

# Jacob Riis

REVEALING "HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES"

## Family Guide

Ages  
8+



# Welcome

Use this guide with your family to discover the story of Jacob Riis (rhymes with “peace”), who worked to improve the lives of New York City’s poorest residents more than 100 years ago.

As you explore this exhibition:

**LOOK** closely

**ASK** questions

**SHARE** what you learn



## *Let’s travel back in time!*

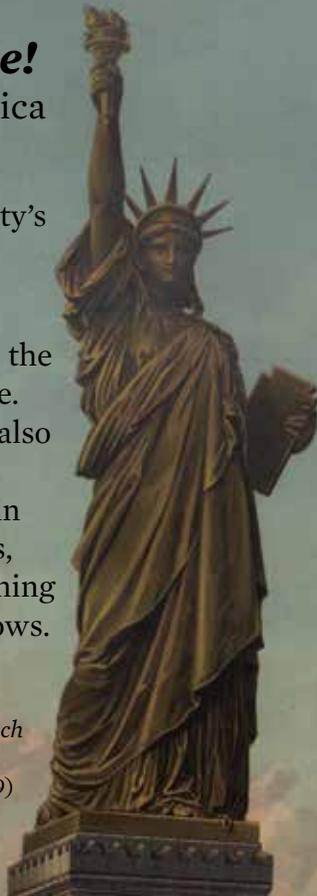
Jacob Riis immigrated to America from Denmark in 1870.

Over the next 30 years, New York City’s Lower East Side became one of the most overcrowded places on earth.

Millions of immigrants who came to the United States lived and worked there. They came mostly from Europe but also from other parts of the world. Many families crammed into small rooms in rundown buildings called tenements, often without indoor plumbing, running water, heat, fresh air—or even windows.

### **COVER IMAGE**

**Jacob Riis.** *The First Board of Election in the Beach Street Industrial School.* Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Roger William Riis (90.134.169)



Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-08455

**FIND** this detail in a large wall map on display.

**WATCH** the moving images on the back wall.

**LISTEN** to Riis’s descriptions in the magic lantern slide show.

**IMAGINE** yourself on the city’s streets.

What might you **SEE**?

**HEAR?**

**SMELL?**

**FEEL?**

**TASTE?**

Riis knew the Lower East Side well. He arrived as an immigrant laborer and later became a reporter. His work brought national attention to the difficult living conditions of immigrants and New York City's poorest citizens—"the other half."

**“ . . . the sights I saw . . . gripped my heart until I felt I must tell of them, or burst . . . or something.”**

**—Jacob Riis**



Jacob Riis, 1900

**FIND** the BIOGRAPHY case to learn more about Riis's life and family.

**ASK** each other:  
How might Riis's own immigrant experience have influenced his reporting?

Riis described what he witnessed in the slums but wished he could use photographs as well as words. If he could show evidence of the awful living conditions, perhaps people would demand changes. But at that time, photography was only possible in good light.

In 1887, the invention of magnesium flash powder meant that photos could be taken anywhere, even in the dark. With this new technology, Riis could add photographs of tenement life to his lectures and articles.

**FIND** the PHOTOGRAPHER case to learn more about camera equipment from Riis's time.

**TALK** about what you notice.  
How does it compare to what we use now?

**SHARE** your ideas. What technologies might Riis use if working today?

Using flash powder could be dangerous. Riis nearly blinded himself in an explosion. More

People sometimes didn't know that Riis or the photographers with him were about to take their picture, especially with the new flash technology.

**IMAGINE** you were surprised by strangers with blinding light, loud noises, and lots of smoke. What would you be thinking?

Technology did not yet exist to reproduce photographs clearly in newspapers and magazines. To illustrate Riis's writing, artists used his photos to create line drawings and engravings that were often published instead.

