

# Discrimination & The Great Depression: A Concealed Interrelation of the SLHP

## Research Question

How are trends in the socioeconomic conditions of black and white interviewees of the SLHP related to the broader racial dynamics at the time of The Great Depression?

## Background and Thesis

The Great Depression brought about the New Deal, which created various government programs meant to aid the US population. Some of those programs included the Federal Writers Project (FWP) and the Southern Life Histories Project (SLHP). The SLHP was an FWP initiative with the goal to employ writers and non-writers alike and have them record the life histories of southerners from all walks of life. Another goal of the FWP and SLHP was to help create a unified identity without highlighting the sociological issues affecting America and the South at the time (Hirsch). These issues included but were not limited to, Jim Crow laws and implicit clauses in legislation. Despite efforts to interview inclusively and muffle these issues, results from metadata and textual analysis revealed that black interviewees had a disproportionately worse socioeconomic condition than their white counterparts. Secondary research affirms that this disproportion was worsened by racial discrimination during The Great Depression.

## Citations

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Sundstrom, William A. "Last Hired, First Fired? Unemployment and Urban Black Workers During the Great Depression." The Journal of Economic History, vol. 52, no. 2, 1992, pp. 415–29. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2123118](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2123118). Accessed 29 Nov. 2022.

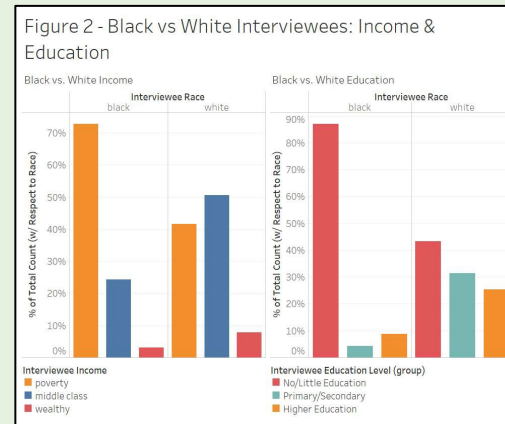
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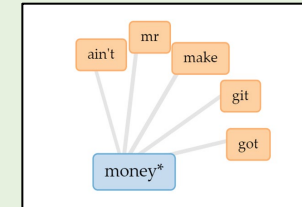
## Methods

Of approximately 1,200 total life histories, a subset of 138 from North Carolina were read and used for the initial corpus. Metadata was then collaboratively created before being analyzed with Tableau. Textual analysis was also performed with Voyant on a corpus of black interviewees as well as white interviewees.

## Results

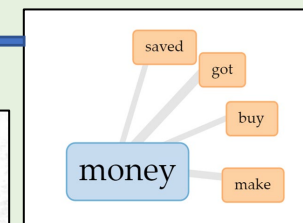


### Linked Words: Black Interviewees



got the epilepsy and Mabel's always down. The only reason my business is not bigger is 'cause I ain't had more money to put behind it.

### Linked Words: White Interviewees



we needed at home. Our forty acres supplied all the foodstuff we could use and we had enough money crop to buy clothes and the extra things we needed. We seldom borrowed and seldom loaned, but we often fed the hungry and helped the sick.

## Conclusions

Findings from analyzing metadata and text as well as further research cement the idea of black Americans being more negatively affected by the Great Depression than their white counterparts. The analyses show a clear disparity in how black and white interviewees experienced as well as perceived education and money. Discrimination through New Deal policies, implicit clauses in other legislation, and the prevention of some legislation being passed amplified this disparity and created other negative impacts for black Americans ("Race Relations" and Lee, 148). For instance, Murphy's "African Americans in the Great Depression and New Deal," they highlight the successful attempts of white southerners to use legislation to hurt black Americans. By working to exclude farmers, 55% of black workers were ineligible for social security when it was created in 1935 (Murphy). The Great Depression was a tumultuous economic time combatted by progressive government action. The SLHP was a part of that action and aimed to unify without critiquing the larger issues of society, however, embedded in these life histories is a snippet of the reality of black Americans during these times: The Great Depression made a bad situation even worse.

## Significance

Black interviewees were disproportionately worse off than their white interviewees when it came to income and education level, two factors that contribute to socioeconomic status. These findings suggest a difference in economic opportunity, and that money may have been a barrier to education, and subsequently better employment opportunities (Sundstrom 427). This is exacerbated by differences found in words linked with "money." Black interviewees use negative sentiments such as "ain't" while white interviewees use more positive sentiments such as "saved" and "buy." This indicates black interviewees may have had a more negative perception of their socioeconomic status.