1960s–1970s REFORM

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

By the mid 20th century, many immigrants of European descent had left the Lower East Side, joining the middle class, predominantly white postwar exodus to the outer boroughs of New York City and the suburbs—a phenomenon characterized by historians as “white flight.” Shifting mid-century immigration and migration patterns required a profound revision of the structure and programming of settlement houses, whose long-time focus had been on first- and second-generation European immigrants. The newcomers arriving in New York City by the 1950s to 1960s were primarily African Americans from the U.S. South, who came as part of the second Great Migration as well as Puerto Rican migrants and immigrants from other parts of the world.

It was an unsettling time for newcomers, who arrived as manufacturing jobs in New York City—the kinds of jobs that had sustained turn-of-the-century immigrants—were on the decline. At the same time, neighborhoods that had long been home to older generations of immigrants were undergoing significant change. Older housing stock like tenements and row houses had become limited, outdated, and dangerous, but postwar large-scale urban renewal initiatives fell short in their promises to provide adequate, modern housing for the masses. While razed tenement blocks made way for both low-income public housing and middle-income cooperatives, these shifts displaced many residents, uprooting the dynamics of neighborhood life. Thus newcomers confronted a city that was lacking in both jobs and infrastructure, and they faced significant competition from more established ethnic groups. They also faced discrimination and challenges due to language barriers and cultural adaptation.

The demographics of the Lower East Side continued to change after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act established a new policy for immigration. It did away with the earlier quota system based on country of origin and opened the door to many new immigrants. By this time, fewer immigrants were coming from Europe. Instead, countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean became the main source of new immigrants.

The mid-20th century was tumultuous in many ways, an era of social and political unrest. The Lower East Side experienced the same rising unemployment, economic anxiety, racial tensions, juvenile delinquency, and drug addiction that were filling headlines nationwide. Although many of these issues were tackled locally, the tumult of this era ultimately demanded federal attention. As part of a sweeping series of federal laws aimed to combat these issues, the Johnson administration sought to expand the government’s role in addressing poverty and human welfare. During his 1964 campaign, Lyndon Johnson had described his vision of a nation “where no child will go unfed and no youngster will go unschooled; where every child has a good teacher and every teacher has good pay, and both have good classrooms; where every human being has dignity and every worker has a job...” In his first State of the Union address, Johnson formally announced an “unconditional war on poverty,” which strived to “strike away the barriers to full participation” faced by the poor in American society.

However, such a vision proved difficult to realize and its execution was criticized and resisted by elected officials across the political spectrum—primarily from conservatives in the U.S. South who argued that federal funds should not be used to help the poor. These were polarizing times and by the late 1960s, between political assassinations, urban uprisings, radicalized protest movements, and the escalation of the Vietnam War, many experienced the world as more unstable and more uncertain than ever before. At the same time, this moment offered an unprecedented platform for people and communities who had long been marginalized to demand their voices be heard.
Activity #1

How Does One Approach Solving Multifaceted Societal Issues?

Settlement houses had worked to create opportunities for young people for decades. In the mid-20th century, “juvenile delinquency”—a term used at the time to describe behavior ranging from truancy to violence, but especially gang activity—became a pressing issue on the Lower East Side. When funding, including federal grants, became available to private institutions to develop preventive measures, settlements were ready to act. In 1957, Henry Street Settlement, in collaboration with a number of other Lower East Side groups, forged a plan to address juvenile delinquency head-on. It would become a model for future programs throughout the nation. It was called Mobilization for Youth.

Henry Street Settlement director Helen Hall argued that a comprehensive approach was needed—one that approached the problems that young people faced structurally, rather than signs of personal or moral failure. The problems that the youth of the Lower East Side faced were not because of or confined to their homes or family life. Therefore, real change required attention to the physical and economic environment, an argument also made by Progressive Era reformers at the turn of the 20th century. As Hall put it: “We wanted to get away from a piecemeal approach and to deal with the community as a whole. It was an effort to saturate a whole poverty area with services enough to change its living conditions.”

Although pioneered by Henry Street Settlement, Mobilization for Youth was taken over within several years by Columbia University, and then expanded into a national program by President John F. Kennedy in 1962, helping to inform subsequent national antipoverty programs.

