The 1950’s

Many Americans prospered during the 1950s. However, more than 30 million Americans lived below poverty line, the lowest income needed to support a family. Many were African Americans, some of the approximately 3 million who had moved north after 1940. They came to find work and better lives but found racial discrimination, few jobs, and low pay. The cities failed to offer adequate housing, schools, or medical care. Government urban renewal programs built new public housing but often increased crime and poverty and destroyed more homes than they built. In the South, African Americans as well as other racial minorities were segregated into separate schools, neighborhoods, and public accommodations. They were denied access to many of the nation’s universities solely because of their race.

Hispanics in the United States also faced poverty. Nearly 5 million Mexicans came to work on farms and ranches during the 1950s and 1960s. Called braceros, these people worked long hours for low pay. Native Americans were the poorest group in the nation. The government’s termination policy forced many to move off of reservations and into cities. Native Americans were forced to assimilate into American culture which meant they no longer were able to speak their indigenous language, discouraged from practicing their native religion, and encouraged to abandon their traditional styles of dress. Many white families in rural Appalachia also faced difficulties. Work, doctors, and nutritious foods were all scarce in rural areas of the country.

Another problem facing the nation was juvenile delinquency, or the antisocial and criminal behaviors of young people. Juvenile crime rose by 45 percent between 1947 and 1953. In 1954, a book titled *1,000,000 Delinquents* claimed that by 1955, one million young people would get into trouble. The book was correct. Americans searched for the causes. Many blamed teenage ‘greasers’ who rejected mainstream societal norms. These teens often smoke and drank underage, engaged in drag racing, encouraged premarital sex, and dropped out of high school.

Experts blamed juvenile delinquency on several cause. They blamed it on a lack of religion and discipline. Others claimed that television, movies, and comic books were the causes. A number of experts pointed the fingers at the rising divorce rate and fears of the military draft. Some critics said that young people were just acting out against tradition. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen stated that Americans were raising bored children. He claimed children were looking for new ways to have fun. Many tried to link delinquency with poverty. However, delinquency involved children from all classes and races in American society. Most teens were not involved in crime or drugs, but the public came to think of all young people as juvenile delinquents. Many parents thought that improving the nation’s schools was the solution to delinquency.

 In the 1950s, the baby boomers began entering the school system. The number of school children increased by 13 million. School districts struggled to pay for new schools and new teachers. Americans became even more concerned about education after 1957. In that year, the Soviet Union launched the world’s first satellites. Americans were afraid of falling behind their Cold War enemy. They believed that schools lacked technical education. New efforts were made to improve math and science education in the schools.