

# Social Concerns in the 1980s

## MAIN IDEA

Beneath the surge of prosperity that marked the conservative era of the 1980s lay serious social problems.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Issues involving health care, education, civil rights, and equal rights for women continue to challenge American society.

## Terms & Names

- AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome)
- pay equity
- L. Douglas Wilder
- Jesse Jackson
- Lauro Cavazos
- Antonia Coello Novello

## One American's Story

Trevor Ferrell lived an ordinary life in Gladwyne, an affluent suburb 12 miles from downtown Philadelphia. Trevor had brothers and sisters, his own room, a favorite pillow, a fondness for video games, and a bike. In short, he seemed like a typical 11-year-old boy until he watched a television news report about homeless people.

Trevor was astonished. “Do people really live like that?” he asked his parents. “I thought they lived like that in India, but not here, I mean in America.” Trevor convinced his parents to drive downtown that night, where he gave a pillow and a blanket to the first homeless man he saw. Soon he and his family were collecting food and clothes to give to the homeless.



▲ Trevor Ferrell listens to a homeless person in Philadelphia.

### A PERSONAL VOICE TREVOR FERRELL

“They have to live on the streets, and right after you see one of them, you see somebody in a limousine pull up to a huge, empty mansion. It’s such a difference. Some people can get anything they want, and these other people couldn’t get a penny if they needed one.”

—quoted in *Trevor’s Place*

As Trevor saw, the restored American economy of the 1980s did not mean renewed prosperity for everyone. As Presidents Reagan and Bush pursued conservative domestic policies, people disagreed about the impact of these policies.

## Health, Education, and Cities in Crisis

In the 1980s, both in the cities and in rural and suburban areas, local governments strove to deal with crises in health, education, and safety. Americans directed their attention to issues such as AIDS, drug abuse, abortion, and education.

## CALIFORNIA STANDARDS

**11.8.2** Describe the significance of Mexican immigration and its relationship to the agricultural economy, especially in California.

**11.10.5** Discuss the diffusion of the civil rights movement of African Americans from the churches of the rural South and the urban North, including the resistance to racial desegregation in Little Rock and Birmingham, and how the advances influenced the agendas, strategies, and effectiveness of the quests of American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans for civil rights and equal opportunities.

**11.10.6** Analyze the passage and effects of civil rights and voting rights legislation (e.g., 1964 Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act of 1965) and the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, with an emphasis on equality of access to education and to the political process.

**11.11.3** Describe the changing roles of women in society as reflected in the entry of more women into the labor force and the changing family structure.

**11.11.6** Analyze the persistence of poverty and how different analyses of this issue influence welfare reform, health insurance reform, and other social policies.

**CST 3** Students use a variety of maps and documents to interpret human movement, including major patterns of domestic and international migration, changing environmental preferences and settlement patterns, the frictions that develop between population groups, and the diffusion of ideas, technological innovations, and goods.



▲ The AIDS quilt was displayed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1987. Each panel honors a person who died of AIDS.

## NOW & THEN

### AIDS WORLDWIDE

In the year 2000, it was estimated that 5.3 million people worldwide became infected with HIV/AIDS. Impoverished countries that lie in sub-Saharan Africa remain hardest hit by the deadly pandemic, accounting for an estimated 3.8 million, or 72 percent, of new cases during the year. At the end of December 2000, the number of adults and children living with HIV/AIDS worldwide was estimated at 36.1 million people, of whom the proportions of males and females were almost equal.

**HEALTH ISSUES** One of the most troubling issues that concerned Americans in the 1980s was **AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome)**. Possibly beginning as early as the 1960s, AIDS spread rapidly throughout the world. Caused by a virus that destroys the immune system, AIDS weakens the body so that it is prone to infections and normally rare cancers.

AIDS is transmitted through bodily fluids, and most of the early victims of the disease were either homosexual men or intravenous drug users who shared needles. However, many people also contracted AIDS through contaminated blood transfusions, and children acquired it by being born to infected mothers. As the 1980s progressed,

increasing numbers of heterosexuals began contracting AIDS. As the epidemic grew, so did concern over prevention and cure.

**ABORTION** Many Americans were concerned about abortion in the 1980s. Abortion had been legal in the United States since 1973, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that first-trimester abortions were protected by a woman's right to privacy. Opponents of legalized abortion quickly organized under the pro-life banner. They argued that human life begins at conception and that no woman has the right to terminate a human life by her individual decision. Proponents of legalized abortion described themselves as pro-choice. They argued that reproductive choices were personal health-care matters and noted that many women had died from abortions performed by unskilled people in unsterile settings before the procedure was legalized.

