Urban Poverty and the Underclass Revisited: “Debates Within” the Underclass Debate

Eugene J. Palka
Professor

ABSTRACT

Urban poverty and the “underclass” remain politically and emotionally charged topics among academicians and political analysts concerned with American urban affairs. Geographers, however, have not been central to the main debates. The latter trend is perplexing, given the spatially concentrated nature of the underclass problem. This paper provides a synthetic review of the urban underclass concept and a distillation of the underclass debate in order to describe the complex and multifaceted problems associated with the urban underclass, and to illuminate themes which may be of interest to geographers. Urban poverty is more concentrated today, and hence, more geographically distinct than it was 20 years ago. A geographic perspective is essential for effectively targeting areas of concentrated poverty with specific strategies and social policy remedies.

KEY WORDS: urban, underclass, inner-city, joblessness, concentrated poverty

INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifteen years, the interdisciplinary topic, the “urban underclass,” has risen to a central position among the research agendas of multiple disciplines interested in various aspects of American urban studies. A review of the literature reveals an abundance of broad, contemporary research devoted to examining the underclass as a phenomenon, and assessing the utility of the underclass concept. More focused studies have sought to attain a clear definition of the term, and to clarify the origin, size, and composition of this disadvantaged group, in an effort to identify: who comprises the underclass; where are they located; when did they surface; and how did the process occur? The ultimate goal presumably, is to use the answers to the above research questions to determine why an underclass evolved, then to prescribe the appropriate social policy to remedy the situation.

Regardless of the perspective or the aspect of the study, research along the lines mentioned above has served to fuel
the underclass debate among a wide range of academicians and policy analysts. Contributions to this interdisciplinary topic have come from sociologists, political scientists, economists, historians, journalists, politicians, and to a much lesser degree, geographers. Surprisingly, geographers have not been central to the main debate, but have largely been relegated to positions along the periphery. The latter observation is perplexing, especially since the need for a geographic perspective appears to be a prerequisite for solving this spatially concentrated problem. Moreover, as a traditional "bridge discipline," geography has the potential to play a central role within the underclass debate. The discipline hosts numerous specialists within the subfields of urban, political, social, and economic geography. Although their contributions have been largely unheard (or unspoken) within the mainstream debate, the geographer's insights and approaches have much to offer to the stagnating, but still unresolved, underclass debate. Yet, despite the special editions of Urban Geography in 1990 and 1991, which called for their increased interest and participation, geographers have been only minimally involved in recent conferences (such as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Policy Conference on Persistent Urban Poverty, November 9–10, 1993); and their perspectives have not been central to the debate.

In an effort to solicit or renew interest among geographers, this paper provides a distillation of the poverty/underclass debate in such a way as to illuminate a variety of themes which may be attractive to geographers. The objectives are to (1) review the historical background of the underclass concept and the plethora of definitions imparted to it; and (2) identify and summarize the "debates within" the underclass debate. To these ends, the paper is organized into three parts and two conceptual models are proposed. The article begins by reviewing the origin of the underclass concept and examining the multitude of controversial definitions which have been subsequently attached to it, and are now well established in the literature. The paper proceeds to identify and elaborate on those issues which, in and of themselves, prompt debates within the underclass debate. The article concludes by redressing the objectives and methodology, and emphasizing the utility of the conceptual models that have been developed. Additionally, it calls for renewed interest among geographers to substantiate or refute liberal or conservative positions within the debate.

**Historical Background**

Perhaps the earliest reference to the current concept of underclass was expressed by Gunnar Myrdal (1963) in The Challenge of Affluence, where he referred to an "under-class" which was cut off from the labor market. In 1969, Lee Rainwater's commentary in Transaction linked the emerging underclass to increased poverty that was a subtle by-product of the otherwise successful experience of US capitalism. The term underclass gained wider recognition in 1980, when in The Black Underclass, Douglas Glasgow asserted that the young men who had participated in the Watts riot of 1965, were part of an emerging underclass, "a permanent fixture in our nation's social structure."

Preceeded by three articles which he published in the New Yorker in 1981, Ken Auletta's Underclass, published in 1982, is widely recognized as the catalyst that enabled underclass to secure dominance in the literature on inner-city pathology (Katz, 1993). Subsequent works have since, freely employed the term, with little consensus on origin, composition, or location of the underclass.

