

The Other America

MAIN IDEA

Amidst the prosperity of the 1950s, millions of Americans lived in poverty.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

America today continues to experience a marked income gap between affluent and nonaffluent people.

Terms & Names

- urban renewal
- bracero
- termination policy

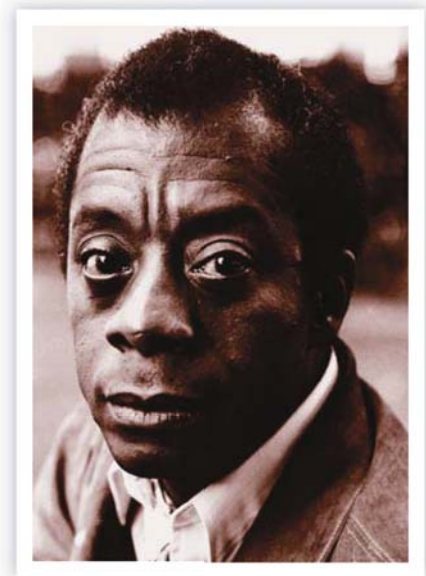
One American's Story

James Baldwin was born in New York City, the eldest of nine children, and grew up in the poverty of the Harlem ghetto. As a novelist, essayist, and playwright, he eloquently portrayed the struggles of African Americans against racial injustice and discrimination. He wrote a letter to his young nephew to mark the 100th anniversary of emancipation, although, in his words, “the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon.”

A PERSONAL VOICE JAMES BALDWIN

“[T]hese innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. . . . This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. . . . You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason.*”

—*The Fire Next Time*



▲ James Baldwin

For many Americans, the 1950s were a time of unprecedented prosperity. But not everyone experienced this financial well-being. In the “other” America, about 40 million people lived in poverty, untouched by the economic boom.

The Urban Poor

Despite the portrait painted by popular culture, life in postwar America did not live up to the “American dream.” In 1962, nearly one out of every four Americans was living below the poverty level. Many of these poor were elderly people, single women and their children, or members of minority groups, including African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans.

WHITE FLIGHT In the 1950s, millions of middle-class white Americans left the cities for the suburbs, taking with them precious economic resources and isolating themselves from other races and classes. At the same time, the rural poor migrated to the inner cities. Between the end of World War II and 1960, nearly 5 million African Americans moved from the rural South to urban areas.

The urban crisis prompted by the “white flight” had a direct impact on poor whites and nonwhites. The cities lost not only people and businesses but also the property they owned and income taxes they had paid. City governments could no longer afford to properly maintain or improve schools, public transportation, and police and fire departments—and the urban poor suffered.

THE INNER CITIES While poverty grew rapidly in the decaying inner cities, many suburban Americans remained unaware of it. Some even refused to believe that poverty could exist in the richest, most powerful nation on earth. Each year, the federal government calculates the minimum amount of income needed to survive—the poverty line. In 1959, the poverty line for a family of four was \$2,973. In 2000, it was \$17,601. **A**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

A What effect did white flight have on America’s cities?

Background

See *poverty* on page R43 in the Economics Handbook.

After living among the nation’s poor across America, Michael Harrington published a shocking account that starkly illuminated the issue of poverty. In *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962), he not only confirmed that widespread poverty existed but also exposed its brutal reality.

A PERSONAL VOICE MICHAEL HARRINGTON

“The poor get sick more than anyone else in the society. . . . When they become sick, they are sick longer than any other group in the society. Because they are sick more often and longer than anyone else, they lose wages and work, and find it difficult to hold a steady job. And because of this, they cannot pay for good housing, for a nutritious diet, for doctors.”

—*The Other America*

URBAN RENEWAL Most African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos in the cities had to live in dirty, crowded slums. One proposed solution to the housing problem in inner cities was **urban renewal**. The National Housing Act of 1949 was passed to provide “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.” This act called for tearing down rundown neighborhoods and constructing low-income housing. Later, the nation’s leaders would create a new cabinet position, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), to aid in improving conditions in the inner city.

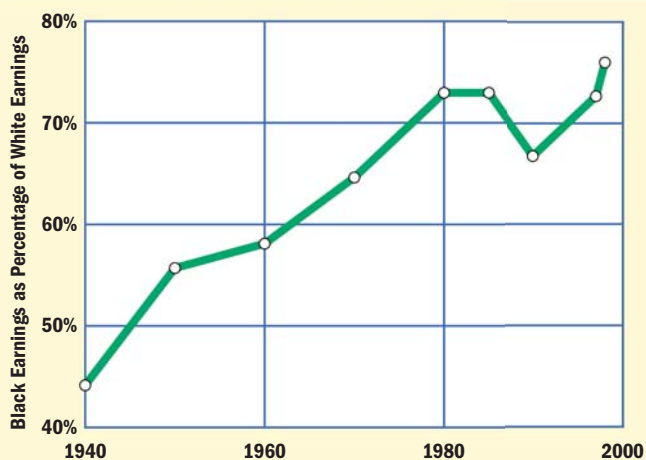
Although dilapidated areas were razed, parking lots, shopping centers, highways, parks, and factories were constructed on some of the cleared land, and there was seldom enough new housing built to accommodate all the displaced people. For example, a *barrio* in Los Angeles was torn down to make way for Dodger Stadium, and poor people who were displaced from their homes simply moved from one ghetto to another. Some critics of urban renewal claimed that it had merely become urban removal. **B**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

B Why were attempts at urban renewal viewed as less than successful?

