

Jacob Riis Describes a New York Gang (1880s)

Jacob Riis was a journalist and social reformer who came to the United States in 1870 when he was 21. Riis wrote a number of descriptions of New York tenement life, and in 1890 published this account of the youthful gangs of the great city. Heavy immigration, poverty, crowding, and the rapid growth of cities like New York were factors contributing to a high rate of crime. Then as now, many of the younger members of the criminal class organized themselves into informal gangs that staked out territories across the city, battled the police, and terrorized the general public. Consider, as you read the following excerpts from his book, whether Riis thought these gangs were transplanted from Europe with the waves of immigration or were native to America.

The gang is an institution in New York. The police deny its existence while nursing the bruises received in nightly battles with it that tax their utmost resources. The newspapers chronicle its doings daily, with a sensational minuteness of detail that does its share toward keeping up its evil traditions and inflaming the ambition of its members to be as bad as the worst. The gang is the ripe fruit of tenement-house growth. It was born there, endowed with a heritage of instinctive hostility to restraint by a generation that sacrificed home to freedom, or left its country for its country's good. . . . New York's tough represents the essence of reaction against the old and the new oppression, nursed in the rank soil of its slums. Its gangs are made up of the American-born sons of English, Irish,

and German parents. They reflect exactly the conditions of the tenements from which they sprang. Murder is as congenial [common] to Cherry Street or to Battle Row, as quiet and order to Murray Hill. The "assimilation" [Americanizing] of Europe's oppressed hordes, upon which our fourth of July orators are fond of dwelling, is perfect. The product is our own.

Such is the genesis [root] of New York's gangs. Their history is not so easily written. It would embrace the largest share of our city's criminal history for two generations back, every page of it dyed red with blood.

Bravado [defiance] and robbery are the real purposes of the gangs; the former prompts the attack upon the policeman, the latter that upon the citizen. Within a single week last spring, the newspapers recorded six murderous assaults on unoffending people, committed by young highwaymen in the public streets. How many more were suppressed by the police, who always do their utmost to hush up such outrages "in the interests of justice," I shall not say. There has been no lack of such occurrences since, as the records of the criminal courts show. In fact, the past summer has seen, after a period of comparative quiescence [inactivity] of the gangs, a reawakening to renewed turbulence of the East Side tribes, and over and over again the reserve forces of a precinct have been called out to club them into submission. It is a peculiarity of the gangs that they usually break out in spots, as it were. When the West Side is in a state of eruption, the East Side gangs "lie low," and when the toughs along the North River are nursing broken heads at home, or their revenge in Sing Sing [a prison], fresh trouble breaks out in the tenements east of Third Avenue. This result is brought about by the very efforts made by the police to put down the gangs. In spite of local feuds, there is between them a species of ruffianly Freemasonry [criminal brotherhood] that readily

admits to full fellowship a hunted rival in the face of the common enemy. The gangs belt the city like a huge chain from the Battery to Harlem—the collective name of the "chain gang" has been given to their scattered groups in the belief that a much closer connection exists between them than commonly supposed—and the ruffian for whom the East Side has become too hot, has only to step across town and change his name, a matter usually much easier for him than to change his shirt, to find a sanctuary in which to plot fresh outrages. The more notorious he is, the warmer the welcome, and if he has "done" [killed] his man he is by common consent accorded the leadership in his new field.

From all this it might be inferred that the New York tough is a very fierce individual, of indomitable courage and naturally as blood-thirsty as a tiger. On the contrary he is an arrant [obvious] coward. His instincts of ferocity are those of the wolf rather than the tiger. It is only when he hunts with the pack that he is dangerous. Then his inordinate vanity makes him forget all fear or caution in the desire to distinguish himself before his fellows, a result of his swallowing all the flash literature and penny-



This photo by Jacob Riis shows the slum district of Mulberry Bend (also called "Bandit's Roost")—one of the toughest and most neglected parts of New York City in the 1890s.

circuits [cheap adventure literature] he can beg, borrow, or steal—and there is never any lack of them—and of the strongly dramatic element in his nature that is nursed by such a diet into rank and morbid growth. He is a queer bundle of contradictions at all times. Drunk and foul-mouthed, ready to cut the throat of a defenceless stranger at the toss of a cent, fresh from beating his decent mother black and blue to get money for rum, he will resent as an intolerable insult the imputation [suggestion] that he is “no gentleman.” Fighting his battles with the coward’s weapons, the brass-knuckles and the deadly sand-bag, or with brick-bats from the rooftops, he is still in all seriousness a lover of fair play, and as likely as not, when his gang has downed a policeman in a battle that has cost a dozen broken heads, to be found next saving a drowning child or woman at the peril of his own life. . . . Ready wit he has at all times, and there is less meanness in his makeup than in that of the bully of the London slums, but an intense love of show and applause, that carries him to any length of bravado, which his twin-brother across the sea entirely lacks. I have a very vivid recollection of seeing one of his tribe, a robber and murderer before he was nineteen, go to the gallows unmoved, all fear of the rope overcome, as it seemed, by the secret, exultant pride of being the centre of a first-class show, shortly to be followed by that acme [highest point] of tenement-life bliss, a big funeral.

Inspector Byrnes is authority for the statement that throughout the city the young tough has more “ability” and “nerve” than the thief whose example he successfully emulates [copies]. He begins earlier, too. Speaking of the increase of the native element among criminal prisoners exhibited in the census returns of the last thirty years, the Rev. Fred H. Wines says, “their youth is a very striking fact.” Had he confined his observations to the police courts of New York, he might have emphasized the remark

and found an explanation of the discovery that the ratio of prisoners in cities is two and one-quarter times as great as in the country at large,” a computation that takes no account of the reformatories for juvenile delinquents, or the exhibit would have been still more striking. Of the 82,200 persons arrested by the police in 1889, 10,505 were under twenty years old. The last report of the society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children enumerates, as “a few typical cases,” eighteen “professional cracksmen,” between nine and fifteen years old, who had been caught with burglars’ tools, or in the act of robbery. Four of them hardly yet in long trousers, had “held up” a wayfarer in the public street and robbed him of \$73. One, aged sixteen, “was the leader of a noted gang of young robbers in Forty-ninth Street. He committed murder, for which he is now serving a term of nineteen years in State’s Prison.” Four of the eighteen were girls and quite as bad as the worst. In a few years they would have been living with the toughs of their choice without the ceremony of a marriage, egging them on by their pride in their lawless achievements, and fighting side by side with them in their encounters with the “cops.”

REVIEWING THE READING

1. According to Riis, what was the origin of the New York gangs?
2. What was the attitude of the municipal police toward the gangs? Why do you think they took this approach?
3. Using Your Historical Imagination. What were the characteristics of a New York gang “tough” of the 1880s? How do you think urban gangs may be similar or different today?