

ROBERT D. PUTNAM

“Robert D. Putnam is technically a Harvard social scientist, but a better description might be poet laureate of civil society.”

New York Times, March 4, 2015

In the highly anticipated OUR KIDS: The American Dream in Crisis (Simon & Schuster; March 10, 2015, \$28), Robert D. Putnam, Harvard professor of public policy and bestselling author of *Bowling Alone*, offers a groundbreaking examination of why fewer Americans today have the opportunity for upward mobility.

The rising inequality gap in America will be the major issue leading up to the next election. In a recent speech, Jeb Bush said “The opportunity gap is the defining issue of our time,” echoing earlier remarks by President Obama. Robert Putnam is the leading expert on the topic—politicians as disparate as President Obama, Jeb Bush, Hillary Clinton, and Paul Ryan have all consulted with him on this issue.

It’s the American dream: get a good education, work hard, buy a house, and achieve prosperity and success. This is the America we believe in—a nation of opportunity, constrained only by ability and effort. But during the last twenty-five years we have seen a disturbing “opportunity gap” emerge. Americans have always believed in equality of opportunity, the idea that all kids, regardless of their family background, should have a decent chance to improve their lot in life. But now, Putnam argues, this central tenet of the American dream seems no longer true or at the least, much less true than it was. In OUR KIDS, Putnam offers a personal, but authoritative look at this crisis.

Putnam begins with the story of his high school class of 1959 in Port Clinton, Ohio. By and large the vast majority of those students—“our kids” to everyone in town—went on to lives better than those of their parents. They raised their children with the same expectations. But those children – and their children – have not fared so well in an age of fragile families, crumbling communities, and disappearing jobs. Their lives reflect the diminishing opportunities that haunt so many American kids today.



OUR KIDS

The American Dream
in Crisis

ROBERT D. PUTNAM

author of *Bowling Alone*

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Putnam also tells the tale of lessening opportunity through poignant life stories of rich and poor kids from cities and suburbs across the country, drawing on a formidable body of research done especially for this book. The result is a rare combination of compelling first-hand narratives and authoritative evidence that David Gergen calls “Must reading from the White House to your house.”

But what is to be done about this crisis? Putnam argues that our civic leaders will need to reach across boundaries of party and ideology if we are to offer more opportunity to all American children. The final chapter includes Putnam’s suggestions for action and a call for change that’s both bottom-up and top-down.

“Yet much of the current debate about inequality has a strangely abstract quality, focusing on the excesses of the 1 per cent without really coming to terms with what has happened to the American middle class over the past two generations. Into this void steps the political scientist Robert Putnam, with a truly masterful volume that should shock Americans into confronting what has happened to their society.” Francis Fukuyama, Financial Times

AMONG PUTNAM’S KEY FINDINGS:

- While there’s been much discussion in recent years about America’s income inequality, we should brace ourselves for growing inequality of opportunity in coming decades. “Today’s” measures of economic mobility refer to a generation born 30 to 40 years ago, and in that sense see society through a “rear-view mirror.” OUR KIDS shows that America has been veering further away from equality of opportunity for several decades, and this data is not captured in the current mobility numbers. The recent trends presage a collapse in social mobility rates in the decades ahead.
- The American Dream is increasingly out of reach for lower income students. Shockingly, smart poor kids (lower third of parental income, top third in test scores) have less chance of graduating from college than not-so-smart rich kids (upper third of parental income, bottom third in test scores).
- Closely calculated estimates of the aggregate economic costs of the widening opportunity gap—in terms of crime and law enforcement, of public health, and above all of lower labor productivity—are massive: \$500 billion per year or roughly \$6 trillion in present value over the lifetimes of the current cohort of disadvantaged kids. These are real costs that will be borne by our own kids if we don’t invest in these other people’s kids, as Americans have historically done in the past.

- There are many growing gaps between the opportunities facing poorer kids (parents with a high school degree or less) and richer kids (parents with a BA or more). Poorer kids get less “Goodnight Moon” time, have fewer family dinners, participate less in sports or other extracurricular activities, attend church less than their richer peers, and are more likely to be obese and inhale more second-hand smoke—each of these gaps has widened in recent years. Richer kids increasingly grow up in two-parent households with fewer economic worries, get high quality daycare, and trust their neighbors more than their poorer counterparts.
- Familial and community resources and supports are increasingly available only to richer kids, as middle and upper class families deploy “air bags” to cushion their children from stressful or traumatic experiences or from mistakes they have made. Poorer families often don’t have the resources to deploy such “air bags” to minimize the negative consequences of childhood misadventures or family or economic changes. Growing up is about learning from mistakes, but the mistakes are relatively costless for affluent kids and often derail poorer kids from the path of success.
- Americans’ social networks are shrinking. The social networks of less educated Americans consist of fewer, more homogenous, more redundant, and less valuable connections. The poorer kids most in need of mentors have many fewer than affluent kids.
- A shriveled sense of “our kids” over the last generation—as we focus only on our own biological kids—has played out fine for affluent kids with two involved parents and private resources to fund extracurricular engagement, but has had devastating effects on poorer children.
- Parents of both rich kids and poor kids want their children to succeed, but the parents of the rich kids typically know how to achieve this, while the parents of poor kids are often clueless. This “savvy gap” encompasses everything from knowing which extracurricular activities will pay off in college admissions, to knowing how to sort out problems at school, to understanding higher education (testing, test prep, financial aid, choosing a school, knowing what majors the labor market will reward), to knowing how to interview for a job or land an internship.
- The Internet seems more likely to widen the opportunity gap than to close it. Affluent Americans use the internet in ways that are mobility-enhancing, whereas poorer, less educated Americans use it in ways that are primarily entertaining. Even though lower class kids have equal physical access to the Internet, they lack the digital savvy to exploit that access in ways that enhance their opportunities.
- Lower class kids are less trusting than their upper class counterparts, because their social environment is pervasively less trustworthy. Mary Sue (an impoverished young woman we met in Port Clinton) expressed a common view among poor kids across the country: “Love gets you hurt; trust gets you killed.” The increasingly common feature of the lives of poor kids of all races is isolation – from family, from school, from church and other community institutions, from neighbors, even from peers.

