

CHAMPAIGN-URBANA SHACK STUDY

(Made by: The Social Welfare Committee of the League of Women Voters of
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The second study is of substandard housing in Champaign and Urbana in the area bounded on the South by Washington, North by Bradley, East by Goodwin, and West by the Illinois Central Railroad tracks. It covers a random sample of 85 shacks inhabited by 109 families. Three hundred-eighty-nine persons, including 166 children, live in the shacks.

The people in these dwellings were interviewed regarding the number of occupants, the number of rooms, the water and toilet facilities, kind of fuel used, amount of rent paid, and type of structure. Usually the interviewers were welcomed as bringing a hope that something might be done to improve conditions. A woman whose family of five were living in a tiny two-room shack said, "I would do anything to get a better place to live".

The area is not beautiful. Streets are unpaved and sidewalks at a premium. The mean little shacks are strangely haphazard and ugly, the yards teeming with litter, stagnant pools of water are underfoot, the privies, doorless, send out their stench, and everywhere the mud lies thick.

The neighborhood contains both Negro and white families but is predominantly Negro. Many occupants suffer not only the ordinary shortages of housing prevalent everywhere, but the additional problem of having to find quarters in a restricted area. For many of these people the only possible shelter has been such makeshift quarters as are here described. They do not like them, but they keep them surprisingly neat, and they earnestly hope for something better.

The shacks were of several types. There were 22 deteriorated houses: dwellings once substantial but now so dilapidated that they could obviously be called shacks. These buildings had such conditions as falling sills, rickety stairs, leaking roofs, vermin and termite infestation, broken and boarded-up windows, screens if any, broken, rotten and splintery wood. Lack of paint is only one of their minor failings.

Such a house was the following: The structure lies in the rear of the owner's house. The latter appears to be a livable home in moderately good condition. It is not until one goes to the back that he can see the unhealthy tenant quarters it hides from the view of the street. This is an unpainted building of two stories with rickety steps leading to the upstairs apartments. The yard is in unspeakable condition. The occupants stated that they had many roaches, rats and other vermin. They also had a great deal of trouble with flies that swarmed into the unscreened windows. Water is hauled by hand, and the three families use a privy standing about 25 feet from the foot of the stairway.

Twenty-eight of the shacks were poorly constructed temporary frame dwellings. Most of them were built recently to meet the wartime housing shortage. Tarpaper is the principal building material. Most of the shacks sit squarely on the ground with no foundation.

Thirty-four buildings were converted from such places as stores, chicken coops and coal sheds. As this conversion was done to meet an emergency need, the work is far from well done. One family visited was living in a tent in December when the study was made, but is now living in a place provided by the Amvets.

These dwellings had exceptionally small rooms. In most cases nothing more can be put into a room than a bed. The ceilings are low, for in very few cases does the height of the rooms exceed six feet.

In none of the shacks were there closets or cupboards. Makeshift boxes and cardboard cartons were used as places for storage. An example of such conditions is a converted one-room chicken house. It is the home of a family of four, the mother and three children aged four, two, and 16 months. The furniture includes a small cot on which the four sleep, a small table, two chairs and a stove. The ceiling is very low and the room is so small that three adults cannot comfortably stand in it, to say nothing of moving about. The stove is used for both cooking and heating and is dangerously close to the dry, splintery board walls. There is only one window, so situated that it does not provide for either proper lighting or ventilation. An oil lamp is used for lighting. The family disposes of waste material in a neighbor's privy and brings water in from a neighbor's faucet.

Another such converted chicken house was measured. It consisted of two rooms occupied by two people. The kitchen was 7'4" by 6'9" and the bedroom was 9'6" by 6'9". The ceilings were 6' high. How inadequate these dimensions were is seen from the fact that the kitchen stove and other necessary equipment left only a path from the entrance to the second room where the bed and bureau covered most of the floor space. Clothing, hung from the walls, crowded the room still further. The conversion of the above figures into cubic feet also indicates overcrowding. The total number of cubic feet in the two rooms was 680, or 340 per person. That this is far below minimum standards may be realized when we remember that the American Public Health Association through its Committee on Hygiene of Housing has set 500 cubic feet as absolute minimum per person where rooms are used for both sleeping and eating.

(^{See} A.P.H.A., Housing for Health, 1941). F.H.A. standards are, of course, considerably higher, the practice in this community being not to grant loans where the number of cubic feet per person falls below 720. We may think of the average room in these shacks as being about half the size of the smallest room in a house of standard construction.

