

9.2 American Life in the 1950s

Was the 1950s a decade of progress?

Explore

Prosperity for All?

How were women and minority groups affected by the economic boom?

American Life in the 1950s: Comparison Chart

As you read pages 4–5, use the Comparison Chart to record ways in which each of the listed groups was affected by the postwar economic boom. Then, list ways in which each group responded.

By June 1947, more than six million people had left the military. The GI Bill enabled some veterans to go to school, but many others still needed jobs. Life for many American workers also became more stable. For example, President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration increased the minimum wage and extended Social Security to more people. The economy was growing, and unemployment was minimal.

Throughout the boom of the 1950s, income and wealth inequality decreased slowly but steadily. For instance, the average real income of the top 10 percent of earners grew by 23 percent, while the average real income of the entire country increased by 28 percent. Many found that the economic boom created new opportunities, but not all Americans shared equally in the prosperity.

Women in the Workforce

During the early 1940s, women who had contributed to the war effort by taking jobs were pressured to give up their jobs to make room for returning soldiers. American media and government-sponsored public service announcements suggested that women should be homemakers. Advertising focused on the nuclear family with a stay-at-home mom, a father who worked, and several children. The ideal woman cooked, cleaned, socialized, purchased household products, and tried to be a good example for her family. She did not work in a manufacturing job outside of the home.

Despite this picture of the ideal woman, after 1947, the number of women in paid jobs compared to men increased. From 1950 to 1960, the percentage of employed women who were married steadily rose to around 60 percent. Increasingly, women sought employment because they and their families wanted to buy more goods and conveniences. The modern economy made these goods available, and the mass media said they should buy them.

Many women also worked from need, not just from want. Some employers, however, considered women's role in the workplace to be of secondary importance to men's. For example, many mature single women

were commonly called “girls” by coworkers.

Poverty and the Cities

Despite the 1950s economic boom, poverty persisted in the United States. The federal government did not keep track of an official “poverty line” until the 1960s, but many researchers have used data to show that the number of families struggling to meet their basic needs fell each decade after the Great Depression. Based on one calculation, during the 1950s, poverty decreased dramatically from 35 percent of all Americans to around 22 percent. Still, in 1960, about 34.5 million families were living in poverty.

Poverty was not distributed evenly among Americans. More than half of African American families lived below the poverty level. Many African Americans faced [de facto segregation](#), or discrimination in education, employment, and housing. Americans of all races in rural areas also had trouble sharing in the economic prosperity. Farming jobs did not pay as well as manufacturing or service jobs, the numbers of which were growing in urban and suburban areas. In 1950, more than 60 percent of people employed in agriculture lived in poverty. Because the South and some parts of the West were largely agricultural, families of all races in these regions saw fewer opportunities for growth.