

Chicago's Italians by Florence Kelley, Archiv fur soz. Gesetzgebubg u. Statistik. XIII, pp. 291-313.

In its ninth special report the U. S. Federal Employment office dealt with the Italians in Chicago. This report contained 408 pages of statistics and explanations and these were more comprehensive than the usual reports. The report is one of a group, which contains investigations of "typical cases", as frequently undertaken by the employment office. Only 6,773 persons were studied.

There were various reasons for the investigation of an ethnic group which was so small in comparison to Chicago's total population of 1, 886, 860. The first reason was, that an immigration law had been proposed in Congress, which would probably have affected the immigration of Italians more than that of any other nationality; a second reason was that, for a long time the labor organizations had accused the Italians of having the most damaging influence upon the workers' standard of living, next to the Chinese. They were accused of being attracted to the occupations which paid the lowest wages. In these occupations through their competition they increased the pressure which had already been felt by others in this wage bracket; and these workers were in the worst position to protect their interests against the results of this competition. In this way they produced more damage than one would expect from their small number. Besides, an earlier special report by the Employment Office had pointed out that the conditions under which the Italians lived were far worse than those of the other immigrants; for this reason a special report seemed in order. In 1894 the seventh report by the office had covered the problem of housing deficiencies in the large cities. The report described the most deprived

sections of Chicago (as well as those of New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore), where the Italians nearly disappear among the 18 other nationalities represented. According to this report, the Italians made up a larger percentage of illiteracy than the general slum population. The average number of days per year on which they had actually been employed was lower than the total of the other slum dwellers. The Italians' average wage for the weeks when they actually had worked was also less than the normal slum dwellers' income. At that time there were no means for carefully testing the reliability of these conclusions. The fact that Miss Caroline Hunt was entrusted with the supervision of the survey speaks well for the accuracy of the results, as she had lived for a long time in Hull House, which is located in the Italian colony. Therefore, she had the unusual opportunity to collect not only reliable answers to the employment office's questions, but also to obtain additional material on family relationships, nutrition and various concealed matters, which are unavailable to the usual census taker. [end page 2, skip to 9]

With the change in the way of life which immigration brings, the women appear to suffer more than the men. In their homeland the whole family worked in the field. In America the men continue to work in the out-of-doors and frequently work for several months in the country. But the women and children stay at home. If the men do not work in the country, they clean the streets, peddle fruits, dig the (foundations for buildings, or work on the railroad tracks, and therefore find themselves continually out-of-doors. They sell newspapers, shine shoes, or peddle various products. The women, however, do not work at all; they merely increase the unproductive class of the colony. This, however, is no evidence of material well-being; their idleness does not result from the ability of their husbands to support them. It is the women who increase the general poverty by their complete incompetence. They are not capable of making or

[end page 9] mending the children's clothing. They do not understand the importance of cooking nourishing meals for their families. The girls marry at age 14 (which is 10 years younger than the average American) so they do not have the opportunity to work as household help for well-situated families and thereby learn how to keep house and raise children properly. Even though the ability to keep house and tend the children is poor among the Italian women, they nevertheless stay at home and don't seek work offered in the city. The only activity in which they are engaged outside their homes, is going to the sweatshop to pick up huge bundles of short trousers, carrying them on their heads to their homes where they are to be sewn. Or in a similar manner they bring home wood which they steal and the children help cut up for firewood.

The inability of the Italian woman to adjust to the necessities of urban life is the reason for their children's ruin. The visiting nurses who see post-natal women, report that there is an unusually high incidence of miscarriages. They also agree that the children are often born crippled and are suffering from rickets.

Although Italian women have the reputation of respectability, they are unfit for motherhood, and their children soon contribute to the lamentable and unusually high death rate among children.

The mothers excuse their incompetence at housekeeping by saying that they must tend the baby, but they do not give the child sufficient nourishment, nor do they wash the child or its clothing.

