

A contextual definition of the underclass

by Martha Van Haitsma

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Assessing whether or not an underclass exists, how it came to be, and what policies are likely to affect it all turn on how the term “underclass” is defined. The underclass has been variously defined by any or all of four characteristics: chronic poverty; nonnormative behavior with respect to income generation and family formation; spatial concentration of such poverty and/or behavior; and intergenerational transmission of such poverty and/or behavior.² The manner in which the underclass is defined will affect research findings and policy prescriptions. A useful definition should at a minimum distinguish the underclass from the poverty population in general and establish the manner in which this group is a class—a category of persons with structurally similar socioeconomic positions.

Long-term poverty is clearly central to the concept of an underclass. Both humanitarian and policy concerns point to those suffering chronic rather than temporary poverty, as they are most in need and most costly to the system. Defining the underclass by duration of poverty alone, however, is unsatisfactory. How are we to know in advance who among the poor will remain poor for long periods of time and who will escape poverty relatively quickly? Some criteria are needed to distinguish between the structural positions of the underclass and other poor persons at any given time.

Defining the underclass by individual behavior alone also has problems. How, for example, does a wealthy celebrity who becomes a single mother share class status with a poor single mother on welfare? Yet both have borne children out of wedlock, a behavioral criterion associated with the underclass. Should teenaged drug pushers from middle-class suburban homes be classified with those from ghetto neighborhoods? Not only is it theoretically implausible to group persons together as a class on the basis of behaviors which arise from and lead to different socioeconomic circumstances, it is nonsensical as a guide to policy formulation. Yet behaviors such as criminal involvement and unwed motherhood, which result from or contribute to extended spells of economic disadvantage, must be dealt with, for they are part of the problem and/or part of the explanation for the phenomenon of the underclass.

Spatial concentration of poverty in and of itself need not constitute a problem distinct from general poverty. The neighborhoods in which people live do alter the mix of opportunities and difficulties they face, but not everyone in an area of concentrated poverty belongs to the same socioeconomic class. Spatial concentration cannot be ignored, however, as it constitutes part of the mechanism that links nonnormative³ patterns of income generation and family formation to chronic poverty. When an area is largely populated by chronically poor persons, the opportunities for climbing out of poverty are diminished.⁴ Residents of such areas have weak links to job networks, and therefore find alternate means of generating income. Higher rates of informal and illegal means of accruing income, as well as welfare use, strengthen networks of information tied to these avenues rather than to formal work. With few visible career prospects and few “marriageable” (i.e., stably employed)⁵ men, young women are more likely to opt for single motherhood as a route to adulthood. The spatial concentration of such behavior creates a normative environment conducive to further behavior of the same sort. Spatial concentration—geographical and occupational isolation from “mainstream” Americans—is crucial to conceptions of the underclass that include normative, subcultural components, but concentration alone is not sufficient.

Adding intergenerational transmission does not improve matters if we combine it merely with poverty or behavior. If only those among the poor whose parents were poor or whose children will also remain poor are members of the underclass, how is their position structurally distinct from those poor for whom this is not the case? And if daughters of single mothers are themselves more likely to become single mothers, what does it matter if they are not thereby disadvantaged?

All these indicators—chronic poverty, intergenerational poverty, patterns of generating income and patterns of family formation that differ from those of the middle class, and spatial concentration—offer clues that an underclass may exist, but none alone is sufficient to define it. The thread that ties the various indicators together is weak attachment to the formal labor market.⁶ Full-time work does not guarantee freedom from poverty in our society, but nonwork almost certainly does guarantee chronic poverty. Poverty accompanied by weak labor force attachment, as opposed to the poverty of the working poor, is likely to be accompanied by high rates of crime, teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock childbirth, welfare dependency, and single-parent households—social dislocations writers tend to associate with the underclass. Spatial concentration of poverty, welfare receipt and crime, and intergenerational transmission of culture or structural position all contribute to the social

context in which poverty may occur. When this context reinforces weak labor force attachment, an underclass can be said to exist.

