



The American **MILLSTONE**

An examination of the nation's
permanent underclass

By the staff of the

Chicago Tribune

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MILLSTONE

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permanent underclass

To the people
of North Lawndale



Preface

In order to lift a millstone, you first
must see it

This book is a collection of Chicago Tribune coverage during 1985 of a story unique to the American experience. It is about people who constitute a segment of an underclass that is mostly black and poor and hopelessly trapped in the urban centers of Chicago and other large cities of the nation.

Neither the existence of this group nor its circumstance is news. What is new and significant is that over the last decade this group appears to have gained political and social acceptance as a permanent fixture of the world's most advanced society without much understanding of, or concern about, the consequences.

In these and related stories published in 1983 and 1984, Tribune reporters and editors have tried to examine the lives of these Americans and to document their impact on the past, present and future of the rest of us. The Tribune editorial board also arrived at some conclusions on what might be done to change things. Those, too, are included in this book.

It was from the beginning an ambitious, seemingly impossible

undertaking certain to hurt people's feelings, attract criticism of the newspaper and possibly raise more questions than it would answer. And in a city of hot political blood and raw racial nerves, it had to be approached cautiously, sometimes in an unorthodox fashion. It is provocative to lift up a rock when so many are being thrown.

But who better than a newspaper with the resources of The Tribune serving a city such as Chicago, where daily life offers a laboratory study of virtually any problem or issue that confronts a modern world? And it did not take long for the more than two dozen reporters, editors and photographers involved in this project to conclude that they were examining the most serious and far-reaching domestic issue facing the American people today.

Ultimately, the term "millstone" was chosen to glue together the puzzle of what we found. No other word better describes the weight of the burden this issue places on America's ability to govern itself in the future, or conveys more urgently the need for riddance of this burden from the American conscience.

By choosing North Lawndale, an almost all-black community with rich history on the city's West Side, as the site for much of their reporting, Tribune reporters were able to find within a few square miles stark examples to illustrate virtually all sides of this complex and sensitive issue and to personify problems that others cannot truly appreciate when presented in the abstract. This has resulted in some hurt feelings, some misunderstandings in some quarters about the newspaper's motives and some baseless allegations that the community has been exploited in the interest of selling newspapers.

Tribune reporters found life and death of all descriptions in North Lawndale, including some amazing and enlightening success stories. And we found instances of courage and commitment by individuals that are truly inspirational and beyond anything we had imagined. But for these few rare exceptions, the real story of North Lawndale was not pretty, successful or uplifting. So it was not presented that way. To do

so would have been to condone and abet the kind of deliberate distortion and blind ignorance that decimated communities like North Lawndale in the first place and made their restoration virtually impossible.

Stories as complex, painful and extensive as this one do not sell newspapers. Our motivation to do the American Millstone series was singular—to give Chicago and the rest of America a new perspective on something gone dead wrong in our society.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James D. Squires". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "James" and last name "Squires" being more prominent than the middle initial "D.".

James D. Squires
Editor
The Chicago Tribune

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I

THE TRAPPED
SOCIETY



The American millstone

In a nation of riches, a permanent
underclass

A new class of people has taken root in America's cities, a lost society dwelling in enclaves of despair and chaos that infect and threaten the communities at large.

The group defies most convenient labels and definitions, but it has its parallels in other societies and in other times. It is most often described in the United States as black, but there are similar groups in other countries without significant black populations, reflecting the fact that at the core the problem is economic.

Its members don't share traditional values of work, money, education, home and perhaps even of life. This is a class of misfits best known to more fortunate Americans as either victim or perpetrator in crime statistics.

Over the last quarter-century in America, this subculture has become self-perpetuating. It devours every effort aimed at solving its problems, resists solutions both simple and complicated, absorbs more than its share of welfare and other benefits and causes social and political turmoil far out of proportion to its numbers.

The existence of an underclass in itself is not new in this

Left: After she was evicted from her apartment, a woman sits amid her belongings with her 14-month-old daughter.

country. What appears to be different today from past decades and centuries is what gives every indication of being the permanent entrapment of significant numbers of Americans, especially urban blacks, in a world apart at the bottom of society. And for the first time, much of the rest of America seems to be accepting a permanent underclass as a sad, if frightening, fact of life.

As researchers and social scientists work to identify and document this trend, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the urban underclass is inextricably entwined with a broad range of more familiar and often debated societal ills that the political system has so far found incurable.

