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John F. McClymer

Late Nineteenth-Century American Working-Class Living Standards

If there is a leitmotif running through recent analyses of the immigrant and working-class experiences, it is the resiliency of cultural patterns and institutions. Unlike older interpretations which focused upon impersonal forces such as urbanization or industrialization, this new scholarship emphasizes the frequently creative ways in which ordinary people adjusted to the demands of modern life. In our eagerness to give immigrant and working-class families their due as historical actors, however, we run the risk of overestimating the control they were able to exercise over their lives. As one recent student of ethnic history posed the issue, we need to determine “to what extent immigrants were makers and shapers of their lives, and to what extent they were victims of circumstances beyond their control.”¹

A first step in answering this question is the reconstruction of working-class living standards because, in a marketplace society, the power to act autonomously is largely a function of the ability to command some surplus income beyond that required to keep body and soul together. A worker unable to meet the “necessary cost of living” was, in the words of an early report of the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, “an involuntary debtor” obliged “to overwork his wife with home and

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1 The classic expression of the older view is Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (New York, 1951). Much of the newer scholarship derives from Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1977). The quotation is from Frances H. Earley, “The French-Canadian Family Economy and Standard-of-Living in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1870,” in Michael Gordon (ed.), *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* (New York, 1983; 3rd ed.), 494.

outside duties” and forced “to deprive his children of education, that he may supply by their labor their cries for bread.”²

Attempts to describe working-class living standards in the United States between the end of the Civil War and the start of World War I have largely been of two types. One relies upon the calculation of a poverty line. A family’s well-being, in these studies, is assumed to rest upon its ability to spend more than the stipulated minimum amount. Analyses of the causes and consequences of poverty proceed by way of comparisons of the demographic, occupational, racial, and cultural characteristics of the poor and non-poor. I argue that poverty-line analysis is inappropriate for most historical purposes even if the numerous and severe problems associated with the calculation of such lines could be overcome.³

A second kind of study calculates the living standard of a typical working-class family. This procedure is methodologically more sound, but its utility is limited. Averages disguise variations; and, if there is a clear message to be found in the ever-increasing number of labor history case studies, it is that American society was enormously diverse. Neither approach, in brief, enables us to identify the range of working-class living standards or test which factors influenced a given family’s chances of achieving one position along that range rather than another. In their place I propose a descriptive model of nineteenth-century living standards based upon the actual consumption practices of the nearly 400 working-class families whose annual budgets were detailed in the *Sixth Annual Report* (1875) of the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor.⁴

2 Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, *Sixth Annual Report* (Boston, 1875), 194.

3 See Eudice Glassberg, “Work, Wages, and the Cost of Living, Ethnic Differences and the Poverty Line, Philadelphia, 1880,” *Pennsylvania History*, LXVI (1979), 17–58; Michael R. Haines, “Poverty, Economic Stress, and the Family in a Late Nineteenth-Century American City: Whites in Philadelphia, 1880,” in Theodore Hershberg (ed.), *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981), 240–276; Steven Dubnoff, “A Method for Estimating the Economic Welfare of American Families of Any Composition: 1860–1909,” *Historical Methods*, XIII (1980), 171–180; Earley, “The French-Canadian Family Economy.”

4 Melvyn Dubofsky’s description of the fragmented, and fragmenting, nature of recent scholarship is typical: “Labor history today resembles Humpty Dumpty after his fall, and all academic history’s horses and men have yet to put it back together again”: *Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865–1920* (Arlington Heights, IL, 1985; 2nd ed.), x. *Sixth Annual Report*, 189–450.

Economists have long wrestled with the technical issues that drawing a poverty line poses. One commonly used technique involves the determination of a market basket of goods and services that a family would supposedly need to maintain some minimum standard of living (of the researcher's devising). A second approach takes the observed behavior of some group which, in the researcher's opinion, is living at this minimum level and uses their actual consumption to calculate the line. The first technique is arbitrary, the second circular.⁵

Historians have not had any more success in overcoming these dilemmas than economists or welfare administrators. Even if they had, however, there would still be compelling reasons for abandoning the poverty-line approach to the study of working-class living standards. All such lines bifurcate blue-collar families into the poor and non-poor. The wisdom of so classifying families is open to serious doubt. There is a good deal of evidence which suggests that, at any given historical moment, a much larger number of families risked falling below such a line than actually were below it.⁶

Two consequences, both regrettable, follow such a division. First, thinking of the working class as composed of the poor and non-poor obscures the fluidity of most families' situations. Second, analyzing the causes of poverty in terms of the differences between those families who happened to have been above the line when the data were collected and those who happened to have been below it is likely to reify as causes accidental or peripheral factors.

