# THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED

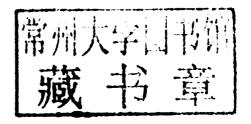The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy

*Second Edition*

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### SECOND EDITION

The University of Chicago Press

Chicago and London

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# Preface

In 1978 the University of Chicago Press published my controversial book, *The Declining Significance of Race*. I had hoped that the major academic contribution of that book would be to explain racial change in America within a macrohistorical-theoretical framework. But there was another contribution I had hoped to make—I wanted to call attention to the worsening condition of the black underclass, in both absolute and relative terms, by relating it to the improving position of the black middle class.

*The Declining Significance of Race* generated controversy not only within academic quarters but in the popular media as well. At the time of publication, heightened awareness of racial issues had been created because changing social structures altered many traditional patterns of race relations and because the state was inextricably involved in the emerging controversy over affirmative action.

In the initial months following publication of the book, it seemed that critics were so preoccupied with what I had to say about the improving conditions of the black middle class that they virtually ignored my more important arguments about the deteriorating conditions of the black underclass. The view was often expressed that since all blacks are suffering there is no need to single out the black poor.

During the controversy over *The Declining Significance of Race* I committed myself to doing two things: (1) I would address the problems of the ghetto underclass in a comprehensive analysis; and (2) l would spell out, in considerable detail, the policy implications of my work. These two commitments provided direction for the writing of *The Truly Disadvantaged*. The first commitment grew out of my personal and academic reaction to the early critics' almost total preoccupation with my arguments concerning the black middle class. Indeed, it was only after I began writing *The Truly Disadvantaged* that serious scholars (particularly those working in fields such as urban poverty, social welfare, and public policy) were beginning to focus on my analysis of the underclass in *The Declining Significance of Race*.

The second commitment was a reaction to those critics who either labeled me a neoconservative or directly or indirectly tried to associate *The Declining Significance of Race* with the neoconservative movement. Although I am a social democrat, and probably to the left politically of an overwhelming majority of these critics, and although some of the most positive reviews and discussions of *The Declining Significance of Race* have come from those of the democratic Left, the title of my book readily lends itself to the assumption that I am a black conservative. Nonetheless, because I did not spell out the policy implications of *The Declining Significance of Race* in the first edition, it was possible for people to read selectively my arguments and draw policy implications significantly different from those that I would personally draw. Herbert Gans's discussion of the failure of the controversial Moynihan report to offer policy recommendations is relevant here. Gans states that "the vacuum that is created when no recommendations are attached to a policy proposal can easily be filled by undesirable solutions and the report's conclusions can be conveniently misinterpreted."[1] In the second edition of *The Declining Significance of Race*, published in 1980, I wrote an epilogue in which the policy implications of my work were underlined in sharp relief, but by then the views of many readers of the first edition had already solidified.

If the idea for the *The Truly Disadvantaged* grew out of controversy over *The Declining Significance of Race,* does it mean that the former will also generate controversy? It will be controversial. *The Truly Disadvantaged* challenges liberal orthodoxy in analyzing inner-city problems; discusses in candid terms the social pathologies of the inner city; establishes a case for moving beyond race-specific policies to ameliorate inner-city social conditions to policies that address the broader problems of societal organization, including economic organization; and advances a social democratic public-policy agenda designed to improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass by emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races can positively relate.

It should be emphasized, however, that many of the central theoretical arguments of *The Truly Disadvantaged* were inspired not by the debate over *The Declining Significance of Race* but by my travels to inner-city neighborhoods in the city of Chicago in the past several years and by my perception of social changes, including changes in the class structure, in inner-city neighborhoods. The essays in part 1 of *The Truly Disadvantaged* describe these changes in some detail and address the question of why the social conditions of the ghetto underclass have deteriorated so rapidly in recent years.

The first chapter in part 1 briefly discusses these social changes, considers the current controversy over the use of the term *underclass,* and attempts to explain why the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has declined in influence in recent years. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how liberals can recapture a position of leadership in the public policy forum now dominated by conservative spokespersons. Chapter 2 describes in considerable detail the problems of violent crime, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, and welfare dependency in the inner city and argues that recent increases in these rates of social dislocation cannot be accounted for by the easy explanation of racism. Instead these problems have to be related to a complex web of other factors, such as the changes in the urban economy, which have produced extraordinary rates of black joblessness that exacerbate other social problems in the ghetto, and the class transformation of the inner city. Chapters 3 and 4 critically examine the popular welfare state explanations of the rise of social dislocations among the ghetto underclass and, in the process, focus more specifically on the association between joblessness and rates of female-headed families. Chapter 3 introduces and provides national data on the "male marriageable pool index"; chapter 4 presents regional data on this index and relates these data to regional figures on female headship. This chapter also considers the relationship between structural changes in the regional economy and both the "male marriageable pool index" and female headship.

