

Great Depression, 1929–1939

Teacher Pages

Overview

This activity is designed to reinforce and expand students' prior knowledge of the Great Depression. In a series of steps, students will identify the different states by region that experienced high levels of unemployment. They will then create a map that displays this information.

Time Required

30–50 minutes

National History Standards

Historical Thinking Standard 2: Historical comprehension

Historical Thinking Standard 3: Historical analysis and interpretation

United States Era 8, Standard 1: The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society

National Geography Standards

Standard 1: How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective

Standard 2: How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context

Standard 3: How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface

Enduring Understanding

The high unemployment that accompanied the Great Depression hit many different parts of the country.

Essential Question

What parts of the country experienced high unemployment during the Great Depression?

Procedure

Note: The following directions are written for a whole-class activity. If you wish, you may instead use the student handout and have students work individually or in small groups on the activity.

1. Read the “Historical Context” section to the class to set the stage for the activity.
2. Distribute the outline version of the map to students.
3. Using a whiteboard, projector, or another display device, show the class the map titled “The Great Depression, 1929–1939” with the “More than 25%,” “18–24%,” and “Less than 18%” layers turned off.
4. Based on their previous knowledge, ask students the following questions:
 - a. Which states do they think would have had the lowest levels of unemployment? Turn on the “Less than 18%” layer for the states that had relatively low unemployment. Have students shade in or outline these states in one color.
 - b. Which states do they think would have had the highest levels of unemployment? Turn on the “More than 25%” layer for the states that had the greatest levels of unemployment. Have students shade in or outline these states in another color.
 - c. Turn on the “18–24%” layer. Have students use a third color for the states that had from 18–24% unemployment.
5. Have a student point out the general area of the Dust Bowl. How did the states affected by it fare in terms of unemployment? Ask students why they think these states experienced the levels of unemployment that they did.
6. How did the most populous states fare? The least populous? Can any conclusions be drawn from the map about whether population correlated with unemployment rates?

Historical Context

The term “**depression**” describes the mood of Americans between 1929 and 1939, as well as the state of the economy. Most **business cycles** run three to six years, first rising then moving downward. During this time, unemployment usually runs between three and five percent. What made the Great Depression so troubling was that it lasted over ten years and the national unemployment rate averaged over ten percent, rising to well over 25 percent in 1933–1934. This high rate of unemployment wreaked havoc on the economy as people who were out of work spent less money on items such as furniture, clothing, automobiles, recreation, medical care, and food. Because people were buying less, businesses couldn’t pay their workers and had to let more go, increasing unemployment. However, the greatest impact of the Great Depression lay in the human suffering and discouragement felt by so many Americans. Small business owners lost everything. Professionals with college educations and advanced degrees found themselves unemployed with little prospect of getting a job because so many like them were out of work. Students graduating from high school and college found no jobs available. The very poor, especially in **urban** areas, had no **safety net** like unemployment insurance or welfare to protect them. State and local governments and private charities tried to help, but were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of unemployed.

Assessment

Tell students that the United States can be divided into five general regions: the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, the Great Plains, and the West. Which region seemed to experience the highest rates of unemployment? The lowest? Why do students think this was so? Have students give oral reports, create PowerPoint presentations, or write essays answering these questions.

Extensions

1. Have students look at unemployment in their state during the Great Depression and at the present. What were the unemployment rates then and now? Have students research the different types of relief offered by the government and private charities for people during the two time periods. Have them produce their findings in a “Then and Now” report.
2. Have students research and then create charts or maps that answer the following questions: What types of industries were hit hardest during the Great Depression? How did high unemployment in one sector of the economy lead to further unemployment in other, related sectors?