The "typical family" approach obscures the fluidity of working-class life as well because it treats those characteristics of family life most subject to change—things like size, health, and age

5 See Oscar Ornati, *Poverty Amid Affluence* (New York, 1966), Appendix I, 141–143; U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *The Measure Of Poverty: A Report to Congress as Mandated by the Education Amendments of 1974* (Washington, D.C., 1974), 5–27; Norton N. Franklin, "The Concept and Measurement of 'Minimum Living Standards'," *International Labour Review*, XCV (1967), 271–298. For an extended analysis of recent historical discussions of working-class living standards in the United States, see McClymer, "The Historian and the Poverty Line," *Historical Methods*, XVIII (1985), 105–110.

6 James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty, 1900–1980* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 13–15; Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York, 1983); Stanley Lebergott, *The Americans: An Economic Record* (New York, 1984), 507–511.

structure—as though they were fixed. Yet, at least since the pioneering analysis of Hunter, the importance, for example, of a given family's age structure in determining its economic well-being has been well known. Hunter argued that the same family which enjoyed relative prosperity when the parents were in their mid-forties and their older children in their late teens or early twenties might well have suffered considerable privation earlier when it was forced to depend upon the father as its sole source of support, and would again later when the father's earning capacity would decline and the children would leave to establish families of their own.⁷

A further effect of dividing blue-collar families into the poor and non-poor is that labor aristocrats, one of the most important groups within the working class, disappear from view. They are simply swallowed up in the ranks of the non-poor. Yet, not only did this group provide much of the leadership for ethnic and trade union activities, but—since most upward mobility took place within the working class—they also defined the upper limits of the possible for most families. Their standard of living, therefore, is of special interest. The typical family approach, unfortunately, is also not a useful way to study them; aristocrats, by definition, were exceptional rather than average. Their importance in working-class and ethnic communities nonetheless demands that we find a way of including them in our analyses.⁸

Accordingly, the descriptive model of working-class living standards proposed here includes a specific category for these families. The model is generated from data collected for Wright's 1875 *Report* as Commissioner of the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor. Historians and economists have long recognized the value of Wright's work, and some have exploited the 1875 budget study to analyze such questions as the elasticity of consumer demand and the effect of assimilation upon ethnic consumption patterns. The object here is to reconstruct consumption levels. For that purpose Wright's 1875 *Report* is a particularly rich source, since it includes not only information about the cash

7 Robert Hunter, *Poverty* (New York, 1906), 44–66.

8 Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880–1970* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973); Howard Chudacoff, "Success and Security: The Meaning of Social Mobility in America," *Reviews in American History*, X (1982), 101–112.

amounts families earned and spent, but also detailed descriptions of their diets, data on the number of rooms that they occupied, family size and structure, and sources of income, as well as bureau agents' comments on the quality of their neighborhoods, general surroundings, furnishings, and wardrobes. Scholars have tended to dismiss this last type of information since agents expressed themselves in the genteel rhetoric of their day. For all the prissiness of their language, however, agents—as we see below—were reliable witnesses.⁹

Wright's families were not a representative sample of Massachusetts' blue-collar population, still less of that of the United States as a whole. Native-born workers were underrepresented; so were the unskilled. In addition, Wright instructed his agents to limit their investigations to the state's largest industrial centers and to its largest industries. They were to go to each city's biggest mill, and then approach the first workingman that they saw. If he proved unwilling or unable to cooperate, they were to solicit the cooperation of the next worker who came into view. Once they had identified a sufficient number of cases, agents were to visit each worker's home twice, once to observe general conditions, and the second time to reconstruct the family's budget for that year. Budget totals were recorded to the penny, but there is reason to believe that at least some of these amounts were approximations. Nonetheless, the overall accuracy of the data is not open to serious doubt.¹⁰

Nor is the non-representative nature of Wright's sample a problem, since the goal here is not to describe the standard of living of typical blue-collar families. Instead it is to develop a model of the range of living standards available to them. For that we do not need a representative sample but merely one with a

9 Jeffrey G. Williamson, "Consumer Behavior in the Nineteenth Century: Carroll D. Wright's Massachusetts Workers in 1875," *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, IV (1967), 98–135, 131n.; John Modell, "Patterns of Consumption, Acculturation, and Family Income Strategy in Late-Nineteenth-Century America," in Tamara Hareven and Maris A. Vinovskis (eds.), *Family and Population in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, 1978), 206–240.

