The Other Side of American Life

Guide to Reading

Main Idea
Not everyone in the United States prospered during the nation's postwar boom, as millions of minorities and rural whites struggled daily with poverty.

Key Terms and Names
poverty line, Michael Harrington, urban renewal, Bracero program, termination policy, juvenile delinquency

Reading Strategy
Taking Notes As you read about social problems in the United States in the 1950s, use the major headings of the section to create an outline similar to the one below.

Reading Objectives
• Identify those groups that found themselves left out of the American economic boom following World War II.
• Explain the factors that contributed to the poverty among various groups.

Section Theme
Continuity and Change For some groups, poverty continued during the apparent abundance of the 1950s.

Previews of Events

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<th>1953</th>
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<td>1953 Federal government institutes termination policy directed at Native Americans</td>
<td>1956 Rudolf Flesch's Why Johnny Can't Read published</td>
<td>1959 A Raisin in the Sun opens on Broadway</td>
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An American Story

In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry’s play, A Raisin in the Sun, opened on Broadway. The play told the story of a working-class African American family struggling against poverty and racism. The title referred to a Langston Hughes poem that wonders what happens to an unrealized dream: “Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” Hansberry’s play won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the best play of the year. Reflecting later upon the play’s theme, she wrote:

"Vulgarity, blind conformity, and mass lethargy need not triumph in the land of Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. . . . There is simply no reason why dreams should dry up like raisins or prunes or anything else in the United States. . . . I believe that we can impose beauty on our future."

—adapted from To Be Young, Gifted, and Black

Poverty Amidst Prosperity

The booming 1950s saw a tremendous expansion of the middle class. In 1950, about 1 in 3 Americans were poor. By 1959, only 1 in 5 were poor. Despite these dramatic gains, about 30 million people still lived below the poverty line, a figure set by the government to reflect the minimum income required to support a family. Such poverty
remained invisible to most Americans, who assumed that the country’s general prosperity had provided everyone with a comfortable existence. The writer Michael Harrington, however, made no such assumptions. During the 1950s, Harrington set out to chronicle poverty in the United States. In his book, The Other America, published in 1962, he alerted those in the mainstream to what he saw in the run-down and hidden communities of the country:

"Tens of millions of Americans are, at this very moment, maimed in body and spirit, existing at levels beneath those necessary for human decency. If these people are not starving, they are hungry, and sometimes fat with hunger, for that is what cheap foods do. They are without adequate housing and education and medical care."

—from The Other America

The poor included single mothers and the elderly; minority immigrants such as Puerto Ricans and Mexicans; rural Americans, black and white; and inner city residents, who remained stuck in crowded slums as wealthier citizens fled to the suburbs. Poverty also gripped many Americans in the nation’s Appalachian region, which stretches from Pennsylvania to Georgia, as well as Native Americans, many of whom endured grinding poverty whether they stayed on reservations or migrated to cities.

**ECONOMICS**

The Decline of the Inner City The poverty in the 1950s was most apparent in the nation’s urban centers. As white families moved to the suburbs, many inner cities became home to poorer, less educated minority groups. The centers of many cities deteriorated, because as the middle class moved out, their tax money went with them. This deprived inner cities of the tax dollars necessary to provide adequate public transportation, housing, and other services.

When government tried to help inner city residents, it often made matters worse. During the 1950s, for example, urban renewal programs tried to eliminate poverty by tearing down slums and erecting new high-rise buildings for poor residents. The crowded, anonymous conditions of these high-rise projects, however, often created an atmosphere of violence. The government also unwittingly encouraged the residents of public housing to remain poor by evicting them as soon as they began to earn any money.

In the end, urban renewal programs actually destroyed more housing space than they created. Too often in the name of urban improvement, the wrecking ball destroyed poor people’s homes to make way for roadways, parks, universities, tree-lined boulevards, or shopping centers.

**African Americans** Many of the citizens left behind in the cities as families fled to the suburbs were African American. The large number of African American inner city residents resulted largely from the migration of more than 3 million African Americans from the South to the North between 1940 and 1960.

