

How did the Depression affect people in the cities?

Unemployment

The most obvious effect of the Depression was the loss of jobs. In industrial areas, mostly the cities of the North and West, unemployment rose rapidly. By 1933 the number out of work had risen to at least 14 million.

Many factory and office workers who had done so well out of the boom of the 1920s lost their jobs. Businesses, hit by falling demand, either laid off workers or reduced their wages. At worst, whole factories were shut down. During the Depression, car production was cut by 80 per cent, and road and building construction fell by 92 per cent. The average hourly wage in the manufacturing industries fell from 59 cents in 1926 to 44 cents in 1933.

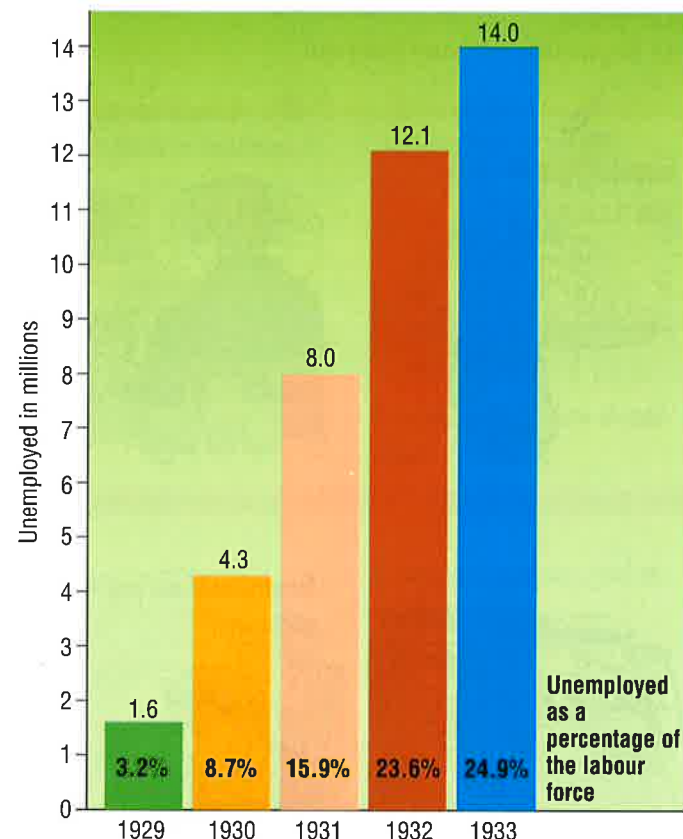
Men and women who lost their jobs rarely found other regular work – and unemployment meant poverty. Men would often spend the whole day tramping the streets, looking for work. Any possibility of a job attracted huge queues of men, patiently standing in line – in the vain hope that they would be lucky.

Homelessness

When people lost their jobs, they fell behind with their mortgage repayments. They were forced to sell their homes or hand them over to the banks. Those who fell behind with rent payments were evicted, often violently.

Thousands were taken in by relatives, but a vast number of people had nowhere to go. They ended up on the streets, homeless and destitute. Many lived in shelters made of packing cases and corrugated iron. Others slept on park benches or in warehouses. Some deliberately got themselves arrested because a night in jail meant a bed and some food.

A large number of men (estimated at two million in 1932) travelled from place to place on railway freight wagons, seeking work. Many became tramps, living in tents by the tracks. Thousands of children were to be found living in railcars or close to the railway lines and riding in or under the freight wagons.



SOURCE 1 Unemployment in the USA, 1929–33

SOURCE 2 The American journalist, Beulah Amidon, described a car factory hit by the Depression in *Toledo: A City the Auto Ran Over*, *Survey*, 1 March 1930. The vast majority of people in Toledo worked in industries connected with the making of cars

“When I was taken through some of the eighty-seven buildings that make up the plant I was reminded of the old desert towns left in the wake of the mining rush. There was the same sense of suspended life, as I moved among silent, untended machines or walked through departments where hundreds of half-finished automobile bodies gathered dust...”



SOURCE 3 The hungry and homeless queue for Christmas dinner outside the Municipal Lodging House, New York, 25 December 1931

SOURCE 4 Part of the evidence given to a committee of Congress in 1931 by William Foster, leader of the American Communist Party

“Thousands of working-class families have been thrown out of their homes because they can no longer pay the rent. In the streets of every large city, workers are dropping, dying and dead from starvation and exposure. Every newspaper reports suicides of these workers, driven to desperation by unemployment and starvation.”

1. Look at Source 1.

- How many people were unemployed in 1929?
- What proportion of the workforce was this?
- How had this changed by 1933?
- In what years did the figures go up fastest?

2. a) What seems to have happened to the car factory in Toledo (Source 2)?

b) Toledo was one of the cities worst hit by the Depression, with almost 80 per cent unemployment. Can you explain why?

