The British underclass

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Is the underclass an American phenomenon? It often seems so. Reports about Western Europe’s social democracies typically portray societies in which the low-income class is hardworking and responsible. Only the United States of America, these reports suggest, is stricken with a large urban population that seems mired at the bottom of society, disorganized and demoralized.

On the left, the blame for this situation is often ascribed to the United States’s failure to adopt a generous welfare state, Sweden being the standard to which the United States should aspire. But it is also widely accepted by left and right alike that the underclass in the United States is unique in that it is predominantly black. It is also widely thought, though more controversially, that the historical experiences of American blacks help to explain today’s underclass. Several theorists have focused on the legacy of slavery; Nicholas Lemann has emphasized the black sharecropper experience; William Julius Wilson calls attention to the elimination of

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manufacturing jobs that black city dwellers once held. Even people who assign more blame to bad contemporary policy than to history (I am one of them) take for granted that it is hard to find Caucasian counterparts to the poorest black neighborhoods in any large American city.

The question of a developing underclass in other Western countries is thus of special interest. If the United States is indeed alone, explanations based on the black experience and a stingy welfare state become more persuasive. If other countries have experienced similar trends, we have a basis for disentangling the factors in modernization, or in policy, or both, that stimulate the growth of what we have come to call an underclass. And so last year I accepted with considerable curiosity an invitation by the London Sunday Times to explore the possibility of an English underclass.

Old concept, new label

Because definition is always a problem when discussing the underclass, let me begin by providing mine. By "underclass" I refer not to poor people, but to a subset of poor people who chronically live off mainstream society (directly through welfare or indirectly through crime) without participating in it. They characteristically take jobs sporadically if at all, do not share the social burdens of the neighborhoods in which they live, shirk the responsibilities of fatherhood and are indifferent (or often simply incompetent) mothers.

The British were among the first to describe an urban underclass, never more evocatively than through Henry Mayhew's 1850 articles in the Morning Chronicle, which first drew the Victorians' attention to poverty. To Mayhew, what we would call a member of the underclass was "distinguished from the civilized man by his repugnance to regular and continuous labor—by his want of providence in laying up a store for the future—by his inability to perceive consequences ever so slightly removed from immediate apprehension—by his passion for stupefying herbs and roots and, when possible, for intoxicating fermented liquors...." Other popular labels for this kind of poor person were "dishonest," "undeserving," "unrespectable," "depraved," "debased," "disreputable," or "feckless."

As Britain entered the 1960s, this distinction between honest and dishonest poor people had been softened. The second kind of poor person was no longer "undeserving"; rather, he was the prod-
uct of a "culture of poverty." But intellectuals as well as the man in the street continued to accept that poor people were not all alike. Most were doing their best under difficult circumstances; a small number were pretty much as Mayhew had described them. Then came the intellectual reformation that swept both the United States and Britain in the mid-1960s, bringing with it a new way of looking at the poor. Henceforth, the poor were to be homogenized. The only difference between poor people and everyone else, we were told, was that the poor had less money. More importantly, the poor were all alike. There was no such thing as the ne'er-do-well poor person—he was the figment of the prejudices of a parochial middle class. Poor people, all poor people, were equally victims, and would be equally successful if only society gave them a fair shake.

The difference between the United States and Britain was that the United States reached the future first. During the last half of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, something strange and disturbing was happening among poor people in the United States. Poor communities, whose inhabitants had mostly been hard workers and good neighbors, began deteriorating. Drugs, crime, illegitimacy, homelessness, dropping out of school and the job market, casual violence—all the measures that were available to social scientists showed large increases, focused in poor communities. As the 1980s began, the growing population of "the other kind of poor people" could no longer be ignored, and a label for it came into use: the underclass.

By and large, British intellectuals still disdain the term. In 1987, the social historian John Macnicol summed up the prevailing view in the *Journal of Social Policy*, writing dismissively that underclass was nothing more than a refuted concept periodically resurrected by conservatives "who wish to constrain the redistributive potential of state welfare." But there are beginning to be breaks in the ranks. Frank Field, the prominent Labour MP, has just published a book with "underclass" in its subtitle. The newspapers, watching the United States and seeing shadows of its problems in Britain, have begun to use the term.

And well they should. I must introduce caveats to that statement. My trip to Britain was a reconnaissance, not a full-scale study. I cannot estimate the size of the British underclass with any confidence. It is possible that the British underclass will for a long time prove less dysfunctional than the American variety. Despite the caveats, however, the warning signs of an underclass in Britain
are reasonably clear. Britain does have an underclass as I have defined it—people living off mainstream society without participating in it—still largely out of sight and still smaller than the one in the United States. But it is growing rapidly. Within the next decade, it could easily become as large (proportionately) as America's.

In making this case, I will concentrate on three phenomena that have turned out to be early-warning signals in the United States: illegitimacy, violent crime, and dropout from the labor force. I begin with illegitimacy, which in my view is the best predictor of an underclass in the making.

Illegitimacy

To focus on illegitimacy still raises hackles in Britain, just as it did in America during the 1970s. Why should it be a "problem" that a woman has a child without a husband? Why can't a single woman raise a healthy, happy child, provided that she receives enough support from the state? Why is raising a child without having married any more of a problem than raising a child after a divorce? The very word "illegitimate" is intellectually illegitimate. Using it in a gathering of British academics is a faux pas, causing pained silence.

