

# **The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life Study Guide**

**The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life by Richard Herrnstein**

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## Plot Summary

The Bell Curve is one of the most controversial works of social science in the 1990s and perhaps from the 1990s to the present day. Its major concerns are those of the relationship between intelligence, genetics and social trends. The history of intelligence testing has occurred mostly in the twentieth century, but various social scientific ideological trends have turned against intelligence testing in recent decades in part because it seems to yield politically disturbing conclusions.

The authors defend these disturbing conclusions and argue that we must face up to them. First, intelligence is not an entirely environmental matter; in fact, it is not even a mostly environmental matter. The data appear to indicate not only that IQ correlates to what people normally regard as intelligence but that it is largely a genetic or at least non-environmental phenomenon.

They also argue that many important social problems are associated with low IQs, including crime, illegitimacy, divorce, poverty and bad parenting. It appears then that the major factor in most social problems in the United States is not a lack of government redistribution and social programs, latent or overt institutional discrimination or simply bad culture. Instead, most of these problems - not all - could be solved by raising the IQs of the least intelligent.

Perhaps the most controversial of the authors' findings is that the average African-American's IQ is a standard deviation - 15 IQ points - lower than the average European or Asian American. The authors also argue that this significantly lower IQ is not due to current racial discrimination, poor institutions, or past oppression. Instead, while they are tentative in their claims, they believe that low black IQ is genetic.

The authors argue that IQ is driving various important social trends that will have a serious impact on American life in the future. First, as intelligence testing improves, businesses have a reason to select more intelligent people for better jobs because they are more productive on the whole. As a result, the class of the most intelligent and the affluent class are merging. Further, due to the high level of mobility in the United States, the 'cognitive elite' is slowly isolating itself from the rest of society, not only geographically but socially and culturally as well. Finally, due to the fact that those with higher IQs have fewer children, the average American IQ is falling and thus the quality of life of the lower classes will fall as the future goes on.

The authors forcefully argue that these are trends that Americans must face head-on if they are to be effectively dealt with. They argue that affirmative action in college and in the workplace has been ineffective and that attempts to impose equality on the population have failed, only hurting the gifted. Instead, they argue for a return to classical liberal bourgeois values, an emphasis on individual responsibility and a scaled back welfare state in order to deal with present and forthcoming social problems tied to IQ.

# Introduction

## Introduction Summary and Analysis

'Intelligence' is something real that differs between people, it is a universal and ancient quality. But over the last thirty years, the idea of intelligence has become unpopular and politically incorrect. Initially, the study of intelligence was stimulated by the Darwinian theory of evolution.

Darwin's young cousin, Sir Francis Dalton, wanted a precise way to measure intelligence and tried to develop an intelligence test. While he failed, his successor, Alfred Binet, developed the first successful test. Later, Charles Spearman discovered a method of correlating the ability to form well on tests with a single variable, 'g', which came to stand for intelligence. Then David Wechsler invented another intelligence test, the WISC, in the 1930s.

Once the 1960s arrived, a controversy concerning intelligence testing arose. Powerful social democratic movements arose that believed in the equality of all people, regardless of any evidence to the contrary. Most social scientists came to wish to find that differences between people were wholly environmental.

When War on Poverty programs began to fail in the late 1960s, some claimed this was due to low IQ in those who were being helped, but the supporters of the Great Society programs vehemently denied this and ran many of the believers in innate IQ out of the social scientists. Throughout the 1970s, IQ testing became increasingly controversial, many arguing that the idea of intelligence is bankrupt and is biased against minorities.

Intelligence theorists came to differ on what intelligence was. Some believed that intelligence represented a kind of brain structuring, others saw intelligence as information processing, and still others divided 'g' into multiple metrics. The authors of the book are classicists. They believe that knowing the intelligence of young children can give one a good idea of how children with similar IQs will, on average, perform.

The authors believe that the data on intelligence have conclusively shown that there is a general factor of intelligence, standardized tests measure the factor to some degree but IQ tests are better, IQ scores tend to track what we ordinarily mean by 'smart', IQ scores are stable over a life, properly administered IQ tests are not demonstrably biased against social, economic, ethnic or racial groups and cognitive ability is substantially heritable, no less than 40% and no more than 80%.



# **Chapter 1, Cognitive Class and Education, 1900-1990, Chapter 2, Cognitive Partitioning by Occupation**

## **Chapter 1, Cognitive Class and Education, 1900-1990, Chapter 2, Cognitive Partitioning by Occupation Summary and Analysis**

The United States has spent the twentieth century being the most open society in history. Never have more people had an opportunity to enter a country with such a vast birth of opportunities. But there are forces that work against individual advancement; as higher education becomes increasingly democratized, new obstacles are being placed between individuals. These obstacles will result in greater and harder to overcome division than many older barriers.

The most amazing feature of higher-education in the United States between 1900 and 1990 is that the number of people with college degrees has increased fifteen times. Furthermore, those admitted into college were chosen for their IQ through increasingly effective methods. The most important time period for this growth and IQ tracking was during the 1950s when the number of people in college increased faster than it had the previous thirty years. As the 1990s begin, 80% of those in the top 25% of skill and intelligence will go to college following high school. Of those in the highest percentiles of skill and intelligence, college is a foregone conclusion.

However, college is not the same as it was in 1990, as the top colleges in the United States have changed. As the number of intelligent children in college has increased, colleges had to diversify, separating them and classifying them. Some colleges drew the very best and brightest from each year's graduating high school classes and the intellectual abilities of these students increased dramatically beyond the remaining college population. The United States has, as a result, become increasingly stratified according to intelligence.

