

The White Underclass

Does the rise in out-of-wedlock babies and white slums foretell a social catastrophe?

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Years later, he can still remember the fingers. He was on his way to school one morning when he spotted three human fingers with bloody stumps, oozing tiny red droplets on the floor of the passageway underneath his housing project. Michael was no naif. He had lived in other projects, but none like Old Colony in South Boston. When his mother and eight siblings first moved in, kids from the other welfare families shattered their windows with rocks and beer bottles for almost a year. Later, one brother jumped off the roof to his death; Michael's rebellious teenage sister was pushed off another roof and became partly paralyzed. Next, an older brother was shot while robbing an armored car; his accomplices covered him with garbage bags and stuffed him under a seat in a getaway car, where he bled to death from a minor wound.

One year in the mid-1980s, when the cocaine dealers started working Old Colony, Michael's mom attended 37 funerals for people dead from drugs or violence. Michael himself moved his bed away from the window to avoid stray bullets, yet the chaos of the streets seeped in anyway. In 1990 his little brother was watching television with a friend when his buddy started playing with a .357 Magnum. Somehow, the gun went off, and the 13-year-old friend lay in a puddle of blood on the living room rug, shot fatally over his left eye. Oh, one last thing about Michael: His full name is Michael Patrick MacDonald; he is Irish, Catholic and white, and so were most of his impoverished, troubled neighbors.

America has always housed poor whites. German and Irish immigrants huddled in New York's disease-laden tenements at the turn of the century, Okies from the Great Plains filled California's dusty roads in the 1930s and the gaunt faces of Appalachian families dotted newscasts in the early 1960s. Yet the specter of a white underclass is something potentially far more fearsome and novel: It suggests images of crime, drugs, gangs, mothers having kids out of wedlock and shiftless men--images of whites rarely displayed on the evening news.

At present, the white underclass is still tiny--less than 2 percent of all non-Hispanic whites. All told, non-Hispanic black ghettos contain three to four times as many residents as white slums, but some experts predict that the white underclass may start to explode, posing a huge burden for taxpayers and social services. As Ronald Mincy of the Ford Foundation points out, only a small proportion of blacks--between 5 and 17 percent, depending on how tightly "underclass" is defined--live in underclass neighborhoods, yet they exact a heavy toll in U.S. cities.

According to Mincy and researchers at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., the 1990 census showed that the population of white underclass neighborhoods numbers somewhere between 378,000 and 1.6 million, depending on the definition used. Most of the underclass areas are concentrated not in media-saturated cities like New York, Los Angeles or Washington but in places like Duluth, Minn., and Portland, Maine.

Using 1990 census and Urban Institute data, U.S. News pinpointed the worst white underclass areas. There U.S. News reporters found people like Roy Church of Detroit's rough southwest neighborhoods, whose three daughters dropped out of school in junior high and bore eight kids out of wedlock. They found Tina Metcalf of Portland's Bayside area, who started doing drugs in ninth grade and, before she quit 15 years later, had a

friend die of a heroin overdose. They found baby-faced Kristina Neff of Waterloo, Iowa, who got pregnant in seventh grade but never married her boyfriend after he went to jail for robbery.

Evolution of a debate. The rise of the white underclass was heralded last fall by Charles Murray, a libertarian social critic with the American Enterprise Institute. He pointed out in the Wall Street Journal that 22 percent of the children born to white women in 1991 were born out of wedlock, a rate close to the 23.6 percent illegitimacy rate that prevailed among blacks when Daniel Patrick Moynihan drafted his famous 1965 report presaging the breakdown of the black family. "In the white low-income communities, you are going to see the kind of social disintegration ... we've seen in the inner city," Murray later declared. "Just think of the amount of anxiety and fear that is created by the inner city right now. Imagine that six times larger." In the controversial new book *The Bell Curve*, Murray and co-author Richard Herrnstein say that most white women who give birth out of wedlock have below-average IQs. They conclude that "these women are poorly equipped for the labor market, often poorly equipped to be mothers, and there is no reason to think that the outcomes for their children will be any better" than those for the children of black unwed mothers.

Ironically, both conservatives and liberals have embraced the notion of a white underclass. For conservatives like Murray, its formation accords with his argument that perverse government policies have enabled more women--black and white alike--to have babies out of wedlock. That theory lends support to his draconian proposal to eliminate welfare benefits for single mothers. Mincey and liberals including President Clinton cite the plight of the white underclass as proof that many problems afflicting poor blacks are colorblind, driven by economic forces.

For now, the status of the white underclass depends in part on how one defines "underclass." Researchers generally employ two definitions. The broader one classifies any urban census tract that is extremely poor--that is, where 40 percent or more of the residents live below the official poverty line--as part of a ghetto. The Urban Institute found that the number of Americans living in ghettolike tracts where most residents were non-Hispanic whites shot up in the 1980s--from 863,000 to 1.6 million, an increase of 85 percent.

