

LEAD ME HOME

TEACHING LEAD ME HOME SOLVING HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA





EDUCATOR OVERVIEW

Article 25 of 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Across many communities in America students see that Article 25 of the UDHR is not being fulfilled. According to Nan Roman, CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, “The problem seems to be getting worse. From 2007 to 2016, it had been going down steadily every year. Starting in 2016, it began creeping up every year... It seems to me that, in a country as wealthy as ours and as wonderful as ours, we really should not have hundreds of thousands of people living on the street.”

Teaching **Lead Me Home: Solving Homelessness in America** is a three-part inquiry-based curriculum exploring the political, economic, and historical context of homelessness in America. Students begin by watching the Oscar nominated *Lead Me Home*, a documentary short telling stories of people experiencing homelessness from their perspective. With their stories in mind and today's crisis as a point of departure, students then analyze key events and federal policies over the past century that shaped and continue to influence our present crisis before reflecting and writing about possible remedies for solving homelessness in their own community.

The documentary short and three part lesson can be incorporated into Economics, Government, Psychology, Sociology, Law, and U.S. History courses. Outside of classrooms, the Teaching *Lead Me Home* materials can be highly relevant for professional development for community-based organizations, social workers, and law enforcement, or used in more informal educational settings such as faith-based or nonprofit organizations.



OBJECTIVES

Part I: Watching and Discussing LEAD ME HOME

- Explore background knowledge and assumptions about homelessness.
- Watch and discuss the documentary *Lead Me Home* using critical media analysis skills.

Part II: LEAD ME HOME In Context: Connecting the Past to the Present

- Understand 20th century U.S. history through the prism of federal housing policy.
- Explore the historical context in which federal housing policy and programs were enacted by reading and discussing a series of short readings.
- Discuss and evaluate in small group discussions the efficacy and legacy of these housing policies today.

Part III: LEAD ME HOME Writing Assignment: A Remedy For My Community

- Draw upon their historical perspective and write an editorial for an online or print news outlet presenting a remedy for homelessness in their community.



Through this course of study, students will also have these learning opportunities:

- **Recognize** the humanity and dignity of all people—unhoused or housed.
- **Shift** negative and punitive mindsets directed towards people experiencing homelessness.
- **Lift** stigmas surrounding people experiencing homelessness in order to increase empathy and compassion.
- **Make** clear that homelessness is a public health crisis.
- **Continue** efforts to decriminalize poverty and mental illness.
- **Emphasize** that solving homelessness occurs through community-wide approaches and programs.



LENGTH AND FORMAT CHOICES

Here are recommended class formats to adjust for your specific needs and schedule.

Four-Day Unit

- One 50-min. class period to watch the documentary plus three class periods to complete the lessons.

Block Period

- Complete Part I and Part II in one 90-min. block period. Assign Part III for homework.

Flipped Classroom Model

- Have students watch the documentary short at home, using a Netflix account.
- Complete Part I, Part II, and Part III in three in-person (or online) 50-min. periods with homework.

Professional Development Workshops/Informal Adult Education (90 min.)

- Watch the documentary as a group.
- Post-screening discussion using **Part I: Lead Me Home** of the resource as your guide.



MATERIALS

In-person

- Access to *Lead Me Home* (40 min. runtime) via Netflix subscription using this educational link for rights clearance: <https://help.netflix.com/en/node/57695>.
- Equipment and reliable internet at school to screen the documentary in person.
- Shared online classroom space with reliable internet at school for students to access online readings.
- Upload all handouts and readings.

Virtual

Lessons are reliant on internet access at home and access to devices to watch the film, complete the readings, and post the writing assignment.



TEACHER PREPARATION

As this lesson relies heavily on a shared online folder with readings, upload the following materials (beginning on page 12 of this guide) prior to starting day one:

- **Handout One** – Definition of Homelessness
- **Handout Two** – Filmmakers Perspective
- **Handout Three** – History of Homelessness in America
- **Jigsaw readings**

Round One: Readings begin on page 15 of this guide

- Reading One: The Great Depression
- Reading Two: The New Deal
- Reading Three: Social Safety Net and Timeline of Deinstitutionalization
- Reading Four: McKinney-Vento Act and HEARTH Act

Round Two: Readings are linked below to be accessed online

- Reading Five: [Why is Homelessness a Systems Problem?](#)
- Reading Six: [“Why You Aren’t Homeless—How Privilege and Fortune Shape the Shelter Census.”](#)
- Reading Seven: [“The 12 Biggest Myths About Homelessness in America”](#)
- Reading Eight: [“As Coronavirus Magnifies America’s Housing Crisis, FDR’s New Deal Could Offer a Roadmap Forward.”](#)



BACKGROUND FOR EDUCATORS: A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

While the term “homeless” is frequently used, many unhoused people deem it stigmatizing and imprecise arguing that a sense of home should not be conflated with a physical structure. Throughout the curriculum “homeless” and “unhoused” are used interchangeably to reflect these current conversations over terminology.

In recent years, nonprofit workers and advocates have also been trying to change how we describe people experiencing homelessness. Rather than say “the homeless” or “homeless person,” they prefer “person experiencing homelessness.” It’s a person-first approach to language that focuses on the person rather than their circumstance.

