

Does Britain have an  
underclass?



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**What is an underclass and does it exist in Britain today?**

The idea of the existence of an underclass isn't by any means new. Charles Murray is perhaps the best known researcher who has studied the underclass both in the US and Britain. Murray arrived in Britain in 1989 from the US where he suggested that a huge underclass had already emerged and he wanted to compare Britain to the US. He described in his 1990 paper "the Emerging British Underclass" that it was spreading "like a plague through our social fabric", concluding that Britain does indeed have an underclass and predicting that by the year 2000 it would have grown to dramatic proportions. This essay shall examine the theory of underclass by Charles Murray and some alternative opinions by his critics in order to exemplify what a complex subject the underclass is. Murray's prediction of an existing and indeed expanding underclass will also be examined.

It is impossible to examine the concept of underclass without looking at an example of class theory of which there are many. Just one has been selected, that of Runciman (1990). He suggests that there are seven classes in British society – the upper class, three middle classes (upper, middle and lower) two working classes (skilled and unskilled) and an underclass.

Runciman describes the underclass as those who are "excluded from the labour market entirely" (cited in Marshall, 1997). This could be because of disability, being in debt, or through lack of skill and are highly likely to be women or/and in the ethnic minorities. These are not causal factors. The main feature of the underclass is long term unemployment.

Murray (1990) agrees that long term unemployment and its increase is the cause of the underclass along with the rise of single parenthood. Welfare

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benefits are too easily available for these groups he argues, thereby creating a “culture of dependency”. Murray’s definition of “underclass” is not concerned with the degree of poverty but a type of poverty and supports the view that the underclass are defined by their behaviour. They devalue the work ethic and are often associated with anti social behaviour and crime. He argues that the provision of welfare benefits for single parents have contributed towards the decline of the traditional nuclear family. Murray focuses on illegitimacy seeing it as a different “problem” from divorce, separation or widowhood. He sees that children who have only ever known one parent from birth are more likely to be in the underclass than those who have, at some point, experienced having two parents. He concluded that illegitimacy was more common in households that were poor than rich and also in white families more than black or Asian (although he doesn’t see “race” or ethnicity, or gender as a contributory factor). He makes a distinction between the short term unemployed and those who are long term “economically inactive”. The reliance on benefits and devaluation of work perpetuates from generation to generation, thereby forming early socialisation into the counter-culture referred to as the “underclass”.

The class theory of Runciman and the meaning of underclass according to Murray are not the only theories in existence. The complexity of it means one fixed definition cannot be attributed to it. Critics of Murray suggest that there is a tendency in his work to blame the underclass themselves, whereas societal factors need to be considered. Glasgow (1980) argues that the economy has failed to provide equal opportunities. Inequalities mean that some groups are excluded. Field (1989) blames the Thatcher government for

rewarding the rich and punishing the poor and suggests that social problems are interconnected. One particular part of Murray's theory that has attracted criticism is the focus on illegitimate<sup>1</sup> children. Brown (cited in *Lone Parent Families*, Ed: Donnellan, 2004) argues that it is unfair to label illegitimate children as being in the "underclass". In many cases of divorce or separation, the absent parent doesn't contribute financially at all or contributes very little, thereby placing their child and former partner amongst the groups that are not so well off. Statistics have shown that single parenthood has risen in Britain supporting Murray's prediction. Britain has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Western Europe, the second highest in the world. The figures for the number of illegitimate children in 1988 in Britain was 25.6%. The 2001 census showed that as many as one in four children are being raised in a single parent family. 90% of single parents are women. Single teenage parents are most likely to be amongst the poorest. Child care facilities are expensive and working hours may not be flexible. Studies have shown that if they do find work they may start at the very bottom of the ladder in part time or temporary positions with few benefits, perhaps only earning slightly more than they would on benefits. If they do try and get themselves out of hardship, it would prove incredibly difficult. Finding work does not necessarily mean that someone will be out of poverty.

Murray fails to mention the elderly, often seen in Britain as outside of mainstream society, despite what their position was during their working life. Field (1989) cites the underclass as consisting of single parents, the long term unemployed and the frail, elderly pensioner. Many critics of Murray

argue that income and wealth need to be equal to give the elderly better lives. Efforts have been made such as free eye tests, free television license and winter fuel payments. However, this help is not available to all pensioners and those in social policy would like to see a return to a link between pensions and earnings (which was abolished in 1980) which would help lift the elderly out of poverty (source: the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website).

Government policies have been implemented to try and alleviate problems. Charles Murray eventually stopped providing Government with possible policies because of pessimism about their capabilities to change things. Figures for February 2006 showed that the employment rate was 74.5% but this figure was down by 0.4% over the year. 51% of those unemployed were women. However, the number of job vacancies had decreased. Those taking part in Government schemes such as the New Deal are not included in unemployment figures. Critics suggest that the Government create these schemes so that unemployment figures drop but putting people into poorly paid work will not lift them out of the underclass. Preston (2005) emphasises that the benefit system for those not working is inadequate and often inaccessible (for example to asylum seeker families) so therefore doesn't provide the security Murray suggests it does.

It is impossible to give an adequate definition of what the underclass is as it is very much a disputed concept. Ideas of what the underclass actually is have been mentioned here, notably Murray who suggests that the British underclass is a subculture in itself and tends to blame the people within it rather than societal circumstances. Critics blame inequalities in education, <https://assignbuster.com/does-britain-have-an-underclass/>

job opportunities, housing and so on. It can be concluded that there are sections of society that could be termed the “underclass”, desperately needing Government to create policies to help them out of poverty and that those outside the mainstream society are growing – asylum seeker families are certainly excluded from mainstream education and a chance to work adding to those living in poverty in this country. In this respect, Murray was right in that those living in poverty has grown. Social scientists and policy makers however do not always agree on who actually makes up the “underclass”.

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