

## **‘Problem families’ and their history since 1880**

**by John Welshman**

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### **Executive summary**

- The chronology of the underclass debate in the United Kingdom and the United States between 1880 and the present reveals that there have been eight major reconstructions, from the ‘social residuum’ of the 1880s to ‘social exclusion’ and ‘troubled families’ in 2012.
- The underclass concept has a number of underlying strands; at different periods, individuals and organisations have played an important defining role, as have newspapers and magazines.
- The way that the concept has been defined in different periods has said as much about broader trends in society and the economy as about the underclass itself; there have been both discontinuities and continuities over time.
- While there have been some periods when no underclass concept has been evident, these have been remarkably brief; the concept offers insights into both wartime and theories about policy transfer.
- If some of the early ideas had little impact on policy-making, over time the ideas have become of more interest to policy-makers, as debates about behaviour have become more central to public policy.
- The concept has proved resilient, for a range of reasons, and its future is likely to be as interesting as its past.

### **What is the chronology of the ‘underclass’ debate in the United Kingdom and the United States, from 1880 to the present?**

Historical research offers important insights into current Government efforts to tackle what are termed ‘troubled’ or ‘problematic’ families. For there is no doubt that there have been a series of similar labels, both in terms of earlier antecedents and in the particular period from 1880 to the present day. Ideas of the deserving and undeserving poor were evident in the early modern period, and are arguably timeless. But in the modern period there have been eight major reconstructions. In the 1880s, social investigators such as Charles Booth became concerned about the emergence of a social residuum in London. In turn, this was replaced by anxieties about the ‘unemployable’ in the writings of William Beveridge and the Webbs in the early 1900s. While this language was less evident in the social surveys published in the first decade of the twentieth century, the 1920s and early 1930s were characterised by the search for a ‘social problem group’. In the early postwar period, this metamorphosed into the

‘problem family’ notion of the 1950s, which cast a powerful spell over volunteers involved in the Family Service Units, public health doctors, and some social workers.

The fourth reconstruction of the concept was in terms of Oscar Lewis’s notion of the ‘culture of poverty’ in the 1960s. Interestingly, it was not the culture of poverty but the British theory of the problem family that was more influential on Sir Keith Joseph as Secretary of State for Social Services when he came up with the ‘cycle of deprivation’ in a 1972 speech. But it was again the United States that was the real driving force behind the concept of the underclass in the 1980s. At the same time, the idea of an underclass also became attractive to observers of economic change and social polarisation in Britain. Finally, from the mid-1990s, the theory of social exclusion has attempted to shed its links with these earlier labels, but nevertheless continues to have echoes with the underclass discourse. Continuities are also evident in specific aspects of policy on child health, most obviously in the way that the phrase ‘cycle of deprivation’ continues to be used in relation to child poverty and the Sure Start initiative for under-fives. And as has already been noted, the continuities are very much alive in Government initiatives around troubled or problematic families.

### **Which individuals and groups have been doing the defining?**

While it is comparatively easy to trace this process, though requiring some fascinating historical detective work, it is more difficult to account for its longevity as a recurring phenomenon. It is important to distinguish underclass stereotypes from related, but more general, ideas about the deserving and undeserving poor, about unemployment and public attitudes towards scroungers, and about behaviour more generally. As John Macnicol has previously argued, underclass concepts have a number of different strands:

1. One is the way that they have been used to signify and denote the alleged behavioural inadequacies of the poor, whether an inability to form attachments to other individuals and agencies, a failure to plan for the future, or a tendency to engage in crime and other forms of antisocial behaviour.
2. Second, there is the use of the phrase to denote the ways in which wider structural processes, whether technological and economic change, unemployment, racial and social segregation in cities, or the move to a post-industrial economy, have contributed to a situation in which groups with poor access to education and skills risk being left behind.
3. Third is the recurring belief in inter-generational continuities, whether of cultural aspirations and habits, or in terms of poverty and teenage pregnancy.
4. Fourth is the belief that the underclass exists separately from the working class, as a subset or what has been called the lower class.
5. Fifth is the combination of rhetorical symbolism and empirical complexity, where the term ‘underclass’ has served as a powerful metaphor for social change on the one hand, but where its supporters have also searched – without much success – for empirical proof of its existence.

Historical investigation illustrates marked differences in these concepts and in the individuals or organisations that have used them. In many cases it has been individuals who have had a prominent role, such as Charles Booth in the 1880s, Oscar Lewis in the 1960s, and Sir Keith Joseph in the 1970s, though it has been more central to the thinking of some than to others. At other times, voluntary organisations and professional groups have been more prominent, such as the Eugenics Society in the 1930s, the Women’s Group on Public Welfare in the 1940s, and the Family Service Units of the 1950s. For these individuals and organisations, underclass stereotypes have had important scapegoating and legitimising functions. It is only

more recently that Government has taken a more active role in sponsoring research, and interestingly the studies sponsored by the Department of Health and Social Security, Social Science Research Council Working Party on Transmitted Deprivation (1974-82) in fact found little evidence to support the original cycle of deprivation hypothesis. The involvement of the Social Exclusion Unit and Treasury in more recent debates about social exclusion suggests a move away from individuals and voluntary organisations to more centralised policy research processes, illustrating how arguments about behaviour have become more central to public policy.

