

JACOB RIIS EXPOSES CHILD LABOR

*Jacob Riis was one of the first journalists to photograph and write about the condition of the poor living in New York City. In books like **How the Other Half Lives**, and in newspaper stories, he exposed the hard life of children working in factories, sweatshops, and mines. This is an excerpt from one of his articles.*

Of Susie's hundred little companions in the alley – playmates they could scarcely be called – some made artificial flowers, some paper boxes, while the boys earned money at "shinin'" [shining shoes] or selling newspapers. The smaller girls "minded the baby," so leaving the mother free to work. Most of them did something toward earning the family living, young as they were.

The occupations that claim children's labor in and out of the shop are almost as numberless as the youngsters that swarm in tenement neighborhoods. The poorer the tenements the more of them always.

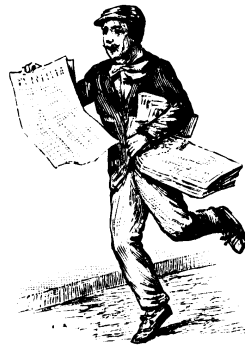
In an evening school class of nineteen boys and girls which I polled once, I found twelve boys who "shined," five who sold papers, one of thirteen years who by day worked in a printing office, and one of twelve who worked in a wood-yard.

Of the girls, one was thirteen and worked in a paper box factory, two of twelve made paper lanterns, and one twelve-year-old girl sewed coats in a sweat-shop.

The four smallest girls were ten years old, and of them one worked for a sweater [sweatshop owner] and "finished twenty-five coats yesterday," she said with pride. She looked quite able to do a woman's work. The three others minded the baby at home; one of them found time to help her mother sew coats when baby slept.

The trouble is not so much that the chil-

dren have to work early as with the sort of work they have to do. It is, all of it, of a kind that leaves them, grown to man and womanhood, just where it found them, knowing no more, and therefore less, than when they began. The years that should have prepared them for life's work are gone in hopeless and profitless drudgery.



The general result was well put by a tireless worker in the cause of improving the condition of the poor, who said to me, "They are down on the scrub level; there you find them and have to put them to such use as you can. They don't know anything else, and that is what makes it so hard to find work for them. Even when they go into a shop to sew, they come out mere machines, able to do only one thing, which is a small part of the whole they do not grasp. And thus, without the slightest training for the responsibilities of life, they marry and transmit their incapacity to another generation that is so much worse to start off with."

She spoke of the girls, but what she said fitted the boys just as well.

Group Discussion: *What kind of work did children in the poor tenement neighborhoods do? What were the typical ages of those Riis talked to for this report? Factory owners at that time sometimes argued that children were getting an education by working. How would Riis probably respond to such an argument?*