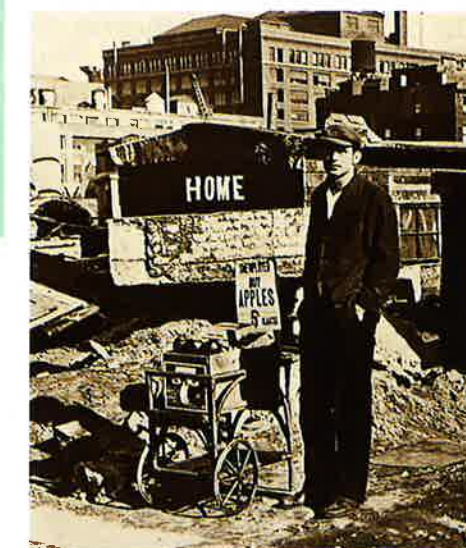
3. How reliable do you think the description in Source 4 is? Think about:

- who wrote it and why he might have written it
- whether other sources agree or disagree.

4. What did people do to try to get jobs?



SOURCE 5 One unemployed man's attempt to find work during the Depression



SOURCE 6 An apple salesman in New York. There were 6000 men selling apples on the streets of New York in 1932. They also sold ties, vegetables and rubber balls, anything to make a few cents. More than 10,000 of New York's 29,000 manufacturing firms had closed down and one in three of the city's workforce were unemployed

Helping the poor

At this time, America did not have a social security system. There was no unemployment benefit for people who lost their livelihood. There were public RELIEF programmes run by towns and cities which organised temporary homes, clothes, jobs and food. But the scale of the problem meant that these programmes could not provide for everyone and many programmes were cut back as incomes from local taxes fell.

Private charities and wealthy individuals helped. They set up soup kitchens and cheap meals centres to feed the hungry. One-fifth of all children in New York were undernourished; the proportion was higher in mining and other industrial areas.

Self-help

In several cities, groups of unemployed men organised themselves to help poor families and prevent them being evicted from their homes. In Seattle, the unemployed were allowed to pick unmarketable fruit and vegetables by nearby farmers, and to cut timber, which they could use to exchange for services like the doctor. In the coal-mining area of Pennsylvania, unemployed miners dug coal on company property and sold it cheaply. The coal company took them to court but juries refused to convict them.

SOURCE 7 From *New Republic* magazine, February 1933

“Last summer in the hot weather, when the smell was sickening and the flies were thick, there were a hundred people a day coming to the dumps ... a widow who used to do housework and laundry, but now had no work at all, fed herself and her fourteen-year-old son on garbage. Before she picked up the meat she would always take off her glasses so that she couldn't see the maggots; but it sometimes made the boy so sick to look at this offal and smell it that he could not bring himself to eat.”

SOURCE 8 A soup kitchen set up to feed unemployed workers. Al Capone provided the money for a soup kitchen to be opened in Chicago



SOURCE 9 A Hooverville in Seattle, 1934. Shanty-towns of shacks, tents and packing cases grew up on the outskirts of the big cities. These were called Hoovervilles after the President

SOURCE 10 From *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, 1939

“There was a Hooverville on the edge of every town ... 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 ... If he had no tent, he went to the city dump and brought back cartons and built a house of corrugated paper. And when the rains came the house melted and washed away.”



SOURCE 11 From *The Lean Years*, Houghton Mifflin, 1960, recounted by Irving Bernstein

“Eleven hundred men standing in a Salvation Army breadline on March 19, 1930, near the Bowery Hotel in Manhattan descended upon two trucks delivering baked goods. Jelly rolls, cookies, rolls and bread were flung into the street with the hungry jobless chasing them. Joseph Drusin of Indiana Township, Pennsylvania, in November 1930 stole a loaf of bread from a neighbour for his four starving children. When caught, Drusin went to the cellar and hung himself.

By 1932 organised looting of food was a nationwide phenomenon. Helen Hall, a Philadelphia social worker, told a Senate committee that many families sent their children out to steal from wholesale markets, to snatch milk for babies, to lift articles to exchange for food.”

SOURCE 12 From an article ‘Negroes out of Work’ in *Nation*, 22 April 1931

“The percentage of Negroes among the unemployed runs sometimes four, five, six times as high as their population percentage warrants ... When jobs are scarce preference is given to the white worker in case of a vacancy; but worse than this, a fairly widespread tendency is observed to replace Negro workers with white. White girls have replaced Negro waiters, hotel workers, elevator operators.”

5. Why did unemployment lead to widespread poverty and homelessness during the Great Depression?
6. Use Sources 7–12 to give examples of the extent of the poverty.
7. a) What sort of help could the poor get?
b) Why was this not adequate?
8. How might the President have felt about the name ‘Hooverville’? Was this fair to him?
9. Why do you think a gangster like Al Capone set up a soup kitchen like the one shown in Source 8?
10. What does Source 12 suggest about the situation of urban blacks during the Depression?

TASK

During the Depression some people fell into despair, while others took different forms of action. Use the text and Sources 3–11 to draw up a list of the different ways people coped with or responded to the Depression.

ACTIVITY

You are a reporter on a New York newspaper in 1932. Your chief has sent you to find out what life is like on the streets for the unemployed. You talk to a variety of people. Using Sources 2–12 in this section, make rough notes in your notebook about the sort of people you have met, what has happened to them, the problems they face, and how they are surviving.