Person-first language	Identity-first language
A person experiencing homelessness	A homeless person
A person living with a disability	A disabled person
A girl who has autism	An autistic girl

Access to stable housing and home ownership in America is also deeply intertwined with the history of land and land ownership and structural and institutional racism. If your students have background knowledge on colonial settlement of indigenous lands, it may be a rich conversation to bring this into your classroom.



STANDARDS

Common Core Standards ELA and History/Social Studies

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2](#)

C3 Framework

- D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.
- D2.His.14.9-12. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.
- D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.



PART I LEAD ME HOME

OPENING



READ ALOUD QUOTE ONE:

“Think of homelessness as a bellwether. It’s an indicator for how well our systems are serving the needs of populations who are often the most marginalized, oppressed, or disenfranchised.”

—Maya Archarya, Community Solutions

Check for understanding the vocabulary words used in this quote. If necessary, spend some time building a working definition of each of these terms using background knowledge, context clues, or a dictionary.

- homelessness
- bellwether
- marginalized
- oppressed
- disenfranchised



READ ALOUD QUOTE TWO:

“Housing barriers are system barriers — they’re not people barriers. No one wants to sleep out in the street.”

—Jennifer Jaeger, Community Services Director, City of Rockford in Illinois

Again, using context clues and background knowledge, have students discuss the statement “Housing barriers are system barriers — they’re not people barriers.”

- What are some systemic barriers for unhoused people to receive housing?
- What other examples of system barriers come to mind?

INTRODUCE *LEAD ME HOME*

- Pass out several Post-it notes to each student.
- Have students define homelessness on one note and on the other note list reasons they believe people experience homelessness today.
- Have students post their notes in the room. (If using *Lead Me Home* as a virtual lesson, this same format can be used with online sticky-notes.)
- Read aloud each student's definitions and reasons as a way of introducing the topic.
- Direct students' attention to **Handout One - Definition of Homelessness** either on the shared online folder or print out hard copies and distribute to students.
- Compare their definitions to the definition of homelessness from Handout One.



DISCUSS AS A CLASS:

- What did their definitions include that the HUD definition did not?
- Do they think the HUD definition captures the complexity of homelessness in America today? Why or why not?

Explain to students that they will be watching the documentary short *Lead Me Home*. The film explores stories of individuals and families experiencing homelessness in three cities in America that declared a homelessness state of emergency - Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

To encourage active watching and strengthen media literacy analysis, read these questions aloud prior to watching. Encourage students to take notes with these questions in mind as they watch the documentary.



DISCUSS AS A CLASS:

- What scene or person stood out to you?
- Do you think *Lead Me Home* is an expression of person-first filmmaking?
- Why do you think the filmmakers chose this title for the documentary?
- What do you think is the point of view of the filmmakers?

WATCH *LEAD ME HOME*

- 40 min. runtime

DEBRIEF SCREENING

- In pairs or small groups, have students share their responses to the four questions posed prior to watching the film.
- Distribute copies or share online **Handout Two - The Filmmakers' Perspective**.
- Read Director Jon Shenk and Pedro Kos's inspiration for making *Lead Me Home* and discuss reactions, responses, and additional questions as a class.



DISCUSS AS A CLASS:

- What new information did you learn?
- What questions would you like to ask the filmmakers if they were in the room?
- After watching the documentary, how are you thinking differently about homelessness?

CLOSING PART I - HISTORY OF HOMELESSNESS HOMEWORK

- Direct students to **Handout Three - History of Homelessness in America** on the shared classroom space. Review the directions on the handout.
- Explain that they will need to access, read, and complete this writing assignment as homework and be prepared to share their reflections and work in class tomorrow.

A photograph of a city street scene. In the foreground, several blue and grey tents are set up on the sidewalk, indicating a homeless encampment. People are walking on the street. In the background, there are modern city buildings under a clear blue sky. A street sign for 'San Pedro St' is visible. The image is split vertically, with the left side showing the street and the right side being a dark blue overlay with text.

WHAT IS A HOMELESSNESS STATE OF EMERGENCY?

Due to increases in their unsheltered homeless population some communities officially declared a homelessness state of emergency (SOE). Declaring an SOE with respect to homelessness has not been a common strategy in the past. A State or local SOE refers to a crisis or disaster in which a government suspends normal procedures to take urgent action. In the current homelessness SOEs, this has meant using funds more flexibly, reducing regulatory barriers, and/or devoting additional funds to the problem. SOEs can also have the effect of generating a sense of urgency and creating public and political will to move quickly within the jurisdiction. However, declaring an SOE does not compel the Federal government to take any action or provide any resources.



PART II

CONNECTING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

OPENING



TEACHER PREPARATION

Prior to class create a class-specific online document titled **Homework: History of Homelessness Questions** in the shared classroom folder.

Organize students into small groups of at least four people.

- Have each student share the three research questions they wrote in response to the homework assignment.
- When finished, have each small group decide on two questions to post on the shared classroom document. Groups may elect to keep a question “as-is” or revise the question to best reflect the consensus of the group.
- Once agreed upon, post the two questions on the shared online document titled **Homework: History of Homelessness Research Questions** and include the names of students with the questions.

