

# Deaths, Disturbances, Disasters and Disorders in Chicago

A Selective Bibliography of Materials in the Municipal Reference Collection of the Chicago Public Library

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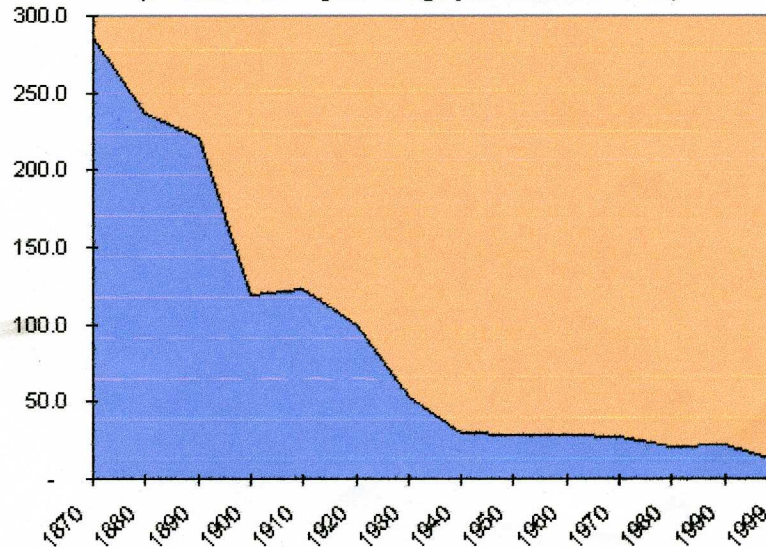
## 19th and 20th Century: Infant and Childhood Mortality



Source: "The Preventable Perils Surrounding the Child." Chicago, Ill. Dept. of Health. *Annual Report 1911-1918*. p. 270.

[Larger image \(80K\)](#)

Estimated Chicago Infant Mortality Rates: 1870 to 1999  
(Deaths under 1 year of age per 1000 live births)



Child deaths, although still a problem today, were an incredible scourge of the 19th century. In 1870, with 4,000 deaths in the 0-4 age group, a Chicago child had a 50% chance of reaching the age 5. Accurate statistics are not available for earlier years, but conditions were probably worse. By 1900 there were over 8,000 annual deaths of 0-4 year-olds, but the odds of surviving to the age 5 had increased to 75%. Today the odds are better than 98%. The infant death rate (0-365 days) has fallen dramatically, but even more pronounced is the decline in the death rates for 1-4 year-olds.

Children in the 19th century were subject to [cholera](#), smallpox, measles and all of the [other adult diseases](#), but childhood diarrheal diseases were the most terrifying. Infants would become diarrheal, then dehydrated, and die. These deaths were directly related to poor sanitary conditions. Deaths were much higher in summer, after rainfalls and in low lying areas, all of which were related to contamination from the sewage filled [Chicago River](#).

A variety of public health, medical, sewage and water supply improvements had dramatically cut the infant death rate by the turn of the century. The Chicago Health Department became an acknowledged leader in infant health with such measures as mandatory milk pasteurization (1909). Massive education programs, well baby clinics and comprehensive vaccinations were some of the many initiatives under the direction of legendary longtime leader Dr. Herman Bundesen. Chicago Lying-in-Hospital became a world leader in reducing infant deaths.

