



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

Issue Four

The Injustice of Family Breakdown

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Putnam, Robert, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

The American Dream. Rags to riches. A land of opportunity. Such ideas are tightly intertwined with American identity and, for generations, have served as a source of hope and optimism amid trying circumstances. This idea of improving one's station in life as a result of hard work and education predates the founding of our Republic. For the many who fled the class stasis and determinism of European society, the colonies represented a blank slate, a chance for upward social mobility. One's station at birth need not determine one's future station in life—this is ingrained within our national identity. And yet, the question inevitably arises: if the American Dream is still relevant or if it has stagnated to the point of parody. At this point, are we trading only in myth?

Within his 2015 bestseller, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Robert Putnam addresses the central question of whether the rungs of the socioeconomic ladder can still be climbed in modern-day America. The author, a renowned Harvard social scientist, is best known for his groundbreaking work, *Bowling Alone* (1995), identifiable to many due to its influence upon the public policy discussions of the 1990s and its iconic cover artwork. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam masterfully depicted a developing crisis in American society: a widespread decline in civic engagement. This decline was shown to permeate all aspects of social life from the most essential (voting participation, church attendance, volunteering/mentoring, etc.) to the more banal (participation in softball and bowling leagues). Hence the title. From a high point of civic engagement in postwar America, we have become significantly less connected to our fellow citizens, as engagement in traditional institutions has declined dramatically. The harm caused by this decline is manifold and felt by many within our society, but perhaps nowhere as profoundly as in the educational and economic outcomes of our children.

Our Kids begins nostalgically with Putnam's childhood during the Eisenhower era in Port Clinton, Ohio, a relatively unremarkable town though remarkable perhaps in its ability to serve as a microcosm—demographically, politically, educationally—for American society at large. As Putnam describes, the socioeconomic barriers in the 1950s were extremely low as economic and educational expansion, civic engagement and social solidarity were all high while income inequality was low. These conditions created a myriad of opportunities for the children of the lower echelon to climb the socioeconomic ladder. To illustrate the pathways that were open at this time, Putnam traces the lives of four of his high school colleagues from the class of 1959 (two African-American, one poor white, and one affluent white). What emerges from these narratives is highly instructive:

The children of manual workers and of professionals came from similar homes and mixed unselfconsciously in schools and neighborhoods, in scout troops and church groups. The class contrasts that matter so much today—in economic security, family structure, parenting, schooling, neighborhoods, and so on—were minimal in that era. Virtually everyone in the PCHS class of 1959, whatever their background, lived with two parents, in homes their parents owned, and in neighborhoods where everyone knew everyone else's first name. Our parents, almost universally homemaker moms and breadwinner dads, were not especially well educated.

In this nurturing environment, the vast majority of his classmates climbed the economic ladder. Half of those raised by high school dropouts went to college. Upward mobility was commonplace and rapid. Informal mentors within the community, such as teachers or church leaders, often played a critical role in encouraging the educational attainment of children within the community. Moreover, low education costs and the availability of local scholarships lowered the barrier to a post-secondary education.

Unfortunately, life for many in today's Port Clinton (again symbolic of America at large) is a far cry from what Putnam and his classmates experienced in the 1950s. Manufacturing, which accounted for the majority of jobs in 1965, collapsed, triggering decades of factory closures and layoffs. Accordingly, incomes which were slightly above the national average in the late 1970s, plummeted to levels more than 25% below the national average. Single-parent households doubled between 1970 to 2010 and, during the same timeframe, the divorce rate quintupled. Only forty percent of children are now born in wedlock. All this makes for a sobering read.

And yet, on the shores of Lake Erie, a completely different picture of Port Clinton emerges. Developers have lined the shore with gated communities and mansions to house wealthy professionals who commute to white-collar jobs in larger Ohio cities. Over the past four decades, while the middle class has dwindled, the number of residents at *both* the top and bottom of the economic ladder has surged. Port Clinton's story is not unique; it has been played out across the country from inner cities to impoverished rural areas.

