

Document A

Riis took this photograph in a dark, windowless tenement in 1890. The men and women in the photograph did not know they were going to be photographed and were surprised when he discharged a bright flash to take the photo. In his notes, Riis reported that the 13-foot room, "slept twelve men and women, two or three in bunks set in a sort of alcove, the rest on the floor."



Title: *Five cents a spot - unauthorized immigration lodgings in a Bayard Street tenement*

Location: New York City

Date: 1890

Photographer: Jacob Riis

Document B

This photograph was taken in Mulberry Bend, one of the most dangerous areas of the notorious Five Points neighborhood in New York City. The image shows a man sitting in front of a dilapidated shack. Riis reported that he paid the man 10 cents to sit for the portrait.



Title: *Tramp in Mulberry Street Yard*

Location: New York City

Date: 1887-1888

Photographer: Jacob Riis

Document C

This image shows an Italian immigrant and her baby sitting in their windowless one-room tenement. The room contains all their possessions, including a rolled-up mattress and a pallet (to her right) that likely served as their bed.



Title: *Italian Mother and Her Baby in Jersey Street*
Location: New York City
Date: 1888-1889
Photographer: Jacob Riis

Document D

This passage is from Riis's influential book, How the Other Half Lives. The section is excerpted from a chapter that discusses Italian immigrants and their living conditions.

The Italian comes in at the bottom, and in the generation that came over the sea he stays there. In the slums he is welcomed as a tenant who "makes less trouble" than the contentious Irishman or the order-loving German, that is to say: is content to live in a pig-sty and submits to robbery at the hands of the rent-collector without murmur. . . .

Ordinarily he is easily enough governed by authority—always excepting Sunday, when he settles down to a game of cards and lets loose all his bad passions. Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler. His soul is in the game from the moment the cards are on the table, and very frequently his knife is in it too before the game is ended.

Source: *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob Riis, 1890.

Guiding Questions

1. What does each photograph suggest about what life was like in the tenements of New York City in the late 19th century?

Document A

Document B

Document C

2. What other evidence might you want to see if you wanted to determine whether these photographs were an accurate representation of life in the tenements?

3. When evaluating whether a historical photograph is useful as evidence, historians consider various questions, including:
- When and where was the photograph taken?
 - Who took the photograph? What was their perspective on the events or people being photographed, and how might that have influenced what they chose to shoot?
 - Why was the photograph taken? Might the photographer have wanted to portray a scene in a particular way?
 - Under what circumstances was the photograph taken? How might these circumstances have limited or enabled what the photographer captured?
 - What technology did the photographer use, and how might that have influenced the image created?

Considering the questions above, why might Riis's photographs be useful evidence about life in New York's tenements?

Considering the questions above, what about the photographs might cause you to question whether they are useful evidence about life in New York's tenements?

4. Riis used the image in Document B in his popular slideshow presentation. In his lecture notes, Riis wrote, “On one of my visits to ‘the Bend’ I came across this fellow sitting . . . and he struck me as being such a typical tramp that I asked him to sit still for a minute and I would give him ten cents. That was probably the first and only ten cents that man had earned by honest labor in the course of his life and that was by sitting down at which he was an undoubted expert.”

What was Riis’s attitude toward the man in the picture?

Does this affect whether Document B is good evidence of life in the tenements? Why or why not?

5. What does Document D reveal about Riis’s attitudes towards Italian immigrants?

Does this passage affect whether Riis’s photographs are good evidence of life in the tenements? Why or why not?

Lecture Notes: Jacob Riis

Immigration & Urbanization (1880-1920)

Immigration to the United States changed significantly in the late 19th century. Until the 1880s, most immigrants to the United States came from Northern and Western Europe and were Protestant Christians. This changed in the early 1880s, with large numbers of Catholic and Jewish immigrants arriving from Southern and Eastern Europe. New immigrants were also more likely to settle in the cities than earlier generations of immigrants, who tended to settle in more rural areas.