Many African Americans had migrated in the hopes of finding greater economic opportunity and escaping violence and racial intimidation. For many of these migrants, however, life proved to be little better in Northern cities. Fewer and fewer jobs were available as numerous factories and mills left the cities for suburbs and smaller towns in order to cut their costs. Long-standing patterns of racial discrimination in schools, housing, hiring, and salaries in the North kept inner-city African Americans poor. The last hired and the first fired for good jobs, they often remained stuck in the worst-paying occupations. In 1958 African American salaries, on average, equaled only 51 percent of what whites earned.

**Picturing History**

*Inner-City Poverty* This young African American girl in Chicago’s inner city struggles to fill a bowl with water that has frozen due to lack of heat. Why did the numbers of poor in the country’s inner cities grow in the 1950s?
Poverty and racial discrimination also deprived many African Americans of other benefits, such as decent medical care. Responding to a correspondent who had seen _A Raisin in the Sun_, Lorraine Hansberry wrote, “The ghettos are killing us; not only our dreams... but our very bodies. It is not an abstraction to us that the average [African American] has a life expectancy of five to ten years less than the average white.” Several African American groups, such as the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), pressed for greater economic opportunity for African Americans. In general, however, these organizations met with little success.

**Hispanics** African Americans were not the only minority group that struggled with poverty. Much of the nation’s Hispanic population faced the same problems. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the _Bracero program_ brought nearly 5 million Mexicans to the United States to work on farms and ranches in the Southwest. The Braceros were temporary contract workers, and many later returned home. Some came with their families, however, and about 350,000 settled permanently in the United States.

These laborers, who worked on large farms throughout the country, lived a life of extreme poverty and hardship. They toiled long hours for little pay in conditions that were often unbearable. As Michael Harrington noted, “[The nation’s migrant laborers] work ten-eleven-twelve hour days in temperatures over one hundred degrees. Sometimes there is no drinking water... Women and children work on ladders and with hazardous machinery. Babies are brought to the field and are placed in ‘cradles’ of wood boxes.”

Away from the fields, many Mexican families lived in small, crudely built shacks, while some did not even have a roof over their heads. “They sleep where they can, some in the open,” Harrington noted about one group of migrant workers. “They eat when they can (and sometimes what they can).” The nation would pay little attention to the plight of Mexican farm laborers until the 1960s, when the workers began to organize for greater rights.

**Native Americans** Native Americans also faced challenges throughout the postwar era of prosperity. By the middle of the 1900s, Native Americans—who made up less than one percent of the population—were the poorest group in the nation. Average annual family income for Native American families, for example, was $1,000 less than that for African Americans.

After World War II, during which many Native American soldiers had served with distinction, the U.S. government launched a program to bring Native Americans into mainstream society—whether they wanted to assimilate or not. Under the plan, which became known as the _termination policy_, the federal government withdrew all official recognition of the Native American groups as legal entities and made them subject to the same laws as white citizens. At the same time, the government encouraged Native Americans to blend in to larger society by helping them move off the reservations to cities such as Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Although the idea of integrating Native Americans into mainstream society began with good intentions, some of its supporters had more selfish goals. Speculators and developers sometimes gained rich farmland at the expense of destitute Native American groups.

Most Native Americans found termination a disastrous policy that only deepened their poverty. In the mid-1950s, for example, the Welfare Council of Minneapolis described Native American living conditions in that city as miserable. “One Indian family of five or six, living in two rooms, will take in relatives and friends who come from the reservations seeking jobs until perhaps fifteen people will be crowded into the space,” the council reported. During the 1950s, Native Americans in Minneapolis could expect to live only 37 years, compared to 46

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**Picturing History**

**Vocational Training** Native American Franklin Beaver learns to become a stone mason at this vocational school sponsored by the U.S. Indian Bureau. Why was the government trying to bring Native Americans into mainstream society?
Poverty in Appalachia

This milling family lived in the kind of extreme poverty that was often overlooked in the 1950s. Eight people lived in this three-room house lined with newspaper. Why was infant mortality so high in Appalachia?

years for all Minnesota Native Americans and 68 years for other Minneapolis residents. Benjamin Reifel, a Sioux, described the widespread despair that the termination policy produced:

"The Indians believed that when the dark clouds of war passed from the skies overhead, their rising tide of expectations, though temporarily stalled, would again reappear. Instead they were threatened by termination... Soaring expectations began to plunge. Termination took on the connotation of extermination for many."

