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***Excerpt from* How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York**

**By Jacob A. Riis**

**Originally published in 1890**

**Reprinted in 1957 by Hill and Wang**

Newspaper reporter and photojournalist Jacob Riis (1849–1914) was one of the earliest social reformers to use his work to document the effects of industrialization on the lower-class citizens of the United States. Riis's articles, books, and photographs helped focus public attention on the unhealthy living and working conditions experienced by many of his fellow New Yorkers, and he was credited for bringing about many governmental reforms in the city.

Riis was born in Ribe, Denmark, and received most of his early schooling from his father, a teacher who also worked for a local weekly paper. As a young man Riis trained to be a carpenter, but at the age of twenty-one he decided to immigrate to New York. He arrived in the city in 1870, a period when jobs were hard to find and competition for them was fierce. For years Riis was forced to take any temporary job he could find, including farm work, brickmaking, and peddling. He even tried mining in Pennsylvania for a short time. Riis was so poor that several times he was forced to stay in the police department lodging houses of the city—filthy, crowded, noisy basement rooms run by the city police for the needy,



**Jacob Riis photographed the poor of New York and wrote about their plight**. (© Bettman/Corbis.)

which lacked toilets, baths, or bedding. Experiencing such poverty during his first years in the United States made a powerful impression on Riis that lasted the rest of his life.

In 1878 Riis found work as a reporter at the *New York Tribune*. He was assigned to the police beat and began to write highly detailed accounts of the city's most violent crimes. At the same time he began to report on the harmful environments in which many New Yorkers lived and worked. His tiny downtown office was surrounded by tenements, rundown, overcrowded apartment buildings that barely meet minimum health standards. As Riis wandered the poor, mainly immigrant neighborhoods gathering material for his stories, he became determined to try to bring about positive change.



**Jacob Riis**. (© Corbis)

At the time Riis began writing, most wealthy New Yorkers believed the poor were responsible for their own problems, judging them either too weak or too immoral to escape from poverty and slum life. Riis argued that it was not the people, but the slums themselves, that were the social problem. He saw that many of the city's lower-class citizens were not criminals or drunkards, but normal people struggling to overcome the terrible circumstances in which they lived. He was certain that most New Yorkers simply failed to understand the troubles of the poor and decided to use journalism to communicate to his readers what it was like to live in the city's tenements.

Riis worked tirelessly in his efforts to report the horrors of the tenement districts, but he quickly found that not everyone believed his descriptions were factual. Frustrated by the limits of the written word, he began to use photography to convey the misery of daily life in the slums. Riis hoped his stories would have a far greater effect on the public if they were accompanied by pictures. The technology to print his photographs was not yet available, however, so what appeared with his articles at first were drawings based on his pictures.

In 1888 Riis began to work for the *New York Sun*. In that year the paper printed an article called "Flashes from the Slums," which was accompanied by twelve drawings based on Riis's photographs. The article described what strange figures Riis and his assistants made in the city streets in the dead of night, as they quickly approached the tenement dwellers with their odd-looking equipment, snapped the photograph in a blinding flash, and ran away, capturing candid shots of the real life on the streets without stopping to ask



**Jacob Riis photographed this poor family in their tenement apartment**. (© Bettmann/Corbis.)

permission. Riis displayed his photographs in slide shows that he delivered in churches and schools. Many people were so overwhelmed by his shows that they spoke out loud directly to the images of people in the slides.

As Riis continued his work for the *Sun*, he investigated many aspects of the city's slums: sanitary conditions, disease, crime, safety, family life, the fate of women and children, and even the treatment of the bodies of those who died from hunger or cold. In 1890 Riis published his first book, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, sections of which had already appeared in *Scribner's* magazine. The book contained seventeen of his photographs, but the reproduction quality was poor due to the technological limitations of the time. Riis's book was widely read and had an intense effect on New Yorkers, moving many to pity and a few to take action to help.

