

Working Women in Large Cities

PA 706
Final Paper
Professor Silverman
Cheryl Crofts
Krystal Williams

Working Women in Large Cities: 1890

Research Question/Objective

The purpose of this study is to determine whether working women in the South faced different obstacles and experienced different treatment than that of their counterparts in the North during the late 1890's.

Abstract

This project was undertaken to evaluate the descriptive statistics collected by the Department of Labor (DOL) under the direction of Commissioner Carroll D Wright in the late 1880's. The purpose of the study was to gather quantitative and qualitative information about the working and living conditions of working women in large cities. Although San Francisco and San Jose were included in the original study, our focus is on the differences between northern and southern states in the United States (on the east coast), therefore, were not included in our evaluation. The two Western states in the study did not contribute significantly to the information collected, although San Francisco's higher wages might have skewed income somewhat had it been included.

In addition to statistics about types of employment, housing, birthplace, education, place of birth and religion, the DOL interviewers were also asked to record their impressions and observations of the general environment and working conditions in which the women lived and worked.

Introduction

In the 1890's, the majority of workers (men and women) led very difficult lives, working long hours under conditions which endangered not only their general health, but also, quite literally, life and limb, with injuries and deaths being commonplace. Unless the women were highly skilled, their pay was very low. Sanitary facilities, if provided at all for working women, were frequently dirty and vermin-infested (Clark and Wyatt). Living conditions were often even worse, with several families sharing a single toilet facility, especially in large cities. Tasks that we now consider minor chores, such as laundry or cooking were, at the time, major undertakings.

Based on anecdotal evidence from our family histories (e.g., a great-aunt who started teaching school at the age of 15, a mother-in-law who started working as a laundress at the age of 6, an uncle who started working as a lumberjack at 14) and other commentaries, we had anticipated finding dramatic differences in the lives of women working and living in large cities in the northern and southern United States.

Although we found less variation between the northern and southern states than we expected, this outcome may be due to the fact that the DOL investigation was limited to a specific class of workers, and to those living in larger communities. According to Commissioner Carroll, for the purposes of the survey, the DOL defined "working women" as those working in "light manual or mechanical labor", such as factories or retail sales. The DOL study also focused

on "...what cities have to offer women in the way of manual labor..." because other types of work had been studied extensively by DOL previously.

Because the focus of the DOL study was on manual work done by working women in large cities, results of the survey may be somewhat. Women in professional positions (e.g., teachers, nurses, office workers) were not included. Because most textile mills were located in smaller cities and towns, the women working there were not included in the study. Agricultural workers were also not included because they lived and worked in rural areas. Nonetheless, the information collected by DOL interviewers paints a fascinating picture of the life of working in the 1890's.

Due to unanticipated difficulties in transferring the information in the DOL report to Excel, and difficulties with SPSS, we were not able to complete the kind of detailed statistical analysis that we had planned to do. However, we have found several interesting and unexpected trends in the data.

We had expected to find low rates of home ownership and large families. We had also expected to find high levels of church attendance, great dissatisfaction with living and working conditions, and better educational results for those who did attend school.

Literature Review

We supplemented the quantitative data in the DOL report with qualitative data using primary source documents. The study by Clark and Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet: The Income and Outlay of New York Working Girls*, contained valuable information about working conditions and health issues facing women in

New York City, and also a detailed look at the attitudes and aspirations of working women in that city.

We were also able to find a limited number of primary sources such as records of speeches and articles written by and about working women. Photographs from the period also serve as dramatic primary source documents about the lives of workers.

Photographer Lewis W. Hine used his camera and his pen to record "...social injustice and labor abuses..." (UPRM.edu). Although not strictly speaking, a contemporary, having started his work a few years later, the photographs that he took of child workers, and the information about their lives that they shared with him are a dramatic testament to their unhappy and often too-short lives. The photographs also reflect practices that had been common for decades. Although child labor was officially discouraged, it was common practice, especially in certain industries such as mills, laundries, and cigar/cigarette factories, where many girls started working at a very young age.

Like Dorothea Lange during the Depression, Lewis W. Hine was a social photographer, interested in recording social injustice. He was a determined and resourceful investigator, often passing himself off as "...an insurance agent, bible salesman, postcard seller or industrial photographer..." (uprm.edu) in order to gain entrance to factories to photograph and talk to the workers.

The literature we found consistently indicates that during the late 1800's, wages for factory workers were low, hours long, such labor laws as existed (such as the laws requiring that seats be made available for retail salespeople or

the laws requiring protective guards on dangerous machinery) are routinely ignored. The situation was particularly stressful for women workers because their wages were low even by factory standards.

Data Collection for the DOL Report

Investigators (mostly women) were sent by Department of Labor to 22 cities in the United States, two cities in the West (San Francisco and San Jose), six cities in the southern United States, and fourteen in northern states. The investigators conducted individual interviews with women working in the 343 industries open to women at the time, speaking with 17,427 participants (an estimated 6-7% of the target population). The cities were carefully chosen to accurately reflect the composition of the target population. Commissioner Wright states in the Introduction that the cities surveyed should be considered “...representative, so far as locality is taken into account...”

Method: Research Design and Sampling Plan

Cross-sectional population-based study based on data from a survey conducted by the Department of Labor (DOL), 1890, by Carroll D. Wright, the first Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor.

Unit of Measurement: The unit of measurement was the individual working woman.

Target Population: The target population was the approximately 2,500,000 women working in large cities in “manual or mechanical labor”, that is, in general terms, factories and retail sales. The target population did not include women of the “professional” classes or those living in smaller cities and/or rural areas.