Because they are unable to nurse the child, they give the children beer, tomatoes, coffee,

bananas, corn, pickles (which often have gone bad) and whatever else the family [end page 10]

happens to have left over from the last meal. Milk is very seldom available to the child. In Italy they were used to goat milk, cheese, olive oil, chestnuts and light wine. In America they have no substitute for the goat. In place of milk they drink beer; instead of wine, they use vinegar; for olive oil they use linseed oil; Italian chestnuts are replaced by American nuts. The children's clothing is just as bad as their diet. Their diapers are dirty rags which are bound tightly around their legs and body. The heat of the Illinois summers weakens them and leaves them vulnerable to digestive upsets and diseases. In the cold of the Illinois winters they are often dressed without flannel and consequently suffer frequently from pneumonia, their typical winter disease. It is not, therefore, surprising that large families die out and the mother of 20 children often dies childless.

All characteristics of the Italian community in Chicago are related to this disparity between a large birth rate and the small number of children who reach maturity. The figures in the above mentioned Labor Office report show how many families have large numbers of children; but they do not even mention the mortality rate among children in comparison to this birth rate. (p. 300) The fact that the average family has 5.2 members does not clarify this fact, because it is too close to the city average to prove anything.

Although the Report contains nothing about the growth of the Italian community, the following table is of interest because it demonstrates the fertility of the Italian woman. If one compares the small number of living children per family, the resulting statistics are rather sad. [end page 11]

TABLE DEMONSTRATING THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN THESE FAMILIES

NUMBER OF BIRTHS	Number of family members in:		
	ITALY	USA	ITALY & U.S.A.
no children	96	331	122
1 child	175	174	108
2 children	155	236	148
3	117	181	166
4	93	144	166
5	63	95	161
6	37	67	137
7	39	44	95
8	28	23	90
9	20	4	71
10	18	5	34
11	8	4	24
12	2	1	11
13	1	-	5
14	4	-	6
15	1	-	-
16	1	-	1
17	1	-	1
18	-	-	1
19	1	-	1

The fourth column contains the number of children born in both the U. S. and Italy. (This should read- "the number of Families who had 1-19 children in both the U. S. and Italy")

The recommendations for a reduction of the Italian quota came from labor organizations and those who seek reform in the welfare system. These two groups use totally different arguments which supplement each other. The recommendations of the labor organizations are: presented before the congressional committee by their labor trade newspapers and regular newspapers.

This view point is so well-known that we need not take special issue with it here. The opinion of those who want to reform the welfare system is annually presented in the proceedings of the National Welfare and Improvement Conference from 1873 to 1898. [end page 12]

The basic logic of the labor organization's argument against the Italian immigration is as follows. The Italians come here as young, strong men who are capable of doing hard labor. They flood the market competing for the small number of jobs available to the most unskilled laborer, because they consent to work for an even lower wage than the Irish, Czech and Germans. In this way they weaken the position of the unskilled laborer. The welfare reformers advance the following argument: Italians are not suited for life in the northern cities. Still they choose this type of life to their and their neighbours disadvantage. They burden the community with unemployable men and crippled children, whose percentage in the Italian community is unusually high. The healthy children are so poorly raised that they too, become a burden on the community. Italians are not suited to govern themselves and participate in a self-governing community. They must be forced to participate in any transaction, which intelligent citizens consider as routine. But the local authorities cannot use force and therefore they cannot fulfill the Italians' requests.

We wish to examine these complaints more closely and see what the special report of the Labor Bureau has to say about them.

It is true that the Italians have not the resistance to withstand the pressure of life in the North. They do not have the energy and endurance of the other laborers. This is demonstrated by the type of work they choose and the large number of unemployed. Proof of this is found in the tables of the Report which deals with types of employment and unemployment. The results of the Table X are as follows: [end page 13]

"It is interesting to note what type of employment the individual in these families is most frequently engaged in. In farm labor, fishing and construction 28 are employed; in the independent, professions there were 28 musicians and organ players; among the domestic and personnel services there were 787 dayworkers; 126 street cleaners; 73 shoe shiners; 45 barbers; 32 canal workers; 23 plasterers; 22 bartenders and 18 scissor sharpeners. In trade and transportation there were 186 ragpickers and sorters, 154 peddlers, 119 railroad workers, 78 newspaper sales-men and carriers, 32 shopkeepers (grocery), 20 salesmen, 15 drivers and 14 wood gatherers. In industry there were 60 hodmen, 38 worked in candy factories, 26 were harbor workers, 22 laid tile, 19 were tailors, (Men and women), 16 were shoemakers, and 14 were tinkers. By far the largest number belonged to the unproductive classes, which were numbered at 1, 689 people. According to this table 1,689 or 60.68% belonged to the unproductive classes; 17.78% were employed as personal and household servants; 17.14% worked in trade and transportation; and 5.52% were employed in industry. It is noteworthy that such a small number of women were capable of earning a living. The group in which most women were employed (personal and domestic services) was less than 1% of all workers.

