

Biography

# Jacob Riis

## Champion of the Poor

by Sarah Wilcox



Mc  
Graw  
Hill

PAIRED  
READ

The Fight for Equality

## STRATEGIES & SKILLS

### Comprehension

**Strategy:** Reread

**Skill:** Author's Point of View

### Vocabulary Strategy

Synonyms and Antonyms

### Vocabulary

boycotts, encouragement,  
fulfill, injustice, mistreated,  
protest, qualified, register

### Content Standards

**Social Studies**

Civics and Government

Word Count: 1,004\*\*

**Photography Credit:** Bettmann/CORBIS

\*\*The total word count is based on words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in captions, labels, diagrams, charts, and sidebars are not included.



Essential Question

How can one person make a difference?

Jacob Riis
Champion
of the Poor

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## CHAPTER 1

# Beginnings



Jacob Riis (*REES*) **immigrated** to the United States in the 1870s. At this time, many people were arriving in New York City looking for a better life. Instead they had to live in dirty and overcrowded **slums**.

Riis knew what it was like to be poor and hungry. He wanted people to understand how hard life was for new immigrants.

Immigrants lived in crowded homes.



Riis became a reporter. He wrote about how hard life was for immigrants. He used photographs to tell their stories. Jacob Riis's stories and photos made a big difference.

Thousands of children lived in slums in New York City.



Jacob Riis was born in 1849 in Denmark. He learned English in school and then became a carpenter.

Riis met a young woman named Elisabeth Nielsen. He wanted to marry her one day, but her stepfather was against the idea. Riis could not find work, so he went to the United States. He was 21. He wanted to get a job and make some money. Then he could marry Elisabeth.

### From Denmark to the United States



Riis traveled to the United States by sea.

Riis arrived in New York City in 1870. He worked many jobs. He worked as a carpenter, miner, farmhand, and on the railroad. He wrote stories for magazines.

Sometimes Riis was mistreated by his employers. They paid him less than they had agreed to. Sometimes he didn't have any money to pay for food or a place to sleep.

After nearly three years, Riis was still poor. Would he ever make enough money to fulfill his dream of marrying Elisabeth?



There were many new immigrants in New York City like Riis. It was hard for them to find work. Many were not qualified for jobs that paid well. They had no money and had to live in cramped and dirty apartment buildings called tenements. Tenements were crowded. There might be 15 people living in one room. Many of the rooms were underground. There was no light or fresh air.



Immigrants lived in tenements like this one.

## MASS IMMIGRATION

From 1847 to 1930, huge numbers of people immigrated to the United States. Most came from Ireland, Germany and other countries in Europe.



Other immigrants lived under bridges or in sheds. Riis later wrote: “No pig would have been content to live in such a place.”

A very poor area in New York City was Five Points in Manhattan. It had overcrowded tenements and badly built sheds. Many people did not have work. They stole food to survive. Most of the children living there were too dirty and hungry to go to school.

**STOP AND CHECK**

What was life like in New York City for many immigrants?



Many people in the Five Points slum lived in sheds.

## CHAPTER 2

# A New Tool



In 1873, Riis began working as a reporter for the New York News Association. He wrote about the terrible **conditions** poor people lived in. He felt it was a terrible injustice.

Riis also wrote to Elisabeth and asked her to marry him. She said yes, and he went to Denmark for the wedding. He came back to New York with Elisabeth.



Jacob's wife Elisabeth poses with their first child Edward.

Back in New York City, Riis got a job as a police reporter for the *New York Tribune*. He wrote stories about life in the slums.

Riis believed that poor people committed crimes because of their living conditions. He needed more than words to convince readers that his stories about **poverty** were true.

In 1887, Riis read about a way to take photos in the dark. The photographer used a special powder to make a bright light. It was called flash photography.

Before this, it was only possible to take photos during the day. Riis thought that he could use flash photography to take pictures inside and on dark streets. Then he would be able to show what the slums were *really* like.

Riis bought a camera and a flash. He was one of the first reporters to use flash photography.

Flash photography was dangerous. Riis needed a person to help him light the flash powder. Once, the flash powder exploded in his face. He was wearing glasses, so his eyes were not hurt.

**STOP AND CHECK**

How did flash photography help Jacob Riis?



Riis used flash photography to take photos of children sleeping on the streets.

## TAKING A PHOTOGRAPH WITH FLASH POWDER

1. Riis put his camera on a tripod.
2. Then, he ground the two flash powders separately.
3. Next, he mixed the powders together.
4. Then, he threw a match on the flash powder. He had to be careful not to get too close!
5. Finally, Riis took the photo. The flash lit up the scene.

Sometimes photographers didn't grind the powders separately. This could cause an explosion or a fire.



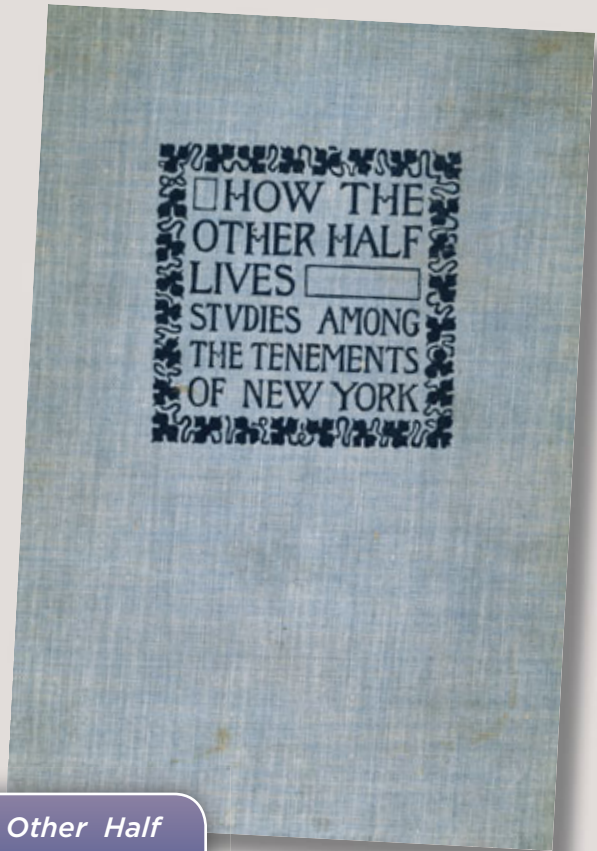
Flash powder let photographers take photographs inside for the first time.