I define the underclass, therefore, as those persons who are weakly connected to the formal labor force and whose social context tends to maintain or further weaken this attachment. This definition requires further elaboration of the terms “labor force attachment” and “social context.”

Defining labor force attachment

Like the concept of the underclass itself, labor force attachment has both normative and structural dimensions. The normative dimension concerns the legitimacy of the income.⁷ The structural dimension of labor force attachment is a measure of its stability: the variability in income flow, including probability of layoff or business failure. The less stable the flow, the more probable it is that a person will have to turn to other income sources over time. The lower the score on these dimensions, the more marginal the labor force attachment (see Table 1).

Marginal self-employment refers to such activities as selling television-repair services or car-repair services outside of formal business channels or selling things one has made or collected such as food, handicrafts, or scrap metal. Informal wage labor refers to day labor and informal contracts where the worker is paid cash. Both these activities are more legitimate than criminal activity, since they are illegal only in the sense that no taxes are paid. Also there is work input, often at very high levels. However, work of this kind is generally highly unstable. Seasonal work and part-time employment, because they occur in the regular economy, are more legitimate than informal wage labor or marginal self-

employment, but still have lower stability and legitimacy than year-round, full-time work. Formal self-employment may be more or less stable than full-time employment, depending on the nature of the work involved, the size of the firm, and so forth, but it is highly legitimate.

Nonwork sources of income can also be characterized as more or less legitimate, but in a social rather than legal sense. Socially legitimate income is that which has some direct or derivative link to the labor market or work effort. As discussed by McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Watson,⁸ direct labor force attachment involves the sale of one’s own labor, whereas derivative attachment involves either the presumed right of minors and spouses to the income of their parents and spouses or the presumed right of persons to collect benefits based on their previous work (e.g., unemployment insurance, social security, disability). Aid from private agencies such as churches and social service organizations is seldom linked to formal work effort, but may involve high levels of “volunteer” work in exchange for goods and/or services received. Similarly, aid from family and friends may involve a return of informal work in the form of child care or other services. Welfare is the nonwork income source least connected to the formal labor market.

Sources of nonwork income can additionally be divided into those which compete with formal employment and those which do not. Means-tested transfer programs compete with earned income and financial capital accumulation, since income and asset levels are used as eligibility criteria. Food pantries and soup kitchens do not usually screen their clients by income or asset levels, allowing persons at low-wage jobs to use such resources as supplements to rather than substitutes for earnings (see Table 2).

People may package together income from different sources and can achieve stronger labor force attachment by combining several weak-attachment types of source (multiple part-time jobs, for example). Diversification of income sources tends to raise the overall reliability of the income flow regardless of the mix.

Table 1

Labor-Force-Attachment Dimensions of Work Income

Type of Work	Legitimacy	Stability
Crime ^a	Very low	Varies
Marginal self-employment	Low to moderate	Low
Informal wage labor	Low to moderate	Low
Seasonal work	Moderate	Low to moderate
Part-time work	Moderate to high	Moderate to high
Formal self-employment	High	Varies
Full-time work	High	High

^aCareer criminals are excluded from consideration here.

Table 2

Labor-Force-Attachment Dimensions of Nonwork Income

Sources of Nonwork Income	Legitimacy	Complementarity with Formal Work
Interest/savings	High	Yes
Means-tested government transfers	Low	No
Government entitlements	Moderate to high	Varies
Aid from private agency	Varies	Yes
Aid from family or friends	High	Yes

When legitimate sources of income are unstable or insufficient, people look for ways to supplement or supplant them. To the extent that a person pursues a strategy for obtaining income that is not legitimate, is incompatible with legitimate methods, or is so unstable that less legitimate supplementary sources of income must be found, that person can be said to be weakly attached to the formal labor force.⁹

Defining the social context

By social context I mean the specific social structures in which an individual is embedded: household, neighborhood, and social network.¹⁰ The social contexts in which an underclass can arise are those which reinforce weak labor force attachment and impede movement toward stronger attachment. They are environments with few opportunities for stable and legitimate employment and many opportunities for other types of income-generating activities, particularly those which are incompatible with regular employment.

