Jacob Riis
Revealing "How the Other Half Lives"
A Library of Congress Exhibition
April 14–September 5, 2016
Thomas Jefferson Building
Jacob A. Riis (1849–1914) was a journalist and social reformer who publicized the crises in housing, education, and poverty at the height of European immigration to New York City in the late nineteenth century. His career as a reformer was shaped by his innovative use of photographs of New York’s slums to substantiate his words and vividly expose the realities of squalid living and working conditions faced by the inhabitants. Harrowing images of tenements and alleyways where New York’s immigrant communities lived, combined with his evocative storytelling, were intended to engage and inform his audience and exhort them to act. Riis helped set in motion an activist legacy linking photojournalism with reform.

This exhibition repositions Riis as a multi-skilled communicator who devoted his life to writing articles and books, delivering lectures nationwide, and doggedly advocating for social change. Jacob Riis: Revealing “How the Other Half Lives” features Riis’s correspondence, documentary photographs, drafts and published works, lecture notes, scrapbook pages, appointment books, financial records, family history, and alliances from throughout his career. The side walls of the exhibition frame Riis’s call to action on problems he focused on as a reporter—housing, homelessness, public space, immigration, education, crime, public health, and labor. These pressing issues remain at the forefront of many public debates today.

By merging, for the first time, the papers the Riis family gifted to the Library of Congress and his photographs in the collection of the Museum of the City of New York, Jacob Riis: Revealing “How the Other Half Lives” provides visitors with an unprecedented opportunity to understand the indelible mark Riis’s brand of social reform left upon our vision of humanity and poverty in the urban landscape as the Gilded Age shifted into the Progressive Era.
Biography

Jacob A. Riis (1849–1914) was born in Ribe, Denmark. He immigrated to America at age twenty with hopes of one day marrying his teenage love, Elisabeth Nielsen [Gjørtz]. Riis wandered through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, taking odd jobs as a laborer and salesman, before landing newspaper work in New York City in 1873. Financially established, Riis won Elisabeth’s hand; they married in Ribe in 1876 and settled in New York, where they raised five children.

Riis recounted his remarkable life story in The Making of an American, his second national best seller. In it, he chronicled his years as a homeless immigrant, his love story with his wife, and his enduring friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, who had become president of the United States only months before the book’s publication in 1901.
For twenty-three years, Riis worked for the New York Tribune and the Evening Sun from an office at 301 Mulberry Street across from police headquarters in the heart of the Lower East Side. Six of those years were spent working nights on the police beat, witnessing criminality and deprivation and gaining an intricate knowledge of street life.

With his Danish accent and crusader views, Riis was an outsider among his fellow journalists. He proved his mettle, however, and became the “boss reporter.”

Writing in a sentimental yet critical style similar to Charles Dickens, he was unyielding in his depiction of the vices, travails, and efforts of the urban poor. 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 inhabit the city’s tenement neighborhoods.
Photographer

Jacob A. Riis’s success as an agent of reform derived not only from his passionate advocacy in print and on the lecture circuit but from his innovative use of the media of his time. He 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. Describing himself as a “photographer after a fashion,” he first guided avid amateur photographers willing to test new flash techniques to take nighttime pictures in the slums. Soon Riis began taking photos on his own, letting commercial firms do the darkroom work. The 100 images he assembled for his “Other Half” lecture slides were powerful persuaders, but the impact of those pictures was diminished in print because 1890s printing technology dictated that images be reproduced as crude wood engravings or tonally flat halftones.