The rapidity of construction of the shacks did not take ventilation or insulation into account, for none of the shacks was well-insulated. As tar paper, the main building material, offers little protection from the weather, cardboard and thick layers of newspapers are nailed to the walls for insulation. Ill-fitting windows, doors that do not shut, cracks and rat-holes provide the necessary currents of air.

This means that heating costs are excessive, and in most cases the cost of fuel amounts to more than the cost of the rent. As there is no storage space for coal it must be bought in small quantities at a greater cost. Many families burn two tons of coal a month in the winter, at an average cost of \$12.50 per ton. Of the 85 shacks, 80 were heated by coal stoves, two by a coal furnace, two by kerosene stoves, and one by a gas heater. The usual practice was to have either a coal stove or small coal heater for both cooking and heating purposes.

The area offers a serious fire hazard. In most of the places bare stove pipes ran through the roofs with little insulation in the necessary places. Rags were padded around many of the stove pipes where they went through the wall. In the tiny, cramped rooms crowded with necessary possessions, stoves had to be close to tindery walls, and there was almost no chance to control a sudden flame if it should spurt up, before the entire room would be ablaze. In none of the places was a fire extinguisher found, but it is doubtful there would be time to put it into operation under such circumstances. The accuracy of these predictions is shown by the fact that a fire in July, 1949, destroyed a shack in a few minutes and took the lives of the young occupants. Colonies of shacks, dangerously close to one another, increase the fire hazard, and, indeed, fires are frequent. The cost of fire protection for such substandard areas is far greater than elsewhere in the community.

One shack, consisting of four small rooms, housed two families with a total of sixteen people, one family having sought shelter with the other when it was burned out. One of the twelve children, a fifth grader, had just returned from the hospital after an operation for the removal of a brain tumor, and the problem of providing proper, restful conditions for his convalescence "was worrying the mother quite a bit".

Water facilities were found to be in dire need of improvement. In less than a third, or 27 shacks only, were faucets found inside. Another 38 shacks had their own outside faucets. In more than one out of five, or 19 shacks, water had to be carried from next door, and in one case it had to be carried from a faucet a block away. During the cold weather in many cases the water had frozen in the pipes.

The inside faucet, where people were lucky enough to have one, was often the only piece of plumbing in the house. In only one place was a complete bathroom found, and in only one was there a kitchen sink. Waste water was usually dumped in the yard.

Only 18 dwellings had an inside toilet. Twelve shacks had the use of adjacent facilities. One had a flush toilet that had long been out of order. More than half, or 45 of the shacks, had the use of privies, often shared with neighbors.

Rent is sometimes paid for use of privies. The tent occupants mentioned above paid \$5.00 a month for the use of the next door privy. One woman said that her rent was raised \$4.00 monthly when a privy was installed to be shared by the occupants of five shacks. Although the usual figure is considerably lower, as many as 26 people were found to be sharing one privy.

The condition of these privies is unspeakable. Rarely is there a door. There is no regular disposal of the contents. Ashes are the only chemical means of treating the waste. Privies are close to the shacks, frequently directly adjacent, and they are carelessly built. Seepage occurs; flies abound in the summer; rats are prevalent.

There is no inspection of these privies. The city ordinances do not require their regular inspection. Their construction is permitted where there is no access to a city sewer, with certain regulations and upon written consent of the sanitary engineer of the Champaign-Urbana Health Department; however, a city sewer is available in most of the area.

Deplorable as these privies are, they would be a luxury to some of the inhabitants of this area. Nine of the shacks visited, nearly ten per cent, had no toilet facilities whatsoever, either inside or out. When asked how waste disposal was managed, one of the occupants said, "We just wait until dark and go out in the yard". Sometimes the waste material is buried regularly in the yard, sometimes it is more carelessly handled.

In one deteriorated six-room house, five couples were living, each paying \$20.00 per month. In addition to the fact that the building was in need of major repairs and the rooms so arranged that it was necessary to pass through one room in order to reach another, there were no toilet facilities whatsoever for these ten people. The landlord hauled the waste material away in his truck.

Just as there is no disposal of the waste material from the privies, so there is no satisfactory garbage collection in the area. An Urbana ordinance requires the disposal of garbage in cans with tight lids and its hauling away weekly. A Champaign ordinance forbids that garbage be burned except by permission of the Fire Chief. Yet

the condition of the alleys and streets is so muddy that it has been reported that private garbage collectors refuse to take their heavy trucks over the unpaved streets of the district. Ordinances providing for the abatement of such nuisances as those described are not enforced.

Rats are everywhere in the area. As soon as one rat-hole is plugged up another is gnawed. One family had a pre-school child whose face was covered with deep lacerations. When the visitor asked the mother the cause of the injuries she was told that the child had been bitten by rats. Rats, flies and vermin do not stay at home but travel to other sections of the community.