10 *Sixth Annual Report*, 219. More than a third of all the families (35.5%) supposedly spent exactly what they earned. In contrast, a 1901 budget study, also undertaken by the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, showed only 6.6% of 152 sample families breaking even. This discrepancy suggests that investigators during the 1875 study may have used the "sundries" category to balance the budgets of those families who were not in debt and who also had no savings.

large enough number of families across the whole range so as to permit reasonable generalizations. On this count the 1875 data are more than adequate (see Appendix).

The model describes working-class standards of living in terms of consumption categories. As such, it needs to meet two criteria. First, the categories ought to correspond to observed consumption patterns. This is, after all, a descriptive model. Second, the living standards so described ought to differ from each other in substantial ways in keeping with the pragmatic maxim that the differences most worth studying are those which actually made differences in peoples' lives.

It was necessary to construct the model in two stages. The first involved identifying consumption levels with respect to basic needs: food, housing, and clothing. The second took those families whose consumption levels for basic necessities met or exceeded the mode for all families and subdivided them according to the possession of items indicating high status or significant discretionary spending. I labelled those families whose consumption fell below the mode in at least two of the three areas of basic needs "substandard." Those whose possessions included such items as pianos, carpets, and sewing machines and whose consumption of basic necessities met or exceeded the mode I labelled "aristocrat." I called the large middle group "standard."

Throughout, I used actual consumption rather than dollar amounts expended. For example, I analyzed diet in terms of how frequently given families ate meat, vegetables, and other foods rather than in terms of how much each spent on food. There are several reasons for this choice. One is that it obviates the necessity of supposing a universal rationality in the buying practices of sample families. Another is that it leaves open the question of what economies of scale, if any, larger families may have enjoyed.¹¹

11 An enlightening discussion of the difference that a shrewd homemaker could make in a family's living standard is Margaret F. Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (Pittsburgh, 1975; orig. pub. 1910), 46–106. See also Dorothee Schneider, "For Whom Are All the Good Things in Life? German-American Housewives Discuss their Budgets," in Hartmut Keil and John B. Jentz (eds.), *German Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1850–1910: A Comparative Perspective* (DeKalb, IL, 1983), 145–160. Scholars have not dealt with the issue of economies of scale, but some have attempted to solve the related question of estimating the differential nutritional needs of different family members by calculating family size in terms of adult male equivalents. See Dubnoff, "Estimating Economic Welfare," 175.

STAGE ONE: BASIC NECESSITIES Table 1 records how many times per day sample families ate meat or fish, vegetables (not including potatoes), and desserts. Most sample families ate two meals a day with meat or fish although a sizable minority (30.9 percent) managed only one. One meal with vegetables was common as well, but more than a third of the sample families (35.3 percent) did not consume vegetables as part of their daily diets. Only an inconsequential 1 percent ate vegetables more than once a day, but these families' diets were quite high in carbohydrates. Almost half (45.1 percent) ate dessert with every meal. It was also common for sample families to sit down to at least one high starch meal, usually supper, every day. Almost half (49.7 percent) made do with a nighttime meal of bread, tea, sauce, and—sometimes—baked beans. Something over a fifth of them (22.3 percent) faced the prospect of two such meals each day.

These data permit us to construct a standard menu for working-class families in the 1870s. It included meat or fish twice a day, vegetables once, two desserts, and one high starch meal. Only if a family ate fewer than two meals a day with meat or fish and more than one high starch meal, or had no vegetables in its diet and ate meat or fish less than twice a day, or had no vegetables in its diet and ate more than one high starch meal per day, did I rate its diet as substandard. I began, that is, with the observed consumption patterns and then stipulated that, to be counted as substandard with respect to diet, a family would have to fall below the modal level on at least two measures.

The relevance of this standard diet is not that it was nutritionally adequate or that families unable to reach it were poor.

