

# The Other Side of American Life

## Guide to Reading

### Connection

In the previous section, you learned about new forms of entertainment. In this section, you will discover how some Americans were left out of the new prosperity.

### Main Idea

- Despite the growing affluence of much of the nation, many groups still lived in poverty. (p. 689)
- Concerns about rising juvenile delinquency and failing educational systems surfaced during the late 1950s. (p. 692)

### Content Vocabulary

poverty line, urban renewal, termination policy, juvenile delinquency

### Academic Vocabulary

abstraction, conformity, technical

### People and Terms to Identify

Michael Harrington, Bracero program

### 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.

### 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.

The Other Side of American Life  
I. Poverty Amidst Prosperity  
A.  
B.  
C.  
D.  
E.  
II.

### Preview of Events

1953

1953

Federal government institutes termination policy directed at Native Americans

1956

1955

Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* published

1959

1959

*A Raisin in the Sun* opens on Broadway

1962

1962

Michael Harrington's *The Other America* published

The following are the main History–Social Science Standards covered in this section.

**11.8.2** Describe the significance of Mexican immigration and its relationship to the agricultural economy, especially in California.

**11.8.4** Analyze new federal government spending on defense, welfare, interest on the national debt, and federal and state spending on education, including the California Master Plan.

**11.10.1** Explain how demands of African Americans helped produce a stimulus for civil rights, including President Roosevelt's ban on racial discrimination in defense industries in 1941, and how African Americans' service in World War II produced a stimulus for President Truman's decision to end segregation in the armed forces in 1948.

## The Big Idea

**Societies change over time.** Despite the increasing prosperity in the United States, many minorities and rural whites continued to struggle with poverty. When people and businesses moved from the cities to the suburbs, the inner cities began to decline. Many of the people left behind were African Americans who faced racial discrimination when searching for employment. Hispanics and Native Americans often faced similar problems. During the 1950s, as people left Appalachia to search for better lives in the cities, they left behind the elderly and those who could not travel. The result was extreme poverty, along with poor nutrition and insufficient healthcare, for those who remained. Americans paid more attention to a rise in juvenile delinquency and inadequate educational systems.

## Poverty Amidst Prosperity

**Main Idea** Despite the growing affluence of much of the nation, many groups still lived in poverty.

**Reading Connection** Are the pockets of poverty in America today the same as they were in the 1950s? Read on to discover groups who were left out of the general economic boom of the 1950s.

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.

### ★ 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*

**Michael Harrington** was another writer concerned with 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; people with disabilities; 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.

**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

▼ Lorraine Hansberry



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.

### 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?](#)



Many African Americans had migrated in 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.

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

## 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?**



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 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 those 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

**Main Idea** Concerns about rising juvenile delinquency and failing educational systems surfaced during the late 1950s.

**Reading Connection** Describe the differences and similarities between juveniles in the 1950s and juveniles today. Read on to discover the growing rate of juvenile delinquency during the 1950s.

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 also alarmed at the behavior of young people who belonged to 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

## 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?](#)



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



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

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?

**HISTORY Online**  **Study Central**

For help with the concepts in this section of *American Vision: Modern Times* go to [tav.mt.glencoe.com](http://tav.mt.glencoe.com) and click on **Study Central**.

**SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT**

**Checking for Understanding**

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

**Reviewing Big Ideas**

- Explaining** 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. **CA 11WS1.6**

# Primary Sources

## Eyewitness to History

*The 1950s has been depicted as a period of prosperity and conformity. Retreating from the turmoil of World War II and the threat of the Cold War, Americans tried to cling to the security of home and family.*

### SOURCE 1:

*Sociologist William H. Whyte, Jr., studied the lives and beliefs of men who worked in large businesses. In *The Organization Man*, published in 1956, he reported that rugged individualism had disappeared in favor of conformity.*

Not in the materialism of heroes but in their attitude toward society is where the change has taken place. In older fiction there was some element of conflict between the individual and his environment; no matter how much assisted by coincidence, the hero had to do something—or at least seem to do something—before he got his reward. Rarely now. Society is so **benevolent**<sup>1</sup> that there is no conflict left in it for anyone to be rebellious about. The hero only thinks there is.

