

HOUSING CONDITIONS AMONG THE WORKING CLASS POPULATION OF OKLAHOMA CITY

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Along with the increase in population and the growth of cities there emerges a more definite housing problem. In the first place urbanization means increased values in real estate. Increased values of real estate, in turn, bring on higher rental and a tenant population. Thus overcrowding and congestion are inevitable accompaniments of the conditions incident to the growth of cities.

The housing problem therefore is more and more becoming one of society's major social problems. City planners are struggling with the situation in order to find a way out. Social workers are interested in the housing problem because of the close relationship between housing conditions and standards of living. The criminologist and student of juvenile delinquency see in poor housing conditions possible causes of crime and delinquency. In short, the housing problem is or should be of interest to every member of the social order.

The data presented in the following pages concerning housing conditions in Oklahoma City represents the results of a study of housing undertaken by the Department of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma at the request of the social agencies of Oklahoma City.¹

It should be further stated that the survey covered only the sections of the city occupied by the working class population. More specifically the survey was intended to get quantitative data concerning the living conditions in the sections of the city wherein originate the great majority of requests for aid received by the social agencies.

OWNERSHIP OF DWELLING

As intimated in the preceding section, along with increased urbanization and the drift of population to the cities there has developed a pronounced tendency away from home ownership. For the most part as cities increase in size there is a corresponding decrease in the percentage of all homes that are owned by the persons occupying them. This tendency, furthermore, is not restricted to any one locality but occurs everywhere to practically the same degree.

In the study of housing in Oklahoma City data were secured which showed ownership of the 449 dwellings occupied by the families interviewed. Three-fourths of the families studied did not own the dwellings they occupied.

Although this figure may not be by any means representative of the city as a whole at the present time, nevertheless, it is interesting by way of comparison with the figures on home ownership in Oklahoma City in 1920 as given by the census. Of the 21,346 dwellings in the city in that year 12,645 or 59.2 per cent were rented.

A study of the survey data as to ownership and tenancy in terms of race showed that a larger proportion of negro families were home owners than were white families. Thirty four per cent of the 135 negro families

¹The survey was conducted by a number of advanced students in Sociology of whom the following are the principal ones: Myra Birrell, C. A. Butler, Ruth Downing, B. H. Kissler, J. D. Sapp, Helen Van Vachter.

TYPE OF RESIDENCE

The single family dwelling still predominates in the sections of Oklahoma City where the survey was conducted. As a matter of fact the same statement would in all probability apply with the same degree of effectiveness to the entire city, since the single family dwelling and the two or three apartment houses include by far the great majority of all housing arrangements.

Of 330 dwellings occupied by white families 301 or 91 per cent were single family dwellings. The remaining dwellings were apartment houses varying from two family apartments to one thirty-six apartment building.

Consideration of the type of residence occupied by negro families showed that the apartment house for the negro was almost non-existent. Of 110 dwellings housing negro families only two were apartments.³

RENT PER MONTH

The amount of rent paid is a very important item of consideration in any attempted evaluation of housing conditions. The item of rent may be considered as the barometer of the condition of the dwelling.

Since, as has been previously pointed out, the families studied were of the working class population, generally from the poorer sections of the city, the following data relative to monthly rentals on dwellings occupied by Oklahoma City families were representative only of rentals received for the poorer dwellings and poorer sections of the city. They may in no wise be taken as representative of rentals throughout the city as a whole.

Information concerning the amount of rent per month per family was secured from 309 families of both races. Twenty of the 309 families, fifteen white and five negro, were paying a monthly rental of only from \$5.00 to \$9.00 while 47 additional families were paying from \$10.00 to \$14.00 a month rent. In other words 31.7 per cent of these families were paying less than \$15.00 per month for rent. Furthermore over one-half, 59 per cent, were paying less than \$25.00 rent per month. The average rent per month for the 309 families was \$24.50.

