

The Chicago School

Between 1915 and 1940, a small faculty within the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology, working closely with a group of highly skilled graduate students, conducted a comprehensive study of the social dynamics in the city of Chicago. Their mission was to establish a new **empirical** field of sociological research, using the city itself as a dynamic laboratory for observing urban phenomena.

Chicago provided an ideal environment for this groundbreaking work. From 1850 to 1900, its population soared from 30,000 to over 1.7 million—likely one of the most rapid urban expansions in history. The city's population was notably diverse, with over a third born outside the United States, originating from countries such as Germany, Poland, Ireland, and Italy. This diversity contributed to a range of complex social challenges, including issues of prostitution, alcoholism, homelessness, and gang activity among youth.

The Chicago School's work in this period introduced and refined innovative research techniques that would transform the field of sociology. While they used traditional methods like **censuses** and **surveys**, they also developed pioneering approaches such as **social mapping** and **life history interviews**. This marked a critical shift, establishing sociology as an empirical field grounded in real-world observation and firsthand accounts, moving beyond abstract theorization. Graduate students gathered detailed data directly from Chicago's neighborhoods, offering in-depth analyses of social structures and individual behaviors within an urban setting.

The faculty's findings were disseminated through influential publications, notably *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, while graduate students produced dissertations that would become sociology classics, including *The Ghetto*, *The Hobo*, *The Gang*, and *The Gold Coast and the Slum*. These works provided not only descriptive accounts but also deep insights into how urban environments shape individual and collective behaviors, setting a high standard for subsequent sociological studies.

Interestingly, the term "Chicago School" was not coined by these sociologists themselves but was adopted later by others who recognized the significant and cohesive impact of their

contributions. This label now signifies a pioneering approach in sociology, defined by methodological rigor and a commitment to studying society through the lens of empirical research.