

SECTION  
**2**



◀ Hobos walk along a railroad line.

**WITNESS HISTORY**  AUDIO

**Riding the Rails**

As the country plunged deeper into the Great Depression, many young people left home, either out of necessity or to follow their dreams of a better life. Nearly a quarter million teenagers hit the road during the early 1930s, jumping freight trains to ride from town to town. Some looked for work, others thirsted for adventure, but all faced the dangers of the hobo life. Charley Bull, who left his California home at 18, recalled:

“You could ride on top of a freight car and then you just had to be careful. If a train is going sixty or seventy miles an hour and hits a curve and you’re walking and your back’s to the turn and you don’t see it coming—a little tiny turn can throw you right off the train. A lot of people have been killed like that.”

—Charley Bull, from a PBS presentation “The American Experience—Riding the Rails”

# Americans Face Hard Times

**Objectives**

- Examine the spread of unemployment in America’s cities.
- Discuss the impact of the depression on rural America.
- Explain the human and geographical factors that created the Dust Bowl.

**Terms and People**

- |               |              |
|---------------|--------------|
| bread line    | Dust Bowl    |
| Hooverville   | Okies        |
| tenant farmer | repatriation |

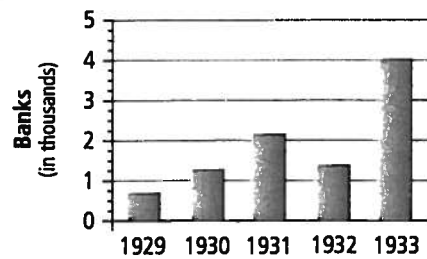
**Why It Matters** The stock market crash signaled the end of boom times and the beginning of hard times. As investors mourned their losses, Americans watched the economy stagger into the Great Depression. In the cities and on the farms, desperate poverty gripped the nation. Even after prosperity returned, those who lived through the crisis would remember the pain and worries of the depression. Tested by extreme hardship, this generation of Americans forged a character and will strong enough to overcome economic ruin and restore prosperity. **Section Focus Question:** How did the Great Depression affect the lives of urban and rural Americans?

## Misery and Despair Grip America’s Cities

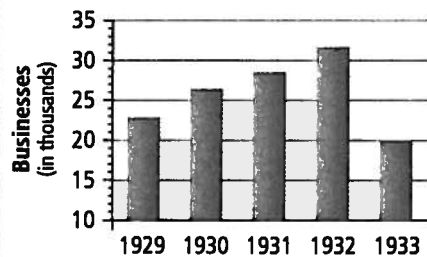
The Great Depression had a deep and lasting impact on the lives of the people who lived through it. Few Americans grasped the underlying problems of the 1920s economy or the subtle reasons for the stock market crash. Fewer still comprehended how the crash led to the Great Depression. But they did understand the *impact* of the economic crisis. Workers understood having a job one day and being unemployed the next. Whole families knew the shame and fear of losing their homes.

The Great Depression touched every American because every American either experienced or knew someone who experienced the hardships and loss caused by the economic catastrophe. For many, their lives were never the same again.

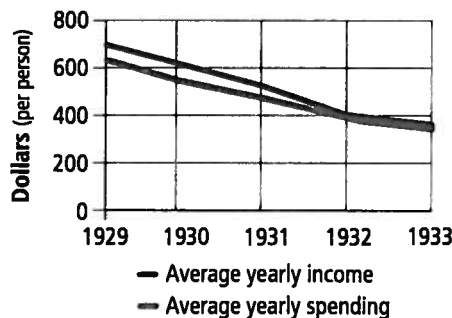
### Bank Failures



### Business Failures



### Per Capita Income and Spending



SOURCE: Historical Statistics of the United States

**Graph Skills** The year 1929 marked the start of a pronounced downturn in the American economy. *In what year did the largest number of banks fail? By roughly how much did Americans' average yearly income decrease between 1929 and 1933?*

**Searching for a Job and a Meal** The threat of unemployment and destitution haunted workers in cities and towns across the United States. Between 1921 and 1929, annual average unemployment rates had never risen above 3.7 percent. But then, the depression hit, and the rate shot up. By 1933, it had climbed to a shocking 24.9 percent.

Despite this high rate, millions of workers were able to keep their jobs. However, most had their wages or hours cut. Many workers brought home paychecks that were 10, 20, sometimes 30 percent less than their pre-depression checks.

Yet statistics tell only part of the story. The human drama of unemployment unfolded over and over again, in city after city across the nation. For a man employed as a factory worker, the 1920s had promised a chance at upward economic mobility. He had been able to provide for his family, enjoy a decent standard of living, and save something for retirement. Then, the depression hit. The man saw his hours cut and his workweek shortened. Eventually, he was laid off. Looking for another job, he trudged from one factory to the next. "No help wanted here" or "We don't need nobody" greeted him at every turn. The man's clothes began to look worn. His collars and cuffs became frayed, and his pants became shiny at the knees. He said less, stared more, moved slower.

Maybe his wife was able to find work washing and ironing clothes or laboring as a maid. But those jobs were hard to find, too. At home, children ate smaller meals. Water replaced milk. Meat disappeared from the table. Hunger lurked about the home like an unwanted guest. Sometimes, the parents and children received free meals in public soup kitchens. Often, the only place for the family to get a free scrap of food was in a bread line, where people lined up for handouts from charities or public agencies.

**Descending into Poverty** Men like the factory worker just described moved from unemployed to unemployable. Whole families descended into hunger and homelessness. Their dreams of success and prosperity turned into nightmares of failure and poverty.

This feeling of loss—this sense of the "American Dream" betrayed—wove through the cultural fabric of the Great Depression. The widespread despair found expression in an early-1930s song by E. Y. Harburg. It tells the story of an American "Everyman," a worker who labored to build the country and a citizen soldier who fought to defend it. However, the depression has left him out of work, out of money, and out of dreams:

#### Primary Source

"They used to tell me I was building a dream  
And so I followed the mob.  
When there was earth to plow or guns to bear,  
I was always there, right on the job.  
They used to tell me I was building a dream  
With peace and glory ahead—  
Why should I be standing in line,  
Just waiting for bread?  
Once I built a railroad, I made it run,  
Made it run against time.  
Once I built a railroad, now it's done—  
Brother can you spare a dime?"

—song lyrics, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?"