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Testing the Underclass Concept by Surveying Attitudes and Behavior

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Recent interest in the problems of an underclass has highlighted deficiencies in the conceptual understanding of the term and empirical investigation into its dynamics. This research note describes the current definition of the concept and presents recent empirical tests of it. By presenting available survey data sets that can identify underclass attitudes, values and behavior, the note refines the deliberations on measurement. Two underclass groups, welfare recipients and criminals, are used to illustrate the methodology.

Defining the underclass, understanding the conditions of its evolution and maintenance, as well as its size in different areas across the country and in different neighborhoods are highlighted as important contemporary national policy concerns (*The Federal Register*, March 28, 1988). This paper describes current definitions of the underclass, presents recent empirical efforts to measure it, and identifies available surveys on welfare recipients and criminals, two underclass groups described by Auletta (1981, 1982) and Wilson (1987).

The paper contributes to the measurement deliberations. It points out that attitudes and values are integral to definitions of underclass, yet they have been ignored in recent studies. It describes empirical possibilities for measurement of attitudes and values as well as behavior to answer questions of keen

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interest to policy makers: (a) Is there an underclass?, (b) What are the conditions of entry to and exit from the underclass?, and (c) How big is the underclass?

From a policy perspective, the concept of the underclass is intellectually attractive because it is capable of provoking bipartisan support to put a dusty issue back on the social policy agenda (Nathan, 1986). When Auletta introduced the term underclass in his article in *The New Yorker* magazine (1981), he prompted a renewed debate on the culture of poverty. Wilson's (1987) recent book has forwarded the policy debate and further legitimated the term. However, considering the amount of theoretical and ideological interest that the proposition stimulated, empirical research on the concept is relatively modest.

There are exceptions. Particularly noteworthy is the research of Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) and Hughes (1988). By operationally defining the underclass using behavioral rather than income criteria, these researchers follow the intellectual tradition forwarded by Auletta (1982), Nathan and Carson (1982), and Wilson (1987). Empirically, their measurement strategies rely on census tract data to describe the underclass by the density of deviant behavior. Illustratively, Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) estimate the size of the underclass—880 census tracts that contain 2.5 million people or about 1 per cent of the total United States population. Using demographic data, they created measures in order to calculate the mean on proportions of high school drop outs, prime age males not regularly attached to the work force, welfare recipients, and female heads in each census tract in the United States. Census tracts one standard deviation above the mean were defined as underclass. Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) and Hughes (1989) both demonstrate that poverty is not synonymous with underclass, although there is some overlap especially in extremely poor neighborhoods. In fact, 39 percent of all underclass tracts are not in areas of extreme poverty, according to Ricketts and Sawhill (1988).

Actually identifying geographical areas containing a high density of social problems is useful from an epidemiological perspective. Wilson (1987), in fact, defines the underclass in terms of social problem density and argues that the density of problems leads to the development of norms for deviant

behavior. The norms, he argues, have deleterious effects on the structure of neighborhoods, making the neighborhoods increasingly homogeneous, isolating, and accepting of deviance.

Auletta (1982) identifies particular groups as underclass: street criminals, hustlers living in the underground economy, mothers on welfare, and the traumatized (homeless, former mental patients, alcoholics, addicts, bag ladies, derelicts). Unlike Wilson (1989), Auletta is less concerned about geographic density as he is about the attitudes, values, and lack of skills that correspond with out-of-the-mainstream behavior across different groups. Presenting us with a focus on behavior, he asks the following question: What is common about these groups? His answer, based on his nonrandom and admittedly small sample, is that they lack social skills necessary for integration in the society, have a different value system, and are alienated from the social structure. Auletta's journalistic attempt to describe commonalities among these people represents a good beginning — a beginning that can be improved upon empirically and substantively.

What is called for is a larger scale empirical test of the underclass propositions forwarded by Auletta (1981, 1982) and Wilson (1987). For policy purposes, it is not unimportant to determine whether and to what extent certain kinds of behavior are associated with certain kinds of antecedent social conditions, including neighborhood underclass composition, and attitudes, including normative attitudes.

