



# Hardship and Suffering During the Depression

## MAIN IDEA

During the Great Depression Americans did what they had to do to survive.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Since the Great Depression, many Americans have been more cautious about saving, investing, and borrowing.

## Terms & Names

- shantytown
- soup kitchen
- bread line
- Dust Bowl
- direct relief

## One American's Story

Ann Marie Low lived on her parents' North Dakota farm when the stock market crashed in 1929 and the Great Depression hit. Hard times were familiar to Ann's family. But the worst was yet to come. In the early 1930s, a ravenous drought hit the Great Plains, destroying crops and leaving the earth dry and cracked. Then came the deadly dust storms. On April 25, 1934, Ann wrote an account in her diary.

### A PERSONAL VOICE ANN MARIE LOW

"[T]he air is just full of dirt coming, literally, for hundreds of miles. It sifts into everything. After we wash the dishes and put them away, so much dust sifts into the cupboards we must wash them again before the next meal. . . . Newspapers say the deaths of many babies and old people are attributed to breathing in so much dirt."

—Dust Bowl Diary

The drought and winds lasted for more than seven years. The dust storms in Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, and Texas were a great hardship—but only one of many—that Americans faced during the Great Depression.



VIDEO

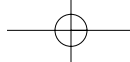
**BROKE, BUT NOT  
BROKEN**  
Ann Marie Low  
Remembers the  
Dust Bowl



## The Depression Devastates People's Lives

Statistics such as the unemployment rate tell only part of the story of the Great Depression. More important was the impact that it had on people's lives: the Depression brought hardship, homelessness, and hunger to millions.

**THE DEPRESSION IN THE CITIES** In cities across the country, people lost their jobs, were evicted from their homes and ended up in the streets. Some slept in parks or sewer pipes, wrapping themselves in newspapers to fend off the cold.



Others built makeshift shacks out of scrap materials. Before long, numerous **shantytowns**—little towns consisting of shacks—sprang up. An observer recalled one such settlement in Oklahoma City: “Here were all these people living in old, rusted-out car bodies. . . . There were people living in shacks made of orange crates. One family with a whole lot of kids were living in a piano box. . . . People were living in whatever they could junk together.”

Every day the poor dug through garbage cans or begged. **Soup kitchens** offering free or low-cost food and **bread lines**, or lines of people waiting to receive food provided by charitable organizations or public agencies, became a common sight. One man described a bread line in New York City.

### Background

Relief programs largely discriminated against African Americans. However, some black organizations, like the National Urban League, were able to give private help.



▲ Unemployed people built shacks in a shantytown in New York City in 1932.

### A PERSONAL VOICE HERMAN SHUMLIN

“Two or three blocks along Times Square, you’d see these men, silent, shuffling along in a line. Getting this handout of coffee and doughnuts, dealt out from great trucks. . . . I’d see that flat, opaque, expressionless look which spelled, for me, human disaster. Men . . . who had responsible positions. Who had lost their jobs, lost their homes, lost their families . . . They were destroyed men.”

—quoted in *Hard Times*

Conditions for African Americans and Latinos were especially difficult. Their unemployment rates were higher, and they were the lowest paid. They also dealt with increasing racial violence from unemployed whites competing for the same jobs. Twenty-four African Americans died by lynching in 1933.

Latinos—mainly Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the Southwest—were also targets. Whites demanded that Latinos be deported, or expelled from the country, even though many had been born in America. By the late 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people of Mexican descent relocated to Mexico. Some left voluntarily; others were deported by the federal government. **A**

**THE DEPRESSION IN RURAL AREAS** Life in rural areas was hard, but it did have one advantage over city life: most farmers could grow food for their families. With falling prices and rising debt, though, thousands of farmers lost their land. Between 1929 and 1932, about 400,000 farms were lost through foreclosure—the process by which a mortgage holder takes back property if an occupant has not made payments. Many farmers turned to tenant farming and barely scraped out a living.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**A** How did the Great Depression affect minorities?

### ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

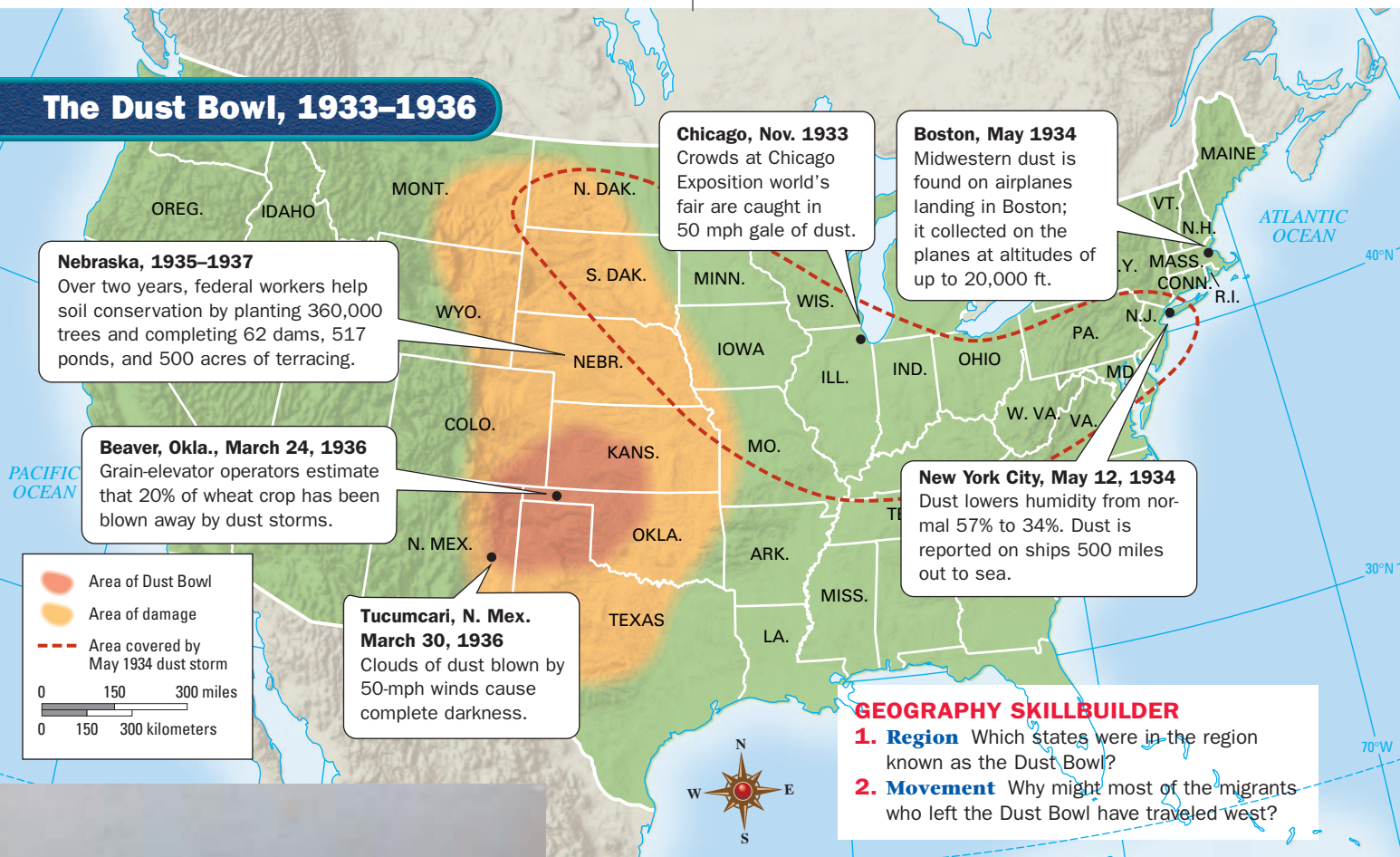
#### AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN VIEW OF THE DEPRESSION

Although the suffering of the 1930s was severe for many people, it was especially grim for African Americans. Hard times were already a fact of life for many blacks, as one African-American man noted:

“The Negro was born in depression. It didn’t mean too much to him, The Great American Depression. . . . The best he could be is a janitor or a porter or shoeshine boy. It only became official when it hit the white man.”

Nonetheless, the African-American community was very hard hit by the Great Depression. In 1932, the unemployment rate among African Americans stood at over 50 percent, while the overall unemployment rate was approximately 25 percent.

## The Dust Bowl, 1933–1936



A farmer and his sons brave a dust storm in 1936.

**THE DUST BOWL** The drought that began in the early 1930s wreaked havoc on the Great Plains. During the previous decade, farmers from Texas to North Dakota had used tractors to break up the grasslands and plant millions of acres of new farmland. Plowing had removed the thick protective layer of prairie grasses. Farmers had then exhausted the land through overproduction of crops, and the grasslands became unsuitable for farming. When the drought and winds began in the early 1930s, little grass and few trees

were left to hold the soil down. Wind scattered the topsoil, exposing sand and grit underneath. The dust traveled hundreds of miles. One windstorm in 1934 picked up millions of tons of dust from the plains and carried it to East Coast cities.

