

# How Different was life for Black Americans if they lived in the North?

## Racism

### Learning objectives

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Jim Crow laws and racist attitudes
- the Ku Klux Klan.

By 1870, the USA had abolished slavery and given black people equal rights as American citizens. In reality, however, black people still faced racism, unequal treatment and violence. All over the USA, black people often did the most unpleasant jobs and were 'last hired, first fired'.

### Racism in the South

In the South, 'Jim Crow' laws enforced **segregation** – the policy of making black people use different, usually worse, facilities from whites. This covered everything from cafés to transport to toilets. States gave black schools less money, so it was hard to pay for books or building repairs. Black people had the right to vote, but white southerners often stopped them from registering to vote. Sometimes they told black people they would lose their jobs if they registered. Sometimes they threatened violence. The law in some states said voters had to be literate (able to read). So in those states, the (always white) person registering voters gave black people a hard test passage to read and white people a simple one. This 'legally' disqualified black people as illiterate.

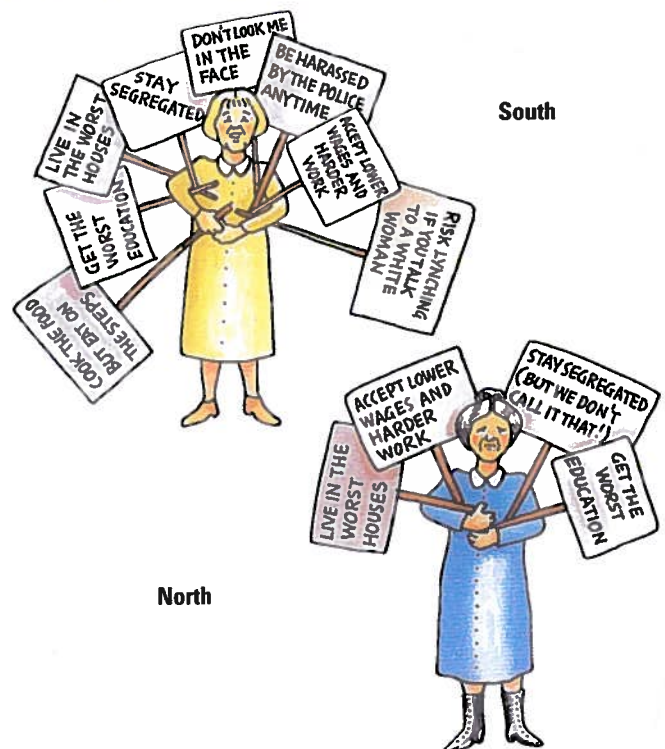
### Racism in the North

The North had no segregation laws, but black people often lived in separate neighbourhoods – usually in the worst parts of towns. So local schools and facilities were often all black anyway. But black people did have more opportunities to live a more equal life. They were more likely to get an education, and that education went on for longer. Many black people hoped that their contribution to the forces and war work during the war would help to change racism, especially in the South. It didn't, so many of them left. In the 1920s, black people moved north in their millions. In 1910, the black population of the Harlem area of New York was 10%. In 1920, it was 33% and by 1930 it was 70%.

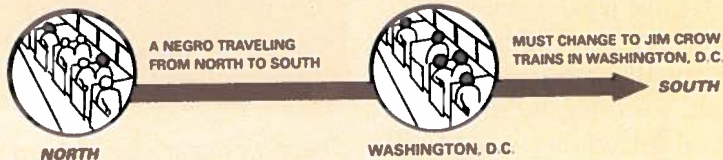
[In 1896] Homer Plessy went to court to challenge a Louisiana railroad's forcing him to sit in a 'separate but equal' carriage, saying it was a violation of his rights under the constitution. Justice John Marshall Harlan said on his behalf: 'Our constitution is colour-blind'. The other justices did not agree; they ruled for the railroad. Separate but equal was legal. Jim Crow laws affected: public transport, shops, post offices, drinking fountains and libraries. Until the 1940s, the American Red Cross kept negro blood segregated in blood banks.

Source A: From Black History for Beginners, written by Denise Dennis in 1984.

The attitudes that many white people had towards black people in the South and in the North.



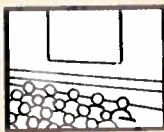
**THE NATION'S CAPITAL A SYMBOL OF FREEDOM AND EQUALITY?**



IF HE DECIDES TO REMAIN IN D.C. OVERNIGHT HE WILL FIND THAT:



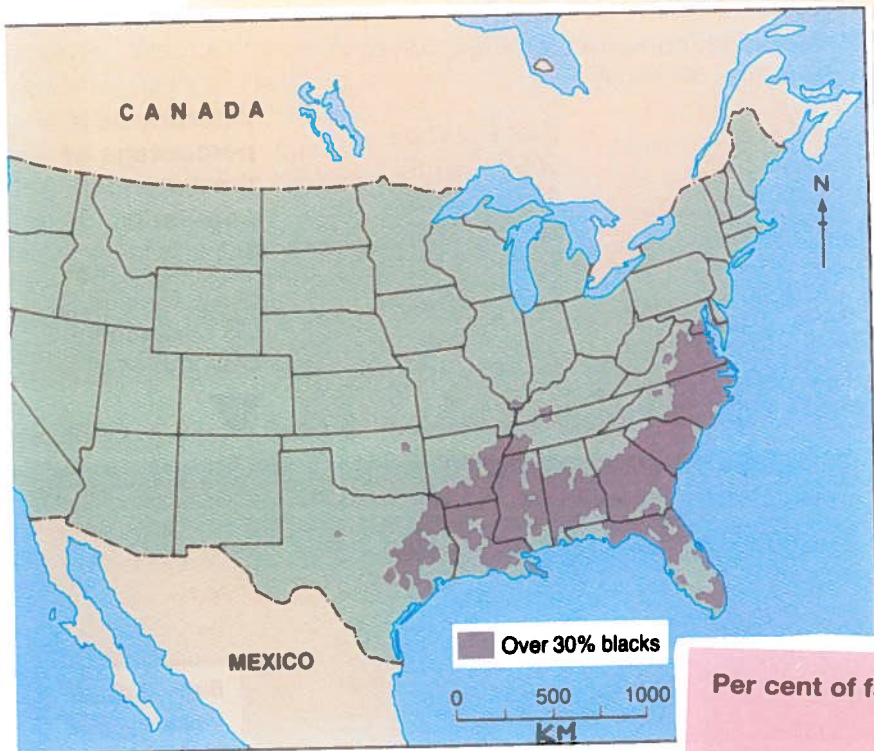
HE CANNOT EAT IN A DOWNTOWN RESTAURANT



HE CANNOT ATTEND A DOWNTOWN MOVIE OR PLAY



HE CANNOT SLEEP IN A DOWNTOWN HOTEL



**Per cent of families on relief, May 1934**

	Black	White
Northern cities	52.2	13.3
Border state cities	51.8	10.4
Southern cities	33.7	11.4

(Source: *To Secure These Rights*)

**Median income of black and white families, 1935-36**

City	Black	White
New York	\$890	\$1,930
Chicago	\$726	\$1,687
Atlanta*	\$632	\$1,876
Columbia*	\$576	\$1,876
Mobile*	\$481	\$1,419

\* cities in the South

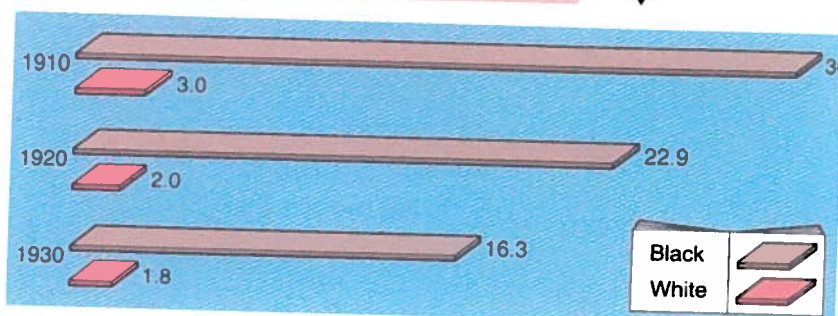
(Source: *Bureau of the Census, US Department of Commerce*)