Quickly have every small group share the questions they posted. After all have shared, explain that they will be choosing one of these questions to address.

ACTIVITY: JIGSAW ACTIVITY FOR HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



TEACHER PREPARATION

Create two folders. One titled **Round One** and the other **Round Two**. Upload or attach links to the readings listed below and organize them into their respective folders.

Have groups number off by four. If groups are larger than four, repeat numbering.

Explain to students that they will be completing a modified jigsaw reading with two rounds of readings and summary exercises. While they are only responsible for sharing their summary of two readings (one in Round One and one in Round Two), they are responsible for knowing all the content.

Note: If they finish their reading and summary early in either round, they should independently complete the other articles in the folder to build their background knowledge.



Individual Work

Each student will be responsible for the following:

1. Close reading of their assigned article.
2. Underline key historical details to share with peers.
3. Prepare a summary of the reading and their learnings to share in the small group. The summary needs to include how the reading topic relates to, is connected to, or has perpetuated homelessness today.



Group Work

After completing individual work students will:

- Share their summary with their small group. The summary needs to include how the history or central topic of the reading has contributed to or informed the crisis of homelessness today.

Round One	Round Two
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading One: Overview on The Great Depression• Reading Two: Overview on The New Deal• Reading Three: Overview on the Social Safety Net and Deinstitutionalization• Reading Four: McKinney-Vento Act and HEARTH Act – access links	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading Five: Why is Homelessness a Systems Problem?• Reading Six: "Why You Aren't Homeless-How Privilege and Fortune Shape the Shelter Census."• Reading Seven: "The 12 Biggest Myths About Homelessness in America"• Reading Eight: "As Coronavirus Magnifies America's Housing Crisis, FDR's New Deal Could Offer a Roadmap Forward."



PART III

WRITING YOUR OWN EDITORIAL

Return to the **Handout Three - History of Homelessness Questions** document.

Open class by watching this short video titled [“Homelessness and Racial Equity.”](#)

Organize students into small groups of no more than three or four students.

- Have students share reactions to the opening video focusing on how it does or does not relate to their own community.
- Next, have students revisit the questions they posed at the start of Part II and discuss any new learnings or new questions that have arisen.
- Finally, revisit HUD’s existing definition of homelessness and The HEARTH Acts in **Handout One**.

Transition from small group work to explaining the final assignment.

Explain to students that in response to the film and the content covered in this lesson, they are to write a short one-page editorial in response to one of these prompts:

- What is one realistic remedy they believe is achievable to decrease homelessness in their community?
- What is the largest systemic barrier to solving homelessness in their community?

The editorial can be no longer than 800 words and must have an original title.



HANDOUT ONE: DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

This is an excerpted definition from [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)⁴

THE U.S. HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT (HUD) DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS:

- > People living in places not meant for human habitation (the streets, abandoned buildings, etc)
- > Living in an emergency shelter or transitional housing facility
- > Facing the loss of housing within the next seven days with no other place to go and no resources or support networks to obtain housing (this third bullet is not specifically described in the McKinney-Vento statute)

THE 2009 HEARTH ACT (HOMELESS EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE AND RAPID TRANSITION TO HOUSING ACT) ADDED THIS TO THE DEFINITION:

- > A situation in which a person is at imminent risk of homelessness or where a family or unaccompanied youth is living unstably. Imminent risk includes when a person must leave his or her current housing within the next 14 days with no other place to go and no resources or support networks to obtain housing
- > Instability includes families with children and unaccompanied youth who:
 - Are defined as homeless under other federal programs (e.g. Department of Education's Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program)
 - Have lived for a long period without living independently in permanent housing
 - Have moved frequently

HANDOUT TWO: FILMMAKERS' PERSPECTIVE

Filmmakers Jon Shenk and Pedro Kos choose to make visible the crisis of homelessness in America through their documentary short *Lead Me Home*. After having read a *New York Times* opinion piece, [“The Tent Cities of San Francisco”](#) written by Dan Duane in 2016, Shenk and Kos reflect:

Like a lot of us, Dan had grown used to the homeless population living near where he lived and had the typical response we think a lot of people have, which is some fear. And when he started writing about it and spending time in homeless encampments, he had an epiphany: a faucet on the side of the building became a kitchen, a park bench became a living room, a patch of grass in a median became a campground.

That made so much sense to us, and we realized that if we suddenly found ourselves without a home, we would do what human beings do, which is to try to figure out a way to create some sanctuary for ourselves so that we could sleep, so that we could eat, so that we could go to the bathroom, so that we could socialize and have safety. And so that remained a North Star for us throughout the filming, to create visual language that would allow people to be reminded that the cycle of the day for those of us who are fortunate enough to have homes to go to at the end of the day is actually not that dissimilar to the cycle of people on the streets, in terms of what we aim to achieve. Living in San Francisco and LA, we often see people experiencing homelessness in our day-to-day lives. Often, people simplify the issue, and cast blame in a way that dehumanizes those on the streets. We wanted to make a film which would reflect the complexity of the issue. More importantly, we wanted to show how each individual experiencing homelessness has a different story. We have enormous respect for people who work in the trenches in an attempt to solve the underlying problems that lead to homelessness, but we felt strongly that we could contribute by reminding the audience of the range of human experience out there. *Lead Me Home* is a personal depiction of this giant, complex problem which is national, political, and has emerged as a result of health care, housing, and tax policy history going back decades. That’s where it started.