In July 1989, the Supreme Court ruled in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Care Services* that states had the right to impose new restrictions on abortion. As a result, abortion restrictions varied from state to state. **A**

### MAIN IDEA

#### Contrasting

**A** What are the two viewpoints on legalized abortion?

**DRUG ABUSE** Battles over abortion rights sometimes competed for public attention with concerns about rising drug abuse. A few people argued that drugs should be legalized to reduce the power of gangs who made a living selling illegal drugs. Others called for treatment facilities to treat addictions. The Reagan administration launched a war on drugs and supported moves to prosecute users as well as dealers. First Lady Nancy Reagan toured the country with an antidrug campaign that admonished students to “Just say no!” to drugs.

“Just say no!”

**NANCY REAGAN, SLOGAN  
IN THE WAR ON DRUGS**

**EDUCATION** Education became another issue that stirred people’s concerns. In 1983, a federal commission issued a report on education titled *A Nation at Risk*. The report revealed that American students lagged behind students in most other industrialized nations. In addition, the report stated that 23 million Americans were unable to follow an instruction manual or fill out a job application form.

The commission’s findings touched off a debate about the quality of education. The commission recommended more homework, longer school days, and an extended school year. It also promoted increased pay and merit raises for teachers, as well as a greater emphasis on basic subjects such as English, math, science, social studies, and computer science.

In April 1991, President Bush announced an education initiative, “America 2000.” He argued that choice was the salvation of American schools and recommended allowing parents to use public funds to send their children to schools of their choice—public, private, or religious. First Lady Barbara Bush toured the country to promote reading and writing skills. **B**

**THE URBAN CRISIS** The crisis in education was closely connected to the crisis in the cities. Many undereducated students lived in cities such as Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. During the 1970s, the United States had become increasingly suburbanized as more and more white families responded to the lure of new homes, big lawns, shopping malls, and well-equipped schools outside the cities. Businesses moved, too, taking jobs and tax revenue with them.

Poor people and racial minorities were often left in cities burdened by high unemployment rates, crumbling infrastructures, inadequate funds for sanitation and health services, deteriorating schools, and growing social problems. By 1992, thousands of people were homeless, including many families with children. Cities were increasingly divided into wealthy neighborhoods and poverty-stricken areas.

One poverty-stricken area, south-central Los Angeles (which had erupted in violence in 1965 and 1968) erupted again in 1992. Four white police officers had been videotaped beating an African-American man named Rodney King, who had been fleeing from the officers in a speeding car. An all-white jury found the officers not guilty on charges of brutality. This verdict resulted in riots that lasted five days and caused the deaths of 53 people.

## DIFFICULT DECISIONS



### SENDING MONEY INTO SPACE

Under the Reagan administration, the government shifted the emphasis of the space program from scientific to military and commercial applications.

Beginning in 1981, NASA directed a series of space shuttle flights. The agency hoped to establish a space station and have the shuttle ferry workers and materials to it.

The explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986 in which the crew was killed (crew shown above) caused a reexamination of ventures into space. Many people thought the money spent on space should be spent on social needs.

1. Should the federal government spend money on space exploration when so many American citizens require basic assistance?
2. If you were a legislator being asked to vote in favor of funding space exploration today, how would you vote? Why?

### MAIN IDEA

#### Identifying Problems

**B** What problems in education emerged during the 1980s?

# The Equal Rights Struggle

Within this environment of dwindling resources and social struggle, women worked to achieve economic and social gains.



Geraldine Ferraro speaks at the 1984 Democratic Convention.

**POLITICAL LOSSES AND GAINS** During the early 1980s, women's rights activists worked to obtain ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Although Congress had passed the amendment in 1972, it had not yet been ratified, or approved, by three-fourths of the states. Supporters of the amendment had until June 30, 1982, to gain ratification from 38 states. They obtained only 35 of the 38 ratifications they needed, and the ERA did not become law. With the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, women's organizations began to concentrate on electing women to public office. More women candidates began to run for office, and in 1984 the Democrats chose Geraldine Ferraro as their vice-presidential candidate. She had spoken of the necessity for women to continue working for equal opportunities in American society.

## ★ PERSONAL VOICE GERALDINE FERRARO

“It is not just those of us who have reached the top who are fighting this daily battle. It is a fight in which all of us—rich and poor, career and home oriented, young and old—participate, simply because we are women.”