—quoted in The Earth Shall Weep

Appalachia

The nation's minorities were not the only people dealing with poverty. The picturesque streams and mountains of Appalachia hid the ruined mines, scarred hills, and abandoned farms of impoverished families who had dwelled in these hills for generations.

During the 1950s, 1.5 million people abandoned Appalachia to seek a better life in the nation's cities. They left behind elderly and other less mobile residents. "Whole counties," wrote one reporter who visited the region, "are precariously held together by a flour-and-dried-milk paste of surplus foods... The men who are no longer needed in the mines and the farmers who cannot compete... have themselves become surplus commodities in the mountains."

A host of statistics spoke to Appalachia's misery. Studies revealed high rates of nutritional deficiency and infant mortality. Appalachia had fewer doctors per thousand people than the rest of the country, and the doctors it did have were older than their counterparts in other areas. In addition, schooling in the region was considered even worse than in inner city slums.

Reading Check Identifying Which groups of people were left out of the country's economic boom of the 1950s?

Juvenile Delinquency

During the 1950s, many middle-class white Americans found it easy to ignore the poverty and racism that afflicted many of the nation's minorities, since they themselves were removed from it. Some social problems, however, became impossible to ignore.

One problem at this time was a rise in, or at least a rise in the reporting of juvenile delinquency—antisocial or criminal behavior of young people. Between 1948 and 1953, the United States saw a 45 percent rise in juvenile crime rates. A popular 1954 book titled 1,000,000 Delinquents correctly calculated that in the following year, about 1 million young people would get into some kind of criminal trouble. Car thefts topped the list of juvenile crimes, but people were
and racial lines—the majority of car thieves, for example, had grown up in middle-class homes. Most teens, of course, steered clear of gangs, drugs, and crime. Nonetheless, the public tended to stereotype young people as juvenile delinquents, especially those teens who favored unconventional clothing, long hair, or street slang.

Many parents were also growing concerned over the nation’s educational system. As baby boomers began entering the school system, they ignited a spurt in school construction. During the 1950s, school enrollments increased by 13 million. School districts struggled to erect new buildings and hire new teachers. Nevertheless, shortages sprang up in both buildings and the people to staff them.

Americans’ education worries only intensified in 1957 after the Soviet Union launched the world’s first space satellites, Sputnik I and Sputnik II. Many Americans felt they had fallen behind their Cold War enemy and blamed what they felt was a lack of technical education in the nation’s schools. Life magazine proclaimed a “Crisis in Education,” and offered a grim warning: “What has long been an ignored national problem, Sputnik has made a recognized crisis.” In the wake of the Sputnik launches, efforts began to improve math and science education in the schools. Profound fears about the country’s young people, it seemed, dominated the end of a decade that had brought great progress for many Americans.
Why Learn This Skill?

Journal writing is personal writing with a casual style. The style in which you write is not as important as what you write about—your experiences, interests, and feelings. Journal writing can help you generate new ideas, and it can also give you a clearer picture of your thoughts and help you put them in order.

Learning the Skill

A journal is a written account that records what you have learned or experienced. In a journal you can express your feelings about a subject, summarize key topics, describe difficulties or successes in solving particular problems, and draw maps or other visuals. To help you get started writing in your journal, follow these steps.

- Jot down notes or questions about a specific topic or event as you read your textbook. Then look for details and answers about it as you continue reading.
- Describe your feelings as you read a selection or look at a photograph. Are you angry, happy, frustrated, or sad? Explain why you are reacting in this way.
- Ask yourself if drawing a map or flowchart would help you understand an event better. If so, draw in your journal.

Practicing the Skill

The following excerpt is a journal entry describing the launching of the nation’s first satellite in 1958. Read the excerpt, and then use the following questions to help you write entries in your own journal.

