

The HUMAN IMPACT of the Great Depression

Analyze the effects of the economic collapse on a variety of social groups.

1. AFRICAN AMERICANS

“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 is a janitor or a porter or shoeshine boy. It only became official when it hit the white man. If you can tell me the difference between the depression today and the depression of 1932 for a black man, I’d like to know. Now, it’s worse, because of the prices....The American white man has been superior so long, he can’t figure out why he should come down. I remember a friend of mine, he didn’t know he was a Negro. I mean he acted like he never knew it. He got tied downtown with some stock. He blew about twenty thousand. He came home and drank a bottle of poison. A bottle of iodine or something like that. It was a rarity to hear a Negro killing himself over a financial situation. He might have killed himself over some woman. Or getting in a fight. But when it came to the financial end of it, there were so few who had anything.”

- Clifford Burke in *Hard Times*

1. AFRICAN AMERICANS

“I am retiring you a few Line to Let you no how they are treating we colored people on this releaf. I went up to our home Vister and replied for some Thing to do an some Thing to eat and She told me that she has nothing for me at all and to they give all the worke to White people and give us nothing an Sir I wont you to no how we are treated here. So please help us if you can.”

- Anonymous letter to F.D.R., 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

1. AFRICAN AMERICANS

“Mr. Presentdent its Certainly a strange thing the way we colored peoples is treated here this government money was sent down here for these peoples where is in knead and the poor widows Where is here going from place to place trying to get work and cant get Nothng to do and hungry and what they does with the Money we cant tell some thimes...white peoples is doing there own work and there fore that knocks the colored out of work and it isnt enough work in the field to depend on....Some of we colored peoples is so ragged we is asham to get out among the peoples like some folks and its getting cold no wood and cold and if we dont get something to do in order so we can have some money we will Freeze to death.”

- Anonymous letter to F.D.R., 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

1. AFRICAN AMERICANS

“The way they are treating the darkies here is A Shame. They wont give them food nor Cloths nor Work to do When they Ask for Any thing they drive them away like dogs....And its more than 200 Darkies in groups Standing on the Road each day. Begging for food and Cloths.”

- Anonymous letter to “President Theo. D. Roosevelt, 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

2. BUSINESSMEN

“I was in business for myself, selling clothing on credit, house to house. And collecting by the week. Up to that time, people were buying very good and paying very good. But they start to speculate, and I felt it. My business was dropping from the beginnings of 1929....It was the time I would collect four, five hundred dollars a week. After that, I couldn't collect fifteen, ten dollars a week. I was going around trying to collect enough money to keep my family going. It was impossible. Very few people could pay you....We tried to struggle along living day by day. Then I couldn't pay the rent....I didn't have a nickel in my pocket. Finally people started to talk me into going into the relief....I was so downcasted that I couldn't think of anything. Where can I go? What to face? Age that I can't get no job. I have no trade, except selling is my trade, that's all....I didn't want to go on relief. Believe me, when I was forced to go to the office of the relief, the tears were running out of my eyes. I couldn't bear myself to take money from anybody for nothing. If it wasn't for those kids - I tell you the truth - many a time it came to my mind to go commit suicide. Than go ask for relief.”

- Ben Issacs in *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*

2. BUSINESSMEN

“We’re about down and out and the only good thing about it that I see is that there’s not much farther we can go.”

- Unemployed man, 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

“I am in need of relief. And I am willing to work but I dont seem able to get food, work, or encouragement of any kind....I was never a beggar and I want to know exactly why men past 50 years cannot get help.”

- Letter to Senator McNary from Mr. A.K., 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

2. BUSINESSMEN

“I am now at the point of despration. But as I have 19 grandchildren all under 14 years of age 9 of whom are boys, to do anything desperette now they would never live down the disgrace. I was always a hard worker saved money invested in the auto business and lost. Am 55 years old...I would not wish as the cost of my life that any one should know I wrote you this letter [seeking a loan]....All I want is a chance.”

