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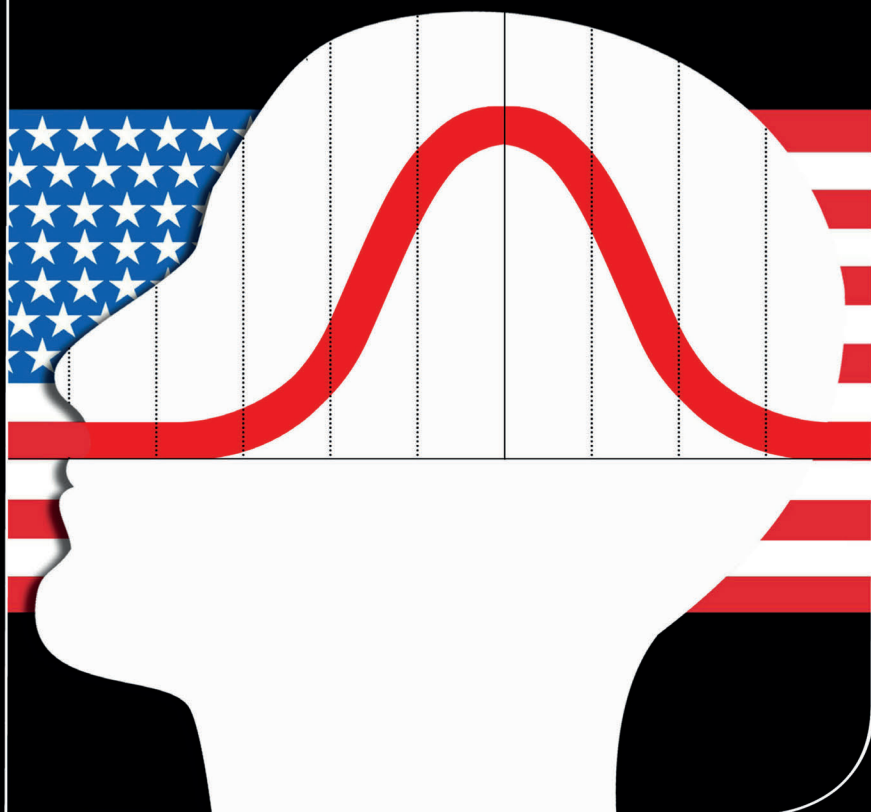
Library

A MACAT ANALYSIS

**RICHARD J. HERRNSTEIN  
& CHARLES MURRAY'S**

# **THE BELL CURVE**

**INTELLIGENCE AND CLASS STRUCTURE  
IN AMERICAN LIFE**





An Analysis of

**Richard J. Herrnstein  
and Charles Murray's**

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**The Bell Curve**  
Intelligence and Class Structure in  
American Life

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With  
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## **CRITICAL THINKING AND *THE BELL CURVE***

**Primary critical thinking skill: REASONING**

**Secondary critical thinking skill: INTERPRETATION**

Herrnstein & Murray's *The Bell Curve* is a deeply controversial text that raises serious issues about the stakes involved in reasoning and interpretation. The authors' central contention is that intelligence is the primary factor determining social outcomes for individuals – and that it is a better predictor of achievement than income, background or socioeconomic status. One of the major issues raised by the book was its discussion of 'racial differences in intelligence,' and its contention that there is a link between the low observed test scores and social outcomes for African-Americans and their lack of social attainment.

While the authors produce and interpret a great deal of data to back up their contentions, they ultimately fail to tackle the problem that neither 'intelligence' nor 'race' have widely accepted definitions in biology, anthropology or sociology. In consequence, the book it has been termed both 'racist' and 'pseudoscientific' thanks to what its critics see as both its faulty reasoning and its uncautious interpretation of evidence. The debate continues to this day, with academics on both sides engaged in fierce arguments over what can be argued from the data that Herrnstein and Murray used.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF THE ORIGINAL WORK**

**Richard J. Herrnstein** was an American experimental psychologist. Born in 1930, he studied for his PhD at Harvard. He spent the rest of his working life at the university, becoming a lead researcher in the field of intelligence and human behavior. His collaboration with Charles Murray came at the end of his life. Shortly before *The Bell Curve* was published in 1994, Herrnstein died from lung cancer.

**Charles Murray** was born in 1943. He earned his PhD in political science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, before going on to work at conservative think tanks. The author of several books, today Murray is one of America's most prominent conservative intellectuals. He has been at the American Enterprise Institute since 1990.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF THE ANALYSIS**

**Dr Christine Ma** received her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 2011. She was then a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, working in the Psychology Department and the Harvard Kennedy School. She is currently an Assistant Professor of psychology at the University of Laverne, California.