Access to regular employment includes knowledge about existing job opportunities, transportation to areas where jobs can be found—or affordable housing closer to the jobs—and whatever levels of schooling and training are needed to obtain the jobs. Contexts which reinforce strong rather than weak labor force attachment are those in which access to information about available jobs is high, access to formal or on-the-job-training is high, and either available jobs pay enough to support workers and their families above the poverty level or supplementary income is available which is compatible with regular work. Contexts which reinforce or encourage weak labor force attachment are those in which knowledge about and access to income strategies other than formal work are high, the predominant strategies are incompatible with regular work, and the most readily available work does not pay enough to support workers and their families above the poverty level and is unreliable and therefore likely to be augmented by nonwork strategies.

The household

An individual's household is the most immediate level of his or her social context. Household composition affects labor force attachment in two ways: First, household members can provide links to employment; they are the first-line social network. Second, the division of labor in a household influences the number of adults free to enter the paid labor force. Persons in households where others are employed stand a better chance of getting employment than persons in households with no employed members. Persons in households with more than one adult are more able to divide child-care and housekeeping duties so that at least one adult can seek outside employment.

The financial resources of the household also affect labor force attachment. If the household has no phone, prospective employers have no easy way to contact job applicants they wish to hire. If there is not access to a car, jobs not

located along reasonably safe public transportation routes may simply be out of reach. Home ownership can provide the equity needed to begin or expand a small business. And homeowners can rent out rooms as a source of income, a strategy fully compatible with formal employment.

The social network

Beyond the household, the next level of social context is the social network of exchange. Relevant network characteristics include its overall size, its quality, and the nature of the links. All else equal, a larger network is more likely to tap into useful job information than a smaller network. All else is seldom equal, however, so that network composition is crucial. Large or small, a network composed primarily of unemployed persons will not be a good source of job information and recommendations. The character of the ties binding network members is also important. Strong ties, such as those of kinship, typically carry greater obligation for mutual support than do those of friend or neighbor. At the same time, because strongly tied persons are likely to have the same sources of information about available jobs, they may not be as helpful to one another as more casual contacts, who can provide new information, more productive for job search.¹¹ Also, if a person is strongly tied to a group with few resources, the strength of the ties may have negative effects, since the network represents a set of obligations as well as a pool of resources.¹²

Network ties of kinship and friendship are important not only for obtaining jobs but also for retaining them. Workers are dependent on one another for on-the-job training and cooperation. New workers with prior ties to established workers are more likely than are those who lack such ties to get the kind of initial training and ongoing support they need to perform their jobs well.

Networks of social exchange may also indirectly affect employment by providing informal sources of financial and material support. Unlike welfare, informal aid from kin and friends is easily combined with earnings. Network members may exchange child care services, permitting greater opportunity for employment. Network support may also provide informal insurance, with mutual exchange ensuring that the risk of uneven income flows from unreliable jobs is more widely shared.

The neighborhood

The third level of social context is the neighborhood in which a person lives. Neighborhood effects include local employment opportunities—especially important for youth—public transportation links to other areas within the urban labor market, access to education and training programs, and the availability of supports such as health care, child care, food and clothing and other in-kind aid, and emergency financial aid from sources that are compatible with formal work. Information about different income strategies is transmitted in the course of daily life by incidental

observation and conversation as well as direct sharing and inquiry. Thus, in neighborhoods where levels of welfare use, informal work, and crime are high, even residents who engage in none of these activities may know quite a lot about how they are conducted. This knowledge broadens the range of options residents may consider when they are financially pressed and also lowers the cost of employing alternate income strategies.

Neighborhoods, households, and social networks can be separated for analytical purposes, but in reality they compose an interconnected whole. People live in households that are part of social networks and are located in neighborhoods. Households break up and recombine, yet members typically remain within the same social networks. Networks span neighborhoods, but may also be heavily shaped in terms of frequency of interaction and exchange by proximity of members.

