

How the Other Half Lives  
The Man Who Changed It All

Andrew Montes, Brian Lu, Zachary Gao

Group Website

Senior Division

Word Count: 379

### Process Paper:

Our main objective when searching for project topics was to find one where someone demonstrated cared enough for others to step in and do something about it. We wanted to do something in New York City as it would also make it much easier to do research instead of an event that happened elsewhere. We focused on housing, as it is one of the most controversial parts of living in NYC, being significantly higher than other parts of the US. Our deciding factor for choosing Jacob Riis' publication of "How The Other Half Lives" was how he not only partook in reforming NYC but also how the book had a huge impact on the US in general, setting a precedent for muckraking corruption and corporate monopolies.

To research the impact of the publication, we went through multiple archives such as "The Library Of Congress", "New York Times Historical", and "JSTOR". This allowed us to gain access to specific primary sources like autobiographies and outdated laws. We also went through some archived newspapers, videos, magazines and anything that depicted or mentioned the old tenement homes in some way. We then borrowed the book by Jacob Riis to gain a better understanding of how disturbing the living conditions were and how people would have reacted at the time.

We decided to make a website because it would allow us to easily display the information we wanted to convey while also allowing for access to online sources to be used directly in our project. Through the website we can divide the major parts of the story in chronological order and allow the user to experience the website as they please. The design of the website's visuals was chosen to resemble a newspaper because we believed that Jacob Riis' own work took the public by storm and garnered widespread media coverage.

Jacob Riis took on the responsibility of exposing injustices in society and by doing so, defended the civil rights of those living in tenement housing. His publication has left a massive impact on society, instilling laws and limitations on housing. Riis was responsible for improving living conditions and although there might still be houses that violate code, the severity of which is rarely as great as it was in the mid 1800s.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

### **Primary Sources**

Curtis, Hannah. Letter, c. 1847. Historical Society Of Pennsylvania (7340).

<https://hsp.org/education/primary-sources/letter-hannah-curtis-to-john-curtis-april-21-1847>

This letter on the Irish Potato Famine was used as an explanation as to why there was an influx of immigrants during the late 1800s. We used this document to better understand that the increased immigration was partially to flee from famine, warfare and other life threatening situations, which in part increased tenements housing as more people were coming in.

Dickens, Charles. American Notes for General Circulation. London: Chapman and Hall, 1842. Library of Congress (26779).

<https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/gdc/lhbtn/26779/26779.pdf>

This source was useful because it provided us with a first hand account from someone that had been inside the tenements. We used this travelogue to better understand what it was like for an outsider to experience the suffocating conditions people faced in these homes.

Fryer, William John. "The Tenement House Law of the City of New York, with Headings, Paragraphs, Marginal Notes and Full Indexes." 1901. Internet Archive.

<https://archive.org/details/tenementhouselaw00fryerich/page/2/mode/2up>.

This lawbook on the Tenement House Act of 1901 was used because we can see how the publication of "How The Other Half Lives" drew public attention to the problem of NY tenement housing. We used this source to better understand the after effects on this issue, with the newly passed laws showing the influence the book had.

Goater, John H. Know-Nothing. 1850. Illustration. Granger (0009144).

<https://www.granger.com/results.asp?image=0009144&itemw=4&itemf=0002&itemstep=1&itemx=2>.

This cartoon was used to give an insight on public opinions towards immigrants during the wave of migration of Irish and German migrants. This cartoon depicts the Irish and Germans as uneducated and unfit to vote.

Hunt, Richard M. William K. and Alva S. Vanderbilt Mansion, 660 Fifth Avenue, New York City. New York, ca. 1885. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017648600/>.

We used this source to better understand the wealth disparity between the lower classes living in the tenements and the affluent upper class, who lived in grandeur mansions not far from the tenements.

Keppler, Joseph. 1889. "The Bosses of the Senate." January 23, 1889. Illustration. U.S. Senate. [https://www.senate.gov/art-artifacts/historical-images/political-cartoons-caricatures/38\\_00392.htm](https://www.senate.gov/art-artifacts/historical-images/political-cartoons-caricatures/38_00392.htm).

This political cartoon depicts the senate room with huge people behind them with names on their shirts. We used this image to better understand the sources of wealth inequalities during the gilded age as the cartoon implies that it's the rich people with monopolies on certain industrial sectors that are the ones truly deciding on laws.

Kunna, J. J., Aileen Eleanor MacGeorge, and Eileen Eleanor MacGeorge. "Immigration." Monthly Labor Review 22, no. 2 (1926): 232–52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41860124>.