As may be expected white families generally paid a higher monthly rental than negro families. Three-fourths of the negro families paid less than \$25.00 per month as compared to 56 per cent of the white families. While the average rent per month paid by white families was \$25.35, the average rent per month paid by Negro families was only \$20.95.

Since a study of rent in terms of wages gives a better insight into the standard of living of a family or social group data relating to the weekly wage of the family head was secured along with the facts regarding housing conditions. As may naturally be inferred, families paying a low monthly rent were also receiving a meager income. In fact, nine family heads, five whites and four Negroes, reported a weekly wage of less than \$5.00. Twenty family heads were receiving less than \$10.00 per week and 145 or two-fifths, less than \$20.00 per week. The average weekly wage of all family heads including both races was \$24.95. Whites were receiving an average of \$27.60 per week and Negroes \$18.30 per week. Approximately

³Information on this point not obtained for eight dwellings occupied by white families and one dwelling occupied by negro families.

one-fourth of the earnings of the family head was going to the payment of rents.

FAMILIES PER DWELLING

A further valuable index of living standards may be found in a consideration of the composition of the household and in the number of separate family groups per dwelling. Slightly over three-fourths of the dwellings housed only one family each. The remaining 22 per cent of the dwellings, on the other hand, were housing two or more families. Two dwellings were discovered which were sheltering six families each.

When it is remembered that these figures refer only to the single family dwelling or space originally intended for one family the great degree of overcrowding becomes very apparent.

ROOMS PER DWELLING

Considerable variation was found in the size both of single family dwellings and the individual apartments. A study of 445 single family dwellings or apartments showed this discrepancy in size of dwellings to a remarkable degree. Twelve of these dwellings had only one room, 51 had two rooms, 89 had three rooms, 119 had four rooms, 91 had five rooms, 42 had six rooms, 17 had seven and 24 had eight or more rooms. The average number of rooms per dwelling was 4.3.

It is significant to note that all of the twelve one-room houses were occupied by white families. No Negro families were found living in one room and only eight of the 111 Negro families studied were living in a two room dwelling.

Of 314 dwellings occupied by white families fourteen dwellings were not provided with separate kitchens. Obviously in the fourteen cases, cooking, eating and sleeping, in fact the job of living, all took place in one room. The degree of overcrowding which has been commented on becomes all the more apparent when it is considered that all the activities of life about the home must take place in a single room. In addition to moral hazards incident to overcrowded conditions the problems of health and sanitation assume a place of major importance.

Although a separate room for eating purposes is relatively less important than a kitchen, nevertheless, the presence or absence of a dining room furnishes another valuable index to living standards. Of 435 dwellings concerning which this information was obtained in 163 or 37.2 per cent of the cases the residents had no separate dining room. In 38.6 per cent of dwellings occupied by white families and in 35 per cent of the dwellings occupied by Negro families there was no separate dining room.

CONCLUSIONS

From an appraisal of the findings of this survey a number of tentative conclusions may be ventured.

In the first place the survey failed to reveal any glaring conditions that seemed to call for an immediate remedy. Aside from a few cases of extreme overcrowding noted and commented upon, the survey revealed conditions more or less typical if not above average conditions, prevalent in similar urban areas.

The rental charges per month are clearly somewhat lower than rentals in cities of equal size in the older states. Lower values in real estate prob-

ably explains the difference together with the very newness of the city itself. Approximately one-fourth of the earnings of the family head went to the payment of rent. This represents approximately the general situation in regard to the proportion of income going to rent.

The proportion of homes owned by the occupants also revealed a very "average" situation for cities of this class as indicated in the body of the report.

The single-family dwelling and not the apartment building seems to be the predominant mode of housing of the working class population of the city. The probabilities are that the apartment house is less extensively developed in Oklahoma City than in older cities of approximately equal population.

The living conditions of Negro families as revealed by the study were on the whole favorable. Some dwellings occupied by Negro families were sorely in need of repair. Municipal legislation should be passed which would remedy this condition somewhat.

