

# BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The USA in the 20th century

## Episode 4 – The experiences of African-Americans in the 1920s

**Announcer:** BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

**Katie:** I'm Katie Charlwood, a history podcaster.

**Datshiane:** And I'm Datshiane Navanayagam, a history graduate and BBC presenter.

**Katie:** Welcome to Bitesize GCSE History. This is episode 4 in our nine-part series on American history, in which we shine a light on African American experiences in the 20th century. It's a serious subject and there'll be a lot to take in.

**Datshiane:** Throughout the series, we'll pull out major themes from the period and see how events and developments connect with them.

**Katie:** Segregation is an important theme, and for this our searchlight will be on the USA's Jim Crow laws.

**Datshiane:** We'll be exploring difficult topics, including racial tensions, and the impact of systemic discrimination. If at any point you feel overwhelmed please take a break or speak to someone you trust. Remember, it's okay to feel emotional about these events, and it's important to approach this subject with respect and care.

**Katie:** We'll also look at the juxtaposition of the African American experience of racism and segregation with a time of cultural and intellectual thriving. So, keep your pen and paper handy, or your laptop, as we will share revision tips as we go.

**Datshiane:** So, let's go over what were known as the Jim Crow laws. These were designed to keep African Americans segregated.

**Katie:** See, slavery had been abolished in the USA in 1865, but some clung on to racist ideas. Some white politicians were determined to maintain their political and economic power over black people, and they did this by passing the Jim Crow laws.

**Datshiane:** But, you know, this didn't just happen in the Deep South. Segregation laws were passed in all but nine American states. Check out BBC Bitesize for more on this, as well as the de facto racism encountered all over America.

**Katie:** Well, that seems to fly in the face of the Declaration of Independence credo, that all people are born equal.

**Datshiane:** Well, a Supreme Court case, Plessy v. Ferguson ruling in 1896, had qualified the original principle, saying people could be 'separate but equal.' This stated that segregation was constitutional and legal, as long as the separate facilities provided to black and white people were of equal quality.

**Katie:** But 'separate' did not mean 'equal' in reality, as we'll see. And more often than not, African Americans were treated like second-class citizens. They couldn't use the same restaurants, hotels, swimming pools. Even shared cemeteries were out of bounds, as well as libraries, cinemas, transport, waiting rooms, schools and toilets.

**Datshiane:** Yes, that's right, Katie. So, I've got a picture here from 1939 of an African American man drinking from a very basic segregated water fountain. Now, we can use that photograph as a source to analyse the idea of 'separate but equal' and how it played out in reality.

**Katie:** Segregation was even maintained in the military. And some states banned marriages between black and white people. But some people tried to override these laws; they fell in love and formed relationships and bonds in spite of these laws. Take the case of Andrea Perez, who was white, who applied for a licence to marry Sylvester Davis, who was black, in 1948.

**Datshiane:** We can use court records as a source to reveal how the couple tried to compel the county clerk of Los Angeles to issue them with the marriage licence and certificate, but their application was turned down.

**Katie:** Because at the time, African Americans were not treated equally by the justice system. Many judges, sheriffs, and even the police, upheld the Jim Crow laws.

**Datshiane:** So, the reality didn't resemble the 1896 court ruling of 'separate but equal,' did it, Katie?

**Katie:** Definitely not. In reality, facilities and opportunities were not equal. Schools for black children were crowded and sometimes there was no funding at all. But in our final podcast, Episode 9, we'll go over how the civil rights struggle in which some people took a stand managed to bring about significant changes.

**Katie:** As this episode centres on racial discrimination intentions, we absolutely need to talk about the Ku Klux Klan, or the KKK. The KKK wanted to keep African Americans – as they said – 'in their place,' by which they meant below white people.

**Datshiane:** The KKK were also hostile to Jewish people and other minority groups, and they used terror and violence to achieve their ends.

**Katie:** Part of their strategy was to intimidate black people to stop them voting for someone who might stand up for them.

**Datshiane:** So, the group was first set up in the 1860s, but then it went into decline at the turn of the century. Then, a controversial but highly popular 1915 feature film called 'The Birth of a Nation' which glorified Klansmen revived their fortunes and membership shot up to five million.

**Katie:** Because of their large membership, their actions and influence in the 20th century was huge. The Klan saw itself as a bastion against so-called 'moral decline.' As

a part of this, they also attacked people who drank alcohol and gambled to clean up society. Their methods were grim and violent, from whipping to lynching.

**Datshiane:** Listen to this. In his autobiography, the black African civil rights activist Malcolm X wrote, 'When my mother was pregnant with me, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home in Omaha, Nebraska one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out. Standing where they could see her pregnant condition, she told them that she was alone with her three small children and that my father was away preaching in Milwaukee. The Klansmen shouted threats and warnings at her that we had better get out of town because the good Christian white people were not going to stand for my father spreading trouble.'

**Katie:** This is an example of how the KKK used violence and intimidation against black people, who they felt were trying to resist racism and segregation. Eventually they lost most of their support when a local Klan leader was tried for the brutal kidnapping, rape and murder of a young woman. At his trial he revealed Klan secrets, and within a year membership had plummeted.