I nonetheless focus on illegitimacy rather than on the more general phenomenon of one-parent families because, in a world where all social trends are ambiguous, illegitimacy is less ambiguous than other forms of single parenthood. It is a matter of degree. Of course some unmarried mothers are excellent mothers and some unmarried fathers are excellent fathers. Of course some divorced parents disappear from their children's lives altogether, and some divorces have more destructive effects on the children than a failure to marry would have had. Being without two parents is generally worse for the child than having two parents, no matter how it happens. But illegitimacy bespeaks an attitude on the part of one or both of the parents. If one stipulates that bearing (and keeping) a child is one of the most profoundly important human acts, then siring a child without intending to support it, or bearing and keeping a child without knowing one can take care of it, constitute an excellent proxy measure of the sort of irresponsibility that is a hallmark of the underclass.

Illegitimacy has been skyrocketing since 1979. I use "skyrocketing" advisedly. This is the graph for the years since World War II ended:
The postwar era divides into three parts. From the end of World War II until 1960, Britain enjoyed a very low and even slightly declining illegitimacy ratio. From 1960 through 1978, the ratio increased, but remained modest by international standards—as late as 1979, Britain's illegitimacy ratio of 10.6 percent was among the lowest rates in the industrialized West. Then, suddenly, during a period when fertility was steady, the illegitimacy ratio began to rise very rapidly—to 14.1 percent by 1982, 18.9 percent by 1985, and finally to 25.6 percent by 1988, thereby catching up with the United States in this unhappy statistic. (The most recent U.S. figures are for 1987, when the ratio stood at 24.5 percent and had been rising by about a percentage point per year.)

The sharp rise is only half of the story. The other and equally important half is that illegitimate births are not scattered evenly among the British population. There is much publicity about the member of the Royal Family who has a child without a husband or the socially prominent young career woman who deliberately decides to have a baby on her own, but these are comparatively rare events. The increase in illegitimate births is strikingly concentrated among the lowest social class.

This is especially easy to document in Britain, where one may fit together the Government Statistical Service's birth data on
municipal districts with the detailed socioeconomic data from the general census. When one does so for the 169 metropolitan districts and boroughs in England and Wales for which data are available from both sources, the relationship between illegitimacy and social class (using the five-class classification used for many years by the Government Statistical Service) is so obvious that statistical tests become superfluous. Municipal districts with high concentrations of household heads in Class I (professional persons) have illegitimacy ratios in the low teens. Wokingham was lowest as of 1987, with only nine of every hundred children born illegitimate. Municipalities like Nottingham and Southwark, with populations most heavily weighted with Class V household heads (unskilled laborers), have illegitimacy ratios of more than 40 percent.

The statistical tests confirm the relationship. With just two measures—the percentage of people in Class V and the percentage of people who are "economically inactive"—the illegitimacy ratio in a community can usually be predicted within just three percentage points of the true number. Statistically, these two measures of economic status explain 51 percent of the variance—an extremely powerful relationship for just two independent variables. In short, the notion that giving birth to illegitimate babies is a general phenomenon, experienced by young career women and girls from middle-class homes as much as by others, is flatly at odds with the facts. There has been a proportional increase in illegitimate births among all communities, but the prevalence of illegitimate births is drastically higher among the lower-class communities than in the upper class.

The data I have just described are based on municipal districts. The picture worsens when we move down to the neighborhood level, though precise numbers are hard to come by. If one assumes that the relationship of socioeconomic status to illegitimacy that holds between municipalities also holds between socioeconomic classes within municipalities, then a municipality with an overall ratio of 35 percent should be expected to have poor neighborhoods where most babies are illegitimate (just as black inner-city neighborhoods in the United States have much higher ratios than black middle-class neighborhoods).

When I raised these points with British demographers and sociologists, the reaction more often than not was, in effect, "So what?" I found that discussing the issue with British experts was like being in a time warp, hearing in 1989 the same rationaliza-
tions about illegitimacy that American experts used in the 1970s and early 1980s.

"Children from single-parent households do just as well as children from two-parent households." For example, there is the case of the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a longitudinal British sample that researchers have been following since 1968. The differences between children from one-parent families and two-parent families are due to social and financial circumstances, not to the parental situation, proclaims a set of studies, prepared under the auspices of the National Children's Bureau.

Assessing these conclusions is made difficult by technical problems with the studies' definitions of "single parent" and "two parent" families; for example, a child could be defined as coming from a one-parent family if he had ever been without two parents, even briefly. But the generic problem with such analyses, and these in particular, is that all forms of single parenthood tend to be lumped together, as if it makes no difference whether the mother is a widow, a middle-aged woman divorced after years of marriage, or a girl of twenty who has never married. All are "single parents," and all single-parent situations are supposed to be equal. But in fact, one particular form of single parenthood—illegitimacy—constitutes a special problem for society. Single-parent situations are radically unequal.

The change in the received wisdom on this topic in the U.S. has been remarkable. One example will serve to illustrate. In 1983 a statistic cited everywhere by those who wanted to debunk the reactionaries was that 50 percent of all U.S. welfare mothers were off the welfare rolls within two years. The idea of "welfare dependency" was a myth. Then in 1986 David Ellwood, the scholar whose work had popularized the 50-percent statistic, took a finer-grained look at the same data (the Panel Study of Income Dynamics at the University of Michigan), separating welfare mothers into different categories. The most important characteristic in predicting whether a woman left welfare quickly was her marital status at the time she had the baby. For never-married women, the average number of years on welfare was not the highly touted two years, but 9.3. British social-welfare scholars respond that in their country single mothers exit rapidly, basing their confidence about the 1980s on survey data about single women who had babies from the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s. The magic number once again is said to be two years.
"It's mainly a black problem." I heard this everywhere, from political clubs in Westminster to the demographics section of a government research office. The statement is correct in this one, very limited sense: blacks born in the West Indies have much higher illegitimacy ratios—about 48 percent of live births in the latest numbers—than all whites. But blacks constitute such a tiny proportion of the British population that their contribution to the overall illegitimacy ratio is minuscule. If there had been no blacks whatsoever in Britain, the overall British illegitimacy ratio of 25.6 percent in 1988 would have dropped by about one percentage point. Blacks are not causing Britain's illegitimacy problem.