Table 1 Diet

% (NOS.) OF FAMILIES EATING			
TIMES PER DAY	MEAT/FISH	VEGETABLES	DESSERTS
Zero	0.3 (1)	35.3 (136)	20.0 (77)
One	30.9 (119)	63.6 (245)	16.9 (65)
Two	56.9 (219)	1.0 (4)	17.9 (69)
Three	11.9 (46)	—	45.1 (174)

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

Still less is it that this is what the average family actually consumed. Instead the point is that the diet actually captures something of the sample families' own notions of what they needed. Families able to spend significantly more per capita on food than the average amount needed to attain this level of consumption typically did not increase the number of times per day that they ate meat or vegetables. Instead they increased the size of the portions or the expensiveness of the cuts that they ate.¹²

It is possible to construct an analogous standard for housing. Table 2 shows the percentages of sample families whose neighborhoods, surroundings, and furnishings were rated as very poor, poor, neutral, good, and very good according to bureau descriptions. Two negative adjectives led to a coding of very poor, one to poor; descriptions like "clean" or "healthy" led to a coding of neutral; one positive adjective sufficed for a coding of good, but two were required for a very good. These verbal rankings correlate quite highly with the most commonly used quantitative measure of housing quality, the number of people per room.¹³

Table 2 Housing Characteristics

	% (NO.) OF FAMILIES		
CONDITION OF	NEIGHBORHOOD	SURROUNDINGS	FURNISHINGS
Very Poor	7.1 (22)	14.4 (50)	4.9 (18)
Poor	15.4 (48)	9.5 (33)	17.2 (63)
Neutral	8.7 (27)	12.9 (45)	3.0 (11)
Good	57.2 (178)	55.2 (192)	16.1 (59)
Very Good	11.6 (36)	8.0 (28)	58.7 (215)

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

12 Families whose per capita food expenditures exceeded the mean by at least one standard deviation (that is, in this instance, who spent at least 20% more per person) were only slightly more likely to eat meat twice or more a day than families who spent within one standard deviation of the mean (84.2% vs. 71.0%; for eating no more than one high starch meal it was 79.4% vs. 78.1%).

13 Correlations (R and Eta) between Agent Descriptions and Housing Density

	R	Eta
Neighborhood	-0.5528 ^a	0.5631
Surroundings	-0.5151 ^a	0.5188
Furnishings	-0.6035 ^a	0.6283

a Density declined as agent descriptions became more favorable.

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

Most sample families lived in “good” neighborhoods. Most found themselves in “good” surroundings. And most had managed to acquire “very good” furnishings. With respect to each measure, however, between a fifth and a quarter of the sample families lived amid “poor” or “very poor” conditions. It bears repeating that this was not a representative sample and that there is no reason to assume that these percentages held true for working-class families generally. What probably did hold true for the blue-collar population as a whole was the greater relative success that families achieved in furnishing their homes than in finding nice neighborhoods or pleasant surroundings. Families could invest in furniture over the years, gradually upgrading their possessions. Some could also invest in a house, but renters found their choice of housing limited by the available stock within walking distance of the head’s employment and by their current ability to pay rent.¹⁴

As with diet, we can use the budget data to define a housing standard. Families could aspire to live in a “good” neighborhood amid “good” surroundings as a reasonable goal. So was owning “very good” furniture. I counted a family substandard with respect to housing only if it fell into the poor or very poor range on two of the three measures. So, for example, if a given family’s neighborhood and surroundings were rated as neutral and its furnishings as very poor, I did not classify it as living in substandard housing.

Clothing, like furnishings, has both a utilitarian and a symbolic import. Not a few people choose, in Veblen’s apt phrase, to be ill-clad so they may appear to be well-dressed. Whether that was the case with the sample families is not clear. Nonetheless, agent descriptions show a large majority (72.4 percent) to have been “well-dressed.” About a fifth (19.2 percent) were either “very poorly” or “poorly” clothed. Few cases fell between these two extremes, a result which suggests that being well-dressed was of prime importance to blue-collar families. Many who lived in poor neighborhoods or scraped along on two high-starch meals

14 A study of three ethnic neighborhoods in Worcester showed that, in 1900, about three Swedish and two French Canadian families in ten owned their own homes. Presumably, working-class families’ prospects for owning homes of their own varied according to local real estate and job markets. See Kevin Hickey, “A Swedish Success Model: A Comparative Study of Ethnic Community within Worcester, Massachusetts, 1870–1900,” paper delivered at conference of American Association of Geographers (1980).

per day nonetheless found the means to maintain their wardrobes well enough to impress bureau agents. As a result, our clothing standard should be high since working-class families appear to have regarded an inability to dress well as a serious disgrace.¹⁵

I used only this one measure of the quality of a family's clothing, and I used the same coding rules as governed the housing variables. Only families falling below the top two categories were classed as substandard with respect to dress. I then checked these results against per capita family expenditures on clothing as a way of testing the overall reliability of agent descriptions. The correlations were quite satisfactory ($R = 0.4716$; $Eta = 0.5915$), especially since per capita expenditures for a single year would at best only be a partial predictor of how well a family would be able to dress. Some important wardrobe items—like winter coats—were not replaced annually; some families shopped more shrewdly and so got more for their money. And families with sewing machines (32.1 percent of the whole) presumably were able to spend less on clothes without sacrificing the quality of their dress.