Linking social context and labor force attachment

This overall web of social relations in which an individual is embedded has important effects on labor force attachment which are not fully captured by commonly measured individual-level variables such as age, education, language ability, and experience. Household and social network contexts may be thought of as portable resources attaching to individuals in a way that neighborhood contexts cannot. These resources bear directly on an individual's chances of success in generating income, just as do financial resources and human capital.

Harley Browning identifies four principal types of individual resource or capital: human capital, financial capital, social capital, and cultural capital.¹³ Human capital includes education, training, and experience; financial capital includes all assets such as savings, a home, a car, or a business; social capital includes bonds of obligation and exchange between people and households; and cultural capital includes "knowing the ropes" of a particular system—speaking the language, both literally and figuratively.

Each type of capital is more or less important to obtain income by one strategy or another. Knowing one's rights, where to go, and how to deal with bureaucracies are all important forms of cultural capital for obtaining public aid. Having employed friends who can recommend you for a job, inform you of openings, or even hire you is important social capital for finding formal employment. Financial capital is most important for self-employment. Some forms of capital are detrimental to particular income strategies and vice versa. Owning major assets such as a house makes it more difficult to qualify for public aid. At the same time, once the public aid strategy is in place, it becomes more difficult to accumulate assets.

Different kinds of capital not only influence the ability of a person to pursue one or another strategy to obtain income,

they also influence each other. All forms of capital are subject to depletion as well as accumulation.¹⁴ Money runs out, friends move away or relationships break off; skills become obsolete; the rules of the system change. All forms of capital require input to remain current. Maintenance of the social ties that constitute social capital requires some financial capital and can deplete savings. Financial resources facilitate maintenance and expansion of social ties of obligation and also increase access to education and training that result in expanded human capital. Education and work experience expand and enrich social networks. Knowledge about the private social service arena—where to get free clothes, food, help with utility bills, free or low-cost education and training—may enable a family to increase its financial capital.

In conceptualizing the social context surrounding labor force attachment, then, portable and nonportable aspects must be considered separately. Persons with high levels of social and cultural capital living in areas with poor local opportunities will be more likely to maintain high labor force attachment than persons in similar neighborhoods with low levels of social and cultural capital.

Advantages of a contextual definition of the underclass

I have defined the underclass as those persons with weak labor force attachment living in social contexts which preserve or further weaken this tenuous link to the formal economy. This definition addresses several problems that arise when alternate underclass indicators are used. First, chronic poverty can only be measured retrospectively. Current occupation and labor force status clearly affect a person's life chances, but some measure of probable duration in that status is needed to evaluate underclass membership. By looking at current labor force attachment *and social context*, chronic poverty can be measured prospectively in terms of probabilities. A person who is currently poor but in a social context which encourages strong labor force attachment is less likely to remain poor for long periods of time than a similar person in a context that reinforces weak labor force attachment. Thus, two currently poor persons with similar education and skills have different risks of falling into the underclass depending on their information networks, their likelihood of marriage, remarriage, or cohabitation with a stably employed partner, their neighborhoods, and their families.

Behavioral indicators of underclass membership raise objections on a number of grounds. First, focusing on behaviors shifts attention away from the reasons for those behaviors and can result in policy recommendations that treat symptoms rather than causes. At the same time, the consequences of particular behaviors for future well-being and mobility cannot be ignored. A definition of the underclass that focuses on labor market attachment within specific social contexts gives due attention to the underlying economic structural problems without losing sight of the proximate social and behavioral factors which contribute to long-term

poverty. Thus the social contexts that impede labor force attachment—poor schools, poorly connected job information networks, lack of affordable housing within reasonable distance of potential employers, discriminatory employers and realtors, lack of affordable day care, etc.—must be the primary targets for social policy, but policy initiatives must also take into account the feedback influence of such income strategies as crime, casual jobs, or welfare dependence. The more people rely on such sources of income, which are outside the formal labor market, the more enmeshed they become in networks of information about these sources rather than formal work opportunities, and the less work experience they acquire to bring to the formal labor market.