"It's not as bad as it looks." In the United States, the line used to be that blacks have extended families, with uncles and grandfathers compensating for the lack of fathers. In Britain, the counterpart to this cheery optimism is that an increasing number of illegitimate births are jointly registered and that an increasing number of such children are born to people who live together at the time of birth. Both joint registration and living together are quickly called evidence of "a stable relationship.

The statements about joint registration and living together are factually correct. Of the 158,500 illegitimate births in England and Wales in 1987, 69 percent were jointly registered. Of those who jointly registered the birth, 70 percent gave the same address, suggesting some kind of ongoing relationship. Both of these figures have increased—in 1961, for example, only 38 percent of illegitimate births were jointly registered, suggesting that the nature of illegitimacy in the United Kingdom has changed dramatically.

British commentators on social policy make much of the cohabitation figures without any apparent basis. Once again, the comparison with the United States is striking: American social scientists never demonstrated empirically, or even tried very hard to demonstrate, that the extended black family was able to compensate for the lack of a married father and mother. In any case, appeals to the extended family became more difficult as the years went on—without marriage, grandfathers and uncles too have become scarce. Ought Britons to assume that jointly registering a birth, or living together at the time of the birth, makes for a stable relationship that is just as good (or nearly as good) as a marriage? I pose it as a question because I don't have a solid empirical answer. But neither did any of the people who kept repeating the joint-registration and living-together numbers so optimistically.
It may at least be said that the anecdotal evidence on this issue is cause for concern. While in Britain, I visited poor neighborhoods in Birkenhead (across the Mersey from Liverpool) and Easterhouse, a huge council estate (the British label for a public housing project) outside Glasgow, and talked not only with single mothers but also with the remaining two-parent families who are trying to raise their own children in a predominantly single-parent environment. Their stories were remarkably similar to those that a family in a poor neighborhood of Detroit might tell.

The cohabiting couples that they described were not surrogate marriages, but more commonly relationships in which the father may have been living in the house when the child was born, but did not assume a father's responsibility to support or bring up the child. The relationships, moreover, tended to be transient and chaotic, with instances in which children with the same father but different mothers lived within a few doors of each other.

Some of the problems of trying to raise children in such an environment may seem trivial but are painfully poignant. Take, for example, the story of a Birkenhead father who told me about going to his little girl's Christmas play at school. He was the only father there—hardly any of the other children had fathers—and his daughter, embarrassed because she was different, asked him not to come to the school any more. But the problems with the breakdown of the married two-parent family go beyond poignancy.

The central problem is that kids tend to run wild in communities without fathers. The fewer the fathers, the greater the tendency. "Running wild" can mean that young children have no set bedtime. It can mean that they are left alone in the house at night while mummy goes out. It can mean that eighteen-month-old toddlers are allowed to play in the street. It can mean children who treat other children too aggressively. The same Birkenhead father and his wife raised their first daughter as they were raised, to be polite and considerate—and she suffered for it. Put simply, her schoolmates weren't being raised to be polite and considerate—they weren't being "raised" at all in some respects. With their second child, the Birkenhead parents eased up on their requirements for civil behavior, realizing that their children had to be able to defend themselves against threats that the parents hadn't faced when they were children. Their third child is still an infant, and the mother has made a conscious decision. "I won't knock the aggression out of her," she said to me. Then she paused, and added...
angrily, "It's wrong to have to decide that."

It is of course true that many families with children have those kinds of problems, not just poor single parents. But this is why the concentration of the underclass into particular neighborhoods is so devastating. A middle-class neighborhood almost certainly has many divorced parents, but the dominant family type is the two-parent family, which remains the visible model for youngsters growing up. Even if one particular youth lacks a father, he lives in a neighborhood in which fathers abound. When the one-parent family becomes the norm and father figures are scarce, the difficulties associated with the single-parent family seem to multiply. One must use "seem" because of the continuing scarcity of systematic investigations. But this is why the British example is so provocative, even on this anecdotal level. One becomes less inclined to assume that the breakdown of the American black family is a black problem fostered by black history.

Crime

Crime is the next place to look for an underclass, for several reasons. First and most obviously, the habitual criminal is the classic member of an underclass, living off mainstream society by preying on it. Habitual criminals, however, are only part of the problem. Once again, the key issue is how a community functions, and crime can devastate a community in two especially important ways: first, to the extent that members of a community are victimized by crime, the community tends to become fragmented; second, to the extent that many people in a community engage in crime as a matter of course, the community's socializing norms change, as different kinds of men are idolized by boys and the standards of morality in general collapse.