Different occupations typically represent different average IQs: doctors tend to be smarter than maids, to give one example. Chapter 2 addresses whether those in occupations with higher IQs are required to have higher IQs in order to perform these jobs. For now, whatever the reason is, people with different average IQs end up in different jobs. The reasons for this must go deep. To guess an adult male's occupation from little information, knowing his childhood IQ will help you as much as knowing how long he went to school.

As jobs increase in intellectual requirements, IQ increases in importance. Digging a ditch does not require anything but a strong back, but in order to be a high-powered

lawyer, high IQ is a must. This is true for jobs like accounting, engineering, professorships, dentistry, mathematics and science. The average IQ for these individuals is 120. Only 5% of those in the highest 10% of IQ were in these fields in 1900, with little change through 1940. But in 1990, 25% of those in the top 10% hold these jobs.

IQ has also become a requirement for being a business executive. To be a CEO of a successful, large firm in 1900, one only needed to be born to the right family. Intelligence may have mattered, but CEOs would not be selected on this basis. This was still true in 1950, but throughout the next thirty years, corporations brought in intelligent people to maximize their profits even if they came from lower classes or socially disfavored minority groups.

In the 1950s, most intelligent people were spread throughout many distinct occupations. But towards the end of the 20th century, a large sample of this group is located within a much smaller number of jobs which have various methods of selecting for IQ.



# Chapter 3, The Economic Pressure to Partition, Chapter 4, Steeper Ladders, Narrower Gates

## Chapter 3, The Economic Pressure to Partition, Chapter 4, Steeper Ladders, Narrower Gates Summary and Analysis

Many hold that people with different IQ end up with different jobs because of education - those with the best scores go to the best schools, and so on. SATs don't matter once one has gained entrance into the right school. The authors argue that education is only part of the explanation, for intelligence is needed to learn the material it is also needed for 'hollow credentialing'. Educational degrees are job-tickets for those who could have done the job without the degree.

But IQ is still important, as IQ makes - on average - for better employees. Lawyers with higher IQs are more productive on average, as are carpenters. The tie between cognitive power and job performances is quite high. Test scores that measure g predict job performance better than test scores tailored to a particular job. IQ advantages last a lifetime; individuals must learn, but being smarter usually leads to retaining knowledge longer. IQ better predicts productivity than interviews, reference checks and college transcripts.

Employers allowed to select for IQ can produce large profit gains from hiring those with high IQs. Economies that allow for these practices will be, on average, more efficient. But since 1971, the Supreme Court has forbidden such hiring. The authors admit that calculating how much this ban hurts the economy is difficult but in 1980, they predict that the loss was between \$13 and \$80 billion/year. The authors' point is only that intelligence is deeply tied to job performance and so politically correct laws can make the economy less efficient.

The authors predict that separating out members of society according to intelligence through the mechanisms of jobs and learning will progress and almost no one can stop it. Economic pressure will force this trend forward—as top colleges produce smarter and smarter graduates, the value of intelligence increases. The wages earned by intelligent people will pull away from those with low IQs. Differences in education can't explain these changes.

Physical segregation of the smartest is increasing as well. The most intelligent have jobs that prevent them from being on the shop floor, construction site, and so on. They increasingly use computers and electronic communication; and they also choose





different areas to live, shop, play, worship and educate their children. Isolation is increased by the mobile and democratic society of the United States.

The more the United States gives children chances to develop their cognitive powers, the more the environmental impact of IQ difference will be eliminated. But as the US equalizes environment, biology will make more and more of a difference. Further, high IQ means that life success is more likely. How well people fare in the US economy will increasingly be a function of IQ.

Another exacerbating trend is 'assortative' mating. People with similar IQs marry. With increased educational and job separation, IQ mating will have increasing effects on future generations. This system is creating an American class system.



# Chapter 5, Poverty, Chapter 6, Schooling

## Chapter 5, Poverty, Chapter 6, Schooling Summary and Analysis

Many people believe that poverty results from being born into poverty. The authors acknowledge that this is somewhat true, as those who grow up in the bottom 5% of socioeconomic circumstances will end up in poverty eight times more often than those in the top 5%. Yet low IQ is an even stronger predictor. If you have an IQ in the bottom 5%, you are fifteen times more likely to end up in poverty than someone in the top 5%. It is clear from the data that intelligence primarily drives poverty.

If you are born into poverty with an IQ of 100, you have a 90% chance of being out of poverty by your early 30s. Intelligence is the most important predictor of poverty, with marital status a close second. Those who are smart and well-educated are basically never impoverished, yet young white adults who marry are almost never in poverty either, even with intelligence and education levels below the average.

It is no longer true that leaving high school before graduating is no social failure. Today, graduating from high school is the norm and failing to graduate produces social disabilities. Most see dropouts as having poor socioeconomic backgrounds, but the story is more complex. Almost no one among whites with an IQ in the top 25% will fail to complete high school, no matter how poor their families are. Dropout almost never occurs in the top half of IQs. Socioeconomic status matters most for those with the lowest IQs. If you are poor, this will have a small effect on whether you will drop out independent of your IQ.

To be more likely to achieve a college degree, it will be best to be in the top of IQs and/or socioeconomic status, but high IQ is more important. Similarly, low IQ is worse than low socioeconomic status. Poor students with high IQs tend to make it through college, but rich students with low IQs often do not.