“As the firing command neared, a deadly silence fell on those who were watching. ... At fourteen and one-half seconds after time zero, after the priming fuel had ignited almost invisibly, the main stage engine came to life with an immeasurable thrust of flame in all directions. ... With thousands of eyes following it, the rocket dug into the night and accelerated as its sound loudened. Spectators on nearby beaches pointed and craned their necks and cried, ‘There it is!’ and began to cheer.”

1. What is particularly interesting about this description?
2. What are your feelings as you read the excerpt?
3. Note the descriptive phrases and details that make the event come to life. Try to use similar techniques when writing in your journal.
4. Draw a map or other visual to help you understand the situation described here.

Skills Assessment

Complete the Practicing Skills questions on page 713 and the Chapter 22 Skill Reinforcement Activity to assess your mastery of this skill.

Applying the Skill

Writing a Journal  Imagine that you have had the chance to take part in a great adventure—for instance, serving in the armed forces during a war overseas or participating in a spaceflight. Make notes for a journal entry describing what you have done and seen.

Glencoe’s Skillbuilder Interactive Workbook CD-ROM, Level 2, provides instruction and practice in key social studies skills.
Chapter Summary

**Signs of Prosperity**

- The GI Bill provided loans to millions of war veterans.
- Consumer spending increased rapidly.
- More Americans owned homes than ever before.

**Signs of Inequality**

- Workers went on strike for higher wages.
- Truman’s civil rights bill did not pass.
- Eisenhower cut back New Deal programs.
- Financially able people moved from crowded cities to new suburbs.
- Many poor people remained in cities that now faced major economic and social problems.
- Many poor people in inner cities and rural areas had limited access to health care.

### Economy

- The U.S. population grew dramatically.
- The number of working women increased.

### Population Patterns

- Medical breakthroughs included the polio vaccine, antibiotics, and treatments for heart disease, arthritis, cancer, and diabetes.
- Improvements in communication, transportation, and electronics allowed Americans to work more efficiently.

### Science, Technology, and Medicine

- Popular culture included new forms of music, radio, cinema, and literature.
- Television replaced radio as the nation’s newest form of mass media.

### Popular Culture

- African Americans and other minorities were, for the most part, not depicted on television.
- Many television programs promoted stereotypical gender roles.
he has unwittingly cast his vote a hundred times for entertainment or for education. Without his knowing it, he has helped to determine the very character of our three most important media of communication—the press, radio, and television.

—quoted in Vital Speeches of the Day

a. According to Gallup, what is a threat to the future of the United States in the world?

b. How do American citizens determine what is read, seen, and heard in the mass media?

26. Organizing Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to list the changes to the American family during the 1950s.

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Practicing Skills

27. Writing a Journal Imagine that you are Dr. Jonas Salk, and you realize that you have just discovered the world’s first successful polio vaccine. Write a journal entry that describes how you feel about this accomplishment and what impact it will have on the world.

Writing Activity

28. Writing a Book Report Read one of the books about American society in the 1950s, such as Why Johnny Can’t Read or The Other America. Write a book report explaining the main concepts of the book and whether or not the issues are similar to or different from the main issues in American society today.

Chapter Activities

29. American History Primary Source Document Library CD-ROM Read the speech “On Television” by Newton Minow, under The Postwar World. Working with a few of your classmates, evaluate whether television has improved since Minow’s critical assessment. Has television content changed since the 1950s? If so, how? Present your findings and comparisons to your class.

30. Research Project Work with a small group to research advertisements from the 1950s. Write a report comparing and contrasting advertisements from that decade with advertisements today. Present one or more of the advertisements along with your comparisons to your class.

Geography and History

31. The graph above shows the number of suburban dwellers in the United States as a percentage of the total population. Study the data displayed in the graph and answer the questions below.

a. Interpreting Graphs: What trend in the percentage of suburban dwellers does this graph show?

b. Understanding Cause and Effect: How might the trend of suburban dwellers shown on this graph have affected life in suburbs and cities?

Directions: Choose the phrase that best completes the following statement.

Which of the following did the Eisenhower administration work to achieve?

F Fixing wage and price controls
G Defeating the Federal Highway Act
H Repealing right-to-work laws
J Extending the Social Security system

Test Taking Tip: Pay careful attention to the wording of the question. Note that three of the four answer choices were not part of Eisenhower’s programs.
before they could be spoken. He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling. From his pocket poured clippings, memos, statistics. Mimicry, humor, and the genius of analogy made The Treatment an almost hypnotic experience and rendered the target stunned and helpless.