If we combine these diet, housing, and clothing standards, we get a model standard of living which corresponds to the actual consumer choices (for example, the high priority given to clothing and furniture) of the sample families. This standard was by no means lavish. A family whose consumption patterns corresponded to it would still have had to sit down to one high starch meal per day, for example. Nonetheless, such a family would have eaten meat or fish twice a day and vegetables once; it would have lived in an adequate apartment in a good neighborhood; it would have been well dressed; and, when company came to call, the family would have been able to take pride in its furnishings.

I classed as substandard overall only those families whose consumption was below the standard level in at least two of the three areas of basic necessities, that is, diet, housing, and dress. This procedure had the effect of holding the number of families in the substandard class to a minimum. Certainly a case could be made for less exclusionary rules. For example, I could have counted as substandard with respect to diet or housing families whose consumption fell below the standard (i.e., mode) on any

15 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, 1953; orig. pub. 1899), 119.

one, rather than on any two, of the three measures used for each. Or, I could have defined as substandard overall any family whose consumption fell below the mode in diet, say, or housing instead of again requiring two areas of substandard consumption. Either change would have markedly increased the number of families classed as substandard.

My reasons for adopting the more stringent rules are two. First, I wanted to hold the number of anomalous cases to a minimum. Some families lived in poor housing, for instance, but ate and dressed well. Others dressed poorly but had sizable savings. No model can entirely escape anomalies but, by stipulating that families must have fallen at least two rankings below the mode in at least two of the three subsistence categories, I reduced their number. Second, I wanted the model's overall consumption categories to differ from each other substantially. If there were not much difference between the day-to-day experiences of the substandard and standard families, or between the standard and the aristocrat, there would be little point to investigating those factors which influenced a given family's prospects of falling into one or another category. The trade-off is that the model counts as living at the standard level some families who presumably managed to make ends meet only with great difficulty. Were the goal to calculate a poverty line, this drawback would be fatal.

Modest though it is, about one sample family in four (23.4 percent) was unable to reach the "standard" level. Whether such families were poor is not at issue here. Whether they were measurably less well off than those families who did reach the standard is at issue, and there can be no doubt that they were. Their diets were lower in protein and higher in starch; they lived in "poor" neighborhoods amid squalid surroundings. Perhaps as serious a deprivation as any, they were unable to afford those public badges of respectability—a "Sunday Best" suit of clothes and furniture fit for entertaining.

STAGE TWO: PRESTIGIOUS POSSESSIONS AND DISCRETIONARY INCOME
That a given family managed to reach this standard in at least two of the three areas of expenditure does not tell us anything more than that it fed, housed, and/or clad itself at a certain level. The data that we have been examining thus far divides the sample families into two groups. Few families ate vegetables more than

once a day, or meat more than twice. Similarly, families tended to be either well or poorly dressed. Fortunately, the *Sixth Annual Report* contains data which allow us to go beyond a simple division of the working class into those below the standard level of consumption and those at or above it. Specifically, it identifies which families owned pianos, carpets, sewing machines, and assorted other objects which bureau agents found sufficiently impressive to record.

Ownership of these items indicated more than a family's ability to afford creature comforts. It also conveyed status. A piano, for example, showed that a family intended to raise its daughters as ladies, and could afford to dedicate an entire room—a parlor—to entertaining guests. Sewing machines, carpeting, and other possessions did not make so grand a statement, but they did indicate that a family had a fair measure of discretionary income. Virtually no family which fell below the standard level of consumption for food, housing, and/or clothing owned any of these objects. One can therefore use their possession to identify working-class aristocrats.

First I excluded any family whose consumption fell below standard for any of the three basic necessities (only families who had fallen below standard in two out of three were counted as substandard). Next I classed as aristocrats those families who owned either a piano or at least two of the remaining three classes of high-status possessions (i.e., carpeting, sewing machines, and a catchall category of all other objects mentioned by bureau agents). Standard families, as a result, were defined entirely by exclusion.