# Chapter 7, Unemployment, Idleness, and Injury, Chapter 8, Family Matters

## Chapter 7, Unemployment, Idleness, and Injury, Chapter 8, Family Matters Summary and Analysis

Unemployed people are understood as pursuing work but failing to achieve it. But there are others not looking. Both are strongly correlated with low IQ for whites. Most of out of the labor force were in college or graduate school but of those not in school, 15% spent a month or more outside of work in 1989. That number was twice that in those with low IQs and socioeconomic background does not explain it.

Why are some out of work? Physical disability is one cause, but low IQ still is a good predictor. Of those who see themselves as too disabled to work, nine out of ten fell in the bottom 25% of IQ and less than 5% were in the top 25%. It is not clear why IQ and physical difficulties are closely related, but those with lower IQs may be more likely to have accidents.

Unemployment tells a similar story. Employment depends on IQ, and socioeconomic background becomes irrelevant when intelligence is accounted for. Most men work steadily but the major risk factor for unemployment is always IQ.

The breakdown of the family has some truth in sectors of white society, particularly among those with low levels of IQ and education; however, this is less true for the intelligent and well-educated. The more intelligent get married more often and the relationships last longer, but the more intelligent get married later. Divorce typically is worse among the poor and less well-educated, but low IQ explains this more effectively.

Illegitimacy is also tied to IQ, and it is worsened when IQ is low and young women are brought up in poor, broken homes. When education is poor, low IQ best predicts when women will have children out of wedlock. At the highest levels of education, practically no white women have illegitimate children, no matter the family background or IQ.



# Chapter 9, Welfare Dependency, Chapter 10, Parenting

## Chapter 9, Welfare Dependency, Chapter 10, Parenting Summary and Analysis

Most assume that welfare mothers have low IQs because they did not do well in school. After all, it seems like women with higher IQs can find jobs more easily and resist welfare dependency as a result. 75% of white women on welfare within one year of their first child's birth were in the bottom 25% of IQ, as opposed to 5% in the top 25%. Those on temporary welfare can be predicted powerfully by low IQ even when controlled for other factors.

Chronic welfare dependence, however, is more complex. White women with higher IQs and socioeconomic background simply do not rely on welfare chronically. But low socioeconomic background predicts welfare dependence better than low IQ. Poverty cultures, then, transmit chronic welfare dependence, but the culture of poverty mostly influences those with low IQs.

Good parenting and bad parenting are real phenomena, but are these phenomena related to IQ? Socioeconomic status and good parenting are linked to discipline and the intellectual and emotional development of children. Those with higher socioeconomic status do better and abuse and neglect are concentrated among the poor. But IQ explains much of the difference away from parenting differences usually linked to education or class.

Low IQ tends to lead to low birth weight, even controlling for other factors. Mothers with high IQs gave their children better environments, but socioeconomic background and current poverty matter. Low IQ mothers also are tied to poor children temperament with regard to friendliness and with poor motor and social development. Poverty has an independent causal role, but it is mild. Further, the child's IQ is tied to the mother's IQ.



# Chapter 11, Crime, Chapter 12, Civility and Citizenship

## Chapter 11, Crime, Chapter 12, Civility and Citizenship Summary and Analysis

Criminals have different IQ distributions than the general population. Criminals have an average IQ of 92, eight points below average. The most serious and frequent offenders have even lower IQs. IQ-criminality ties are especially acute with young men. The differences between those getting caught and getting away with their crimes are not significant. Socioeconomic status is not a major explanatory factor. High IQ often protects against relapsing into criminal behavior. Turbulent homes and criminal parents will less likely follow their parents if they have high IQs. Low IQ predicts criminal behavior and socioeconomic background was a negligible risk when controlled for IQ.

To maintain a free society, citizens must participate in civic enterprises, be it elections or being a good neighbor. Without civility, a society will require coercion to sustain the social order. Civility is very difficult to isolate and study but it may correlate with political involvement, which is tied to participation level and knowledge level. The best data on these matters result from children. Higher IQs learn about politics and the working of government faster; they are more likely to talk or learn about politics. As children age, their differences in political involvement increase.

The standard view of political involvement rests on socioeconomic status. Those with higher levels of socioeconomic status vote more often and know more about politics. They also care more. But the key level is education—those who vote the least are the least well-educated. Education matters because it is correlated to IQ. High IQ is also associated with 'middle-class values', staying in school, working hard, and staying married. These factors help to maintain civil society.



# Chapter 13, Ethnic Differences in Cognitive Ability, Chapter 14, Ethnic Inequalities in Relation to IQ

## Chapter 13, Ethnic Differences in Cognitive Ability, Chapter 14, Ethnic Inequalities in Relation to IQ Summary and Analysis

There is no doubt that there are ethnic differences in IQ. Large human groups vary between one another culturally and biologically, so the notion that they might vary in intelligence should not surprise anyone. These differences have important social consequences, but they are not as bad as many suppose.

East Asians have the highest scores in IQ and achievement tests. It is not clear how large the difference is, whether it ranges from a few to ten points. But East Asians have higher nonverbal intelligence but equal or lower in verbal intelligence.

African-Americans and European-Americans differ by an entire standard deviation. The average white has a higher IQ than 84% of blacks. Average black and white IQs vary within every socioeconomic class but differ more at higher levels than lower levels. IQ differences are not the result of test bias and have equal predictive force across races.

