



The Disappearing Ladder of Opportunity

A Review of

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

by Robert D. Putnam

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Reviewed by

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The theme of this important book is the growing gap between rich and poor children in America and what that means for their future and the future of our nation. Others have written persuasively about this growing poverty gap in both the United States and in other countries (Piketty, 2014). But, Putnam excels above others by combining poignant stories of poor families with a critical review of the social science and economic research to plead for imminent action. We could do worse than making this book mandatory reading for every mayor, governor, state, and U.S. legislator.

The author's credentials are exceptional. Educated at Oxford and Yale, Robert D. Putnam is a professor of public policy at Harvard University. He has served as the dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Two recent examples of his 14 books include *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Putnam & Campbell, 2012) and the bestselling *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Putnam, 2001). Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama and national leaders from Britain, France, Germany, Finland, Singapore, Ireland, Australia, and elsewhere have consulted him.

The author sets the stage by reminiscing about his hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio in the 1950s. This was an era of full employment, and few families experienced joblessness or serious economic insecurity. Interview, survey, and economic data about Port Clinton from the 1950s to the present are used to illustrate the growing opportunity gap between the rich and the poor. Almost 75 percent of the author's high school graduating class obtained more education than their parents. Now, kids in Port Clinton obtain less education than their parents. By 2012, the average worker in Ottawa County was paid 16 percent less in inflation-adjusted dollars than his or her grandfather or grandmother was in the early 1970s. Disturbing social and familial changes have accompanied this economic downturn. Unwed births have risen, the number of single-parent homes doubled, and the divorce rate quintupled. Child poverty grew from less than 10 percent in 1999 to nearly 40 percent in 2013 (pp. 20–22). Other cities, such as Bend, Oregon, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles are

also similarly described showing the growing economic gap between the rich and poor and what that means for children.

A major strength of this work is the critical usage of research. Putnam notes when well-controlled experiments are available to support his conclusions and when the research support is weak. A series of scissor charts are used to dramatize the diminishing opportunities of children in poverty compared to children from more affluent families. There are charts showing the growing number of single-parent families, the amount of time parents spend with children, participation in community activities by children, the amount of mentoring for children, the number of high school dropouts, etc. In general, these scissor charts are well done, although the scaling of some seems to exaggerate actual differences.

Puzzling to many readers will be the author's definition of the "rich." He argues that when education and income data are both available for making predictions of economic well-being, that education is a more powerful predictor. Therefore, the "rich" is defined as those with a college degree and are contrasted throughout the book with the "poor," who are defined as those with no more than a high school education. Throughout the book, the college premium is emphasized and the worth of the college degree is increasing (p. 184). Sometimes a composite of education, income, and occupational status is used for social class (p. 45). Some studies referenced by the author seem to have their own nuances in defining social class, and this adds some unavoidable inconsistency.

The Disappearing Family

Most of the book is devoted to describing the worsening plight of poor children in America. The causes and implications of these trends are analyzed at the family, parent practices, and community levels. The typical family picture represented by the *Ossie and Harriet* TV show of the 1950s and 1960s is seldom found today and especially among those with only a high school education.

The increasing absence of the father from the family is identified as a major shortcoming in the lives of poor children. The evidence is reviewed showing the negative results of father absence upon children including behavioral problems, social-skill deficits, and reduced social mobility (McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). Especially dramatic is the likelihood that girls from father-absent families are more likely to become single mothers themselves.

Inadequate Parenting Practices

The strongest section of this book is the description of the influence of poverty on actual parenting practices. The "toxic stress" found in families living in poverty impedes healthy parenting practices and contributes to a chaotic family environment that includes inconsistent and unresponsive caregiving, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. These inadequate parenting practices lead to deficits in children's physical, cognitive and social development which are present in the preschool years and continue throughout life (p. 119).

The author joins a chorus of others who have recently argued for the value of soft skills in predicting future productivity of children (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). These skills include self-control and communication and interpersonal skills. These types of skills are especially

promoted by the quality of early parent-child interactions. A fascinating area of research reviewed by the author is the positive effect on adolescent well-being of having family dinners at least five times per week (Musick & Meier, 2012). The contrast between parenting practices of the rich and poor is dramatized by use of interview quotes of single mothers in poor families that do not prioritize family discussions but struggle to make enough money to have food for their children, whenever they could make time to eat.

The role of schools in creating the social mobility gap is minimized. The author uses the work of Nobel Prize winner James Heckman in arguing that the deficits in cognitive and social skills are already present when children enter kindergarten, and they are set by dysfunctional parenting (Heckman, 2008). But schools can be an important intervention. When poor children are able to move to more affluent schools and interact with affluent children, their test scores improve. Startling numbers are presented on the difference in the learning environments in poor and affluent schools. Poor schools have four times the concentrations of children with academic, attention, and behavioral problems as low-poverty classrooms (p. 170). A study is reviewed of California high schools which found that high-poverty schools have two to three times the levels of many common stressors, such as student hunger, unstable housing, economic problems, medical and dental care, caring for family members, immigration issues, community violence, and safety concerns compared to matched affluent schools (Rogers & Mirra, 2014, p. 171).

