



Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980

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This classic book serves as a starting point for any serious discussion of welfare reform. *Losing Ground* argues that the ambitious social programs of the 1960s and 1970s actually made matters worse for its supposed beneficiaries, the poor and minorities. Charles Murray startled readers by recommending that we abolish welfare reform, but his position launched a debate culminating in President Clinton's proposal "to end welfare as we know it."

Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980 Details

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Jeff Shelnutt says

In his ground-breaking (shaking?) work thirty years into the American welfare experiment, Murray opens with two assertions:

1) *It was made profitable for the poor to behave in the short-term in ways that were destructive in the long-term.*

2) *These long-term losses were then covered up--subsidizing irretrievable mistakes.*

The author proceeds to trace the statistical evidence of these assertions through a copious use of graphs. He cites three decades of trends in poverty, employment, wages and occupations, education, crime, and the family.

The conclusion: the increase of federal subsidies to the poor paralleled the increase in poverty rates, unemployment, and crime, while also contributing to the breakdown of the family unit and decline in educational performance--all this among populations who received the most "benefit" from the various forms of welfare.

A majority of the middle and upper-class American population is willing to help those who are in legitimate need, especially if this help is given in such a way as to encourage breaking out of the poverty cycle. Most taxpayers don't grumble at their taxes being used in such a manner. However, here's the rub. What if the money being invested into the welfare system is counter-productive?

In short, Murray recommends massively scaling back federal funding along with a completely reconsidered approach to the "problem of the poor." He argues that everyone should have the *opportunities* to better themselves, rather it be educationally or economically. But no one should be *rewarded* for refusing to take advantage of the opportunities or for "working" the welfare system.

Billions for equal opportunity, not one cent for equal outcome...[the] common theme is to make it possible to get as far as one can go on one's merit, hardly a new ideal in American thought.

[I propose that] the options are always open. Opportunity is [made available and] endless. There is no punishment for failure, only a total absence of rewards. Society--or an idealized society--should be preoccupied with making sure that achievement is rewarded.

Murray envisions welfare benefits coming from a combined effort of state and local governments, private businesses and charitable organizations. Keeping efforts at the local level automatically strips away layers of unnecessary federal bureaucracy and cuts down in misallocated funds--all this while simultaneously increasing accountability.

I'll add that the church has traditionally been central to poverty alleviation. The early Christians made it a

priority to take care of one another, and sought ways to help the suffering poor around them. As Paul prepared for taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, he writes of the other apostles, "*They only asked us to remember the poor--the very thing I was eager to do*" (Gal. 2:10).

It is true, as Jesus said, that the poor will always be with you (Mat. 26:11). It is also true that I, as a Christian, have a responsibility to help the legitimately poor who the Lord brings into my path. Rome can implement feeding programs and build job training centers. But Caesar and his Senate sit aloof, mired in political wrangling, focused on generalities.

People are not statistics. They are real individuals with real needs. I agree with Murray that there must be a better way to help the poor than by pouring billions of dollars into a broken system (and this was in 1984 when the book was first published!). This must be attempted without degrading the recipients. The goal is not only the betterment of economic conditions, but assisting in such a manner that allows each person to retain his or her dignity and self-respect.

Jonathan Lukens says

An interesting data based counter argument to the standard rhetoric in my department where everyone shares the belief that all great things come from government intervention. I think Murray make a few causal claims that may be merely correlations. However, i like people who buck conventional wisdom, especially in the academy where there is a tendency toward group think. Data is old--would be interesting to see an update that includes post TANF data.

Ben says

When this inveterate racist asks why Black people are out of work, the answer may surprise you! (spoiler alert: the answer will not surprise you). He uses lots of graphs to hide the fact that he obscures the situation by confusing correlation with causation - i.e. - as government means tested welfare programs have expanded the plight of the black male youth has gotten worse therefore the plight of the black male youth is the fault of expanded program. Nothing int he book (written 1984) would surprise anyone who has listened to conservatives speak for the past 2-3 decades, but I guess he was the first person to really promote the idea that welfare created negative incentives and inculcated an expectation of failure. Either way, it's a bunch of bullshit, a mix of obfuscation, dishonesty, and stupidity.

Sylvester Kuo says

Losing Ground is Murray's comprehensive study of the disastrous effect of social welfare in the United States. Essentially, any of the social experiments were performed at the expenses of taxpayers with negative outcomes, what needs to be done is to create a colour blind society focusing on the hardwork of the individual or else it will destroy itself. The book is a little dated but still relevant to the socialization of

schools, healthcare and crime.