Among the conclusions drawn from reporting by Tribune staff members in Chicago and across the country on such social concerns as crime, street gangs, prisons, hunger, housing, welfare, inner-city schools and this new, apparently permanent, underclass are the following:

- Most of the violence, both random and predatory, emanating from the underclass is directed at members of the same group or other poor people trapped by circumstance within easy range. But chills are sent through entire cities by the mindlessness and casual amorality of the rapes, beatings, robberies and murders.

- Public schools, often cited as the best hope to break the cycle of poverty, usually are among the first victims. As violence stalks the corridors, education succumbs to fear. If they are able, the best, or most realistic, leave for safer schools. The rest drop out of the system or mark time in an agonizing standoff with their tormentors.

- Public housing, conceived as a steppingstone out of poverty, has frequently deteriorated into islands of terror populated in large part by brutal gang members, single mothers, pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers and children, whose chances of escaping the urban jungle are overwhelmingly diminished by the negative role models who dominate their environment.

- Racism and poverty are basic ingredients in the cauldron that gives birth to most of the inner-city underclass. But most poor people and most black people avoid and abhor the web of antisocial pathologies that seems to ensnare thousands in the nation's major cities.

● Traditional poverty alone does not account for the enduring presence of this new group at the bottom of American urban life. In addition to the welfare payments that form a base for its survival, an underground economy produces usually untraced and untaxed cash from enterprises ranging from jobs that bring under-the-table pay to prostitution, drug dealing, thievery and fencing. For some, at least, the money earned would be sufficient to buy their way out of the abyss. But because their income frequently depends on the favorable climate of that environment, few seem to leave.

● The illegal nature of many of the careers acceptable within the enclaves of the underclass lands a disproportionate number in prison. There, they often thrive in a milieu not unlike the one they left and return to their neighborhoods as folk heroes, free of the stigma that might follow them elsewhere.

● Because the lifestyles of those deeply embedded in the underclass are so out of tune with society in general, the group appears to have an impact far beyond its relatively small percentages in the community. Much white and black flight from the cities, with the resulting loss to the tax base and to the stability of institutions, can be traced to the perceived threat from this group and its intractable problems. Politicians of all colors and at all levels of government find it almost impossible to win support for improvements in welfare, housing, schools, transportation, day care or almost anything else that might be perceived by a hostile public as benefiting the most visible of the black urban underclass.

● To understand the far-reaching implications of the problem, or to formulate any kind of action to deal with it, society must understand how the new underclass developed and gave birth to its most virulent offspring.

Unquestionably, racism and poverty were the midwives. But the rapid progress in civil rights and social programs in the 1960s laid a groundwork of great expectations that embittered those somehow left behind. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; the futile, neighborhood-destroying riots; the militant campaigns to define black manhood, which encouraged many to shun menial jobs for more dignified work that constantly eluded them; the cancerous growth of the drug culture; the disappearance of smokestack industries from the cities; the accelerated decline of the black family; the in-

creased availability of welfare; the quantum leap in illegitimate pregnancies, which produced contracting generations of mothers in their early teens, grandmothers in their late 20s and great-grandmothers in their early 40s—all these gave rise to the permanent underclass.

The people who study this group believe there is a pattern to the behavior, one bordering on the pathological. It is a compressed, inner-city world dominated by values foreign to the rest of society, which witnesses only the most violent behavior when it reaches the headlines or television news.

The Reagan administration, with its cutbacks in social programs, has quickened the arguments about how to approach the problem. Any national response, even one to ignore it, ultimately will involve billions of dollars in outlays or losses.

Conservative social policy, which has been on the rise since the decade began, is attempting to use the group to discredit many of the welfare programs of the last two decades, make severe cuts in federal involvement and generally influence the government to take a strictly limited role in the future. They see this as a law-and-order matter, and the response has been to build more prisons and hire more police.

The debate is racially sensitive, because the emphasis is on the poorest of the poor, most of them blacks who live in the core of America's cities. The question is not one of race but of racism, of economics and politics and perhaps of capitalism itself. Similar problems have emerged in other developed capitalist societies: Britain, Ireland and other parts of Europe.

The jobs have gone away and most of the people who find themselves at the bottom rung of capitalism's ladder have no escape. The days when cities needed vast pools of manpower for smokestack industries are gone. The people who were drawn by that magnet, and their children and grandchildren, remain. And they are plagued by problems that have become too acute to ignore in a society that claims equality and opportunity as its goals.

Significantly, many black scholars and sociologists are raising hard questions about historical racism and the urban economy, and their effects on black family life.

Sociologist William Julius Wilson of the University of Chicago has called the existence of a black underclass "one of the most