This paper is a review and evaluation of surveys which could be used to investigate empirically the structure and dynamics of the underclass. The review focuses on two underclass groups — welfare recipients and criminals. In particular, it operationalizes the underclass, and identifies data sets which singly, or in combination, may be useful to test the underclass idea through the survey method to understand and describe the dynamics of underclass status.

Problems in the Survey of the Underclass

The survey method, a quantitative approach capable of uncovering covariation in behaviors, attitudes, and social conditions, has several drawbacks. Sampling procedures depend on

the stability of the sample population, and underclass populations are likely to be transient. The survey method depends on subject compliance, either through questionnaires or interviews. Potential respondents in underclass groups may not want to comply for a variety of reasons: feelings of invasion of privacy, fear of retribution for information given or general mistrust of the intentions of the researchers. In addition, problems in literacy or ability to understand survey questions may influence potential respondents' decision to participate.

Additionally, the effectiveness of the survey method depends on the organization of the research operation. Interviews can be gained or lost as a function of the research group's adaptability to securing interviews with underclass groups, for examples, by paying for interview time and travel costs, and conducting interviews in the natural environment or an easily accessible neutral location.

Several people who are involved in studying underclass groups (Jackson, Tucker, & Bowman, 1982; Weiss, 1977) have reported a number of such problems. In the study of the underclass, the problem of actually locating the sample, once drawn, is of particular concern. Nonresponse bias threatens the reliability of the findings, and the high costs of locating subjects are of great concern to a research endeavor concerned with the underclass (Lerman & Pottick, 1988; Montero, 1977; Myers, 1977; Schwartz, 1970).

To study the underclass, it makes sense to begin with a group of people who are seen as out-of-the-mainstream and study the nature and course of their social condition. Focusing on groups that have been defined in terms of their *behavior* has advantages. Carson (1983, for instance, argues that by focusing on behavior, theorists and researchers from a variety of disciplines can investigate the concept using common language. Focusing on the *behavioral patterns* of the underclass can be useful to determine how certain kinds of conditions lead to certain behaviors — such as entering out-of-the-mainstream subgroups or leaving them. Criminals and welfare recipients are chosen for study in this paper because they represent groups on which surveys have been conducted. Moreover, they represent groups on which policy decisions currently are being made.

All of the data sets to follow can be acquired by interested researchers. Specific detail of purposes, sampling, methodology, variable domains, and representative publications by program researchers is available on request from the author.

A Review of Potentially Useful Surveys

Is there an underclass?

The question of whether there is an underclass as a function of social conditions, values and attitudes requires analysis *across* underclass groups. Data which describe psychological variables (attitudes, values, motivation), behavioral variables (frequency of out-of-the-mainstream behavior) and social-situational variables (school conditions, age, education, income, marital and parental statuses, and occupational history) for each of two underclass groups would provide a foundation for beginning to understand if there are any commonalities in social conditions or personal experience between the groups.

Since the question requires only a snapshot to be taken of the underclass groups at a given point in time, cross-sectional data rather than longitudinal or panel data, are sufficient. Investigators traditionally have not explored these groups simultaneously, so patterns across groups that may have policy implications remain undetected.

There are several data sets which have variables which are comparable, use similar methodologies, and contain at least some identical measures. Listed below are several potential survey organizations with data tapes available for interested researchers to analyze.

1. Rand Corporation Habitual Criminals Program (1974–present) Principal Investigator, J. Petersilia.
2. The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Birth Cohort (1972–present); Principal Investigator, M. Wolfgang.
3. Iowa Urban Community Research Center, Racine, Wisconsin Birth Cohort Studies (1974–present); Principal Investigator, L. W. Shannon.
4. The University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Working Welfare Women and their Families (1983–84); Principal Investigator, R. C. Sarri.

5. Harvard University, Murray Center, Stress and Families Project, Principal Investigator, D. Belle.

To take a snapshot of *each* underclass group with these data could uncover commonalities in the social conditions, attitudes, and values that predict variation within each group. The nature of the variation could be compared across groups. The questions could be phrased in ways familiar to researchers interested in gender or racial differences: What are the similar and different predictors of the same outcomes for distinctly different groups? Quite acceptable would be to analyze separately the two populations — criminal and welfare recipients, with an eye to understanding the commonalities and differences.

