

NEW RIGHT VIEWS OF THE FAMILY



The New Right perspective on the family is rooted in conservative and traditional values, advocating the nuclear family as the ideal structure for societal stability. Proponents of this view, such as Charles Murray, argue that family breakdown leads to numerous social problems. Below, we will explore the key assumptions, the work of Charles Murray, including his influential book *Losing Ground*, the perceived strengths and criticisms of this perspective, its implementation in UK social policy, and its relevance to policy debates.

Key Assumptions of the New Right

Like functionalists before them, the New Right emphasises the importance of the nuclear family, defined as two heterosexual parents and their biological children. They argue this family structure provides the best environment for raising children due to its stability and clear division of gender roles:

- **Instrumental Role:** Men are the breadwinners, providing financial support for the family.
- **Expressive Role:** Women take on caregiving and emotional support roles.

This perspective holds that traditional family values promote social order and discipline. Conversely, the breakdown of these structures, such as the rise in single-parent families, is linked to social problems, including crime, educational failure, and dependency on welfare.

Charles Murray and the Underclass

Charles Murray, a leading New Right thinker, introduced the concept of the "**underclass**" to describe a segment of society characterised by welfare dependency and moral decline. According to Murray:

- **Single-Parent Families:** These families fail to provide the discipline and role models necessary for children to develop a strong work ethic.
- **Welfare State:** Generous welfare benefits encourage a "culture of dependency," disincentivising work and marriage.



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Losing Ground

In his book *Losing Ground* (1984), Murray critiques the US welfare system, arguing that it perpetuates poverty rather than alleviating it. He presents data suggesting that welfare policies disincentivise marriage and employment while fostering a cycle of dependency among recipients. Although *Losing Ground* primarily focuses on the United States, its themes resonated with conservative policymakers in the UK, who saw parallels in their own welfare systems. Murray contends that:

- Welfare policies unintentionally reward behaviour that undermines social stability, such as having children outside of marriage.
- Policymakers should reform welfare systems to promote self-reliance, work ethic, and traditional family values.

Conservative Social Policy in the UK

The New Right perspective, and Murray's ideas in particular, significantly influenced Conservative social policies in the UK, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and later governments:

- Reduction of Welfare Benefits:
 - Policies aimed to reduce welfare dependency by limiting benefits for single parents and unemployed individuals.
 - The introduction of means-testing and stricter eligibility criteria reflected Murray's emphasis on discouraging dependency.
- Promotion of Marriage and the Nuclear Family:
 - Tax incentives were introduced to encourage marriage.
 - Social campaigns promoted the nuclear family as the ideal structure.
- Criticism of Alternative Family Structures:
 - Public speeches by Conservative politicians frequently emphasised the problems associated with single-parent families, echoing Murray's arguments about the underclass.
- Tougher Stance on Crime:
 - New policies linked family breakdown to rising crime rates, with calls for stronger disciplinary measures and youth programmes to address behavioural issues.

These policies were part of a broader effort to instil a sense of personal responsibility and reduce the role of the state in individuals' lives.



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Criticisms of the New Right Perspective

1. Family Diversity:
 - Critics argue the New Right idealises the nuclear family and ignores the benefits provided by alternative family structures, such as same-sex families and single-parent households.
2. Oversimplification:
 - Assumes all social problems stem from family breakdown, neglecting structural factors like poverty, education, and inequality.
3. Patriarchal Bias:
 - Feminists critique the endorsement of traditional gender roles, seeing them as reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics.
4. Stigmatisation:
 - Stigmatises single parents and those reliant on welfare, creating a divisive narrative around family forms.

Questions for Students

What are the core assumptions of the New Right perspective on the family?

Summarise Charles Murray's views on the underclass and single-parent families.

What are the main arguments presented in Murray's book *Losing Ground*?

How have Murray's ideas influenced Conservative social policies in the UK?

Identify and explain two criticisms of the New Right perspective.

Compare the New Right perspective with feminist views on the family.

