

## PASSAGE: THE GREAT DEPRESSION

**SOCIAL SCIENCE:** This passage is adapted from the essay “The Great Depression” (2023) by Delma Porter.

The Great Depression was a period in American history that spanned more than ten years. The Depression began in the US and spread around the world. Throughout the 1920s, the US economy expanded rapidly, and the nation’s wealth doubled between 1920 and 1929. During the “Roaring Twenties,” people put their money into the stock market. The stock market reached its peak in 1929.

On October 24, 1929, the US stock market crashed. The depression that followed Black Thursday spread quickly across the globe. This period was the longest depression of the 20th century. The Great Depression was caused in part by increased consumer debt, decreased industrial production, and reckless expansion of the US stock market. At the same time, a large area of the country experienced severe droughts and dust storms. The Southern Plains became known as the Dust Bowl and many farmers lost their crops. A large number of people moved from farmland to cities to find work. When the bottom dropped out of the stock market, stocks lost all of their value. Prior to October 24, there had been dips in the stock market. There had been ups and downs, but after Black Thursday, the market continued to drop steadily, and people panicked. People who had money in checking and savings accounts immediately went to their banks and attempted to withdraw their life’s savings. Unable to pay out to all of the individuals who wanted their money, the banks were forced to close their doors. By the end of 1931, over 4,000 American banks had closed. Over \$550 million in deposits were lost. The banks were forced to foreclose on family farms because people could not make payments. Over 20% of Americans were unemployed. If people managed to keep their jobs, often wages were cut, and work hours were often reduced to part-time.

The American household was dramatically affected because businesses closed all over the country, leaving many people without an income. People were laid off and families went hungry. There was a food shortage and families were encouraged to increase their food production as much as possible. It was common for communities to have gardens for families to grow produce. Cheap foods were one solution, so families who could not grow their food were forced to purchase the cheapest foods available—beans, rice, chili, and macaroni and cheese were the foods that most families ate regularly. These foods were inexpensive to prepare, could be stretched to feed a lot of people, and could be reused in other meals.

The Depression affected families and communities all over the world. The number of women who worked outside of the home increased. From 1930 to 1940, the number of employed women in the US rose 24%. Employers were able to pay women less than their male counterparts. Businesses helped by opening soup kitchens and giving out free food when they could. The US government made financial aid available to families in the form of social security and welfare. Marriages became strained and the national suicide rate rose to an all-time high in 1933. Many teenagers left home to look for work due to a lack of family income. For fun, families played board games such as Scrabble or cards at home. Listening to the radio was a popular pastime as people could not afford to go to the movies. One-third of theaters closed during the Great Depression.

*A&E Television Networks. (n.d.). Great depression: Black Thursday, Facts & Effects. History.com. <https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/great-depression-history>*

*A&E Television Networks. (n.d.-b). Life for the average family during the Great Depression. History.com. <https://www.history.com/news/life-for-the-average-family-during-the-great-depression>*