**Dr Michael Schapira** earned his Ph.D. from the Teachers College at Columbia University for research into historical perspectives on the crisis of the university system. He is now on the faculty of the philosophy department at Hofstra University.

## **ABOUT MACAT**

### **GREAT WORKS FOR CRITICAL THINKING**

Macat is focused on making the ideas of the world's great thinkers accessible and comprehensible to everybody, everywhere, in ways that promote the development of enhanced critical thinking skills.

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**Director for Education and Skills, Organisation for Economic**  
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**former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge**

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**Rt Hon Charles Clarke, former UK Secretary of State for Education**

‘The Macat analyses provide immediate access to the critical conversation surrounding the books that have shaped their respective discipline, which will make them an invaluable resource to all of those, students and teachers, working in the field.’

**Professor William Tronzo, University of California at San Diego**





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# WAYS IN TO THE TEXT

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## KEY POINTS

- Richard J. Herrnstein (1930–1994) was an American experimental psychologist;\* Charles Murray (b. 1943) is an American conservative\* political scientist\* (a scholar of political behavior and systems of government, holding right-wing political beliefs).
- *The Bell Curve* argues that inequality in America is the result of varying levels of intelligence in the population. The authors say that intelligence is the best predictor of success in life.
- *The Bell Curve* is one of the most controversial books of the twentieth century. It claims that there are large differences in intelligence between ethnic groups\* (subgroups who self-identify as Latino, black, white, or Asian, for example).

## Who are Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray?

The son of Hungarian Jewish immigrants, Richard J. Herrnstein, coauthor of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994), was born in 1930. He grew up in New York City, going on to Harvard University\* to study for a PhD in experimental psychology.\* At Harvard he worked with the famous psychologist B. F. Skinner.\*<sup>1</sup> Skinner was a founder of the school of behaviorism,

according to which all human behaviors are conditioned by rewards and punishments.<sup>2</sup> Later, however, after completing his PhD and joining the Harvard faculty as an experimental psychologist, Herrnstein moved away from Skinner's ideas. He became a leading researcher on intelligence and human behavior and claimed that innate (that is, inherent or inborn) biological forces contribute more to human behavior than one's environment.

Charles Murray was born in Newton, Iowa in 1943. He attended Harvard as an undergraduate and earned his PhD in political science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.\* During the 1980s he was a fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research,\* a conservative think tank\* (a privately funded organization conducting research and advocating for policy change). Here he wrote *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (1984), a book that made him famous in conservative intellectual circles. In 1990, Murray joined the American Enterprise Institute,\* another conservative think tank in Washington, DC.

Four years later, Murray and Herrnstein collaborated on *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. Shortly before the book was published, Herrnstein died of lung cancer. When *The Bell Curve* was met with both acclaim and controversy for its arguments and views, it was left to Murray to defend the book. He remains a staunch defender of the work's most controversial claims and has become one of America's most prominent conservative intellectuals.

### **What Does *The Bell Curve* Say?**

*The Bell Curve* presents a controversial argument. The book's core idea is that social inequality in America can be explained by genes\*—material inherited by children from their parents conferring biological characteristics. Herrnstein and Murray believe that intelligence is the most reliable predictor of success in life. At the top, the intellectual elite graduate from the best colleges and hold the best jobs. At the bottom, the intellectual underclass\* suffers poverty, crime, and unemployment.

According to Herrnstein and Murray, intelligence is predominantly an inherited attribute. In the simplest terms, either you are born smart or you are not. Neither home environment nor schooling can change your genetic\* inheritance.

The intellectual elite was fortunate enough to be born with good genes. The intellectual underclass was less fortunate in the genetic lottery. Between these two groups, *The Bell Curve* suggests, there is a growing gap, and there is little that the federal government can do about it. The authors believe that policies to improve opportunities for the lower classes will not achieve their goals because intelligence, not education or environment, determines people's success in life.

Herrnstein and Murray suggest that the intellectual divide in the population lies at the heart of the socioeconomic divide. An individual's socioeconomic status\* is based on their economic status and their social position. This social gap (the divide between those who have wealth and influence and those who do not) also happens to mirror racial divides in America. Herrnstein and Murray link social position to genetic inheritance, which therefore links intelligence to race\*—and offers an intellectual justification of the dominance of white people in American society.

When the book was first published these views about the social-racial divides in modern America were widely criticized. *The Bell Curve* became one of the most controversial publications of the 1990s. Three decades on, *The Bell Curve* is still controversial. Policy-makers and researchers continue to ask questions raised by the book:

- Is the intellectual underclass incapable of the same success as the intellectual elite?\*
- Is there a reason why African Americans are found in large numbers in impoverished communities?
- Is there nothing we can do to change this troubling reality?