

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

Written by Robert Putnam

Reviewed by Art Stellar

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Some authors are good at telling stories. Some provide solid content adding to the knowledge base. A few enable their readers to draw meaningful conclusions from their work. This author, Robert Putnam, does all three in a highly readable book that brings into focus the impact of economic inequality and related national trends, much like his seminal work *Bowling Alone*.

Our Kids is a great book for educators who observe these trends every day as it will enable them to understand what is happening and why it is occurring. Sociologists and others interested in public policy will find meaning in the demographic movements, especially related to socioeconomic implications. Local, state, and Federal educational policy makers and lawmakers should read this book to gain an appreciation for the complexity of the widening of class inequity as it influences individuals, families, and communities.

Putnam reveals a country divided by a society that is becoming increasingly two tiered without a significant or viable middle class. The number of families in poverty, per traditional definitions, is steadily getting larger. Ironically, the number of families considered to be well-off is also slowly expanding. The gap between

these upper-class families and the truly economic elites is widening. The gap between the poor and the really wealthy has never been greater, according to the numerous statistics presented throughout this book. Some analysts consider race and ethnic background to be the drivers of this trend. This author acknowledges the correlation of race and ethnic background with one's future socioeconomic status, although he views the primary causal factor for success as family income. Achieving the American Dream of improving one's status in life has become nearly out-of-reach for those living in poverty.

Historically in the United States, education and hard work were viewed as the roads to a better life. Working harder is still an overall key, except the lower one starts on the economic ladder, the more difficult it is to reach the middle rungs, let alone the top. There are only so many hours in a day and menial labor jobs are fewer and fewer with income often only covering expenses. Hard work was and is more of a factor for those in the shrinking middle class or in the upper financial levels than those in the lower income levels.

From the days of Horace Mann, and perhaps earlier, education has been the recognized best path for realizing the American

Dream. Possessing a high school diploma has become a minimum requirement for most jobs. A college degree has been the real ticket to success, although that that is less true today than decades past. Nevertheless, education remains a viable means for reaching success in this country.

Completing high school is more of a struggle for the poor, as dropout figures show. Being accepted into a college program, paying for college, and graduating is more of a burden for many families of limited means. Thus, education, while still a launching pad, is less accessible for those in poverty. The poor must deal with multiple distractors to getting a good education.

And it is not just money; it is also the lack of support systems that encourage educational advancement. While money can buy tutors, pay for tuition, etc., there have also been friends, family and community norms that were prevalent in the past that have helped students overcome barriers. The author shows in individual case studies and from scholarly research that such support systems for the promotion of education are eroding across the country, especially for those living in poverty.

The author begins with his own high school graduating class in Port Clinton, Ohio—a rather typical small Midwest town. He documents the transition of a place where when he was growing up economic class did not permanently determine an individual's projected path in life.

Community residents were mindful of the needs of others and everyone monitored the children. Parents expected their offspring to have better lives than they experienced. These attributes did not dominate Port Clinton as he returned as a scholar/author.

He found that the gap between those with money and those just getting by had widened with less contact between these two segments of society in what was still a small town. Families had become more fragile. Community spirit had dissipated. Besides reviewing the overall picture of Port Clinton, he sought answers by intense examination of a few individual students representing different layers of the community.

This approach is what makes his book come alive to the reader. He is an exceptional writer who describes his subjects in a way which relates their human struggles and captures the attention of the reader who wants to know what happens next.

Sprinkled throughout the text are quotes, statistics and graphics demonstrating that the various trends in Port Clinton parallel the rest of the country. However, to ensure that Port Clinton is not an anomaly, he invokes his research and writing style practices in several other places across the United States—Bend, Oregon; Atlanta, Georgia; Orange County, California; and two economic divergent communities in the Philadelphia area.

Starting with Port Clinton, his focus was on Families, then in order: Parenting, Schooling, and Community in the order of the communities.

Putnam has done an excellent job of providing solid content and captivating personal accounts to construct a view that as income gaps have grown, more and more children have less opportunity for achieving the American Dream.

Unlike many others with a political agenda, he does not suggest that the wealthy are villains striving to keep the masses at bay.

Instead he suggests that all people have similar pragmatic concerns about helping their own. What is missing is the cultural glue and support mechanisms that assist everyone regardless of class.

The author, in describing his own ascent from a modest background, credits hard work and education as influencing factors. He admits that his own personal view, before this research project, was: “If I and my classmates could climb the ladder, I assumed, so could kids from modest backgrounds today. Having finished this research, I know better.” (p. 230) In the opinion of this reviewer, that’s the feeling he is trying to stir among the readers of this book.

Chapter six has the vexing title “What Is to Be Done?”. There is a plethora of programs offered about what could be done. Some have results. Some have promise. What is missing is

an over-arching framework or alignment that connects the dots between the problems, outlined so well in the first five chapters, with researched solutions.

The last page reminds us of the individualist tradition in America contrasted with the also popular and more generous communitarian tradition in this country. The author’s last words are these: “...America’s poor kids do belong to us and we to them. They are our kids.” (p. 261)

This last statement and the entire book will resonate with superintendents and educators everywhere, as well as parents and school board members. It would make a great gift for motivating group discussions, especially if the conversations centered upon the question of “What Is To Be Done?”

Reviewer Biography

Art Stellar is vice-president of the National Education Foundation and CyberLearning. He is also a consultant with Cenergistic the leading energy conservation company helping schools save energy dollars. Stellar has received three of AASA top awards: “Distinguished Service Award”, “Dr. Effie Jones Humanitarian Award “for promoting diversity and reducing equity gaps and “Leadership for Learning” for advancing student achievement and reducing gaps between student subgroups. He has served as a superintendent for 25 years and became a life member of AASA in 1972. The Horace Mann League elected him president, as did ASCD and the North American Chapter of the International Society for Curriculum and Instruction. He can be reached at artstellar@yahoo.com or at 828-764-1785.

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Mission and Scope, Copyright, Privacy, Ethics, Upcoming Themes, Author Guidelines, Submissions, Publication Rates & Publication Timeline

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