**Things to remember while reading the excerpt from *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*:**

* In the late eighteenth century, 95 percent of the U.S. population lived in rural areas. There were only five cities with more than ten thousand people and no city as large as fifty thousand. With industrialization, however, came urbanization. By 1870 almost 170 cities had populations over 10,000 and 15 cities had more than 100,000 people.
* In 1890, the year Riis's book was published, New York City had a population of 1.5 million and was the nation's largest city and port. The city continued to grow, and in 1900, only ten years later, its population had nearly doubled at 3.4 million. Most of the huge increase was due to the large number of immigrants arriving from Europe.
* From the 1820s to the 1880s, most immigrants that came to the United States were from England, Scotland, Scandinavia, Germany, and Ireland. Poor economic and political conditions in Germany and Ireland during those years caused about three million people from each country to move to America in search of better lives. The Great Migration of 1880 to 1920 that followed brought twenty-seven million immigrants to the country, mainly from the eastern European nations of Russia, Poland, Italy, Greece, and Austria-Hungary.
* At the turn of the twentieth century, the highest immigrant populations in the nation resided in four of its largest cities: New York; Boston, Massachusetts; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Chicago, Illinois. Some nationalities were more likely than others to settle in the urban areas. It was estimated that five out of every six Irish and Russian travelers and three out of four Italian and Hungarian immigrants chose to live in cities.
* The nation's cities were not prepared for the large inflow of people, most of whom were poor, unskilled, and did not speak English. Resourceful city-dwellers began to convert older houses into tenement buildings to rent to the newcomers at high prices. Because rental space was so limited and the demand was so great, landlords and real estate developers cut the buildings up into tiny, dark, stuffy living areas. Closets became bedrooms for multiple people. Small houses built for one family often became the residence for ten or more families, all of which were paying high rents.
* By the early 1900s, 1.2 million people were crowded into thirty-seven thousand overcrowded tenement buildings in New York. The tenements did not provide adequate water, air, or sewage or garbage removal systems. Many people who lived in the slums became victims of crime or disease.
* Riis quotes heavily throughout his book from the many reports he had researched before writing it.

**Excerpt from How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York**

**Chapter 1: Genesis of the Tenement**

The first tenement New York knew bore the **mark of Cain** from its birth, though a generation passed before the writing was **deciphered**. It was the "**rear house,**" infamous ever after in our city's history. There had been tenant-houses before, but they were not built for the purpose. Nothing would probably have shocked their original owners more than the idea of their harboring a **promiscuous** crowd; for they were the **decorous** homes of the old **Knickerbockers**, the proud aristocracy of Manhattan in the early days.

It was the stir and bustle of trade, together with the tremendous immigration that followed upon the war of 1812 that **dislodged**, them. In thirty-five years the city of less than a hundred thousand came to harbor half a million souls, for whom homes had to be found … [The original owners'] comfortable dwellings in the once fashionable streets along the East River front fell in to hands of real estate agents and boarding-house keepers…. As business increased, and the city grew with rapid strides, the necessities of the poor became the opportunities of their wealthier neighbors, and the stamp was set upon the old houses, suddenly become valuable…. [According to a report to the Legislature of 1857] "their large rooms were partitioned into several smaller ones, without regard to light or **ventilation**, the rate of rent being lower in proportion to space or height from the street; and they soon became filled from cellar to **garret** with a class of tenantry living from hand to mouth, loose in morals, **improvident** in habits, degraded, and **squalid** as beggary itself."…

Still the pressure of the crowds did not abate, and in the old garden where the stolid Dutch **burgher** grew his tulips or early cabbages a rear house was built, generally of wood, two stories high at first. Presently it was carried up another story, and another. Where two families had lived ten moved in. The front house followed suit, if the brick walls were strong enough. The question was not always asked, judging from complaints made by a contemporary witness, that the old buildings were "often carried up to a great height without regard to the strength of the foundation walls." It was rent the owner was after; nothing was said in the contract about either the safety or the comfort of the tenants….