**COMPETING DEFINITIONS**

Understanding relevant terminology is essential to effective communications and scholarly debate within any discipline. Whenever a key concept or phenomenon is central to the research agenda of multiple disciplines, a clear and concise definition of the centrally important term, concept, or phenomenon is absolutely critical, not only for effective communication across disciplinary boundaries, but also to avoid confusion...
within a single discipline. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that sociologists, urban geographers, political scientists, and the media will agree upon a precise definition of underclass (nor even unanimously agree on the existence of such a phenomenon) in the near future; although, a consensus may do wonders to bridge communication barriers astride disciplinary boundaries, enhance scholarly debate, and contribute to a more effective development and implementation of social policies. As Van Haitsma (1989) notes, “the manner in which the underclass is defined will affect research findings and policy prescriptions.”

Michael Katz (1993) explains that “however defined, underclass is a metaphor of social transformation, asserting the emergence of a new social grouping within America’s inner cities.” He also notes that the SSRC Committee for Research on the Urban Underclass did not adopt an official definition of the term; nor have other urban poverty researchers adopted a standard definition (Katz, 1993). Although widely employed, the term continues to promote images of a variety of bad behaviors; it unquestionably blames the victim; and as a term, it may be considered inadequate since it does not describe, in the strict sense, a “class.” Consequently, many liberals have abandoned use of the term because of the negative connotations that are attached to it. Nevertheless, underclass is still the critical phenomenon that is central to the debate on inner-city poverty, and continues to be widely employed throughout the literature. Unfortunately, inconsistent use is widespread, as writers routinely adopt a definition that best serves their own agenda.

Perhaps the earliest definition of underclass was provided by Douglas Glasgow (1980) in The Black Underclass. In a rather vague definition, Glasgow regarded the underclass as “a permanently entrapped population of poor persons, unused and unwanted, accumulated in various parts of the country” (Glasgow, 1980).

In his 1982 seminal work, The Underclass, Ken Auletta defined the underclass as “a relatively permanent minority among the poor, which could be further classified as passive poor, hostile street criminals, hustlers, and the traumatized.” As opposed to Glasgow’s emphasis on conditions, Auletta’s focus is on behavior regarded as deviant by the majority of Americans.

Lawrence Mead’s book, Beyond Entitlement (1986) focuses on the non-working, able-bodied poor who fall into the “undeserving” category, and yet are the recipients of federal aid, a process which Mead sees as counterproductive. In his view, the undeserving poor are synonymous with the underclass. In his 1992 book, The New Politics of Poverty, Mead builds upon his earlier contention that athletic, non-workers are the country’s most important social problem. He further contends that “levels of crime and unwed parenthood appear to have peaked in the ghetto, yet non-work continues to increase” (Mead, 1992). To Mead, the ghetto is the domain of the underclass, whom he later refers to as the “demoralized group unable to get ahead because of a lack, not so much of opportunity as of personal organization,” and who have distressing ties to crime and welfare (Mead, 1992). Moreover, Mead describes the underclass, not as victims of racism or inadequate jobs (although he acknowledges the minor contribution of each), but rather, as those two to eight million people who lack “schooling, skills, and discipline to advance” (Mead, 1992).

Nicholas Lemann (1986) concludes that the underclass refers to isolated, jobless, inner-city Blacks, residing in extremely depressed northern industrial centers. His two part article in The Atlantic Monthly (June and July 1986) asserts that the underclass phenomenon has its roots in the “culture of poverty” thesis (previously introduced by anthropologist Oscar Lewis) and can be directly linked with the institutions of slavery and sharecropping in the South.

William Julius Wilson (1987) provides a widely accepted liberal definition of the underclass in The Truly Disadvantaged. Wilson’s (1987) underclass can be defined as the heterogeneous grouping of fami-
lies and individuals (almost exclusively, the disadvantaged segments of the Black urban community) who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system; including those individuals who; 1) lack training or skills; 2) experience long-term unemployment or are outside of the labor force; 3) engage in street crime or other aberrant behavior; and 4) experience extended periods of poverty or welfare dependency.

Martha Van Haitsma (1989) recognizes that underclass has been variously defined using some combination of four measures: chronic poverty; non-conformist behavior regarding income generation and family formation; spatially concentrated poverty and/or nonconformist behavior; and intergenerational transmission of poverty and/or behavior. She recognizes, however, that any combination of the above criteria may still result in a definition that is inadequate. Emphasizing a key aspect of Wilson's definition, Van Haitsma insists that the critical condition missing from previous definitions is "a weak attachment to the formal labor market," which may be a function of "social context." Consequently, she defines the underclass as "those persons who are weakly connected to the formal labor force and whose social context tends to maintain or further weaken this attachment" (Van Haitsma, 1989).

Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) attempt to operationalize underclass in "Defining and Measuring the Underclass." Citing a wide variety of definitions for the term, they seek to develop an operational definition consistent with the emphasis of most underclass literature on behavior rather than poverty. To be meaningful, they contend that underclass must be conceptually distinguishable from poverty. Consequently, Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) define the underclass to be those populations residing in census tracts where the rates of high school dropouts, prime age males not regularly attached to the labor force, welfare recipients, and female headed households are greater than one standard deviation than the mean for the nation.

In "Concentrated Deviance and the Underclass Hypothesis," Mark Alan Hughes (1989) contends that "underclass is primarily characterized by its deviance from social norms regarding family structure, working for a living, respect for the law, and so on." He essentially accepts the same criteria adopted by Ricketts and Sawhill. He is significantly different, however, in his measurement strategy. Whereas Ricketts and Sawhill use census tract data to define tracts which score one standard deviation above the national mean in all four criteria, Hughes adopts the same criteria, yet uses "twice the median" scores as an alternative measurement strategy. Perhaps more importantly, Hughes' measurement strategy adds a more concrete spatial dimension to the definition of underclass.

Joe Trotter (1993) synthesizes from a number of works to adopt a more general definition of underclass. He concludes that the notion of underclass was adopted by social scientists, policy experts, and journalists in the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to describe and explain increases in urban poverty (Trotter, 1993). He notes that according to these groups, the urban underclass refers to those families and individuals who exist outside the American occupational structure (Trotter, 1993).

The point to reviewing the assortment of definitions presented herein, is to gain an appreciation for the wide variety of meaning imparted to the term, underclass. None of the definitions stand alone. Each has a number of supporters. As Johnson and Oliver (1990–91) note, in general, definitions of underclass can be grouped into three main categories: 1) those which define the underclass in terms of its behavioral distinctiveness (Auletta, 1982; Loury, 1985; Lemann, 1986; Gilder, 1981); 2) those which stress the relationship of the underclass to the labor market (Kasarda, 1989; Wilson, 1987; Glasgow, 1980); and 3) those which emphasize spatial and social isolation (Hughes, 1989; Wilson, 1987). In any case, there is no single definition that is widely accepted. Moreover, to many, the plasticity of the term underclass almost seems to be advantageous, as researchers, journalists, and politicians feel free to mold
the term to best suit their needs and/or help to advance their agenda. Employing the framework provided by Johnson and Oliver (1990–91), Figure 1 groups some of the dominant players who contribute to the continuing debate on the underclass, based on the aspect of the definition which they most emphasize.

Inasmuch as my conception of the underclass springs forth from an extensive review of the literature, it is necessary to reveal my own position at this point. In this regard, the underclass has historical roots (Trotter, 1993), but has evolved to crisis proportions relatively recently (Sugrue, 1993). The group is largely comprised of disadvantaged Blacks (Lemann, 1986a and b; Wilson, 1987), and to a much lesser degree, Hispanics (Tienda, 1989; Jargowsky and Bane, 1991; Lemann, 1991). Moreover, the group is largely concentrated in the former industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest (Wilson, 1987; Fainstein and Fainstein, 1989), and has felt the impact from a number of processes, such as: deindustrialization and deconcentration (Kasarda, 1976, 1985, 1989, 1990); an outmigration of the Black middle class from center city to suburban areas (Wilson, 1987); and residential segregation (Bartelt, 1993; Fainstein & Fainstein, 1989). Among the most disadvan-

FIGURE 1. The multifaceted definition of underclass.
taged, these mechanisms have prompted a skills and spatial mismatch (Karsada, 1976, 1985, 1989, 1990) and separation from the labor market (Wilson, 1987; Kasarda, 1989; Sugrue, 1993). The end result of these circumstances has been spatial and social isolation (Wilson, 1987; Hughes, 1989; Trotter, 1993; Bartelt, 1993) into areas of concentrated poverty (Wilson, 1987), void of social resources (Johnson and Oliver, 1990–91), and dominated by distinctive underclass behavior (Murray, 1984; Loury, 1985; Lemann, 1986; Mead, 1992).