**FIND** examples of line drawings on the PUBLIC HEALTH wall panel.

**CHOOSE** any photograph in the exhibition.

**CREATE** your own line drawing of it:

**WRITE** a caption for your drawing:

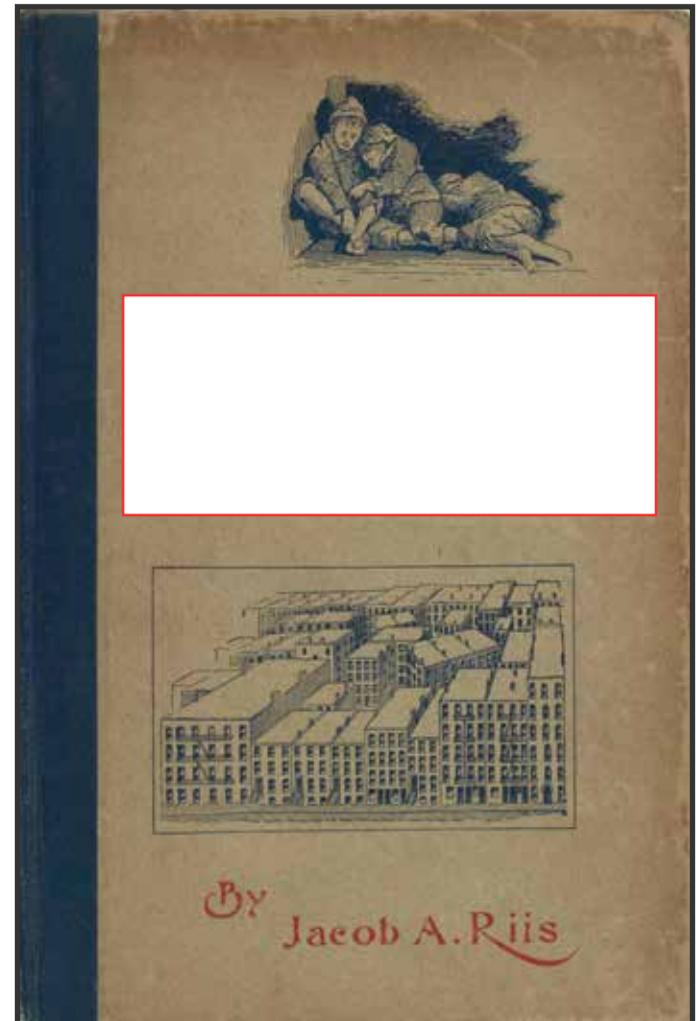
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Riis became famous in 1890 when his book, *How the Other Half Lives*, became a bestseller. It introduced many Americans to the harsh realities of life in the tenements.

**FIND** the WRITER case to see an original copy of *How the Other Half Lives*.

**READ** Riis in his own words. Why do you think Riis chose this title for his book?

**THINK** of an alternative title, then **WRITE** it below.



During the Gilded Age (1865–1900) some wealthy people lived very extravagantly. Riis’s work helped prove that thousands of New Yorkers lived in horrible slums not far from the city’s fanciest neighborhoods.

**FIND** the REFORMER case to learn more about real people, especially children, whose stories and photographs Riis featured in his work.

**FIND** this detail in one of the case’s photographs. What might these hands tell you about this person?



Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Roger William Riis (90.13.4.132)

**LOOK** closely at the rest of the picture. What else do you see?

**INVENT** a story about her life. Then read the real story below.

Riis met nine-year-old Katie when he took pictures at a school. She only went to school when she could be spared from her job cooking, cleaning, and keeping house for her three older siblings who all worked. When Riis asked Katie about her work she replied “I scrubs.” He described her as “a sober, patient, sturdy little thing . . . with that dull life wearing on her day by day.”

**FIND** this detail in another photograph.



Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Roger William Riis (90.13.2.97)

**DESCRIBE** what you think is happening. How does this scene compare with children’s lives today?



How did Riis work to improve schools and playgrounds?

**INVESTIGATE** the PUBLIC SPACE and EDUCATION wall panels to learn more.

“I was a writer and  
a newspaper man,  
and I only yelled about  
the conditions which I saw.”

–Jacob Riis

**BE** a reformer like Riis.  
What conditions would you yell about today?

**THINK** about a time when you really wanted  
to change someone’s mind.

**SHARE** ways to help people notice or think  
differently about something you care  
about. How could you communicate  
your ideas?

Through the efforts of Riis and other reformers,  
life on the Lower East Side began to improve over  
the years. Riis continued writing and lecturing  
until his death in 1914.

**EXPLORE** the LEGACY section to learn how  
Riis’s work continued.

**IMAGINE** if Jacob Riis was alive today.  
Do you think he would start a blog?  
Post to Facebook or Instagram?  
Use Snapchat?  
Tweet?

**WRITE** about your Riis exhibition visit  
in no more than 140 characters.  
Describe your favorite discoveries.

**ASK** an adult if you may share your Library  
of Congress experience on social media.

**IN YOUR OWN WORDS . . .**

*Want to learn more about Jacob Riis and  
the Gilded Age in New York?*

**VISIT** [www.loc.gov/exhibits/jacob-riis/learn-more](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jacob-riis/learn-more)  
for a list of books for young readers and  
other resources.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, the Danish Ministry of Culture, the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces, and The Royal Danish Embassy provided generous support for this guide as well as other educational programs related to *Jacob Riis: Revealing “How the Other Half Lives.”*



A postcard sent by Jacob Riis to his daughter showing Ribe, his birthplace in Denmark. Jacob A. Riis Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress