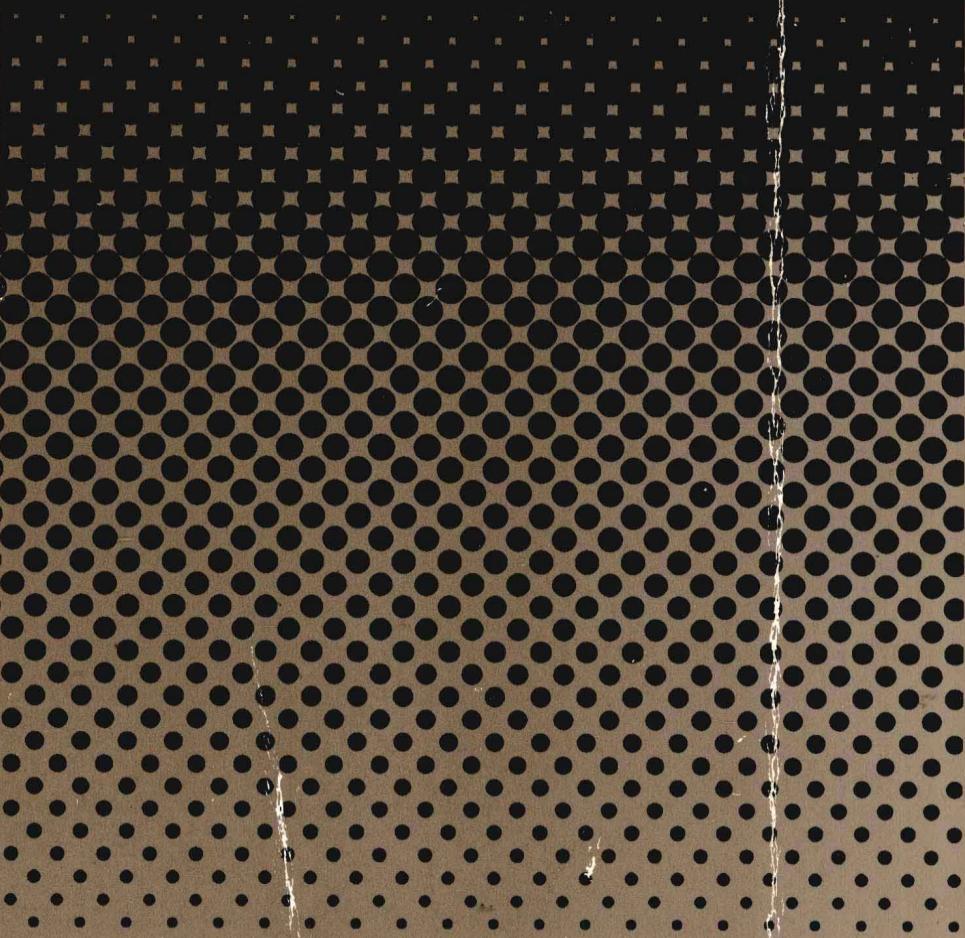


E D I T E D B Y

Christopher Jencks & Paul E. Peterson



**THE URBAN
UNDERCLASS**

THE URBAN UNDERCLASS

**CHRISTOPHER JENCKS
PAUL E. PETERSON
EDITORS**

**THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

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1775 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Urban underclass / Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson,
editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8157-4606-7 (cloth)

ISBN 0-8157-4605-9 (pbk.)

1. Urban poor—United States. 2. Afro-Americans—Economic
conditions. 3. Afro-Americans—Social conditions. 4. Inner
cities—United States. 5. Urban policy—United States.

6. United States—Race relations. I. Jencks, Christopher.

II. Peterson, Paul E.

HV4045.U73 1990

305.5'69'0973091732—dc20

90-23619

CIP

9 8 7 6 5

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements
of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Per-
manence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Preface

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM tells us that the United States *is* witnessing a significant growth in the size of its urban underclass. Many believe that the percentage of the population persistently poor is large and rapidly increasing, that more and more unmarried teenage girls are bearing children, and that welfare rolls are exploding. It is frequently alleged that crime is on the increase, young people are dropping out of school in record numbers, and higher percentages of the population are withdrawing from the labor force. The poor are also said to be increasingly isolated in ghettos at the cores of our metropolitan areas.

Yet none of these propositions is true. The essays on the urban underclass in this book try to separate the truth about poverty, social dislocation, and changes in American family life from the myths that have become part of contemporary folklore. They show that the most important problem—the rise in the percentage of children living in poverty—is due to the increasing number of female-headed households and the decline in the earnings of young men. They demonstrate that the main issue is not so much a growth in the size of the underclass as the persistence of poverty decades after the country thought it had addressed the problem. And they point out that the paradox of poverty in a wealthy nation will continue until society makes greater efforts to provide all citizens with improved educational and economic opportunities as well as adequate income maintenance in times of need.