Jim says

An excellent data-based analysis of the massive social programs introduced starting in the mid-sixties, and their effects. Murray convincingly argues that after billions and billions spent on welfare programs, including AFDC, food stamps, unemployment insurance, job training programs, and others, the effect on the target population has been mostly negative. He effectively shows that these programs actually caused harm. This is a harsh reality that people instinctively know but everyone is afraid to deal with. Our government may be in a position where it tried to do good and actually made things worse, but now is so invested in the program that it can't turn back and right the wrong. It's a good read, and I highly recommend it for anyone thinking about how government can make effective policy.

Josie says

I don't think Goodreads will let me paste a five-page long "journal" for class in my review. Suffice to say that the margins in my copy are annotated quite angrily.

Cav Harris-Brandts says

A stats-driven look at the genesis and years between 1950 and 1980 of American social policies.

This book presented a lot of good information, but I found reading very monotonous, boring, and dry.

To quote another review:

"The book doesn't lend itself to the audio book format, which was how I tried to "read" it. It's more of a text book than a good read, and you really need to focus on the information to absorb it, and unfortunately, my mind continued to drift while listening. "

Msimone says

Government social policy between the 1950s to the 80s provided public assistance to the poor in the form of subsidized housing, child care, and welfare income. According to the author, the "Great Society" generosity deterred the poor from every wanting to shovel out from poverty and led them to the perpetuate generational cycles of jobless males, unwed mothers and female dominated households who lived off of tax dollars that paid for their food stamps, welfare checks and medicare. Murry demanded policy reform to public assistance that required the poor to demonstrate moral responsibility to work in return for economic assistance. His argument was less moral as it was economic to persuade the Reagan Administration to tighten requirements for welfare eligibility for the poor. The cost of welfare continues to rise while the poverty culture in American cities persists and increases among minorities and non-minorities who are shut out of the middle class not because they do not work, but more so because there are not job opportunities to improve their

skills and increase their eligibility for existing jobs. This book provided me with an opportunity to reflect on how welfare reform since the 80s has reacted strongly to stop the generosity of welfare programs and services of the Great Society without supporting job training in employable areas, job stimulus through corporate involvement, and universal health and child care for all.

Michael says

I am a retired 30 year veteran police officer and started my police career at about the time "Losing Ground" was published. Through my police career I watched the deterioration of the poor, particularly Blacks. I always suspected that the government programs of the Lyndon Johnson administration had something to do with it but never had a way to confirm it until I found a copy of "Losing Ground." It is not a political book although politicians should be ashamed of themselves for what they did and continue to do to the poor by chaining them to poverty with well-meaning government programs.

Charles Murray studies the effect of government policy on the poor from 1950 to 1980, illustrating each point with a graph or list of figures, explaining the relevance of each. It is not a math book and the charts illustrated do not detract from but are essential to the author's argument.

From 1950 to the Johnson administrations, the poor were making progress every year, particularly Blacks. Blacks, on the own, had were struggling and working their way out of poverty. The one graph which shocked me the most was the "Black Teen Labor Participation Rate" graph in which Black teens actually had a higher rate than White teens up to 1964. Up to that year, Blacks were making great strides in moving into the middle class. Then, suddenly, it all stopped and all the success Blacks had made disappeared. The rates in unemployment, labor participation, income, and all the other indicators of success plunged and continue to do so to this day. Black culture has been destroyed and well meaning Whites are responsible.

Murray, in "Losing Ground," explains how all this came about and how the more money the government spent on poverty, the worse poverty got (a direct inverse relationship). He lists the programs that caused the collapse but, in my opinion, he left one out. During the Johnson administration, slums (a euphemism for Black neighborhoods) were torn down and the displaced Blacks were moved in to low-income crime ridden concentration camps called "projects" which were later torn down. This time the banks were forced by the government to offer low-income people (mostly Blacks) no down payment, no security loans they could still not afford which led to the real estate collapse a few years ago. However, this is not crucial to the book and Murray more than adequately proves his case.

"Losing Ground" is an excellent book, one of the most startling books I've read, and should be used as a textbook in schools.

Olivia Barton says

Murray utilizes terrible research methodology, and fails to examine compounding factors that cause poverty & associated use of welfare (ex. racism leads to less trust in healthcare facilities and therefore more single mothers in the black community, the high imprisonment rate of black men compounds with this as well). More importantly he completely ignores the economy in his analysis. For example, he states recipients of welfare don't take jobs because they make more money on welfare, without analysing how his solution, to

strip all social welfare programs, would leave impoverished individuals with very poor paying jobs and overall more impoverished and decrease upward mobility, or at least wellbeing (other than possible self-esteem associated with having a job). On top of this he assumes, or at least only presents an imaginary scenario of Harold and Phyllis, that welfare recipients do not take responsibility for getting off welfare. With no backing other than more people were on welfare, because it expanded, he argues that the community status gained from workinghard has been lost. He needs to support this. I acknowledge that welfare can incentivize disenfranchisement [law of unlimited resources], but getting rid of welfare in general will not discontinue poverty and the struggles of impoverished individuals and families.