OUR KIDS is a major contribution to the ongoing discussion about inequality in America, a deeply



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert D. Putnam is the Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. Professor Putnam is a member of the National Academy of Sciences and a fellow of the British Academy. In 2006, he received the Skytte Prize, the world's highest accolade for a political scientist, and in 2012, he received the National Humanities Medal, the nation's highest honor for contributions to the humanities. Educated at Swarthmore, Oxford, and Yale, he has served as dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He has written fourteen previous books, including the prize-winning *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* and the bestselling *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*.

Putnam has been consulted by Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama, as well as national leaders from Britain, France, Germany, Finland, Singapore, Ireland, Australia, and elsewhere, and grassroots activists around the world. The *Sunday Times* of London has called him "the most influential academic in the world." He lives in Jaffrey, New Hampshire and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Simon & Schuster simonandschuster.com

PRAISE

“Robert D. Putnam vividly captures a dynamic change in American society--the widening class-based opportunity gap among young people. The diminishing life chances of lower-class families and the expanding resources of the upper-class are contrasted in sharp relief in *Our Kids*, which also includes compelling suggestions of what we as a nation should do about this trend. Putnam’s new book is a must-read for all Americans concerned about the future of our children.”

– William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor, Harvard University

“Robert Putnam weaves together scholarship and storytelling to paint a truly troubling picture of our country and its future. *Our Kids* makes it absolutely clear that we need to put aside our political bickering and fix how this country provides opportunity for its millions of poor children. This book should be required reading for every policymaker in America, if not every American.”

– Geoffrey Canada, President, the Harlem Children’s Zone

“In yet another path-breaking book about America’s changing social landscape, Robert Putnam investigates how growing income gaps have shaped our children so differently. His conclusion is chilling: social mobility ‘seems poised to plunge in the years ahead, shattering the American dream.’ Must reading from the White House to your house.”

– David Gergen

“With clarity and compassion, Robert Putnam tells the story of the great social issue of our time: the growing gap between the lives of rich and poor children, and the diminishing prospects of children born into disadvantage. A profoundly important book and a powerful reminder that we can and must do better.”

– Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*

“Charles Dickens used his literary genius to compel his contemporaries to face up to the poverty and violence which afflicted the poor in Victorian England, and Robert Putnam does the same in his newest book, which analyzes ‘The American Dream in Crisis’ not in social science lingo, but through the direct experience of a group of young Americans also struggling with poverty and violence. *Our Kids* shows that we are living in a two-tier social and economic world where the affluent succeed through education and economic opportunity, and the poor struggle unavailingly to rise out of their poverty. The compelling results of Putnam’s research are inescapable. Read this book and discover a new America.”

– Jill Ker Conway

“Highly readable...An insightful book that paints a disturbing picture of the collapse of the working class and the growth of an upper class that seems to be largely unaware of the other’s precarious existence.”

— Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

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— Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*

“Our Kids is a superb achievement. Through vivid portraits of children and lucid syntheses of research findings, Putnam offers an incisive diagnosis of why true equality of opportunity has largely disappeared in the U.S. and its economics and democratic costs for all Americans, including the well-off. Most importantly, he offers a comprehensive set of policy proposals, from early childhood daycare and more parental coaching to more inclusive extracurricular programs at school and consistent mentoring programs, that are most likely to reverse the opportunity gap. Our Kids will be the best roadmap for America’s next important social reform.”

— Ezekiel J. Emanuel, M.D., Ph.D., Vice Provost and Chair of the Department of Medical Ethics and Health Policy at the University of Pennsylvania

“Our great theorist of social transformation Bob Putnam finds that his own hometown and country are torn apart by class divisions that make the American dream unavailable, democracy dysfunctional, and America’s prospects for all darker. With compassion and distress, Putnam urges us to confront and heal our new fractured reality.”

— Tony Marx, President and CEO, The New York Public Library



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ABOUT THE BOOK

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