As with the definition of substandard, one might well argue for a less stringent set of rules for the aristocrat category. But more permissive rules would have increased the number of anomalous cases as well as blurred the day-to-day differences between aristocrat and other working-class families. In addition, the strict rules for the aristocrat and substandard categories automatically produces a large middle group, which corresponds to an important reality of working-class life—namely, that most families risked both rising above and falling below the standard level. Table 3 shows how many of each category there were in the 1875 sample.

Table 3 Frequency Distribution of Sample Families by Consumption Level

CONSUMPTION STANDARD	%	(NO.)
Substandard	23.4	(90)
Standard	57.9	(223)
Aristocrat	18.7	(72)

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

Table 4 Consumption Levels and Head's Occupational Level

OCCUPATIONAL LEVEL	% (NO.) OF FAMILIES		
	SUBSTANDARD	STANDARD	ARISTOCRAT
Unskilled	93.3% (84)	40.4% (90)	4.2% (3)
Skilled	6.7% (6)	59.6% (133)	95.8% (69)

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

It is likely, given the way that the sample was taken, that aristocrat families are overrepresented. The compensating advantage is that they form a large enough share of the sample (18.7 percent) to permit analysis of what characteristics differentiated them from those families not so well situated. Similarly, the proportions of substandard and standard families in the sample may well not be representative of working-class families generally.¹⁶

Tradition dictates that working-class aristocrats be skilled workers. Table 4 shows that the father's occupation did indeed play a major role in determining a family's chances of achieving a given standard of living. Families headed by skilled workmen made up 54 percent of the sample; they were 95.8 percent of the aristocrat families. In contrast, families headed by unskilled workers were 46 percent of the sample but 93.3 percent of those living at a substandard level. Equally striking, however, and certainly

16 Bureau agents were instructed to choose only those families who had kept good records of their income and expenditures; this presumably favored the inclusion of disproportionate numbers of well-established families. *Sixth Annual Report*, 219. Even so, Dubofsky summarized the current literature as putting the percentage of aristocrat families at between 14% and 18%: "Industrialism and the American Workers," 5.

less simple to explain, is the limited role that a father’s occupation played in determining whether a family would achieve a standard level of consumption. Families headed by unskilled workers were only marginally less likely to fall within the standard range than were those headed by skilled workers.

Skilled status almost guaranteed that a family would not fall below a certain level, just as unskilled status virtually ruled out a family’s achieving aristocrat status. But, most families, whether headed by a skilled worker or not, fell somewhere in the middle of the range. The occupational status of its head was insufficient, by itself, to lift a family to the aristocrat level—if we define that level in terms of actual patterns of consumption. Nonetheless, the role of occupation is important enough to give meaning to intra-class mobility.¹⁷

A family’s size is also a powerful predictor of its chances of being at either extreme of the range. Table 5 shows that few small families needed to fear falling below the standard level and that many could anticipate reaching aristocrat status. It shows too that large families, those with more than four children, were about as likely to be at either end of the spectrum as their overall numbers in the sample would justify. It is average-sized families, those

Table 5 Consumption Levels and Family Size

SIZE	% (NO.) OF FAMILIES		
	SUBSTANDARD	STANDARD	ARISTOCRAT
< 5	4.4% (4)	31.8% (71)	55.5% (40)
5–6	81.1% (73)	54.7% (122)	33.3% (24)
> 6	14.4% (13)	13.5% (30)	11.1% (8)

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

17 Much of the controversy which swirls around the measurement and analysis of occupational mobility originates in the fact that most observed movement between occupations took place within the working class. Katz has been especially critical of analyses which highlight this intraclass mobility, arguing instead that common class position is what should be stressed. See Katz, Doucet, and Stern, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 39–40. Table 4 above hardly resolves this dispute. But it does supply an empirical meaning for intraclass mobility.

with three or four children, who appear to have been most at risk of falling to substandard levels and to be least likely to achieve aristocrat status.

Average-sized families were 56.9 percent of the whole sample but 81.1 percent of those eking out an existence at substandard levels. In contrast, large families were 13.2 percent of the sample and 14.4 percent of those below the standard level. The overall effect of family size, then, was negative until there were a large enough number of children (apparently four or more) for them to begin to serve as economic assets. A small family was an unequivocal advantage. Of the sample 29.9 percent consisted of families with two or fewer children. They were a negligible 4.4 percent of the substandard families and a full 55.5 percent of those reaching the aristocrat level.

