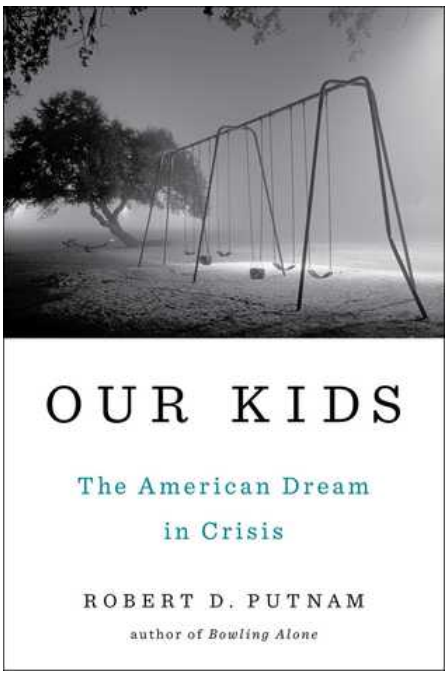

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

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A groundbreaking examination of the growing inequality gap from the bestselling author of *Bowling Alone*: why fewer Americans today have the opportunity for upward mobility.

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. Now, this central tenet of the American dream seems no longer true or at the least, much less true than it was.

Robert Putnam about whom *The Economist* said, "His scholarship is wide-ranging, his intelligence luminous, his tone modest, his prose unpretentious and frequently funny," offers a personal but also authoritative look at this new American crisis. Putnam begins with his high school class of 1959 in Port Clinton, Ohio. By and large the vast majority of those students "our kids" went on to lives better than those of their parents. But their children and grandchildren have had harder lives amid diminishing prospects. Putnam 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.

Our Kids is a rare combination of individual testimony and rigorous evidence. Putnam provides a disturbing account of the American dream that should initiate a deep examination of the future of our country.

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis Details

Date	:	Published March 10th 2015 by Simon & Schuster (first published March 1st 2015)
ISBN	:	9781476769899
Author	:	Robert D. Putnam
Format	:	Hardcover 386 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Education, Sociology, Politics, Economics, Parenting, History

From Reader Review Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis for online ebook

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Bryan Alexander hosted a readalong of this book on his blog, where there has been thoughtful ongoing discussion chapter by chapter. He also talked about the book on the 30th episode of the Reading Envy Podcast. The best discussions are in those two locations.

The book is well worth the read if you are interested in socioeconomic topics, particularly if you work with kids in any way. I read it from the perspective of changing demographics at my own institution, more because I wanted to be presented with creative solutions that I could adapt to my own situation. Unfortunately, I think Putnam is not as strong on solutions as he is on discussing the data and changes. I suspect someone else may need to take his ideas forward with stronger or more feasible solutions.

Basic summary comes late in chapter 5:
"If it takes a village to raise a child, the prognosis for American children isn't good: in recent years, villages all over America, rich and poor, have deteriorated as we've shirked collective responsibility for our kids."

Clif Hostetler says

[image error]

Marks54 says

This is a report of Putnam's latest study on inequality in education in America. Qualitative interview results for a selected set of respondents which is then supplemented by summaries of current results from larger sample statistical studies. It is a timely book that is easy to read. The results - that inequality is currently being driven by class rather than racial divisions - are reasonable and well presented. While I enjoyed the book, I did not find it outstanding. I have read much of the research covered in the book and there is little new here. Moreover, the framework that Putnam develops lumps together the situations of the upper middle class and the super rich (top 1 percent). This is a major gap and the study neglects the richness open to a more complete theoretical approach, such as that pursued by Piketty. While painting a plausible picture, however, there is also little new in terms policy recommendations. There is also the tension that comes from focusing on individual cases and thus presenting pictures that can be deconstructed in terms of the choices of individuals. While there are always choices, the structural pressures on the disadvantaged are if anything downplayed and thus the state of the crisis posed by inequality is less rather than more developed. It is, if anything, too rosy of a picture. To be fair to Putnam and his RA, they appear to realize this issue in their final chapter on methods, although it is unclear what was done with this recognition.

