Settlement work is typically considered one of the greatest contributions of the progressive movement, but the motivations for each are not as noble as generally believed. Scholars tend to glorify or vilify settlement work, as in the best cases, it helped lift an immigrant family from the slums, while it is criticized for the erasure of native cultures and languages that often accompanied Americanization efforts. Even in their own time, some settlements were scrutinized more carefully, as the public felt that they could have radical politics, and were a hotbed of anarchistic dissenters. They were not even safe from criticism from the people settlement work was designed to help; many immigrants felt very negatively towards settlement workers for intruding into their family life, and for attempting to dissolve their cultural ties and replace them with star spangled patriotism.

If outcomes are measured by the benefits solely to the community being served, Lillian Wald’s house made the most unselfish contributions. Wald’s settlement most closely follows the idealized version of settlement work, while the beneficial outcomes of Coit’s are mostly driven by his experimental approach to social reform, and Gurney’s became almost entirely driven by the oversight of the Catholic Church, and was typical of religious settlements. The private motivations, be they scientific, religious, or medicinal, affected their public outcomes, as it determined the type of service available at each settlement, and typified the traditional models of settlement work.

Settlement work began in the United Kingdom, and was a way to provide charity to the lower class in the form of education, medicine, spiritual and physical nourishment, and financial assistance. Starting in the late 1880s, settlement work began to appear in the United States in major urban centers in the Northeast, such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, which continuously had large immigrant populations entering, and a need for community organization and charitable ventures. From six such locations in 1891, to more than four hundred in 1910, the value of settlement houses was quickly seen in New York City, and many large cities established several to serve their large immigrant populations.[[1]](#footnote-1) The settlement houses became hubs in their respective communities that occasionally ministered to their religious needs, provided invaluable social connections, and educational and occupational opportunities.

Many of the programs that these settlement homes ran were precursors to social work, and several were worked into the responsibilities of the public school system, park and urban planning commissions, and became core tenets of the progressive platforms. Though each settlement was different, Linda Gordon argues in “Social Insurance and Public Assistance: The Influence of Gender in Welfare Thought in the United States, 1890-1935” that through their work with settlement houses, women became community organizers and builders, and were sought after for their experience with the immigrant and impoverished communities in New York City’s Lower East Side.[[2]](#footnote-2) The well to do women who worked with settlements all over the city often had a degree of education that pushed them into leadership roles. Lillian Wald and Marion Gurney worked almost exclusively with women at their settlements, as they were staffed by nurses and nuns.

The push towards integrated communities of immigrants and service providers was part of what made settlement work so invaluable, argues June Granatir Alexander in her text, *Daily Life in Immigrant America 1870-1920*. Alexander describes how the immigrants tried to blend into their new homes, and how the settlement house’s accessibility made it easier for immigrants to utilize the services they offered, which ranged from English lessons, skill training, child care, and medical help.[[3]](#footnote-3)   Barbara Bair agrees with Alexander and Gordon in her chapter, “The Settlement House Movement” in *Immigration in US History*, that the services provided were integral to the establishment of American lives for immigrants, and the settlement house work was a proving ground for many women with political aspirations, a home for charitable intentions, and a place to test programs that would be adopted by public school systems, labor unions, and government platforms.[[4]](#footnote-4) The experience of the settlement workers who lived in the slums strengthened their arguments, and their recommendations to legislators about how to improve the daily life of the poor and immigrant communities, as they saw the daily struggles of the people they were attempting to assist.

1. Bair, Barbara, Carl L. Bankston, and Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo, ed. *Immigration in U.S. History*, Pasadena, California: Salem Press, 2006, p 644. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gordon, Linda. “Social Insurance and Public Assistance: The Influence of Gender in Welfare Thought in the United States, 1890-1935.” *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 1, (February 1992): 19-54. Accessed September 15, 2016, p 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alexander, June Granatir. *Daily Life in Immigrant America 1879-1920: How the Second Great Wave of Immigrants Made their Way in America*. Chicago: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2009, p 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bair, Bankston, and Hidalgo, 645. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)