The American sociologist Herbert Gans has argued that the ‘label formation’ process includes a number of interested parties – ‘label makers’ (both alarmists and counters), ‘label users’, ‘legitimators’, the labelled themselves, and the romanticisers who revive old labels. What support does historical research offer for the framework that Gans has proposed? It certainly is the case, as has been suggested in the American context, that terms follow a trajectory of emergence, popularity, the acquiring of a pejorative character, and then a falling out of favour. The role of the ‘alarmists’ does appear critical, since discussions of this type are invariably provoked by alarm about the characteristics of the relevant groups and its members. Similarly the role of the ‘legitimators’ is also important, although they can include academics, professionals, journalists, and politicians. The role of the popular media shows some important continuities, wider changes in its technology and scale notwithstanding. In the 1880s it was contemporary periodicals and newspapers that were crucial to the propagation of the concept of the social residuum. Similarly a hundred years later, in the 1980s, it was again magazines and newspapers that were crucial to the rise of interest in the underclass, through articles by the journalist Ken Auletta in the *New Yorker*, and the way that the *Sunday Times* sponsored the visits of Charles Murray to Britain. In between, the role of the media was much more muted and the influence of the ideas themselves was limited to a professional rather than a popular arena. The role of the ‘romanticisers’ seems less evident – once concepts have dropped out of favour and popular usage it is difficult for them to make a comeback.

### **Is it basically the same idea that has been invented and re-invented in a linear process?**

Perhaps the most important aspect of this story is the question of whether there is sufficient similarity or linearity between these related concepts to support the argument that there has been a successive reinvention of the underclass concept over the past 132 years. Clearly the economic, political, and social landscape within which these ideas have evolved has changed dramatically. The way that the concept has been defined in different periods has said as much about broader trends as about the underclass itself: in the economy and labour market, in terms of the role of women and the emphasis placed on the family, with regard to migration and urbanisation, and in terms of ideas about behaviour and agency. At various times it has been joblessness, household squalor, mental health (especially mental deficiency or learning disability), long-term poverty, illegitimacy, and crime that have been drawn into underclass stereotypes. Ideas of class formation and biological determinism have played into this, as well as eugenics and a vague and indefinable fear of the ‘other’. The social problem group of the 1930s represented a medicalisation of the concept of the residuum, while it was the idea of ‘transmission’, more usually associated with infectious disease, which was central to the cycle of deprivation research of the 1970s.

Nevertheless, there are also the striking continuities between these ideas – in terms of the alleged physical and mental characteristics of the poor, the stress placed on inter-generational continuities, and the focus on behavioural inadequacies. Arguably most marked has been the

emphasis on the 'costs' of these individuals or groups to the taxpayer and the state, namely the perceived costs of dependency to charity and social welfare, and with regard to institutions such as prisons, hospitals, asylums, and schools. And there has been a clear desire to quantify the size of the 'problem'. In his book *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890), William Booth argued that the 'submerged tenth' comprised around 3m people, or one-tenth of the 31m people in Great Britain at that time. Since then, the underclass has usually been perceived as the 'bottom' ten per cent. The Government's emphasis on 120,000 problem families is thus only the most recent example of this phenomenon.

### **How and why do these concepts emerge?**

It is arguable that there are chronological gaps in the history, periods when no underclass concept was available or taken up by social investigators. At these times, a more structural interpretation of poverty and unemployment seemed to be dominant. These include the period from the outbreak of the First World War to the late 1920s; the shorter period of 1937–43; and the period from 1972 to the early 1980s, when social scientists resisted the imposition of the cycle of deprivation hypothesis. Some of the chronological stepping-stones were more about processes than the setting out of the parameters of a social group, most obviously in the case of the cycle of deprivation, and less obviously with the culture of poverty, and the processes by which one concept replaces another remain unclear. But what is perhaps more noticeable is that these periods are remarkably brief. Above all, the argument that the postwar period was dominated by an emphasis on structural factors, and by economic determinism on the part of social researchers, or by 'knightly' behaviour by professionals in the public sector, seems difficult to sustain given the focus on families deemed to be 'problem'. Rather it appears that at most times in the period since 1880, there has been a variant of the underclass theory available to researchers, although of course the scale and influence of the ideas have varied greatly. This, in turn, problematises attempts to identify shifts (as has been suggested of Rowntree's 1901 survey of York) between behavioural and structural interpretations.

If we focus on those periods when the ideas appear to undergo a period of transition, contradictions emerge. Gareth Stedman Jones has proposed, for example, that the idea of the social residuum evaporated during the First World War, when the advent of full employment suggested that those previously deemed unemployable had never really existed. But conversely, it was during the Second World War that the notion of the problem family emerged to replace the theory of the social problem group. We can date the timing of this with some precision – to the *Our Towns* report, published by the Women's Group on Public Welfare in March 1943. Similarly the problem family undermines the argument that underclass stereotypes are most likely to emerge in periods of economic dislocation, when attention tends to become focused on the behavioural inadequacies of a 'reserve army of labour'. In fact, the problem family notion, although never a major aspect of discussions of social policy, coexisted in 1950s Britain with full employment, economic optimism, and a strong belief in the nuclear family.