Above
Jacob Riis. “The Making of an American,” handwritten lecture notes. Jacob A. Riis Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (019.00.00)

Opposite
Jacob Riis wrote his first (and now enduringly famous) book, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) late at night “while the house slept.” He recalled: “It was my habit to light the lamps in all the rooms of the lower story and roam through them with my pipe, for I do most of my writing on my feet.” The book was a bestseller. Riis continued to pursue his activism through writing. His long stint as a police reporter, first with the *New York Tribune* and then the *New York Evening Sun*, ended in 1901, but Riis continued to produce a stream of freelance articles for newspapers and literary magazines like *Scribner’s*, *The Century*, and *The Churchman*. He also published nearly a dozen influential books involving urban reform, including *The Children of the Poor* (1892), *A Ten Years’ War* (1900), *The Making of an American* (1901), and *The Battle with the Slum* (1902).
granted from southern Italy in exclusive possession of this field, just as his black-eyed boy has monopolized the boot-black's trade, the Chinaman the laundry, and the negro the razor for purposes of honest industry as well as anatomical research. Here is the back alley in its foulest development—naturally enough, for there is scarcely a lot that has not two, three, or four tenements upon it, swarming with unwholesome crowds. What squalor and degradation inhabit these dens the health officers know.

Through the long summer days their carts patrol The Bend, scattering disinfectants in streets and lanes, in sinks and cellars, and hidden hovels where the tramp burrows. From midnight till far into the small hours of the morning the policeman's thundering rap on closed doors is heard, with his stern command, "Apri port!" on his rounds gathering evidence of illegal over-crowding. The doors are opened unwillingly enough—but the order means business and the tenant knows it even if he understands no word of English—upon such scenes as the one presented in the picture. It was photographed by flash-light on just such a visit. In a room not thirteen feet either way slept twelve men and women, two or three in bunks set in a sort of alcove, the rest on the floor. A kerosene lamp burned dimly in the fearful atmosphere, probably to guide other and later arrivals to their "beds," for it was only just past midnight. A baby's fretful wail came from

**An All-night Two-cent Restaurant, in "The Bend."**

the sleeping scene. The policeman, gloomy, firm, with a swift sweep of his hand, the sacrifice he had made of his personal interests to satisfy the law, was about to turn the room back into business.

Of the vast homeless crowds the census takes no account. It is their instinct to shun the light, and they cannot be corralled in one place long enough to be counted. But the houses can, and the last count showed that in "The Bend district," between Broadway and the Bowery, and Canal and Chatham Streets, in a total of nearly four thousand four hundred "apartments," only nine were for the moment vacant. West of Broadway, in the old "Africa" that receives the overflow from The Bend and is rapidly changing its character (the colored population moving uptown before the tide of Italian immigration and the onward march of business—an odd co-partnership), the notice "standing-room only" is up. Not a single vacant room was found there. The problem of the children becomes, in these swarms, to the last degree perplexing. It is not unusual to find half a hundred in a single tenement.

There was a big tenement in the Sixth Ward, now happily in process of being appropriated by the beneficent spirit of
Reformer

Based on his own experiences as an immigrant and his knowledge of the slums as a police reporter, Riis advocated for practical solutions to a wide array of social problems. Through lectures, newspaper and magazine articles, and books like *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and *The Children of the Poor* (1892), Riis worked tirelessly to influence public opinion. He met with a hostile reception from New York City’s powerful political machine, Tammany Hall, whose leaders saw well-meaning, middle-class reformers as a threat to their influence. But in 1894, an anti-Tammany reform candidate, William L. Strong, won the mayor’s office and instituted a period of “good government” policies. Among Strong’s appointments was a young Theodore Roosevelt as police commissioner. Roosevelt befriended Riis and supported his causes, as Riis advocated for the destruction of the worst of the old tenements, the construction of parks, education for children, and the closing of the dangerous police station lodging houses.
By 1900, Riis was a national authority on urban poverty. The lure of the lecture circuit was more than financial. His fame allowed him to retire as a police reporter in 1901 and rely on lecturing as his primary source of income. For several months out of the year, he crisscrossed the country, even after a serious heart attack in 1900 and against doctor’s orders. Riis’s 1901 autobiography *The Making of an American*, in which he regaled readers with accounts of the degrading experiences of his early years as a struggling immigrant, consolidated his status as a celebrity and resonated with audiences across the country. A newspaper account of Riis’s 1911 lecture in San Jose, California, noted: “Simply as the story was told, it held the listeners wrapt. ‘If,’ said [Riis] in closing, ‘the story of one plain immigrant lad helps you to look with kind eyes on one little unfortunate lad I shall think my words well spoken.’”
Ally