1. In an effort to address juvenile delinquency in the neighborhood, Henry Street Settlement leaders knew that they must consider all the factors leading to this phenomenon. It wasn’t because the teenagers were “bad”; there were multiple issues at play, including tensions among ethnic groups, a lack of resources in local schools, declining housing conditions, and rising unemployment.

To better understand these factors, Settlement leaders started by creating a map (included below) of the area surrounding the Settlement and outlined schools, parks, community centers, housing projects (public housing and middle-income housing cooperatives), a hospital, an outdoor amphitheater, and public pools.
2. Suggested prompts for group discussion:

- What questions does this map raise for you?
- What do you want to know more about?
- Why did Henry Street Settlement begin to solve the issue of juvenile delinquency by drawing a map? What was the purpose?
- Might young people in the neighborhood have drawn the map differently from settlement house leaders? What might that they have included or left out?

3. Read The New York Times article from February 6, 1959, about the Mobilization for Youth program.
Access the article here: https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1959/02/06/80759506.html?pageNumber=24

4. Suggested prompts for group discussion:

- According to The New York Times article, what types of organizations were involved in spearheading Mobilization for Youth?
- According to the article, what types of services were to be provided in the Lower East Side to help solve the problem of juvenile delinquency?
- The group that started Mobilization for Youth believed it was important to consider all the factors that led to juvenile delinquency. Do you agree with this approach to solving problems? Can you think of a modern-day example problem-solving in a holistic way?

Continuing the conversation

Henry Street Settlement continues to solve societal issues in a holistic way. Today, some of the main issues that Lower East Side residents face are access to affordable housing, gentrification, and displacement. An art and activism organization called Perfect City, based at the Abrons Arts Center at Henry Street Settlement, is focused on exploring residents’ range of experiences in a changing New York City. The group uses a variety of activities, from performance to roundtable discussions, to explore current societal problems, including the connections among issues such as street harassment and gentrification.

In Perfect City’s own words, “People who grow up in cities are natural born urban planners. We have to be. We ride public transit before we are even born; we use creative strategies to navigate invisible and visible boundaries as we go through our days. But our needs and our narratives are not at the table when decisions are made about zoning, planning and which neighborhoods are in the crosshairs of development.”

Learn more about Perfect City at: http://perfectcity.org/

One of the activities Perfect City conducts is called Avoidance Mapping. Participants draw maps of the routes they take—to work, to school, or to other locations—leading to discussions of how one’s place in society affects our daily lives and how we plan to move through the city. According to Perfect City members, Avoidance Mapping is “a way to identify unconscious bias, the sophisticated ways we know about where to go and who to steer clear of, and how there are many cities mapped onto one concrete location.”

If you would like to try Perfect City’s Avoidance Mapping exercise, you can find detailed instructions here: https://urbanomnibus.net/2017/07/what-do-you-avoid-where-do-you-belong/
Activity #2

How Does National Policy Affect Local Communities?

With the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, which severely limited which nationalities could legally enter the United States, immigration slowed significantly. After decades of rising anti-immigrant sentiment, the new law established a quota system—allowing in fixed numbers of people from each country. The quotas were determined based on false scientific theories related to racial hierarchy and fitness for citizenship—for example, that immigrants from some countries could assimilate to American society more successfully than others. Northern and Western Europe were issued the highest quotas, while countries in Eastern and Southern Europe received the lowest. The law also expanded earlier exclusionary legislation to bar immigration from all countries in Asia, with the exception of the Philippines, which was a U.S. territory at the time.

This discriminatory law remained in place for four decades. However, the civil rights revolution of the 1960s ushered in a new era of openness to immigration. After years of opposition to the law, the principles of fairness invoked by civil rights leaders led, in 1965, to the passage of the Hart-Celler Act, which established a new policy for immigration. The act did away with earlier quota systems based on countries of origin, establishing equal quota numbers for every country. It also favored reuniting immigrant families and enticing skilled labor to the United States.

As federal immigration law changed, the Lower East Side, a famous destination for new immigrants, changed as well.