I also enjoyed the cross-generational analysis that starts off the book. The author is also careful in presenting his methods and showing how this study passes muster for social science norms. It is a capably done study. It is the contribution that concerns me.

Still, the publicity that the book has received is good and the book is worth reading.

James (JD) Dittes says

"If our kids are in trouble--my kids, our kids, anyone's kids---we all have a responsibility to look after them." I place this quote at the beginning of my review--even though it is the last quote of the book (p 261) because it delineates those who will want to read it from those who will ignore its profound proofs and conclusions.

There are those who see kids as *Our Kids* and those who complain about "those kids." Putnam's book is definitely for the former. Looking at the basic systems that support American kids, Families, Parents, Schools and Communities, he finds much that has improved in recent years, but growing gaps of support between prosperous families and those in need.

Each chapter includes cases studies of young people and parents from both sides of the tracks. Putnam uses their experiences to emphasize researched findings about effective parenting, successful schools and meaningful community supports.

For example, one chapter that surprised me was the chapter on parenting. Educated parents (whom Putnam describes as having a BA degree or higher) tend to nurture and motivate their children through vision, whereas High School and under-educated parents, tend to emphasize conformity and discipline. The morning after reading this, I was caring for the children of a close high school friend, who did not go on to complete college. "If they don't behave, I'm going to have their daddy whoop them," I heard her say. If my kids are bad, I'm more interested in learning why!

As a teacher, I'm going to use the lessons learned here in the way I interact with my own students. Putnam emphasizes how church pastors and teachers can have outsized influences in the lives of kids who may not have necessary support from home. In fact, he shows ways that all Americans, of many career types, can have a genuine impact on *Our Kids* for many generations to come.

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farmwifetwo says

Through the use of stereotypes and previously done research the authors try to write a book about the disparities of income gaps and offer no real solutions.

http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi...

Vance says

Robert Putnam provides another interesting read that hits on timely issues to tackle how the American Dream is in crisis.

I read his book “Bowling Alone” years ago and it definitely influenced the way I see the world. For example, our lack of social capital continues to affect our actions and contributes to a breakdown in the fabric of society. This book “Our Kids” builds on that work by looking at specific stories of families of different

demographics and socioeconomic levels to understand if there’s a divide in the opportunity gap.

Putnam finds that the big opportunity gap is based on the socioeconomic status of the privileged versus underprivileged. He brings up the issue of income inequality quite often and how that relates the education system and other institutional issues.

The problems identified deal with the breakdowns in the family, income inequality, lack of education, and lack of networking. His solutions are broad and vague, but they tend to revolve around more government intervention: increased contraception access to reduce pregnancies of unplanned babies, more spending on education, expand the Earned Income Tax Credit, fund more for child care and welfare programs.

While I enjoyed the book, I give it 3 stars because of the lack of specificity in the solutions and the lack of consideration of government programs leading to these socioeconomic problems that then contribute to social ills. In particular, we should work to strengthen institutions like the family and civil society in general by reducing the wedge the government has placed in people’s incentives, especially in the poorest among us. Without understanding the effect welfare has had on these incentives, there is a lack of understanding of an appropriate solution.

Therefore, in my view he over-emphasizes government solutions for the social ills he identifies that would actually make the situation worse because those solutions are already part of the problem.

But don’t take my word on the book, check it out for yourself.

Yannis Theocharis says

I was very much looking forward to reading this book. I was not disappointed and I can strongly recommend it. As always, Putnam has a lot to say and delivers in style. The central argument of this book is that inequality *of opportunity* in America is growing (alongside economic inequality), to the point that the poorer clusters of the society experience a present and a future that is virtually unimaginable to those coming from privileged backgrounds. The book is basically a description of social change thought a large collection of "Scissor graphs" showing increasing class gaps when it comes to how various factors (family background and stability, residential segregation, education, school quality and community) affect socioeconomic mobility. Around these graphs, Putnam has elegantly wrapped text stemming from interviews conducted with people from different social backgrounds in various parts of the country painting a dire picture about the state of inequality of opportunity in America; a condition that makes upward mobility not just harder than it used to be in the baby boomer generation but often impossible (or even something one would contemplate). Putnam's hope is that his readers will be able to at least get an idea of how the other half lives.. or rather struggles to survive. Putnam is extra cautious to point out that most of his warnings and developments he describes are based on correlations - as only few of the studies he includes in the book have randomised experimental designs "proving" causality - yet the overall picture - whether causal or not - is plausible. And dire.