The elements of the population dealt with in the 1894 slum report rated below average in their ability to earn a living. Still, 15.04% in Chicago were employed in industry. The above report on the Italians shows that only 5.52% were employed in industry.

The figures for weekly earnings were reported for 2,420 persons. The 32 workers employed in fishing, stone breaking, and masonry received the highest wage of [end page 14] \$7.64 per week. The 361 employees in industry reported an average weekly earning of \$7.33. 1123

domestic personnel reported a weekly income of \$7.23. The average weekly wage for 2420 people studied was \$5.93. According to the 7th special report of the Labor Office in 1894, the average wage for the general slum population was \$9.88. Thus, the comparatively great difference in wages between Italians and the average is significant. There are some probable explanations. As a rule, members of unmixed Italian families perform the tasks which require no skills, little manual dexterity, and strength. The average number of working hours per week was lower for the Italian families than for the general slum population.

Table XI reports the unemployment rate among Italians. This table includes all people over 15 years of age reported that they were gainfully employed and those who were only employed during part of the year. Of the 2,663 people employed, 1517 were without work during a part of the year. 40 were unemployed for one month; 56 for two months; 49 for three months; 66 for four months; 102 for five months; 250 for six months; 183 for seven months; 232 for eight months; 161 for eight months; 310 for nine months; 161 for ten months; and 68 for 11 months. The average time of unemployment for the whole slum population was only 3.1 months according to the first special report in 1894. Among the general slum population the rate of unemployment for otherwise productive classes was 15.80%. The unemployment among Italian families was 22.40% for a part of the year. Moreover, Italians were unemployed for an average of seven months - more than twice the number of months than the general slum population - according to the first special report. [end page 15]

The statements in this report point out that the Italians of Chicago are physically unfit to work. The tables of statistics concerning sickness and physical fitness leave no doubt about this.

Despite this the Italians still move to the north from the south and refuse to leave Chicago permanently once they have established themselves. The government has repeatedly tried to develop colonies in the south for the Italians, where they could set up fruit orchards and groves. Although the climate is more suited to their physical nature, no one has ever succeeded in this venture. There simply were never enough settlers who were interested. It is a possibility, that the Italians did not have the initial investment to survive until the first harvest; it is also possible that some would prefer to live off whatever their children could earn in the cities. In any case it is certain that the Italians prefer to live in the city and therefore always in the poorest slums.

The Italians` transgression of all rules and personal and public hygiene results from the conditions in their community. They live packed closely together in the most unhygienical tenement houses. They live together on one block or a group of blocks, and establish their own separate community. Non-Italians usually move out and leave the Italians behind with no outside influences or examples to follow. Therefore they do not have the opportunity to raise themselves from their low standard of living, to a higher economic and social level. The Italians in these surroundings live in such a way that their community become a center of phthisis (wasting or atrophic disease). When the men go to the country to work on the railroads during the summer, the women and children move into single-room dwellings. Usually four women rent a four room apartment with a common kitchen so they can live near each other. In any case, for five months the women and children live in the [end page 16] street as much as possible, using their apartments only to sleep in at night and as protection from storms and wind. At the end of the season when the men return they transfer their sleeping quarters to the basement - out of which they will be driven only by an epidemic. When a smallpox epidemic broke out in 1894, killing

1200 victims, these basement dwellings were evacuated and closed; ostensibly they were to remain closed. This type of living may be less dangerous in southern Italy than in the cold of Chicago where the Italians must remain at home-six of seven months per year, and where phthisis is so widespread. But because the Italians are unfamiliar with these problems they fail to protect themselves as well as their neighbours from the dangers. This inability to adjust to new surroundings is even more evident in their dress. They do not like to wear flannel during the winter, except for men's shirts and women's skirts. The children wear cotton underwear unless the doctor or visiting nurse has specially prescribed woolen clothes for them. Because Chicago does not have a river in which the women can wash their clothes (as they are used to doing in their sunny homeland), many women completely give up washing altogether. The family wears their clothing until only tatters remain and then it is thrown away. Because the women cannot wash together, it becomes a chore. Moreover, the women would have to hang up the wet clothes to dry in their kitchen or bedroom during most of the year.