Worse was to follow. It was "soon perceived by estate owners and agents of property that a greater percentage of profits could be realized by the conversion of houses and blocks into **barracks,** and dividing their space into smaller proportions capable of containing human life within four walls…. Blocks were rented of real estate owners, or '**purchased on time,**' or **taken in charge at a percentage,**and held for **underletting.**" With the appearance of the middleman, wholly irresponsible, and utterly reckless and unrestrained, began the era of tenement building which turned out such blocks as Gotham Court, where, in one **cholera epidemic** that scarcely touched the clean wards, the tenants died at the rate of one hundred and ninety-five to the thousand of population; which forced the general **mortality** of the city up from 1 in 41.83 in 1815, to 1 in 27.33 in 1855, a year of unusual freedom from epidemic disease, and which wrung from the early organizers of the Health Department this wail: "There are numerous examples of tenement-houses in which are lodged several hundred people that have **a pro rata** allotment of ground area scarcely equal to two square yards upon the city lot, court-yards and all included." The tenement-house population had swelled to half a million souls by that time, and on the East Side, in what is still the most densely populated district in all the world, China not excluded, it was packed at the rate of 200,000 to the square mile, a state of affairs wholly unexampled. The utmost **cupidity** of other lands and other days had never **contrived** to herd much more than half that number within the same space. The greatest crowding of Old London was at the rate of 175,816. **Swine**roamed the streets and gutters as their principal **scavengers**. The death of a child in a tenement was registered at the Bureau of Vital Statistics as "plainly due to suffocation in the foul air of an unventilated apartment, and the Senators, who had come down from Albany to find out what was the matter with New York, reported that 'there are annually cut off from the population by disease and death enough human beings to people a city, and enough human labor to sustain it.'" And yet experts had testified that, as compared with uptown, rents were from twenty-five to thirty percent higher in the worst slums of the lower wards, with such accommodations as were enjoyed, for instance, by a "family with boarders" in Cedar Street, who fed hogs in the cellar that contained eight or ten loads of manure; or "one room 12 × 12 with five families living in it, comprising twenty persons of both sexes and all ages, with only two beds, without partition, screen, chair, or table." The rate of rent has been successfully maintained to the present day, though the hog at least has been eliminated.

Lest anybody flatter himself with the notion that these were evils of a day that is happily past and may safely be forgotten, let me mention here three very recent instances of tenement-house life that came under my notice. One was the burning of a rear house in Mott Street, from appearances one of the original tenant-houses that made their owners rich. The fire made homeless ten families, who had paid an average of $5 a month for their mean little cubby-holes. The owner himself told me that it was fully insured for $800, though it brought him in $600 a year rent. He evidently considered himself especially entitled to be pitied for losing such valuable property. Another was the case of a hard-working family of man and wife, young people from the old country, who took poison together in a Crosby Street tenement because they were "tired." There was no other explanation, and none was needed when I stood in the room in which they had lived. It was in the attic with sloping ceiling and a single window so far out on the roof that it seemed not to belong to the place at all. With scarcely room enough to turn around in they had been compelled to pay five dollars and a half a month in advance. There were four such rooms in that attic, and together they brought in as much as many a handsome little cottage in a pleasant part of Brooklyn. The third instance was that of a colored family of husband, wife, and baby in a wretched rear **rookery**in West Third Street. Their rent was eight dollars and a half for a single room on the top-story, so small that I was unable to get a photograph of it even by placing the camera outside the open door. Three short steps across either way would have measured its full extent.

There was just one excuse for the early tenement-house builders, and their successors may plead it with nearly as good right for what it is worth. "Such," says an official report, "is the lack of house-room in the city that any kind of tenement can be immediately crowded with lodgers, if there is space offered." Thousands were living in cellars. There were three hundred underground lodging-houses in the city when the Health Department was organized. Some fifteen years before that the old Baptist Church in Mulberry Street, just off Chatham Street, had been sold, and the rear half of the frame structure had been converted into tenements that with their swarming population became the scandal even of that reckless age. The wretched pile harbored no less than forty families, and the annual rate of deaths to the population was officially stated to be 75 in 1,000. These tenements were an extreme type of very many, for the big barracks had by this time spread east and west and far up the island into the sparsely settled wards….

The climax had been reached. The situation was summed up by the Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor in these words: "Crazy old buildings, crowded rear tenements in filthy yards, dark, damp basements, leaking garrets, shops, outhouses, and stables converted into dwellings, though scarcely fit to shelter brutes, are habitations of thousands of our fellow-beings in this wealthy, Christian city."…

**What happened next …**

Not long after *How the Other Half Lives* was published, Riis made an important friend and ally in his mission to help the poor. In his autobiography, *Making of an American* (1901), Riis explained how future president Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919; served 1901–9), then the police commissioner of New York City, suddenly appeared in his life:

*It could not have been long after I wrote 'How the Other Half Lives' that he came to the Evening Sun office one day looking for me. I was out and he left his card merely writing on the back of it that he had read my book and had 'come to help.' That was all, and it tells the whole story of the man. I loved him from the day I first saw him; nor ever in all the years that have passed has he failed of the promise made then. No one ever helped as he did*.