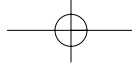
The region that was the hardest hit, including parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado, came to be known as the **Dust Bowl**. Plagued by dust storms and evictions, thousands of farmers and sharecroppers left their land behind. They packed up their families and few belongings and headed west, following Route 66 to California. Some of these migrants—known as Okies (a term that originally referred to Oklahomans but came to be used negatively for all migrants)—found work as farmhands. But others continued to wander in search of work. By the end of the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of farm families had migrated to California and other Pacific Coast states.

### Background

The most severe storms were called “black blizzards.” They were said to have darkened the sky in New York City and Washington, D.C.

## Effects on the American Family

In the face of the suffering caused by the Great Depression, the family stood as a source of strength for most Americans. Although some people feared that hard times would undermine moral values, those fears were largely unfounded. In gen-



eral, Americans believed in traditional values and emphasized the importance of family unity. At a time when money was tight, many families entertained themselves by staying at home and playing board games, such as Monopoly (invented in 1933), and listening to the radio. Nevertheless, the economic difficulties of the Great Depression put severe pressure on family life. Making ends meet was a daily struggle, and, in some cases, families broke apart under the strain.

**MEN IN THE STREETS** Many men had difficulty coping with unemployment because they were accustomed to working and supporting their families. Every day, they would set out to walk the streets in search of jobs. As Frederick Lewis Allen noted in *Since Yesterday*, “Men who have been sturdy and self-respecting workers can take unemployment without flinching for a few weeks, a few months, even if they have to see their families suffer; but it is different after a year . . . two years . . . three years.” Some men became so discouraged that they simply stopped trying. Some even abandoned their families.

During the Great Depression, as many as 300,000 transients—or “hoboes” as they were called—wandered the country, hitching rides on railroad boxcars and sleeping under bridges. These hoboes of the 1930s, mainly men, would occasionally turn up at homeless shelters in big cities. The novelist Thomas Wolfe described a group of these men in New York City. **B**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Causes

**B** Why did so many men leave their homes during the Depression?

#### A PERSONAL VOICE THOMAS WOLFE

“These were the wanderers from town to town, the riders of freight trains, the thumbers of rides on highways, the uprooted, unwanted male population of America. They . . . gathered in the big cities when winter came, hungry, defeated, empty, hopeless, restless . . . always on the move, looking everywhere for work, for the bare crumbs to support their miserable lives, and finding neither work nor crumbs.”

—*You Can't Go Home Again*

During the early years of the Great Depression, there was no federal system of **direct relief**—cash payments or food provided by the government to the poor. Some cities and charity services did offer relief to those who needed it, but the benefits were meager. In New York City, for example, the weekly payment was just \$2.39 per family. This was the most generous relief offered by any city, but it was still well below the amount needed to feed a family.







**WOMEN STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE** Women worked hard to help their families survive adversity during the Great Depression. Many women canned food and sewed clothes. They also carefully managed household budgets. Jeane Westin, the author of *Making Do: How Women Survived the '30s*, recalled, “Those days you did everything to save a penny. . . . My next door neighbor and I used to shop together. You could get two pounds of hamburger for a quarter, so we’d buy two pounds and split it—then one week she’d pay the extra penny and the next week I’d pay.”

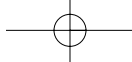
Many women also worked outside the home, though they usually received less money than men did. As the Depression wore on, however, working women became the targets of enormous resentment. Many people believed that women, especially married women, had no right to work when there were men who were unemployed.

## HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

### HOBO SYMBOLS

Hoboes shared a hidden language that helped them meet the challenges of the road. Over time a set of symbols developed for hoboes to alert each other as to where they could get food or work or a place to sleep, and what houses to avoid. They often marked the symbols, such as those shown below, on the sides of houses and fences near railroad yards.

-  Sit down meal
-  Only bread given here
-  Good place for a handout
-  Sleep in barn
-  Good water
-  Danger



In the early 1930s, some cities refused to hire married women as schoolteachers.

Many Americans assumed that women were having an easier time than men during the Great Depression because few were seen begging or standing in bread lines. As a matter of fact, many women were starving to death in cold attics and rooming houses. As one writer pointed out, women were often too ashamed to reveal their hardship.

