

THE UNDERCLASS

Crime, community and welfare

It is a decade ago now that Charles Murray first described and accounted for a growing American underclass and bagged Marx's notion of the lumpenproletariat for the radical right. Now, by concentrating on the 'early warning signals' of illegitimacy, violent crime and labour force drop out, he finds that here too is a growing population "who live in a different way from other Britons ... and whose values are contaminating the life of entire neighbourhoods..." The underclass is the pathological manifestation of a 'culture of dependency' produced by welfare policy induced changes in incentives. First in America and now here, the benefits system put a premium on being poor; made it worthwhile for families to break up and for lower class women to forego marriage, as father absence means increased economic well-being. With no pressure on men to support families, their efforts decline. The changes in the rules of the economic game cause "status conventions to flip completely in some communities".

Breaking taboos

While a *Sunday Times* report credits Murray with having 'invented the idea of an "underclass"', he is more a taboo breaker. When Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a democrat, published *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* in 1965, which first drew attention to disintegrative trends in black families, it was met with such outrage from the progressive intelligentsia that serious investigation of problems in the American inner city was curtailed for over a decade. With the persistent refusal to notice or believe signs of social deterioration, a prominent response to rising crime is still to deny that anything is happening beyond a statistical illusion, created by people

attending to events which had been 'invisible' or irrelevant in the past. The term 'moral panic' is marshalled to denounce and cauterise moral sensitivity to virtually anything that human beings may suffer or inflict one upon another, or any concern that conditions should not get worse, or could be improved.

There is a strong resistance to suggestions that some behaviour, like out of wedlock child-bearing, might be problematic and that fathers are necessary for children's development. Certainly, any notion that the values of the poor have a role in sustaining their disadvantages seems to blame them for their own misfortunes. Murray sees this as the homogenisation of the poor as a group of deserving victims, whose only problem is



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lack of money. Traditionally, even working class people distanced themselves from the 'roughs', who lacked the order and controls to wrest independence and dignity from a hard environment.

The criminal area

However, accounts of antisocial behaviour and delinquency as subcultural class differences were prominent up into the 1960s. Fabian sociologist Terence Morris spoke unabashedly of how older teenagers and adults were "like 'carriers' of disease" in *The Criminal Area*. As attitudes and behaviour carried over from an earlier delinquent phase, absenteeism replaced truancy and the boss or the teacher as figure of alien authority. Children cast out into the street play group soon graduated to the hedonistic gang.

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Fathers were uninvolved and haphazard providers. With no premium on restraint, husbands and wives fought like tigers and readily deserted. Poverty too could be seen as a symptom of a defective culture, set in motion by external pressures, and perpetuating itself in the face of changing opportunities. Hence, Murray has been accused of just re-cycling an old 'culture of poverty thesis'.

It is possible not to dispute the facts or the effects of growing social dislocation, while taking issue with Murray over the reasons. The position of those like American sociologist William Julius Wilson, is to be distinguished from any rejection or dismissal of the facts or effects of social deterioration. In turn, characterisations and explanations in terms of a 'dependency culture', or anything else, can be rejected without having to deny that an underclass exists or what it is. Even reasons for its existence and whether or not it is welcomed can be distinguished from how it is identified.

Urban communities in the recent past were more likely to exhibit features of social organisation, like positive neighbourhood identification and explicit rules and sanctions against aberrant behaviour. There is a distinction here between networks of interlinked, overlapping and mutually supportive relationships - involving marriage, family, neighbourhood, work, school and recreation - and social structures which are more like a pile of bricks, disjointed and divided. The extent of ties to immediate groups of family, friends, neighbourhood, school and work are measures of integration everywhere. Detachment is predictive of levels of crime, mental illness, welfare dependency, suicide and so forth.

The underclass

The 'underclass' describes the worst results of social dislocation. Family disruption is most acute, and low social



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class, poor parental supervision, relatives who are unwed mothers and poor neighbourhoods all compound each other. A heterogeneous mix of people are outside of the occupational system and their isolation makes it difficult to get into job networks and maintain behaviour conducive to good work performance. Boys assume that the upkeep of children is something women take care of, as patterns of transient relationships become cyclical. With dependence on public assistance taken for granted, it is difficult to develop useful work habits and attitudes. Access to income from crime reinforces men's detachment from the labour force. The more communities draw on illegal income and are victimised by violence, the less capable are the law-abiding of setting standards. The exodus of more stable working- and middle-class segments, means further isolation from mainstream patterns and norms.

At very least, Murray knows a social catastrophe when he sees one

While we have extreme and deepening dislocation in some communities, facets of this dislocation are spreading in the

wider society, where the collapse of the family is a general development.

In turn, while a person's behaviour and outlook tend to be shaped by those with whom they are in frequent contact - we do not have to go beyond this to separate subcultural values. Highly conventional values and aspirations also run throughout society. The incentive and disincentive effects of wages, benefits and taxation are considered by men in relation to the way these facilitate or frustrate their efforts to fulfil their primary moral obligations as worker and family provider. And here, while the benefits system has become increasingly developed for lone parents, there has also been a massive loss of jobs for less skilled men, and employment has generally become fragile and casualised. These employment changes alone are enough to decimate a community's supply of marriageable males. However, it does not do just to blame Murray for a lopsided explanation, or even massive omission. At very least, he knows a social catastrophe when he sees one. Those who criticise, but persist in defining problems only in racial or sexual terms, are just diverting attention away from the way that the fate of poor communities is extricably tied to the economic shifts and public policies

which are working so drastically against them.

Patricia Morgan is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Economic Affairs, Health & Welfare Unit.

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KEY POVERTY STATISTICS - From the Child Poverty Action Group

A growing section of our society is living in poverty.

The poverty line - There is no official poverty line. Instead CPAG uses two alternatives; one derived from the 'Low Income Families' statistics based on the level of income support (1), the other derived from the government Households Below Average Incomes (2), based on 50% of average income after housing costs.

The 'poverty line' in 1991/2 (1994 prices) (50% of average income after housing costs)

Single adult	£63
Couple with no children	£115
Couple with 3 children (aged 3, 8, 11)	£191
All family types	£115

The numbers in poverty - According to the latest figures 1 in 4 people (including children) in the UK were living in poverty in 1991/92 compared with under 1 in 10 in 1979. Children are even more likely to be in poverty - nearly 1 in 3 were living in poverty in 1991/92 compared to 1 in 10 in 1979.

Growing divisions - There has been a dramatic widening of the gap between rich and poor since 1979. The poorest 10% (decile group) had a fall of 17% in their real income after housing costs while the average had a rise of 36% and the top 10% a rise of 62%.

Rises in real income between 1979 and 1991/92 (after housing costs and including the self-employed)

	Income before housing costs	Income after housing costs
First 10% (bottom)	0	-17%
Second	6%	0
Third	11%	6%
Fourth	16%	16%
Fifth	23%	23%
Sixth	28%	29%
Seventh	31%	33%
Eighth	36%	39%
Ninth	44%	46%
Tenth (top)	57%	62%
Total population	36%	36%

(1) See Poverty the Facts, C Oppenheim, CPAG Ltd, 1993 for an analysis of Low Income Statistics.

(2) Households below Average Incomes, A statistical analysis 1979-1991/92, DSS, HMSO 1994

*Carey Oppenheim
Child Poverty Action Group
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