"DEBATES WITHIN" THE UNDERCLASS DEBATE

There are a number of debatable issues inherent in the underclass debate. On some issues, it is difficult to distinguish between liberal and conservative positions, as only subtle points separate the two camps, and members of each, frequently adopt varying aspects of multiple positions. This scenario appears to be present in much of the previous literature which tries to better conceptualize the notion of an underclass by answering several broad questions about this disadvantaged segment of society, namely: who are they?; where are they located?; when did they surface?; and how did this process occur? The answers to these questions are complex, and understandably varied, even within liberal and conservative camps. Although answers to the above questions may enable one to better conceptualize the underclass as a phenomenon, questions remain about the nature of the debate.

Compared to the broad questions that were previously addressed, the intent here is to identify and examine a number of specific issues which clearly divide the two camps and enables one to identify key members of each group, and to better appreciate major points of contention. The following are among the more divisive issues which are inherent in the underclass debate.

Focus of the Debate

The first issue which clearly divides liberals and conservatives involves the focus of the debate. For conservatives, the focus of the debate has been on the behavioral problems of the underclass; whereas, liberals have largely focused on structural problems which contributed to the formation of an underclass. In examining the use of the term "underclass," Katz (1993) observes that conservatives emphasize "bad behavior" or values; whereas, liberals focus on structures within society that have exacerbated social problems. Similarly, Wilson (1987) recognizes this distinction and notes that conservatives have traditionally stressed the importance of different group values and the adverse effects of various government programs on individual or group behavior and initiative. On the other hand, liberals have emphasized "how the plight of disadvantaged groups can be related to the problems of the broader society," and as a result, seek to open the opportunity structure (Wilson, 1987).

Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) bluntly state that "most of the literature on the underclass has emphasized the behavioral deviancy of the group." To support their position that "the underclass is a subgroup of the American population that engages in behaviors at variance with those of mainstream populations," they also cite conservative descriptions of the underclass provided by Kenneth Clark (a psychologist), Richard Nathan (a social scientist), and Ken Auletta (a journalist), all of which emphasize behavior as the primary focus (Ricketts and Sawhill, 1988).

By contrast, Kasarda (1990) typifies the liberal focus of the debate in the title of his article: "Structural Factors Affecting the Location and Timing of Urban Underclass Growth." Therein, Kasarda (1990) examines the demographic and economic conditions, and various governmental policies which may have inadvertently contributed to the rise of an urban underclass. Thus, like most liberals, he focuses on the impact of structures within society, and pays little, if any attention to behavior.

In summary, the focus of the underclass debate for liberals has been on structural problems, while conservatives...
have focused on underclass behavior. Arguably, this difference in focus has historical roots in the age-old distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor.

Social Policy

On the issue of social policy, liberals have sought to eliminate poverty, whereas conservatives have argued to reduce dependency. Charles Murray’s (1984) book, Losing Ground generated overwhelming conservative support for reforming social policy to reduce dependency. Murray (1984) claims that previous social programs fostered a demoralized way of life and produced welfare dependence. Losing Ground had enormous implications on social policy during the Reagan administration. Based on the logic that curtailing liberal social programs would prompt people to look for jobs (thus reducing dependency), conservative social policy initiatives like “workfare” and “learnfare,” oriented social policy towards the single goal of reducing dependency.

Meade (1986) echoed many of the same conservative contentions as Murray, in his book, Beyond Entitlement. Meade added further weight to the conservative argument with the publication of The New Politics of Poverty in 1992, where he again asserts that liberal social policies have resulted in a pattern of dependency.

The major liberal response to Murray’s book was provided by Wilson (1987) in The Truly Disadvantaged. Whereas Murray, Meade, and other conservatives advocated social policy as a means to reduce dependency, Wilson and other liberals promoted social policy as a mechanism to eliminate poverty. Wilson (1987) specifically calls for social policy to alleviate poverty, joblessness, and related forms of social dislocation in an effort to resolve the underclass problem.

Criminal Sentencing

A third issue within the underclass debate that clearly divides liberals and conservatives, involves criminal sentencing. Liberals have favored rehabilitation as a fundamental goal of the criminal justice system. By contrast, conservatives view punishment as the principal task of criminal sentencing.

Meade (1992) reveals the opposing positions on criminal sentencing when he contends that “conservatism means using the government more vigorously against crime;” whereas, “liberalism connotes resistance to enforcement and a greater tolerance for disorder.” Meade (1992) further contends that “conservatives want to repress crime, while liberals seek solutions mainly through providing benefits.”

