

Social Effects of the Depression

READING FOCUS

- How did poverty spread during the Great Depression?
- What social problems were caused by poverty in the 1930s?
- How did some people struggle to survive hard times?

MAIN IDEA

By the early 1930s, wage cuts and growing unemployment had brought widespread suffering across the United States.

KEY TERMS

Hooverville
Dust Bowl

TAKING NOTES

As you read, complete this chart by listing examples of how the Great Depression affected different parts of American society.

Effects of the Great Depression	
Social Groups	Effects
City laborers	Many lost their jobs, became homeless, lived in poverty, some resorted to living in "Hoovervilles"
Farmers 514-25	
Women 516	
Children 515	
Men 515-16	
Racial minorities 517	

Setting the Scene Many Americans thought the Depression would not last. They were soon proved wrong. Hard times continued and eventually spread to all levels of society. Those who never imagined they would one day have to ask friends, neighbors, or even the government for money found themselves with no other option. In this account from 1934, a "middle-class" college graduate details the awkwardness and pain associated with what she described as "becoming one of them," or joining the ranks of the poor:

“Two years ago I was living in comfort and apparent security. My husband had a good position in a well-known orchestra and I was teaching a large and promising class of piano pupils. When the orchestra was disbanded we started on a rapid down-hill path. My husband was unable to secure another position. My class gradually dwindled away. We were forced to live on our savings.

In the early summer of 1933 I was eight months pregnant and we had just spent our last twelve dollars on one month's rent for an apartment. . . . [which] lacked the most elementary comforts such as steam heat, bathtubs, sunlight, and running hot water. They usually are infested with mice and bedbugs. Ours was. . . .

What then, did we do for food when our last money was spent on rent? So strong was the influence of our training that my husband kept looking feverishly for work when there was no work, and blaming himself because he was unable to find it. . . . An application to the Emergency Home Relief Bureau was the last act of our desperation.”

—From Ann Rivington [pseudonym],
“We Live on Relief,” *Scribner's Magazine*, April 1934

Poverty Spreads

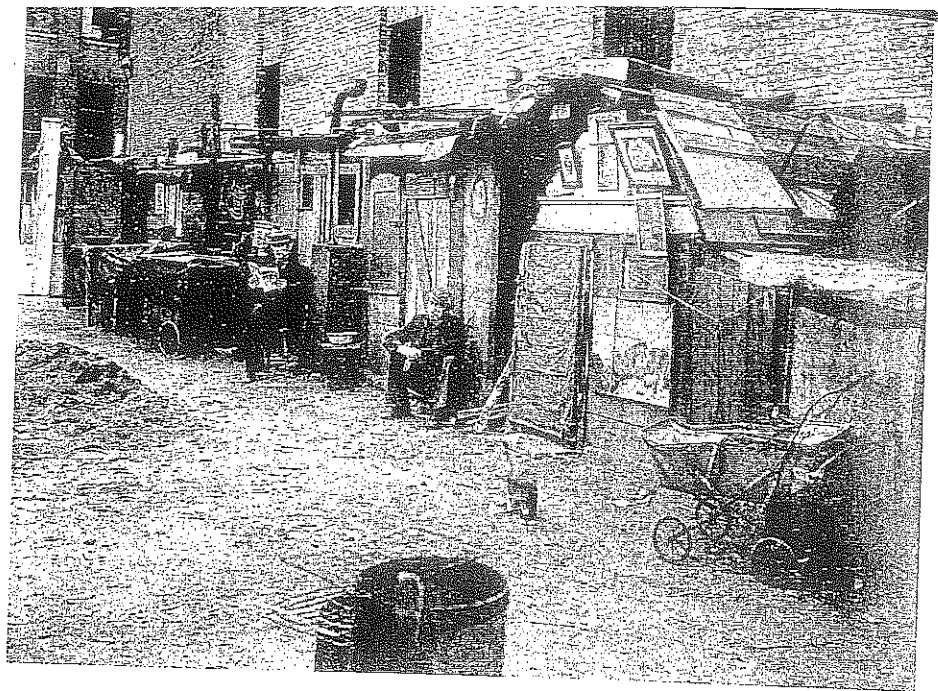
Imagine that the bank where you have a savings account suddenly closes. Your money is gone. Or your parents lose their jobs and cannot pay the rent or mortgage. One day you come home to find your furniture and all of your belongings on the sidewalk—you have been evicted.