1. Individually or in pairs, read the speech delivered by President Johnson when he signed the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. The speech can be accessed here: http://www.lbjlibrary.net/collections/selected-speeches/1965/10-03-1965.html

Directions: Look at the chart “Regions of Birth for Immigrants in the United States 1960-Present” and answer the questions below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observe</th>
<th>Reflect</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What time period does this data cover?</td>
<td>• Do you see anything surprising on this chart?</td>
<td>• What questions does this data chart raise for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do the different colors indicate?</td>
<td>• Why do you think this data was collected?</td>
<td>• What do you want to know more about that is not included in this data?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are your first impressions?</td>
<td>• Is the most recent demographic data for the United States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reflective of your neighborhood? How is it similar or different?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name: ________________________________
3. Look at the census data for the Lower East Side from 2017. Be sure to look specifically at the chart for “Place of Birth.”


4. Suggested prompts for group discussion:

- In what way is the immigrant population on the Lower East Side similar to or different from that of the United States overall?

- Search the demographic data for other U.S. cities and small towns to see how immigrant populations in those locations are similar to or different from those of the Lower East Side.

- Demographic data can feel abstract and disconnected from real people and their stories. Do you have any family members, friends, community members, or acquaintances who immigrated to the United States after 1965?
  - Which country did they come from?
  - Did they already have family members living in the United States before they arrived?
  - What were some of their motivations for coming to the United States?
  - Where did they first live when they arrived in the United States?
  - Why did they go to that city or neighborhood?
Activity #3

What Is the Responsibility of a Cultural Institution to Serve Its Local Neighborhood?

Throughout Henry Street Settlement history, the arts have been central to the organization’s philosophy of human progress and well-being. But an ongoing debate has unfolded about access, representation, and the arts center’s responsibility to the surrounding community versus the city and nation as a whole.

In 1967, Settlement director Helen Hall retired and was succeeded by Bertram Beck. In his 10 years as director, Beck believed that to be successful, any resolution of the problems of poverty must actively involve marginalized community members. In New York City, he said, that meant particularly African American and Spanish-speaking communities.

For Beck, an important path to greater community involvement would be found through the arts. Beck believed that Henry Street needed to create cultural offerings that would better reflect the diverse makeup of its community—a view that founder Lillian Wald shared at the start of the 20th century. At Henry Street’s Neighborhood Playhouse, staff met with local residents to plan an advisory committee that would weigh in on better ways to incorporate local representation. Above all, Beck wanted to help all people from the community feel welcome at Henry Street, whatever their cultural background, and however they identified themselves.

One of the key initiatives Beck oversaw was the creation of the New Federal Theatre. Initially funded by Henry Street and a small grant from the state arts council, the theater was founded by Woodie King, Jr., who had served as director of Pete’s House Arts for Living Program at Henry Street. Running on a limited budget, the New Federal Theatre opened in 1970. Performances took place in the basement of nearby St. Augustine’s Church.

The New Federal Theatre, whose name hearkened to the Great Depression’s Federal Theatre, was a groundbreaking initiative that pushed to integrate people of color and women into mainstream theater. King was African American, and most of the plays he mounted at the theater were by black playwrights. As King later recalled, “Many white-controlled theatres produce only European plays that are directed to their own need to glorify the past,” while “African Americans are not integral to their past in any kind of positive way. That [left] me with a large canvas of untold stories.” The New Federal Theatre still exists today, operating from midtown Manhattan.
2. Arts programming has been a part of Henry Street Settlement for more than 125 years. Over time, leaders of the arts center have had differing philosophies about the role of the arts within a social services agency and within a community. Some have been more focused on serving the neighborhood surrounding the Settlement, and others have focused on bringing new audiences to the Lower East Side. These debates reflect discussions that cultural organizations have all over the country. Think of an arts organization in your neighborhood. Do you believe that it is oriented more toward people in the immediate community or the city as a whole? Divide the class into teams for a debate.

The central debate question is: **Does a cultural institution have the responsibility to serve its local neighborhood?**

**Suggested directions for the debate:**

- Split the class into three teams. One team will research the *affirmative argument*; one team will research the *negative argument*. The third group will research both sides and judge the debate.

- Give each team 20 minutes to prepare as a group. Each team should designate a leader to give the opening statement of the debate, one team member to give a rebuttal after the opening statement, and one team member to deliver the closing statement.

- After prep time is over, pick one group from each side of the argument to participate in the debate. The other team will listen and judge the debate.

