

# Not Up to Snuff

by Evelyn Pyburn

I lived most of my early life in housing that any regulator or housing administrator would have razed upon sight. I would have been viewed as a victim of inadequate housing even though my family and I had no idea we were so seriously deprived.

In my ignorance I would suggest that the days spent in such housing were among the best of my life.

We lived in an original homestead house—only slightly revised over the years—on a farm way out in the hills of Montana. Not until I was about 8 or 9 did they even run electricity to the property.

Oh, yes, there was an outhouse. My brothers and I carried wood and watched my grandmother and mother cook on a wood-burning stove. Among our daily chores was to pump water from the well and carry it into the house. I have never found water that tasted as good, as cold or sweet.

I remember watching my grandparents play dominoes by lantern light—my eyes so tired I could hardly keep them open, only to fall asleep at the table and find in the morning that someone had carried me to bed.

Early on winter mornings, Grandpa would let me sit on his lap with my bare feet dangling in front of the open oven of the kitchen stove, as the first fire of the day began warming the house.

Sometimes little drifts of snow could be found piled delicately on the window sill in the living

room. The house whistled, moaned, and howled when a fierce wind blew; and the rain pattered musically on the roof.

Some bats lived in the roof near the chimney. Their occasional squeaking was nothing more than household background sounds, and we would watch them fly about in the summer evening sky. As a child it never occurred to me that there might be houses without bats.

Changes came with time. First electricity, and then one day the gas line was brought through. Running water was put in. And then the day came when my family actually built a new house.

When the old homestead house was burned (taxes on it were astronomical)—we, grown children, watched sadly with tears in our eyes.

No doubt about it, I was thoroughly deprived as a child, and I wouldn't trade a moment of it for the fanciest and most lavish house in the world.

None of that fits into the regulators' books, however, and most would never comprehend how I could have grown up feeling sorry for everyone else because they didn't have what I had.

How greatly my view of the world differed from so many others never dawned upon me, until one day, as a reporter, I was interviewing a newly named housing expert. He started rattling off the numbers of substandard homes that existed in Gallatin, Meagher, and Park Counties. As I put the numbers into perspective, I realized that he was talking about a lot of homes. I knew all those communities well and I couldn't visualize that many substandard houses. So I was prompted to ask exactly what constituted a "substandard home" in his book.

As he began describing the government's broad criteria for substandard housing, I was, at first, astonished and then began to smolder, as I realized he was calling every home I had ever lived in "substandard." Not only mine, but that of almost every one I had ever known in our rural community and probably most of the homes that comprised all the small towns roundabout.

I still think of all those hard-working, proud people, and how affronted they would feel had they any idea that what they worked so hard for, and loved so dearly, was offhandedly categorized as "substandard" by a bureaucrat who lived in an urban ticky-tacky without the slightest idea of what it took to acquire and maintain that old homestead of my grandparents. □

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# BOOKS

## THE EMERGING BRITISH UNDERCLASS

by Charles Murray

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Reviewed by William H. Peterson

*In extending our charity we must endeavor to distinguish the really deserving; for those who willingly and professionally seek the charity of others forfeit all self-respect, and, in being content so to live, sacrifice personal dignity.*

—MANCHESTER UNITY (British charitable organization), 1938

In 1984 Charles Murray published *Losing Ground*, an indictment of America's welfare state. In that book Murray offered statistical proof on the counterproductivity of social engineering and relief measures such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children—that on balance and over time public welfare compounds rather than relieves social despair and destitution. An underclass emerges, persists, grows from one generation to another, with all manner of perverse repercussions.

Now Murray follows up his American analysis with a pared-down study of the British welfare experience and comes up with a similar finding—the rise of a British underclass, the growth of a culture of poverty, of what I call “the professional poor”: those who forgo livelihoods and openly feed at the public trough as a way of life.

Here he is careful to differentiate between the British poor and the underclass. The Bible observes that the poor shall be “always with you.” Similarly, Murray sees that some people will ever be at the bottom, that a bottom in any statistical vertical range of incomes has to occur by definition, that the dynamics of life, history, and economics will necessarily shuffle incomes up and down, that some historians have a point in noting a cycle “from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves in three generations.”

The subsidized underclass is something else. So

what gives this latest Murray study special bite is not just his seeing that the underclass is swelling in England, but his observation that three British phenomena which have turned out to be early-warning signals for the American underclass are being insufficiently recognized. This is evident in commentaries by four British sociologists (one of whom is a Labour Member of Parliament) which are included in this volume. The three phenomena are: illegitimacy, violent crime, and labor-force dropouts.

Illegitimacy has escalated in Britain—from 5.1 percent of births to single women as a percentage of all births in 1958 to 25.6 percent in 1988, a five-fold increase in just 30 years. This rising illegitimacy is strikingly concentrated in the underclass, in communities without fathers in the traditional sense. The fewer the fathers, argues Murray, the greater the tendency of children to “run wild,” to abandon schooling and employment, or to become criminals.

Naturally enough, crime also escalates—from 27 crimes of violence per 100,000 population in 1958 to 314 in 1988, with again the preponderance of that crime concentrated in the slum neighborhoods, in males in the second half of their teens.

So school and labor-force dropouts are also on the rise. For to many in the British underclass, work is an aversion. Murray relates an illustrative anecdote. Recently contractors carrying out extensive renovations in a British low-income housing project were obliged to hire local youths for unskilled labor as part of a legislated work-experience program. Thirteen youths were hired. Ten actually showed up on the first day. By the end of the week, only one was still at work.

What Murray is describing is a vicious circle. He sees these social problems as interconnected, as reinforcing one another, with both the dole and drug abuse increasing significantly. He writes:

Young men who are subsisting in crime or the dole are not likely to be trustworthy providers, which makes having a baby without a husband a more practical alternative. If a young man's girl friend doesn't need him to help support the baby, it makes less sense for him to plug away at a menial job and more sense to have some fun—which in turn makes hustling and crime more attractive, marriage less attractive. Without a job or family to give life meaning, drugs