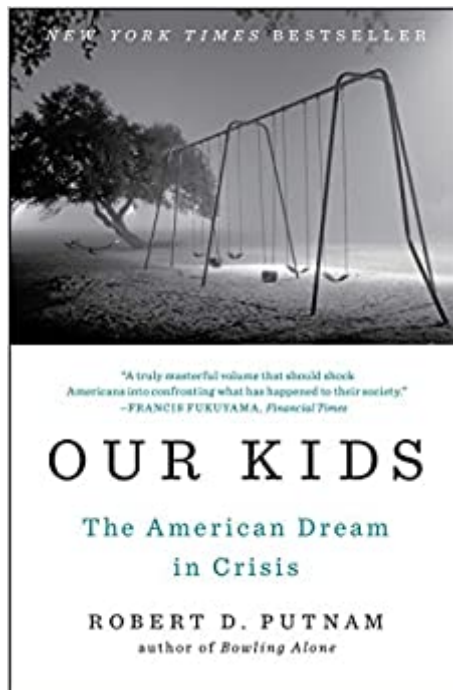


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# Our Kids: The American Dream In Crisis



## Synopsis

A New York Times bestseller and “a passionate, urgent” (The New Yorker) examination of the growing inequality gap from the bestselling author of *Bowling Alone: why fewer Americans today have the opportunity for upward mobility*. Central to the very idea of America is the principle that we are a nation of opportunity. But over the last quarter century we have seen a disturbing “opportunity gap” emerge. We Americans have always believed that those who have talent and try hard will succeed, but this central tenet of the American Dream seems no longer true or at the least, much less true than it was. In *Our Kids*, Robert Putnam offers a personal and authoritative look at this new American crisis, beginning with the example of his high school class of 1959 in Port Clinton, Ohio. The vast majority of those students went on to lives better than those of their parents. But their children and grandchildren have faced diminishing prospects. Putnam tells the tale of lessening opportunity through poignant life stories of rich, middle class, and poor kids from cities and suburbs across the country, brilliantly blended with the latest social-science research. “A truly masterful volume” (Financial Times), *Our Kids* provides a disturbing account of the American dream that is “thoughtful and persuasive” (The Economist). *Our Kids* offers a rare combination of individual testimony and rigorous evidence: “No one can finish this book and feel complacent about equal opportunity” (The New York Times Book Review).

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“There are just a few essential reads if you want to understand the American social and political landscape today. Robert Putnam’s *Our Kids* . . . deserve[s] to be on that list.” (David Brooks *The New York Times*) “Robert D. Putnam is technically a Harvard social scientist, but a better description might be poet laureate of civil society. In *Our Kids*, Putnam brings his talent for launching a high-level discussion to a timely topic. . . . No one can finish *Our Kids* and feel complacent about equal opportunity.” (Jason DeParle *The New York Times Book Review*) “Putnam’s new book is an eye-opener. When serious political candidates maintain that there are no classes in America, Putnam shows us the reality and it is anything but reassuring.” (Alan Wolfe *Washington Post Book World*) “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 *The Financial Times*) “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)“The book’s chief and authoritative contribution is its careful presentation for a popular audience of important work on the erosion, in the past half century, of so many forms of social, economic, and political support for families, schools, and communities. . . . Our Kids is a passionate, urgent book.” (Jill Lepore The New Yorker)“A thoughtful and persuasive book.” (The Economist)“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))

Robert D. Putnam is the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. Nationally honored as a leading humanist and a renowned scientist, he has written fourteen books and has consulted for the last four US Presidents. His research program, the Saguaro Seminar, is dedicated to fostering civic engagement in America. Visit [RobertDPutnam.com](http://RobertDPutnam.com).

America is becoming rigid. It is settling into immobile classes. The classes don’t mix, not in neighborhoods, not in schools, not in marriage and not in work. This is precisely the opposite of the ideals of the nation and the opposite of the way it was just 60 years ago. Usually, it’s hard to see the trends when you’re immersed in them, but this is all pretty clear in the USA in 2015. Putnam explores it through the proxy of his own experience, and intensive (sometimes horrifying) interviews with people in key communities from coast to coast. In his hometown, a rustbelt community, everyone in his generation did far better than their parents. Now, crime, poverty, underemployment, unemployment and minimal prospects for improvement are the rule. This even transcends race as the issue of the day. Blacks divide by class just as whites do. The upper classes live separate, relatively charmed lives of unlimited prospects and opportunities. The rest are lucky to make it through high school to a job of any kind. Upward mobility is all but out of the question. Putnam examines the family, the community, the school and the support network. He finds unlimited proof that in every case. The upper classes are moving forward with ease, while the lower classes and the poor are trapped in a world of violence, debt, and lack of resources. Even their social networks lack the kinds of weak ties that allow rich kids’ parents to make a phone call for them. There is all kinds of irony. The principle of scarcity means the more uncertain parents are about income, jobs, and housing, the less attention they can pay to their children. Despite being around more, the stress level and the frustration level mean less parental guidance, more violence and abuse, and of course that violence, being the norm, is carried on by

