

Jacob Riis

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Jacob Riis, a police reporter whose work appeared in several New York newspapers, documented the living and working conditions of the poor. Through articles, books, photography, and lantern-slide lectures, Riis served as a mediator between working-class, middle-class, and upper-class citizens.

Improving City Conditions

Riis argued for better housing, adequate lighting and sanitation, and the construction of city parks and playgrounds. He portrayed middle-class and upper-class citizens as benefactors and encouraged them to take an active role in defining and shaping their communities. Riis believed that charitable citizens would help the poor when they saw for themselves how "the other half" lived.

According to historian Robert Bremner:

"The reformers' problem was to rouse the public from its lethargy, make consciences uneasy, and stir genial good will into enthusiasm for social betterment. Their first step was to lay bare the responsibility of the community for needless suffering."

Nurture, Not Nature

Critics of charities argued that poverty was the result of individual or moral weakness; therefore, the poor could not be helped through charitable donations. Gilded Age reformers like Riis believed that poverty was the result of environmental conditions; thus, reform efforts could help the poor.

Speaking at an 1895 lecture at the Labors of the Tenement House Chapter of the King's Daughters, Riis stated:

"The reason charity has been discredited is because it has worked with the broken fragments, the drunken and the shiftless, helping as it could, mourning that such things must be, but never asking the reason why or knowing anything of the honest, thrifty poor who live lives of heroism such as we cannot live."

Riis believed that moral citizens, regardless of their economic status, should be given a chance to improve their lives. Like Riis himself, given that chance, many could rise out of poverty and into the ranks of the middle class.

Riis chose to work with middle-class and upper-class philanthropists to bring about reform. He believed that private wealth could help transform the slums into better places to live. "I am a believer in organized, systematic charity upon the evidence of my senses," Riis wrote in his autobiography.