Also, he discusses "black culture" as a white man without talking to black people...

Ray says

The book doesn't lend itself to the audio book format, which was how I tried to "read" it. It's more of a text book than a good read, and you really need to focus on the information to absorb it, and unfortunately, my mind continued to drift while listening.

E says

The book begins to drag a quarter in, which tables and figures and statistics, but Murray rousing to a smashing conclusion at the end. Strangely, the text isn't racist, or even against helping the disenfranchised. Murray comes across as a sympathetic and introspective defender of better the life of the poor. Perhaps these labels flung against him are the result of his conclusion. He directly accuses the progressive social policies of institutionalizing the same racism they claimed to fight against. A racism that is couched in terms like betterment, and assistance instead of raw racism. A racism that is impossible to fight against because, in an Orwellian twist, it has coopted the terms of righteousness for the sake of its own survival.

Russell Hayes says

The thesis of this book is that welfare increases poverty. It cannot reduce poverty.

Prior to the 1960s, the prevailing view of the past 300 years or so was that welfare should be aid in the form of things like housing (think Dickens's Bleak House), not a direct dole out of money to the poor. Welfare was thought to encourage sloth and laziness: by increasing the value of being unemployed vis a vis being employed, the classic market response is to increase supply of the unemployed. It also increased illegitimacy (which is a chief cause of poverty) because as long as the man is not legally responsible for the child, his income does not count against hers for welfare benefits. Furthermore, in experiments across the US between poor populations in the same city, some of whom receive welfare and some of whom don't, the breakup of marriage (another cause of poverty) was about 40% higher among families receiving welfare.

At the crux of the issue is to what degree the system is to blame or the individual. If the system is to blame, then self-sufficiency no longer becomes morally superior to independence. Those who have succeeded and escaped poverty are not to be commended. Placing the blame on the system also removes from the impoverished any idea that they can succeed. The very reward structure of status and money to those who have separated themselves and climbed the social ladder is what fosters the near classless society that has thrived in America unlike any other nation. A classless society is one of the chief goals of liberalism. Their placing the blame on the system is thus self-refuting and undermines their own goal.

Welfare means that it is easier to get along without a job. Because it is easier to get along without a job, it is easier to ignore education. It is easier for a man to have a baby without being responsible for it. It is easier for a woman to have a baby without having a husband. It is easier to get away with crime. Thus it is easier to obtain drugs, and to support a drug habit.

Removing welfare would mean parents would do more in their children's education--they don't want them living off their money. Parents would buckle down and try harder to make their kids not have children unless in a stable family--they don't want to be stuck paying for their grandkids. Young people would find that they are in fact work ready--doing menial jobs and gaining the work ethic that comes with them is suddenly preferable from the alternative. Finally, those low income families who have been doing the right thing would be vindicated and not ridiculed.

If an impartial observer from a foreign land looked at the data of the black lower class from 1950-1980 and given no information about social and public policy changes of that time period, he would think that outright, virulent racial discrimination against the black poor had dramatically increased during the late 1960s and 1970s (the time when the welfare system really took off). Of course, the opposite actually happened. Until the late 60s, the black lower class had been making steady economic gains vis a vis whites. This came to a screeching halt with the welfare reforms of the late 60s.

At the end, Murray breaks form and asks a strikingly personal question. If you were a parent and knew your kids would be orphaned tomorrow, which family would you rather send them to:

- 1) A very poor family, in which they will sometimes, but not often, lack food and be badly clothed, but the parents have worked hard all their lives, make sure the children study and go to school, and value independence; or
- 2) A less-poor family, in which the parents have never worked, don't value education, but your children will have enough food and clothes, provided by others.

The first choice is the clear winner; our current system prefers the second.

All in all, a thoroughly-researched work, full of data rather than rhetoric, but still interesting to read.

Abby Jean says

check a citation - any citation - and it certainly won't support murray's argument or say what he says it does. specious arguments to support bigoted AEI values/ideals. useful only for throwing.

Kris says

Generally an intriguing and useful book of information on the poor. I appreciated his attention to detail, but it got little dry in places. This was also hard to read as an audio book, and I really had to pay attention in quiet places to get through it. The second half was much easier for me to follow, as he uses stories as hypotheses and illustrates ideas with analogies. There are some good quotes and points to be pulled out.

I like his examples of incentives and disincentives for poor families on welfare, and juveniles in crime. I also like how he shows how the stigma of welfare has changed over time, and how social statuses amongst the poor have been homogenized (people receive a form of welfare regardless of marriage status or employment status), and how often the poor are now lumped all together into one category as victims. Institutions are blamed, instead of individual responsibility.

I want to read Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010 at some point. But now I'm realizing that I should probably buy a hardcopy and go through it intentionally and carefully. One day.