As the possible causes for increasing inequality in America continue to be debated in the public sphere, we are less and less likely to actually interact with those outside of our socioeconomic realm. As Putnam and others have shown, there are numerous reasons for this unfortunate circumstance. Residential sorting by income—facilitated by the growth of the suburbs, the highway system, and the availability of school test results—has led to a sharp increase in the uniformity of our neighborhoods. Compared to forty years ago, high-income and low-income

students are much less likely to attend the same schools. Much of this is driven by the desire of high-income families to chase high-performing public schools. On this score, a Brookings Institution researcher recently showed that families, on average, pay a \$200,000 premium for a home near a high-performing school as compared to a similar home near a low-performing school. What exactly does one get for this substantial outlay?

Generally, what these parents are paying for is not greater spending per pupil or higher paid teachers. Numerous studies in education have shown these two factors to have minimal predictive relevance in school performance. Instead, positive peer pressure and parental engagement often drive achievement at high-performing schools. The aspirations and beliefs of students and parents alike matter greatly. On the other hand, the results of low-performance schools are often hampered by the effects of the cycle of poverty (hunger, gang violence, unstable housing) and are four times as likely as high-income classrooms to be disrupted by behavioral problems. Inevitably, teacher morale is lower and turnover far outpaces that of high-performing schools. As Putnam shows, at school, it's not only the classroom that is determinative of student performance; the fields, band room, and stage are also crucial. Putnam cites a number of studies showing the correlation between extracurricular activity involvement and positive outcomes, including higher grade-point averages, better work habits, greater self-esteem, lower dropout rates, and higher future wages. He references one fascinating survey showing long-time benefits of participation in extracurricular activities:

Students who attended high school in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1940s even found neurological effects a half century later: students who participated in extracurricular activities were substantially less likely than those who hadn't to suffer from dementia at the turn of the century, even after adjusting for differences in IQ and educational attainment.

This is a major concern as the gap between extracurricular activity participation continues to widen between high and low-income students. Greater opportunities are afforded to children in more affluent schools. Opportunities, as Putnam illustrates, that can have lasting long-term benefits. However, these benefits still pale in comparison to those received by children raised in a loving, two-parent household.

In comparing life today to that of the 1950s, perhaps no change is as evident as in family structure. Shortly afterwards, the collapse of the traditional family began due, in part, to the decoupling of sex and marriage with the advent of the birth control pill, transformed sexual norms, female employment, and a creeping sense of narcissism. Now, what we see amidst the wreckage of the sexual revolution, is a two-tiered concept of marriage. As Putnam describes, the college-educated upper-third of American society has developed a "neo-traditional" marriage pattern. Often, both spouses work outside of the home, marriage and child-bearing are delayed, and domestic duties are divided more evenly. On the other hand, in the high-school-educated lower-third, childbearing has become disconnected from marriage and "multi-partner fertility" is often the norm. The common result is for children to reside in a single-parent household long after their biological parents have split up. The statistics are staggering. Whereas only 10% of children born to women with a bachelor's degree or higher are born out of wedlock, the same is true for over 60% of children born to women with a high-school degree or less. Ethnographers have shown that poor women value marriage as highly as their affluent counterparts, but believe economic well-being to be the cornerstone of a successful union.

Declining employment prospects and a dramatic spike in incarceration rates among young men are clearly two reasons why marriage is not as popular as it used to be. Putnam's analysis is direct on the impact this has upon our youth:

Children pay the cost of early childbearing and multi-partnered fertility in the form of diminished prospects for success in life. Children who grow up without their biological father perform worse on standardized tests, earn lower grades, and stay in school for fewer years, regardless of race and class. They are also more likely to demonstrate behavioral problems such as shyness, aggression, and psychological problems such as increased anxiety and depression. Children who spend part of their childhood in a single-mother home are also more likely to have sex earlier and to become young, single parents, re-creating the cycle.

Our Kids is a sobering read as Putnam offers a unique perspective on how the lives of children are directly affected by economic inequality and the deterioration of the traditional family. Children from low-income families are falling further and further behind their high-income counterparts, as they are often unable to reap the innumerable benefits of a stable family structure and strong social institutions. As Putnam shows, for far too many, the steps up the socioeconomic ladder are proving too steep, too burdensome to ascend. Our kids deserve better.

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