Much of the conservative emphasis on punishment is based on the findings of James Q. Wilson (1983), who submits that more rigid criminal sentencing reduces crime rates. As such, he proclaims that the benefits of tougher crime policies are far greater than the costs of administering them. Similarly, Ehrlich (1973) previously concluded that imprisonment had a deterrence effect on potential criminals. Thus, he advocated reducing crime by way of increasing the probability of imprisonment for criminals.

Wilson (1987) acknowledges that conservatives criticize liberal changes in the criminal justice system for “decreasing the sanctions against aberrant behavior and thereby contributing to the rise of inner-city crime.” Wilson does not however, see the link between liberal criminal sentencing policies and increased urban crime. Rather, he is quick to point out that there is a direct correlation between crime rates and the economic status of a community (Wilson, 1987). Thus, Wilson expects to see higher crime rates in the more economically distressed and socially isolated areas of inner cities, irrespective of criminal sentencing.

Johnson and Farrell (1993) view the conservative anti-crime policy of punishment rather than rehabilitation, as having a negative impact on the disadvantaged. In assessing the genesis of the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992, they note that California (once a leader in the rehabilitation of criminals) epitomizes the shift in policy, by embracing punishment (and explicitly not rehabilitation) as the purpose of
prison, and by requiring mandatory prison sentences. The result of California’s tough anti-crime policy has been a sky-rocketing prison population, massive increases in state spending on the criminal justice program (at the expense of other programs, such as education), a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities, and a significant decrease in the job prospects for those previously charged with a crime (Johnson and Farrell, 1993).

Conservatives view tough criminal sentencing as a means to punish those who exhibit “bad behavior.” Liberals, however, regard criminal sentencing as discriminatory, and contend that punishment without rehabilitation returns a troubled individual back to society with little chance of gaining employment and virtually no other alternatives.

**Welfare**

Welfare is the fourth highly contested issue within the underclass debate. One might argue that the issue of welfare is not distinct from social policy, and therefore does not warrant separate attention. My treatment of welfare as a separate issue, is based on the central role it has played within the underclass debate. Arguments over social policy have been on a broad scale; whereas, welfare, has frequently been the focal point of social policy debates. Moreover, as a key aspect of social policy, welfare has been implicated as both the culprit and a potential remedy to the underclass problem.

As a general concept, welfare can be defined as any of a variety of supplementary benefits given by the federal government to needy households. While there is agreement on this definition, there is little consensus over the questions of who, when, why, how much, and for how long, as they relate to welfare payments or benefits. Answers to these specific questions are beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, however, that liberals generally regard existing welfare programs as inadequate for meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged. On the other hand, conservatives contend that welfare exacerbates the problem of the underclass by providing disincentives to work and become self-sufficient.

Murray (1984) and Meade (1986; 1992) are the most widely cited architects of the conservative position. Murray (1984) contends that generous welfare programs provide disincentives to work and are the fundamental cause of Black male joblessness, Black family disintegration, and inner-city poverty. Murray asserts that the welfare programs “tried to provide more for the poor and produced more poor instead;” hence further aggravating a grave situation. Moreover, he states that “for the first time in American history, it [has become] socially acceptable within poor communities to be unemployed, because working families too were receiving welfare” (Murray, 1984). In general, Murray believes that liberal welfare programs perpetuate poverty.

Meade (1992) criticizes the work ethic of the disadvantaged (particularly young, Black males) and asserts that generous welfare programs actually reward those who refuse to work. Meade draws a parallel between welfare and sharecropping, and regards both as institutions which relieve individuals of their responsibility to strive to become self-sufficient.

Katz (1993) makes an interesting distinction between the positions of Murray and Meade. He notes that Murray’s dependents were clever and rational, and understood how to work the welfare system to their advantage; whereas, Meade’s welfare recipients lacked competence and were victims of a culture of dependence, reinforced by liberal policy (Katz, 1993). In either case, conservatives claim that welfare programs not only fail to remedy the underclass problem, they contribute to further deterioration.