These essays were initially presented at a conference held at Northwestern University in October 1989 that was sponsored by the Social Science Research Council's Committee for Research on the Urban Underclass and Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research. We especially wish to thank Martha Gephart, Robert Pearson, and Raquel Rivera, senior staff members of the Committee for Research on the Urban Underclass, who helped plan the conference, identify presenters, discussants, and other participants, obtain written comments

from discussants, and prepare the volume. We also wish to thank Hervey Juris, then acting director of the center, who initiated the idea of a conference and took responsibility for the logistical arrangements at Northwestern University. The discussants at the conference were J. Lawrence Aber, Mary Jo Bane, Rebecca Blank, Barry Bluestone, John Bound, Philippe Bourgois, Anthony Bryk, Sheldon Danziger, David Elwood, Edward Gramlich, Mark Hughes, Sara McLanahan, Ruth Massinga, John Ogbu, Isabel Sawhill, and Linda Williams.

James Schneider and Nancy Davidson edited the book, Todd Quinn verified the manuscript, Eje Wray assisted in the physical preparation of the manuscript, and Max Franke compiled the index.

Financial assistance for the conference was made available by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research. Additional financial assistance to the editors was provided by the Joseph B. Grossman Fund of the Center for American Political Studies at Harvard University.

The views expressed in this book are those of the authors and should not be ascribed to the people or organizations whose assistance is acknowledged above, to any agency that funded research reported here, or to the trustees, officers, or staff members of the Brookings Institution.

CHRISTOPHER JENCKS
PAUL E. PETERSON

March 1991

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Part One

Thinking about the Underclass

The Urban Underclass and the Poverty Paradox

PAUL E. PETERSON

THE URBAN UNDERCLASS is at once a characterization of a fragment of American society, a statement about the interconnections among diverse social problems, and an attempt to theorize about the paradox of poverty in an affluent society. The term is powerful because it calls attention to the conjunction between the characters of individuals and the impersonal forces of the larger social and political order. "Class" is the least interesting half of the word. Although it implies a relationship between one social group and another, the terms of that relationship are left undefined until combined with the familiar word "under." This transformation of a preposition into an adjective has none of the sturdiness of "working," the banality of "middle," or the remoteness of "upper." Instead "under" suggests the lowly, passive, and submissive, yet at the same time the disreputable, dangerous, disruptive, dark, evil, and even hellish. And apart from these personal attributes, it suggests subjection, subordination, and deprivation. All these meanings are perhaps best brought together in Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Wotan goes under the earth to wrest the ring from the malicious Alberich, who had used it to enslave a vile and debased subhuman population.

Because of these diverse meanings, underclass is a word that can be used by conservatives, liberals, and radicals alike. It is a fitting term for conservatives who wish to identify those people who are unable to care for themselves or their families or are prone to antisocial behavior. But underclass, like lumpen proletariat, is also a suitable concept for those who, like Karl Marx, want to identify a group shaped and dominated by a society's economic and political forces but who have no productive role. And underclass is acceptable to some liberals who somewhat ambiguously refuse to choose between these contrasting images but who nonetheless wish to distinguish between the mainstream of working-class and middle-class America and those who seem separate from or marginal to that society. But, above all, the concept has been called back into the so-

cial science lexicon because it offers an explanation for the paradox of poverty in an otherwise affluent society that seems to have made strenuous efforts to eradicate this problem.

Two recent analyses of the urban underclass, Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984) and William Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), have generated the most vigorous research effort on the poverty paradox since the proliferation of urban studies spawned by the civil rights movement during the 1960s. Indeed, this renaissance of social science investigation into the connection between the urban underclass and the paradox of poverty in the late 1980s is, on the whole, simply a picking up of the intellectual pieces that were left scattered in the early 1970s by the acrimonious debate over the existence and nature of the culture of poverty, Daniel Moynihan's study of *The Negro Family* issued by the Labor Department, and the Nixon administration's family assistance plan.¹ The objectivity of research, the effect on scholarship of the racial background of social science investigators, and the hidden agendas of protagonists in the debates all became a matter of considerable disputation. Amidst this turmoil, college students and younger scholars turned their attention elsewhere, foundation and government agencies reoriented their research priorities, and universities closed down their urban studies programs.

The research and analysis reported in this volume is just one sign among many that at least for the moment the urban studies tide has begun to flow back in. Motivated by an effort to test some of the many hypotheses set forth in Wilson's book, it brings together research by sociologists, economists, political scientists, and policy analysts that allows us to make some empirically based assessments of the validity of various claims about the origins and significance of the urban underclass. The collection is hardly definitive, for research on this topic is today vigorous enough that new insights and findings are emerging with a rapidity quite unthinkable in the recent past. We offer these essays instead as a signpost, a marker of the understanding of the connection between the urban underclass and the poverty paradox reached in the waning years of the twentieth century.

The Paradox of Continuing Poverty

When Lyndon Johnson declared the War on Poverty in 1964, he had good reason to believe that the federal government could succeed in ridding itself of the paradox of widespread poverty in the world's wealthiest

1. Office of Policy Planning and Research (1965). On the controversy, see Rainwater and Yancey (1967).