As we began the journey of making the film back in 2017, we met with different organizations working in the homelessness space, from shelters, to supportive housing, to social workers, law authority, and city officials. More importantly, we were lucky enough to meet and connect with a number of extraordinary people from all walks of life who were experiencing or had experienced homelessness. We shot each of the subjects in the film going about their daily lives and then constructed the film as the experience of two days, from sunrise to sunset, really focusing on the things that unite us all as human beings. We wake up, we do our morning routines, we eat, we do our laundry, all these everyday things we all have to do. We really focused on depicting these core human experiences that we all share, but from a perspective that we have been marginalizing and making invisible. The film is meant to “shift perspective (and) to create an experience rather than dissecting problems intellectually.”

HANDOUT THREE: HISTORY OF HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA

DIRECTIONS

Homelessness in the United States is a highly complex and dynamic condition that has evolved over time. The demographic characteristics of persons experiencing homelessness have changed due to, among many things, structural and institutional racism, fluctuations in the economy, population shifts, and changes in societal attitudes towards mental illness, poverty, addiction, sexual violence or other hidden (and visible) parts of our humanity. While our understanding about the causes of homelessness and what interventions are most effective has improved, there is still much more we need to learn about this complex issue.

Complete the two readings below which offer different historical overviews of homelessness in America before completing the written portion of the assignment.

1. Close Read: Take notes on new learnings

- [History of Homelessness in America](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519584/?report=printable)
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519584/?report=printable>
- [A Brief Timeline of Race and Homelessness in America](https://community.solutions/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/A-Brief-Timeline-of-Race-and-Homelessness-in-America-March-2019.pdf)
<https://community.solutions/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/A-Brief-Timeline-of-Race-and-Homelessness-in-America-March-2019.pdf>

2. Write three questions you would like to investigate on the history of homelessness in America based on the article and the timeline.

You will be sharing these questions in class tomorrow.

Question One:

Question Two:

Question Three:

READING ONE - THE GREAT DEPRESSION

EXCERPTED FROM THE GILDER LEHRMAN INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Herbert Hoover got many things wrong about the great economic calamity that destroyed his presidency and his historical reputation, but he got one fundamental thing right. Much legend to the contrary, the Great Depression was not entirely, perhaps not even principally, made in America. “The primary cause of the Great Depression,” reads the first sentence of Hoover’s *Memoirs*, “was the war of 1914–1918.”

Though economists and historians continue to this day to debate the proximate causes of the Great Depression, there can be little doubt that the deepest roots of the crisis lay in the several chronic infirmities that afflicted the post–World War I international economic order and touched every country on the planet. The fighting had taken a cruel toll on key economies like those of Britain, France, and Germany, the core societies of the advanced industrialized world. The lingering distortions in trade, capital flows, and exchange rates occasioned by the heedlessly punitive Treaty of Versailles, as the economist John Maynard Keynes observed at the time, managed to perpetuate in peacetime the economic disruptions that had wrought so much hardship in wartime. What was more, memories of the war’s bitter fighting and vengeful conclusion rendered the post-war international atmosphere toxic, poisoning the wells of traditional diplomacy and dooming any efforts at concerted multilateral action to deal with the gathering crisis. To those abundant physical and institutional ills might be added the psychological maladies of near-religious faith in *laissez-faire* and the gold standard as the most sacred of orthodoxies, the economic equivalents of the Nicene Creed. All of this added up to a witches’ brew of economic illness, ideological paralysis, and consequent political incapacity.

The United States had participated only marginally, and only late in the day, in the First World War. But even that relatively modest departure from the nation’s historic tradition of isolating itself from European affairs was sufficiently costly and so disillusioning that Americans turned their country decidedly inward in the 1920s. They disarmed their military forces and swiftly dismantled the nation’s war machinery. The US Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and rejected membership in the nascent League of Nations, even though the League had been the brain-child of America’s wartime president, Woodrow Wilson. In 1922 the Congress passed one of the highest tariffs in United States history, effectively closing the American market to foreign vendors. It sealed off that market even more tightly when it passed the notorious Smoot-Hawley Tariff eight years later. The government in Washington insisted throughout the postwar decade that the Europeans must repay the entirety of the loans extended to them by the US Treasury during the war, a short-sighted, penny-pinching, Scrooge-like policy that added heavy additional ballast to an international financial system already staggering under weighty economic burdens. And in 1924 the republic for the first time in its history imposed a strict limit on the number of immigrants who could annually enter the country, slamming the door shut against millions of souls who wanted to claim the American dream, or the American refuge, as their own. They included (though Americans could not yet know it) would-be fugitives from Nazi persecution in the disastrous decade that followed. Militarily, diplomatically, commercially, financially, even morally, Americans thus turned their backs on the outside world and plunged headlong into the intoxicating diversions of the fabled Jazz Decade.

