

Appraising the Legacy of Hull House:
The Role of the United States Children's Bureau
in the American Mortality Transition

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Abstract

Between 1910 and 1930 a precipitous decline in the infant mortality rate occurred that signaled the beginning of the American Mortality Transition. Until the last decade, explanations for this remarkable demographic event centered on macro-level factors, such as advances in agriculture and transportation, improvements in the public health infrastructure (e.g. sewage disposal and water supply protection), and progress in the science and technology of medicine, particularly the development of inoculation for communicable diseases. However, recent causal reappraisals employing more advanced analytical techniques and newly-available demographic evidence emphasize the importance of fundamental changes in household-level health behaviors (particularly maternal behaviors) in reducing infant deaths. During the early twentieth century the U.S. Children's Bureau pursued a campaign to reduce infant mortality through maternal education and other prevention activities. This campaign built on the applied research and health promotion work of the settlement house women who established the bureau and comprised its early leadership. Until now, though, direct linkages between these coincident efforts and the reduction in infant mortality have been difficult to establish. Through qualitative and quantitative analysis of Children's Bureau reports and demographic analysis of the 1910 and 1920 Public Use Micro Sample census data, we link the philosophy, passion and science of the bureau's early leadership to new evidence and conclusions about the remarkable improvements in infant survival that occurred, not coincidentally, at the apex of the bureau's Progressive Era activities.