Jacob Riis’s career-long “battle with the slum” was aided through acquaintances and friendships with political and affluent allies—the most powerful being Theodore Roosevelt. Their deep friendship began in 1895 when then Police Commissioner Roosevelt sought out Riis in his newspaper office across from police headquarters on Mulberry Street. Riis took the commissioner on a series of nighttime forays into the slums and used the relationship to make recommendations for reform of the police and health departments, many of which Roosevelt embraced. Over time their bond strengthened, even after Roosevelt left the city to climb the rungs from a state to a national political career. The two men supported each other publicly—artfully using the media to enhance their mutual reputations.
Legacy

Riis often said he was not alone in pressing for urban reform. As the Gilded Age ended, his sentimental appeals to Christian empathy were eclipsed by more organized means to combat poverty. New college-educated Progressive reformers saw unionization, woman suffrage, protective legislation, and government intervention as ways to achieve far-reaching social change. But Riis had pioneered techniques utilized in the new emerging fields of social work, investigative journalism, and photojournalism. His fieldwork in the streets; case studies of the ill and poor; documentation with a camera; use of public relations; interest in statistics; and close association with government authorities and health officers, all laid groundwork for what was to come.

When on May 25, 1914, Riis died of heart disease at age 65, Lillian Wald, founder of the Henry Street Settlement, eulogized him “for friendship and encouragement and spirited fellowship, for opening up the hearts of a people to emotion, and for the knowledge upon which to guide that emotion into constructive channels.”

Above
Nellie Simmons Meier (d. 1939). 1903 print of Jacob Riis’s right hand with signature published in Lions’ Paws, The Story of Famous Hands. New York, 1937. Nellie Simmons Meier Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (098.00.00)

Opposite
Lewis Hine (1874–1940). “Photographic Investigation of Child Labor Conditions in Sardine Canneries of Maine, August 1911.” Gelatin silver photograph. Papers of the National Child Labor Committee, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (108.00.00)
Acknowledgments

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Online Exhibition
This exhibition is available online at www.loc.gov/exhibits/jacob-riis/

Public Programs
A list of Public Programs for youth and adult audiences, including lectures, films, and
special presentations, are listed in the online exhibition and updated as new
programs are added: www.loc.gov/exhibits/jacob-riis/public-programs

Through the generosity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, the Danish
Ministry of Culture, the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces, and The Royal
Danish Embassy, a family guide, designed for younger visitors, ages 8+ and their
families, features a series of age-appropriate, self-guided activities. The guide
encourages users to explore the exhibition, look closely, ask questions, and reflect on
how they might affect change in our world today.

A hands-on learning cart invites visitors of all ages to investigate late nineteenth/early-
twentieth-century photographic equipment and processes that bring to life the stories behind the creation of Riis’s work. Stationed inside the exhibition, cart
facilitators engage visitors with artifacts and related materials to highlight Riis’s
experiences and the conditions he documented.

Read More About It

Books by Riis


Books about Riis


Companion Volume
Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York’s Other Half is the first comprehensive study and complete catalogue of Jacob Riis’s photographs and is the culmination of more than two decades of research on Riis by photographic historian Bonnie Yochelson. published by Yale University Press in association with the Museum of the City of New York and the Library of Congress. The book is supported by the Phillip and Edith Leonian Foundation.
Jacob Riis

REVEALING “HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES”

is a co-presentation of the Library of Congress and the Museum of the City of New York.

This exhibition unites, for the first time, the Jacob A. Riis Papers from the Library of Congress and the Museum of the City of New York’s Jacob A. Riis Collection of Riis’s photographs.

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