Family size alone explains little. What really mattered, and what family size as a variable captures only imprecisely, were the ages and roles of the family members. Children old enough to work would obviously have affected their family's consumption prospects differently from those still too young to contribute to its total income. The 1875 data provide only partial information about children's ages, and none about the parents'. They do, however, identify the number of children at work, at home, and at school. These three variables permit us to analyze the differential impact of children.

Table 6 defines those and the other variables used in a discriminant analysis of the 1875 sample families' prospects for falling into one consumption category rather than another. These variables proved powerful when it came to predicting which families would be in the substandard and standard categories, but were weak in predicting aristocratic families. Overall, the analysis was accurate in 65.47 percent of the cases; it achieved a success rating of only 16.4 percent, however, with respect to the aristocrat category. The difficulty lay in distinguishing between standard and aristocrat families on the basis of these variables. Table 7 records the classification results.

Limiting the stepwise discriminant analysis to families in the upper two categories improved matters not at all. The analysis correctly grouped 76.9 percent of the cases overall, but this success was due entirely to its prediction that virtually every case would

Table 6 Discriminating Variables

VARIABLE	DESCRIPTION	TYPE	RANGE
School	No. of children in school	Interval	0-4
Children work	No. of children at work	Interval	0-3
At home	No. of children at home	Interval	0-3
Unskilled	Head's skill level	Dummy	0-1 ^a
Native	Head's nativity	Dummy	0-1 ^b

a Coded 0=unskilled, 1=skilled. The Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor's determinations of skill level were used.

b Coded 0=foreign born, 1=native born.

Table 7 Discriminant Analysis Classification Results

ACTUAL GROUP	NO. OF CASES	PREDICTED GROUP MEMBERSHIP		
		SUBSTANDARD	STANDARD	ARISTOCRAT
Substandard	81	57 70.4%	24 29.6%	0 0.0%
Standard	214	30 14.0%	169 79.0%	15 7.6%
Aristocrat	67	0 0.0%	56 83.6%	11 16.4%

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

fall into the standard category. When limited to just substandard and standard families, the analysis successfully grouped 81.4 percent of the cases as Table 8 shows.

The effect of each variable in influencing a family's standard of living can be seen in Table 9, which summarizes the initial stepwise procedure. It shows that the father's skill level was the first variable entered. (The rule governing the stepwise procedure was to enter the variable which would most reduce the sum of unexplained variations, the residual variance). Next came the number of children at home. The more numerous they were, the lower the family's living standard. Next came the father's nativity. Native birth was a clear advantage. The fourth variable entered

Table 8 Discriminant Analysis Classification ("Substandard" and "Standard") Results

ACTUAL GROUP	NO. OF CASES	PREDICTED GROUP MEMBERSHIP	
		SUBSTANDARD	STANDARD
Substandard	81	56 69.1%	25 30.9%
Standard	214	30 14.0%	184 86.0%

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

Table 9 Summary of Stepwise Discriminant Analysis

STEP	ENTERED	VARIABLES	WILKS' LAMBDA	SIGNIFICANCE	RESIDUAL VARIANCE
		IN			
1	Unskilled	1	0.667329	0.0000	2.00992
2	At home	2	0.627363	0.0000	1.91236
3	Native	3	0.611087	0.0000	1.86535
4	Children work	4	0.597807	0.0000	1.84191

SOURCE: Calculated from *Sixth Annual Report*.

was the number of children at work. Like the number of children at home, the number of children at work was inversely related to the family's prospects of achieving a standard or higher consumption level. This effect was less pronounced, but is still important because it suggests that, even though working children increased family income, they did not do so sufficiently to offset the additional expense that their presence entailed.

The discriminant analysis also suggests a reason why medium-sized families—those with three or four children—were most at risk to fall to a substandard level of consumption while being least likely to achieve aristocrat status. All children, whether at home, at school, or at work were economic liabilities. But those at work clearly were less so. Families with few children, as a result, had a clear advantage in achieving a higher standard of living. And families with many children, five or more, had a relative advantage over those with three or four, simply because they were much more likely to have some working children.