—from Lyndon Johnson: The Exercise of Power

With every technique he could think of, Johnson sought to find consensus, or general agreement. His ability to build coalitions had made him one of the most effective and powerful leaders in the Senate's history.

A War on Poverty As president, Johnson used his considerable talents to push through a number of Kennedy's initiatives. Before the end of 1964, he won passage of a tax cut, a major civil rights bill, and a significant anti-poverty program.

Why was this powerful man so concerned about poor people? Johnson liked to exaggerate the poor conditions of his childhood for dramatic effect, but he had in fact known hard times. He had also seen extreme poverty firsthand in a brief career as a teacher in a low-income area. Johnson understood suffering, and he believed deeply in social action. He felt that a wealthy, powerful government could and should try to improve the lives of its citizens. Kennedy himself had said of Johnson, "He really cares about this nation." Finally, there was Johnson's ambition. He wanted to achieve great things so that history would record him as a great president. Attacking poverty was a good place to begin.

Plans for an anti-poverty program were already in place when Johnson took office, and he knew that he would be able to command strong support for any program that could be linked to Kennedy. In his State of the Union address to Congress in 1964, barely seven weeks after taking office, President Johnson told his audience: "Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope, some because of their poverty and some because of their color and all too many because of both." Johnson concluded his speech by announcing that his administration was declaring an "unconditional war on poverty in America."

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"...many Americans live on the outskirts of hope..."

—Lyndon Johnson

**Picturing History**

Rural Poverty Photographs such as this one of Alice Mae Wyatt and her children—6-year-old Sally and 17-month-old Henry—shocked many Americans and won support for Johnson's programs. Why was the president so concerned about poverty?
By the summer of 1964, Johnson had convinced Congress to pass the Economic Opportunity Act. The act established a wide range of programs aimed at creating jobs and fighting poverty. It also created a new government agency, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to coordinate the new programs. Many of the new programs were directed at young Americans living in the inner city. The Neighborhood Youth Corps provided work-study programs to help underprivileged young men and women earn a high school diploma or college degree. The Job Corps tried to help young unemployed people find jobs. One of the more dramatic programs introduced was VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), which was essentially a domestic Peace Corps. VISTA put young people with skills and community-minded ideals to work in poor neighborhoods and rural areas to help people overcome poverty.

The Election of 1964 As early as April 1964, Fortune magazine declared, “Lyndon Johnson has achieved a breadth of public approval few observers would have believed possible when he took office.” Johnson had little time to enjoy such praise, for he was soon to run for the office he had first gained through a tragic event.

Johnson’s Republican opponent in the 1964 presidential election was Barry Goldwater of Arizona, a senator known for his outspoken conservatism. He set the tone for his campaign when he accepted his party’s nomination, declaring, “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!”

Few Americans were ready to embrace Goldwater’s message, which was too aggressive for a nation nervous about nuclear war. On Election Day, Johnson won in a landslide, winning all but five southern states and Arizona. “For the first time in my life,” he said later, “I truly felt loved by the American people.”

The Great Society was Johnson’s vision of the more perfect and equitable society the United States could and should become. According to Bill Moyers, who served as Johnson’s press secretary, Johnson admired Franklin Roosevelt and wanted to fulfill FDR’s mission. To do that would require a program that would be on the same large scale as the New Deal.

Johnson’s goals were consistent with the times for several reasons. The civil rights movement had brought the grievances of African Americans to the forefront, reminding many that greater equality of opportunity had yet to be realized. Economics also supported Johnson’s goal. The economy was strong, and many believed it would remain so indefinitely. There was no reason, therefore, that poverty could not be significantly reduced—especially when some had so much and others had so little.

Johnson first elaborated on the goals of the Great Society during a speech at the University of Michigan. It was clear that the president did not intend only to expand relief to the poor or to confine government efforts to material things. The president wanted, he said, to build a better society for all, a society “where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, . . . where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community. . . .”

READING CHECK

Examine the Great Society and the War on Poverty.