the children. Their experience of life is summed up as “Love gets you hurt; trust gets you killed.” Survival means keeping to yourself. Don’t get involved in anyone else’s business. This is the exact opposite of the 20th century, when neighbors kept watch, and everyone chipped in to help. Today, no good deed goes unpunished is the philosophical backstop of most Americans. Families no longer provide the boost they did to young minds. Working and poor classes have fewer dinners together, where events and issues get aired. Their children hear far fewer words, and spend less time in after school (or any) activities. While rich kids get more face time, poor kids get more screen time. Only 23% of lower class children start school already knowing the alphabet, vs 77% of the better educated classes. This chasm was not a result of a hippie revolution in the 60s. Family breakdown is a result of joblessness and lower expectations beginning in the 80s. Today, the poor and the working poor get married less often. They start families every time they start a new relationship, devoting less time to their children in total. Teen pregnancies are down significantly, but once out in the world, additional out of wedlock children are the norm. In school, socio-economic status has become more important than test scores in determining who graduates from college. The numbers are stark. Poorer kids participate in fewer after school activities, often because of pay to play, which their parents can’t afford. Marching band is totally out of the question unless you come from wealth. Equal access in school has become quaint history. Lower class parents, having little or no experience with these activities, don’t push their kids into them like soccer moms do. And studies show gigantic gains in income, networks and long term health for those who do participate. Informal mentoring doesn’t exist for the poor kids; their parents have no support network to consult. Disengagement and retreat to social isolation affects the lower classes disproportionately. And disengagement is what the internet society is all about. The book is filled with dozens of ugly charts that all decline or point downward. The result is a totally different America, dealing with unnecessary poverty, childhood poverty, additional taxpayer burden, lost competitiveness, lost earnings, lower consumer spending, lower growth, and of course, the dissolution of social cohesion. And near zero economic mobility for most. We are becoming two countries in the style of the kingdoms of old. The classes don’t meet, mix, or trade, despite being just on the other side of the interstate highway. Putnam points to himself, revealing he could not imagine what life is like for the lower classes, because his generation was mobile and escaped them. Anyone reading this book will also likely be from the more successful class and will similarly have zero experience with the mean world of “the 99%.” It makes for a gripping, shocking, appalling read. There is too much to say about this important book. Read it and

it will change you. David Wineberg PS. I have just posted a review of *The Free Will Delusion: How We Settled for the Illusion of Morality*. It answers the questions about how all this could have happened here. It provides the provenance for Putnam's evidence. They make a complete pairing of the story.

This is an important book for U.S. citizens. Robert Putnam makes the case that American society has changed over past decades. People have segregated themselves by neighborhood. University graduates live in uniformly high income neighborhoods, which was not true in the past; these neighborhoods have schools where kids do well. People who have not gone beyond high school tend to live in uniformly low income neighborhoods, which also was not as true in the 1950s or even 1970; these neighborhoods have schools where kids do not do well. Lack of investment in these poor kids is costing the country now, and the total cost will be in the trillions of dollars. Besides, as Putnam points out, it is profoundly immoral to let some of our kids down while others do well. <http://j.mp/1F0PYGJ>

This book covers a wide range of critical issues relating to child development in a modern society where the institution of the traditional family has been slowly crumbling. The issues are not new, and in fact, scholars have studied them since before the initiation of the Head Start program in 1965. What is most valuable in Putnam's writing is the compelling need to examine and integrate complex relationships if we are ever to develop a successful coping strategy. It's not appropriate to dump a complex, major social problem on a beleaguered school system which, in totality, is too big and too demanding of human and fiscal resources to operate effectively.

As explained in the afterward Bob Putnam was very surprised by the change in the life opportunities of kids growing up in Port Clinton Ohio. Economic classes that are now strongly segregated interacted across the social spectrum in the 50's when Putnam was growing up. The book expands on this insight with stories and statistics that flesh out the dimensions of the problem of income inequality. The stories come from communities across the U.S. so you get a sense of the representativeness of the observations. The book is entertaining and informative, and it feeds empathy for people most of us seldom intersect with. And the book ends with practical proposals based on general characteristics seen in the stories and Statistics. For example, go to your local school district and advocate for the removal of fees for students to participate in extra-curricular activities.

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