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### **Interview Transcript**

#### **1.) What legacy did Jacob Riis leave and how is it significant to modern day New York?**

Jacob Riis shone a spotlight on poverty in cities, so that people who were not poor themselves could no longer pretend it didn't exist, and furthermore made them acknowledge that poverty was a matter of complex circumstance, not the result of moral failings. More practically, he drew attention to the appalling conditions of housing, sanitation, and the care and education of children, as well as the lack of green spaces in the inner city. Mulberry Bend, the slum block to which he devoted most of his energies, was torn down and replaced by Columbus Park (still there). New housing codes were passed that prevented, for example, windowless rooms, cellar apartments, and wooden stairs vulnerable to fires. The many homeless children were lodged and fed in orphanages and newsboys' homes. More parks were opened throughout the city. Also, not incidentally, he pioneered the use of photography as a tool for social reform.

#### **2.) Describe life in the tenements and daily life for the poor immigrant people.**

Life was brutal. The tenements were unheated except by coal stoves or braziers, which spewed noxious gases and frequently started fires. Apartments intended for a family of four might be inhabited by multiple families of six or eight--sometimes multiple families in a single room. Plumbing was frequently a matter of a communal pump and outhouse in the back court. Fathers of families very often drank away their pay, leaving mothers and children to beg and scrounge for enough to eat. Children quite often were turned out by their families to fend for themselves when they were as young as eight or nine. Diseases blew through, and with few medical services and terrible sanitation to boot their mortality rate was high, and this including diseases that already at the time were preventable by vaccination, such as smallpox and measles.

#### **3.) Did Riis' friend, Theodore Roosevelt, have anything to do with Riis' success in arousing the people? Did he raise Riis' credibility?**

Theodore Roosevelt became a friend and supporter of Riis's when he (TR) was police commissioner, although by then Riis was already known and influential, having published *How the Other Half Lives* five years earlier. But Roosevelt and Riis collaborated to eliminate the notorious police station lodging houses.

**4.) Describe how Riis had experienced being in poverty before finding work as a journalist.**

Riis came to the United States from Denmark in 1870, when he was 21. For the next four years a combination of bad luck, bad planning, bad bosses, and his own impulsive and hotheaded nature kept him erring from job to job, finally resulting in his finding himself homeless on the city streets. For several weeks (he is not very specific here) he slept in police-station lodgings, where he was robbed and where his small dog was killed by an attendant.

**5.) What were some of Riis' most influential photographs?**

The most influential pictures by Riis were the ones of Mulberry Bend and its various inlets (Bandits' Roost, Bottle Alley, etc.), those of Italian immigrants crowded together in small rooms within, and all his pictures of poor children--sleeping outdoors and laboring in particular.