The narrower underclass definition measures "dysfunctional" behavior instead of concentrated poverty. Using this standard, underclass neighborhoods are those with high rates of female-headed families, welfare dependency and labor force and school dropouts. The population of these troubled white neighborhoods stayed roughly constant from 1980 to 1990--at about 380,000.

In two important respects, white and black ghettos are similar no matter how they are defined. Mincey's tabulations show that both white and black underclass areas are filled with men who abandoned the work force and residents who dropped out of high school. In 1990, in the typical "bad behavior" white underclass tract, 55 percent of the men did not participate in the work force and 42 percent of the residents had dropped out of school; the corresponding figures for black tracts were 62 percent and 36 percent. However, black underclass areas are still more likely to have female-headed families and residents on welfare; in the average black tract, 71 percent of the families were headed by women, but in the white one, 53 percent were.

To locate white underclass neighborhoods, U.S. News used a conservative definition: urban areas of at least two contiguous census tracts where a majority of residents were non-Hispanic whites, where 40 percent or more of the residents lived in poverty and where more than 300 white, female-headed families with children resided. From that universe, U.S. News identified the 15 underclass areas that had the highest rates of female-headed families, the best proxy available in census figures for unwed motherhood (table, Page 41).

The atmosphere. From city to city, white underclass neighborhoods look much the same. Most do not contain high-rise housing projects or chockablock tenements. Instead, the streets look innocuously decrepit, filled with row houses with peeling paint and an occasional abandoned house. On warm nights, groups of men can sometimes be seen drinking on street corners or in parks, congregating in taverns or kibitzing on front stoops. An occasional prostitute may wander by to solicit her johns.

Inside the row houses, young mothers, sometimes joined by their parents, pursue lives of cigarettes, television and Nintendo. The apartment walls often sport cheap reproductions of portraits of Jesus or Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. Commercial strips are lined with bars, small grocery stores, pawnshops and liquor outlets, but the neighborhoods nonetheless feel isolated from the rest of the city, cut off by railroad tracks, rivers, highways or industrial areas.

Roy Church--he was too embarrassed to use his real name--couldn't believe how sour it had all turned. A native Detroiter, he met his wife in 1970 when she moved from rural Kentucky. For 20 years, he worked as a rail inspector for Conrail. Then he was diagnosed with diabetes, he was laid off and his family collapsed. His four children dropped out of school around the seventh grade. His three daughters, all eventually on welfare or disability, bore eight children out of wedlock. At 47, Church, along with his wife, was temporarily caring for most of their grandchildren, since their own daughters were plagued by drug addiction or mental illness.

This southwest neighborhood always had its toughs, but not white gangs like those there now. Al's Lounge, an old haunt of Hungarian workers, is boarded up, the walls covered with gang emblems. Several largely white "crews," such as the Cash Flow Posse and the Square Boys, patrol the streets like vigilante Guardian Angels, keeping outside troublemakers away. Everyone knows the Cash Flow Posse bangs to the left, meaning they cock their hats to the left, roll up their left pant cuffs and display bandannas in their left pockets. Most nights, Church heard gunfire. Then, three weeks ago, he died of complications from diabetes. Five days later, his wife finally raised enough money from relatives to pay for his funeral.

The origins. While its roots are diverse, the white underclass often sprouts in the shadows of shuttered factories and what were once hard-drinking, blue-collar sections of town. The list of cities with white ghettos--including Detroit, Flint and Jackson, Mich., and Duluth, Minn.--reads like a roll call of rust belt decay. Waterloo, Iowa, a town of 67,000, lost about 9,000 jobs to layoffs at Deere & Co. in the mid-1980s and another 1,500 when Rath Packing Co., one of the nation's largest hog-slaughtering operations, closed its doors. Today, one of the Rath family homes is a halfway house for mentally ill homeless men.

Hardly any of the cities in the U.S. News top 15 are in the West or the South, although the South is the poorest region in the nation. In fact, some white slums in the North contain significant numbers of Southern whites who migrated years ago from Appalachia looking for work. Most of the migrants succeeded, but some--or at least their children--now live in white "hillbilly ghettos" in cities like Detroit, Cincinnati and Baltimore. Novels such as Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* captured the loss of place that many migrants felt in big cities, where tending a garden or helping a neighbor was no longer routine. A man might be dirt poor in Kentucky, but he could still maintain his dignity--that was much harder in Roy Church's Detroit.

