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Books In Review

The Urban Underclass *and* Inner–City Poverty In The United States

Always Among Us

The Urban Underclass. Edited by Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson. *Brookings Institution Publications. 490 pp. $34.95 cloth, $14.95 paper.*

Inner–City Poverty In The United States. Edited by Lawrence E. Lynn, Jr. and Michael H. McGeary. *National Academy Press. 280 pp. $29.95.*

Reviewed by Lawrence M. Mead

The presence of entrenched poverty and welfarism in America's cities, in both bad times and good, is the nation's leading social dilemma. Neither liberal nor conservative administrations have made much dent on the problems in the last twenty years. That effort, however, has generated some of the most advanced social research ever produced. Studies of poverty and dependency, many funded by government, have had great influence on both public policy and the social sciences. It is less clear whether this influence has been salutary.

These two books are of the sort that regularly publicize the latest results from the poverty network. Both come from esteemed institutions–the Brookings Institution, a leading Washington think tank, and the National Research Council. The editors and most of the contributors are recognized experts. The studies assess various social and economic factors, such as racial bias or unemployment, that might help to explain persistent poverty or dependency. They do this very capably, making use of census and other data on urban areas as well as the most advanced statistical methods. Several decades of this sort of inquiry explain why poverty and dependency are better understood in the U.S. than in any other country.

At the same time, however, this tradition of research has created serious problems for social science and social policymaking. Highly quantified studies of this sort have, in fact, revealed little about the *causes* of poverty. The research is very good at describing the social and economic conditions of the poor, much less good at explaining how they got that way. Long–term poverty among the working–aged, the most controversial kind, is due largely to the fact that parents in poor families seldom work regularly. Typically, the mothers go on welfare, and the fathers live off them or by street hustling, without steady employment. Researchers have failed to find any simple explanation for these patterns.

A number of "barriers" have been thought to explain nonwork, but none of them does so satisfactorily. Racial discrimination does not seem to keep many nonwhites out of all employment unless they are thoroughly incompetent. The wages available to the unskilled are generally enough to keep families out of poverty if both parents work, as is now usual for the society. At least low–paid jobs appear to be available to most job seekers most of the time. Contrary to claims by advocates, child care is generally available and affordable. That is one reason why most single mothers are already working; welfare mothers are the exception.

Barriers and inequities still exist in America, but they mainly explain differing success among people who are already employed; most notably, those with more education do better than those with less. But barriers seldom explain a failure to work at all, which is the main problem among the poor. Nonpoor Americans, who are working at the highest levels in history, realize the rewards of employment. So do immigrants, who flock here from all over the world mainly because work is available. Only the poor seem not to do so, for reasons that remain largely unknown.

My own view is that nonwork is mostly due to ethnicity and weak public institutions. Most of the long–term poor are black or Hispanic. These groups seem prone to poverty, not because of any lack of potential, but because harsh memories of when they were denied opportunity cause many members not to study or work hard. At the same time, government has failed to uphold mainstream mores among the poor in the last twenty–five years. In ghetto areas, typically, the criminal law is weakly enforced, the schools do not expect children to learn, and welfare has not required adult recipients to work. The most effective social strategy to appear recently is tougher work requirements in welfare;

these raise work levels among the dependent as nothing else has.

Neither attitudes nor institutions, however, are much studied by today's poverty researchers. The first generation of poverty experts in the 1960s spoke of a "culture of poverty," but that approach became too sensitive following the notorious controversy in 1965 over the "Moynihan report," a government study by now–Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, which pointed out the family problems of blacks. Poverty research and policy development has since been dominated by economists, who attribute the same maximizing psychology to the poor as they do to stockbrokers on Wall Street, thus obfuscating the distinctive, defeated mentality of the ghetto. Public institutions also get little attention because one cannot analyze them quantitatively as easily as social and economic variables. The study of what used to be called "public administration" thus commands little prestige in the public policy graduate schools, which employ many of the authors represented in these and similar volumes.

The researchers also have come to stand between government and an effective social policy. The experts have such prestige that Washington can hardly imagine inaugurating any social policy that does not reflect their agenda. Government cannot simply proceed against the misbehaviors, such as crime or nonwork, that are the initial causes of most poverty today. Policy must be justified by "studies," which typically focus on determinants that are more impersonal, particularly adverse economic conditions and insufficient government training programs, support services, or income benefits. Poverty researchers are seldom guilty of overt political bias, though most of them are liberals who would like a more generous policy toward the poor. The slant appears, rather, in the questions addressed by research, which has persistently focused on "structural" determinants of poverty lying outside the poor themselves.

Unfortunately, this approach has achieved little. In the 1960s, experts designed special education and training programs intended to enhance the skills of the poor, but evaluations found that they had only limited impact. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, economists devoted enormous energy to measuring and reducing the "disincentives" that welfare regulations created against employment, since recipients could not take jobs without having their grants reduced. But studies–including massive government experiments in guaranteed income–showed the effects on work effort to be remarkably slight. Government income transfers such as Social Security have reduced poverty, but mainly among the elderly. To give more cash to younger adults and families is politically unacceptable as long as the parents do not work more steadily.

More recently, most antipoverty research has been oriented to verifying the theories of William Julius Wilson, a prominent sociologist, that the ghetto is poor because it is cut off from mainstream society. Wilson believes that there is a "mismatch" between the jobs offered by the economy and the jobless poor. Supposedly, the former exist mostly in the suburbs and demand advanced education; the latter dwell mostly in the inner city and are unskilled. Secondarily, there are "concentration effects," a tendency for aberrant behaviors such as crime and illegitimacy to flourish in the ghetto because of its isolation from mainstream society. Unfortunately, as several papers in the current volumes report, there is more evidence for the second of those ideas than the first. The inner city is not barred from the economy, but to some extent its problems are feeding on themselves.

Poverty research also tends to isolate policy deliberations from politics by wrapping them in a cocoon of statistical methods that only trained social scientists can fathom. Government analysts have to translate the research for the elected and appointed leaders who make policy, which sometimes makes those officials the puppets of their advisors. Policymaking based on research takes on an elitist cast, removed from the perceptions and desires of ordinary people and those who represent them. It tends also to be irresolute, because experts seldom agree about how to interpret the evidence.

On all these counts, the technical sort of research reported in these books, impressive though it is, should have less influence than it does. Social science needs more inquiry into poverty culture and institutions, even though they cannot be studied as rigorously as social conditions. Government needs a more practical, less academic social policy aimed at the deficiencies of public authority–law enforcement, school standards, and work requirements–that the research itself suggests are central to poverty today.

Before the age of quantified research began about 1960, government knew far less about poverty than it does today but was probably more effective in dealing with it. The focus was not on curing adverse social conditions but on ensuring–through education and employment–that all Americans made use of the opportunities available to them. Thirty years of poverty research have taught us much, but have not improved on that prescription.

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