The essays in part 2 of *The Truly Disadvantaged* critically examine public policy approaches to the problems of the ghetto underclass. Chapter 5 reveals the shortcomings of race-specific policies, including affirmative action, in addressing the problems of the ghetto underclass by arguing that minority members from the more advantaged families profit disproportionately from such policies because they are disproportionately represented among those of their racial group most qualified for preferred positions. This chapter argues, therefore, that the amelioration of the conditions of the truly disadvantaged minority members such as the ghetto underclass requires policies that are not race-specific. Chapter 6 extends the analysis presented in chapter 5 by examining the limitations of both the race relations vision and the War on Poverty vision in explaining the problems of the ghetto underclass and in proposing public policy solutions. This chapter argues that because these visions do not relate the problems of minority poverty directly to the broader problems of economic organization, they provide few satisfactory explanations for the sharp rise in inner-city social dislocations since 1970. The lack of adequate liberal explanations cleared

the path for the emergence of conservative public policy arguments on the need to change the values and behavior of the minority poor. Finally, chapter 7 integrates and summarizes the basic arguments in the preceding chapters and then recommends a comprehensive public policy agenda to improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass. An important feature of this agenda is that it includes programs to attract and sustain the support of the more advantaged groups of all races and class backgrounds.

In preparing this book I benefited greatly from an award from the Ford Foundation to support the writing of humanistic nonfiction books on major social issues in contemporary society and a grant from the Spencer Foundation. Both of these awards allowed me to reduce my teaching load during the 1982–83 academic year to devote more time to writing, and to hire two marvelous research assistants, Robert Aponte and Kathryn Neckerman, who helped to collect and analyze data for this study. Also, Neckerman coauthored chapter 3, "Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap between Evidence and Public Policy Issues"; both Aponte and Neckerman helped write chapter 4, "Joblessness versus Welfare Effects: A Further Reexamination." The appendix, "Urban Poverty: A State-of-the-Art Review of the Literature," was coauthored by Aponte. I would also like to acknowledge the work of two other research assistants, Loic Wacquant, who developed the maps on the spread of poverty and unemployment in community areas in Chicago, and Patricia Potter, who (along with Wacquant) collected the data for the concentration of inner-city poverty (see Chapter 2).

I also benefited from a year in residence as a fellow at the Center for the Study of Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University during the 1981–82 academic year. There I did a good deal of the initial reading for this study and, partly through participation in a series of stimulating seminars at the center with some of the leading social policy experts in the country, developed ideas about economic and social welfare policy.

Finally, I benefited from the helpful comments of Bernard Gifford (dean of the School of Education, University of California, Berkeley) and Ira Katznelson (dean of the Graduate Faculties, New School for Social Research). Gifford and Katznelson read the first draft of this manuscript and provided detailed written criticisms and suggestions that were very helpful in the revisions of the final draft.

I have dedicated this book to my wife, Beverly, who I am sure does not realize how important she has been in my intellectual development. Just as with my previous books, she edited the entire manuscript and was an insightful critic. But she does something that is even

more important—her enthusiasm for my work has had a rejuvenating effect that allowed me to overcome periods of fatigue during the latter stages of writing and helped me to complete this book despite extreme local and national demands on my time.

# Contents

# 1

# The Ghetto Underclass, Poverty, and Social Dislocations

# 1    Cycles of Deprivation and the Ghetto Underclass Debate

I n the mid-1960s, urban analysts began to speak of a new dimension to the urban crisis in the form of a large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasted sharply with the behavior of the general population.[1] Despite a high rate of poverty in ghetto neighborhoods throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rates of inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid-1970s.