Liberals strongly refute the claims that welfare provides disincentives. Rather, they contend that many welfare programs are ineffective because they are inadequate. In attacking the adequacy of one welfare program, Greenstein (1985) points out that “no other group in the American society experienced such a sharp decline in real income since 1970 as AFDC mothers and their children,” thus refuting the conservative contention
that welfare recipients (who are rewarded for doing nothing) are financially “better off” than the working poor. Similarly, Greenstone (1991) specifically notes that “the growth of the underclass since the early 1970s has occurred at a time when the real value of welfare payments has actually been falling. Katz and Sugrue (1993) explain that few people can survive solely on public assistance. In emphasizing the inadequacy of welfare programs, they conclude that most recipients are forced to “work off the books” or find other ways of supplementing their income, and are invariably “forced to cheat,” as a means to survive. As a testimony to the utility of welfare programs, Johnson and Farrell (1993) cite data from a recent census report, which indicates that “the national poverty rate is higher today than it was twenty-five years ago, as a consequence of Republican cuts in the social welfare arena.”

**Employment**

Like welfare, the issue of employment has remained central to the underclass debate and serves to clearly divide liberals from conservatives. Ironically, both camps view employment as a major contributor to the underclass problem, and both concur that concentrated poverty has roots in unemployment. Yet, despite this consensus on the importance of both employment and unemployment as causal factors affecting underclass status, there is widespread disagreement over the availability of employment opportunities.

Liberals view the decline in employment opportunities (specifically for young, Black males residing in former industrial inner-cities of the Northeast and Midwest) as the fundamental explanation for the growing underclass. Wilson (1987) notes that Blacks were disproportionately concentrated in the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest, and hence were the most adversely affected by a changing urban economy, characterized by a decline in manufacturing jobs, and an increase in high-tech and advanced service jobs. In response to this changing urban economy, an out-migration of middle class Blacks to suburban areas ensued, leaving behind those who eventually became victims of a spatial and skills mismatch, and further isolated from the labor market (Wilson, 1987). In Wilson’s view, joblessness provides the fundamental explanation for the evolving underclass in areas of concentrated poverty; and so it follows that employment is the key to solving the underclass problem.

In noting that Wilson’s explanation has considerable merit for Rustbelt cities, Johnson and Oliver (1991) note that Wilson’s theory is less applicable to cities like Washington, D.C., where manufacturing was never the dominant employer. As such, Johnson and Oliver propose four additional processes which adversely affect employment opportunities (particularly for Black males). Specifically, they identify the geographical pattern of overall employment growth and decline; the deconcentration of employment opportunities; the shift from the Fordist mode to more flexible modes of production; and the privatization of public sector employment (Johnson and Oliver, 1991). Although they differ in their explanations of the processes which contributed to the decline in employment opportunities, Johnson and Oliver nevertheless concur that joblessness and subsequent isolation from the labor market are the primary contributors to the underclass crisis.

Like Wilson (1987), and Johnson and Oliver (1991), Kasarda (1976; 1985; 1989; 1990) sees the lack of employment opportunities as the primary explanation for the growing underclass. Similarly, Sugrue (1993) argues that the reorganization of space in the contemporary urban economy has increasingly isolated the urban poor, both socially and economically.

Conservatives contend that employment opportunities have not diminished. The consensus within the conservative camp is that new jobs have been generated as quickly as manufacturing jobs have declined. Moreover, they assert that one’s race or ethnic group has no bearing on finding a new job.

Meade (1992) bluntly asserts that “the initial reason for most working-aged pov-
erty is simply that fathers in ghetto areas tend not to provide for their children, while mothers usually go on welfare rather than work themselves.” Moreover, he insists that for Black males, their reservation wage is too high, and their reservation commute is too low (Meade, 1992). Thus, Meade views “work ethic” and not “employment opportunity” as the basic underclass problem. To him, the availability of jobs is not even an issue; rather, the “unwillingness to work” is the underlying problem.

Murray (1984) also alludes to the poor work ethic of the underclass, while downplaying the role of employment opportunities. As a case in point, Murray contends that “participation in the labor force measures a fundamental economic stance: an active intention of working, given the opportunity.” With this definition in mind, Murray identifies a significant decline in labor market participation for Black males from 1960 through the early 1980s. More importantly, he notes that this dramatic decline in labor market participation is striking, since it occurred during an exceedingly tight labor market. Hence, Murray disputes the significance of any imbalances in employment opportunities.