- Letter to F.D.R. from anonymous writer, 1934, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

3.CHILDREN

“I am a boy of 12 years....My father hasn't worked for 5 months. He went plenty times to relief, he filled out application. They won't give us anything. I don't know why....My father he staying home. All the time he's crying because he can't find work. I told him why are you crying daddy, and daddy said why shouldn't I cry when there is nothing in the house. I feel sorry for him. That night I couldn't sleep.”

- Letter to President and Mrs. Roosevelt, 1936, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

3.CHILDREN

“Please help us. My mother is sick three year and was in the hospital three month and she came out but she is not better and my Father is peralised and can not work and we are poor....We have no one to give us a Christmas presents. And if you want to buy a Christmas present please buy us a stove to do our cooking and to make good bread.”

- Letter to F.D.R. from a 10-year-old girl, 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

3.CHILDREN

“These storms were like rolling black smoke. We had to keep the lights on all day. We went to school with headlights on, and with dust masks on. I saw a woman who thought the world was coming to an end. She dropped down on her knees in the middle of Main Street in Amarillo and prayed out loud: ‘Dear Lord! Please give them another chance.’”

- Texas Schoolboy, in *This Fabulous Century*

3.CHILDREN

“I’ll work for fifteen [cents]. I’ll work for food. The kids. You ought to see them. Little boils, like, comin’ out, an’ they can’t run aroun’. Give ‘em some windfall fruit, an’ they bloated up. Me. I’ll work for a little piece of meat....the children of the poor grew up rachitic, and the pustules of pellagra (*vitamin deficiency disease) swelled on their sides.”

- From *The Grapes of Wrath*

4. FAMILIES

“I am to have a baby. We wanted one before but felt we should have more assurances for the future before we deliberately took such a responsibility. But now that it has happened, I won’t give it up!...Won’t you do something so my husband can have a job?...We have absolutely nothing but our home.”

- Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Mrs. M.H.A., 1934, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

4. FAMILIES

“I remember lying in bed one night and thinking. All at once I realized something. We were poor. Lord! It was weeks before I could get over that.”

- Depression victim, 1933, in *This Fabulous Century*

“Us people has got to stick together to get by these hard times.”

- Large migration family, in *This Fabulous Century*

“I’ve wrote back [to friends] that we’re well and such as that, but I never have wrote that we live in a tent.”

- Tennessee woman, in *This Fabulous Century*

4. FAMILIES

“We make as much as is fitten for such as us runnin’ - around folks. Cain’t send the children to school we ain’t got the clothes. By a’ savin up we got so’s we can move on to the next place. We haven’t had no help no way.”

- Texas migrant worker in California, in *This Fabulous Century*

“We had been eating wild greens since January this year. Violet tops, wild onions, forget-me-nots, wild lettuce and such weeds as cows eat. Our family are in bad shape childrens need milk women need nurishments food shoes and dresses - that we cannot get.”

- Kentucky miner, in *This Fabulous Century*

4. FAMILIES

“In the evening a strange thing hapened: the twenty [migrant] families became one family, the children were the children of all....Sitting about the fires, the twenty were one. They grew to be units of the [migrant] camps, units of the evenings, and the nights. A guitar unwrapped from a blanket and tuned - and the songs, which were all of the people, were sung in the nights.”

- From *The Grapes of Wrath*

4. FAMILIES

“The rag town lay close to water; and the houses were tents, and weed-thatched enclosures, paper houses, a great junk pile. The man drove his family in and became a citizen of Hooverville - always they were called Hooverville....And when the rains came the house melted and washed away. He settled in Hooverville and he scoured the countryside for work, and the little money he had went for gasoline to look for work.”

- From *The Grapes of Wrath*

5. FARMERS

“My family needs some clothes for they are about naked i have four boys going to scschool and this makes the second week they have stay home for they do not have any clothes or shoes to wear.”

- Letter to Sen. Neely from J.T.C., 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*.