Michelle Loomis, 28, opened the Waterloo Courier and gasped. The headline blared: "Two Men Arrested in 16 Burglaries." One of the men was the unwed father of her two youngest children. Her own mother had given birth to her when she was 14 and was so poor growing up that the family collected bath water off the roof. Loomis dropped out of school at 13 and subsequently had five kids, several of whom she supported with welfare and food stamps over nine years. Today, however, all her children are living with relatives, at the behest of either the courts or Loomis herself. On a recent visit with Loomis, her daughter Stephanie points to a

man in a photo album. "That's my daddy," she says. But the man in the photo is Chuck, the recently arrested alleged burglar, with whom Michelle hitched up after Stephanie was born. No one corrects the little girl.

The next evening, Kristina Neff, 17, stops by to play Nintendo. An older black man who lived downstairs from her impregnated Neff in seventh grade. The fact is, there's no shame in getting pregnant as a teen in East Waterloo. In 1992, 259 teens gave birth in the county, 228 of them out of wedlock. At nearby West High, half of the 21 babies born this past school year had moms in the ninth or 10th grade. "At first it was kind of fun," says Neff, but now her 2-year-old boy is having seizures. She will wait until her son is 3 or 4 before she gets pregnant again. "I like them," she says, "when they're babies."

The unwed mom. A disturbing little secret, shared among social workers who help poor whites, is that many young women are perfectly content to have babies out of wedlock. Most of those interviewed by U.S. News don't believe in abortion or adoption, and they have easy access to cheap contraception. Pregnant students treated at the South Boston Community Health Center often insist that having a baby will give them "somebody to love." Poor, unwed mothers explain that welfare makes it easier to get by without a husband. Typically, fathers disappear within a year or two of a child's arrival; most are unemployed, underemployed, on drugs, drinking or in prison, or have moved on to another girlfriend. Many mothers, meanwhile, are fleeing abusive families, and those who aren't often still want their own place. Welfare--and if they are lucky enough to get it, housing assistance--helps make the move possible. In only seven states are minors still required to live with an adult caretaker to get their own welfare checks.

Recently, in the rough Kennedy Park section of Portland, Maine, a revealing scene played out as youth worker Mike Rodriguez helped three teens put together an AIDS prevention video. Shawn Burton, a 17-year-old high school dropout, was the trio's leader. He disdains the father he rarely saw because he "wasn't mature enough." Back on camera, however, Laurie, a pert 8-year-old, has just said a line thrown to her by Shawn: "Kids are having kids." When a reporter suggested Laurie could say, "Kids shouldn't be having kids," Shawn interjected. "No, that would be a judgment call," he said. "The kids would get turned off."

The low point for Tina Metcalf was the funeral of her lifelong friend Bruce. "If I ever die, don't cry for me--party for me," Bruce always told Metcalf. Then 23, she took that admonition to heart and went on a two-week binge that culminated in her and some of her friends smoking coke for three days before they watched Bruce's funeral procession in a driving rainstorm.

Metcalf has been drug free for four years now, but not before enduring 15 years of dissipation. Raised in Portland's Bayside neighborhood, she started taking drugs in ninth grade and quickly progressed from marijuana to speed, LSD, THC, Valium, cocaine and alcohol; along the way, she had two kids out of wedlock. Metcalf's mother, who worked hard to stay off welfare, wasn't around much. According to Metcalf, her alcoholic father ended up living in a nearby park. When Metcalf was 5, he showed up one day for a visit--and took the kids panhandling. When she turned 13, she says, he gave her some "rush," a cheap liquid inhalant, and some pot.

Whites and blacks. In every city U.S. News visited with a significant black or Hispanic population, poor minorities tended to be worse off than poor whites. The white ghettos had less poverty than the black ones, lower proportions of female-headed families and lower homicide rates. Some residents of white slums seized on conditions in nearby black ghettos to show that things were not that bad for them. Others, however, found white poverty doubly humiliating. Charlene Manley, Michelle Loomis's mother in Waterloo, explained: "If

you're white and you're poor, you had all the help in the world and blew it. But if you're black, people say there's an excuse for it."

Given the disparities between white and black ghettos, it's not surprising that white slums tend to be less violent and chaotic. Predominantly black ghettos have more families missing a father who might control errant children; they afford less opportunity for mobility out of the ghetto because of the persistence of housing discrimination and racism; and the communities have had longer to deteriorate. While crime is rampant in white underclass neighborhoods, random violence and murders are infrequent and drive-by shootings almost unheard of. Flint, Mich., had 48 homicides in 1993, but it was a rare event last year when two white teens got shot after they wandered into a black part of town to buy crack cocaine. Crack use--and the violence it can spawn--is comparatively rare among poor whites, and that accounts in part for the differing patterns of violence in white and black underclass areas. Even so, heroin has made a troubling resurgence in white slums.

The scourge of the white underclass still is alcohol. The poor white neighborhood near downtown Jackson, Mich., has the highest reported crime rate in the city, with much of it connected to alcohol--domestic violence, disorderly conduct and personal assaults. Officer Beth Whaley, who patrols Flint's mainly white south and east sides, says some weeks she is called to the same homes over and over again. With a note of disgust, she observes that "the incidents are almost always alcohol related, and the kids are usually right in the middle of it--watching it all."