Income Gap in America
(Ratio of Black Male Earnings to White Male Earnings*)



*Figures are for year-round, full-time employment.
Source: *The First Measured Century*, Theodore Caplow, 2001

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Graphs

1. What trend does the graph show from 1940–1980?
2. What factors affecting people’s lives might contribute to the income gap?

Poverty Leads to Activism

Despite ongoing poverty, during the 1950s, African Americans began to make significant strides toward the reduction of racial discrimination and segregation. Inspired by the African-American civil rights movement, other minorities also began to develop a deeper political awareness and a voice. Mexican-American activism gathered steam after veterans returned from World War II, and a major change in government policy under Eisenhower's administration fueled Native American protest.



▲ In 1942, Mexican farm workers on their way to California bid farewell to their families.

MEXICANS SEEK EMPLOYMENT Many Mexicans had become U.S. citizens during the 19th century, when the United States had annexed the Southwest after the War with Mexico. Large numbers of Mexicans had also crossed the border to work in the United States during and after World War I.

When the United States entered World War II, the shortage of agricultural laborers spurred the federal government to initiate, in 1942, a program in which Mexican *braceros* (bră-sâr'ōs), or hired hands, were allowed into the United States to harvest crops. Hundreds of thousands of braceros entered the United States on a short-term basis between 1942 and 1947. When their employment was ended, the braceros were expected to return to Mexico. However, many remained in the United States illegally. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans entered the country illegally to escape poor economic conditions in Mexico.

Background

In 1954, the U.S. launched a program designed to find and return undocumented immigrants to Mexico. Between 1953 and 1955, the U.S. deported more than 2 million illegal Mexican immigrants.

THE LONGORIA INCIDENT One of the more notorious instances of prejudice against Mexican Americans involved the burial of Felix Longoria. Longoria was a Mexican-American World War II hero who had been killed in the Philippines. The only undertaker in his hometown in Texas refused to provide Longoria's family with funeral services.

In the wake of the Longoria incident, outraged Mexican Americans stepped up their efforts to stamp out discrimination. In 1948, Mexican-American veterans organized the G.I. Forum. Meanwhile, activist Ignacio Lopez founded the Unity League of California to register Mexican-American voters and to promote candidates who would represent their interests. **C**

NATIVE AMERICANS CONTINUE THEIR STRUGGLE Native Americans also continued to fight for their rights and identity. From the passage of the Dawes Act, in 1887, until 1934, the policy of the federal government toward Native Americans had been one of "Americanization" and assimilation. In 1924, the Snyder Act granted citizenship to all Native Americans, but they remained second-class citizens.

In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act moved official policy away from assimilation and toward Native American autonomy. Its passage signaled a change in federal policy. In addition, because the government was reeling from

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

C How did the Longoria incident motivate Mexican Americans to increase their political and social activism?

Vocabulary

subsidizing:

financial assistance given by a government to a person or group to support an undertaking regarded as being in the public interest

the Great Depression, it wanted to stop subsidizing the Native Americans. Native Americans also took the initiative to improve their lives. In 1944, they established the National Congress of American Indians. The congress had two main goals: (1) to ensure for Native Americans the same civil rights that white Americans had, and (2) to enable Native Americans on reservations to retain their own customs.

During World War II, over 65,000 Native Americans left their reservations for military service and war work. As a result, they became very aware of discrimination. When the war ended, Native Americans stopped receiving family allotments and wages. Outsiders also grabbed control of tribal lands, primarily to exploit their deposits of minerals, oil, and timber.

THE TERMINATION POLICY In 1953, the federal government announced that it would give up its responsibility for Native American tribes. This new approach, known as the **termination policy**, eliminated federal economic support, discontinued the reservation system, and distributed tribal lands among individual Native Americans. In response to the termination policy, the Bureau of Indian Affairs began a voluntary relocation program to help Native Americans resettle in cities.

The termination policy was a dismal failure, however. Although the Bureau of Indian Affairs helped relocate 35,000 Native Americans to urban areas during the 1950s, they were often unable to find jobs in their new locations because of poor training and racial prejudice. They were also left without access to medical care when federal programs were abolished. In 1963, the termination policy was abandoned.



▲ Native Americans like the man above received job training from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to help them settle in urban areas.

SECTION 4

ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term, write a sentence explaining its significance.

•urban renewal

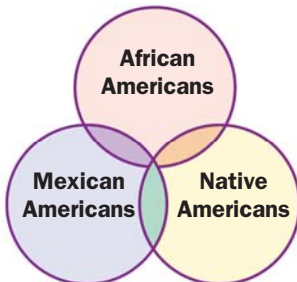
•bracero

•termination policy

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

In overlapping circles like the ones below, fill in the common problems that African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans faced during the 1950s.



What do these problems illustrate about life in the 1950s?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING

Do you think that urban renewal was an effective approach to the housing problem in inner cities?

Why or why not? **Think About:**

- the goals of the National Housing Act of 1949
- the claims made by some critics of urban renewal
- the residents' best interest

4. ANALYZING ISSUES

How did Native Americans work to increase their participation in the U.S. political process?

5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Which major population shift—"white flight," migration from Mexico, or relocation of Native Americans—do you think had the greatest impact on U.S. society? Why? **Think About:**

- the impact of "white flight"
- the influx of "braceros"
- the effects of the termination policy