

***Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (2015),
by Robert Putnam, New York, NY:
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Harvard social scientist, Robert Putnam, has written a sobering assessment about upward mobility, the opportunity gap, and the endangered “American Dream.” Well-known for his classic take on the dissolution of American communities in *Bowling Alone*, Mr. Putnam paints a vivid description of the layers that have been contributing to the chasm of differences in the lives of poor and affluent children. Through detailed storytelling and intensive research between two generations of the rich and poor, *Our Kids* examines families, parenting, education, and communities in order to uncover the contributions to a quickly dividing social structure and the enduring effects on the lives of children. By uncovering the dynamic forces of economics, declining wages, job instability, challenging public policy, and drastic cultural change, Mr. Putnam calls on us to consider the statistics and institute new ideas to bridge the gaps that divide our kids.

Our Kids begins with a visit to Port Clinton, Ohio, the hometown of Mr. Putnam. He calls Port Clinton of the 1950s a “remarkably representative microcosm of America.” Reflecting on social and economic norms of Port Clinton, Mr. Putnam discusses the lives of the children of working-class and wealthy families and compares those lives to modern American children.

Most children of Port Clinton in the 1950s lived in two-parent homes, in tight-knit neighborhoods where men were the proverbial breadwinners and women raised children. Children from working-class and affluent families generally lived in the same neighborhoods although they generally did not socialize “across racial lines.” Children from both socioeconomic classes did well in school and it was a social norm for all people to care for and support the children and their college aspirations. When most children graduated from

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high school, they attended college. Most women married before graduating college although both men and women were equally likely to attend. Much has changed in America since the 1950s and the ways in which our children have been impacted is monumental.

Compared to the 1950s, inequality is staggering today. Socioeconomic gaps and inequality in opportunity are compounded by the shifts in families, communities, parenting, and education. In the 1970s, due to the economic collapse and recession, the poor began to lose ground while the affluent “within each major racial/ethnic group ... pulled away from the poorer coethnics.” The college educated net worth grew by 47% while the net worth of those with a high school graduation fell by 17%. Fewer children are exposed to others outside of their “socioeconomic niche.” The affluent have left the neighborhoods, schools, and churches they once shared with all members of their communities. Neighborhoods are consistently homogeneous, poor and affluent. And while race-based segregation is declining, class-based segregation is increasing. The affluent are moving to bigger homes, sending their children to better schools, and using their wealth to pave the way to opportunity for their children. The poor have far fewer options in what Mr. Putnam says is “increasingly separate and unequal worlds, removing the stepping-stones toward upward mobility.”

The family structure of the poor has changed. Compared to the married, mother-at-home with the kids of the 1950s, today’s families are fractured in many ways. High school graduates are less educated and having children at young ages, while the college educated are having children in their late 20s and early 30s. Nonmarital births with the college educated are on the decline, while high school graduate nonmarital births account for half of all births in that group. Cohabitation has doubled among high school graduates and has increased from 31% to 47% in college graduates, even though trends suggest that cohabitation generally lasts 14 months and does not result in marriage. Divorce that dou-

bled in the 70s and 80s has declined in the college educated and is increasing in poor families. Mr. Putnam maintains that Black families have been hit particularly hard by this change in family structure.

In high school educated families, children have become most likely to be raised by a single parent or in any myriad of multipartner dynamics that are often ever-changing and unpredictable. On the flip side, more affluent families are returning to the traditional, dinner-at-the-table dynamic that bodes well for family cohesion and ultimately, success for their children. Culture, gender, and sexual norms have changed within families as well, so that childbearing is delayed and professional opportunities increase for educated, working women.

Social policies, as well, have impacted the families of the poor; parental incarceration due to the war on drugs and three strikes laws have had a significant influence on the likelihood of single-parent homes and “bad educational outcomes.” The trauma of parental incarceration is not only impacting the children of the poor, but children in the classrooms whose parents are both at home. Mr. Putnam’s conclusion is that where single-parents are concerned, there is less upward mobility for children but maintains that it is a complicated layer of “racial, residential segregation, community strength, and schooling.” As it turns out, poverty in one generation begets “poverty in the next.”

Parenting, as a byproduct of these changes in family dynamics, has had a profound effect on the ways in which the poor and affluent support their children; the consequences are far-reaching. In discussing parenting, Mr. Putnam introduces Desmond, sisters Michelle and Laura, and Elijah. The children are African American children raised in Atlanta, where the African American community is increasingly segregated due to socioeconomics. They are from the upper-middle class, the suburbs, and the “impoverished ghettos” respectively. The differences between these childhood stories are significant and the conclusion is this: early life experiences coupled with socioeconomic

environments are having an affect on development and brain structure.