Attention to social context also allows us to ignore “underclass” behaviors that occur throughout society. Persons from middle-class or working-class homes, with access to good-quality public schools and a social context that encourages strong labor force attachment, may still turn to crime. Such persons are criminals, but they are not part of the underclass as here defined.

Some researchers object to any use of criminal activity as a behavioral indicator of underclass membership.¹⁵ Residents in ghetto areas of high unemployment may, however, turn to criminal or quasi-illegal activities¹⁶ as temporary or supplementary sources of income without committing themselves to a life of crime. Looking at persons as more or less attached to the legal economy and paying attention to the larger social circumstances of their criminal involvement helps to weed out career criminals who are part of the underworld rather than the underclass.

Including certain patterns of family formation as indicators of underclass membership has drawn justifiable criticism because of the implication that unmarried motherhood in and of itself is pathological. Revising the underclass definition to hinge on labor force attachment *and* its social context refocuses the problem in terms of available jobs, women’s low earning power, a dearth of other employed adults within the household, and a lack of adequate day care. Solutions can then be proposed both to enhance labor force attachment (educational, training, and placement programs) *and* to alter the social context (by providing child care and affordable nonsegregated housing, for example).

Conclusion

In the current debate about the underclass, the concept of a culture of poverty is once again gaining common acceptance. Available definitions of the underclass tend to stress deviant behavior and intergenerational transmission of deviance and dependence among the chronically poor. Such conceptualizations of the underclass result in policies geared toward individual rehabilitation. I argue that a definition of the underclass based on labor force attachment within specific social contexts more accurately defines the underclass as a distinctive socioeconomic class and also leads to more

productive policy implications. A shift of focus from individual deficiencies to social conditions which affect labor force attachment brings social structure into the underclass definition in a very concrete way by drawing attention to the actual mechanisms by which larger social forces are translated into unequal outcomes across groups. ■

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²See for example Frank Levy, “How Big Is the American Underclass?” Urban Institute Working Paper 0090-1, Washington, D.C., 1977, for a definition based on persistent poverty; and Douglas G. Glasgow, *The Black Underclass: Poverty, Unemployment, and Entrapment of Ghetto Youth* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), for a definition based on both persistent and intergenerational poverty. See Ken Auletta’s *The Underclass* (New York: Random House, 1982) for a behavioral definition, and Erol R. Ricketts and Isabel Sawhill, “Defining and Measuring the Underclass,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 7 (Winter 1988), 316–325, for a definition combining spatial and behavioral criteria. Mary Jo Bane and Paul A. Jargowsky have done descriptive work on the underclass based on a spatial concentration of poverty definition; see “Urban Poverty: Basic Questions Concerning Prevalence, Growth, and Dynamics,” in Michael McGeary and Laurence Lynn, eds., *Concentrated Urban Poverty in America* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, forthcoming).

³Here, nonnormative with respect to mainstream, middle-class norms: illegitimate from the dominant point of view.

⁴See William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵See William Julius Wilson and Kathryn Neckerman, “Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap between Evidence and Public Policy Issues,” in Sheldon H. Danziger and Daniel H. Weinberg, eds., *Fighting Poverty: What Works and What Doesn’t* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁶See Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel, and Dorothy Watson, “Family Structure, Poverty and the Underclass,” in Michael McGeary and Laurence Lynn, eds., *Urban Change and Poverty* (Washington, D.C. National Academy Press, 1988).

⁷I use the term “legitimate” rather than “legal” because illegality is only one end of a continuum of legitimacy, which includes a less formal notion of social acceptability. I argue that seasonal work and part-time work, as categories, apart from the specific content of the job, are seen as less “real” work than year-round, full-time work.

⁸“Family Structure, Poverty and the Underclass.”

