Introduction

Jacob Riis was born in Ribe, Denmark on May 3rd, 1849. He worked as a carpenter in Copenhagen, emigrated to the United States in 1870. In 1877 Riis became a police reporter for the New York Tribune. In 1888 Riis was employed as a photo-journalist by the New York Evening Sun. Riis was among the first photographers to use flash powder, which enabled him to photograph interiors and exteriors of the slums at night. He also became associated with what later became known as muckraking journalism. His book “How the Other Half Lives” published in 1890 brought him to the attention of Theodore Roosevelt, who eventually became his friend. Riis also wrote over a dozen books including Children of the Poor (1892), Out of Mulberry Street (1898), The Battle With the Slum (1902) and Children of the Tenement (1903). Jacob Riis, whose autobiography, The Making of An American, was published in 1901, died in Barrie, Massachusetts, on 26th May, 1914.

Materials & Methods

Aware of what it was like to live in poverty, Riis was determined to use his journalistic skills to communicate with the public and fight the poverty and homelessness among the country. He took hundreds of photos illustrating poor living conditions of homeless people. He blamed industrialization and greedy landlords for this situation. In his book, Riis divided the poor into two categories, those deserving of assistance and those undeserving, and called for government intervention. During the 1890s many people in upper- and middle-class society were unaware of the dangerous conditions in the slums among poor immigrants. The book shocked the conscience of Americans by showing in vivid detail the slum conditions of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where immigrants were packed into tenements, many of them with no windows or ventilation, and waged a daily battle against overcrowding, crime, disease, filth, and poverty. He also exposed how people living in tenements would work for just few cents a day and children would work in factories and other jobs where poor work conditions would lead to diseases and death at a young age.

Conclusions

When industrialization took place in the United States, many people lost their jobs, houses and source of income. Immigrants, who came to America to start a new life, struggled even more, living in slums, working long hours in dangerous work places just to earn few cents to buy some food. Jacob Riis became an inspiration for many reporters and photographers during that time and after. His fight to expose the living conditions of poor and homeless people to the wealthier was something unexpected back then. It shocked many but also influenced many more people to help. People started to realize how divided society was. Government also made its effort by employing photographers to continue what Riis began, to follow his steps and use it to benefit the poor. More important were the benefits that came from helping the poor.