

1992

## Book Notes: The Urban Underclass. by Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson.

Daniel A. Farber

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/concomm>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Farber, Daniel A., "Book Notes: The Urban Underclass. by Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson." (1992). *Constitutional Commentary*. 192.

<https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/concomm/192>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Minnesota Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Constitutional Commentary collection by an authorized administrator of the Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [lenzx009@umn.edu](mailto:lenzx009@umn.edu).

sions of her conservative colleagues through the guise of a more enlightened means.”

A succinct and fairly comprehensive overview of this evolving body of law, *Lowering the Wall* provides readers with a feeling for where the Court's decisions appear to be leading church-state doctrine. Ivers makes clear his desire for an about-face. Readers, regardless of their ideological bent, can appreciate the solid platform he builds from which to watch the Supreme Court's establishment and free exercise clause decisions of the 90s.

*Rikke A. Dierssen-Morice*

**THE URBAN UNDERCLASS.** By Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson. Brookings Institution: Washington, D.C. 1991. \$14.95 (paper).

This book is a collection of nineteen scholarly papers on poverty in America. We cannot do better to summarize its contents than to quote from the Preface:

Conventional wisdom tells us that the United States *is* witnessing a significant growth in the size of its urban underclass. Many believe that the percentage of the population persistently poor is large and rapidly increasing, that more and more unmarried teenage girls are bearing children, and that welfare rolls are exploding. It is frequently alleged that crime is on the increase, young people are dropping out of school in record numbers, and higher percentages of the population are withdrawing from the labor force. The poor are also said to be increasingly isolated in ghettos at the cores of our metropolitan areas.

Yet none of these propositions is true.

In short, this book should prompt a startling revision of what many of us think we know about poverty in America.

Those who do not have time to read the entire book should at least read Christopher Jencks' essay, "Is the American Underclass Growing?" Among the interesting facts in this essay are the following:

—The school dropout rate for blacks decreased dramatically over the past two decades, from 28 percent to 15 percent.

—Reading skills among 17-year-old blacks improved substantially over the same time period. For example, twenty years ago, under 40 percent were rated as having at least "intermediate" reading skills; by 1988, the figure was 76 percent. (Over the

same time period, the percentage of whites in this category increased by only 6 percent, to 89 percent.)

—The homicide rate in 1989 was lower than that in 1980 and only slightly higher than the 1970 rate. The only group showing a substantial increase consisted of black men between the ages of 15 and 24, whose risk of a violent death increased by 30 percent.

—The marriage rate among black men with steady jobs fell almost as much between 1960 and 1980 as the rate among black men as a whole, suggesting that lack of male employment opportunities is only one factor in the decrease in two-parent black families.

Too much of our thinking about race and discrimination law is based on what economists call “stylized facts”—meaning generalizations that everyone assumes to be true without much thought. This book is a welcome addition to the debate.

*D.A.F.*

**THE LOGIC OF DELEGATION: CONGRESSIONAL PARTIES AND THE APPROPRIATIONS PROCESS.** By D. Roderick Kiewiet and Mathew D. McCubbins. University of Chicago Press: 1991. \$12.95 (paper).

The conventional wisdom is that Congress has steadily delegated its decisionmaking authority to the executive branch, while most of the power within Congress itself has gravitated to the committees. The views of the majority of legislators, then, have had progressively less influence on the making of public policy. This conventional wisdom forms an important part of the background for current debates about the separation of powers.

This book mounts a powerful challenge to that view. On theoretical grounds, the authors argue that legislative majorities have neither any real incentive to give up power, nor any means of doing so irrevocably, since what one majority gives up today another majority is equally free to reclaim tomorrow. This part of that analysis is based on what is now called “positive political theory” or more popularly “public choice”—the use of economic theory to explain political institutions.

More importantly, Kiewiet and McCubbins offer substantial empirical evidence on the subject. In an extensive historical and statistical study of the appropriations process, they conclude that