This is in many ways a heartbreaking book, although if you have seen "The Wire" you will be no stranger to the lives of those whose terrifying experiences with violence, gangs, parental abuse, drugs, and so on are narrated in this book through their own words. You will certainly not be a stranger to the consequences either - at least if you've been following the news. You probably *will", however, find yourself being amazing with the extent of these developments and with how obviously difficult is to reverse them. What I like is that

within the stories narrated - even the most depressing and heartbreaking - there is almost always a glimmer of hope reflected in the humanity and efforts of people who inspired, supported, helped, and loved others without asking for anything in exchange. The kind of stories that reinstate your trust in humanity. Yet, as the book shows, they are not enough. It is political will that can reverse these patterns (if they can be reversed), and that is the subject of the last chapter about "what is to be done", in my view the weakest of the book.

And a final note. I am not expecting Putnam, a Harvard academic, to say clearly that what he describes is class struggle of a modern kind (although he clearly says that the differences are no longer race-based but class-based and there are clear and massive class differences within different races), but in reality that is precisely what he is talking about. And in many ways it is precisely the outcome of policy decisions made during a certain period and expanded (strengthening the disastrous effects especially towards the poorest) during the rise and spread of neoliberalism. Although again Putnam does not want to push the political point as far as I would have liked (or he pushes it in a rather subtle way, some may argue), much of the neoliberal policies advanced over the last decades (as well as the absence of responsible policies -regardless of ideological origin- for the most vulnerable clusters of society) have had a destructive effect of American society, tearing the social fabric apart. This much is clear.

Thomas says

A saddening yet necessary examination of how the gap between the rich and the poor has expanded in the United States. Fans of Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* may enjoy this book, as Robert Putnam blends human narratives with quantitative data to make his points. His main thesis: while America once served as the land of opportunity for a lot of us, the opportunity for the impoverished has shriveled up. Putnam shows how economic inequality has widened through discussing how wealthier parents can afford more time, motivation, and resources for their kids, how poor kids have fewer connections and mentors in their communities, and how poor kids have fewer family dinners which disadvantages them, and more. He does a great job portraying the relentless cycle in which the wealthy can continue to ascend while the poor get trapped in dead ends, of no fault of their own. The book concludes with some practical suggestions on how to improve these issues, such as fighting against pay-to-play policies in local schools and expanding the earned income tax credit and the child tax credit.

My sole main critique concerns how I wish Putnam had dedicated more time to examining how race, immigration status, and other identity factors influence wealth. I feel like he understated the role of race, especially in regard to intergenerational wealth and how experiences of racism can affect socioeconomic status. I am unsure if he minimized the role of race to appeal to a broader audience. Still, despite this limitation, I am glad this book exists and illuminates how the myth of the American dream has long collapsed. If we want to revive it for *all* of our kids and not just the wealthy ones, we have to work toward that goal intentionally.

Bri (girlwithabookblog.com) says

For more reviews visit, http://girlwithabookblog.wordpress.com

A lot of press have published very enthusiastic and positive reviews about Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis by Robert D. Putnam, but as someone who works in the education field, has a background in family,

youth, and educational sociology, and is a frequent reader of nonfiction, I must strongly disagree with the bubble of positivity surrounding this book. The book covers what the author believes to be the disintegration of the “American dream” which, for the purposes of the book, is essentially the belief that individuals can achieve upward social and economic mobility through increased educational attainment.