This primary article on immigration in 1926 showcased the large growing number of immigrants being received in the U.S., but especially in port cities like New York City. We used this information to help us understand the topic of tenements by seeing that as more and more people come into the country, a need for better and greater housing to house this growing population will be needed, and so the already created tenements will need to change.

Ladies of the Five Points Mission. The Old Brewery: and the New Mission House at the Five Points. History of Women. New York, NY: Stringer & Townsend, 1854. PDF e-book. <https://books.google.com/books?id=-2sEAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

This book reveals a personal experience with Irish immigrants living in the Five Points slums and the harsh living conditions they had to face due to their poverty. This source was useful because the book's authors are on a mission to improve the conditions of the people living in the Five Points slums, suggesting that there were some smaller organizations willing to lend a hand to those living in slums.

Maguire, John Francis. The Irish in America. 4th ed. New York, NY: Longmans, Green, 1868. PDF e-Book. Retrieved from [https://books.google.com/books?id=sW13DTfZ-ToC&source=gbp\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.com/books?id=sW13DTfZ-ToC&source=gbp_navlinks_s).

This source was used because it provides not only an account of the hardships which Irish immigrants faced but also their lasting contributions to American society despite discrimination. This source helped us better understand the effects of immigrant populations on American society.

New York (N.Y.). Tenement House Department. Man in Kitchen—Bedroom with Dishes, Clothes, Irons. 1904. Photograph. The New York Public Library (AZ 07-299).  
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e4-3217-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

This image is useful because it gives a look into the interiors of one of the tenement houses in NYC's slums. The image was used to give a visual on the unsanitary and inadequate conditions of a tenement house.

New York Times. "Tenement Houses." Our City's Condition. New York City, NY, June 12, 1865. The New York Times.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1865/06/12/archives/our-citys-condition-the-tenement-houses-and-their-inhabitants-frail.html>

This primary resource describes the condition of the city and the conditions that people had to live in, extreme overcrowding, insufficient ventilation, and horrible sanitation facilities that left people vulnerable to sickness. This shows the problems faced by people living in the tenements with poverty that prohibited people from actually growing, and with this report the government was still to really handle the problem.

Pintard, John. Letters From John Pintard to His Daughter. New York, NY: New York Historical Society, 1940. Internet Archive.  
[Letters from John Pintard to his daughter, Eliza Noel Pintard Davidson, 1816-1833 : Pintard, John, 1759-1844 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

This source was useful as it showed us another perspective that people had on the tenement situation. We used these letters to gather insight from a person that looked down on the lower class, which was more in line with how people viewed the people of the slums before the book's publication.

Riis, Jacob August. A Row of Houses in the Five Points Neighborhood of Manhattan. 1879. Photograph. Wikipedia.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Five\\_Points\\_New\\_York\\_City\\_C.1879.gif](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Five_Points_New_York_City_C.1879.gif).

This image was used to give a visual on one of the most prominent and densely-populated slums of NYC, the Five Points slum. It shows the dank, crowded row of houses stereotypical of a slum at the time.

Riis, Jacob August. *How the Other Half Lives*. 1932. Reprint, New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1890. Internet Archive.

[https://archive.org/details/howotherhalflive00riis\\_0/page/2/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/howotherhalflive00riis_0/page/2/mode/2up)

This is the book released by Jacob Riis that described the horrible living and sanitary conditions that many immigrants and low income families had to live through to even be able to live in the growing city of New York. With this book Riis brought attention to the conditions these people lived through to audiences, especially the government officials of the city, that they had to change their way of dealing with the growing population and how people were treated.

Riis, Jacob August. *Lodgers in Bayard Street Tenement, Five Cents a Spot*. 1889. Photograph. MoMA. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/51194>

This photograph depicts a group of immigrants living inside of the tenements houses, they appear dirty and cramped inside of the deteriorating living space. This helps us understand our topic by showing how unsanitary and unhygienic the housing was and a lot of immigrants like those shown had to live inside.

Riis, Jacob August. *Out of Mulberry Street*. New York, The Century co., 1898. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/outofmulberrystr00riis>

We used this source to get a better view on what Mulberry Bend looked like at the time Riis published his book. This helped us contrast with an image of Mulberry Bend in the present day.

Rockwood, George Gardner. Lincoln Steffens, American Muckraking Journalist. May 1894. Photograph. University of California.