These increasing rates of social dislocation signified changes in the social organization of inner-city areas. Blacks in Harlem and in other ghetto neighborhoods did not hesitate to sleep in parks, on fire escapes, and on rooftops during hot summer nights in the 1940s and 1950s, and whites frequently visited inner-city taverns and nightclubs.[2] There was crime, to be sure, but it had not reached the point where people were fearful of walking the streets at night, despite the overwhelming poverty in the area. There was joblessness, but it was nowhere near the proportions of unemployment and labor-force nonparticipation that have gripped ghetto communities since 1970. There were single-parent families, but they were a small minority of all black families and tended to be incorporated within extended family networks and to be headed not by unwed teenagers and young adult women but by middle-aged women who usually were widowed, separated, or divorced. There were welfare recipients, but only a very small percentage of the families could be said to be welfare-dependent. In short, unlike the present period. inner-city communities prior to 1960 exhibited the features of social organization—including a sense of community, positive neighborhood identification, and explicit norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior.[3]

Although liberal urban analysts in the mid-1960s hardly provided a definitive explanation of changes in the social organization of inner-city neighborhoods, they forcefully and candidly discussed the rise of social

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dislocations among the ghetto underclass. "The symptoms of lower-class society affect the dark ghettos of America—low aspirations, poor education, family instability, illegitimacy, unemployment, crime, drug addiction, and alcoholism, frequent illness and early death," stated Kenneth B. Clark, liberal author of a 1965 study of the black ghetto. "But because Negroes begin with the primary affliction of inferior racial status, the burdens of despair and hatred are more pervasive."[4] In raising important issues about the experiences of inequality, liberal scholars in the 1960s sensitively examined the cumulative effects of racial isolation and chronic subordination on life and behavior in the inner city. Whether the focus was on the social or the psychological dimensions of the ghetto, facts of inner-city life "that are usually forgotten or ignored in polite discussions" were vividly described and systematically analyzed.[5]

Indeed, what was both unique and important about these earlier studies was that discussions of the experiences of inequality were closely tied to discussions of the structure of inequality in an attempt to explain how the economic and social situations into which so many disadvantaged blacks are born produce modes of adaptation and create norms and patterns of behavior that take the form of a "self-perpetuating pathology."[6] Nonetheless, much of the evidence from which their conclusions were drawn was impressionistic—based mainly on data collected in ethnographic or urban field research that did not capture long-term trends.[7] Indeed, the only study that provided at least an abstract sense of how the problem had changed down through the years was the Moynihan report on the Negro family, which presented decennial census statistics on changing family structure by race.[8]

However, the controversy surrounding the Moynihan report had the effect of curtailing serious research on minority problems in the inner city for over a decade, as liberal scholars shied away from researching behavior construed as unflattering or stigmatizing to particular racial minorities. Thus, when liberal scholars returned to study these problems in the early 1980s, they were dumbfounded by the magnitude of the changes that had taken place and expressed little optimism about finding an adequate explanation. Indeed, it had become quite clear that there was little concensus on the description of the problem, the explanations advanced, or the policy recommendations proposed. There was even little agreement on a definition of the term *underclass.* From the perspective of liberal social scientists, policymakers, and others, the picture seemed more confused than ever.

However, if liberals lack a clear view of the recent social changes in the inner city, the perspective among informed conservatives has

crystallized around a set of arguments that have received increasing public attention. Indeed, the debate over the problems of the ghetto underclass has been dominated in recent years by conservative spokespersons as the views of liberals have gradually become more diffused and ambiguous. Liberals have traditionally emphasized how the plight of disadvantaged groups can be related to the problems of the broader society, including problems of discrimination and social-class subordination. They have also emphasized the need for progressive social change, particularly through governmental programs, to open the opportunity structure. Conservatives, in contrast, have traditionally stressed the importance of different group values and competitive resources in accounting for the experiences of the disadvantaged; if reference is made to the larger society, it is in terms of the assumed adverse effects of various government programs on individual or group behavior and initiative.

In emphasizing this distinction, I do not want to convey the idea that serious research or discussion of the ghetto underclass is subordinated to ideological concerns. However, despite pious claims about objectivity in social research, it is true that values influence not only our selection of problems for investigation but also our interpretation of empirical data. And although there are no logical rules of discovery that would invalidate an explanation simply because it was influenced by a particular value premise or ideology, it is true that attempts to arrive at a satisfactory explanation may be impeded by ideological blinders or views restricted by value premises. The solution to this problem is not to try to divest social investigators of their values but to encourage a free and open discussion of the issues among people with different value premises in order that new questions can be raised, existing interpretations challenged, and new research stimulated.

I believe that the demise of the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has made the intellectual discourse on this topic too one-sided. It has made it more difficult to achieve the above objective and has ultimately made it less likely that our understanding of inner-city social dislocations will be enhanced. With this in mind I should like to explain, in the ensuing discussion in this chapter, why the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has receded into the background and why the conservative perspective enjoys wide and increasing currency. I should then like to suggest how the liberal perspective might be refocused to challenge the now-dominant conservative views on the ghetto underclass and, more important, to provide a more balanced intellectual discussion of why the problems in the inner city sharply increased when they did and in the way that they did.