—quoted in *Vital Speeches of the Day*

### Women's and Men's Average Yearly Earnings in Selected Careers, 1982

| Career                  | Women    | Men      |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|
| Accountant              | \$19,916 | \$25,272 |
| Advertising Manager     | 19,396   | 32,292   |
| Computer Operator       | 13,728   | 17,992   |
| Cook                    | 8,476    | 9,880    |
| Engineer                | 26,052   | 31,460   |
| Financial Manager       | 19,136   | 30,004   |
| High School Teacher     | 18,980   | 21,424   |
| Insurance Salesperson   | 15,236   | 22,152   |
| Lawyer                  | 30,264   | 34,008   |
| Personnel Specialist    | 17,836   | 26,832   |
| Physician               | 21,944   | 26,884   |
| Police/ Detective       | 15,548   | 20,072   |
| Real Estate Salesperson | 16,432   | 24,076   |
| Registered Nurse        | 20,592   | 20,696   |
| Retail Sales Worker     | 8,736    | 13,728   |
| Social Worker           | 15,600   | 20,436   |
| University Professor    | 20,748   | 26,832   |

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey, 1983–1989*.

#### SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts

1. Name one career that paid men and women almost equally.
2. What conclusion can you draw from this chart?

In the November 1992 election, the number of women in the House of Representatives increased from 23 to 47, and the number of women senators tripled—from two to six. President Reagan also had earlier named two women to his cabinet: In 1983, Elizabeth Dole became secretary of transportation, and Margaret Heckler became secretary of health and human services. Nevertheless, women remained under-represented in political affairs. 🗳️

**INEQUALITY** Several factors contributed to what some called the “feminization of poverty.” By 1992, 57.8 percent of the nation's women were part of the work force, and a growing percentage of women worked as professionals and managers. However, in that year women earned only about 75 cents for every dollar men earned. Female college graduates earned only slightly more than male high-school graduates. Also, about 31 percent of female heads of households lived in poverty, and among African-American women, the poverty rate was even higher. New trends in divorce settlements aggravated the situation. Because of no-fault divorce, fewer women won alimony payments, and the courts rarely enforced the meager child support payments they awarded.

To close the income gap that left so many women poor, women's organizations and unions proposed a system of **pay equity**. Jobs would

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

🗳️ What steps did women take to help them move forward after the ERA failed to pass?

be rated on the basis of the amount of education they required, the amount of physical strength needed to perform them, and the number of people that an employee supervised. Instead of relying on traditional pay scales, employers would establish pay rates that reflected each job's requirements. By 1989, 20 states had begun adjusting government jobs to offer pay equity for jobs of comparable worth.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Issues

**D** What gains did women make during the 1980s and early 1990s?

Women also fought for improvements in the workplace. Since many working women headed single-parent households or had children under the age of six, they pressed for family benefits. Government and corporate benefit packages began to include maternity leaves, flexible hours and workweeks, job sharing, and work-at-home arrangements. Some of these changes were launched by individual firms, while others required government intervention. Yet the Reagan administration sharply cut the budget for daycare and other similar programs. **D**

## The Fight for Rights Continues

Cuts in government programs and the backlash against civil rights initiatives, such as affirmative action, affected other groups as well.

**AFRICAN AMERICANS** African Americans made striking political gains during the 1980s, even though their economic progress suffered. By the mid-1980s, African-American mayors governed many cities, including Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Hundreds of communities in both the North and the South had elected African Americans to serve as sheriffs, school board members, state legislators, and members of Congress. In 1990, **L. Douglas Wilder** of Virginia became the nation's first African-American governor. The Reverend **Jesse Jackson** ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988.

Middle-class African Americans often held professional and managerial positions. But the poor faced an uncertain future of diminishing opportunities. In 1989, the newly conservative Supreme Court handed down a series of decisions that continued to change the nation's course on civil rights. In the case of *Richmond v. J. A. Croson Company*, for example, the Court further limited the scope of affirmative action, policies that were designed to correct the effects of discrimination in the employment or education of minority groups or women. Other decisions by the Court outlawed contracts set aside for minority businesses. Sylvester Monroe, an African-American correspondent for *Newsweek* magazine, commented on the way in which some African Americans saw the backlash against affirmative action. **E**



▲ Jesse Jackson campaigns for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Issues

**E** What political gains did African Americans make during the 1980s?

### A PERSONAL VOICE SYLVESTER MONROE

“There’s a finite pie and everybody wants his piece. Everybody is afraid of losing his piece of the pie. That’s what the fight against affirmative action is all about. People feel threatened. As for blacks, they’re passé. They’re not in anymore. Nobody wants to talk about race.”