Greatly moved by Riis's book, Roosevelt began to accompany him on many of his nightly journeys through the slums of New York. Roosevelt admired Riis, and when he became president he offered Riis government positions. Riis refused, however, claiming his work was in the city.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Riis's work had started to take effect and improvement began to occur. New Yorkers demanded action to renovate the city's slums. School playgrounds and boys' and girls' clubs were established. The city water was purified, which reduced epidemics of yellow fever, smallpox, and cholera. The police station lodging houses for the homeless were eliminated and more humane shelters were created. Riis helped force the destruction of overcrowded rear-tenements and demanded light for dark tenement hallways. One of the most notable victories in his career was the demolition of Mulberry Bend, the worst tenement block in the city, which was replaced by Mulberry Bend Park.

Riis continued to write and lecture frequently on the problems of the poor. He published over a dozen books and many articles. He died in Massachusetts at the age of sixty-five.

**Developments in Photography**

Jacob Riis lived in a time when the art of photography was beginning to grow. In 1871 the dry plate process was invented. In this method the basis of the photograph was an emulsion, or a suspended mix of silver salts, which formed a coating on a glass plate on which an image is captured as a negative. The dry plate process replaced portable darkrooms, which had been used in the past to develop negatives immediately after the picture was taken. This allowed a photographer to travel to take pictures, rather than the subjects having to come to him. By 1878 dry plates were being manufactured commercially, and in 1881 George Eastman (1854–1932) founded the Eastman Dry Plate Company. The company went on to develop flexible film so that photographic negatives would be less likely to break. By 1888 Eastman's company had developed roll film and immediately came out with a box camera already loaded with enough film for one hundred pictures that could be developed at its Rochester, New York, location. Eastman-Kodak became incorporated in 1892. It would eventually become the world's largest photography company and it still is today.

Riis was well-known by the time of his death, but his photography had been mostly forgotten. A collection of his photographs lay hidden in the attic of his family's home in Long Island for decades. In 1946 the photographs were found, restored, and placed on display in the Museum of the City of New York.

**Did you know …**

* Many of Riis's photographs were taken at night so he needed an artificial lighting system. His technique was still in the experimental stages, consisting of an open flash set against a frying pan. It did not always work well; he almost blinded himself once, and twice he set fire to the immediate surroundings while taking his pictures. On another occasion he set fire to his own clothes.
* Riis and photographer Lewis Hine (1874–1940) are credited with a style known as social reform photography. Both used the camera to document the problems of the poor and to try to bring about social changes.
* In his preface to Alland Alexander Sr.'s 1993 book, *Jacob A. Riis: Photographer and Citizen*, noted photographer Ansel Adams (1902–1984) praised Riis's work: "The factual and dated content of subject has definite historic importance, but the larger content lies in Riis's expression of people in misery, want and squalor. These people live again for you in the print—as intensely as when their images were captured on the old dry plates of ninety years ago…. I have thought much about this intense, living quality in Riis's work; I think I have an explanation of its compelling power. It is because in viewing those prints I find myself identified with the people photographed. I am walking in their alleys, standing in their rooms and sheds and workshops, looking in and out of their windows. And they in turn seem to be aware of me…."

**Consider the following …**

* Read the previous entry, Chapter 9, which contains the excerpt from William Graham Sumner's "The Concentration of Wealth: Its Economic Justification." Sumner believed that charity was to be avoided because it interfered with the natural social process in which the people best adapted to their environment succeeded and the weak lived in poverty or eventually died out. Riis disagreed with Sumner's theory. If he were talking to Sumner, what do you think his argument would have been?
* Look at the photographs by Riis in this chapter. Write down in detail what you see, what you particularly notice about each picture, and how it makes you feel.

**For More Information**

**Books**

Alexander, Alland Sr. *Jacob A. Riis: Photographer and Citizen*. New York: Aperture Book, 1993.

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Riis, Jacob. *Making of An American*. New York: Harper & Row, 1901.

**Periodicals**

"Work Among the Poor." *New York Times* 8 (10 April 1895): 4.