Roaches also were prevalent. In most of the dwellings, attempts had been made to stem their advance, but as poor construction negated lasting effects, the roaches remained in dominance.

Probably the most unfortunate condition existing in the area was the overcrowding that prevailed both within the shacks and on the lots where clusters of buildings were found. When we remember that the rooms in these shacks are for the most part but half the size of those in ordinary houses the figures on room crowding become all the more significant. The average shack contained three rooms. In this area, as elsewhere, some people had more space than others. One woman, for example, had four rooms to herself, and three people had three-room shacks in which they were living alone. However, the great majority of the persons in these shacks were living in overcrowded conditions, not taking the size of the room into account. The average number of rooms per family was just over two rooms. Sixty-two per cent were living in overcrowded rooms according to this standard. Forty-five per cent were living two or more persons to a room, and twenty per cent were living three or more persons to a room. What this means in terms of living may be seen by such cases as the following.

A family of three occupied a converted coal shed. When the shed was converted into a two-room dwelling very little effort was made to remove the coal dust. Only a partition of cardboard material was used to separate the two rooms, and no door between was provided. There is only one entrance and one window. The ceiling, less than six feet high, is circled with water that has leaked in. There are no toilet facilities inside or out and the occupants "throw the waste material in the yard". Water is brought from the house in front. One of the rooms is used as a kitchen, the size of which limits the furniture to a stove, table and two chairs. The other room had space for no furniture other than a double bed, the only available sleeping place for the mother, the daughter aged 21, and the son aged 18.

A family of thirteen was occupying a three-room dwelling, so small that beds necessarily occupied a great deal of the space. In one of the rooms there were two chairs, a double bed, a table and a stove. A double bed and chair nearly filled the second room. The third room served as a kitchen and was so tiny and narrow that a table could not be used in addition to the stove and ice-box, since space was needed for passing from the outside and into the adjoining room. Clothes washed by the mother were hung in the rooms on lines attached to the six foot ceiling. The water used, obtained from a faucet outside, was thrown into a yard littered with trash and debris. The privy was perhaps five or six feet from the house.

In another converted shed containing three tiny rooms the mother said that the children were restless because all six had to sleep in one bed.

There is crowding, too, for childless or small families. The largest house of the group, a ramshackle building in need of repairs, had sixteen rooms. Three of these were vacant, and the rest were rented to single people or small families. Each family furnished heat for its own room, in addition to the \$22.00 per month rent. Nineteen people shared the use of a kitchen and a common living-room, and one flush toilet. These quarters were considered relatively desirable, and according to established standards do not represent overcrowding, though the difficulties of so many people living together can be imagined.

In addition to room crowding there were further problems caused by the frequent clustering of shacks on single or adjacent lots. Here the fire hazards, the sanitation problems, and the psychological hazards of crowding are all intensified. In one cluster of shacks nineteen people were living, all using the same privy, all using the small yard for dumping waste, all using water brought from the owner's house, so, all dependant upon this trash heap for breathing space when they wished to leave their cramped indoor quarters.

At one address a cluster of three shacks was found at the rear of the owner's dilapidated frame dwelling which appears to house two or three families. One of the shacks, containing four rooms, shelters three families, five adults and four children. A second, consisting of three rooms, is occupied by a family of thirteen. The third, a tiny converted chicken coop, houses an elderly couple. These ten adults and fourteen children living at the rear of an ordinary city lot, are in surroundings of indescribable squalor. The approach is from an alley deep in mud. Where there is not mud there are stagnant puddles of water in the yard, slippery pieces of garbage, or sharp cinders. Little piles of kindling and little piles of coal are beside each dwelling. Pieces of broken furniture and discarded trash lie about.

A flock of chickens is next to the coop where the old couple are living. The doorless privy, adjacent to one shack, and only a yard or two from another, is used by twenty-six people, including two from the owner's house.

For such conditions as have been described, the median rent paid per shack was \$22.50 per month, exclusive of utilities, which were never included in the rent. The median rental per family was \$20.00, and 17 families were paying exactly that rent. However, the range was from \$5.00 to \$42.00 per month. Five families were buying these places. In some instances the family income was sufficient to afford a better place if any had been available. In terms of the conditions of shelter, most people would agree that the rents were excessive.

Tax loss is apparent. The area has the lowest assessed valuation in the two towns. The total valuation in one shack colony previously described was only \$1500, as assessment was made only on the original house. The cost in services to these 24 individuals in fire and police protection, schooling for the children, and all the other forms of tax-supported services would far exceed any return from the property.

It is not necessary to belabor the point that such housing is a financial burden to the whole community.