The history of the concept of the underclass offers an interesting perspective on debates about policy transfer between the US and the UK. The current literature on policy transfer stresses the need to consider not just what is transferred, but the motivations of those involved. The history of the underclass concept shows the complexities inherent in policy transfer. It would seem at first glance that Britain has been more influenced by the US than vice versa. In the early 1900s, eugenicists in Britain were well-aware of the American studies of the Jukes and Kallikak families, held to represent inherited criminality and mental deficiency respectively.

The 1980s underclass debate is perhaps the clearest example, with the early debates occurring in the US, and with one mechanism being quite clear – an invitation that the *Sunday Times Magazine* extended to Charles Murray in 1989. But in other cases, there has been considerable resistance to American ideas. In the late 1960s, for example, British social researchers were resistant to the notion of the culture of poverty, apart from the creation of Educational Priority Areas and Community Development Projects, and it is clear that Sir Keith Joseph's cycle of deprivation owed much more to his earlier interest in the idea of the problem family. The contemporary emphasis on social exclusion originally owed more to ideas from across the Channel than to ideas from across the Atlantic. It would seem, therefore, that while there are similarities in timing between the invention of underclass concepts in the UK and the US, the form that they took was often very different, reflecting the different histories, ethnic mix, and political cultures of the two countries. Most evident was the much stronger connection with race that was forged with the underclass concept in the US.

### **What is the impact of these concepts, if any, on policy-making?**

Although assessing 'influence' is notoriously difficult, it is also worth asking what practical impact these ideas had on actual policymaking. The different concepts were undoubtedly of considerable interest to social commentators, but did they actually influence real policymaking on the ground? In the case of the early concepts, there seems to have been little direct influence. Neither the theory of the social residuum, nor the idea of the unemployable, nor the notion of the social problem group appears to have influenced policy directly. Some of the ideas were relatively short-lived, and in any case attempts at legislation, whether to segregate mental defectives or to introduce voluntary sterilisation, were unsuccessful. Much later, in the case of the cycle of deprivation, the theory was viewed with hostility by social science researchers, and there was a marked disjunction between the ideas as expressed by Sir Keith Joseph and what the researchers actually found. In the 1980s it seems that the underclass concept again had little direct influence on policy – in Britain, for instance, the failure to find empirical support for the existence of an underclass weakened its claims to exert a direct influence on policy.

In other cases there has been a clearer link between the ideas and particular policy initiatives. In the case of the unemployable, there was a broad link with policies on the administration of unemployment relief in the interwar period, which it has been argued was dominated by the 'search for the scrounger'. Moreover very similar debates were evident some fifty years later, in the 1980s, when the renewal of debates about the 'workshy' had a powerful influence on the 1989 Social Security Act. The idea of the problem family was central to the identity of the Family Service Units, and there was a direct link too with local authorities, first through local Health Departments and then in the 1960s through Children's Departments. It has been argued too, that the culture of poverty theory did influence the American 'War on Poverty', and British equivalents were apparent in the Educational Priority Areas and Community Development Projects. Furthermore, while the underclass notion was arguably less influential, the Charles Murray analysis, on the allegedly detrimental effects of benefits on behaviour, was of considerable interest to policymakers. Finally, the concept of social exclusion had an important influence on New Labour policy, and indeed the idea of a cycle of deprivation was reborn in relation to the Sure Start initiative. Thus as social scientists have become more concerned to unravel the relative influences of agency and structure in the causation of poverty and deprivation, governments have shown increasing interest in ways of influencing behaviour.

### **Conclusion: why has the concept been so resilient?**

What is apparent is that the concept of the underclass has been periodically invented and re-invented in the UK and the US over the past 132 years. The persistence of the underclass and related ideas suggests that this process of word substitution is likely to survive and perhaps flourish in the future. There are several reasons for the apparent resilience of the concept. First, the unresolved issue of the relative importance of behavioural and structural factors in the causation of poverty and deprivation. It is in part this that gives the concept much of its ambiguity and flexibility. Second, the relatively early stage (at least in Britain) of such potentially important data sources as longitudinal and panel data on poverty dynamics and income mobility. Third, the continued likely pace of technological change, globalisation, and economic uncertainty which together are likely to continue to raise the spectre, both real and imagined, of groups perceived as ‘left behind’ or ‘cut off’ from the mainstream working class. And fourth, the value of the concept as a convenient symbol and metaphor for fears and anxieties whose empirical reality remains unproven. While there has already been some repackaging of terms such as ‘troubled families’, the exact forms that these labels will take can only be guessed at. But together these forces should ensure that the future of the underclass concept will be as interesting as its past.

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#### **Further reading**

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#### **About the author**

John Welshman is Senior Lecturer in the History Department at Lancaster University, UK. He has published widely on the history of the concept of the underclass. His most recent book is *Titanic: The Last Night of a Small Town* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012).  
j.welshman@lancaster.ac.uk

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