# Cleaning Up the Slums



Riis's photos were printed with his stories in newspapers. The photos shocked people. He also showed his photos during the lectures, or talks, he gave. He talked about how immigrants needed better places to live and parks to visit.

In 1890, Riis published a book called *How the Other Half Lives*. It had photos that showed what the slums were really like.



Riis's book *How the Other Half Lives* was very popular.





Riis took this photo that showed men sleeping on the floor.

Riis's book was read by the future president, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was a big encouragement to Riis. They became friends.

*How the Other Half Lives* also encouraged the city council to improve living conditions for the poor. The city began to clean up the Five Points slum in Manhattan.

It took 14 years to tear down the Five Points slum. Riis's work helped win that battle.

Jacob Riis died in 1914. Jacob Riis Park in New York City is a memorial to him. There is also a school and a playground named in his memory.

**STOP AND CHECK**

What important things did Jacob Riis accomplish?



People enjoy the beach at Jacob Riis Park.

## THE LIFE OF JACOB RIIS

- 1849: Riis is born in Ribe, Denmark.
- 1870: Riis immigrates to the United States.
- 1876: Riis marries Elisabeth Nielsen.
- 1877: Riis begins working as a newspaper reporter.
- 1888: Riis first uses flash photography.
- 1890: Riis publishes the book *How the Other Half Lives*.
- 1914: Riis dies.



# Respond to Reading

## Summarize

Summarize how Jacob Riis used journalism to help the poor. Use your graphic organizer to help.

Details

↓

Author's Point of View
------------------------

## Text Evidence

1. What kind of text is *Jacob Riis: Champion of the Poor*? What text features tell you that?

**GENRE**

2. What does the author want you to learn from Jacob Riis's life? **AUTHOR'S POINT OF VIEW**

3. What is a synonym for the word *cramped* on page 6? **SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS**

4. Does the author think that Jacob Riis made a difference? Write about the author's point of view using details from the text to support your answer. **WRITE ABOUT READING**

**Compare Texts**

Read about how a young girl made a difference in her community.

# The Fight for Equality



Sylvia Mendez grew up in California in the 1940s. Non-white children were not allowed to go to the same schools as white children then.

## Access Denied

When Sylvia was eight years old, her parents tried to register her at a school for white children. Sylvia's father was from Mexico, and her mother was from Puerto Rico, so she wasn't allowed to go to the school. The school for non-white children was older and farther away than the white school.

## Victory in California

Sylvia's parents thought that Sylvia should be able to go to the white school. Her parents and the community protested. They sued the school districts and won. Sylvia had to speak in court to show that she could speak English.

After this, California was the first state to end **segregation** in schools in 1947. Soon people in other states began to protest against segregation. They held boycotts. By 1969, children no longer went to different schools because of their race.



These people are protesting against school segregation.

## Life After School

Sylvia went to the school for white children. Sometimes she was teased and called names. But she studied hard.

Today Sylvia Mendez speaks at schools about education. She encourages students to study.

In 2011, Mendez was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The medal is for her work for **civil rights**. It is given to people who make the United States or the world a better place.



President Barack Obama presents Sylvia with her medal.

Martin H. Simon/CORBIS



### Make Connections

How did Sylvia Mendez make a difference?

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Jacob Riis and Sylvia Mendez both made a difference in their communities. How are they the same? How are they different? **TEXT TO TEXT**

# Glossary

**civil rights** (*SIH-vuhl rights*) the rights of people no matter what their race is (**page 18**)

**conditions** (*kuhn-DI-shuhnz*) environments or surroundings (**page 8**)

**immigrated** (*l-muh-grayt-id*) moved to a new country (**page 2**)

**poverty** (*PAH-vuhr-tee*) the state of being poor (**page 9**)

**segregation** (*SE-gri-gayt-shuhn*) separating by race (**page 17**)

**slums** (*sluhmz*) the run-down areas of a city, inhabited by poor people (**page 2**)

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# Focus on Social Studies

**Purpose** To show how kids can make a difference in their communities

## Procedure

**Step 1** With a partner or a small group, brainstorm things in your community that you would like to change.

.....

**Step 2** Choose the one you would most like to do something about.

.....

**Step 3** Make a plan. What are you going to do? How will you do it? Who is going to do what? Do you need help?

.....

**Step 4** Share your plan with the rest of the class.

## Literature Circles

### Nonfiction

# Thinkmark

### **The Topic**

What is *Jacob Riis: Champion of the Poor* mostly about?

### **Text Structure**

What two things did Jacob Riis do to help the poor?

### **Vocabulary**

What new words did you learn in the text?  
What helped you understand what they meant?

### **Author's Purpose**

Why do you think the author wrote *Jacob Riis: Champion of the Poor*?

### **Conclusions**

What conclusions can you make about people who make a difference?