

- Mark your confusion.
- Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)
- Write a 250+ word response to the article.

(If you are a teacher or student who would like to modify this Google Doc, go to File > Make a Copy. I cannot and do not respond to Share requests -- my apologies!)

Biography: Jacob Riis

By Newsela Staff

Synopsis: Reformer and journalist Jacob Riis was born in Denmark in 1849, and immigrated to New York in 1870. He was unable to find work, and he soon found himself homeless, living in police lodging houses and begging for food. The conditions in the lodging houses were so bad that Riis vowed to get them closed. Eventually, Riis landed a job as a police reporter. He worked in the poorest, most crime-ridden areas of the city and began to bring a camera with him to document what he found in these neighborhoods, and the conditions in which these people lived.

For this, Riis is considered to be one of the fathers of modern photojournalism. His book "How the Other Half Lives" inspired then-police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt to close the lodging houses. It also brought about many needed reforms in housing laws. So important was Riis' work that Roosevelt called him "New York's most useful citizen."

Early Life

Jacob A. Riis was born in Denmark in 1849, and he immigrated to America at age 20.

As a young new immigrant, alone, homeless and struggling to find work — with only a stray dog as a companion on the street — Jacob Riis was the victim of crime at a police lodging house. These were areas in some police stations that let homeless people stay the night. A locket with his girlfriend's picture was stolen from him in his sleep. Reporting the crime, he was thrown from the premises by a disbelieving policeman, who clubbed his dog. It became his life's mission to get these lodging houses shut down.

In 1873, Riis landed newspaper work in New York City. Riis and his girlfriend, Elizabeth, married in Denmark in 1876 and settled in New York, where they raised five children.

Reporter And Photographer

For 23 years, Riis worked for New York newspapers. Six of those years were spent working nights on the police beat, witnessing crime and poverty and gaining an intricate knowledge of street life. From the start of his work in journalism, he used the personal stories of the slum dwellers he met to paint a vivid picture of what it was like to live in the city's tenement neighborhoods.

Riis was the first reformer to recognize the potential in new methods of low-light flash photography. He used photographs of squalid conditions in the poorest parts of New York City to convince middle-class audiences of the need for action.

Writing "How The Other Half Lives"

Riis' first and most famous book, "How the Other Half Lives," was published in 1890.

"How the Other Half Lives" has long been recognized as a classic in the "muckraking" reform tradition. He incorporated stories about individuals written from observation or based on interviews with people he met or photographed. His photographs in the book made a powerful impact on people. One of them shows a room in a lodging house about 13-foot square, in which 12 men and women slept, most on the floor.



Jacob Riis photo "Five-Cent Spot," 1888–1889.

He also collaborated closely with the New York Health Department, and other authorities to understand the statistical and sociological data that underlay the conditions he saw in the streets and tenement houses.

Jacob Riis' career-long "battle with the slum" was aided through friendships with political and rich allies — the most important being President Theodore Roosevelt. Riis took Roosevelt, then the New York police commissioner, on a series of nighttime journeys into the slums and made recommendations for reform of the police and health departments, many of which Roosevelt embraced.

Riis And Reform

When Jacob Riis published "How the Other Half Lives" in 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau ranked New York as the most densely populated city in the United States — 1.5 million inhabitants.

Disease, sanitation, garbage and hygiene issues were constant concerns in crowded impoverished tenement districts.

Jacob Riis wrote frequent articles urging measures to protect public health. Poor water quality, filth, vermin, and overcrowded living conditions meant typhus and cholera outbreaks were common, as were high rates of child mortality and tuberculosis. As many as one in five babies died. Riis worked with health and hygiene department officials to document and report sources of disease.

Riis advocated for open-air parks for children, who previously had nowhere but the streets or the dark hallways and cramped back spaces of tenements to play. Riis helped raise support for small public parks and thought that every public school should have a playground. He believed in the right of boys and girls to play as part of healthy early child development, and as an outlet for energies that could instead be turned to lives of vice or crime. Riis said, "Bad boys and bad girls are not born, but made... They are made bad by environment and training. The children must have room to play."



Children sleeping on Mulberry Street in New York City, 1890.

Riis worried about sweatshop labor taking place within tenement apartments and in small factories in the Lower East Side. Whole families, including children, would often be involved in garment making, cigar making, millinery and artificial flower assembly. They worked in crowded, hot conditions and were paid by the “piece” or the lot. Riis was dismayed about child labor, in particular, in homes and in factories. Riis said that many of these little children appeared old before their time.

Death And Legacy

His fame allowed him to retire as a police reporter in 1901 and relied on lecturing as his primary source of income.

Riis had pioneered techniques that were later used in the new emerging fields of social work, investigative journalism and photojournalism.

On May 25, 1914, Riis died of heart disease at age 65. Lillian Wald, another well-known reformer, praised him “for opening up the hearts of a people to emotion, and for the knowledge upon which to guide that emotion into constructive channels.”

Riis’ name lives on at the Jacob Riis Houses on the Lower East Side in Manhattan and Jacob Riis Park in Far Rockaway, Queens.

Response Options:

- What problem(s) did Riis see in the world? How did he earn a living doing something about that problem?
- What is one “life lesson” you take from Riis’ biography? How could Riis’ life apply to yours?