

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

Robert Putnam

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The late economist Arthur Okun, perhaps best known for creating the first version of the Misery Index—a shorthand for assessing just how dissatisfied people ought to be with the economy—wrote an influential paper for the Brookings Institution in 1975 titled “Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff.” Okun’s premise was that democracies suffer a tension under capitalism: the promise of political and social egalitarianism is undermined by “gaping disparities in economic well-being.”

To soften resistance for his redistributionist remedy, he proposed a thought experiment he called “the leaky bucket”—a welfare transfer analogy that acknowledges inherent waste. He used the experiment to pose the question: What percentage of inefficiency (leaking water) is acceptable to achieve the gains in equality we seek?

Of course, Okun’s tradeoff framed the problem to serve his solutions, presuming that conjuring the will to pay the price for income equality is the only real barrier to achieving a more widely shared prosperity. It’s as if equality and efficiency outcomes were governed by two competing levers that each society could adjust, constrained only by competing interests and political will, to fine-tune their own optimal combination.

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam, author of the best-selling *Bowling Alone*, doubles down on this view of the world in his newest book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, in which he claims that Americans have a choice to make. We can make collective government investments to lift up poor kids today or endure untenable levels of inequality in the near future.

Pairing life stories of pseudonymous subjects with several decades worth of data, Putnam argues that income inequality is the canary in the coal mine alerting us to the more serious problem lurking beneath our public debates: inequality of opportunity. He points out that Americans have historically been disinclined to begrudge others their success so long as everyone enjoys an equal chance to achieve it. That sets the stage for the key question *Our Kids* attempts to answer: “Do youth today coming from different social and economic backgrounds in fact have roughly equal life chances, and has that changed in recent decades?”

He argues that intergenerational opportunities in America have been skewing more and more in favor of those with the means and the education to seize them, and that this divergence presents both a crisis of social conscience and a challenge to the legitimacy of the American Dream.

According to Putnam, the problem is not simply a problem of rich and poor, nor, as he presents in the data, a racial or ethnic problem. It is really a problem of class, which he defines by level of education. He reviews an array of empirical findings related to families, schooling, parenting, and communities and presents a series of widening gaps over time between those with college degrees and those without. For example, since the 1970s, the difference in the median ages of first-time mothers has grown between educated and less educated women due mostly to women with college degrees now waiting until well after college to have children. But it also reveals those without college degrees tend to start sooner than they used to.

Even family dinners are skewing according to this same pattern. “From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s . . . family dinners became rarer in all social echelons,” but since then, he reports, that trend leveled off for households led by college-educated parents, and only continued downward for high school-only educated families.

Comparative historical data is missing for some of the other evidence Putnam includes, but the disparities revealed help to tell the story of class differences today. For example, today’s better-educated parents, it turns out, are more likely to have better social networks with larger sets of both strong and weak ties to others. Weak ties are particularly valuable for economic opportunities like finding a new job. It also means more-educated parents might have a wider network of professional acquaintances through which they can, for example, identify potential mentoring opportunities for their children.

Virtually all of the findings he points to are correlations that render his final chapter, “What is to be done?,” a bit impotent. He concedes that “the link from income inequality to opportunity inequality is not simple and instantaneous” and suggests that time lags mean we won’t really know if his thesis is right until the next generation has reached midcareer and participated in more surveys. That’s a big problem if you want to advance a credible policy solution today based on this research.

Putnam is not fazed. He says his criterion for taking action “is not whether any given proposal has already proven effective, but whether the evidence suggests that it has promise.” He then makes what is perhaps his most passionate appeal for reform: more funding for extracurricular activities in schools, with an emphasis on team sports like football.

It’s odd that, after 200-plus pages of research findings and anecdotes all used to prove a nationwide crisis, he would call for more football as a key part of the solution. It’s perhaps as perplexing as bemoaning a nationwide decline in bowling league participation.

Still, some of the findings are truly alarming and deserve our attention. For example, he highlights a 2000 follow-up report on the National Education Longitudinal Study that showed that high-scoring 8th grade test-takers from families in the bottom quartile of income turned out to be slightly less likely to go to college than their low-scoring counterparts from the top quartile.

So, what, then, is to be done? Putnam’s Harvard colleague Steven Pinker makes an apt observation in his 2002 book *The Blank Slate*—which served, in part, as a call for social scientists to acknowledge advances in cognitive science when studying and accounting for human behavior—that when it comes to public policy, scientists of all stripes are probably better at identifying tradeoffs than they are at resolving them.

What, for example, can government do about declining rates of family dinners? Income-transfer programs and work-hours legislation might sound like part of a solution, but consider the case of Stephanie, a high school dropout and one of the subjects Putnam’s team studied. Her family does not eat dinner together, not because she is not home to make a meal, but because, as she explains, that’s simply not their way of doing things. “We’re not a sit-down-and-eat family,” she said. Her daughter, Lauren, added, “When it’s time to eat, it’s whoever wants to eat. It wasn’t everybody sit at the table, like a party or something.”

Perhaps, as a microtest for a publicly funded education campaign designed to encourage families to adopt the practice, Putnam could tell Stephanie that successful families tend to eat dinner together. Of course, to be fair to Stephanie, Putnam would have to clarify that he can’t say whether the act of having the family dinner itself will make any difference. He only knows that those who tend to achieve more also tend to practice that particular habit. In other words, if

Stephanie wants to increase the odds of her children capitalizing on future opportunities, Putnam can't claim with any scientific authority that family dinners will contribute to her success.

Pinker warns that "the belief that human tastes are reversible cultural preferences" has led to poor social planning at best and, at worst, "some of the greatest atrocities in history." Putnam's *Our Kids* presents a lot of data worth reviewing, and some telling stories about life in America today, but his call to action flows not from evidence, but from hope.

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