challenges and limitations, reflecting the complexity and long-term nature of social change. Today, in reviewing this history, we should not only see the achievements of the reforms but also recognize their limitations, drawing lessons from them.

The experiences of New York City's child welfare reforms tell us that protecting children's rights and promoting child welfare is a long-term endeavor requiring the joint efforts of the entire society. It needs the participation of government, social organizations, professionals, and ordinary citizens. In contemporary society, child welfare remains an important issue, and New York City's historical experiences provide valuable insights for considering and resolving current child welfare problems. In the future, we need to inherit historical experiences while continuously innovating and improving child welfare policies and practices based on new social conditions and challenges, creating a better environment for the healthy growth of every child.

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