<https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf696nb55m/?layout=metadata&brand=calisphere>.

This photo depicts a famous muckraker, Lincoln Steffens, who was influenced by the work of Jacob Riis to advocate for changes in the American government to care more for the population and the people.

Roosevelt, Theodore. "Annual Message to Congress (1904)." Speech, 58th Cong., 3rd sess., Congressional Record 39, Senate and House of Representatives, Washington D.C., Washington, D.C., December 6, 1904.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/fourth-annual-message-15>

During the speech, former President Theodore Roosevelt addresses the slums in America, particularly those in Washington, New York, and Chicago (among many others) and brings up the high mortality rates of infants living in the cramped, unsanitary tenement houses. This source demonstrates a response to Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, showing the initial changes which the exposing of living conditions brought.

Spauster, Patrick. "Housing Violations in NYC Jumped 24% This Year. We Mapped Them by Neighborhood." City Limits. Last modified October 16, 2024. Accessed November 7, 2024.

<https://citylimits.org/2024/10/16/housing-violations-in-nyc-jumped-24-this-year-we-mapped-them-by-neighborhood/>.

This source was used to list out various recent violations in housing code in New York City and the city's increased enforcement of the housing code. This source showed the willingness of the state to cut down on improper housing in the past year by enforcing laws which Jacob Riis helped bring about.

Steffens, Lincoln. *The Shame of the Cities*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2004. Google Books.

[https://books.google.com/books/about/The\\_Shame\\_of\\_the\\_Cities.html?id=CLSEXRHKzPoC](https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Shame_of_the_Cities.html?id=CLSEXRHKzPoC).

This source was useful because it showed the rising prevalence of muckraker journalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This book specifically addresses government policies that harm poor populations, demonstrating the impact of Jacob Riis' book.

The Condition of the Laboring Man at Pullman. 1894. Illustration.

<https://gompers.umd.edu/Pullman%20Cartoon.htm>.

This political cartoon depicting a guy named "Pullman" crushing an employee was used as it demonstrates the conditions of the working class during the gilded age. We used this image to better understand how during this time, the rich often exploited their employees and other middle to lower class people with low wages and high rent.

The Departure. July 6, 1850. Illustration. Cashman History.

<https://cashmanhistory.com/showmedia.php?mediaID=25364&medialinkID=60620&sitever=standard>



This illustration depicting a huge crowd of people boarding a ship was used as it depicts the sheer number of people immigrating or moving away from their homeland. We used this image to understand the vast amount of people immigrating to America and why urban areas like NYC failed to keep up.

The Evening Tribune. 1904 State of the Union Address-Teddy Roosevelt. December 6, 1904. Photograph. RareNewspapers. <https://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/676241>.

This image was used to show the publicity of President Theodore Roosevelt's 1904 State of the Union Address. It gave us a primary view on the newspaper and what was written on it with contemporary writing and opinions.

Riis, Jacob. The Making of an American. New York: Macmillan, 1928. Retrieved from [https://archive.org/details/makingofamerican0000jaco\\_v7c0/page/18/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/makingofamerican0000jaco_v7c0/page/18/mode/2up)

This book was used to better understand the process by which Jacob Riis gathered his images and empathized with the people of the slums in NYC. This helped us better understand the impact of Riis and his credibility as a photojournalist-activist.

Riis, Jacob. "Children's Playground in Poverty Gap". Photograph. 1889. International Center of Photography. <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/childrens-playground-in-poverty-gap>

This photograph depicts a child on a barren field implied to be a playground with nothing but a wheelbarrow to play with. This gives an insight to how the people living in the slums had limited access to recreational activities and the destitute conditions which the children of the slums lived in.

Riis, Jacob. "Slept in that cellar four years". Photograph. 1890. Museum of the City of New York. <https://collections.mcny.org/Explore/Highlights/Jacob%20A.%20Riis/>

This image was useful as it gave an example of the conditions which people living in the slums had to face even when trying to sleep. The image's title implies that these people were trapped in this lifestyle, further exasperating the harsh conditions of the households.

## Secondary Sources

Apmann, Sarah Bean. 2016. "Tenement House Act of 1901." Village Preservation. April 11, 2016. <https://www.villagepreservation.org/2016/04/11/tenement-house-act-of-1901/>.