Consider first the official crime figures, reported annually for England by the Home Office. As in the case of illegitimacy, I took for granted upon arrival that England had much lower crime rates than the United States. It therefore came as a shock to discover that England and Wales (which I will subsequently refer to as England) have a combined property-crime rate apparently as high, and probably higher, than that of the United States. (I did not compare rates with Scotland and Northern Ireland, which are reported separately.) I say "apparently," because Britain and the United States define property crime somewhat differently. But burglaries, which are similarly defined in both countries, provide
an example. In 1988 England had 1,623 reported burglaries per 100,000 inhabitants, compared with 1,309 in the United States. Adjusting for the trans-Atlantic differences in definitions, England also appears to have higher rates of motor-vehicle theft than the United States. The rates for other kinds of theft seem to be roughly the same. I wasn’t the only one who was surprised at these comparisons. If you want to attract startled and incredulous attention in the U.K., mention casually that England has a higher property-crime rate than that notorious crime center of the Western world, the United States; no one will believe you.

The understandable reason why no one believes you is that violent crime in England remains much less frequent than in the United States, and it is violent crime, not property crime, that engenders most of the anxiety and anger about crime. Thus, in all of 1988, England recorded just 624 homicides. The United States averaged that many every eleven days—20,675 for the year.

That’s the good news for Britain. The bad news is that the violent-crime rate in England has been rising very rapidly, as shown below:

**Violent crimes per 100,000 inhabitants, England and Wales**

The size of the increase isn’t as bad as it first looks, because England began with such a small initial rate. The rise is steep
nonetheless, and it became much steeper in about 1968. Compare the gradual increase from 1950-1968 with what happened subsequently. By 1988, England had 314 "offences of violence against the person" reported per 100,000 people. The really bad news is that England has been experiencing this increase despite demographic trends that should have led to a decrease. This point is important enough to explain at more length.

The most frequent offenders, the ones who puff up the violent-crime statistics, are males in the last half of their teens. As males get older, they tend to become more civilized. In England, the number of males in this troublesome age group increased throughout the 1970s, and this fact was widely used to explain the crime increase. But the number of English males aged fifteen to nineteen hit its peak in 1982 and has subsequently decreased both as a percentage of the population and in raw numbers (by a little more than 11 percent in both cases). Despite the reduction in the number of males in the highest-offending age group after 1982, the violent-crime rate in England from 1982 to 1988 rose by 43 percent.

"The increase is a statistical artifact," I was frequently told—another echo of the American dialogue in the 1960s and 1970s. One version of this argument is that crime just seems to be higher because more crimes are being reported to the police than before (because of greater access to telephones, for example, or because of the greater prevalence of insurance). This seems unlikely to do much better as an explanation than it did in the United States, where changes in reporting work both ways. Rape and sexual assault are more likely to be reported now, because of changes in public attitudes and judicial procedures regarding those crimes. But an anonymous purse-snatch is less likely to be reported, because the victim doesn't think it will do any good, and the drop-off in reporting for this reason is worst in the neighborhoods where crime is perceived to be out of control.

The most obviously spurious version of the "crime isn't really getting worse" argument uses rates of increase rather than the magnitude of increases to make the case. The best example in Britain is the argument that public concern about muggings in the early 1970s was simply an effort to scapegoat young blacks, and resulted in a "moral panic." Sociologist Stuart Hall and his colleagues made this case at some length in 1978 in a book entitled Policing the Crisis, in which, among other things, they argued with
a straight face that because the rate of increase in violent crimes was decreasing, the public’s concern was unwarranted. Applying their logic to recent trends, for example, the increase in violent crime in the 1950s was worse than the increase in the 1980s, because violent crime rose by 88 percent from 1950-1958, whereas it rose by only 60 percent from 1980-1988. The problem with this line of reasoning is apparent when one takes another look at the graph of violent crime shown above. From 1950-1958, the violent-crime rate increased by thirteen crimes per 100,000 inhabitants. From 1980-1988, it increased by 118 crimes per 100,000 inhabitants.

The denial by intellectuals that crime really has been getting worse spills over into denial that poor communities are more violent places than affluent communities. To the people who live in poor communities, this doesn’t make much sense. One man in a poor, high-crime community told me about his experience in an open university where he had once taken a sociology course about poverty. The professor kept talking about this “nice little world that the poor live in,” the man remembered. The professor scoffed at the reactionary myth that poor communities are violent places. To the man who lived in such a community, the professor was talking “bloody drivel.” A few weeks later, a class exercise called for the students to canvass a poor neighborhood. The professor went along, but apparently he too suspected that some of his pronouncements were bloody drivel—he cautiously stayed in his car and declined to knock on doors himself. And that raises the most interesting question regarding the view that crime has not risen, or that crime is not especially a problem in lower-class communities: Do any of the British intellectuals who hold this view actually believe it, to the extent that they take no more precautions walking in a slum neighborhood than they do in a middle-class suburb?

In the United States, the arguments that crime isn’t really getting worse have virtually disappeared, and an examination of the English crime statistics leads me to expect that the same thing will happen in Britain. The changes are too big to be explained away. If Britain follows the American model, after all the statistical artifacts are taken into account and debated it will be decided that England is indeed becoming more dangerous; that this unhappy process is not occurring everywhere, but disproportionately in particular types of neighborhoods; and that those neighborhoods turn out to be the ones in which an underclass is taking over. Reality will once again force theory to its knees.
Voluntary unemployment

If illegitimate births are the leading indicator of an underclass and violent crime a proxy measure of its development, the definitive proof that an underclass has arrived is that large numbers of young, healthy, low-income males choose not to take jobs. This decrease in labor-force participation is the most elusive of the trends in the growth of the British underclass.