The Family

A sixth area of contention within the underclass debate involves the changing nature of the family. Liberals regard underclass families as victims of structural changes beyond their control. They recognize increasing social and economic isolation, a lack of marriageable males (Wilson, 1987), and concentrated poverty and crime, as factors which disrupt the underclass family. Within this context, many liberals view single parent households, out of wedlock births, and cohabitation as rational responses to the turmoil confronting the underclass. Conservatives however, view these latter conditions as proof that the family is a crumbling institution among the underclass. Moreover, they argue that family values have eroded to the point of rendering this institution ineffective as a traditional stabilizing force in areas of concentrated poverty.

Greenstone (1991) provides one of the “most liberal” perspectives on the issue of the family when he declares that “within the context of the ghetto, ghetto-specific practices become genuinely adaptive.” Within this context, Greenstone proceeds to analyze family values among the underclass. He notes that the lack of decent paying jobs, leads most men to the conclusion that they cannot make satisfactory contributions as providers. Consequently, most men seek self-esteem and social recognition through other means, such as through sexual exploits, drinking, or maintaining peer relations in lieu of family commitments. As a result, underclass women are confronted with a lack of marriageable males (as previously noted by Wilson, 1987), and find it almost impossible to marry and raise “legitimate” children in the traditional fashion. Out of wedlock child-bearimg often appears as the only viable alternative. Within the context of concentrated poverty areas, the above responses seem to be rational. Thus, Greenstone (1991) concludes that from this perspective, a moral critique of the underclass conduct (in regards to traditional family values) is largely irrelevant.

Although conservatives have used statistics (dating from about 1960 to the present) on teenage pregnancies, births out of wedlock, female-headed households, and divorce rates, as incriminating evidence and proof of the decline in family values among the underclass, Wilson (1987) disputes such conclusions and insists that the disintegration of underclass families is directly tied to joblessness. Wilson contends that the lack of employment opportunities and a stable income have not only created stressful, unstable conditions for families, but have prompted an imbalance in the Black male marriageable pool. This latter condition invalidates many of the conservative conclusions about the increasing number of out of wedlock births, because Black women have responded by delaying marriage and being less likely to remarry, thus inflating the out of wedlock birth statistic.
Within the context of Chicago's concentrated poverty areas, Anderson (1989) examines sex codes and family life among the inner-city poor. Anderson supports Wilson's contentions and concludes that "the lack of family-sustaining jobs or job prospects denies young men the possibility of forming economically self-reliant families, the traditional American mark of manhood." In Anderson's opinion, this reality prompts the alternative paths taken by young, Black inner-city males and females, which eventually contribute to increased teenage pregnancies, out of wedlock births, and female-headed households in ghetto communities. Similarly (Testa; Astone; Krough; and Neckerman, 1989), stress the impact of joblessness on family creation and stability. In their survey of inner-city residents in Chicago, they found that employed fathers were twice as likely as nonemployed fathers to marry the mother of their first child, a finding which is consistent with Wilson's hypothesis that the rise in Black male joblessness is linked to the increase in never-married parenthood (Testa; Astone; Krough; and Neckerman, 1989).

Central to the liberal views on family values of the underclass, is the emphasis on evaluating teenage pregnancies, out of wedlock births, female-headed households, and co-habitation within the context of their surroundings. Given the limited opportunities in areas of concentrated poverty, what constitutes rational, or at least acceptable behavior, is likely to be at odds with the views of "mainstream America."

Conservatives have frequently employed statistics on teenage pregnancies, out of wedlock births, female-headed households, and broken marriages as indicators of low moral standards, deviant behavior, and family disintegration among the underclass. The conservative emphasis on the deteriorating family values of the underclass, has roots in the Moynihan report of 1965. Conservatives largely overlooked several key aspects of the report, which called attention to the history of racial discrimination against Blacks, and the contemporary social, economic, and political barriers to Black equality (Moynihan, 1965). Instead, based on accounts of increased rates of out of wedlock births, female-headed households, and broken marriages, many conservatives embraced what they perceived as family deterioration within the Black communities of inner-cities. Rather than regarding these latter measures as manifestations of previous racial discrimination, conservatives generally came to view the contemporary Black family of the inner-city as problematic, unstable, and lacking "appropriate values."

While liberals tend to focus on the causes of family disruption, conservatives have emphasized the effects. Moreover, conservatives have used the image of the unstable family to "paint a picture" of the "undeserving poor" in the debate over welfare entitlements. Murray (1984) argues that liberal benefits of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) serve to entice underclass women to forego marriage. He further contends that many couples elect to dissolve their marriage in order to receive welfare and improve their financial situation. In either case, Murray implies that the underclass lacks moral convictions, and completely disregards family values for the sake of receiving welfare.

