

The Great Depression

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A. Introduction: Broad Picture of Great Depression impacts 1929-33:

fall of 10% in the Gross National Product; shares fell 44% by 1931, then up
unemploy't: peak 1932 = 29% (old trade union system), or 20% (system today).
bankruptcies rose fourfold; evictions rose fourfold
disruption: changing houses (and schools); searching for work (esp. on farms)

This talk is based on over 2,000 interviews, 1200 from my students (from 1965 to 1986); and 800 from publications and the ANL and other library collections. Early interviews by my students were based on a common questionnaire and 500 of these were processed by computer to give trends, and the findings from this survey are cited several times below. Traditional histories have emphasised the worst moments of the worst off. The interviews allow a more general range of experiences. Public records show that health improved. In what ways and why?

B. Statistical indicators that health improved

no starvation from Depression deprivation
stable weight of school children, and improved height
fall in deaths from several diseases related to poverty
fall in infant mortality and fall in the general death rate
after a jump in 1930, suicide rates fell as Depression deepened

C. How people got by or did well for material needs

1. Food

- a. mid 1930+, dole as coupons for food from local stores; not for grog or cigs
- b. private charities help e.g. Salvation Army + Charities Organisation Society
- c. help from relatives, esp. from small farms, and from neighbours
- d. unemployed self-help: home gardens = vegetables, fruit, chooks
- e. economising = buying cheap from hawkers + local markets; cheaper meals
- f. trapping rabbits, fishing, mushrooms, blackberries = mainly recreational
- g. from 500 interviews only 4% ever went hungry, but not badly or for long

2. Clothing and fuel

- a. help from private charities
- b. councils collect donations of clothing and redistribute to the needy
- c. married women at home, skilled at making or mending clothes
- d. firewood free from councils; otherwise the poor forage for wood
- e. from 500 interviews, 6% said they had trouble with clothing

3. Housing and shelter

- a. on mortgages: banks allowed debt rather than evict, fear damage or pillage
- b. renters often ran up debts: landlords, too, fear damage to empty houses
- c. living in humpies = well under 1%: an interesting option (pride in huts + lifestyle)
- d. 13% of 500 move: of these 75% re-rent; 25% share (usually briefly, with relatives)
- e. gradually government moratoriums against evictions; help from councils.
- f. help for rent from governments; + single men could go to special shelters
+ single women were paid an allowance to board out
- g. housing pool remains the same; empty houses in 1933 = 4%; similar after WW2

4. Cash: sources of income (for all of the above) in poor families:

- a. most still in work; wages fell 20%, prices fell 24% = higher real wages;
many poor households included a member who worked, or with pension
- b. unmeasured economy: unemployed made goods for door to door sale, women

- sold services locally like washing, mending clothes, housekeeping, childminding; men did car and house repairs, + fossicked for gold
- c. many men went to the country, harvesting = good wages, or farm work for low wages + keep, sending the money home
- d. governments provided relief work at basic wage rates per hour (varied hours per week about 3 months in the year), e.g. building roads + canals

*Overall, for all needs above, there was much more help than in the 1920s

D. Mental issues

1. Mental pain: often greater than physical pain:

- a. worry (to keep job; to pay rent or mortgage; to meet daily needs)
- b. shame at being unemployed, shabbiness, loss of status
- c. loss of purpose and work fellowship, boredom

2. Mental resilience:

- a. 'being philosophical': not worry, take life 'one step at a time', or 'day by day'
- b. self-respect through non-material virtues such as never being idle, cleanliness, honesty, sobriety, chastity, cheerfulness, kindness
- c. virtue in thrift and stoicism
- d. a-materialism - embracing beliefs that money not very important (e.g. 'we didn't have much but we didn't want much'; and songs: 'I've got plenty of nothing + nothing's plenty for me'; '[Things] I prize [like] stars in the skies... all are free').
- e. suicides (rate per million): 1925-7 av =143; 1930=168; 1931-3 (peak unemployment) av =137; 1963=175, 1965-7 av =163, 1997 = 146

3. Reasons why many people said they were happy, even if poor:

- a. closeness in family relations: more time with children, father at home more, making things together, gardening, hunting and fishing
- b. self-entertainment: singing, yarning, children invent games; family home concerts; parties; card games, picnics, love of beauty
- c. community bonding, mutual help; e.g. at local centres and as neighbours
- d. community singing in glee clubs, local halls and parks; also dances; sport
- e. freedom, e.g. from bad work:: such as in mines or unhealthy factories

E. Conclusion and meaning-making

- a. Leftwing historians stress worst suffering, as did Rightwing daily Press at the time; the Left as critique of capitalism; the Right regretting material losses, to promote charity instead of higher taxes, and to attack Labor governments that were widely in power 1930-31. A culture-wide agreed story on pain.
- c. But suffering is a legitimate part of the Depression story, esp. for compassion
- b. But it is not the majority story. Achievements of the poor also deserve attention perhaps as guidelines to what is most worthwhile in life