The main barrier to understanding what’s going on is the high unemployment of the 1980s. The official statistics distinguish between “unemployed” and “economically inactive,” but Britain’s unemployment figures (like those in the U.S.) include an unknown but probably considerable number of people who manage to qualify for the benefit even if in reality very few job opportunities would tempt them to work. On the other side of the ledger, over a prolonged period of high unemployment the “economically inactive” category includes men who would like to work but have given up. To make matters still more complicated, there is the “black economy” to consider, whereby people who are listed as “economically inactive” are really working for cash, but not reporting their income to the authorities. So we are looking through a glass darkly, and I have more questions than answers.

The simple relationship of economic inactivity to social class is strong, just as it was for illegitimacy. According to the 1981 census data, the municipal districts with high proportions of Class V household heads also tend to have the highest levels of “economically inactive” persons of working age. This is another way of saying that you will find many more working-aged people who are neither working nor looking for work in the slums than in the suburbs. Some of them are undoubtedly discouraged workers, but two questions—applying specifically to lower-class young men—need to be asked and answered with much more data than are currently available.

First, after taking into account Britain’s unemployment problems when the 1981 census was taken, were the levels of economic inactivity among young males consistent with the behavior of their older brothers and fathers during earlier periods? Or were young males dropping out more quickly and more often than in the past?

Second, Britain has for the last few years been conducting a natural experiment, with an economic boom in the South and continued high unemployment in the North. If lack of jobs is the
problem, then presumably economic inactivity among lower-class healthy young males in the South has plummeted to insignificant levels. Has it?

The story that I heard from a variety of people in Birkenhead and Easterhouse was that the youths who came of age in the late 1970s risk becoming a lost generation. My sources did indeed ascribe the problem to the surge in unemployment at the end of the 1970s. "They came out of school at the wrong time," as one older resident of Easterhouse put it, and have never in their lives held a real job. They are now in their late twenties. As economic times improve, they are competing for entry-level jobs against people ten years younger, whom employers prefer to hire. But it's not just that, he added. "They've lost the picture of what they're going to be doing," he said. When he was growing up, he could see himself in his father's job. Not these young men.

This generation gap was portrayed to me as being only a few years wide. A man from Birkenhead in his early thirties—who had worked steadily after leaving school until he lost his job as an assembly-line worker in 1979—recalled how humiliated and desperate to work he had remained, even as his unemployment stretched from months into years. He—and the others in their thirties, forties, or fifties—were the ones showing up at six in the morning when jobs were advertised. They were the ones who sought jobs even if they paid less than the benefit rate. "The only income I wanted was enough to be free of the bloody benefit system," he said. "It was like a rope around my neck." The phrase for being on benefit that some of them used, being "on the suck," says a great deal about how little they like their situation. In passing, it should be noted that this way of looking at things is no small asset to Britain. In many inner cities of the U.S., the slang for robbing someone is "getting paid." Compare that inversion of values with the values implied by "on the suck." Britain in 1989 still has resources that seem to have been depleted in urban America.

But the same men who talk this way often have little in common with their sons and younger brothers. Talking to boys in their late teens and early twenties about jobs, I heard nothing about the importance of work as a source of self-respect and no talk of just wanting enough income to be free of the benefit system. To make a decent living, a youth of twenty-one explained to me, you need £200 a week—after taxes. He would accept less if it was all he could get. But he conveyed clearly that he would feel exploited. As
for the government's employment, the Youth Training Scheme, that's "slave labor." Why, another young man asked me indignantly, should he and his friends be deprived of their right to full unemployment benefits just because they're not yet eighteen? It sounded strange to my ears—a "right" to unemployment benefits for a school-age minor who's never held a job. But there is no question in their minds that that's exactly what the unemployment benefit is: a right, in every sense of the word. The boys did not mention what they considered to be their part of the bargain. "I was brought up thinking work is something you are morally obliged to do," as one older man put it. With the younger generation, he said, "that culture isn't going to be there at all." The older men had anecdotes to back up these observations. During the extensive housing refurbishment now going on at Easterhouse, for example, the contractors are obliged to hire local youths for unskilled labor as part of a work-experience scheme. Thirty Easterhouse young men applied for a recent set of openings. Thirteen were accepted. Ten actually came to work the first day. By the end of the first week, only one was still showing up.

My hypothesis—the evidence is too fragmentary to call it more than that—is that Britain is experiencing a generation gap by class. Well-educated young people from affluent homes are working in larger proportions and for longer hours than ever. The attitudes and behavior of the middle-aged working class haven't changed much. The change is concentrated among lower-class young men in their teens and twenties. It is not a huge change. I am not suggesting that a third or a quarter or even a fifth of lower-class young people are lounging about, indifferent to work. But an underclass doesn't have to be huge to become a problem.

That problem is remarkably difficult to fix. It seems simple—just make decent-paying jobs available. That's what we used to think in the United States, and we tried nearly everything to prove it—training programs, guaranteed jobs, special "socialization" programs that taught not only job skills but also "work readiness skills" like getting to work on time, "buddy" systems whereby an experienced older man tried to ease a trainee into the world of work. Controlled experiments show that these strategies have consistently had little effect at best, no effect most commonly, and occasionally negative effects. Nor did the expanding economy of the 1980s do much good—the percentage of American black male youths out of the labor force was the same in 1989 as it had been in 1979, and
it is still far above the rate for white male youths. The lesson that Britain is just beginning to learn is that it is irretrievably disastrous for young men to grow up without being socialized into the world of work. By remaining out of the work force during the crucial formative years, young men aren't just losing a few years of job experience. They are missing out on the time in which they need to be acquiring the skills and the networks of friends and experiences that enable them to establish a place for themselves—not just a place for themselves in the workplace, but a vantage point from which they can make sense of themselves and their lives. Furthermore, when large numbers of young men don't work, the communities around them break down, just as they break down when large numbers of young unmarried women have babies. The two phenomena are intimately related, as George Gilder has argued most eloquently.