In the less than several dozen years, the IQ variance between blacks and whites has decreased three points, but this is due to a smaller number of very low black scores. Diminishing racism and higher social achievement by blacks may be closing the gap. It is not clear what the relationship is between genes and environment. The differences between East Asians and European whites appear to be genetic and there appears to be similar evidence for genetic differences between American whites and blacks. But environmental factors do have a role, as IQ tests may also have different meanings for those from different cultures.

If there are racial differences in IQ, it is not a major social disaster. Individuals should deal with one another in the same way. A real problem lies only in the effect that elites ignoring real differences will have on social policy.

Ethnic inequalities of various sorts - education, unemployment, crime, etc. - are often discussed. In this chapter, the authors relate these inequalities to IQ. They find that Latinos and whites of similar IQ levels have almost the same social and economic outcomes. Few differences are substantial.

But blacks and whites have a more complicated relationship. When it comes to education level of good jobs, black-white differences change places. When IQ is



controlled for, higher numbers of blacks than whites have college degrees and prestigious jobs. When IQ is controlled for, difference in wages for year-round workers shrinks to only a few hundred dollars.

But the black-white gap in family income/year or those below poverty shrinks when controlling for IQ but is still large, as are differences in unemployment, marriage, illegitimacy and so on. Explanations for these inequalities abound, but IQ probably plays some role. Thinking through these issues carefully and without ideology is important to getting at the truth.



# **Chapter 15, The Demography of Intelligence, Chapter 16, Social Behavior and the Prevalence of Low Cognitive Ability, Chapter 17, Raising Cognitive Ability**

## **Chapter 15, The Demography of Intelligence, Chapter 16, Social Behavior and the Prevalence of Low Cognitive Ability, Chapter 17, Raising Cognitive Ability Summary and Analysis**

Various demographic trends are probably causing IQs to fall in the United States, and these trends will have consequences. First, modernization reduces birth rates which fall faster for the educated rather than the uneducated. For this reason, a downward shift in ability occurs on average; this is exacerbated by the fact that educated women have babies later.

A professional consensus exists in the United States that these downward pressures have operated either through most or all of the century. Women in all races and ethnicities follow this pattern, and blacks and Latinos are the most affected which could produce further gaps in achievement.

Immigration rules also produce downward trends. The average immigrant IQ in the 1980s was 95 but this might not be a problem, as immigrant IQs tend to increase as they assimilate, but other trends indicate that the immigrant population may still be changing in a negative way. Changes in the environment and technological level of the United States are only masking these trends.

Chapter sixteen does not ask whether low IQ results in social problems but rather seeks to understand how widespread low IQ is among those with these problems. Causal relationships are hard to establish but measuring prevalence is easier. Most of the deleterious societal problems in our day most affect those with low IQs. Solutions to these problems must take this into account.

Many of the social problems in the United States today could be solved if we could increase intelligence substantially, regularly and at a reasonable cost. The environmental improvements needed, better food, better educational environments for young children and better schools overall will help, but the task of increasing intelligence is still hard.



Nutritional approaches look good, as rising IQs in other countries seem explainable by increased nutrition, but the link is mysterious at this point. Traditional education does not substantially diminish IQ inequality in developed countries as much of the gains of twelve-year education have already been achieved. And special programs to raise IQ only have temporary effects. Educational research must be pursued in more detail.

Many advocate preschool as a means to raising IQs but Head Start, the federal government program that helps disadvantaged children, does not raise IQ. Most costly and substantive preschool programming may help but it is not clear whether the gains achieved from such programs would be significant. The only reliable mode of increasing IQ is adoption at birth from poor environments to good ones. Average IQ gains through adoption range around six points. The problems of low IQ for now appear without solution.



# Chapter 18, The Leveling of American Education, Chapter 19, Affirmative Action in Higher Education

## Chapter 18, The Leveling of American Education, Chapter 19, Affirmative Action in Higher Education Summary and Analysis

Many believe that American public schools poorly perform their assigned tasks, and there is evidence to support this view. But it is unclear whether or not American school children of previous decades would do better on academic skill tests. Those children with average IQs may have better academic preparation today than at any time in the recent past. The main problem is that the SAT scores of the most gifted children have been declining since the mid 1960s and verbal scores have not recovered.

The authors argue that this is due to the fact that more attention and resources have been invested in the disadvantaged than the gifted. When the book was written, one-tenth of a percent of federal funds that went to pre-college education went to the gifted. American education has been made less demanding, including textbooks, course requirements, homework and graduation. The gifted are being enabled to leave school without proper development.

Policy design requires look at the facts. Universal education systems will inevitably fail some, but our system could be much better. The average student in high school has little reason to work hard. Going to college is easy and doing well in high school has little payoff in terms of money or jobs. But there is hope: given trends in the past there is reason to expect for educational achievement to increase in the future.

The federal government should create educational institutions that allow parents to send children to schools that they choose, be it through vouchers, tax credits or public school choice. Federal scholarships should be designed to promote educational achievement and some funds focused on the disadvantaged should be reallocated to the gifted.

The authors urge primarily a change in attitude among educators. Until the second half of the century, most acknowledged the importance of educating the gifted because the future of society depended on them. Education has to aim for greater technical achievements, as it should aim to produce the wisdom and virtue associated with an educated individual.

The authors argue that affirmative actions, as it is practiced on college campus, should be evaluated based on what it actually achieved. They believe the practice cannot be rationally maintained when one looks at the data. Affirmative action is a huge advantage



for blacks and Latinos, giving them their own admissions progress. The average black freshmen at top colleges are in the tenth to fifteenth percentile of the average IQ on campus. The gap is not reduced in graduate school and even appears to grow.

