

## READING 4: THE INTELLECTUALLY AND PHYSICALLY DISABLED

The Great Depression was a period in American history that saw the collapse of the U.S. economy, a rapid closure of factories, and a lack of goods and food production, all resulting in widespread hardships for virtually all Americans. Beginning with the stock market crash in October 1929, which wiped out millions of dollars in investments, the United States entered an era marked by extreme poverty and joblessness.

During the Depression, families who had children with intellectual disabilities felt the financial strain of providing for the children's special needs. Some public schools in large cities provided special education classes, but these services were not provided in most communities. In 1933, for example, families of special needs children in Cleveland, Ohio, formed an advocacy group to protest that their children were excluded from attending public school.

In the community, families of children with intellectual disabilities often were met with disapproval or negative attitudes, forcing many to consider placing their children in government-run institutions. These institutions could provide food and shelter for the disabled that financially struggling families could not.

The stigma of disabilities led to movements to rid the gene pool of "undesirable" genetic elements. The prevailing theory at the time was that intellectual disabilities could be inherited. In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Virginia law allowing for forcible sterilization of people considered "unfit." These forced sterilizations often took place in institutions without the consent of the patient or the patient's family.

For adults with intellectual or physical disabilities, jobs were scarce or non-existent during the Great Depression. Ironically, in 1932, the first disabled president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was elected. In 1921, Roosevelt had contracted polio, which left him with paralysis from the waist down. Confined to a wheelchair, Roosevelt tried to minimize his disability with the American public. Roosevelt and his staff purposely avoided situations where the public would see him in his wheelchair. Instead, Roosevelt would appear behind a podium or large desk when speaking publicly to hide his disability.

Roosevelt created many jobs for Americans through his New Deal programs, but his job creation programs did not always allow for people with disabilities to work. In 1935, New York City's League of the Physically Handicapped formed to protest job discrimination against New Deal programs. After continued protests, 1,500 jobs were created for the disabled in New York. Roosevelt and Congress passed The Social Security Act of 1935, which included financial assistance for the blind and children with disabilities. This financial support allowed some families to keep disabled children at home.

### Sources:

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