
Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

Robert D. Putnam
(Simon & Schuster, 400 pp, \$28.00)

by Meghan McQuiggan

Economic and social inequality in the United States has been widely discussed by researchers and policymakers alike. Many experts agree that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, leading to the disappearance of the middle class (Pew Research Center, 2015). In addition to this discourse, the issue of class inequality has attracted significant media attention, igniting public opposition to unequal economic conditions. Consequently, the issue has become a major talking point among political leaders and candidates as they search for ways of restoring equitable opportunity to all citizens.

Harvard social and political scientist Robert Putnam conducts an in-depth analysis of inequality in his 2015 work *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Specifically, he examines the waning American Dream, the growing opportunity gap between lower- and upper-class children, and the resulting impacts on our nation's youth. Putnam says that the central question of the book is, "Do youth today coming from different social and economic backgrounds in fact have roughly equal life chances, and has that changed in recent decades?" Throughout the work, Putnam uses a combination of qualitative narrative and quantitative

analysis to argue that children from different socioeconomic backgrounds do not have the same chances of success and that the gap between them is growing. The generally approachable and engaging text synthesizes and presents an impressive breadth of academic research on inequality's seemingly endless contributing factors. As the topic has been popular during the recent presidential debates, the work is informative and timely.

In Chapter 1, Putnam begins by describing the American Dream using his own hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio, where he graduated from high school in 1959. Putnam details the lives of his classmates Don, from a poor, working-class family, and Frank, from a local wealthy family. Despite these economic differences, both Don and Frank went on to obtain college degrees and have successful careers. Putnam describes this as typical for the town, where even lower-income children could achieve upward mobility. These children made it "higher up the economic ladder" than their parents (p.7). He asserts that, at the time, adults invested in all children in the community and ensured they could attain success regardless of their background.

In contrast, the author describes the Port Clinton of today as a "split-screen American nightmare," in which class origins create monumental barriers to success (p.1). Putnam describes the manufacturing industry collapse in the 1970s and how the population declined. He goes on to detail the resulting increases in juvenile delinquency, single parenting, divorce, unwed births, and child poverty. Additionally, Putnam likens the Port Clinton story to towns all across America, suggesting these trends simultaneously occurred throughout the country. He asserts that Port Clinton today is a town of contrasting realities between the upper-class children of the lakeshore region and the poor children of the downtown area. He uses the accounts of Chelsea and David to juxtapose their lifestyles. Chelsea has a very involved mother, a family that holds nightly family dinners and elaborate birthday parties, and she also participates in numerous extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, David has an imprisoned, drug-addicted father, was on probation as a teen, and has a child of his own. Putnam uses these narratives to argue that opportunities available for lower- and upper-income children are diverging. Rich children have more opportunities than in the past, while poor children's chances of success are declining.

While these two anecdotal stories alone represent extreme family situations, Putnam's subsequent quantitative analysis is more convincing. The author uses rigorous data sources, such as Census data, and displays the information using graphs and maps that clearly illustrate the prominent wealth gap and neighborhood segregation between upper- and lower-class families both in Port Clinton and across the country. At the end of this chapter, Putnam explains his methodology for most of the analyses in the book: he uses education as an indicator of social class. Therefore, he refers to those with a bachelor's degree as upper-class and rich and those with no more than a high school education as lower-class and poor. Although the analyses throughout the book certainly make a persuasive case for contrasting opportunity levels, education may not be the best proxy for social class. Many individuals with only high school diplomas have achieved great economic success and would not be considered poor. Similarly, some individuals with higher education live in poverty and are not upper-class. Although Putnam

explains that income data is often “noisier” than is education data, with more errors and missing data, the use of education as a measure of social class and the interchangeability of language he uses throughout leaves room for skepticism.

In Chapter 2, Putnam dives into explaining how the families of upper-class and lower-class children differ. Again, he begins with a narrative account of two vastly different children. Andrew has extremely supportive, loving parents who strive to make their children happy and successful, while Kayla has an absent mother and a family plagued by crime, alcoholism, and failed marriages. The author explains how family structures in America are moving away from the traditional two-parent, working father household, but these divisions occur across class lines. He argues that, in the college-educated upper class, families still look relatively similar to the traditional family, but generally now include a working mother. Putnam asserts that unwed births, divorce, single parenting, and blended families disproportionately occur in the bottom third of American families. He asserts that this difference has led to two very different tiers of family structures. Putnam uses “scissor charts” in this chapter, a term he uses to describe graphs that show the widening gaps between lower- and upper-class families (p.64). The striking trends depicted in the graphs make an almost undeniable case for the differences in family situations by class. Additionally, he considers competing theories for the decline of the American family, including economic hardship, cultural changes, and shifts in religious and political ideology. Finally, he concludes by discussing the impacts of this two-tier family structure, providing a comprehensive review of how non-traditional families correlate with weakened life outcomes for children.

In the next chapter, the author explains the differing parenting styles between upper- and lower-class families. He starts by contrasting the parenting styles of three black families from Atlanta, likely to control for race in discussing family differences. In these narratives, we see a wide continuum of parenting practices, from those very engaged in their children’s education to those who abuse their children. Putnam asserts class-based parenting differences not only exist among black families, but among white families as well. After the individual accounts, Putnam shifts to discussing the neuroscience research on the effects of early experiences on children’s development. He summarizes findings about the importance of caring and cognitively stimulating interactions with parents. Additionally, he notes the negative impacts of chronic stress, poverty, and neglect on children’s outcomes. Putnam zooms out and explains how parenting practices and children’s brain development link to social class. Upper-class parents can invest more money and time in their children, including enrollment in high-quality childcare. Again, Putnam’s review of the most renowned research on child development, as well as his own analyses and graphs, makes a strong argument for the link between social class and parenting styles. However, Putnam should have acknowledged that these differences are generalizations; certainly some well-educated, high-income parents are so busy that they neglect their children, leading to adverse outcomes. Similarly, some lower-class parents invest substantial time to ensure their own children fare better.