Asians are particularly hard hit by this process; they actually suffer a penalty. The typical Asian freshman is at the sixtieth percentile in IQ, but the differences between Asians and whites are small compared to that of blacks and Latinos. The gap cannot be defended on the grounds that it helps the disadvantaged as disadvantaged blacks are given far more advantages the disadvantaged whites. And blacks from rich backgrounds are also given an edge over poor whites.

Affirmative action has placed more blacks and Latinos in college but the costs are large. Blacks and Latinos are a small minority at elite colleges but they are a large proportion of students that do poorly. The gap in achievement may have psychological consequences and may be the source of increased racial tension on these campuses and large black dropout rates. Graduation does not mean the same thing to minorities and whites.

The authors urge that affirmative action be used to benefit the truly disadvantaged, no matter their skin color, when qualifications are the same. This would be more fair and more in line with the original intentions of the program.



# Chapter 20, Affirmative Action in the Workplace

## Chapter 20, Affirmative Action in the Workplace Summary and Analysis

As a general rule, firms will seek to hire the most productive workers they can and employment tests will make it easier to find them, but due to affirmative action and the Supreme Court ruling out achievement tests, employers have been prevented from doing this. The law as it stands is rooted in the view that ability tests are not good ways of picking employees; tests which check particular job skills are thought better. But empirically, this is false.

Job discrimination laws are thought to have had some impact in certain jobs, in certain settings, into the 1960s and 70s, but their impact has not been decisive. Blacks are often overrepresented in white collar and professional jobs, which indicate the pervasiveness of affirmative action in the workplace. The costs of affirmative action in the work place are not well studied, particularly job performance. The best data we have indicates wide racial disparities in job performance.

Some hard truths must be faced. First, current job discrimination law has economic costs and is unfair to employers and employees. Further, when IQ is controlled for, it is difficult to show that the United States still suffers from racial discrimination to a great degree within jobs and pay. The authors argue for a return to the original idea of affirmative action, eliminating the current set of job discrimination laws. Increased productivity and fairness will be substantial.



# Chapter 21, The Way We Are Headed

## Chapter 21, The Way We Are Headed Summary and Analysis

Chapter twenty-one speculates about how the increasing separation of classes based on IQ will affect American life in government. They expect for the high-IQ elites to be increasingly isolated. They predict that the smartest will tend to be the wealthiest as time goes on and that the quality of life for people with low IQs will increase.

The authors reaffirm their commitment to the view that there is an 'invisible migration' of high IQ individuals into social elites. They argue that life has been good for the socioeconomic elites and that this demonstrates the triumph of the American ideal. But they are worried about the formation of a class of high-IQ individuals. These individuals often have very different cultural habits, watching far less television and reading more often. Since high-IQ is correlated with better job performance, as time progresses the high-IQed will migrate into the richest sectors of society.

The authors urge that Americans face reality about a growing low-IQ underclass. They worry about a new sort of 'Latin American' conservatism developing, where elites act to keep the underclass in a lower social and economic position, rather than embracing the open liberal society advocated by classical liberals like Adam Smith. They also worry about how children will fare under this system.

If a high-IQ elite class forms, and the underclass continues to deteriorate, the state will probably take on increasing 'custodial' duties. When the elites in a society become rich enough, they often stop worrying about their own economic status and tend to feel sympathy towards and guilt about those who have less. The authors suspect that elites will increasingly support policies that coddle and take care of the poor, meaning an extended commitment to the welfare state. Child care in the inner city will become the state's problem.



# Chapter 22, A Place for Everyone

## Chapter 22, A Place for Everyone Summary and Analysis

In the final chapter, the authors advocate policies they believe will help to thwart the coming trends. They argue that the ideology of egalitarianism must be rejected. While some forms of equality are ideal, such as the idea of equal rights, the idea that people should be equal regardless of their choices is pernicious. Further, a good sort of equality must be advocated: equality of authority, where individuals are allowed to govern themselves.

Individuals should be allowed to find valued places in society. Inevitably letting the process of cognitive migration work itself out will help make society more productive. Further, individual freedom will allow individuals with varied IQs to find places in society where they are valued.

The authors argue that the end of the twentieth century United States has a series of social rules that make life easy for the cognitive elite and hard on everyone else. We should make it easier to make a living, to live a virtuous life, to stay married, and so on. They also advocate allowing wage inequality to promote the ideal but are worried about the implications of staying silent about demographic trends. Finally, the Great Society has failed and its programs must be scaled back.

The authors end by arguing that inequality is a fact of life and that trying to cure it has been a disaster. The best this country can do is to learn to live with it and to adopt a moral ideal that evaluates individuals based on their actual strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices, assets and debits.



# Characters

## The Cognitive Elite

Perhaps the main focus of *The Bell Curve* is on what the authors term 'the cognitive elite'. The cognitive elite are those members of American society that both have high IQs and positions of power, influence and resources when it comes to occupation. They are elites in the sense that they are smarter and more powerful than the large majority of Americans.

For much of American history, those with high IQs and those who were rich were not often the same people. The rich were not always the ones with great technical skill or large vocabularies, but were those who struck it rich through entrepreneurial skill or inherited money from one who did. But as time progresses, those with high IQs can be selected for by intelligence testing. Those with high IQs are on average more productive than those with low IQs. As a result, there are strong and perhaps irresistible economic pressures for class stratification, with high-IQ individuals the bosses of the low-IQed, making far more money than those with low-Qs, holding more political positions, being healthier, living longer and - most importantly - having fewer children.

