Jacob Riis

AMERICAN JOURNALIST

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**Alternative Title:** Jacob August Riis

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**Jacob Riis,**in full **Jacob August Riis** (born May 3, 1849, [Ribe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ribe-Denmark), [Denmark](https://www.britannica.com/place/Denmark)—died May 26, 1914, Barre, [Massachusetts](https://www.britannica.com/place/Massachusetts), U.S.), American newspaper reporter, social reformer, and photographer who, with his book *How the Other Half Lives*(1890), shocked the [conscience](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conscience) of his readers with factual descriptions of [slum](https://www.britannica.com/technology/slum) conditions in [New York City](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-York-City).

Riis immigrated to the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States) at the age of 21 and held various jobs, gaining a firsthand acquaintance with the ragged underside of city life. In 1873 he became a police reporter, assigned to New York City’s Lower East Side, where he found that in some tenements the infant [death rate](https://www.britannica.com/science/mortality-demography) was one in 10.

By the late 1880s, Riis had begun photographing the interiors and exteriors of New York slums with a [flash lamp](https://www.britannica.com/technology/flash-lamp). Those photos are early examples of flashbulb [photography](https://www.britannica.com/technology/photography). Riis used the images to dramatize his lectures and books, and the engravings of those photographs that were used in *How the Other Half Lives* helped to make the book popular. But it was Riis’s revelations and writing style that ensured a wide readership: his story, he wrote in the book’s introduction, “is dark enough, drawn from the plain public records, to send a chill to any heart.” [Theodore Roosevelt](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodore-Roosevelt), who would be elected U.S. president in 1900, responded personally to Riis: “I have read your book, and I have come to help.” The book’s success made Riis famous, and *How the Other Half Lives* stimulated the first significant New York legislation to curb tenement house evils. It also became an important predecessor to the [muckraking journalism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/muckraker) that took shape in the United States after 1900.

**Riis, Jacob: shelter for immigrants in a New York City tenement**

Shelter for immigrants in a New York City tenement, photograph by Jacob Riis, 1888.