

Main idea of how the other half lives

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



Jacob Riis' photography was revolutionary in his time for portraying a side of life not many people see. With the exception of people actually experiencing and living in it, most of the country was very ignorant about slums and poverty in America. While words on a piece of paper can do a relatively good job creating a vivid picture in your head, nothing compares to actually seeing the real thing with your own eyes. Therefore, I do not believe he would've been able to capture the hearts and sympathies of others without showing the cold, hard truth some Americans were faced with at the time.

How the Other Half Lives by Jacob Riis was a publication of photojournalism. It showed the horrendous and unsafe living conditions in New York slums during the 1880s. He also paved the way for future muckraking journalism by exposing these unseen truths of the slums. Before Riis people either turned a blind eye to what they saw or simply were unaware because no one else was talking about it. For the most part, middle and upper class societies were unaware of how bad living conditions were for poor immigrants. Many people were living in tight spaces with far too many occupants. About 10% of these apartments had plumbing in them, which pales in comparison to what ideally would be safe for these apartments. Obviously with so many people squeezed together and with no proper plumbing system, diseases spread like wildfire. Overall, it seemed like no one cared and nothing was going to be done to improve the way of life for the lower class.

Riis ended up leaving the Tribune because he felt like he wasn't getting the reaction he wanted and not much change was coming from his reporting. At its worst the Lower East Side's population density was greater than any neighborhood in the world with 335, 000 people per square mile which is

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staggering to even think about. He went on to write *How the Other Half Lives* and was able to show an even more narrowing truth with the addition of individual stories accompanied by his photographs. Riis, rightly so, felt that if he showed photographs, which is a truth that cannot be bargained with, corrupt politicians could not weasel their way out of the situation and would be forced to take action. And at that time cameras and photographs were not as widely seen as we see them today, so a picture was viewed as almost equal to the real thing. Some could even say his photography was “artless” because he did not wish to capture aesthetics or images pleasing to the eye, rather the cold hard truth as it looked like through his eyes.

It would have been impossible for Riis to garner the reaction he did of poor living conditions in New York with the absence of photography. People see words on a piece of paper and are inclined to make their own judgements regarding it. You can choose to believe what you want too and even if you do believe the words, it doesn't quite resonate as well as a photo. After all, you can be thousands of miles away and see a photograph of a place you've never been too or never even heard of, and you can have a sense of what it is like to live there. Especially looking beyond the exterior of what you see at first glance, and going a little deeper to the little things hidden in the background. Riis was a revolutionary guy for his time and exposed the hidden truths that people were unaware of.