This post on the after effects of the Tenement House Act of 1901 was used to better understand the positive and negative impacts of the law being passed. We used this source to discover that the Tenement House Act inadvertently raised rent prices as they limited the amount of people that could live in a single tenement house

Battman Studios. Levine\_Kitchen\_c.Battman\_Studios.jpg. Photograph. Pottermore.com. [https://images.ctfassets.net/bxd3o8b291gf/3WQOBdEjEAokIMICMoQUO4/64014144f08d7bf9beadf469d8c3ec2e/Levine\\_Kitchen\\_c.Battman\\_Studios.jpg](https://images.ctfassets.net/bxd3o8b291gf/3WQOBdEjEAokIMICMoQUO4/64014144f08d7bf9beadf469d8c3ec2e/Levine_Kitchen_c.Battman_Studios.jpg).

This image was used to show the modern-day condition of a tenement house. This source was useful because it shows that some of the houses were preserved for public viewing as a historical relic.

"Columbus Park." NYC Parks. Accessed May 10, 2025. <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/columbus-park-m015/history>

We used this source to better understand the history of one of the areas concentrated with tenements in New York. This source was helpful as it provided another perspective on the reconstruction of Mulberry Bend.

German Historical Institute. "Number of German and Irish Immigrants, 1820-1900." Chart. Immigrant Entrepreneurship, April 12, 2018. Accessed December 2, 2024. <http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org/images/number-of-german-and-irish-immigrants-1820-1900/>.

This graph depicts the number of German and Irish Immigrants coming into the United States 1820-1900 with an especially massive growth after the Potato Famine and after the Revolutions of 1848. This helped us understand the growth of the immigrant population coming into the United States and how much the US, especially NY is dealing with this growing population, it lets us know where this massive influx of people came from.

Harrington, Michael. The Other America: Poverty in the United States. White Plains, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/otheramerica00mich>

We used this source to better understand the prolonged effects of Jacob Riis' book, *How the Other Half Lives*—particularly how it inspired other works with the purpose of exposing injustices in society.

Johnson, Lyndon Baines. "Special Message to the Congress: America's Unfinished Business, Urban and Rural Poverty." Address, University of Michigan, University of Michigan, Ann Harbor, MI, March 14, 1967.  
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-americas-unfinished-business-urban-and-rural-poverty>

This speech by President Lyndon B. Johnson addresses the lasting issue of poverty in the United States while also mentioning the legacy of the actions of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt and Jacob Riis. This source was useful as it mentions Riis and his legacy and the various programs and organizations, such as The Children's Bureau and The Economic Opportunity Act of 1967, dedicated to improving living conditions. This shows that the government is actively addressing the issue of poverty.

Johnson, Steven. "Light". Video file, 50:40. PBS. 2014.  
<https://www.pbs.org/video/how-we-got-now-lightep/>

We used this video to better understand the process by which Jacob Riis used flash photography to capture the dim, dark, and uninhabitable conditions of the tenements.

Spargo, John. *The Bitter Cry of the Children*. New York, NY: Garrett Press, 1970. EPUB.  
Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/57125/pg57125-images.html>.

This book was used because it was written by a muckraking journalist, John Spargo, who was a part of the Progressive Movement. This source was useful because it contributed to the passing of child labor laws in America that restricted it to people over the age of 16.

Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation. "The Statue of Liberty." Last modified March 4, 2020. <https://www.statueofliberty.org/ellis-island/overview-history/>.

This website on the history of Ellis Island was used because it provided a brief explanation of immigration during this time period. We used this source to better understand the causes of the influx of people that led to the improper housing situation.

Strahan, Derek. "Mulberry Bend, New York City." *Lost New England*. Last modified June 2, 2014. Accessed May 10, 2025.  
<https://lostnewengland.com/2014/06/mulberry-bend-new-york-city/>

We used this source to have a better contrast of how Mulberry Bend was like before and after Riis's influence. This source was helpful because it provided more clarity on what changes were enacted as a result of Riis's publication.

Hine, Lewis. Self-portrait of Lewis Hine. Gelatin silver print. 1930. Eastman Museum.  
[http://www.geh.org/fm/lwhprints/htmlsrc2/m197810590046\\_ful.html](http://www.geh.org/fm/lwhprints/htmlsrc2/m197810590046_ful.html)

This portrait of Lewis Hine was used to give a visual on one of the famous photojournalists of the twentieth century which Riis helped propel the rise of. We used this source also to better understand the extent and legacy of Riis' impact on the public sphere.

"Jacob Riis." 2015. The Library of Congress. 2015.  
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a08818/>.

This photo was used to better visualize Jacob Riis. We used this photo to help the audience place a face to a name that our entire project was based on.