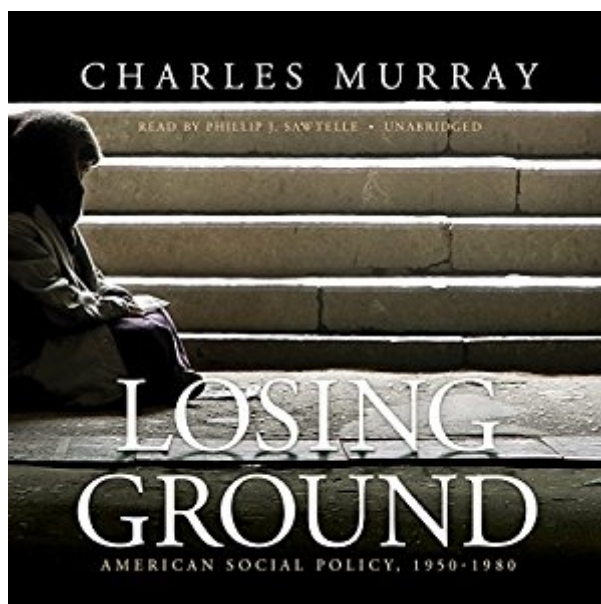


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Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950 - 1980



Synopsis

Beginning in the 1950s, America entered a period of unprecedented social reform. This remarkable book demonstrates how the social programs of the 1960s and '70s had the unintended and perverse effect of slowing and even reversing earlier progress in reducing poverty, crime, ignorance, and discrimination. Using widely understood and accepted data, it conclusively demonstrates that the amalgam of reforms from 1965 to 1970 actually made matters worse. Why? Charles Murray's tough-minded answers to this question will please neither radical liberals nor radical conservatives. He offers no easy solutions, but by forcing us to face fundamental intellectual and moral problems about whom we want to help and how, *Losing Ground* marks an important first step in rethinking social policy. Charles Murray is the W. H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He first came to national attention in 1984 with *Losing Ground*. He received a bachelor's degree in history from Harvard and a doctorate in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He lives with his wife in Burkittsville, Maryland.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is not often that you read a perfectly convincing argument, but this book did it for me. The charts alone tell the whole story: increased spending on welfare while poverty is decreasing, coupled with higher crime, illegitimacy, unemployment, low birth weight all beginning within the years 1964-68. I've never cried at a movie, but if any book deserved a few tears, this would be it. Apart from the increase in birth rates, which Murray tries but fails to explain as a function of rational choices (can it ever?), every other statistic is shown by Murray to be the indirect result of well-intentioned and

perfectly disastrous policies. Beginning with the indifference to poverty in 1954, to the modest programs under Kennedy, to the whole-hearted expansion under Johnson, to the institution of a permanent minimum income under Nixon, the war on poverty was lost within three years without anyone bothering to call off the troops. Murray makes the point that any slight "variance" in the statistics, even if only a tenth of a percent, is considered significant, but illegitimacy among poor blacks, for instance, drops from 80% to 40% in a matter of a few years. How human behavior, perfectly stable for decades, can change in a matter of a few years is, in fact, shocking, and Murray engages in a little detective work that is entirely convincing. The reason is in fact no mystery: if you pay people to stay unmarried, live apart, and not work, they will do precisely that. If, on top of that, you stop jailing criminals and seal their juvenile records, crime will also go up. That the Watts riots occurred just two weeks after the 1964 civil rights legislation, and the new welfare policies were instituted the same year, is no accident either.

This is an important book that explains an incredible transformation in American social policy. Sometime around the mid-1960s, a new code of private values and government policies pushed their way into mainstream society. This vision and its consequences were a radical departure from our nation's past. From 1950 to 1965, an economy founded on free market principles, nurtured on minimal government regulation, and protected from large welfare programs, had slashed the poverty rate from one third of the population to just over one-tenth. Eliminating poverty seemed like a real possibility to Americans as long as the wheels of capitalism continued to spin unhindered. From 1950 to 1965, African-Americans won court battles giving them the human rights guaranteed to every citizen. These belated changes were cemented by the hallmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and accompanied by a remarkable surge in African-American incomes. This fifteen-year period was an era of immense progress. Not only were the classes and races coming together but crime was remarkably low, families exceptionally resilient, and drug use almost non-existent. Then around 1965 something happened. All of a sudden the capitalist economy that made Old World immigrants into middle-class, suburban home-owners was described as a guilty, imperialist system that exploited the poor and the weak. Government planners in Washington got right to solving this "problem." From now on, people could expect a guaranteed income for an unlimited period of time, without regard to personal behavior or the ability to work. To show what a compassionate society we are, we would destroy the work ethic that was the bedrock of Western civilization. But that wasn't the best part.

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