Everything covered in the book isn’t new to anyone that works in education or is in tune with social inequality in anyway. I concede that this book is likely not meant for people who are already interested in and informed of these topics, but is rather meant to serve as an introduction to the general public of the troubling conditions that surround young people who are trying to advance themselves within society. However, the tone that Putnam adopts within his book is incredibly condescending. Within the work, he highlights the different life and education experiences that typically occur for youth in different economic classes, ranging from upper-middle class families to those who are living below the poverty line. I’m happy that Putnam (or rather his graduate student, Jennifer Silva, who actually conducted all of the interviews detailed in the book) included a range of representations of what it’s like to grow up in America today in comparison to what his and his high school classmates’ lives were like in 1959 in his hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio. However, what really irked me is when the author would write calls to action with an air of assumption that anyone reading the book helms from something above a working class background. When this happened, it seemed to me like Putnam sometimes lost sense of the humanity of the populations that he doesn't personally identify as and assumed that anyone reading his book would be of the same social social class as him. Because of this, I felt like the calls to action were particularly alienating.

The main argument Putnam makes throughout the book is that class influences a child's success in the American schooling system and subsequent career and education trajectory more than race does. While I agree that class is incredibly influential on these outcomes, race can also greatly impact how children are treated by their peers, community, and educators, and this cannot be brushed aside as easily as Putnam makes it seem. I wish Putnam had spent more time digging into how the intersection of race and class can impact certain children, but he seemed to cherry pick stories that supported his main thesis instead of looking to include a representation of different experiences.

Aforementioned alienation aside, I guess Our Kids can serve as a good introduction to how social and education inequality affects young people for a reader who is completely new to these topics. If you decide to read this, please realize that Putnam’s tone can be incredibly condescending at times and this subsequently impacts how he details the experiences of all of the study participants who were interviewed. I partly think he did this in order to enact a larger call to action and a greater sense of shared responsibility with the assumed (upper-middle class) audience who is reading the book, but it fell flat for me.

Below, I've included two quotes that I found particularly troubling in order to provide examples of why this book rubbed me the wrong way. They are only included in this review because I feel like they can help potential readers decide whether or not this is a book they would like to read.

When describing how a poorer individual relates to his parents’ political ideologies, Putnam states, “David lives in a chaotic family situation with no role models at all for political or civic engagement, so our questions about those topics elicited a puzzled stare and a brief response, as though we had asked about Mozart or foxhunting.”

“But most readers of this book do not face the same plight, nor does its author, nor do our own biological kids. Because of growing class segregation in America, fewer and fewer successful people (and even fewer of our children) have much idea how the other half lives. So we are less empathetic than we should be to the plight of less privileged kids.”

Todd N says

Everything that you need to know about the lack of opportunity equality -- and therefore the lack of upward mobility -- in today's America can be summed up in one graph on page 190 of this book. It displays the results of a study showing that a poor 8th grade kid who scores well on standardized tests is less likely to graduate from college than a rich 8th grade kid who scores poorly on the same tests.

So if you are a kid with the misfortune of being born near the bottom of our greasy class ladder, America's institutions will be sure to keep a weighty boot on your neck for the rest of your miserable existence. You'd probably have a better chance against the medieval feudal system, the court of Louis XVI, or maybe the Greek gods.

The subject of this book is kids in America. This is smart because who doesn't want anything but the best for kids, even poor ones (as opposed to adults)? It's also risky because demographic studies about what happened to a generation don't usually come out until they have reached 40 or so. So while it might be premature to focus on today's batch of kids, there are still some pretty clear trends.

The book starts with a retrospective of Mr. Putnam's own class of 1959 in Port Clinton, Ohio. Similar to another really good book on the same topic, Coming Apart by Charles Murray, rich and poor live in similar neighborhoods and have similar values. It's like Happy Days but with a bunch more racism and factory work.

Then we jump to the present day and get case studies showing an upper- and lower-middle class family illustrative of differences in (1) family structure, (2) parenting, (3) schools, and (4) community. There is one chapter on each topic. Of course the chapter on public schools is the most horrifying. The case studies are extremely compelling and I'm going to assume representative, though obviously not scientific. Then come a boatload of studies, facts, and figures backed up with footnotes in case you want to read more.