The climate, their houses, nourishment, clothing, their high unemployment rate and the idleness of the women--all of these circumstances account for the fact that the Italians in Chicago are physically weaker than any other segment of the working population . The report only reinforces this conclusion. Table XX contains information on sickness and physical ailments from which the observed families suffered in one year. Of the 6773 persons observed, 1448 or 21.38% became ill or suffered from some-physical injury. If we omit women who have given birth from these totals, we find that 1185 or 17.50% were ill or physically incapacitated in comparison to the 3.90% average for the general slum population (according to the 1894 Report). It is typical

for the Italians that of 1448 people who became ill during the year, 301 or 20.79% were giving birth and 203 or 14.02% suffered from fever, typhus, malaria etc. [end page 18]

The welfare workers complain that not only is the Italian community the center of infectious diseases, but also that a larger percentage of this community becomes a burden on the rest of the community. It is said that this is because the men who are injured while working are simply careless; that the children are so poorly treated they either come into the world as cripple or have rickets because of poor nourishment. Because of the type of work done by the Italian men, they are from the outset in the greatest danger of injury or death. This is especially true in tunnel building and ditch digging; or working on the railroad where they may be run over; or in explosions while breaking stones; or when walls collapse as buildings are being torn down. After his death the Italian leaves his wife and children without support, unless he happens to belong to a voluntary mutual aid society. Occasionally Italians form such societies which are more or less well organized. If a worker is injured, he dislikes to be brought to a hospital. At home he receives such inadequate care that his recovery takes much longer than it would for an Irishman, Czech or German. This inadequacy is the explanation for the figures of the report on unemployment, and illness. The conditions of the children need no special explanation. It is noticeable to anyone who visits the Italian quarter that many [end page 18] children with rickets and scurvy are seen. This is unusual in American working class neighbourhoods. The ignorance of their parents is demonstrated by the fact that these children are not in hospitals or sanatoriums where they could receive medical aid.

The Italians are accused of being unable to raise their children properly. Except for those who are unable to work because of acquired or hereditary diseases, the children who are healthy are still unfit for the life of a northern worker. They are not sent to school, and because they remain illiterate they have no economic value for the community. Except for the tile-layers, the Italians are not handicraft workers. Even those children of tile-layers are not brought up to follow in their fathers' footsteps. The boys are sent into the streets at age seven or eight to earn their keep by selling newspapers, polishing shoes, collecting cigar butts which they sell to cigarette factories, peddling fruit, begging or stealing. The girls remain at home with their mothers and the youngest sit idle in the dirty rooms or they accompany their mothers collecting coal from railway tracks or stealing the wood from torn-down houses. The wood is constantly being torn off these houses and because of this people are beginning to think of changing Chicago from a city of wood to a city of stone. Other girls either sew for the sweat shop boss and work at home for the lowest wages, sell flowers, or beg since they all learn to play some kind of instrument before they learn to speak English. If the girls are not kept at home or sent into the streets, they are sent to the candy factories where they are given the lowest paid and dullest work. Sometimes they are employed sorting rags by Russian Jews who prefer hiring Italian girls to women of their own race because the Italians will work for lower wages. These girls at least learn something from [end page 19] their fellow-workers and marry later than those girls who remain at home. Even the more prosperous Italians do not aspire to raise their children to a higher standard of living, as do the other immigrants. They are greedy and save to buy tenement houses so that their children can become landlords, instead of spending money on their children's education, as a Russian, American or German father would. If the son of a well-to-do Italian becomes the-owner of a

cigar store or an innkeeper, the father's highest hopes are realized. A fruit wholesaler who does a good business is regarded as a magnate in the colony.