Prosperity in the 1920s in America was real enough, but it was not nearly so pervasive as legend has portrayed. The millions of immigrants who had swarmed into the nation’s teeming industrial cities in the preceding decades

remained culturally isolated and economically precarious in gritty ethnic ghettos. The overwhelming majority of black Americans still dwelled in the eleven states of the old Confederacy, the poorest and most disadvantaged people in America's poorest and most backward region. Well before the Great Depression of the 1930s smote the land, almost as soon as the Great War concluded in 1918, a severe economic crisis had beset the farm-belt. It did not entirely lift until the next world war, more than twenty years later. The sorely afflicted countryside was still home to nearly half of all Americans in the 1920s, and one out of every five workers still toiled on the nation's fields and farms. Prosperity seemed perpetually to pass them by. Virtually none of them enjoyed such common amenities of urban life as electricity and indoor plumbing.

As the decade of the twenties reached its operatic climax, other maladies began to appear, faintly at first, but with mounting urgency as the Depression began to unfold. A curiously ramshackle, poorly regulated private banking system, a legacy of Andrew Jackson's long-ago war on central banking, had managed to wobble its dysfunctional way into the modern era. Some twenty-five thousand banks, most of them highly fragile "unitary" institutions with tiny service areas, little or no diversification of clients or assets, and microscopic capitalization, constituted the astonishingly vulnerable foundation of the national credit. As for government—public spending at all levels, including towns, cities, counties, states, and the federal government itself, amounted only to about 15 percent of GDP in the 1920s, one-fifth of which was federal expenditures. "If the federal government should go out of existence, the common run of people would not detect the difference in the affairs of their daily life for a considerable length of time," said famously taciturn President Calvin Coolidge in one of his more long-winded (and accurate) assessments of the national scene. Ideology aside, its very size made the federal government in the 1920s a kind of ninety-pound weakling in the fight against the looming depression monster.

Yet for most of the 1920s the mood of much of the country, impervious to news of accumulating international dangers and buoyed by wildly ascending stock prices as well as the congenial optimism that is every American's birthright, remained remarkably upbeat. In the fateful autumn of 1929, the bubble burst. The Great Crash in October sent stock prices plummeting. Banks failed by the thousands. Businesses collapsed by the tens of thousands. Millions—nobody knew how many, so primitive were the government's fact-finding organs—went unemployed. Herbert Hoover, elected just months earlier amid lavish testimonials to his peerless competence, integrity, and can-do talents, saw his presidency shattered and his reputation forever shredded because of his inability to tame the depression demon—though, again contrary to legend, he toiled valiantly, using what tools he had and even inventing some new ones, to get the upper hand.

By 1932, some thirteen million Americans were out of work, one out of every four able and willing workers in the country. Even those horrendous numbers could not begin to take the full measure of the human misery that unemployment entailed. Given the demography of the labor force and prevailing cultural norms that kept most women, and almost all married women, out of the wage-paying economy, a 25 percent unemployment rate meant that, for all practical purposes, every fourth household in America had no breadwinner, no income, no hope. Many Americans believed they were witnessing not just a massive market downturn, but the collapse of a historic economic, political, and social order, perhaps even the end of the American way of life. Yet curiously, as many observers noted, most Americans remained inexplicably docile, even passive, in the face of this unprecedented calamity.

Among those who were perplexed by the apparent submissiveness of the American people as the Depression descended was Franklin D. Roosevelt. "There had never been a time, the Civil War alone excepted," an associate recollected Roosevelt saying during the 1932 presidential campaign, "When our institutions had been in such

jeopardy. Repeatedly he spoke of this, saying that it was enormously puzzling to him that the ordeal of the past three years had been endured so peaceably." That peculiar psychology, rooted in deep cultural attitudes of individualism and self-reliance, worked to block any thought of collective—i.e., political—response to the crisis. Understanding that elusive but essential American cultural characteristic goes a long way toward explaining the challenges that faced any leader seeking to broaden the powers of government to come to grips with the Depression.

Elected to the presidency in 1932 on a platform that promised "a new deal for the American people," Roosevelt now took up that challenge, with results that were transformative for American society. FDR was destined to hold office for more than a dozen years. He was thrice re-elected, a record matched by no previous incumbent and forbidden to all future presidents by the passage of the Twenty-second Amendment to the Constitution in 1951. FDR was then and has remained ever since a surpassingly enigmatic figure. His personality perplexed his contemporaries and has challenged his biographers for more than half a century. His long-serving Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, called him "the most complicated human being I ever knew." Yet for all the opacity of his innermost character, he clearly brought with him to the presidency, and bequeathed to the American people, one simple and supremely important belief. It is appropriate to call it a vision: that American life could be made more secure.

Roosevelt, like Hoover before him, never did find a remedy for the Great Depression. It hung heavily over the land through virtually all of Hoover's presidency, through Roosevelt's first two terms, down to 1940 and even beyond, nearly a dozen years of suffering and anxiety without equivalence in the history of the Republic. Before World War II came along and revolutionized all political and economic formulas, none of FDR's exertions managed to wrestle the unemployment rate below fourteen percent. For the decade of the 1930s as a whole, it averaged 17 percent. Some critics in fact blame the economy's stubborn inability to recover on Roosevelt's own allegedly anti-business policies.