Each chapter contains lots of "scissor charts" showing one group of Americans pulling away from the other group, usually based on income or education.

Weirdly, or maybe smartly, Mr. Putnam keeps politics almost completely out of this book. I figured after the appalling studies and facts presented in this book that the last chapter would be some kind of screed blasting someone. (But then again Mr Murray couldn't resist doing that in Coming Apart, and frankly he completely lost me in his last chapter.) He winds up making recommendations to help bring America back together, but somehow our broken political system gets a pass. I guess that's how Mr. Putnam gets to be an advisor to our past three presidents. As long as he gets them to read this book, I'm okay with it.

Very highly recommended. In the same zone as Coming Apart (Murray) and The Unwinding (Packer) and sorta The Divide (Taibbi).

A few other random notes:
* They could improve a kid's chance of success drastically simply by moving his family out of a poorer neighborhood and into a richer one. (Who even does studies like that? Is that even ethical?)

* Even the upper class parents felt the need to manipulate the education system through great effort to get their kids a decent education. There really is a huge problem there. The 1959 kids were embarrassed at any

attempt at parents to intercede in their education. The present day kids don't have a say of course.

* It's sad how in one case study church programs were a way for people to get help for addiction problems but also a way for dealers to pick up new customers

* This book made me reassess the people I know who are in their 20s. Now I realize that they are pretty much all from upper class backgrounds. (I used to assume that everyone came from a similar background as me, paid for college themselves, and started their careers with no outside assistance like I did.)

* Reading this book helped me understand why the hiring process at Google made me feel uneasy. Jokes like, "Oh your dad left so you had to go to a local college? Maybe Yahoo would be better for you," were still funny to me in 2006, but more in a gallows kind of way.

* Given the differences between the two schools described in Orange County, I don't see why everyone is so uptight about the standardized testing movement. (Best of the Left podcast did a whole hand-wringy episode on this last week.) I think it would bring exactly the kind of problem with substandard schools and social promotion to light.

* It's amazing how quickly a neighborhood can deteriorate from safe and diverse to unsafe in less than a generation. There are several examples described in the book.

* There are about a billion studies showing that extracurricular activities are tied to positive outcomes later in life. I was a band-o, so I guess I had this covered, but outside of that I was never one for extracurriculars. I didn't realize that with cuts to funding, esp. in California, most of them are either gone or they cost money. I probably wouldn't have been in band if it had cost my parents extra money, which means I would have just stayed in my room and played The Wall and Dark Side of the Moon an extra million times instead.

* If society is going to marginalize people without college degrees and there aren't enough jobs that require college degrees then how is this all going to end up? Right now 2% of Americans make their living through agriculture and the manufacturing base has greatly declined. Are we promoting college for all knowing that a certain percentage will be consigned to crappy service jobs? Ones that will probably pay so low that they will require tax payer funded benefits?

* When the dozen or so 2016 candidates talk about blue collar family values and some even claim that they still represent blue collar values, do they mean that their families are split up, they rarely attend church, they often draw public assistance, and they have loose ties to the communities? Demographically this appears to be what they are saying. I guess it doesn't sound very populist to say they have upper-middle class values, but I think that's what they are actually getting at.

* I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I hate rich kids.

Caren says

The widening gap between upper and lower income levels in the USA has been cause for a lot of research and discussion. Mr. Putnam's book considers one aspect of inequality: how if affects the opportunity of children in this country to advance beyond the class into which they have been born, which used to be known as the American Dream. He begins with changes in his own home town of Port Clinton, Ohio, looking at