The tables on school attendance show an inexplicably favorable record which is surprising to anyone well acquainted with the Italian colony. Yet in comparison to the conditions reported in 1894 these findings were unfavorable. The following table gives the number of people in school according to sex and age:

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Under 5 yrs. old	1	2	3
5 yrs. old	14	9	23
6	39	45	84
7	91	64	155
8	78	57	135
9	64	66	130
10	67	49	116
11	44	25	69
12	44	45	89
13	39	18	57
14	26	23	49
15	30	11	41
16	10	3	13
17	14	-	14
18	3	-	3
19	1	-	1
20	2	-	2
21	2	-	2
24	1	-	1
25	1	-	1
TOTAL:	571	417	988

[end page 20]

According to this table the largest number of school children is seven years old. This is 13.94 of the boys and 15.33% of the girls enrolled in school. More than half the school children are

between seven to ten years of age which is 52.54% of the boys, 56.60% of the girls and 54.26% of all children in school. The 331 children between ten and thirteen years of age comprised 33.50% of the total enrollment, and those from fourteen to nineteen comprised 12.25%.

In order to understand this table, one must refer to the following table, which deals with children from five to fourteen.

SEX	AT HOME	AT WORK	IN SCHOOL	AT WORK & IN SCHOOL	TOTAL
Male	199	52	450	56	757
Female	271	34	394	7	706
Total	470	86	844	63	1,453

As explanation, the report states, "26.29% of the boys between five and 14 are at home. This includes all the children who had not been to school at all and . who had not worked during the entire year Among the girls a greater percentage had remained at home. Still the largest percentage of children of both sexes were in school The percent of boys in school was 59.44% and for girls it was 55.81%. Among the boys 6.87% were working and 7.40% were both working and in school. Among the girls, however, 4.82% were working and 0.99% were both working and attending school Among the 1,463 children between five and 14 of both sexes, 844 or 57.69% were in school during part of the year; 470 or 30.129% remained at home during the year; 86 or 5.88% worked during all or part of the year; 63 or 4.31% both worked and attended school "

In the 1894 Slum Report the following figures for Chicago were given; 64.87% of the children were in school; 28.03% stayed at home; 4.91% were employed. [end page 21]

The two tables are probably the saddest aspect of the report on the Italians. They show that almost half of the Italian children grow up without attending school. Those who do attend school leave so soon that they have little chance to learn as much as the children of other slum dwellers, and compared to the children of better neighborhoods they learn almost nothing. Thus, the Italian children remain as uneducated as their parents. They become a double problem to the city because of their youth and their ignorance. Because they did not grow up in the country they do not have the strength of their fathers. They do not have the agility or the cleverness of the city children who attend school regularly.

Finally, the Italians are accused of lacking in political sense because they cannot conform to the laws and must be forced to do things which other citizens do on their own initiative. This is the result of their lack of education, because a good citizen without education is impossible. It is said that they are not actually harmful in politics, but merely passive. They have sent only one or two representatives to the state legislature and have never elected any aldermen to the city council. Once they had an outstanding representative on the school board, but since his death they have had no say in educational matters. Because only a few of them consent to becoming naturalized citizens, their competitors try to convince the city government to hire only citizens, in order to eliminate Italians from city employment. These efforts have proven to be partially effective. Indeed, one wonders if there would be any Italian citizens at all in the city if it were not for this effort to exclude non-citizens from city employment.

Even if one agrees with all the above complaints about the Italians, the fact remains [end page 22] they comprise only a small percentage of Chicago's total population-whether there are 25,000 (as the Consul claims) or 6773 (as the Labor Office states) , or 5685 (according to the 1890 census). However large their present population may be, it is certainly too small to have a noticeable effect upon a city with 1, 886, 860 people . (The latter figure is the result of the school census of July 1898.) If the Italians had been absorbed into the various neighborhoods throughout the city they would scarcely be noticed. It is only because of their unusual habit of living together that they have been the object of criticism. How they will be dealt with is the problem of the American cities in which they occupy an inferior position--dynamically and numerically--in every respect.

The inability of the city government to cope with the problem of the presently small number of Italian immigrants and to change them into harmless citizens is a sad example of the city's general failings. It should be the clear duty of the city to acclimate Italians to the demands of city life. However, our city government cannot accomplish this aim under the present constitution. It is now the fate of those Italians who have settled here that they will die out after one or two generations. Every one of the complaints against the Italians harmful (negative) characteristics could be overcome through a dedicated, energetic city policy. The mere mention of the possibilities is enough to enable anyone to see the possibilities for improvement.