Losing ground in Britain

How big is the British underclass? It all depends on how one defines its membership; the size of the underclass can be made to look huge or insignificant, depending on what one wants the answer to be. It seems safe to conclude, however, that the underclass now poses a much smaller problem for Britain than for the U.S. If the crime and illegitimacy trends in Britain leveled off where they are now and the South's tight labor market spread to the North, Britain would continue to have an underclass but not one that would force major reform. Britain could continue to treat social policy as it has since the Beveridge Report, looking for ways to fine-tune social-welfare and criminal-justice systems that most Britons think work pretty well.

The question facing Britain is the same one facing the United States: How contagious is this disease? Is it going to spread indefinitely, or will it be self-containing? Imagine, for example, what Britain will be like ten years from now if the trends continue unabated. The results seem preposterous. If violent crime follows the steepening trendline it has displayed since 1969, by 1999 the British violent-crime rate will be double the rate that already is a source of such concern. In the case of illegitimacy, it is impossible to assume that the exponential curve in the trendline since 1970 will continue to steepen—if it were to do so, all British births would be illegitimate by the end of the century. But even if we assume more conservatively that the trend of the last ten years will
continue linearly, more than 40 percent of births will be to single women by 1999. Because these results are so obviously preposterous, the question arises: Why might these projections be too high? Why may we reasonably expect that recent trends are caused by abnormal forces that are about to fade?

Here we reach questions about causation that are most controversial. In his recently published book, Labour MP Frank Field blames Mrs. Thatcher for the emergence of a British underclass. Field claims that the increased inequalities produced by rewarding the rich and punishing the poor have generated an underclass; change the policies, Field contends, and the underclass will diminish.

My interpretation and the interpretations of the left do not so much compete as pass in the night. As far as I can tell, inequality in general and Mrs. Thatcher’s policies in particular hardly enter in. The slope in the graph in violent crime steepened most conspicuously in the late 1960s, long before Mrs. Thatcher came to power. The acceleration in the illegitimacy ratio was beginning in 1979, and was nearly as steep as it would ever get by Mrs. Thatcher’s first full year in office. It is hard to credit that Mrs. Thatcher’s influence on fertility behavior among single young women occurred within days of her election.

In any case, let me propose a more radical reason why the Thatcher government’s policies have little to do with the development of an underclass: the relevant policies haven’t changed that much under Mrs. Thatcher. Despite the many dramatic changes in Britain in other spheres, the culprits behind the trends that I have described have been largely unaffected.

The hypothesis I bring to interpreting events in Britain is directly analogous to the one I used in analyzing the American situation several years ago in Losing Ground. In talking about the underclass, we are really talking about phenomena that relate directly or indirectly to the behavior of people in their late teens and early twenties. Young people—not just poor young people, but all young people—try to make sense of the world around them. They behave in ways that reflect what they observe. In the 1960s and 1970s, social policy in Britain fundamentally changed what makes sense. The changes did not affect the mature as much as the young. They affected the affluent hardly at all. But the rules of the game did change fundamentally for low-income young people, changing behavior in their wake.
"Making sense of the world around them" has to be understood in terms of the judgment and the time frame of young people. People in their late teens and early twenties can be terribly foolish and short-sighted. Late adolescence is a critical time of life for shaping the future, and unfortunately also a time during which all of us—not just blacks and the poor—are prone to do things that can be self-destructive. Unlike middle-class youths, inner-city youngsters are likely to lack not just money, but also the education, the socialization to longer-term thinking, and the adult oversight that together would manage to rein them in.

In the U.S. context, the rules of the game changed during a reform period that stretched from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, and they changed in every sphere—education, criminal justice, and welfare; through legislation, court decisions, and administrative reforms; at the federal level and at the state level. What makes the British case intriguing is that the changes in intellectual fashion followed the same time schedule as in the United States, but the policy changes did not. Policy toward crime changed course during the late 1960s, whereas the most significant changes in policy toward single women with children occurred in the last half of the 1970s.

I begin with crime, assuming this common-sense view of the situation: if a criminal's chances of being punished go down, crime goes up. In every respect—the chances of getting caught, the chances of being found guilty, and the chances of going to prison—crime has become safer in Britain throughout the postwar period, and most dramatically safer since 1960.

The landmark legislation was the Criminal Justice Act of 1967, implemented in 1968, which for the first time introduced parole to Britain, mandated suspension of all sentences of less than six months, and in a variety of other ways legislated the same philosophy of criminal justice—less use of prisons, less talk of just deserts, more therapy, the advent of "minimal intervention"—that had been affecting United States criminal-justice policy in less cohesive and integrated ways throughout the 1960s.

Without trying to establish causal links between legislation and behavior here, I will simply review some of the salient trends that a thoughtful criminal, or prospective criminal, might reasonably have noticed. "Clear-up rates" are one example. ("Clearing up" a crime in Britain means that the police think they know who did it, regardless of what happens in the courts). With a few crimes such
as homicide, the clear-up rate has remained high and unchanged. But for a crime such as robbery, the clear-up rate, which had risen during the 1950s, fell from 61 percent in 1960 to 42 percent in 1970, dropped again to 29 percent by 1980, and dropped still further to 21 percent in 1987—an extremely large change. Reductions for other crimes have been smaller but significant.