The author presents some of his scissor plots showing differences between poor students and affluent students in participation in extracurricular activities. There are more extracurricular activities for students in affluent schools. Many of these activities are “pay-to-play” activities, including clubs and sports. Through these activities, students learn important skills like self-control, leadership, and communication skills, and they are provided important mentoring.

Disintegration of the Community

The third level of analysis is the more difficult and this is at the community level. The disintegration of communities and the isolation of poor children are key concerns. Now, poor kids are isolated in the community contrasted to when churches, individuals, and companies would take responsibility for “our kids” (p. 19). Educated and affluent parents have several types of social connections such as professors, friends of the family, work associates, etc. Many of these social ties are not there for the poor, who mainly rely on family and neighborhood friends.

The author states that many neighborhood churches have abdicated their moral obligation to support neighborhood children. Attendance rates at churches for both the rich and poor have been decreasing, but especially among the poor. The crux of this dwindling community resource is lack of opportunity for poor kids for adult mentoring. Interpersonal trust has also fallen for all youth, but especially for the poor, as measured by survey questions like “Most people can be trusted.” Along with this decreasing interpersonal trust is growing negativism toward government and lack of community engagement. Add to this picture the crime, drugs, and violence that many poor kids experience and the picture becomes bleaker. According to the author, nearly two thirds of affluent kids (64 percent) have some mentoring beyond their extended family, while nearly two thirds of poor kids do not (62

percent). As a result, poor kids do not have adult guidance on how to navigate processes and institutions very important for becoming a productive adult (pp. 214–216).

A Call to Action

Finally, the author has a chapter on policy recommendations. This chapter was a disappointment to this reader. Throughout the book, the author stressed that good research is available on what can be done. Then, why not be bold with recommendations and predictions of how many children will escape intergenerational poverty if these approaches are used? This half-hearted recommendation section does not marshal public or private resources toward action. The author describes the disappearing opportunity for poor children as a “crisis,” but his recommendation section is hardly a crisis plan. In addition, more thought needs to go into being more specific with the recommendations. For example, some interventions can be targeted at individual, family, and community levels. Even though Putnam says that effective interventions will be costly, no effort was made to prioritize recommendations according to cost-effectiveness.

Nevertheless, several important recommendations are highlighted. Since effective interventions to improve marriage rates among the poor are not apparent, good practices of birth control should be promoted. Good parent training and father responsibility should be stressed. But, recommendations on specific programs to achieve these results are missing. Nothing is said about some proven programs for early maternal and child health and some federally funded community-based child prevention programs that promote parent-child bonding and communication.

More controversial is the recommendation of providing money to the poor to directly offset the effects of poverty. One review of experimental studies argues that increasing the annual income of a poor family by \$3,000 per year during the child’s first five years of life is associated with improvement of achievement tests equal to 20 SAT points and 20 percent higher income later in life (Duncan, Morris, & Rodrigues, 2011; Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Examples of specific policy initiatives to distribute money to the poor include expanding earned income tax credits, expanding the existing child tax credit, and continuing some current antipoverty programs. Innovative wage and job supports for poor families are advocated and evidence is reviewed that they can lead to better academic performance. The New Hope program in Milwaukee is given as an example and the Jobs-Plus program in Baltimore, Chattanooga, Dayton, Los Angeles, and St. Paul.

A key factor in father absence among poor families is the rate of incarceration of young males and especially Black and Hispanic males. Reduced sentencing for nonviolent offenders is advocated and effective rehabilitation of prisoners that prepares them for jobs. Again, specific intervention recommendations are missing. Greater work place flexibility and parental leave are promoted. The affluent are able to afford the best day care programs, but the poor cannot afford this luxury. Therefore, Putnam advocates high-quality and affordable day care for low-income families with supportive programs like Early Head Start and Educare and nonprofit day-care centers subsidized by private philanthropists.

Putnam argues that schools are not the problem, but they can be a part of the solution. Examples of effective school-based programs include the Talent Initiative project, which pays top teachers to teach in poorer neighborhoods, Charter schools, and innovative

programs like the Promise Academy in Harlem and Cristo Rey Catholic Schools for inner-city Latino children. Finally, the author makes a plea that churches accept their moral obligation to help the poor by providing mentoring and support for families.

Conclusion

The theme of this book and its call for action is for policy makers, teachers, ministers, clinicians, and every one of us. The book is very well written and maintains the reader's interest. Detailed notes and references are provided that the reader can pursue with an Internet link to a full bibliography. This is a very important book. In this decade, we must make changes highlighted by this book to help our kids, or the ladder of opportunity for all and the American dream will disappear.

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