The most effective change in the situation of the Italians in Chicago could come about if the government could develop a truly understanding policy toward labor. Today the Italians become the victims of the lowest bid system by which the city awards its contracts to who offers the

lowest price. There is no consideration of [end page 23] contractor's ability or knowledge and no concern for the workers to whom he contractors delegate this work. No one inquires on the worker's behalf about the working conditions which are imposed by the contractor. Moreover, many corrupt aldermen exert their influence to remove those employees who do not comply with their wishes. The political and economic demoralization of the Italians is due primarily to the ever-changing city policies and the irresponsible contractors whom they hire. If those who now work regularly for these contractors could be hired for a constant, permanent wage, they could more easily improve their living conditions. This wage need not be higher than the city currently pays, but merely steady. However, there is no reason to expect the city government will introduce such a policy.

The overcrowded dwellings could be mitigated if only the ordinances now on the book; could be energetically enforced. Sick persons could be forced to have themselves treated in the hospital. School attendance could be required by law for all children. Their begging and hawking, and customary theft of wood and coal could be forbidden once and for all. Today they polish shoes and collect cigar butts during school hours under the very eyes of the police. No one is concerned about this. The employment of girls in the sweatshops could be regulated by law. In the schools they could be taught how to become better, more understanding ding mothers, than their own mothers were. The minimum age for marriage could be raised from 14 to 16. One certainly does not make these proposals to the state of Illinois or the city of Chicago, their co-operation in these matters is not to be expected. It is not the [end page 24] policy of Chicago to impose any restrictions. In an earlier article (on the Chicago public library) I have already demonstrated that the city makes its institutions available to the inhabitants without making any effort to convince

the people to use them. The city offers employment (hardly under the most favorable conditions), free baths, free education, free schoolbooks for the poor, a public library, and a free hospital. But the city exercises no pressure on the citizens, even when the general welfare demands it. The children who cannot attend school because they have not sufficient clothing do not receive aid from the city, but from a private organization. Another private organization (The Humane Society) intercedes in cases where parents mistreat their children. Those children found guilty of crimes in a law court are entrusted to another private organization which observes and improves them. Obligatory school attendance is not enforced. In only one case during the school year from September, 1887 to June, 1898 was a father fined one dollar for not sending his child to school. The city also does nothing to prevent the exploitation of the children by their parents, and to make the stay in Chicago of the parents who live off the children, less pleasant.

The Italians suffer the most from this live-and-let-live (*laissez faire*) policy. The native Americans, the Germans, the Russian Jews and almost all other immigrants have at least some initiative and take advantage of the opportunities offered by the city in order to improve their lot. The Italians, however, are not capable of this and as a result they suffer the most from all the disadvantages which result from leaving their homeland and benefit from none of the opportunities. [end page 25] If we may be allowed to draw some conclusions from the experience of a single city, we can see that the exclusion of all Italians from the country is not the answer. This is not necessary because their number is so small and their community is not increasing. Until now the Italian has presented no danger to the American worker, because the type of employment sought by the Italians is not the kind in which Americans wish to be employed. The American does not compete in the limited occupations of the Italians. The

American would seldom wish to clean streets, hawk fruit, dig for the railway, or work on the canals and in tunnels. Neither is he a rag picker or organ grinder. Should the Italian-population suddenly increase or should they begin working in occupations from which they were formerly excluded, then their relationship to American workers would be significantly altered. Their population is currently so small and they are so unsuited to take on new types of employment, that one can hardly anticipate such a change. They hardly stand in the way of an American who wants to improve his position. The Italian children are physically so retarded that they offer no serious competition for Americans or immigrants from northern Europe.

Because the community is so small and is not naturally increasing a law limiting the immigration is an unnecessary measure to protect the native worker.

However, if the present freedom of immigration is to be continued, then the example of the Report must be followed and even more comprehensive and complete investigations must be carried out. Moreover, future reports should utilize all local sources to investigate the nationalities question. It is of the greatest importance that the policies in the cities where Italian communities have built up be changed from the ground up. In the interest of the general health and education, the state must be enabled to exert greater influence on the individual citizen.