If clear-up rates had been the only thing to change, the overall effect on the “safeness” of crime would have been modest. But while clear-up rates were falling, so was the likelihood of conviction after apprehension. When the Criminal Justice Act was passed, half of all cleared-up offenses resulted in a conviction. A decade later, in 1977, the proportion had fallen to 43 percent; a decade after that, to 30 percent.

Perhaps most importantly, the penalties imposed upon conviction changed. This last topic is a source of great misunderstanding, for prison is the most obvious form of punishment and prisons are commonly thought to be incapable of reducing crime. Partly, the misunderstanding arises from a confusion between the incapacity of prisons to rehabilitate offenders (which is reasonably well-documented) and their capacity to deter potential offenders (which is not well-documented). Strict and consistent use of prisons, as once characterized Britain, can at the same time be miserably inefficient at rehabilitating criminals and spectacularly effective in deterring people from becoming criminals in the first place.

Another misunderstanding arises from the tendency to think in terms of the raw number of people in prison. As the number of people in prison rises but crime also continues to rise, the conclusion is loudly proclaimed that incarceration doesn’t work. But if one is thinking in terms of risks, the obvious measure is not the number of people in prison, but rather the chances of going to prison if one commits a crime. That figure has plummeted, not only since the reform of 1967 but since the end of World War II. Prison sentences as a proportion of reported crimes fell by almost half from 1950 to 1967, then fell by another 30 percent in the single year after the reform was implemented, and have remained comparatively steady (though still falling slowly) since then.

But comparatively few offenders were sent to prison even in the tough old days. Thus a full analysis of the trends in punishment would consider fines as well as prison sentences, the use of cautions and suspended sentences, the effects of the parole system on actual time served, the delay between arrest and disposition, and a
host of other factors that affect how a person arrested for a given crime in 1960 was treated differently from someone arrested for the same offense today. It seems evident from a variety of descriptions in the press and essays on the criminal-justice system that the use of penalties has fallen in every dimension—not just in severity, but in swiftness and certainty as well.

Even using simple measures, recent trends in penalties are at odds with the Thatcher government's reputation for being punitive and anti-crime. The actual end products of the criminal-justice system haven't corresponded to the rhetoric. From 1982 to 1987, even as crime continued to rise, the number of convictions and prison sentences dropped—not just as a proportion of crimes, but in raw numbers. In 1982, 3.1 million indictable offenses were known to the police, and 475,000 people were found guilty of them; of these, 50,300 received unsuspended prison sentences. In 1987, 3.7 million indictable offenses were known to the police (up 19 percent), 366,000 people were found guilty of them (down 19 percent); of these, 41,700 received unsuspended prison sentences (down 17 percent). Can these figures be the product of a get-tough policy?

Because crime statistics are so subject to qualifications and punishment itself is debated so passionately, let me make clear what I am and am not saying. I'm not claiming that the official statistics are perfect, or that British law enforcement has gotten lax, or that one must ignore the complicated social forces associated with increases in crime. I do claim that committing a crime is much safer than it used to be, and that this trend still continues. That being the case, why shouldn't crime continue to increase? In fact, why shouldn't the slope of the increase in the graph of violent crime continue just as steeply for the next ten years? It might flatten out, but it is difficult to think of a good reason why.

Similarly, why shouldn't illegitimacy continue to increase? There is an obvious explanation for why single young women get pregnant: sex is fun and babies are endearing. Nothing could be more natural than for young men and women to want to have sex, and nothing could be more natural than for a young woman to want a baby. A better question than asking why single young women get pregnant is to ask why they don't. The obvious answer is that in the past it was very punishing for a single woman to have a baby. (If that seems too negative, then one may say that a young single woman who had a baby had to forgo many social and economic rewards. It amounts to the same thing.)
One type of punishment was social stigma (or one type of reward for virtue was social acceptance), and without doubt the sexual revolution of the 1960s markedly reduced the stigma. Leaving aside why this happened, it is reasonable to expect that illegitimacy would have risen in the 1960s even if social policy had remained unchanged. But in addition to stigma, until recently severe economic punishment awaited single mothers. For a poor single woman, supporting a baby alone was next to impossible. Having to do so was something to be actively avoided.

At this juncture, we come to the benefit system, another source of great controversy and confusion in Britain as in America. There is no evidence anywhere, including Britain, that large numbers of young women get pregnant so that they can get on welfare—or, in the British phrase, on benefit. (Sometimes they have a second child specifically so that they can remain on benefit, but that constitutes a comparatively minor part of the problem.) Rather, the problem in providing money to single women who have babies is that the income enables many young women to do something that they would naturally like to do. Such benefits don’t have much effect on affluent women—the benefit rate is so far below what they consider their needs that they are not in any way “enabled” to have babies by the level of support being provided. For poor women, however, the benefit level can be quite salient in deciding whether having a baby is feasible. And the simple economic feasibility of raising a baby without the support of a father changed fundamentally during the 1970s.

In 1955, for example, an unmarried, unemployed mother with a single child under five had to get along on less than £22 a week, miserably little (all figures will be in 1987 purchasing power). It was almost impossible to survive on such a budget. Unless the mother had some other source of support, the only realistic option was putting the child up for adoption or into the care of the local authority. Having an illegitimate baby was brutally punishing if you were poor. (It was also punishing if you were rich, but for different reasons.) During the 1960s, the benefit grew, reaching about £36 by 1970—still an extremely slender stipend, though conceivably enough to get by on.