In summary, when liberals assess the changing nature of the underclass family, they attribute the rise in female-headed families and out of wedlock births to the extraordinary rise in Black male joblessness (Wilson, 1987). Conservatives however, cite various aspects of family instability as evidence of an "undeserving poor."

The purpose of examining the above six issues has been to give form to the underclass debate. Figure 2 captures the "debates within" the underclass debate, and enables one to clearly distinguish between liberal and conservative positions, and better conceptualize the debate.

CONCLUSION

In the earlier stages of the underclass debate, broad questions focused on the very existence of an underclass, the precise definition of the phenomenon, and
DEBATES WITHIN
THE
UNDERCLASS DEBATE

(ISSUE)

<----LIBERALS-------------------------------CONSERVATIVES---->

* structural problems [FOCUS] * behavioral problems
* eliminate poverty [SOCIAL POLICY] * reduce dependency
* rehabilitate [CRIMINAL SENTENCING] * punish
* inadequate [WELFARE] * exacerbates the problem; provides disincentives

* deindustrialization, [EMPLOYMENT] * plenty of jobs, deconcentration, poor work ethics, joblessness, reservation wages detachment from the too high, and/or labor market reservation commute too low
distress social and economic conditions, lack of marriageable males

* victims, [FAMILY] * values have instability, eroded, out of distressed social and wedlock births, economic conditions, co-habitation, lack of marriageable males teenage pregnancies

FIGURE 2. Liberal and conservative emphasis on key issues.

the utility of the term. More recent ques-
tions have been directed towards mea-
suring the underclass, tracing the origins, identifying the current distribution and composition, and explaining the pro-
cesses by which an underclass evolved.
Throughout the earlier stages of the debate, it was difficult to distinguish be-
tween liberal and conservative positions, since many of the questions were broad, and/or theoretical. With the publication of Losing Ground in 1984, the conservative signpost was firmly planted. In 1987, The Truly Disadvantaged served as the rally-
ing call for liberals; and with the publication of The New Politics of Poverty, boundaries between liberals and conserv-
vatives were clearly drawn.
Although shifting within camps and among “middle of the roaders’’ continues, specific issues such as those ad-
dressed in this paper, enable one to
clearly delineate liberal versus conservative positions on issues within the underclass debate. Despite the apparent oversimplification, the distinction between liberal and conservative camps is important because of the widely held perception that liberal means "Democrat" and conservative means "Republican."

Based on a conceptual understanding of the underclass phenomenon, this paper has sought to explain the "nature" of the debate. A review of the literature revealed six "debates within" the underclass debate. These were subsequently used as a framework to divide liberals and conservatives within the debate. Just as conservative initiatives (regarding the underclass problem) prevailed during the republican administrations of the 1980s, liberal initiatives have come to the forefront during the Clinton administration. As such, the two conceptual models developed in this paper may be useful for better understanding the links that future policy initiatives have to key players within the academic and political realms.

Most importantly, the intent herein has been to provide a distillation of the underclass debate in such a way as to reveal a number of specific areas where geographers can make immediate contributions to furthering the debate. The geographic perspective is sadly lacking within each of the six "debates within" the debate. In addition to the obvious concerns of locating and measuring the areal extent of areas of concentrated poverty, related concepts such as urban restructuring, accessibility, migration, residential location, and zoning, all allude to the importance of effectively managing space within the urban area; and hence, shed light on the spatial dimension of the underclass problem. Moreover, since the urban underclass is not uniformly distributed, but rather, constitutes a spatially concentrated problem, geographic approaches or frameworks for studying locations, and methods for determining the appropriate scale of analysis are invaluable to furthering the debate. Additionally, at the risk of sounding too parochial, the geographer's tools (maps, geographic information systems, and a variety of analytical techniques) can do wonders to better define, measure, visually portray, and compare and contrast various spatial aspects of the underclass phenomenon. Unfortunately, during an opportune time for sweeping reform, geographers are currently underrepresented at professional forums addressing the topic. If this paper does nothing more than illuminate the lack of geographic perspective within the contemporary underclass debate, then it will have served its purpose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT STATEMENT

I am indebted to Professor James H. Johnson, Jr. for inspiring me to undertake this project. Moreover, I am extremely grateful to him for editing multiple versions of this manuscript and for sharing his expertise and enthusiasm for the topic.

REFERENCES