Yet while Hoover's failure to restore the economy led to his political ruin, Roosevelt seized upon the enduring economic crisis as a matchless political opportunity. FDR used the occasion of the Great Depression to break the untamed bronco of let-'er-rip, buccaneering, laissez-faire capitalism that had gone unbridled for more than a century before the 1930s...

David Kennedy is Donald J. McLachlan Professor of History, Emeritus at Stanford University. His scholarship is notable for its integration of economic and cultural analysis with social and political history. Over Here: The First World War and American Society (1980) used the history of American involvement in World War I to analyze the American political system, economy, and culture in the early twentieth century. Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War (1999) recounts the history of the United States in the two great crises of the Great Depression and World War II.

READING TWO: THE NEW DEAL

EXCERPTED FROM THE GILDER LEHRMAN INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's protean presidency from 1933 to 1945 (the longest term of leadership in this nation's history) has provoked many debates about the man and his policies. For some he is the brilliant tactician who wrestled mightily with the deadlocking forces of economic crisis and totalitarianism to save capitalism and liberal democracy in its time of grave danger. Others view him as a devious and unprincipled compromiser, a broker president who fragmented the national polity as he built electoral coalitions around self-serving interest groups. Yet others charge him with dramatically expanding the welfare state, undermining the free enterprise economy and sapping American initiative. Few disagree though that his response to the worst depression in American history is the defining feature of his presidency.

Well born and favored with an elite education, Franklin Roosevelt (1882–1945) was the only son of an aristocratic upstate New York family that had made its fortune in international trade. A distant relative of Theodore Roosevelt, he married the President's niece Eleanor Roosevelt in 1905, attracted by her active intellect and progressive conscience. Trained in the law, he soon made his way into New York Democratic politics, winning election to the state senate in 1910, where he helped lead the insurgent forces to oppose Tammany and later to support Woodrow Wilson's presidential candidacy in 1912. After the election Wilson appointed the charismatic patrician assistant secretary of the Navy.

Though they were of different parties and differed in their policies, Presidents Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt were shaping progressive influences on the ambitious FDR, but by 1920 when he ran for vice president on the Democratic ticket, the reform tide had passed, inaugurating a Republican ascendancy that would last till 1932. The thirty-eight-year-old Roosevelt returned to practicing law in New York only to be struck by polio the following year. Despite strenuous therapy he would never walk unassisted again, but for the rest of his life he managed to convey a vigor and exuberance that helped conceal his debilities, taking great care not to be seen publicly or photographed with crutches or in a wheelchair. Elected governor of New York State in 1928 by a narrow margin, he gained wide popularity through innovative reforms and, once the Depression hit, a series of activist measures that provided relief for the unemployed, a program of public works, and other important social welfare measures. His willingness to experiment with new approaches and expand the reach of government attracted important progressives like Harry Hopkins and Frances Perkins to his administration.

In 1932, in the depths of the Depression the Democratic Party nominated him to run for the presidency. Promising a "new deal" for the stricken nation he easily defeated a vulnerable Herbert Hoover to become the thirty-second president of the United States. Little in the campaign foreshadowed the scope of his program for repairing the crippled economy and uplifting the nation. Nor did he hint at the greatly expanded role that he himself intended to play in directing the recovery. But the crisis had prepared the American people for change and experimentation and with his ebullient personality and crafty political instincts Roosevelt exploited this yearning for new departures. There was talk of revolution in these desperate days but for all the shifts and adjustments to come Roosevelt harbored no plans to alter the fundamental political economy of the United States, only to make it respond more capably to the crisis that he inherited.

With a blaze of bold executive action in his first 100 days, he dashed the torpor and malaise that enveloped Washington. Declaring that he intended to employ powers similar to those granted by the Constitution to fight a war, Roosevelt led a compliant Congress to enact legislation assigning him unprecedented responsibilities for economic planning and assistance to the unemployed. And while a fuller perspective reveals how bounded these changes were, the swift pace and broad scale of the reforms conveyed a resolute engagement with the people's troubles.

Over the next eight years the New Deal erected the scaffolding for a federal welfare system providing relief, unemployment insurance, and old-age pensions. Through the National Recovery Administration, Agricultural Adjustment Act, Securities and Exchange Commission, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Federal Housing Administration, and National Labor Relations Act—or the NRA, AAA, SEC, FDIC, FHA, NLRB—and other “alphabet agencies,” it regulated agriculture, industrial policy, labor, and banking and investment, vastly expanding federal authority over the daily lives of citizens. It utilized progressive taxing to moderate income disparities, fashioned a fresh urban policy granting new salience to metropolitan America, and undertook a massive, if uncoordinated, system of federal works projects designed to stimulate employment and inject federal funds into the economy. This program alone created a vast legacy of school buildings, post offices, airports, federal housing projects, and dams, as well as a disposition on the part of states and cities to look to Washington to underwrite large internal improvements... Another New Deal favorite, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) placed millions of unemployed urban teenagers in rural camps to work on conservation projects and other improvements.

