Research Reports

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"The Underclass Revisited."

The AEI Press, c/o Publisher Resources Inc., 1224 Heil Quaker Blvd., P.O. Box 7001,
La Vergne, Tenn. 37086–7001, 43 pp. $9.95.
Author: *Charles Murray*

With the crime rate down, welfare rolls shrinking, and the labor market tight, the underclass is out of the spotlight. But it has been largely untouched by these positive social trends, reports Murray, author of the influential *Losing Ground* (1984).

By *underclass*, he explains, he means the millions of people—chiefly urban, black, and low-income—who are cut off from mainstream America, "living a life in which . . . productive work, family, [and] community . . . exist in fragmented and corrupted forms."

The falling crime rate—down by 17 percent nationally between 1991 and 1997—has mainly been achieved, he writes, "not by socializing the underclass but by putting large numbers of its members behind bars." During those years, the number of people in prison or on probation or parole increased by 25 percent, to 5.7 million.

Despite an economy that has employers begging for help, Murray says, 23 percent of young black males not in school, the military, or prison were jobless in 1997 and not even looking for work.

Out-of-wedlock births, at least, are not on the rise. The proportion of black children who are born to unwed mothers has even dropped slightly, from a high of 70 percent in 1994 to 69 percent in 1997—still disturbingly high. And in 1997, 26 percent of white children were born to unmarried women, "a figure comparable to the black ratio in the mid-1960s."

It is still uncertain, Murray says, what the slimming of the welfare rolls since the 1996 reform (by 38 percent for blacks and 33 percent for whites, as of mid-1997) means for the underclass. However, unofficial data reported in mid-1998, he says, suggest that many of the women leaving welfare "would not have spent much time in the system anyway and are not part of the underclass." Moreover, "no . . . body of research demonstrates that it is good for children when a single mother works—rather the opposite."

"Economically," Murray writes, "underclass neighborhoods are probably somewhat more prosperous than they were during the recession of 1991–1992." However, it is "not at all clear" that there has been any social improvement. The infant mortality rate fell sharply between 1982 and 1997, but the incidence of very-low-birthweight babies (under 3.3 pounds) increased by 38 percent among blacks and 22 percent among whites. Despite improved medical care, it appears that more and more women "are getting pregnant and then failing to take even rudimentary care of themselves."

"World Population Beyond Six Billion."

Population Reference Bureau, 1875 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Ste. 520,
Washington, D.C. 20009–5728, 44 pp. $7.
Authors: *Alene Gelbard, Carl Haub, and Mary M. Kent*

In the century now ending, the population of the world has tripled in size, from fewer than two billion in 1900 to more than six billion—a landmark theoretically reached on October 12, according to the Population Reference Bureau. Life expectancy has increased by two-thirds, and the dire predictions of Thomas Malthus and his successors have not come true.

Nevertheless, say the authors, all affiliated

with the Population Reference Bureau, more than one-fifth of the world's people live in poverty, subsisting on less than $1 a day. Many specialists predict dramatic declines in life expectancy in parts of sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the spread of AIDS and HIV.

In the United States, life expectancy is now 76 years, compared with 68 years at midcentury and 47 years in 1900. Americans and others in developed countries also have had low rates of fertility in recent decades. In not one major industrialized country today do women, on average, have more than two children. In nearly all of Europe and Japan, population growth has come to a halt. Indeed, in 14 European countries, there is natural decrease—fewer births than deaths each year.

Less developed countries, however, experienced rapid population growth during the last half-century—from 1.7 billion people in 1950 to 4.7 billion in 1998. The growth would have been even greater had fertility rates not begun to fall—from an average of 5.9 children per woman to three in Latin America and the Caribbean, for example.

But fertility rates remain high in Africa, the authors say, where "widespread poverty, high rates of illiteracy, largely rural populations, and strong traditional preferences for large families do not favor a rapid decline." A high rate also persists in the Middle East, though the situation varies from country to country. In recent decades, Arab women, who traditionally wed in their teens, have been waiting longer—with the median age of marriage in Saudi Arabia, for instance, advancing from 16 to 21.

The world's population is expected to keep growing, at least for the next few decades. But United Nations projections for 2050 range widely—from a decline to four billion to an increase to 27 billion.