*The Bitter Cry of Children* John Spargo (1905)

Work in the coal breakers is exceedingly hard and dangerous. Crouched over the chutes, the boys sit hour after hour, picking out the pieces of slate and other refuse from the coal as it rushes past to the washers. From the cramped position they have to assume, most of them become more or less deformed and bent-backed like old men…

I once stood in a breaker for half an hour and tried to do the work a twelve-year-old boy was doing day after day, for ten hours at a stretch, for sixty cents a day. The gloom of the breaker appalled me. Outside the sun shone brightly, the air was pellucid [clear], and the birds sang in chorus with the trees and the rivers. Within the breaker there was blackness, clouds of deadly dust enfolded everything, the harsh, grinding roar of the machinery and the ceaseless rushing of coal through the chutes filled the ears. I tried to pick out the pieces of slate from the hurrying stream of coal, often missing them; my hands were bruised and cut in a few minutes; I was covered from head to foot with coal dust, and for many hours afterwards I was expectorating some of the small particles of anthracite I had swallowed.

I could not do that work and live, but there were boys of ten and twelve years of age doing it for fifty and sixty cents a day. Some of them had never been inside of a school; few of them could read a child’s primer. True, some of them attended the night schools, but after working ten hours in the breaker the educational results from attending school were practically nil.

As I stood in that breaker I thought of the reply of the small boy to Robert Owen. Visiting an English coal mine one day, Owen asked a twelve-year-old lad if he knew God. The boy stared vacantly at his questioner: “God?” he said, “God? No, I don’t. He must work in some other mine.” It was hard to realize amid the danger and din and blackness of that Pennsylvania breaker that such a thing as belief in a great All-good God existed.

Boys twelve years of age may be *legally* employed in the mines of West Virginia, by day or by night, and for as many hours as the employers care to make them toil or their bodies will stand the strain. Where the disregard of child life is such that this may be done openly and with legal sanction, it is easy to believe what miners have again and again told me—that there are hundreds of little boys of nine and ten years of age employed in the coal mines of this state.

Document Analysis Questions:

Underline three quotes that you think are important to understanding the document. Why are these quotes important?

List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.

What is the purpose of this document?

Photo Analysis Questions:

List the people, places, and activities you see in these photos.

Why were these photos taken?

Choose one photograph’s title. How does the title bring meaning to the photograph?

Jacob Riis and John Spargo were both muckrakers. Based on this document and these photos, what is a “muckraker”?