The authors see an almost Marxist process of class separation occurring - but instead of the capitalist class becoming relatively smaller and more powerful and more in control of the working-class proletariat, the high-IQed will become more isolated culturally, geographically and morally from the cognitive underclass.

## The Cognitive Underclass

The cognitive underclass is also a main character in *The Bell Curve*. The cognitive underclass contrasts with the cognitive elite—they are members of American society that have both low IQs and lack positions of power, influence and resources when it comes to occupation. They are an underclass in the sense that they are a large group that is less intelligence and powerful than a small minority of Americans.

The cognitive underclass will often not go to college, and if they do, they will not go to the best colleges, whereas the cognitive elite often go through elite colleges in the United States. The authors argue that, due to the fact that the cognitive underclass tend to have low-IQs, they are prone to a wide array of social problems. In their view, low IQs are associated with and maybe causally tied to many social problems including but not limited to poverty, undereducation, unemployment, workplace injury, familial abuse and neglect, welfare dependency, divorce, crime and poor citizenship.

The authors are concerned that because the cognitive underclass has more children and that because current immigration to the United States is comprised largely of immigrants with below-average IQ that the cognitive underclass will not only continue to grow but that their average IQ will continue to fall. These trends will produce more social



problems in greater amounts. As the cognitive elite becomes richer, more powerful and more intelligent, their attention will turn towards helping the 'less fortunate,' leading them to take up a 'custodial' role vis-à-vis the cognitive underclass, a trend which the authors find disturbing.

## **High-IQ Whites**

The authors argue that high-IQ whites have a much higher quality of life due to their high IQs.

## **Low-IQ Whites**

The authors argue that low-IQ whites are far more prone to a variety of social ills than high-IQ whites.

## **Blacks**

The authors argue that - in all likelihood - low African American IQ is partly genetic.

## **East Asians**

East Asians are thought to be the losers in the Affirmative Action system.

## **Alfred Binet**

He created the first usable intelligent test in 1903.

## **Charles Spearman**

Spearman developed the idea of 'g' a factor that correlates to intelligence and that is measured by IQ score.

## **David Wechsler**

Wechsler invented the WAIS or the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, in 1939.

## **Social Scientists in the 1960s**

Social scientists in the 1960s began to turn against the idea of intelligence testing, in part for ideological reasons.



## **Educators**

American educators face pressure to focus more resources on the least advantaged rather than promoting the steady state of the gifted.

## **Children**

The authors believe that children are the major victims of current United States social policy.

## **The Poor**

The authors believe that poverty and low IQ are strongly correlated.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Intelligence Quotient**

IQ, the score used to assess intelligence.

### **The Alfred Binet Intelligence Test**

The first intelligence test, which is discussed in the book. It measures IQ.

### **The WAIS**

A later intelligence test developed in 1939 that is still used today.

### **Affirmative Action**

The social program that is supposed to promote the interests of disadvantaged minorities by requiring schools and workplaces to include a higher proportion of them in these institutions than they would through merit-based criteria alone.

### **The War on Poverty**

A series of social programs implemented by the Johnson administration in the mid 1960s. These programs have caused great controversy and the authors are among its foremost critics.

### **Class Stratification**

Class stratification occurs when distinctions between social classes become more pronounced. The authors believe that this is occurring between IQ-levels.

### **Public Education**

The American public education system is not any worse than it has been in decades past but it still doesn't do justice to gifted education.

### **Crime**

The authors believe that crime is strongly correlated with low IQ and perhaps causally related.



## **Bad Parenting**

The authors believe that bad parenting is strongly correlated with low IQ and perhaps causally related.

## **Civility**

Civility is that quality of a citizen which causes her to uphold that public morality of her society, making institutions work without coercion.

## **Egalitarianism**

A series of ideologies, some of which the authors object to. The versions they most object to are those that ignore or misrepresent natural biological inequalities between people.

## **Natural Inequality**

The authors argue throughout the book that it would be foolish to ignore natural inequalities between individuals.

## **Individual Responsibility**

The authors advocate a strong classical liberal emphasis on individual responsibility and reject the view that the state should care for the disadvantaged to a great degree.

## **The United States**

The authors are primarily focused on the society of the United States of America.

## **Elite Colleges**

Elite colleges increasingly contain high-IQed individuals, leading more and more to the formation of a cognitive elite.

## **The American Workplace**

Affirmative action in the American workplace has been a failure, the authors argue.

# Themes

## The Genetic Basis of IQ

A major theme of *The Bell Curve* concerns the sources of intelligence. The book was published in the early nineties, about three decades after social scientists began to turn about the idea of the heritability of intelligence along with the notion of intelligence in the first place. For instance, many social scientists held that intelligence testing laid at the root of the eugenics movement and the view that some races, for instance, had systematically lower IQs than other races due to genetic factors had clearly racist implications.

Other scientists were so keen on emphasizing the role of environment in determining intelligence that they came to fracture the very concept of intelligence, claiming that there is no one thing that we mean when we speak of 'intelligence,' but rather a series of socially constructed metrics of skill that are inappropriately combined under the label of 'IQ'.

