Uneven Safety Nets

Family life and federal aid during the Great Depression

SS24.US2.5b "Analyze the impact of the Great Depression and the resulting social programs on the American family and minority groups."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two ways families coped with lost income, circle two ways federal programs helped, and number two limits on who received help. Use your marks to compare how different families experienced the Depression.

When a Paycheck Disappeared

1. In 1932, a factory layoff could empty a family's savings within weeks. Parents took in boarders, children postponed school, and relatives shared crowded rooms to stretch food money. Unemployment was not evenly spread. Black workers often lost jobs before white workers and faced discrimination when seeking new ones. Mexican American families also faced job losses; some were pressured or forced to leave the United States, including people who were U.S. citizens. For these families, a lost paycheck could also threaten their place in a community.

2. Beginning in 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) paid unemployed people to build roads, repair schools, and work on other public projects. A paycheck could help a family buy food while improving its town. The WPA also employed some women in sewing rooms and other projects, but jobs were limited. Local officials sometimes discriminated against Black applicants or assigned them lower-paid work. Federal aid could steady a household without ending the unequal treatment its members faced.

3. The Social Security Act of 1935 created old-age insurance and a system of unemployment insurance, offering more lasting protection than a temporary work project. Yet its original insurance programs left out most farm and domestic workers. Black and Mexican American workers were disproportionately employed in those jobs, so many could not build retirement coverage or claim unemployment benefits through those programs. A family might gain wages from a relief job while another family, shut out of insurance, continued to depend on relatives when work disappeared.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How could job loss disrupt a Mexican American family's life beyond the loss of wages?

2. How could a WPA job help a Black family while leaving a barrier in place?

3. How did the Social Security Act's job exclusions make its protection unequal?

4. How did the WPA and the Social Security Act address different kinds of family insecurity?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 70 to 90 word letter from a family member during the Depression. Show how the WPA and Social Security affect your family's choices differently, and include one barrier faced by a minority group.

ANSWER KEY

Uneven Safety Nets

GRADE 11 · SS24.US2.5b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two ways families coped with lost income, circle two ways federal programs helped, and number two limits on who received help. Use your marks to compare how different families experienced the Depression. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How could job loss disrupt a Mexican American family's life beyond the loss of wages?	**Some families were pressured or forced to leave the United States, even if family members were U.S. citizens, disrupting their ties to a community.**
2	How could a WPA job help a Black family while leaving a barrier in place?	**WPA wages could buy food, but local discrimination could keep Black applicants from jobs or place them in lower-paid work.**
3	How did the Social Security Act's job exclusions make its protection unequal?	**Most farm and domestic workers were excluded from its original insurance programs. Because Black and Mexican American workers disproportionately held those jobs, many lacked that protection.**
4	How did the WPA and the Social Security Act address different kinds of family insecurity?	**The WPA offered temporary wages through public work. The Social Security Act established insurance against unemployment and loss of income in old age.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Dear Cousin, When Dad lost his factory job, we moved into Grandma's apartment to save rent. A local official turned Dad away from a WPA road crew; as a Black worker, he faced barriers even in relief. My sister later found WPA sewing work, which pays for groceries. Dad's factory work may count toward future Social Security retirement insurance, but Mom's domestic work does not. We still share rent because one paycheck cannot support us all. Your cousin, Ruth

Accept historically plausible family situations that distinguish temporary WPA wages from Social Security insurance. The letter should connect a minority group's barrier to a family decision, not merely name the barrier.