

Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York's Other Half

Introduction to Lesson Plans

The Frederick A.O. Schwarz Children's Center at the Museum of the City of New York serves tens of thousands of children and adults each year through fieldtrips, out-of-school time programs, family programs, and professional learning opportunities. Additionally, the Schwarz Children's Center creates pre- and post-visit materials for teachers to use in their classrooms. This packet contains lesson plans to accompany the *Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York's Other Half* exhibition and includes vocabulary lists, images of sources, document based questions, activities, and a bibliography for further research. These lesson plans are also available online at <http://www.mcny.org/content/educators-guides> and many of the featured images can be downloaded from the Museum's digital archive. To view these and other images from the Museum's Jacob Riis collection visit <http://www.mcny.org/collections> and click on Collections Portal.

While these lesson plans are intended to stand alone as resource for classroom use, teachers may opt to bring their students to the City Museum to visit the *Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York's Other Half* exhibition through March 20, 2016. The Schwarz Children's Center offers a 60-minute tour of the exhibition that showcases Riis as a pioneering newspaper reporter and social reformer, and reunites Riis's photographs from the collection of the Museum of the City of New York, with his archive, which belongs to the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library. During the fieldtrip, students will analyze his photographs and prose, in the format in which they were seen, and write a short editorial about housing reform.

To register for the *Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York's Other Half* fieldtrip, or learn about professional learning opportunities for teachers, visit www.mcny.org/education or email schoolprograms@mcny.org.

Historical Overview

Between 1870 and 1900, three-quarters of the 12 million immigrants who came to the United States settled in New York. Like generations before them, the newcomers—largely from Eastern and Southern Europe—arrived hoping to improve their lives and those of their children. Instead, many of them found themselves living amidst unprecedented urban squalor in the crowded tenements of the Lower East Side.

Their struggles remained generally invisible to the larger society until newspaper reporter Jacob August Riis (1849-1914), himself an immigrant from Denmark, began documenting the appalling conditions of the city's slums in the 1880s. He rose to national prominence with his 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives*, in which he exposed the nature of tenement life in New

York, riveting the attention of the nation and earning a reputation as the country's leading social reformer.

Jacob A. Riis was a skilled and resourceful communicator: his success as an agent of reform derived not only from his passion and actions, but from his innovative use of the media of his time. Indeed, Riis is remembered today as much for his revolutionary photographs as for his writings. Ironically, he did not consider himself a photographer and did not see any intrinsic value in his images beyond their immediate use in illustrating his words. But the images made an indelible mark on his audiences. *Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York's Other Half* presents these unforgettable photographs in the context of Riis's lectures and publications and exposes the methods by which a media-savvy journalist became a national force in social reform.