The authors of *The Bell Curve* strongly disagree with both of these ideas. They first emphasize that despite the protestations of many social scientists and intellectuals on the left, the notion of IQ is not only statistically coherent, it roughly correlated to ordinary people's usage of the terms 'intelligent' and 'smart'. Furthermore, the authors use various studies of IQ tests to show that when one isolates for environment and other post-natal factors, much of the differences in IQ remain, which strongly suggests that IQ has a partly genetic basis, if not a largely genetic basis.

## The Stratification of Society

Because the authors believe that IQ is heritable, they believe that environment and training will not turn out to be effective methods of increasing IQ levels. Further, they believe that native IQ and job productivity are highly correlated. As a result, businesses seeking to maximize profit (most of them) have a strong, if not irresistible incentive to seek out high-IQ individuals for their top jobs, as having intelligent people in the right places will increase profits.

For this reason, however, there will be pressure to place people of high-IQ in top professions across American society, which will inevitably lead to financial gains on the part of the more intelligent. And due to the increased social mobility of Americans, this new 'cognitive elite' will increasingly have the ability to isolate itself from the population at large.

What's worse, the 'cognitive underclass' tends to have more children. This trend along with increased low-IQ immigration will have a tendency to lower the average IQ of the cognitive underclass, increasingly dividing the general population from the cognitive



elite. As a result, the authors expect for American society to become increasingly stratified between high-IQ and low-IQ social classes.

Much of the argumentation about the nature of genetics in *The Bell Curve* is aimed at showing that IQ is heritable precisely because the authors are concerned about how heritable IQ will lead to class stratification and the threat class stratification poses to American society as it has existed since its inception.

## **Facing the Reality of Inequality**

If the authors urge anything, they urge that their readers and their critics face reality. For too long, the authors argue, left-wing ideology has blinded social scientists to obvious facts about IQ, its coherence and its heritability. A spirit of egalitarianism, which holds that all individual differences are environmental and not inborn, pervades academic which leads scientists to be ideologically unable to perceive evidence in favor of a genetic basis for IQ.

The authors are always careful to emphasize that the data they have do not prove a causal connection between IQ and the various factors associated with it in the data, but they do constantly point to the fact that the data is strongly suggestive: IQ is heritable and is associated with a variety of social ills.

Furthermore, the IQ of African-Americans is substantially lower than white and East Asian IQs and that indeed perhaps this fact and not racial discrimination or a lack of redistribution is at the root of the social problems in black America.

But the authors, contrary to their critics, do not appear motivated by racism. If anything, they seem motivated by unusually Marxist fears about class stratification and express a sense of desperation for Americans to wake up and realize what is happening to their society. They do not express animus towards left-wing social scientists. Instead, they seem eager to gain their agreement because they believe that all Americans have an important part to play in preventing their predicted trends from having the nasty effects of American society the authors expect.

# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of the Bell Curve is - notoriously for some, and heroically for others - unabashedly conservative/libertarian. The authors affirm the values of individual responsibility, merit-based social institutions, bourgeois virtues, unbroken homes, limited government and free markets. They also emphasize innate biological features of human nature and recommend that society accept natural inequalities between the abilities of individuals rather than attempt to deny or repress them.

One of the reasons the reaction to The Bell Curve was so vehement was in part because it was perceived to be a right-wing response to social problems. And in some ways, it is. By emphasizing the partial heritability of IQ and then attempting to show that low IQ explains much of the variance in crime, poverty, abuse, undereducation, etc. between individuals and even races, the authors tacitly (and sometimes explicitly) deny a large role for government in altering social environments and providing a social safety net as effective means of fighting poverty and other social ills.

But the book is not merely negative in its perspective, it is foreboding but positive as well. For instance, the authors are deeply concerned about the stratification of American society and the effects they suspect it will have on American culture and the quality of life of the cognitive underclass. Yet they believe by facing reality, Americans can do things to ameliorate these problems. Thus, the authors make a variety of positive policy recommendations.

## Tone

The tone of The Bell Curve contains varied elements. It is stern but cautious, critical but hopeful, foreboding yet positive. The book is stern because it is out to encourage people to face harsh realities about the heritability of IQ and the inability of government to cure social ills. It is also stern in its insistence that there are important, perhaps partly heritable elements in the wide gulf between white and black IQs.

However, the book is also cautious because the authors realize how controversial their positions are. The book is quite long and contains a wide range of research; further, the authors are resistant to draw inferences about causation from correlation.

The book is critical about the attitudes of social scientists of their day for being beholden to ideology in their research and trying to sometimes hide and misinterpret data that do not support their preconceived conclusions. But the book is hopeful; it does not insist that those who disagree with the book cannot be reached or that they are not well-intentioned, just confused.



Finally, *The Bell Curve* is foreboding in tone. It predicts a grim future for the United States, with an increasingly isolated and powerful cognitive elite and a growing and increasingly poor cognitive underclass. But the authors are hopeful because they believe if the American people are honest with themselves and admit these trends are genuine, then they can stop the problems before they occur or at least slow them down.

## Structure

*The Bell Curve* is a long book, at nearly 850 pages. The book's structure is not complex, however. *The Bell Curve* contains an introduction, and twenty-two chapters divided into four parts. It then contains seven appendices, over one hundred pages of notes and a sixty-page bibliography. The heart of the book, however, is still large, running around 525 pages.

The introduction carefully explains the task of the book and sets the reader up to be shocked and disturbed by many of its conclusions. Part I, "The Emergence of a Cognitive Elite" argues that a social class of high-IQ, powerful individuals is coalescing in American society. The authors use four chapters to make their point, "Cognitive Class and Education, 1900-1990", "Cognitive Partitioning by Occupation", "The Economic Pressure to Partition", and "Steeper Ladders, Narrower Gates".