WORK IS WHAT I
WANT AND NOT CHARITY
WHO WILL HELP ME
GET A JOB 7 YEARS
IN DETROIT NO MONEY
SENT AWAY FURNISH
BEST OF REFERENCES
PHONE RANPOLPH 8331 DEPT
1753



VIEWING HISTORY The number of people without jobs rose dramatically after the Crash.
Drawing Inferences What can you tell from this man's sign about the social view of charity in the 1930s?

VIEWING HISTORY Makeshift huts served as homes for the homeless and unemployed in this New York City Hooverville. *Making Comparisons Do "Hoovervilles" exist today? Under what conditions do the homeless now live?*



People at all levels of society faced these situations during the Great Depression. Professionals and white-collar workers, who had felt more secure in their jobs than laborers, suddenly were laid off with no prospects of finding another position. Those whose savings disappeared could not understand why banks no longer had the money they had deposited for safekeeping.

"Hoovervilles" The hardest hit were those at the bottom of the economic ladder. Some unemployed laborers, unable to pay their rent, moved in with relatives. Others drifted around the country. In 1931, census takers estimated the homeless population in New York City alone at 15,000.

Homeless people sometimes built shanty towns, with shacks of tar paper, cardboard, or scrap material. These shelters of the homeless came to be called **Hoovervilles**, mocking the President, whom people blamed for not resolving the crisis.

A woman living in Oklahoma visited one Hooverville: "Here were all these people living in old, rusted-out car bodies," she noted. "There were people living in shacks made of orange crates. One family with a whole lot of kids were living in a piano box."

Many homeless and jobless people, rather than staying in one place, became drifters, hitchhiking from one "hobo jungle" to another. Thousands rode the rails—or jumped on trains illegally to travel across the country. They slept in boxcars or open freight cars. By 1933, an estimated one million people were on the move, risking jail, injury, or death.

Farm Distress Farm families suffered as low crop prices cut their income. When they could not pay their mortgages, they lost their farms to the banks, which sold them at auction. In the South, landowners expelled tenant farmers and sharecroppers. In protest against low prices, farmers dumped thousands of gallons of milk and destroyed crops. These desperate actions shocked a hungry nation.

The Dust Bowl For thousands of farm families in the Midwest, the harsh conditions of the Depression were made even more extreme by another major crisis of the decade. The origin of this one was not economic, but environmental. Between 1931 and 1940, so much soil blew out of the central and southern Great Plains that the region became known as the **Dust Bowl**.

Focus on GEOGRAPHY

Weather in the Dust Bowl The Great Plains is called "America's breadbasket." Deep, fertile soils, a long growing season, and flat land make it ideal for farming. But the region has always experienced severe weather. Hot and humid tropical air masses come from the Gulf of Mexico. Cold polar air masses rush southward from above the Arctic Circle. When these air masses collide, powerful storms with fierce updrafts are created. The complex root systems of the grasslands had protected the soil from weather. As you have read, however, when farmers plowed the land, this natural protection was lost.

The Dust Bowl was created, in part, by dust storms that began in the early 1930s. Farmers said the storms were the result of a severe drought. While drought was a major factor in creating the Dust Bowl, it was not the only factor. Farming practices also contributed.

As long as there was a thick layer of prairie grasses to protect topsoil, severe weather could not harm the land. When farmers plowed the land, however, they stripped the soil of its natural protection. Winds picked up the dark, nutrient-rich topsoil and carried it eastward, sometimes for hundreds of miles, leaving behind barren, shifting dunes of grit and sand. The map below shows the extent of soil erosion across the plains.

The most severe storms of the dry years were called “black blizzards.” Time after time, dirt was swept up and dropped by the ton over states and cities far to the east. The dirt darkened the sky in New York City and Washington, D.C. It stained the snows of New England red and dropped on ships hundreds of miles off the Atlantic Coast. The drought and winds persisted for more than seven years, bringing ruin to the farmers.