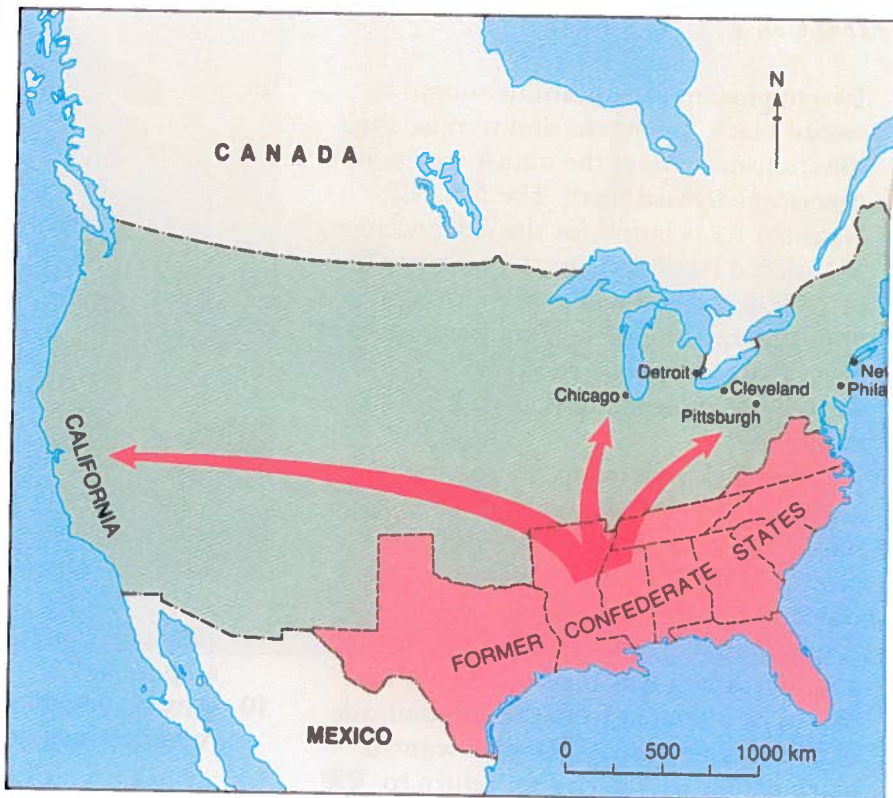
**Statistics of inequality**

**Illiteracy as a percentage of the American population**

(Source: *Bureau of the Census, US Department of Commerce*)







The majority of black Americans did not benefit from the economic boom of the 1920s. They were still seen as second-class citizens. Especially in the South, blacks were **segregated** and suffered from discrimination and often terrible intimidation.

### The Jim Crow laws

Africans had been brought to America as slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the time slavery was ended in the 1860s, there were more black people than whites living in the American South. After the Civil War ended in 1865, 41 state governments, fearing the growing power of black Americans, introduced laws to control black people's freedom. They were known as the Jim Crow laws after a song of 1830. The song, which portrayed black people as childlike and inferior, featured a song-and-dance caricature of black Americans.

Under the Jim Crow laws, the state governments segregated blacks from whites in schools, parks, hospitals, swimming pools, libraries and other public places. After the First World War, new Jim Crow laws in some states extended segregation to taxis, race tracks and boxing matches.

Black Americans found it hard to get fair treatment. They could not vote and were denied access to good jobs and a reasonable education. They were intimidated by whites, who tried to control them through fear. In total, 360,000 black Americans served in the First World War, but they returned home to find that racism was still part of everyday life. In 1919 at least 70 black people were lynched in the southern states. Generally speaking, police there turned a blind eye.

### Migration north

Faced by racism and living in often chronic poverty, thousands of southern black Americans

moved to the cities of the north in the years after 1910, hoping to find a better life. The black population of Chicago and New York doubled in the 1920s: Chicago from 110,000 to 230,000, and New York from 150,000 to 333,000.

However, conditions in the North were not much better. Blacks were given poorly paid jobs and were the first to be laid off in bad times. They generally lived in squalid tenement ghettos and faced even more racial intolerance. For example, in Chicago in 1919, gangs of Irish and Polish immigrants attacked blacks who tried to use public facilities. In New York and Chicago they often lived in worse housing than whites yet paid higher rents. They had inferior education and health services.

▲ Migration to the North. From the fields and shacks of the South, thousands of black people joined the great migration to the factories and ghettos in the North and West.

In one district in New York, a Negro population equal in numbers to the inhabitants of Dallas, Texas, or Springfield, Massachusetts, lives, works, and pursues its ideals almost as a separate entity from the great surrounding metropolis. Here Negro merchants ply their trade; Negro professional men follow their various vocations; their children are educated; the poor, sick, and orphan of the race are cared for; churches, newspapers, and banks flourish heedless of those, outside this Negro community, who resent its presence in a white city.

◀ G A black writer describing Harlem in New York in the 1920s. Some historians see the great migration as a revolt; a refusal by blacks to be pushed around in the segregated South and instead to build their own communities in the North.

In the North



## Improvements

There were some improvements for black Americans in the years after 1918, especially in the northern states.

- In Chicago and New York there was a growing black middle class. Middle-class blacks used their position to bring about change. For example, they boycotted department stores in Chicago until the stores agreed to employ black assistants.
- Jazz brought fame to several black singers and musicians, such as Louis Armstrong (see page 43).
- The black neighbourhood of Harlem in New York became the centre of the Harlem Renaissance – a flourishing of black singers, musicians, artists, writers and poets.
- Black theatre attracted big audiences. Black performing artists, including singers, comedians and dancers, were popular in clubs and musical shows.
- Life expectancy for blacks increased from 45 in 1900 to 48 in 1930.

## Summary

- Over the 1920s, 1.5 million black Americans left the South for the cities of the North. In many ways their lives improved:
  - 1 They had a chance of getting a job.
  - 2 Some blacks did well and formed a new black middle class.
  - 3 They could get educated at black universities and colleges.
  - 4 There were black newspapers, magazines, literature.
  - 5 Popular black heroes appeared – sportsmen and jazz musicians. Jazz, created by black musicians, swept the USA first and then became the popular music of the western world.
  - 6 There was less obvious discrimination – no segregated buses or restaurants, for example.
- In other ways black Americans still faced difficulties. There was discrimination in:
  - 1 jobs – blacks were the last to be taken on, the first to be fired.
  - 2 housing – blacks were forced into ghettos, like Harlem, New York and South Side, Chicago. Even recent immigrants, discriminated against by most whites, were hostile to blacks.