**Datshiane:** Okay, so segregation was widespread, but it was most marked in the southern states. So, it's no wonder, really, that many from the African American communities decided to strike out for a better life away from the south. This became known as the Great Migration.

**Katie:** Where there was better pay and chances of working in the new industries.

**Datshiane:** Yes, so African American populations more than doubled in Chicago and New York in the early 1900s.

**Katie:** Yeah, but there was still racism.

**Datshiane:** Exactly. Some factories wouldn't hire black workers, or they paid them the lowest wages.

**Katie:** And sometimes there were riots, like in 1919 when a black teenager accidentally strayed onto a whites-only beach in Chicago.

**Datshiane:** Despite the racism suffered, African Americans were trailblazers in organising against these injustices. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois, the great-grandson of an African who had been enslaved. He helped set up the NAACP in 1910, which campaigned for voting rights for African Americans, as well as campaigning against racial violence, discrimination in employment, and segregated public facilities.

**Katie:** In this section there has been some serious history to take in, so pause here if you need to reflect.

**Datshiane:** So, let's consider how racism impacted the lives of African Americans in the 1920s. This might be the basis of an exam question. Have a go yourself after the podcast. Remember to use your knowledge and always use a primary source if you have one.

**Katie:** In my answer, I'd write that African Americans continued to face discrimination, especially in the south as a result of the Jim Crow laws and a corrupt legal system, whilst still facing violence and intimidation from the KKK. But I'd also say that there were also new opportunities. With the Great Migration, millions of black Americans headed north to find better pay and work in industry. However, they were still paid less and there were still racial tensions that occasionally erupted into riots. Against that there were also political changes too, and some of these were positives, for example, voting rights led to elected officials who were black.

**Datshiane:** You're right. So, perhaps add that there were campaigns to improve outcomes after W.E.B. Du Bois set up the NAACP in 1909.

**Katie:** So, I'd conclude that some African American communities thrived despite the racism in northern cities. Harlem in New York particularly became a hive of creative talent and culture.

**Datshiane:** And that's what we're going to look at in the next section. When I was at university I loved Bessie Smith's voice. She was an African American blues singer, and her songs were raw and powerful and like nothing I'd heard before. They were just full of emotion, and she had such a strong voice that she often did it without a microphone. She was one of the artists that emerged in the Black Renaissance. African American artists, poets, writers and musicians began to thrive.

**Katie:** Like Louis Armstrong with his trumpet and his group The Hot Five were another example. Harlem, a neighbourhood in New York City, was slap-bang in the middle of this fabulous activity.

**Datshiane:** And what's more, white people also joined in to dance and listen to this music. Let's check in with our Bitesize History time-travelling reporter Jordan who's in Harlem in 1925.

**Jordan:** This is the Savoy Ballroom in the heart of Harlem, which has become the epicentre of a cultural movement, the Harlem Renaissance. Despite the harsh realities of segregation and racism, black culture is thriving here, and jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith are leading the charge. But this thriving scene contrasts with the struggle that African Americans face across the country. Amidst the glamour and excitement in Harlem, I just saw Marcus Garvey, a powerful figure, advocating for African pride and unity. Garvey has inspired many with his message, declaring: 'The black skin is not a badge of shame but rather a glorious symbol of national greatness.' Harlem offers a sanctuary for artistic expression and pride. Movements like Garvey's organisation, the UNIA-ACL, as well as other intellectual and cultural hubs, keep the spirit of Renaissance alive. Here in the heart of Harlem a revolution of music, art and pride flourishes against the backdrop of racial inequality. This is Jordan. Back to the studio.

**Katie:** Thanks, Jordan. Okay, so it is test time. Three questions, five seconds each to write your answers down. Here goes. What is the name of the laws designed to keep African Americans segregated?

**Datshiane:** The Jim Crow laws.

**Katie:** And what court ruling by the Supreme Court qualified that this meant people were 'separate but equal?'

**Datshiane:** That was the Plessy vs Ferguson ruling in 1896.

**Katie:** And what was the Harlem Renaissance?

**Datshiane:** Well, this was a surge in creativity, culture and pride amongst African Americans, especially in Harlem, New York. Okay, Katie, let's do a quick overview of this episode.

**Katie:** Okay. The Jim Crow laws continued to keep African Americans segregated in the 20th century.

**Datshiane:** African Americans faced significant barriers to voting, especially in the southern states.

**Katie:** Economic opportunities were limited, and they faced discrimination in hiring and employment practices.

**Datshiane:** Don't forget, widespread violence and intimidation were used to maintain racial hierarchies.

**Katie:** And so many African Americans moved from the rural south to northern cities in the Great Migration.

**Datshiane:** But despite these hardships, African Americans contributed significantly to American culture, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

**Katie:** Coming up in the next episode we've got prohibition, speakeasies, Mafia and mobs.

**Datshiane:** Thanks for listening.