5. FARMERS

“When these winds hit us, we and our misery were suddenly covered with dust. Here in the Texas Panhandle we were hit harder than most anywhere else. If the wind blew one way, here came the dark dust from Oklahoma. Another way and it was the gray dust from Kansas. Still another way, the brown dust from Colorado and New Mexico. Little farms were buried. And the towns were blackened.”

- Texas farmer, in *This Fabulous Century*

5. FARMERS

“All that dust make some of the farmers leave; they became the Okies. We stuck it out here. We scratched, literally scratched, to live. We’d come to town to sell our cream for nine cents a pound. If we could find a town a town big enough and far enough away from the dust, we could sell eggs at ten cents a dozen. Despite all the dust and the win, we were putting in crops, but making no crops and barely living out of barn yard products only. We made five crop failures in five years.”

- Oklahoma farmer, in *This Fabulous Century*

5. FARMERS

“Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land - in California, where the fruit grows. We’ll start over. But you can’t. Only a baby can start. You and me - why, we’re all that’s been . . . This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can’t start again.”

- From *The Grapes of Wrath*

5. FARMERS

“If they come take my farm, I’m going to fight. I’d rather be killed outright than die by starvation. But before I die, I’m going to set fire to my crops. I’m going to burn my house, I’m going to p’izen my cattle.”

- debt-ridden farmer, in *This Fabulous Century*

6. MEXICAN AMERICANS

“During the first quarter of the century the Mexicano had been needed as a laborer. Many historians believe that the Southwest would have reverted to a desert without the Mexican. He had reduced the cost of labor for agribusiness, working at stoop labor which few Anglo-Americans, even the poorest, would perform. The 1930’s, however, brought hungry hordes of Arkansas and Oklahomans to the Southwest, displacing the Mexicanos in the farm and in the city. Many Mexicanos were forced to go on relief.”

- *From A Mexican American Chronicle*

6. MEXICAN AMERICANS

“In the 1930’s, to ease the strain on United States; resources, the federal government sent back to Mexico tens of thousands of Mexican Americans who were on relief. Sometimes whole families were herded aboard cattle cars and transported south of the border. Many of these people had actually been born in the United States and were United States citizens. Many of the men had served in the armed forces during World War I. But such considerations were overlooked in carrying out the policy of deportation. Mexican Americans were encouraged, even “helped,” to leave the United States.”

- from *The Mexican American*

6. MEXICAN AMERICANS

“The economic crisis and intensified class struggle of the 1930’s resulted in the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers from the U.S. As unemployment in the southwest soared - worsened by the migration of over a million people into California from other parts of the United States between 1930 and 1940 - as urban Mexican communities in such cities as Los Angeles began to rebel against their oppression, and as farm labor strikes flared up throughout California, the steel net of the border “gestapo” swept through the MExican barrios. In California, in particular, the militancy of the Mexican workers - many of who were active trade unionists and members of the Communist Party - met fierce repression. More than 75,000 Mexicanos were deported from Los Angeles alone in 1931.”

-from *Beyond the Border: Mexico and the U.S. Today*

6. MEXICAN AMERICANS

“It will be necessary for the County of Los Angeles to furnish transportation for these people in order to move them out. I therefore respectfully request that the sum of \$6000.00 be authorized to be expended in this manner, thus ridding ourselves of a large number of Mexicans who have been or are in danger of becoming dependent upon the County.”

- Los Angeles County Clerk to the Board of Supervisors, 2-10-31

6. MEXICAN AMERICANS

“As a result of the depression, by early 1930 a change had begun to take place in the Anglo American stereotype of Mexicans, at least in the Southwest. Many Anglos in the Southwest considered Mexican as a foreign, short-term laborer, who had no rights to welfare benefits. They thought the answer was ridiculously simple: send Mexicans back to Mexico. Many repatriated Mexicans had been living in the United States for decades and had children who were United States citizens by birth, who therefore could not be legally deported. The surprising aspect of repatriation is that very few Americans spoke out in defense of the constitutional rights of their fellow citizens, and a majority condoned these repatriation programs.”

