

Fierce Job Competition in California

As Okies flowed into California, Mexican and Mexican American migrants already there faced stiff new competition for scarce jobs. Here, a family of migrant farmworkers gathers outside their home in California's Imperial Valley. *What does the photograph suggest about the economic status of migrant workers in California?*

Few Americans Escape Hard Times

One of the ironies of the depression was the word itself. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an economic slump was called a "panic" or a "crisis." President Hoover used the word *depression* to describe the state of affairs because he thought it sounded less severe than the other terms. But before long, Hoover's "depression" gave way to the "Depression" and then the "Great Depression." The term described not only a state of mind, but also an economic reality. It showed a despondent America, filled with people overwhelmed by seemingly inescapable poverty. Not only did the depression make victims of the men and women who lost jobs, it also was an economic and emotional crisis that profoundly affected Americans in all walks of life.

The Depression Attacks Family Life For millions of Americans, the depression was an intensely personal affair. Men who lost their jobs and could not find other work often felt that they had betrayed their families. They had been the "breadwinners," the providers, the ones whose paychecks fed and clothed the family and kept a roof over everyone's head. The loss of a job meant a reduction in status. Different men reacted differently to unemployment. Many labored tirelessly to find a new job, while others sank into shame and despair. Some even deserted their families.

The unemployed were not the only ones who suffered. Men lucky enough to have jobs lived in constant fear that the next paycheck would be their last. They often felt guilty for being employed while so many of their relatives and friends were suffering. Few Americans were spared from the crisis.

Wives and children experienced the pain of their husbands and fathers. Birthrates plummeted to the lowest marks in American history—a sure sign of family distress. Mothers worked constantly to stretch meager family incomes. They sewed clothes, searched for odd jobs, and valiantly tried to meet their families' needs. With both parents preoccupied with making something out of nothing, family discipline often declined. Some children quit school. Others ran away from home. Families coped with the depression as best they could. Some huddled together, working to survive the hard times. Others broke apart, making those times even harder and lonelier.

Minorities Suffer Hardships The depression affected everyone, but it did not affect them equally. Americans on the bottom rung of the economic ladder—the poorest of the poor, often minorities with no financial resources—felt the sting of the depression the keenest. A Howard University sociologist noted early in the crisis that African Americans were “the last to be hired and the first to be fired.” In the South, landowners threw African American sharecroppers off the plots they had been farming. Many of these workers migrated to northern cities, but there were no jobs waiting there. Only more poverty greeted them. In 1932, unemployment among African Americans hovered around 50 percent, nearly double the national rate.

However, African Americans had long stood firm against the challenges of poverty. They relied on the emotional resources of family and religion to cope with grim times. During his interview with a depression historian, an African American man explained what the depression meant to African Americans:

Primary Source

“The Negro was born in depression. It didn’t mean too much to him, The Great American Depression, as you call it. There was no such thing. The best he could be was a janitor or a porter or shoeshine boy. It only became official when it hit the white man.”

—Clifford Burke, quoted in *Hard Times*, 1970

Hard times came upon Mexican Americans as well. As more Okies headed west out of the Dust Bowl, the competition for jobs between those migrants and Mexican American farmworkers in states like California heated up. A flood tide of workers struggled to find and keep farm jobs. Often, Mexican Americans faced the additional burden of discrimination when competing with white farmhands for those jobs. In the Southwest, many white Americans clamored for Mexican American repatriation. Repatriation involved efforts by local, state, and federal governments to encourage or coerce Mexican immigrants and their naturalized children to return to Mexico. Hundreds of thousands of people of Mexican ancestry—many of them U.S. citizens—were pushed out of the United States. Even so, many more remained. By the end of the 1930s, Mexican Americans were working in most industries of the Southwest, including farming, ranching, and industry.

Checkpoint How did the depression take a toll on women, children, and minorities in America?



Poverty in the South

African Americans who had long faced discrimination and segregation were especially hard-hit by the depression. Many moved from the South to seek jobs in the North. Here, a man sits forlornly outside his home in Atlanta, Georgia.

SECTION **2** Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
Web Code: nea-0803

Comprehension

- 1. Terms and People** What do each of the following terms have in common? Explain.
 - bread line
 - Hooverville
 - tenant farmer
 - Okies
- 2. NoteTaking Reading Skill: Categorize** Use your Venn diagram to answer the Section Focus Question: How did the Great Depression affect the lives of urban and rural Americans?

Writing About History

- 3. Quick Write: Brainstorm for Possible Solutions** Choose one topic from this section, such as skyrocketing unemployment in American cities, about which you could write a problem-solution essay. Use the text and your own knowledge to list possible solutions to the problem. Next, organize your list by ranking the solutions from most effective to least effective.

Critical Thinking

- 4. Compare and Contrast** How were the experiences of the urban unemployed and the rural poor similar? How were they different?
- 5. Recognize Effects** How do you think the arrival of so many Okies affected native Californians?
- 6. Draw Inferences** Where might Americans have laid the blame for their difficulties during the early 1930s?