**A PERSONAL VOICE** MERIDEL LE SEUER

**“I’ve lived in cities for many months, broke, without help, too timid to get in bread lines. I’ve known many women to live like this until they simply faint in the street. . . . A woman will shut herself up in a room until it is taken away from her, and eat a cracker a day and be as quiet as a mouse. . . . [She] will go for weeks verging on starvation, . . . going through the streets ashamed, sitting in libraries, parks, going for days without speaking to a living soul, shut up in the terror of her own misery.”**

—*America in the Twenties*

**CHILDREN SUFFER HARDSHIPS** Children also suffered during the 1930s. Poor diets and a lack of money for health care led to serious health problems. Milk consumption declined across the country, and clinics and hospitals reported a dramatic rise in malnutrition and diet-related diseases, such as rickets. At the same time, child-welfare programs were slashed as cities and states cut their budgets in the face of dwindling resources.

Falling tax revenues also caused school boards to shorten the school year and even close schools. By 1933, some 2,600 schools across the nation had shut down, leaving more than 300,000 students out of school. Thousands of children went to work instead; they often labored in sweatshops under horrendous conditions. **C**

Many teenagers looked for a way out of the suffering. Hundreds of thousands of teenage boys and some girls hopped aboard America’s freight trains to zigzag the country in search of work, adventure, and an escape from poverty. These “wild boys” came from every section of the United States, from every corner of society. They were the sons of poor farmers, and out-of-work miners, and wealthy parents who had lost everything. “Hoover tourists,” as they were called, were eager to tour America for free.

From the age of eleven until seventeen, George Phillips rode the rails, first catching local freights out of his home town of Princeton, Missouri.

“There is no feeling in the world like sitting in a side-door Pullman and watching the world go by, listening to the clickety-clack of the wheels, hearing that old steam whistle blowing for crossings and towns.”

While exciting, the road could also be deadly. Many riders were beaten or jailed by “bulls”—armed freight yard patrolmen. Often riders had to sleep standing up in a constant deafening rumble. Some were accidentally locked in ice cars for days on end. Others fell prey to murderous criminals. From 1929 to 1939, 24,647 trespassers were killed and 27,171 injured on railroad property.

**“If I leave my mother, it will mean one less mouth to feed.”**

**EUGENE WILLIAMS,  
AGE 13**



**◀ Two young boys, ages 15 and 16, walk beside freight cars in the San Joaquin Valley.**

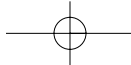
**Background**

Rickets is caused by a vitamin D deficiency and results in defective bone growth.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Analyzing Effects**

**C** How did the Great Depression affect women and children?



**SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS**

The hardships of the Great Depression had a tremendous social and psychological impact. Some people were so demoralized by hard times that they lost their will to survive. Between 1928 and 1932, the suicide rate rose more than 30 percent. Three times as many people were admitted to state mental hospitals as in normal times.

The economic problems forced many Americans to accept compromises and make sacrifices that affected them for the rest of their lives. Adults stopped going to the doctor or dentist because they couldn't afford it. Young people gave up their dreams of going to college. Others put off getting married, raising large families, or having children at all.

For many people, the stigma of poverty and of having to scrimp and save never disappeared completely. For some, achieving financial security became the primary focus in life. As one woman recalled, "Ever since I was twelve years old there was one major goal in my life . . . one thing . . . and that was to never be poor again."

During the Great Depression many people showed great kindness to strangers who were down on their luck. People often gave food, clothing, and a place to stay to the needy. Families helped other families and shared resources and strengthened the bonds within their communities. In addition, many people developed habits of saving and thriftiness—habits they would need to see themselves through the dark days ahead as the nation and President Hoover struggled with the Great Depression. These habits shaped a whole generation of Americans.



▲ This Ozark sharecropper family was photographed in Arkansas during the 1930s by the artist Ben Shahn.

**Vocabulary**

**stigma:** a mark or indication of disgrace



**ASSESSMENT**

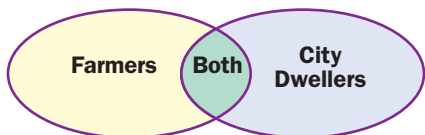
**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- shantytown
- bread line
- direct relief
- soup kitchen
- Dust Bowl

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

In a Venn diagram, list the effects that the Great Depression had on farmers and city dwellers. Find the differences and the similarities.



Which group do you think suffered less?

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. CONTRASTING**

How was what happened to men during the Great Depression different from what happened to women? children? **Think About:**

- each group's role in their families
- the changes each group had to make
- what help was available to them

**4. ANALYZING EFFECTS**

How did Dust Bowl conditions in the Great Plains affect the entire country?

**5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS**

In what ways did the Great Depression affect people's outlook?