⁹This concept might be operationalized by constructing a scale from -100 to +100 representing the percentage of a person’s income derived from highly legitimate sources weighted by the relative stability and work compatibility of those sources, less the percentage of a person’s income derived from less legitimate sources weighted by the relative legitimacy of each source. Thus, a person whose total income came from criminal activity would rate a -100, a person whose total income came from public aid or informal work would rate somewhere in the mid-negative range, a person whose total income came from seasonal and part-time work would rate somewhere in the mid-positive range, and a person whose total income came from stable employment would rate +100.

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Fellowships and grants for research on the urban underclass: Social Science Research Council

Three fellowship and grant programs are being offered to encourage research on urban poverty in the United States and to recruit and nurture talented and well-trained students and scholars to continue to work on the problems associated with concentrated and persistent urban poverty: its dynamics, consequences, and what can be done to overcome it.

The fellowships and grants are sponsored by the Social Science Research Council through its Committee for Research on the Urban Underclass. Funds are provided by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Foundation for Child Development. Students and scholars who are members of minority groups are especially encouraged to apply.

The three are designed to reach undergraduates, graduate students, and Ph.D.'s.

- *Undergraduate Research Assistantships* provide support for research conducted by undergraduate students in collaboration with faculty and/or advanced graduate students. Applications may be submitted by faculty members or universities or colleges for projects involving up to five undergraduates. For individual projects, the student must be a member of a minority group; for group research projects, at least half of the students must belong to minority groups.
- *Dissertation Fellowships* provide financial support for full-time research directed toward completion of the doctoral dissertation.
- *Postdoctoral Grants* will provide stipends and resources to cover research expenses for one year of research to applicants with a Ph.D. or comparable research experience.

Information and application materials may be obtained from Social Science Research Council, Research on the Urban Underclass, 605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158 (212-661-0280). Application deadline is January 10, 1990.

Special research focus: The Fund for Research on Dispute Resolution

The Fund for Research on Dispute Resolution announces a special initiative within its competitive grants program to encourage research on disputing and dispute resolution focusing on the underclass, the poor, minorities, and dependent populations. The Fund welcomes submissions addressing important disputing and dispute-processing research issues in these areas and anticipates supporting research addressing these social problems in upcoming rounds of grants.

The Fund encourages studies on disputing and dispute processing in different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, and, in particular, efforts to study the impact of disputing patterns and processes on these populations. The Fund seeks to begin exploration of these issues and to move beyond program-driven evaluation. It encourages researchers to engage in critical examination of disputing and dispute handling and will support studies that are both theoretically grounded and socially useful.

For a copy of its 1989 program announcement and submission guidelines, contact the Fund for Research on Dispute Resolution, 1901 L St., N.W., Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036 (202-785-4637). The next deadline for submission of concept papers is September 15, 1989. The Fund is an independent research grants program supported by the Ford Foundation and affiliated with the National Institute for Dispute Resolution.

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¹⁰Obviously, the larger socioeconomic and political system provides the structure in which the more immediate contextual variables of household, neighborhood, and network are shaped. I focus here on the more proximate levels of social context, which both mediate the larger structural forces and reflect the unequal impact of those forces across social groups. Direct attention to the effects of economic cycles, industrial organization, forms of government, etc. on labor force attachment is needed but is beyond the scope of this article.

¹¹See Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," in Samuel Leinhardt, ed., *Social Networks: An Emerging Paradigm* (New York: Academic Press, 1977). This work has been substantiated by Edwina Uehara, who did a study of an inner-city poverty group (Uehara, "Job Loss and Network Mobilization among Poor Urban Black Women," Ph.D. disserta-

tion, School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, 1987).

¹²Uehara, "Job Loss."

¹³See Harley Browning and Nestor Rodriguez, "The Migration of Mexican Indocumentados as a Settlement Process: Implications for Work," in George J. Borjas and Marta Tienda, eds., *Hispanics in the U.S. Economy* (New York: Academic Press, 1985).

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵See, for example, William Kornblum, "Lumping the Poor: What Is the 'Underclass?'" *Dissent* 31 (Summer 1984), 295-302.

¹⁶For example, breaking fixtures out of abandoned buildings, removing building materials from vacant lots and open demolition sites, selling government surplus food or other free goods not meant for resale.