Children from affluent homes are experiencing “concerted cultivation” where their parents are invested, warm, and supportive. Children of poor families are experiencing great deficits and experiencing chronic stress that ultimately impacts executive function and noncognitive skills such as “grit, self-control, and emotional stability.” These children will have life-long challenges that will impact their physical and mental health. Children of these homes are left to “natural growth,” being left to manage on their own, without proper support from nurturing adults. The major difference is the manner in which parents engage their children, with the affluent raising independent and self-confident children, and those of poor families tending toward physical discipline and punishment. Children of poor families hear less words, are spanked more often, and no longer eat meals together, if at all. Parents of more means are also able to spend more on childcare, extracurricular activities, and recreation. Poor parents are simply unable to invest in the early years and their children get less of them in many ways. Time and money stressors “tend most noticeably to affect cognitive development.” The reflections on parenting and socioeconomic illustrate the widening class gap among children and how the gap is devastatingly huge, even before children enroll in school.

Where it was once hoped that schools, at the very least, could be great equalizers for children, it is found that the gap is growing wider in education. Schools with affluent families tend to be private and parent funded. Parents are increasingly involved and their children tend to go further in life. Upper-class parents actively seek out better educational environments for their children down to the location they purchase their homes. Schools with more affluent children have more extracurriculars and invest heavily in SAT preparation.

Research concedes that “high standards and aspirations tend to be contagious—as do low standards and aspirations.” Children from

poor homes tend to receive their education in schools where poverty, truancy, and suspensions are high. Parents are apathetic and less likely to be involved in schooling. Children bring their lives to school with them, including drugs and dysfunction. Gangs, crime, and fear are pervasive in the schools of impoverished children. Hunger, insecure housing, and economics are showing up in the classroom. Children from these schools have less access to support, extracurriculars, and college prep courses. In the long run there are significant impacts to high school and college attainment, with poor children going to community colleges and the affluent making it to “selective colleges and universities.” Only 12% of community college attendees continue on to a 4-year degree. Lower income high school graduates are also increasingly attending for-profit institutions, which are expensive and have low graduation rates. Sadly, once again, socioeconomic is a predictor of eventual college graduation. The gap continues to widen and opportunity seems less likely.

Last, our communities, the fiber of children’s social worlds, are impacting their opportunities and eventual lifelong status. The communities our children are living in and the resources at their disposal continue to determine their outcome. Most importantly, wealthier children have access to larger communities and social access, that creates a larger pool of opportunities. Mentors are available to affluent children also granting children more access and support. Children in poorer communities are isolated, with their families acting as their sole source of social access. Increasingly, and in contrast to Port Clinton of the 1950s, more children are without mentors and community support. These isolation leads to depression, illness, obesity and a total lack of trust in neighborhoods and communities that are riddled with violence and drugs. Churches, once a social glue for all socioeconomic groups, are increasingly abandoned by the poor, leaving children without guidance, faith, and a safe home base.

Mr. Putnam does not leave us without solutions. He insists that sweeping social commitment to our youth can activate change and moderate the growing divide between the poor and affluent. He contends “poor kids, through no fault of their own, are less prepared by their families, their schools, and their communities to develop their God-given talents as fully as rich kids.” These impacts are not felt by the poor alone, but by all of us, and so, we must invest. Through the expansion of child tax credit, protection of antipoverty programs (food stamps, housing vouchers, and child care support), reduction of sentencing for nonviolent crimes, and prisoner rehabilitation, we can bring more stability to homes in terms of economics, safety, security, and family cohesion. Parents should be offered more education and coaching and be given more flexibility in the workplace to care for their families. Quality childcare and early education opportunities should be afforded to all children. Schools need better trained teachers committed to the students through incentive programs to reduce

turnover and apathy. More investments should be made in extra curricular activities for all children, regardless of socioeconomics and vocational training should be readily accessible. Children need access to mentors through local organizations and community revitalization. Neighborhoods need to welcome all children, we will all benefit.

These great divides, gone unchecked, have the potential to alter the fabric of our society without the commitment of all people to our children. When our communities are protected and well, we all reap the rewards of a healthy society. Social change is on the horizon with growing emphasis on early education, family support, and enrichment programs in schools and neighborhoods. Public disdain is high when children are not cared for properly. Once we begin to acknowledge that our communities are strong when our children are well, the gaps so clearly illuminated can begin to close. But we have work to do for all children, for our kids.