In Part II, "Cognitive Classes and Social Behavior", the authors argue that IQ is strongly correlated to a wide variety of social ills. They argue specifically that low-IQ is strongly correlated with poverty, poor schooling, unemployment, idleness, injury, divorce, poor parenting, welfare dependency, crime and poor citizenship. They do so in seven chapters, "Poverty", "Schooling", "Unemployment, Idleness, and Injury", "Family Matters", "Welfare Dependency", "Parenting", "Crime", and "Civility and Citizenship".

Part III, "The National Context" covers ethnic differences in intelligence, the distribution of intelligence and the tie between social behavior and low IQ. They make their points in four chapters, "Ethnic Differences in Cognitive Ability", "Ethnic Inequalities in Relation to IQ", "The Demography of Intelligence", and "Social Behavior and the Prevalence of Low Cognitive Ability".

In Part IV, "Living Together" the authors address how the problems they point to affect American society and how to ameliorate them, ending with some stern warnings about problems ahead and solutions to our current problems. Their argument proceeds in six chapters, "Raising Cognitive Ability", "The Leveling of American Education", "Affirmative Action in Higher Education", "Affirmative Action in the Workplace", "The Way We Are Headed" and "A Place for Everyone".

After the book ends, the authors include seven appendices covering statistical methods, survey issues, technical measurement issues, regression analyses, and so on.



## Quotes

"That the word intelligence describes something real and that it varies from person to person is as universal and ancient as any understanding about the state of being human." Chap. 1, Cognitive Class and Education, 1900-1990, p. 1

"Measures of intelligence have reliable statistical relationships with important social phenomena, but they are a limited tool for deciding what to make of any given individual." Chap. 1, Cognitive Class and Education, 1900-1990, p. 2

"To say that most of the people in the cognitively demanding positions of a society have a high IQ is not the same as saying that most of the people with high IQs are in such positions." Chap. 1, Cognitive Class and Education, 1900-1990, p. 27

"An IQ score is a better predict of job productivity than a job interview, reference checks, or college transcripts." Chap. 4, Steeper Ladders, Narrower Gates, p. 64

"Low IQ continues to be a much stronger precursor of poverty than the socioeconomic circumstances in which people grow up." Chap. 5, Poverty, p. 127

"The disquieting finding is that the worst environments for raising children, of the kind that not even the most resilient children can easily overcome, are concentrated in the homes in which the mothers are at the low end of the intelligence distribution." Chap. 10, Parenting, p. 204

"Insofar as intelligence helps lead people to behave in these ways, it is also a force for maintaining civil society." Chap. 12, Civility and Citizenship, p. 254

"Nothing seems more fearsome to many commentators than the possibility that ethnic and race differences have any genetic component at all. This belief is a fundamental error. Even if the differences between races were entirely genetic (which they surely are not), it should make no practical difference in how individuals deal with each other." Chap. 13, Ethnic Differences in Cognitive Ability, p.270

"Mounting evidence indicates that demographic trends are exerting downward pressure on the distribution of cognitive ability in the United States and that the pressures are strong enough to have social consequences." Chap. 15, The Demography of Intelligence, p. 341

"Raising intelligence significantly, consistently and affordably would circumvent many of the problems that we have described. ... But raising intelligence is not easy." Chap. 17, Raising Cognitive Ability, p. 389

"The problem with American education is confined mainly to one group of students, the cognitively gifted. Among the most gifted students, SAT scores started falling in the mid-1960s, and the verbal scores have not recovered since." Chap. 18, The Leveling of American Education, p. 417





"Predicting the course of society is chancy, but certain tendencies seem strong enough to worry about: an increasingly isolated cognitive elite, a merging of the cognitive elite with the affluent, and a deteriorating quality of life for people at the bottom end of the cognitive ability distribution." Chap. 21, *The Way We Are Headed*, p. 509

"Child care in the inner city will become primarily the responsibility of the state." Chap. 21, *The Way We Are Headed*, p. 523

"The most individualistic of nations contains one of the friendliest, most eager to oblige, neighborly peoples in all the world." Chap. 22, *A Place for Everyone*, p. 550

"Cognitive partitioning will continue. It cannot be stopped ..." Chap. 22, *A Place for Everyone*, p. 551

"At the heart of our thought is the quest for human dignity." Chap. 22, *A Place for Everyone*, p. 551

"Inequality of endowments, including intelligence, is a reality. Trying to pretend that inequality does not really exist has led to disaster. Trying to eradicate inequality with artificially manufactured outcomes has led to disaster. It is time for America once again to try living with inequality, as life is lived ..." Chap. 22, *A Place for Everyone*, p. 551



## Topics for Discussion

Many people have criticized the Bell Curve as racist. Do you think it is a racist work? Why or why not?

Research some of the empirical claims about the genetic basis of IQ. What do you think of the authors' claims in light of the research?

In your opinion, is affirmative action good or bad for society? Is it fair or unfair? Why or why not?

Do you think that most social problems can be explained in large part through low IQ? If not, what are better explanations?

The authors make predictions about the future. It has been nearly two decades since most of their data was collected. What do you think of their claims?

Is the stratification of American society according to IQ a bad thing?

Should United States' social policy be aimed at raising low IQ?

How should social policy change in the United States if the main empirical arguments the authors make are correct?