Predominantly white gangs, like those in Detroit, have proliferated in a number of white ghettos. Mount Clare, in Baltimore, has two loosely organized "posses," the Lumberyard Gang and the Doghouse Gang; Bayside, in Portland, has the Grant Street posse. For the most part, however, white gangs resemble the Jets and Sharks of West Side Story more than the Bloods and Crips of South Central Los Angeles. Except in Detroit, white gang fights are generally resolved with fists, or perhaps with a bat or beer bottle, not with Uzis.

Patty Duquette, one of 12 children in her French Catholic family, grew up in public housing in South Boston, and for the past 10 years, she and her four sons have lived off welfare in the Old Colony project. The sporadic gunfire of the mid-1980s has largely vanished, reportedly at the order of Irish mobsters. Heroin is back, though; most days her kids see syringes in the courtyard outside her entryway, and not long ago one of her neighbors accidentally pricked himself with a needle while gardening. Racial tensions also simmer--roughly a quarter of the 813 families in Old Colony are minorities, and when Duquette walks through the projects, black residents she barely knows sometimes call her "honky."

Still, not everything is bleak. The father of her children stopped using drugs, started working and contributes to his kids' support, though he has a new girlfriend. Duquette got her GED five years ago, teaches at the Boys Club preschool and wants to become a certified Montessori teacher. She'd like to move, but for now Old Colony is a safe, cheap place to live, and there is a multiyear list of families who want to move in.

Murray revisited. In his Wall Street Journal op-ed, Charles Murray wrote that "illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time--more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare or homelessness, because it drives everything else." If he is right, the southern tip of South Boston should be a shambles. It has the highest proportion of female-headed families of any white underclass area in the nation--73 percent. Yet old women walk their dogs at midnight in the "lower end," residents often leave their screen doors unlocked on hot evenings, and if a boy steals a bike, folks will track him down and make him return it. Across the street from the projects are well-kept beaches and a huge park with a half-dozen baseball diamonds, soccer fields and playgrounds. Indeed, project residents would be surprised to hear themselves

described as members of a white underclass. Many prominent white Bostonians, including state Senate President Billy Bulger, grew up in "Southie's" projects.

It may be that South Boston's lower end--parochial, wary of outsiders and still very Catholic--is an anomaly. But even beyond South Boston, there is good reason to question Murray's prediction that the white underclass may soon eclipse its black counterpart. Poor whites, for instance, do not face entrenched housing discrimination. That means poverty among them is less concentrated and they are less likely to live in slums that dominate vast tracts of a city. Mincy's census analysis shows that in 1990, 30 percent of poor blacks lived in extreme-poverty areas; only 7 percent of poor whites did. The absence of discrimination also makes it easier for poor whites than poor blacks to leave the slums behind and harder for the white underclass to calcify for generations.

The search for answers. Liberals account for the rise in white out-of-wedlock births by pointing to the dwindling number of blue-collar jobs for men, while conservatives tend to stress the impact of perverse welfare policies and feminism. Clearly, though, one nonideological factor--a societywide change in attitudes--has weakened the stigma against out-of-wedlock childbearing. Twenty years ago, two thirds of white Americans opposed the idea that "it should be legal for adults to have children without getting married." Five years ago, whites were just about evenly split on the issue.

Whatever the cause, policy makers know next to nothing about how to reduce unwed motherhood. Charles Murray's plan to end welfare benefits for single mothers and place poor children, where necessary, up for adoption or in orphanages would likely reduce out-of-wedlock births, but its side effects could be horrific. Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala calls Murray's plan "a 1994 version" of Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal--which suggested, satirically, that the best way to deal with food shortages and overpopulation was to eat the babies of the poor.

Michael Patrick MacDonald, who saw those severed fingers many years ago, is searching for solutions, too. The courts overturned his little brother's manslaughter conviction in the shooting of his 13-year-old friend, and after the violent deaths of three brothers, the MacDonald family fled their South Boston project. MacDonald moved to the racially mixed Jamaica Plain neighborhood; he now works on juvenile justice issues for a community group and helps run a gun buyback program.

One morning a few months ago, MacDonald went back to the old 'hood and drove slowly around the projects, pointing out the spots where tragedy had befallen his family. Suddenly, he turned wistful. "There is not a victim mentality here," he said. "It's just the opposite. Maybe it was a false sense of security, but it always felt like people watched your back here." Several mothers lounged on the stairs of a project entryway as their toddlers splashed about in a small inflatable pool. "I'm thinking of moving back," MacDonald announced abruptly. "I miss the neighborhood." The ghosts, he said, were tugging at him to return, and several weeks later he did in fact move back. "You've got to understand," he explains. "This is where all my memories are now, good and bad."