

Module 6: A Nation Grows - 1877 to the 1900s

Topic 1 Content: Problems with Urbanization Notes

Introduction

Problems with Urbanization

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Rapid urbanization of cities caused problems. For example, immigrant workers experienced extremely harsh living conditions. Many lived in cheaply constructed tenement buildings that were unsanitary. Cities had high crime rates and few police to enforce laws. Since buildings were built close to one another, fires sometimes caused major destruction to entire portions of the city.

In this interactivity, click the images in the media panel to learn about the problems major cities faced as America expanded.



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Housing

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Immigrants moving to a city had two options for housing. First, they could buy a house on the outskirts of town. If they chose this option, commuting to work became problematic. Immigrants could also rent a room in a tenement. Tenements were buildings made up of a room or set of rooms that formed separate residences. Many times tenements had two or three families living in a space intended for one family. This created very crowded and unsanitary conditions.

Image: Inside of a tenement house, New York City



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Transportation

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Mass transportation systems were designed to move large numbers of people to and from their jobs easily. San Francisco introduced the first street cars, also called trolleys. Many cities followed suit, building trolley or streetcar lines. In the Northeast, the cities of New York and Boston were the first to build subway systems around the turn of the century.

Image: New York Police Department, 1894



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Image: New York Police Department, 1894

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Water

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Cities lacked clean drinking water. Early tenement houses were not even connected to water lines. Since plumbing did not exist in buildings, residents had to fill pails of water from faucets on the street for daily use. The water was not treated which made it unsafe for consumption. By the 1870s, most city water was filtered. The chlorination of water began in 1908.

Image: Tenement water pump, New York City



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Sanitation

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Cities in the early Nineteenth Century were dirty. Tenement buildings had no plumbing and were unequipped to deal with the residents' waste. Since trash collection did not exist, city streets filled up with garbage. In addition, the air was polluted by factory smoke. By 1900, many of the major cities had sanitation departments and sewer lines.

Image: A horse lies dead in the city street, New York City



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Crime

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Crime was common in most cities. Therefore, to help eliminate crime, most major cities in the United States had a police force by 1880. While police could stop some crime, the force was too small to have a major impact.

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Fire

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Cities were at risk for major fires because tenement houses were built closely together, and limited water lines existed. In fact, major fires occurred in every city. Two of the greatest fires happened in Chicago in 1871 and San Francisco in 1906. By the early Nineteenth Century, every major city had fire departments. Consequently, in order to curb the fire risks, buildings were constructed of brick, stone, and concrete rather than wood.

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