During the 1970s, the size of the benefit for single women began to rise more rapidly, increasing more than a third in purchasing power from 1970 to 1976 and reaching a high of £52 in 1980. Meanwhile, in 1977, the Homeless Persons Act was passed.
Before, a single mother had to wait in queue for housing. The act stipulated that pregnant women and single mothers were to get some sort of housing immediately—and to go to the top of the queue for council housing—if they couldn't live with their parents and were otherwise homeless. Not surprisingly, large numbers of young women with babies suddenly found that they were unable to live with their parents.

The effect of all these changes was not continuous. The right analogy for understanding the process is not a young woman with a calculator, following the latest quotations on benefits and deciding whether to change her fertility behavior. Rather, the analogy is the way a pot comes to boil. Thus, for example, I doubt that the Homeless Persons Act induced many young women to have babies so that they could get their own flats. Rather, the benefit increases and the Homeless Persons Act were steps in a quiet, cumulative process whereby having a baby as a single mother went from "extremely punishing" to "not so bad." By 1977 a poor young woman looking at the world around her could see that single mothers in their neighborhoods were getting along, whereas a similar young woman in the early 1960s would have looked around and concluded that being a single mother was to be avoided at all costs.

The combination of cash and housing did not offer enough to appeal to the middle class, but it provided low-income young women with a standard of living no worse and often better than they endured with their parents. Meanwhile, sex was as much fun as ever and babies were as endearing as ever. By the end of 1978, the illegitimacy ratio had begun the rapid rise that has continued throughout the eighties. A series of changes in the benefit rates and collateral housing benefits lifted a large portion of low-income young women above the threshold where having and keeping a baby became economically feasible.

Following this logic, it doesn't make any difference if the benefit level stops getting higher, or even if it diminishes somewhat. As long as the benefit level is well above the threshold, the dynamics of social incentives will continue to work in favor of illegitimacy, as the advantages of legal marriage become less clear and its disadvantages more obvious. For men, the pressures to marry will continue to diminish. Given all this, I cannot see why the illegitimacy ratio would level off.

I have touched on only a few of the changes in British social policy that relate to the development of an underclass. State edu-
cation was a lively topic of conversation among people with whom I talked everywhere; the stories sounded depressingly like the problems with urban public education in the United States. Drug abuse in Britain is reported to be increasing significantly. These developments all interact. When one leaves school without any job skills, barely literate, the job alternatives to crime or the dole are not attractive. Young men who are subsisting on crime or the dole are not likely to be trustworthy providers, which makes having a baby without a husband seem more plausible. If a young man's girlfriend doesn't need him to help support the baby, it makes less sense for him to plug away at a menial job and more sense to have some fun—which in turn makes hustling and crime more attractive, marriage less attractive. Without a job or family to give life meaning, drugs become that much more valuable as a means of distraction. The cost of drugs makes crime the only feasible way to make enough money to pay for them. The interconnections go on endlessly, and they help to explain why community norms lose their force, why the role of older adults in the community diminishes, why communal bonds loosen.

A dearth of solutions

The British in both parties still talk as if modest, incremental changes in one corner of the system can have an effect. The Conservatives continue to profess high hopes for youth employment programs, get-tough-on-crime reforms, and for the prospect of falling unemployment in the North. Labour seems genuinely to believe that Thatcherism is to blame and that a Labour government will bring back the good old days. And it would be foolhardy to assume too quickly that all of these voices are wrong. Britain is not the United States, and the most certain prediction is that British experience will be different from ours. At the close of this brief tour of several huge topics, let me be the first to acknowledge that I have skipped over complications and nuances and surely missed special British conditions of which I am ignorant.

Still, so much has been the same so far. In both countries, the same humane impulses and the same intellectual fashions drove reforms in social policy. The attempts to explain away the consequences have been similar, with British intellectuals in the 1980s—just like American intellectuals in the 1970s—saying that the problems aren’t really as bad as they seem. And to the extent that the United States has had more experience than Britain with a
growing underclass, the sad lesson we have to offer is our powerlessness to do much about an underclass once it exists. No matter how much money we spend on our cleverest social interventions, we don’t know how to make teenagers who have grown up in an underclass culture into steady workers, we don’t know how to make up for the lack of good parents, and, most critically, we don’t know how to make up for the lack of communities that reward responsibility and stigmatize irresponsibility. Let me emphasize the words: We do not know how. It’s not money we lack, but the capability to social-engineer our way out of this situation. Unfortunately, the impression persists that our social engineering simply hasn’t been clever enough, and that we must strive to become more clever.

Another possibility was voiced first by another American visitor to Britain, Benjamin Franklin. “There is no country in the world where so many provisions are established for [the poor],” he wrote in 1766 about Britain to a British audience. “[S]o many hospitals to receive them when they are sick and lame, founded and maintained by voluntary charities; so many almshouses for the aged of both sexes, together with a solemn law made by the rich to subject their estates to a heavy tax for the support of the poor.... In short, you offered a premium for the encouragement of idleness, and you should not now wonder that it has had its effects in the increase of poverty.”

We cannot say things so baldly in the last years of the twentieth century, but Franklin’s analysis is not far from the mark. Some years ago I wrote for an American audience that the real contest about social policy is not between people who want to cut budgets and people who want to help. Watching Britain replay our history, I can do no better than repeat the same conclusion: when meaningful reforms finally do occur, they will happen not because stingy people have won, but because generous people have stopped kidding themselves.