- from *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans*

7. MIGRANT WORKERS

“The forgotten man is still forgotten.”

- J.W.C., worker, 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

"Why does Every Thing have Exceptional Value. Except Human being?"

- Anonymous letter to Herbert Hoover, 1930 in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten man*

"We ain't no paupers. We hold ourselves to be decent folks. We don't want no relief. But what we do want is a chanst to make an honest living like what we was raised."

- one of the down and out, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

7. MIGRANT WORKERS

“I have worked hard all my life, and all I have now is my broken body.”

- California field hand, in *This Fabulous Century*

"This is hard life to swallow, but I just couldn't sit back there and look to
someone feed us."

- Migratory worker, in *This Fabulous Century*

7. MIGRANT WORKERS

“October- December 1932. Cut Malaga and muscat grapes near Fresno. About \$40 a month. December 1932. Left from Imperial Valley, California February 1933. Picked peas, Imperial Valley Earned \$30 for season. On account of weather, was fortunate to break even. March-April 1933. Left for Chicago. Returned to California. May 1933. Odd jobs on lawns and radios at Fresno. June 1933. Picked figs near Fresno. Earned \$50 in two months.”

- migratory worker's logbook, in *This Fabulous Century*

"When they need us they call us migrants. When we've ckd their crops we're bums and we've got to get out."

- Migratory worker, in *This Fabulous Century*

7. MIGRANT WORKERS

“[Highway] 66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert’s slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there.”

- from *The Grapes of Wrath*

“Our people are good people, our people are kind people. Pray God some day kind people won’t all be poor. Pray God some day a kid can eat.”

- from *The Grapes of Wrath*

7. MIGRANT WORKERS

“The moving, questing people were migrants now. Those families which had lived on a little piece of land, who had lived and died on forty acres, had eaten or starved on the produce of forty acres, had now the whole West to rove in. And they scampered about, looking for work; and the highways were streams of people, and the ditch banks were lines of people. Behind them more were coming The movement changed them; the highways, the camps along the road, the fear of hunger and the hunger itself, changed them. The children without dinner changed them, the endless moving changed them. They were migrants.”

-from *The Grapes of Wrath*

8. WOMEN

“For the last three or four years we have had depression and suffered with my family and little children severely....I am living in this house for about ten years and when times were good we would put our last cent in the house and now I have no money, no home, and no wheres to go. I beg of you to please help me and my family and little children for the sake of a sick mother and suffering family to give this your immediate attention so we will not be forced to move or put out in the street.”

- Letter to F.D.R. from Mrs. E.L., 1934, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

8. WOMEN

“Long as I can work, I’ll get along somehow.”

- Mother suffering from tuberculosis, in *This Fabulous Century*

“No work, no hope: just live from one day to the next. Maybe better times are coming. Personally, I doubt it.”

- Small-town housewife, 1933, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

8. WOMEN

“I am a widow with a son fourteen years of age and am trying to support him and myself and keep him in school on a very small sum which I make. I feel worthy of asking you about this: I am greatly in need of a Coat. If you have one which you have laid aside from last season would appreciate it so much if you would send it to me.”

- Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, 1934, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

8. WOMEN

“But I hope some day things will be a little better. It is hard to send you children to school. With hardly anything to eat. And not the warmer kind of clothes. I have three little children and I can hardly feed them right: because. Dont have the right kind of thing: I have one sickly child and he need milk I can’t buy the milk for him because my Husband wages are small.”

- Letter to Harry Hopkins, Federal Relief Administrator, 1935, in *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*

8. WOMEN

“The bank foreclosed the mortgage on the family farm. And the women went quickly, quietly back into the houses and herded the children ahead of them. They knew that a man so hurt and so perplexed may turn in anger, even on people he loves. They left the men along to figure and to wonder in the dust....The children crowded about the women in the houses. What we going to do, Ma? Where we going to go? The women said, We don't know yet. Go out and play. But don't go near your father. He might whale you if you go near him. And the women went on with the work.”

- From *The Grapes of Wrath*