The combination of terrible weather and low prices for farm products caused about 60 percent of Dust Bowl families to lose their farms. More than 440,000 people left Oklahoma during the 1930s. Nearly 300,000 people left Kansas. Thousands of families in Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, and other southwestern Plains states migrated to California. Many found work on California’s farms as laborers. About 100,000 of the Dust Bowl migrants headed to cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego. Relief did not come to the Dust Bowl region until the early 1940s, when the rains finally arrived and World War II drove farm prices up.

Poverty Strains Society

As the Depression wore on, it took a serious physical and psychological toll on the entire nation. Unemployment and fear of losing a job caused great anxiety. People became depressed; many considered suicide, and some did take their own lives.

Impact on Health “No one has starved,” President Hoover declared, but some did, and thousands more went hungry. Impoverished people who could not afford food or shelter got sick more easily. Children suffered most from the long-term effects of poor diet and inadequate medical care.

“All last winter we never had a fire except about once a day when Mother used to cook some mush or something,” one homeless boy recalled. “When the kids were cold they went to bed. I quit high school, of course.”

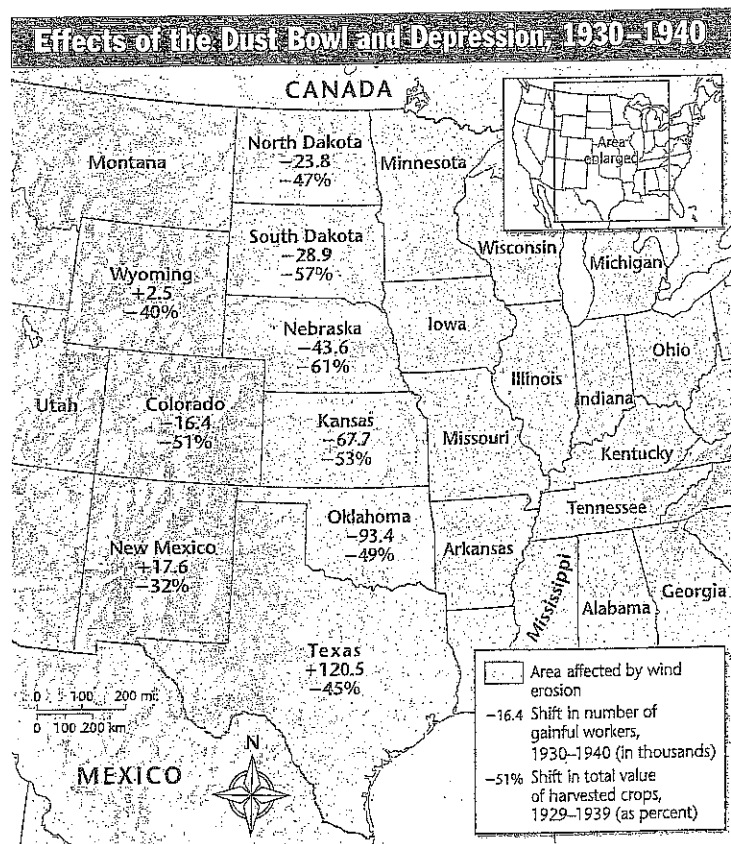
In the country, people grew food. In cities, they sold apples and pencils, begged for money to buy food, and fought over the contents of restaurant garbage cans. Families who had land planted “relief gardens” to feed themselves or so they could barter food for other items. One historian recalled:



Sounds of an Era

Listen to a reading from John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and other sounds from the Great Depression.

MAP SKILLS Drought combined with over-farming to reduce the Great Plains to dust. **Regions** How did farmers destroy the region’s natural protection against severe weather?



READING CHECK

How did the Great Depression impact people's health?

⁶⁶ In Detroit nearly one out of every seven persons was on relief [government aid]. Children scavenged through the streets like animals for scraps of food, and stayed away from school. . . . Among high school students in the inner city the incidence of tuberculosis tripled. Each day four thousand children stood in bread lines. With their sunken, lifeless eyes, sallow cheeks, and distended bellies, some resembled the starving children in Europe during the war.⁹⁹

—Robert Conot

Stresses on Families Living conditions declined as families moved in together, crowding into small houses or apartments. The divorce rate dropped because people could not afford separate households. People gave up even small pleasures like an ice cream cone or a movie ticket.