how children from disparate backgrounds in his youth, the 1950s, compare to kids growing up there now. His view then widens to other areas of the USA, always comparing children from lower economic and education-level families and children from families whose parents are more highly educated and with comfortable incomes. When Mr. Putnam was growing up (and he is now in his 70s), residents of his town thought of all of the kids in town as "our kids" and those from families with fewer resources were mentored and helped by other community members. In other words, all of the children were seen as the future of the town, all of them were "our kids". (He acknowledges that racism certainly was a problem in the town of his youth, but even the two African-American children in his graduating class achieved great leaps beyond the level of their parents, both earning graduate degrees.) Fast forward to his town today, where those children at the bottom are very often from single-parent families, living on the edge in dangerous neighborhoods and with no prospect of rising above that level. In Mr. Putnams's highly regarded previous book, "Bowling Alone", he decried the waning of "social capital". In a way, this book continues that lament. He is a professor of public policy at Harvard, so this sort of broad overview which considers the ramifications of continuing on this trajectory would seem to be his specialty. He feels so strongly about the threat of continuing on this path that he openly says he timed the book (which he thinks could be his last) to coincide with the next presidential election. He believes it should become the top talking point. This book is engaging, with its stories of real people, even while being a piece of rigorous research by an academic (with roughly 80 pages of notes and a twenty-page section at the end that details how he went about his research). It is clear he meant it to reach the widest possible audience. He explores, with actual families as examples, how the family and parenting, schooling, and community affect what sorts of opportunities are open to kids of different classes. He says (in the section that explains his methodology) that he tried to find a "quartet" of people in varied areas of the country. The quartet would consist of a girl and her mother, and a boy and his father. For some of the poorer kids, this had to be modified, since some of the fathers were not around. He noted that the way poorer, less educated parents raise their kids is very different from the more economically advantaged families. Here is an observation, from page 119:

"One broad class difference in parenting norms turns up in virtually all studies: well-educated parents aim to raise autonomous, independent, self-directed children with high self-esteem and the ability to make good choices, whereas less educated parents focus on discipline and obedience and conformity to pre-established rules...Upper-class parents have more egalitarian relations with their children and are more likely to use reasoning and guilt for discipline, whereas lower-class parents are more likely to use physical punishment, like whipping."

He continues on page 122:

"Class-based differences in parenting style are well established and powerfully consequential. The ubiquitous correlation between poverty and child development (both cognitive and socioemotional) is, in fact, largely explained by differences in parenting styles, including cognitive stimulation (such as frequency of reading) and social engagement (such as involvement in extracurricular activities...) In particular, parental reading (controlling for many other factors, including maternal education, verbal ability, and warmth) fosters child development. Child development specialists Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook have found that differences in parenting---especially maternal sensitivity and nurturance, but also provision of books, library visits, and the like---is the single most important factor explaining differences in school readiness between rich kids and poor kids, as measured by literacy, mathematics, and language test scores at age four."

He further says, on page 128:

"What are kids from less educated homes doing when they are not getting personal attention from their parents? Studies of how children actually spend their days suggest that the most important part of the answer is TV...Children with well educated parents...spend less time watching TV and more time reading and studying compared to children of less educated parents...With the spread of the Internet, TV is being gradually replaced by Web-based entertainment, but the basic fact remains: rich kids get more face time, while poor kids get more screen time."

He goes on to note that parental stress is a big reason for this difference. He quotes Laura Bush as saying, in

2007, "If you don't know how long you're going to keep your job, or how long you're going to keep your house, you have less energy to invest in your kids." Putnam says: "The first lady's comments anticipated arguments that the behavioral economists Dendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir made in their 2013 book, "Scarcity". Under conditions of scarcity, they write, the brain's ability to grasp, manage, and solve problems falters, like a computer slowed down by too many open apps, leaving us less efficient and less effective than we would be under conditions of abundance. What we usually understand as an impoverished parent's lack of skills, care, patience, tolerance, attention, and dedication can actually be attributed to the fact that the parent's mind is functioning under a heavy load." (page 130-131).

The last chapter of the book is titled "What is to be done?", but he also emphasizes (in case the preceding stories haven't made a strong enough impression) why this matters. On page 230 he says:

"Poor kids, through no fault of their own, are less prepared by their families, their schools, and their communities to develop their God-given talents as fully as rich kids. For economic productivity and growth, our country needs as much talent as we can find, and we certainly can't afford to waste it. The opportunity gap imposes on all of us both real costs and what economists term 'opportunity costs'."