### The Declining Influence of the Liberal Perspective on the Ghetto Underclass

The liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has become less persuasive and convincing in public discourse principally because many of those who represent traditional liberal views on social issues have been reluctant to discuss openly or, in some instances, even to acknowledge the sharp increase in social pathologies in ghetto communities. This is seen in the four principal ways in which liberals have recently addressed the subject. In describing these four approaches I want it to be clear that some liberals may not be associated with any one of them, some with only one, and others with more than one. But I believe that these approaches represent the typical, recent liberal reactions to the ghetto underclass phenomenon and that they collectively provide a striking contrast to the crystallized, candid, and forceful liberal perspective of the mid-1960s. Let me elaborate.

One approach is to avoid describing any behavior that might be construed as unflattering or stigmatizing to ghetto residents, either because of a fear of providing fuel for racist arguments or because of a concern of being charged with "racism" or with "blaming the victim." Indeed, one of the consequences of the heated controversy over the Moynihan report on the Negro family is that liberal social scientists, social workers, journalists, policymakers, and civil rights leaders have been, until very recently, reluctant to make any reference to race at all when discussing issues such as the increase of violent crime, teenage pregnancy, and out-of-wedlock births. The more liberals have avoided writing about or researching these problems, the more conservatives have rushed headlong to fill the void with popular explanations of inner-city social dislocations that much of the public finds exceedingly compelling.

A second liberal approach to the subject of underclass and urban social problems is to refuse even to use terms such as *underclass*. As one spokesman put it: " 'Underclass' is a destructive and misleading label that lumps together different people who have different problems. And that it is the latest of a series of popular labels (such as the 'lumpen proletariat,' 'undeserving poor,' and the 'culture of poverty') that focuses on individual characteristics and thereby stigmatizes the poor for their poverty."[9] However, the real problem is not the term *underclass* or some similar designation but the fact that the term has received more systematic treatment from conservatives, who tend to focus almost exclusively on individual characteristics, than from liberals, who would more likely relate these characteristics to the broader problems of society. While some liberals debate whether terms such as

*underclass* should even be used, conservatives have made great use of them in developing popular arguments about life and behavior in the inner city.[10]

Regardless of which term is used, one cannot deny that there is a heterogeneous grouping of inner-city families and individuals whose behavior contrasts sharply with that of mainstream America. The real challenge is not only to explain why this is so, but also to explain why the behavior patterns in the inner city today differ so markedly from those of only three or four decades ago. To obscure these differences by eschewing the term *underclass*, or some other term that could be helpful in describing changes in ghetto behavior, norms, and aspirations, in favor of more neutral designations such as *lower class* or *working class* is to fail to address one of the most important social transformations in recent United States history.

Indeed, the liberal argument to reject the term *underclass* reflects the lack of historical perspective on urban social problems. We often are not aware of or lose sight of the fact that the sharp increase in inner-city dislocations has occurred in only the last several years. Although a term such as *lumpen proletariat* or *underclass* might have been quite appropriate in Karl Marx's description of life and behavior in the slums of nineteenth-century England, it is not very appropriate in descriptions of life and behavior in America's large urban ghettos prior to the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, in the 1940s, 1950s, and as late as the 1960s such communities featured a vertical integration of different segments of the urban black population. Lower-class, working-class, and middle-class black families all lived more or less in the same communities (albeit in different neighborhoods), sent their children to the same schools, availed themselves of the same recreational facilities, and shopped at the same stores. Whereas today's black middle-class professionals no longer tend to live in ghetto neighborhoods and have moved increasingly into mainstream occupations outside the black community, the black middle-class professionals of the 1940s and 1950s (doctors, teachers, lawyers, social workers, ministers) lived in higher-income neighborhoods of the ghetto and serviced the black community. Accompanying the black middle-class exodus has been a growing movement of stable working-class blacks from ghetto neighborhoods to higher-income neighborhoods in other parts of the city and to the suburbs. In the earlier years, the black middle and working classes were confined by restrictive covenants to communities also inhabited by the lower class; their very presence provided stability to inner-city neighborhoods and reinforced and perpetuated mainstream patterns of norms and behavior.[11]

This is not the situation in the 1980s. Today's ghetto neighborhoods