Chapter 4 discusses the schooling differences between upper- and lower-class children. Similar to the other chapters, it begins with a narrative account to depict

the class differences. Isabella, Lola, and Sofia are all Hispanic young women living in Orange County, California. However, their experiences at Troy High School and Santa Ana High School greatly differ. Consistently top-ranked nationally, Troy offers a plethora of Advanced Placement (AP) classes and a distinguished science and technology program, and 99 percent of students advance to college. Just miles away, Santa Ana is located in a neighborhood combating drugs, crime, and violence, and academics seem to be an afterthought. Putnam says that the “stark comparison between them heightens our awareness of the many contrasting features of schools in rich and poor communities today...” (p. 159). After providing this illustrative perspective, Putnam explains that residential segregation by income leads students to attend schools of varying levels of quality. Although Putnam nods to the differences in class offerings, funding levels, and teacher quality, he generally downplays how schools may contribute to the class gap. Rather, he asserts factors such as parent involvement, community fundraising, peer pressure, and extracurricular involvement explain differences in children’s school experiences. In sum, Putnam argues that schools do not widen class gaps, they merely reflect differences in society. While some points of the chapter are credible, such as data to showing low-income schools have more disciplinary problems and fewer team sports, Putnam leaves the reader with questions. He leaves politics out of the discussion, not explaining the causes of differential funding, teacher quality, and extracurricular offerings between low- and high-income schools. Similarly, he attributes school issues to the residential separation of low-income students, yet does not explain the underlying political causes of housing segregation. However, Putnam takes an uplifting stance at the end of the chapter in suggesting that even if schools are not causes of opportunity gaps, they may be part of the solution. In the final chapter of the book (discussed below), Putnam offers a plethora of school-based reforms for increasing equality of opportunity, demonstrating that schools have the potential to be part of the solution.

In Chapter 5, Putnam discusses how community factors differ among children from lower- and upper-class backgrounds. This time, he contrasts the lives of two Philadelphia single moms and their daughters. Specifically, the author describes the girls in Lower Merion, a wealthy suburb, as having nannies, tutors, Ivy League classes, and religious mentors. At the same time, the girls in Kensington, a poor inner-city neighborhood, have lives impacted by drugs, crime, homelessness, and teen pregnancy. Putnam acknowledges that even the wealthy family faced challenges, yet argues they could deploy an “airbag” of private resources to ensure their children’s success (p. 210). Additionally, he underscores the importance of social networks, even though society is becoming more individualistic (a main argument in Putnam’s prior book, *Bowling Alone*). He connects the concept of social networks to children by using data to show lower-class children have access to fewer mentors and live in areas with less neighborhood trust. Putnam weaves these qualitative accounts, quantitative analyses, and literature together to stress that communities have moved away from a communal concern for all children in favor of a more self-interested approach, which disproportionately affects poor youth.

In the first five chapters, Putnam explains the opportunity gap and uses families, parenting, schools, and communities to show how experiences differ between lower- and upper-class children. In the final chapter, titled “What is to be done?” he suggests that current social policies prevent others’ success. Putnam discusses a breadth of reforms, including parental leave, center-based childcare, parental coaching, mixed-income housing, more experienced teachers, more extracurricular activities, community health and social services, vocational education, more adult mentoring, and neighborhood revitalization. He cites examples of how each of these programs has proven successful in the past and urges leaders to look for cost-effective ways to expand these policies. Although it is easy to understand how each of these solutions could reduce the opportunity gap, these ideas are not new. Therefore, the reader is left wondering why these programs have not been widely implemented already. In order to provide a comprehensive answer to “What is to be done?” a discussion on the political and financial feasibility of these policies would have contributed to the book.

Overall, *Our Kids* is a timely, well-written, thorough, and eye-opening book. It combines the fields of economics, psychology, neuroscience, public policy, and history to argue it is increasingly difficult to achieve the American dream, particularly for lower-class families. Putnam’s extensive use of data creates a highly persuasive argument, and an abundance of research forms the foundation of his work. He strives for transparency about his methods, frequently mentioning that many of the studies cited are not randomized controlled experiments and correlation does not equal causation. He also acknowledges the individuals’ stories in the book came from convenience sampling and do not show all of the exceptions to lower and upper class families’ lives.

The main limitations of the book exist in the narrative accounts and the final chapter on policy solutions. The qualitative accounts capture the reader’s interest and juxtapose the varying situations of upper- and lower-class families. However, they are difficult to follow, especially when referred to in subsequent chapters. Putnam seeks to help readers see “how the other half lives,” yet selecting extreme family examples may have the reverse effect and reinforce stereotypes of poor and rich families’ lives (p. 41). Putnam dedicates over 200 pages to make a convincing case for the growing opportunity gap America. However, fewer than 20 pages describe potential solutions. While he lists many suggestions about *what* is to be done, there is little explanation as to *how* these policies should be accomplished.

Anyone interested in social, urban, or educational policy would enjoy this book for its comprehensive and intriguing analyses. Putnam explains the economic, political, and moral implications of class differences on society as a whole, including upper-class individuals. He demonstrates that in order to restore upward mobility, everyone needs to be invested in the well-being of all children. Therefore, *Our Kids* is a worthwhile, though flawed, read for anyone interested in the social, economic, and political future of our country.

REFERENCES

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