Not only were new immigrants settling in urban areas, many Americans were also moving from the country to cities in search of economic opportunities. The large numbers of new arrivals caused American cities to grow rapidly in the late 19th century, and high demand for housing meant that there were few good options for new arrivals.

Tenements

Many poor immigrants settled in tenements, which were small apartments that often had only one room. Life in the tenements was different from city to city (and from building to building), but they were often dirty and crowded. The tenements of New York City were known for their especially bad conditions. Single rooms often housed multiple families and did not have private bathrooms. Many tenements also lacked running water and electricity, and some did not have windows for ventilation or light. These conditions had serious consequences for residents. Tenement dwellers in New York suffered from much higher rates of infectious diseases, infant mortality, and crime than those living in wealthier parts of the city.

Jacob Riis

Jacob Riis came to the United States from Denmark in 1870, when he was 20 years old. He arrived in New York City nearly penniless and worked a variety of jobs before entering the newspaper business. In 1877, Riis took a job as a police reporter for the *New York Tribune*. As part of his job, he would follow the police into some of New York City's poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods, which showed him what life was like in the tenements. His experiences convinced him that something needed to be done to improve the living conditions of the poor, and he supported efforts to change the city's housing laws and policies.

Riis & Flash Photography

In 1887, Riis learned that German inventors had created a new type of "flashlight powder," which could be used to photograph dark spaces. The flash powder was ignited with a spark, sending a cloud of fire and sparks into the air that would light a space long enough to take a picture. Riis decided to use this invention to photograph the dark interiors of the tenements and the alleyways that surrounded them. Over the next decade, Riis took hundreds of photographs of New York's poorest neighborhoods. Some of Riis's photographs were posed, with the participants sitting for portraits. Others were candid, with his subjects unaware that they were being photographed. Riis would

sometimes enter tenements and surprise those inside with a blinding flash, running away before they knew what had happened.

The photograph in this slide shows a family of Eastern European immigrants in their one-room tenement. The room served as both their home and work place. Riis reported that members of this family worked 17 hours a day, seven days a week making cigars in the room, and that the cramped space reeked of toxic fumes.

Riis & Advocacy for the Poor

Riis hoped to use his photographs to convince others to support housing reform. In 1888, he created a slideshow lecture that included about one hundred images on glass slides. He showed the images with a “magic lantern,” an early projector. Riis narrated the slides as he showed them, and he was an excellent story teller. His presentation received rave reviews, and his lecture was soon in high demand. In the coming years, Riis would travel across the country delivering the lecture.

Riis chose powerful images for his slideshow. His pictures would have been troubling to his middle-class audiences, few of whom had seen urban poverty up close. The photograph on this slide is titled “Bandit’s Roost.” It shows an alley between tenement buildings in Mulberry Bend, one of the city’s most dangerous neighborhoods. On the left is a young mother with her children. On the right is a group of “toughs” staring at the camera.

How the Other Half Lives.

In 1889, an editor from a well-known magazine called *Scribner’s* attended Riis’s lecture and offered him \$150 to write an article for his magazine. The article eventually led to a book deal in 1890 for *How the Other Half Lives*. In this influential book, Riis described the conditions in the tenements and the lifestyles of poor immigrants who lived in New York’s poorest slums. Riis also argued that the problems of the poor were caused by bad housing conditions and not hereditary. Riis believed that urban poverty could be fixed with better housing conditions and good government policies.

How the Other Half Lives was widely read and influenced the Progressive Era movement for more effective urban government and better housing for the poor. Riis’s groundbreaking work also served as an inspiration for generations of progressive photographers and journalists who have promoted change and advocated for the poor.

Central Historical Question

Today we are going to analyze four photographs by Jacob Riis that portray poor immigrants living in New York City from 1887-1892 and answer the question: What were conditions like in New York City tenements in the late 19th century?