Men who had lost jobs or investments often felt like failures because they could no longer provide for their families. If their wives or children were working, men thought their own status had fallen. Many were embarrassed to be seen at home during normal work hours. They were ashamed to ask friends for help.

Women faced other problems. Those who had depended on a husband's paycheck worried about feeding their hungry children. Working women were accused of taking jobs away from men. Even in the better times of the 1920s, Henry Ford had fired married women. "We do not employ married women whose husbands have jobs," he explained. During the Depression, this practice became common. In 1931, the American Federation of Labor endorsed it. Most school districts would not hire married women as teachers, and many fired those who got married.

Many women continued to find work, however, because poor-paying jobs such as domestic service, typing, and nursing were considered "women's work." The greatest job losses



VIEWING FINE ART Dorothea Lange's most famous photographs, the "Migrant Mother" series (1936, right), have become a symbol of the Depression. The face of the undernourished mother displays a numbness to her destitute surroundings, yet a certain determination to pull through it all. Above is another of Lange's most famous photographs, "White Angel Breadline." **Determining Relevance** What effect did Lange's photographs have on the general public?



of the Depression were in industry and other areas that seldom hired women.

Discrimination Increases Hard economic times put groups of Americans in competition with one another for a shrinking number of jobs. This produced a general rise in suspicions and hostilities against minorities. African Americans, Hispanics, and in the West, Asian Americans all suffered as white laborers began to demand the low-paying jobs typically filled by these minorities. Hispanics and Asian Americans lost not only their jobs but also their country. Thousands were deported—even those born in the United States.

Black unemployment soared—about 56 percent of black Americans were out of work in 1932. Some white citizens declared openly that blacks had no right to jobs if whites were out of work. Gordon Parks, a photographer who rode the rails to Harlem, later wrote:

“To most blacks who had flocked in from all over the land, the struggle to survive was savage. Poverty coiled around them and me with merciless fingers.”

—Photographer Gordon Parks

Because government relief programs often discriminated against African Americans, black churches and organizations like the National Urban League gave private help. The followers of a Harlem evangelist known as Father Divine opened soup kitchens that fed thousands every day. Discrimination was even worse in the South, where African Americans were denied civil rights such as access to education, voting, and health care. Lynchings increased.

The justice system often ignored the rights of minority Americans. In March 1931, near Scottsboro, Alabama, nine black youths who had been riding the rails were arrested and accused of raping two white women on a train. Without being given the chance to hire a defense lawyer, eight of the nine were quickly convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to die.

The case of the “Scottsboro boys” was taken up, and sometimes exploited, by northern groups, most notably the Communist Party. The party helped supply legal defense and organized demonstrations, which, after many years, helped overturn the convictions, but four of the “boys” spent many years in jail.

Stories of Survival

A generation of Americans would live to tell their grandchildren how they survived the Depression. Wilson Ledford first felt the effects of the Depression in March 1930 when he was 15, living in Chattanooga, Tennessee, with his mother and younger sister. Wilson had worked part time and after school in a grocery store since he was 11. By 1930, his family could no longer afford Chattanooga. They moved back to Cleveland, Tennessee, a nearby small town. They survived on the rent Wilson’s mother received on a house and 15 acres of land, which she still owned. The property brought in \$6 a month in rent—except when the tenants were out of work. After taxes and insurance, the family had about a dollar a week to live on. Wilson “swapped work with neighbors.” He looked after the family horse and cow, chopped wood for the fireplace, tended the garden that provided family food, and raised corn to feed the animals:

AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY

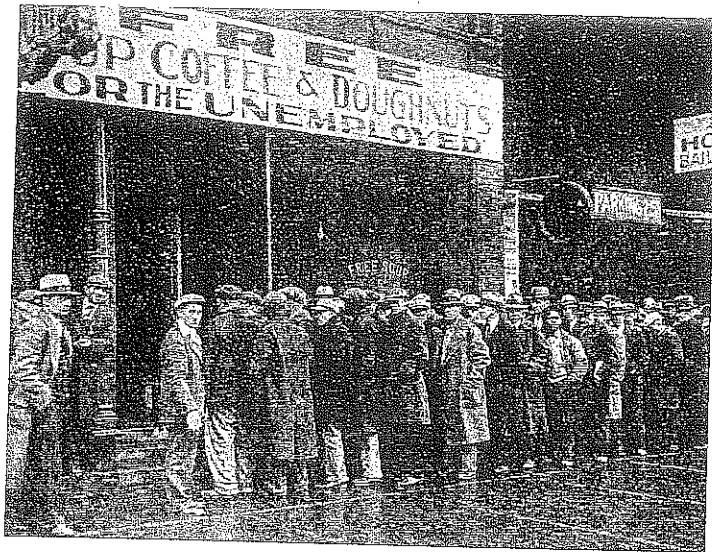


“The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera,” said photographer Dorothea Lange. Born in New Jersey in 1895, Lange decided at a young age to be a photographer. In 1919, Lange opened a portrait studio in

San Francisco where she photographed wealthy clients. Beyond the windows of her studio, she could see the spreading effects of the Depression. She thought about the vast difference “between what I was working on in the printing frames [in the studio] and what was going on in the street.”

Lange’s first exhibition, in 1934, landed her an assignment to photograph the hundreds of migrant workers streaming into California from the Dust Bowl. Lange’s photographs showed the world the desperation and bravery of families displaced by the Depression.

Lange continued to document the suffering and mistreatment of other Americans until her death in 1965. But she will be forever linked in people’s minds to the 1930s and the human courage that she made a part of the nation’s permanent record.



VIEWING HISTORY Many Americans reluctantly waited in "souplines" such as this when they did not have enough money to buy food. **Drawing Inferences** What do you think was the hardest part of such an experience? What made it easier?

“We had to raise most of what we ate since money was so scarce. . . . Sometimes I plowed for other people when I could get the work. . . . I got 15 cents an hour for plowing, and I furnished the horse and plow.”

—Wilson Ledford

Nothing was wasted. Wilson’s mother kept chickens and traded eggs at the store for things they could not grow or raise. Overalls cost 98 cents; shoes were \$2. She bought a pig for \$3 and raised it for meat, and she made jelly from wild blackberries. Despite the family’s own poverty, she gave extra milk and butter to “some poor people, a woman with three small children who lived in a one-room shack with a dirt floor.”

Wilson never got to high school, “as survival was more important.” The Ledfords had no radio, but Wilson made his own entertainment. Wilson and some other boys cleaned the rocks off a field, graded it, and made a baseball diamond. Baseballs were precious. “You could buy a pretty good baseball for a quarter and a real good one for 50 cents. . . . If we lost a ball during the game, everyone had to go hunt for it.”

In the summer of 1932, when he was 17, Wilson got a job in Chattanooga delivering ice. He worked there again the next summer: “I worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, and made \$3.00 a week.” When the icehouse closed in the fall, Wilson hitchhiked throughout the Southeast looking for work, but never had any success. “I pumped up so many tires for people I rode with, I had blisters all in my hands. Finally I got back home.”

Later Wilson bought a truck to haul coal, cotton, and oranges, then worked nights in a woolen mill while carrying ice during the day. Finally, “I got a call from Chickamauga Dam and I went to work there. That was a good job working on the dam. I made 60 cents an hour. Times were better by then, but did not start booming until World War II started.”

Section

2

Assessment

READING COMPREHENSION

1. Who lived in **Hoovervilles**?
2. What factors led to the creation of the **Dust Bowl** in the 1930s?
3. What were some causes and effects of increased discrimination during the Great Depression?
4. What can you learn about the Depression from Wilson Ledford’s experiences?

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

5. **Identifying Central Issues** Explain the effect the Depression had on the psychology of many Americans. Why do you think the Depression changed people’s goals and expectations?
6. **Writing an Interview** In an effort to learn firsthand what it was like to live during the Great Depression, write ten questions that you might ask someone who lived through it.



Take It to the NET

Activity: Writing a Newspaper Article Write a newspaper article describing the conditions faced by those living in the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression. Be sure to include a lot of details for the readers back home. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.
www.phschool.com