Sample Population: The DOL sent representatives to individually interview women in the target population in 22 cities in the United States. 17,427 working women, drawn from 343 of the industries open to women at the time participated in the study. A concerted attempt was made to interview women working in all levels in all industries. Quoting Commission Wright, "...The tables show a wide range, the facts having been obtained from all grades within the range designated, and the agents of the Department have carried their work into the lowest and worst places in the cities named..." Most of the information was collected by women, because "...It was considered entirely appropriate, in an investigation of this kind, that the main facts should be collected by women..." (DOL)

Sample Size: 17,427 women from an estimated target population of two and a half million conforming to the DOL's specifications for "working women".

Outcome Measures:

The socioeconomic indicators were: income, ethnicity, employment status, health insurance, lack of transportation and attitudes towards healthcare providers.

As mentioned previously, 17,427 women participated in the quantitative data collection phase, approximately 6-7% of the target population. Qualitative data was obtained from the interviewers' comments and also gleaned from the writings of Clark and Wyatt.

Method: Variables

Working Women in Large Cities was a descriptive study, collected with the intention of summarizing the information. We have collapsed data from the tables in the DOL report into various charts and graphs, regrettably just with the use of Excel, instead of SPSS as planned. In our evaluation, we have considered only the difference between the north and south. This data can provide a useful tool to aid in understanding life and work in a different place and time.

Results

Although the survey did not cover all topics of interest to modern investigators, (e.g., race was not a variable) the scope of the survey is impressive considering the primitive means of recording and compiling survey data available at the time. In addition to compiling quantitative data, the interviewers were also instructed to record their impressions of the general environment of each city and industry, including sanitary facilities, condition of streets and general demeanor of workers. This information is included in Commissioner Carroll's introduction to the results of the survey, and provides intriguing and instructive qualitative data concerning conditions affecting the lives of the working women of the time.

Statistically speaking, the differences in the lives of the working women in the north and south proved minimal. However, the researcher's observations of the cities showed that vast differences did indeed exist between the two regions. In essence, it appears that the overall quality of life was better in the north.

Atlanta (coined the 'New South') was on the cutting edge of industrial development. Each new manufacturer served as a springboard for another, creating a relationship of co-dependence between industries. According to Commissioner Wright, "Manufacturers of all descriptions are springing up, and one necessitates another. The large patent-medicine industry caused the establishment of glass works..."

However, the working conditions for the industry workers were not cutting edge. It can only be assumed that these unsatisfactory working conditions were a result of the industries being in the early stages of development. These less than desirable accommodations may have been the catalyst for creating a lackluster workforce. Many employers were extremely dissatisfied with the quality of the women's work and their dependability. Their moral character and lack of education were also a bone of contention. As a result of their discouragement with the women, many employers began hiring their northern counterparts.

According to the DOL researchers, Baltimore, Maryland (a city in the north), was quite the opposite in terms of quality of women, who were considered a cut above the southern women, morally, educationally and religiously. However, the working conditions were comparable to Atlanta's in many ways, with few exceptions.

Data Source

Responses from the respondents who participated in the survey were analyzed. The survey was a cross-sectional, national survey.

Analysis Strategy

The first step in analyzing the information collected was to organize the data. The survey conducted consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data; however, most questions were of a quantitative nature.

Levels of Measurement

- ***Nominal and interval/ratio***

Inferential & Descriptive Statistics

The data from our research consisted of both inferential and descriptive statistics. As, our goal was to reach a conclusion that extended beyond what the immediate data showed alone, our research was of an inferential nature. We also described the basic features of the data of the study in great detail, which enabled us to provide simple summaries about the sample and the measures. The descriptive statistics were used to present the quantitative descriptions in a more manageable form.

- ***Mode*** for qualitative data
- ***Mean*** for quantitative data
- ***Median*** for quantitative data

Description of Variables

- **Independent Variable(s):** Industry, Cities in Northern or Southern Region (quantitative)
- **Dependent Variable(s):** Responses to questions regarding working, health and living conditions (qualitative)

- **Confounding Variable(s):** Women researcher's opinions may be biased for different reasons (i.e., their birthplace, current employment, education, etc.)

Implications for Public Administration:

Women's employment outside of the home (or farm) in the late 1890's served as a springboard for analyzing labor issues and the statistical analysis served as scientific data for the emerging labor reform campaigns and legislation of the period. Moreover, this information is valuable in assessing the current conditions of the women's labor force in the U.S. in 21st century as well as other parts of the world where women are continually being exploited.

Sources Cited

Bureau of Labor Statistics of the State of California, *Eighteenth Biennial Report, 1917-1918*. California State Printing Office, Sacramento, 1918

Clark, S A and Wyatt, E, *Making Both Ends Meet: The Income and Outlay of New York Working Girls*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1911, Retrieved November 30, 2007 from www.gutenberg.net, The Project Gutenberg eBook. (Made available by the Albert R Mann Library, Cornell University)

Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Fourth Annual Report of the United States Commissioner of Labor*, 1888, Washington, DC, GPO, 1888. Retrieved November 16, 2007 from <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/2585745?n=59&s=4>

National Women's History Museum, *NHHM Exhibit: A History of Women in Industry*,. Retrieved November 16, 2007 from <http://www.nwhm.org/exhibits/Industry/6.htm>

Rowling, M, *New Internationalist: Sea Change – Women-labor unions and women's issues in export factories*, (2001). Downloaded 9/23/2007 from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0JQP/is_2001/ai_81170787/print

Schroder, I & Schuler, A (2004) In "*Labor Alone There is Happiness*": A Women's Work, Social Work, and Reform Endeavors in Wilhelmine Germany- A Transatlantic Perspective, *Journal of Woman's History*, Volume 16, Number 1, 2004, pp.127-147

Yannarella, P, (200) *Documents Newsletter*, W. Frank Steely Library. Retrieved September 24, 2007 from <http://www.nku.edu/~yannarella/news0006.html>