—quoted in *The Great Divide*



▲  
**Dr. Antonia Coello Novello served as surgeon general under President Bush.**

**GAINS FOR LATINOS** Latinos became the fastest growing minority during the 1980s. By 1990, they constituted almost nine percent of the population, and demographers estimated that Latinos would soon outnumber African Americans as the nation's largest minority group. About two out of three Latinos were Mexican Americans, who lived mostly in the Southwest. A Puerto Rican community thrived in the Northeast, and a Cuban population was concentrated in Florida. Like African Americans, Latinos gained political power during the 1980s. Toney Anaya became governor of New Mexico, while Robert Martinez became

governor of Florida. In August 1988, President Reagan appointed **Lauro Cavazos** as secretary of education. In 1990, President Bush named Dr. **Antonia Coello Novello** to the post of surgeon general.

Many Latinos supported bilingual education. They feared that abandoning Spanish would weaken their distinctive culture. In the words of Daniel Villanueva, a television executive, "We want to be here, but without losing our language and our culture. They are a richness, a treasure that we don't care to lose." The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and the 1975 amendment to the Voting Rights Act enabled Spanish speakers to attend school and vote in their own language, but by the mid-1980s opposition to bilingualism was rising. Critics argued that it slowed the rate at which Spanish-speaking people entered mainstream American life. They also feared that the nation would become split between English speakers and Spanish speakers.

**NATIVE AMERICANS SPEAK OUT** Native Americans also became more self-conscious of their dignity and more demanding of their rights. In the 1970s, they organized schools to teach young Native Americans about their past. They also began to fight for the return of ancestral lands wrongfully taken from them.

During the 1980s, the Reagan administration slashed aid to Native Americans for health, education, and other services. Driven to find new sources of revenue, Native Americans campaigned for gambling casinos on their land as a way to bring in money. After the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Native Americans, many tribes opened Las Vegas-style casinos, which provided additional funding for the tribes that operated them. Nonetheless, the long-term problems faced by Native Americans have not been solved by gambling casinos, although the new wealth has helped to some extent. **F**

**AN EXPANDING ASIAN-AMERICAN POPULATION** Asian Americans were the second-fastest growing minority in the United States during the 1980s. By 1992, the U.S. population included about 8.3 million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Asian Americans constituted 3.25 percent of the population.

Some have cited Asian Americans as an example of how minorities can succeed in the U.S. Yet while Asian Americans have low crime rates, low school dropout rates, and low divorce rates, Asian-American unemployment and poverty have been higher than the national figures.

**Vocabulary**  
**demographer:** a person who studies the characteristics of human population, such as growth, density, and distribution

## NOW & THEN

### AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Affirmative action refers to the effort to provide education and employment opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups, such as women and racial and ethnic minorities. The federal government first instituted affirmative action policies under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Presidents Reagan and Bush actively opposed affirmative action and racial quotas. In the 1990s, President Clinton supported affirmative action. Despite his support, in 1996, voters in California approved a referendum that did away with state affirmative action programs.

In 2001, the future of affirmative action was uncertain. President Bush expressed support for equal opportunity, but his Attorney General, John Ashcroft, was denounced by civil rights groups, in part because of his anti-affirmative action record.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Identifying Problems

**F** What problems did Native Americans face in the 1980s?



◀ A gay rights march in Washington, D.C., October 1987

**THE GAY RIGHTS MOVEMENT ADVANCES** During the 1970s and 1980s, gay men and lesbians began to fight openly for civil rights. While the gay rights movement suffered a setback during the early 1980s in the face of conservative opposition and the AIDS crisis, by the late 1980s and early 1990s a new surge of gay activism was under way in the country. Direct action groups sprang up throughout the country, calling for an end to anti-gay discrimination. Although several speakers at the 1992 Republican National Convention condemned gay activism, these speakers were unable to slow the pace of change. By the year 1993, seven states and 110 communities had outlawed such discrimination.

SECTION  
**3**

**ASSESSMENT**

**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name below, write a sentence explaining its significance.

• **AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome)**

• **pay equity**  
• **L. Douglas Wilder**

• **Jesse Jackson**  
• **Lauro Cavazos**

• **Antonia Coello Novello**

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES** (11.10.6)

Use a chart like the one below to list some of the social problems of the Reagan and Bush years and how the government responded to them.

| Social Problems | Government Responses |
|-----------------|----------------------|
|                 |                      |

Choose one issue and write other responses the government might have made.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. PREDICTING EFFECTS** (11.11.6)

How might improvements in the educational system help solve other social problems? **Think About:**

- the impact education might have on health-related problems
- the impact that education might have on urban problems
- the impact that education might have on unemployment

**4. COMPARING** (11.10.6)

Compare the political gains and losses experienced by various groups during the Reagan and Bush administrations.

**5. FORMING GENERALIZATIONS** (11.11.6)

Why might a widening gap between the richest and poorest citizens of a country be a cause for concern about that country's future?