

# SECTION 4 The Other Side of American Life

## Guide to Reading

### Main Idea

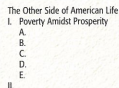
Not everyone in the United States prospered during the nation's postwar boom, as millions of minorities and rural whites struggled daily with poverty.

### 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.

### Preview of Events



## ★ An American Story ★



Lorraine Hansberry

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.”

Postwar prosperity had bypassed many segments of the population. Minorities and the poor wondered when they could seize their own piece of the American dream.

—adapted from *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*

### Poverty Amidst Prosperity

Although the 1950s saw a tremendous expansion of the middle class, at least 1 in 5 Americans, or about 30 million people, lived below the **poverty line**, a figure the government set 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 1940s and 1950s, the country witnessed a sharp rise in the number of Hispanic residents, as nearly 5 million Mexicans immigrated to the United States. They came to help fill the country's agricultural labor need through what was known as the **Bracero program**.

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



### Picturing History

**Poverty in Appalachia** This mining 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 Refel, 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

four-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

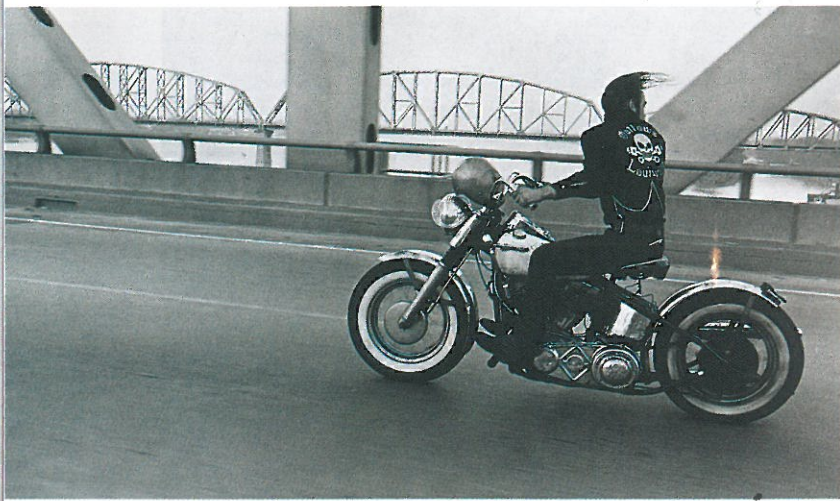
During the 1950s, many middle-class white Americans found it easy to ignore the poverty and racism that afflicted many of the nation's minorities, since they themselves were removed from it. Some social problems, however, became impossible to ignore.

One problem at this time was a rise in, or at least a rise in the reporting of, **juvenile delinquency**—anti-social 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

### 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?](#)





**Rebelling Against Conformity** This biker, one of the Louisville “Outlaws,” fits the stereotype of the 1950s juvenile delinquent.

also alarmed at the behavior of young people who belonged to street gangs and committed muggings, rape, and even murder.

Americans could not agree on what had triggered the rise in delinquency. Experts blamed it on a host of reasons, including poverty, lack of religion, television, movies, comic books, racism, busy parents, a rising divorce rate, and anxiety over the military draft. Some cultural critics claimed that young people were rebelling against the hypocrisy and conformity of their parents. Conservative commentators pinned the blame on a lack of discipline. Doting parents, complained Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, had raised bored children who sought new thrills, such as “alcohol, marijuana, even murder.” Liberal observers preferred to pinpoint social causes, blaming teen violence on poverty and feelings of hopelessness among underprivileged youths. Delinquency in the 1950s, however, cut across class

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.

**✓ Reading Check** **Evaluating** How did many Americans feel about the education system of the 1950s?

## SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT

### Checking for Understanding

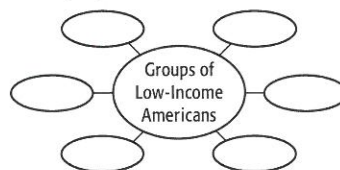
- Define:** poverty line, urban renewal, termination policy, juvenile delinquency.
- Identify:** Michael Harrington, Bracero program.
- Evaluate** how the federal government’s termination policy affected Native Americans.

### Reviewing Themes

- Continuity and Change** Why did urban renewal fail the poor of the inner cities?

### Critical Thinking

- Interpreting** What were some possible reasons for a dramatic rise in juvenile delinquency in the 1950s?
- Organizing** Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to list the groups of Americans who were left out of the country’s postwar economic boom.



### Analyzing Visuals

- Analyzing Photographs** Study the photograph on this page. What in the photograph might attract young people to this type of life? Why would others oppose such a life?

### Writing About History

- Expository Writing** Using library or Internet resources, find information about juvenile delinquency in the United States today to write a report. Compare today’s problems with those of the 1950s. Share your report with the class.