If Herbert Hoover viewed American capitalism as a rigid system, in FDR's hands it became a flexible set of guidelines that could be modernized and modified as the occasion dictated. Ever a pragmatist, he experimented with different solutions and readily abandoned those that failed to bring results or win voter support. At first the New Deal supported price fixing and corporate trade agreements to restore business vitality; a few years later after he lost confidence in this approach, Roosevelt's Justice department carried out the most aggressive anti-trust offensive in American history. Early concerns about containing deficits made way for large spending programs only to be replaced by a sharp retrenchment in 1937, contributing to what many termed a “Roosevelt recession.” After this he adopted the theories of British economist John M. Keynes, who advocated massive government spending to stimulate depressed markets. Roosevelt's equally shifting approach to work relief led to some hasty plans and jerry-built programs that critics denounced as wasteful boondoggles. More significantly, before the end of Roosevelt's first term the Supreme Court struck down critical parts of his keystone AAA and NRA agencies as unconstitutional extensions of federal authority.

The intractable economic crisis, adverse Supreme Court decisions, clamorous opposition on the political right and left, and growing popularity of splinter political movements led by Dr. Francis Townsend, Senator Huey Long, and Father Charles Coughlin pushed FDR to change course before the end of his first term. So different was his new approach that historians have referred to it as a second New Deal. In addition to establishing a safety net for the elderly and unemployed and what opponents labeled a “Soak the Rich tax,” the new initiatives targeted monopolies, publicized big-business abuses, and strengthened the hand of labor unions. Later, he signed legislation for a minimum wage and the forty-hour work week.

The length of his tenure together with the expanded role of the federal government and the calculated use of popular “fireside chats” and press conferences inserted FDR into the daily lives of Americans as no other president before. But following his 1936 landslide victory, an emboldened FDR made a damaging miscalculation proposing to neutralize Supreme Court opposition to his activist policies by changing the Court's composition.

This “Court packing” scheme failed, though even in this instance Roosevelt’s efforts were not without a payoff as the Court did not overturn any other major New Deal legislation after this. Still the setback cost him dearly, opening a split within his own party.

A chastened Roosevelt turned more cautious and protective of his New Deal coalition composed of machine politicians, organized labor, blue-collar workers, intellectuals, city dwellers, farmers, marginalized minorities, and southerners. He now tempered his political enthusiasms, refusing to commit political capital to contentious moral campaigns. Even after African Americans transferred their vote to the Democratic Party, the New Deal did little to address systemic racial discrimination. Fearful of offending the white South FDR declined to back legislation that would make lynching a federal crime; and many of the New Deal programs tolerated Jim Crow practices.

Women played a more visible role in the New Deal than in previous administrations, but women’s rights remained a deferred dream in the Depression era when even Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first female Cabinet member in history, favored giving jobs to men, who were presumably responsible for the household, over women. If domestic policy and the Depression set the policy agenda for Roosevelt’s first two terms, foreign affairs took over by the late thirties. After it became painfully clear to Britain and France that sacrificing smaller nations to the Nazi regime would not prevent war, an isolationist American Congress passed neutrality acts designed to prevent involvement in the European conflict. Unable to ignore British pleas for assistance, especially after the fall of France in June of 1940, FDR used a variety of subterfuges to begin sending arms to Britain. In 1940, he ran for an unprecedented third term, campaigning on keeping the US out of war...

What he could not do, despite all the New Deal programs, was solve the complex Depression crisis. Only World War II with its relentless demand for production, manpower, and unchecked spending restored the economy. By then the progressive energy that kept experimenting with new plans and initiatives had been stilled by the burdens of war, a war that transformed America’s international role. What the New Deal did accomplish was to recast the social contract, shape a mixed economy, dramatically expand federal authority, and firmly place the presidency at the center of American government.

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READING THREE: SOCIAL SAFETY NET AND TIMELINE OF DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION

The concept of the social safety net entered the public policy arena during the early 1980s, as changes initiated by the Reagan administration sought to streamline government programs while maintaining supports for people termed “the truly needy” (Burt and Pittman 1985; Palmer and Sawhill 1982, 1984). The purpose of a safety net is to protect people from ultimate harm. By implication, a social safety net comprises a set of programs, benefits, and supports designed to ensure that people do not lack the basic necessities of life—shelter, food, physical safety, health, and a minimum level of financial resources. A social safety net may go even further by ensuring that people have the means to change the circumstances that put them at risk. Job training, child care, and/or child support services are examples of safety net programs that help people move toward economic self-sufficiency.

Most of the largest federal safety net programs are results of the Social Security Act. Social Security and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were original titles under the act when it first passed in the 1930s as part of the New Deal. Other major components were added in the 1960s as part of the War on Poverty, including Medicare, Medicaid, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The Food Stamp program originated with the Food Stamp Act of 1977. Some of these safety net programs (Social Security, Medicare) operate as social insurance; eligibility is not dependent on low income. They are, however, largely restricted to disabled people and people ages 65 and older, leaving out most families with young children in the home. The remainder are “means-tested,” that is, applicants must be and remain under a certain income level to qualify. Except for the Food Stamp program, the qualifying income levels are well below the federal poverty level (FPL), and net household income must be at or below the FPL to qualify for food stamps. During 1996–1997, the period of interest for this paper, anyone who qualified could receive benefits from these means-tested programs for as long as they met the eligibility criteria; the programs operated as open-ended entitlements. For qualifying families with children, the combination of AFDC, food stamps, and Medicaid provided the basic federal safety net. In August 1996, Congress fundamentally changed the nature of that safety net for families with children when it passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193, known as PRWORA). PRWORA replaced AFDC with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. Of critical importance is the increased flexibility states received to design their own programs and to use some portion of the TANF block grant according to their own priorities. PRWORA increased the devolution of federal authority to states that had occurred through federal waivers allowing states to experiment with key features of their AFDC programs. At the time PRWORA was enacted, some states (e.g., Massachusetts, Michigan) had already adopted and were implementing extensive statewide welfare reform initiatives. Other states had significant demonstration programs in operation (e.g., California, Minnesota) but had yet to apply the principles of these demonstrations to the whole state. Still other states had neither demonstrations nor statewide changes in operation and had to completely redesign their welfare systems. Thus in late 1996 and early 1997, states were at very different stages in reaching the ultimate shape of their post-PRWORA safety nets.

DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION: A HISTORY

1860

Twenty-eight of the 33 existing U.S. states have state psychiatric hospitals.

1883

Worcester State Hospital opens in Massachusetts as the first psychiatric hospital fully supported by state funds.

1939-1945

During World War II conscientious objectors enter state psychiatric hospitals to replace doctors who were sent away for the war effort.

1946

Life magazine publishes photos depicting the horrors inside the hospitals.

1954

Chlorpromazine, marketed as Thorazine, is approved by the Food and Drug Administration. It's the first anti-psychotic drug widely used to treat the symptoms of mental illness. For many, it brought hope that some patients could live among the community.

1955

The number of patients inside public mental hospitals nationwide peaks at 560,000.

1959

The number of patients in California state mental hospitals peaks at 37,000.

1963

President John F. Kennedy signs the **Community Mental Health Act**. This pushes the responsibility of mentally ill patients from the state toward the federal government. JFK wanted to create a network of community mental health centers where mentally ill people could live in the community while receiving care. JFK could have been inspired to act because his younger sister, Rosemary, was mentally disabled, received a lobotomy and spent her life hidden away.

Less than a month after signing the new legislation, JFK is assassinated. The community mental health centers never receive stable funding, and even 15 years later less than half the promised centers are built.

1965

The U.S. Congress establishes **Medicaid and Medicare**. Mentally disabled people living in the community are eligible for benefits but those in psychiatric hospitals are excluded. By encouraging patients to be discharged, state legislators could shift the cost of care for mentally ill patients to the federal government.

1967

Ronald Reagan is elected governor of California. The number of patients in state hospitals had fallen to 22,000, and the Reagan administration uses the decline as a reason to make cuts to the Department of Mental Hygiene. Governor Reagan and his administration cut 2,600 jobs and 10 percent of the budget despite reports showing that hospitals were already below recommended staffing levels.

1967

Reagan signs the **Lanterman-Petris-Short Act** and ends the practice of institutionalizing patients against their will, or for indefinite amounts of time. This law is regarded by some as a “patient’s bill of rights”. Sadly, the care outside state hospitals was inadequate. The year after the law goes into effect, a study shows the number of mentally ill people entering San Mateo’s criminal justice system doubles.

1969

Reagan reverses earlier budget cuts and increases spending on the Department of Mental Hygiene by a record \$28 million.

1973

The number of patients in California State mental hospitals falls to 7,000.

1980

President Jimmy Carter signs the **Mental Health Systems Act** to improve on Kennedy’s dream.

1981

President Reagan repeals Carter’s legislation with the **Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act**. This pushes the responsibility of mentally ill patients back to the states. The legislation creates block grants for the states, but federal spending on mental illness declines.

2004

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 10 percent of state prisoners have symptoms that meet criteria for a psychotic disorder.

READING FOUR: MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT AND HEARTH ACT

The two major pieces of federal legislation in the United States that provides assistance for people experiencing homelessness are the McKinney-Vento Act and the 2009 HEARTH Act (Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act).

If you are assigned to Reading Four, access these three resources to complete your summary.

<https://education.wm.edu/centers/hope/specialtopics/documents/bios.pdf>

<https://education.wm.edu/centers/hope/specialtopics/mckinneyact/index.php>

https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2021/04-17_Homeless-Assistance-McKinney-Vento.pdf

REFERENCES AND BACKGROUND



Part I: Understand homelessness as a systemic problem

- Resource: [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)
- Article: [History of Homelessness in America](#)
- Timeline: [A Brief Timeline of Race and Homelessness in America](#)

Part II: Historical Context – Past and Present


- Blog: [Why is Homelessness a Systems Problem?](#)
- Article: [“Why You Aren’t Homeless—How Privilege and Fortune Shape the Shelter Census.”](#)
- Article: [“The 12 Biggest Myths About Homelessness in America”](#)
- Article: [“As Coronavirus Magnifies America’s Housing Crisis, FDR’s New Deal Could Offer a Roadmap Forward.”](#)
- Reading: <https://education.wm.edu/centers/hope/specialtopics/documents/bios.pdf>
- Reading: https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2021/04-17_Homeless-Assistance-McKinney-Vento.pdf

Part III: Writing Your Own Editorial

- [Video Explainer](#): racism and homelessness
- Websites that list out different actions for mayors, health systems leaders, and [citizens](#)



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