What are the conditions of entry to and exit from the underclass?

Survey methods vary in their ability to answer questions of entry into and exit from any group. Panel data, where respondents act as their own controls, are the best to understand changes over time. Longitudinal data are the next best, limited only by the possibility of sampling error due to cross-sectional sample selection and comparison. Cross-sectional data, the least expensive to collect, are the least adequate to answer the question because researchers must rely on retrospective accounts of past behavior to understand changes.

Potentially useful panel/longitudinal studies are ones conducted at the following:

1. Iowa Urban Community Research Center, Racine, Wisconsin Birth Cohort Studies (1974–present); Principal Investigator, L. W. Shannon.
2. The Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Causes and Cures of Welfare (1978–1981); Principal Investigator, L. Goodwin.
3. The University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Panel Study of Income Dynamics; Principal Investigator, J. L. Morgan.

Change could be studied within a particular underclass group or between two different underclass groups. Because researchers studying criminals and welfare recipients all focus on *behavior*, these researchers traditionally have been interested in examining the predictors of changes in behavior over time. The data sets would allow one to compare change relationships

discovered for critical and comparable variables through multivariate regression analysis in two different underclass groups. Focusing on the conditions under which "within group" change occurs across different groups could be useful to predict common characteristics of the underclass for potential social policy interventions.

How big is the underclass?

How widespread the underclass condition is and where it is geographically concentrated are important concerns for social policy analysts. As Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) and Hughes (1989) ably have demonstrated, census tract data can be analyzed to uncover the density of social problems in particular geographical areas. Census tract data also can be used in conjunction with survey data sets. Several investigators have merged census tract information onto the data files:

1. The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Birth Cohort Studies; Principal Investigator, M. Wolfgang.
2. Iowa Urban Community Research Center, Racine, Wisconsin Birth Cohort Studies; Principal Investigator, L. W. Shannon.
3. The University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Panel Study of Income Dynamics; Principal Investigator, J. L. Morgan.

The birth cohort studies can track changes in the distribution of attitudes, values, and behaviors over time. Neighborhood social conditions can be investigated using the detailed measures in the census tract data. From a policy perspective, systematic variations in attitudes, values, and behaviors as a function of neighborhood demographics could allow us to locate high risk geographic areas and target service accordingly. From a theoretical perspective, the demonstration of the types of impact of neighborhood demographics on attitudes, values, and behaviors is a test of the propositions set forth by Wilson (1987).

The Panel Study of Income Dynamics includes welfare recipients in its subsample of 1900 low income families, and provides detailed information on attitudes, behavior, work history through intensive interviewing. It has a variety of variables to use to uncover determinants of changes in the number of

welfare recipients and low-income families. With the use of census tract data, investigators can begin to understand the effects of neighborhood on attitudes, values, and future behavior.

Summary and Implications

The observations of Auletta (1981, 1982) and Wilson (1987) have inspired a continued inquiry on the structure, dynamics, and size of the underclass in American society. This review of the survey research literature on the underclass, with specific reference to criminals and welfare recipients, represents an attempt to locate available studies which could be used to investigate empirically the nature, dynamics, and size of the underclass through large scale survey data.

Several potentially useful studies were uncovered. Because they were not designed specifically to study the underclass, they have limitations, however. Of most concern is the different choice of variables that investigators interested in criminals and welfare recipients, respectively, include. Studying the relationships among social conditions, attitudes, values, and behaviors within two different underclass groups could serve as a beginning effort to understand the similarities and differences between the groups. This type of analytic strategy has been used profitably in the literature on race and gender differences.

The use of census tract information to predict the size of certain underclass groups across the country is a provocative possibility to identify high-risk areas in the nation. If we can identify the nature of the underclass, its dynamics, and its size — that is, if we can describe the conditions which create out-of-the-mainstream behavior in different underclass groups — we can begin to design and test programs aimed at modifying the conditions under which the behavior is maintained.

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