Stories must have at least the appearance of a conflict if they are to be stories, but contemporary writers get around this by taking a chunk of environment and then in some fashion disguising its true goodness from the hero. Since this means that the hero's troubles stem from a false image of life, the climax is easily resolved. The author simply tears the veil away. It was really okay all along only the hero didn't know it. Relieved, the hero learns the wisdom of accepting what probably would have happened anyway. . . .

But the general run of current self-improvement books shows a rather steep divergence from the old tradition. On the surface they do not seem to, and



▲ *A typical street in Levittown, Pennsylvania*

their titles promise the old fare. Essentially, however, what they tell you to do is to adjust to the situation rather than change it. . . . [T]he picture they present is one of an essentially benevolent society, and the peace of mind or the positive thinking **extolled**<sup>2</sup> is a kind of resignation to it.

### SOURCE 2:

*William Levitt responded to the enormous demand for housing after World War II by constructing entirely new neighborhoods in several states. A *Time* article from July 3, 1950, describes one of these neighborhoods.*

Like its counterparts across the land, Levittown is an entirely new kind of community. Despite its size, it is not incorporated, thus has no mayor, no police force, nor any of the other traditional city officers of its own.

<sup>1</sup>**benevolent:** kind

<sup>2</sup>**extolled:** highly praised



▲ *Elvis Presley on The Steve Allen Show*

It has no movies, no nightclubs and only three bars (all in the community shopping centers).

And Levittown has very few old people. Few of its more than 40,000 residents are past 35; of some 8,000 children, scarcely 900 are more than seven years old. In front of almost every house along Levittown's 100 miles of winding streets sits a tricycle or a baby carriage. In Levittown, all activity stops from 12 to 2 in the afternoon; that is nap time. Said one Levittowner last week, "Everyone is so young that sometimes it's hard to remember how to get along with older people."

The community has an almost antiseptic air. Levittown streets, which have such fanciful names as Satellite, Horizon, Haymaker, are bare and flat as hospital corridors. Like a hospital, Levittown has rules all its own. Fences are not allowed (though here and there a home-owner has broken the rule). The plot of grass around each home must be cut at least once a week; if not, Bill Levitt's men mow the grass and send the bill. Wash cannot be hung out to dry on an ordinary clothesline; it must be arranged on rotary, removable drying racks, and then not on weekends or holidays. . . .

### SOURCE 3:

*Elvis Presley's swiveling hips upset many people. He became the target of those who believed that rock 'n' roll was too dangerous for American youth. In the July 16, 1956, issue of Newsweek, John Lardner reviewed Presley's appearance on The Steve Allen Show.*

There is nothing to be said against Elvis—and many people have said it—except that when placed in front of a microphone, he behaves like an outboard motor. . . .

Nonetheless, we all watched with interest last week when one of our number, Steve Allen, made a public attempt to neutralize, calm, or de-twitch Elvis Presley, the lively singer.

Allen did this, one assumes, in what he personally considers the best interests of civilization. . . . Civilization today is sharply divided into two schools which cannot stand the sight of each other. One school, Allen's . . . believes in underplaying, or underbidding, or waiting 'em out. The other, Presley's, is committed to the strategy of open defiance, of confusing 'em, of yelling 'em down. The hips and the Adam's apple . . . must be quicker than the eye. . . .

When Allen made his move last week to mute and frustrate Presley . . . [he] was nervous, like a man trying to embalm a firecracker. Presley was distraught, like Huckleberry Finn, when the widow put him in a store suit and told him not to gap or scratch.

Allen's ethics were questionable from the start. He fouled Presley . . . by dressing him like a corpse, in white tie and **tails**.<sup>3</sup> This is a costume often seen on star performers at funerals, but only when the deceased has specifically requested it in his will. Elvis made no such request—or for that matter, no will. . . .

<sup>3</sup>**tails:** man's tuxedo coat with long tapering ends

### DBQ Document-Based Questions

Historical Analysis

CA HR4; HI2

**Source 1:** Why does Whyte believe that conflict has disappeared?

**Source 2:** How were the people in Levittown similar?

**Source 3:** According to Lardner, why did some people dislike Elvis?

### Comparing and Contrasting Sources

How is conformity addressed in each of the accounts?