The high proportion of home owners among Mexican families is significant. At the same time the housing situation in relation to Mexican families, whether the dwelling was owned by its occupant or not, were uniformly the most unfavorable, revealed by the survey. The outside toilet was almost universally used. Modern plumbing was conspicuous for its absence. There was a general lack of cleanliness on sanitation, prevalent about the whole neighborhood of Mexican residence. Streets were unimproved, being mere sandy lanes for the most part. There were no sidewalks worthy of the name. Furthermore a large element of the Mexican population has been shifted to or allowed to drift into the vicinity of the city dump-yards, incidentally a very unwholesome atmosphere for the development of American ideals and the proper assimilation of these people into American culture.

The survey failed to reveal any alarming conditions regarding the roomer problem. However, owing to a lack of a personnel qualified to make a thorough study of this most difficult aspect of any study of housing relatively little of the survey work was conducted in the strictly rooming house areas of the city. The findings on this point are therefore, somewhat necessarily more favorable than the true conditions would really warrant. In fact, the study of the rooming house problem represents the weakest point in the entire survey.

Manifestly the outside toilet, as intimated in the consideration of Mexican families, should be legislated out of existence. This condition can be remedied comparatively easily and no area within the city limits should be without this very vital sanitary improvement.

There seemed to be a tendency for too many families to congregate in a dwelling originally intended for one family. It would seem to be a practicable policy for legislation to be enacted that would at least limit the number of separate family groups which may occupy a single family dwelling to two families.

Along the same line, the number of persons per room should be studied carefully with a view of enacting legislation limiting the number of persons per each sleeping room. In no case should the number per each sleeping room exceed two persons.

Fire escapes proved to be very rare. However, owing to the fact that the great majority of dwellings surveyed were of the single story type there was relatively little need for the fire escape, so that this situation may be passed up as generally satisfactory.

The amount of ventilation and light as indicated by the number of windows per room indicated a situation as a whole satisfactory.

The frame building prevailed in the large majority of the cases. This fact naturally increases the fire hazard which will increase as the growth of the city increases. Some legislation that would tend to curb the construction of frame dwellings, especially the distance between frame buildings should be passed and carefully enforced. Probably existing legislation if more rigidly enforced would in large measure take care of this situation.

The frequency with which the dwelling was classified as "dirty" and "disorderly" indicated that the quality of housekeeping practiced by the wives and mothers of working class families could be considerably improved. A campaign of education in this particular on the part of some interested agency could no doubt achieve commendable results.

Finally, it is realized that a description of the ideal, of what should be, as contrasted with what is are two entirely different propositions concerning any proposed condition or solution. This statement applies with peculiar emphasis to any housing recommendations that may be set forth.

It is recognized clearly that many of the ills connected with housing conditions are beyond the reach of legislation. Too frequently unfortunately, bad housing conditions take their root in the economic structure and thereby defy the best efforts of the reformers of housing conditions and set at naught the best legislation looking toward improvement of unfavorable conditions. For example, legislation looking toward the limitation of the number of persons per room, or a standard of repair, if effected would inevitably increase rents. The prospective renter in turn cannot pay above a certain proportion of his income and keep body and soul together. In other words the situation too frequently resolves itself into a sort of a vicious circle. Improvement in one line brings on difficulties in another which in turn react to tear down the original improvements.

The history of housing legislation in many of our larger cities; their constant efforts to improve conditions and the equally constant failings lends courage to the pessimist who persists in saying that after all the *laissez faire* policy is the only practicable policy and that those things must naturally work themselves out regardless of attempted legislation.

In spite of the apparent soundness of a great part of this reasoning, state and municipal legislation affecting housing can at least afford certain very definite checks to an otherwise unmolested situation which would shortly bring on deplorable conditions as history will readily reveal. In view of this, therefore, the public spirited citizen generally, the social worker in particular, finds plenty of incentive in behalf of housing legislation as one of the tools that will help in the better adjustment of individuals and families to their particular localities and environments.