In the terms of our original question—how much control did working-class families have over their day-to-day living conditions—we can say that structural factors alone did not determine a family's living standard. They did, however, lengthen or shorten the odds on a given family achieving a given level. Specifically, an immigrant family of average size headed by an unskilled laborer could hope at best to reach the standard level. A small, native-born family headed by a skilled worker could normally hope to reach that level at worst. What tipped some of the first sort into the substandard category or raised some of the second into the aristocrat category may well have been contingencies largely beyond the family's control, such as unemployment, illnesses, and accidents, on the one hand, and personal characteristics, such as thrift, ambition, and industriousness, on the other. Families did have some say in their own well being: the native born, the skilled, and those with few or no children had far more say than immigrants, the unskilled, and those with more than two children.

APPENDIX: COMPARING THE RANGE OF LIVING STANDARDS IN THE 1875 SAMPLE WITH MASSACHUSETTS WORKING-CLASS FAMILIES OVERALL Wright was a thorough and imaginative social investigator, but his methodological repertoire did not include random sampling. As a result, neither his 1875 Massachusetts study nor any of the several dozen family budget surveys that it inspired over the next thirty years examined a representative cross-section of working-class families in even one state, to say nothing of the United States as a whole. The unrepresentative nature of the data collected limits the usefulness that these studies can have. One cannot, to cite an obvious example, assume that any study's average values for wages, say, or food expenditures hold for the working class as a whole. One cannot assume that these averages hold for any group larger than the actual population studied.

However, the almost 400 families that Wright examined in such detail for his 1875 report were sufficiently diverse in background, composition, and economic condition to make it plausible that they might accurately display the range of working-class living standards. Although one cannot infer the material conditions of the average blue-collar family from Wright's data, one may be able to describe the range of standards that such families could anticipate reaching. Whether one can or not depends, in the first instance, upon whether there were enough families of sufficiently different living conditions studied in the report to create methodologically sound categories. The body of this article argues that this was in fact the case. Success also depends upon how well those

families' income, occupations, and expenditures match up with the range of such characteristics across the state.

Fortunately, it is possible to examine how the families in the 1875 report compare with Massachusetts working-class families generally. Wright directed the 1875 state census and instructed the enumerators to complete an individual schedule of twenty questions concerning living conditions for each family. He then incorporated the results, based upon 80,893 valid returns—of which 71,339 “were from the ‘wage’ class,” in his *Seventh Annual Report* (1876). These census data are very extensive. However, they did not involve a complete count of all the families in the state. In addition to an unknown number of unenumerated families, Wright’s bureau rejected 29,353 of the original 110,246 schedules because of doubts about their accuracy or for other technical reasons. Nonetheless, the number of returns is extremely large, and the data that they yielded compared so closely with those gathered from employers that “the absolute reliability of the averages given . . . is thoroughly assured.”¹⁸

The following table compares data on the 1875 sample families with those collected statewide during the 1875 state census. Since the budget study was limited to Massachusetts’ largest industrial centers, I have used the census data for the cities of Boston, Fall River, Lawrence, Lowell, Springfield, and Worcester rather than statewide averages. Since Wright did report the census data as averages, I have put the budget data into the same form.

The workers that Wright’s agents approached when carrying out the budget study, it turns out, were fairly typical. Their average wage and that of their working children both fall well inside the range formed

Table A Census and Budget Sample Data on Wages, Rents, and Housing

	AVER. WAGES		NO. RMS. RENTED	ANNUAL RENT
	MALES ^a	CHILDREN ^b		
1875 Budget Study	\$568	\$230	4.74	\$124
Boston	570	223	3.95	163
Fall River	484	457	4.90	128
Lawrence	505	279	5.31	131
Lowell	513	253	5.03	113
Springfield	603	360	5.12	140
Worcester	588	193	4.72	150

a Not all males in the census data were heads of families.
b These averages are for those families whose children did work, and should *not* be read as being the average for all families. The 1875 budget study figure is for the second earner in the family, 91.9% of whom were sons or daughters. Less than 2% of these children were eighteen or over.
SOURCE: *Sixth and Seventh Annual Reports*.

18 *Seventh Annual Report* (Boston, 1876), x.

by the census count for Massachusetts' largest industrial centers; so too do the size and cost of their housing. Unfortunately, it is not possible to compare total expenditures for both groups. As Wright pointed out, "many of the persons who filled out [census] schedules were unmarried, and had no families dependent on them for support" with the result that the data "do not show the cost of supporting families." Those items which are comparable, however, do indicate that the range of family situations sampled in the 1875 study probably resembled that of all blue-collar families in the state.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.