- Have the affirmative side start with a two-minute introduction. Then the negative side has two minutes.

- After the opening statements, the groups have two minutes to develop a rebuttal. The negative side is the first to present their rebuttal (2 minutes), followed by the affirmative side (2 minutes).

- After the rebuttal statements, each team has up to 2 minutes to make closing statements.

- Following the debate, the third teams will each vote on which team made the strongest arguments during the debate.

3. Craig Peterson became the director of Henry Street Settlement’s Abrons Arts Center in 2016. The center today is committed to serving the local community first and foremost. In this video clip, he speaks about the role of the Abrons Arts Center within the Settlement: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CV_OIYcQINM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CV_OIYcQINM)

4. **Suggested prompts for group discussion:**

   - What is the strongest argument for a cultural institution to serve its local neighborhood first and foremost?

   - What are the benefits, if any, to encourage people who do not live in the neighborhood to visit the cultural institution?

   - What are some of the challenges of striking a balance between serving a local community and serving visitors to the community?

   - What is an example of a cultural institution (e.g., museum, library, historic site, arts organization, etc.) that serves its local community in a meaningful way? What are some of the approaches it takes?
Activity #4

What Constitutes “Humane” Housing?

In the mid-1970s, New York City was on the brink of bankruptcy and suffered through the worst homeless crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The crisis had its roots in the early 1960s, as job opportunities for the poorest New Yorkers declined. The availability of low-income housing also shrank, and abandoned buildings proliferated. These already wrenching problems were exacerbated by the fact that New York State had earlier begun to deinstitutionalize psychiatric patients, without ensuring that they had the means to obtain adequate housing. The result was a rising homeless population.

To house this homeless population, the city used privately owned “welfare hotels.” Although the city paid exorbitant prices to rent these hotels, they were rundown and unsafe. Whole families crowded into single decrepit rooms. “Families stopped functioning. Kids stopped going to school,” recalled Henry Street’s Danny Kronenfeld—who would ultimately help to find solutions to the problem.

After conditions at the worst welfare hotels were publicized, New York City Mayor John Lindsay demanded a solution from city agencies. The Housing Authority turned to Henry Street for help. The Settlement’s response would help pioneer a new way to address homelessness and the issues that accompanied it.

Danny Kronenfeld, then an instructor at the Columbia University School of Social Work, had recently written a paper called “An Alternative to Welfare Hotels: A Plan for the Creation of a Temporary Family Residence” (September 1971). Henry Street Executive Director Bertram Beck hired Kronenfeld to create a model program that would address the city’s urgent problem.

Their innovative plan would provide transitional housing to homeless families. They provided comprehensive social services, such as mental health care, job coaching, or access to education, to address families’ underlying needs. They would particularly help people focus on the issues that had made families homeless and find ways to improve their economic future. The Settlement would provide help finding permanent housing, follow-up, and more.

In 1972, the first tenants moved into the six-story Urban Family Center (UFC), where each family had its own apartment. Drawing on the settlement tradition, Kronenfeld, now UFC director, lived at the center along with his family and other staff. Kronenfeld went on to become director of the Settlement.

As Verona Middleton-Jeter, who came to work as a live-in social worker at the center in 1972 (and would decades later become director of Henry Street Settlement) summed it up in a 2009 interview, “most of the city’s transitional housing programs today are really a (version) of that program... Henry Street played a major role in bringing respect to the way homeless people were and are treated.” Five years after the Urban Family Center opened, the Shelter for Domestic Violence Survivors opened under its auspices. One of the first publicly funded shelters, it would provide on-site social services for female survivors and their children.
1. Read the excerpts of a transcribed oral history with Danny Kronenfeld. After you read the oral history, complete the worksheet below.

Access oral history excerpt here: [Danny Kronenfeld oral history excerpt](#)
Name: ________________________________________________________________

Directions: Read the transcribed oral history with Danny Kronenfeld about his experience opening the Urban Family Center and answer the questions below.

1. Danny Kronenfeld recalls the atmosphere of the Urban Family Center. Which details does he share? What were some of the services and programs provided to families?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. What does Danny Kronenfeld mean when he says that the Urban Family Center provided “humane” housing?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. If you could ask Danny Kronenfeld a question, what would you want to know?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________