Continuing, on page 232, he says:

"Roughly two thirds of these costs reflect lost earning, lower economic growth, and lower tax revenue, while less than 5 percent reflect the costs of 'welfare ' programs. Even if we harden our hearts and simply leave these poor kids to fend for themselves, we will still have to reckon with the lion's share of these costs, because these kids will not be contributing to the national economy."

He also says that "college-educated young people are more civically engaged", while poorer kids are often apathetic. Here is an exchange with one of his poorer subjects (from pages 237-238):

"On the other side of the tracks, David lives in a chaotic family situation with no role models at all for political or civic engagement, so our questions about those topics elicited a puzzled stare and a brief response, as though we had asked about Mozart or foxhunting.

Q: Do you ever vote?

A: Never voted.

Q: Do you know if your parents are involved in politics, or if they get involved in stuff?

A: I don't talk to them about it.

[The researcher queries Kayla, another disadvantaged young person:]

Q: Are you involved in political stuff or community stuff?

A: Not really.

Q: Are you interested in watching the news?

A: It gets old after a while. Somebody shot somebody, or somebody robbed somebody. I'm not that interested.

Q: Are you excited about the election coming up? Do you think you'll vote?

A: Nah, I don't care.

Q: Do you have a party that you like?

A: They all kind of suck.

Q: Are your parents involved in politics at all?

A: Not really."

Mr. Putnam points out that this apathy has ramifications for democracy: first, that the political system becomes less representative of Americans as a whole, and second, that this mass of disaffected people could become restive.

From pages 239-240):

"An inert and atomized mass of alienated and estranged citizens, disconnected from social institutions, might under normal circumstances pose only a minimal threat to political stability, with any menace muted by the masses' very apathy. Government under such circumstances might not be very democratic, but at least it would be stable. But under severe economic or international pressures---such as the pressures that

overwhelmed Europe and America in the 1930s---that 'inert' mass might suddenly prove highly volatile and open to manipulation by antidemocratic demagogues at the ideological extremes."
Mr Putnam does have suggestions for addressing these problems. He speaks about ways to affect family formation and structure, about early childhood development programs and instruction in effective parenting, about changing the residential segregation (based on income inequality) of public schools, of getting kids into extracurricular activities by getting rid of "pay-for-play" programs, and of studying how our country approached these very same challenges in the past. He encourages readers to move past the individualist mindset that has threaded its way through this country's history, and turn to more communitarian values, quoting a city manager from Boston as saying: "If our kids are in trouble---my kids, our kids, anyone's kids---we all have a responsibility to look after them." (page 261).

** Here is an interview with the author, from Book TV:
http://www.c-span.org/video/?325084-1...

Ian says

Yeah, what can you say about a book like this? Seems to be getting a near universal 4-star rating here, as it is well-written, meticulously researched, interesting, and exceedingly timely.

That said, the book covers a lot of well-explored territory, and I rarely found myself surprised by any of the book's conclusions. The book makes an attempt to say that class rather than race or other factors is the driving determinate for kids' life outcomes. This may or may not be true -- frankly it's beyond my área of expertise.

However, it felt the author was downplaying a lot of things to keep this book safely within the politically correct circle... note the distinct lack of negative reviews for this book, in comparison to Charles Murray's much more interesting book on the same subject: Coming Apart

Similarly, this book's conclusions and call to action are weak and uninspiring. More mentoring and free after school activities would probably be of some help to lower-class students, but I can't imagine them making any great difference.

Jan Rice says

How could he idealize the 1950s? How could he say equality of opportunity has *declined* since then? For whom?

Even if I hadn't been studying *The Black Swan*, even if I'd never read *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, I would have had to be questioning.

Why does the fact that all the classes tended to live together in close proximity in the '50s make that decade the pinnacle? Why not the 1920s or '30s, when whole *families* lived together and whole communities were

rooted in one place?

Just coincidentally, '59, this ideal year of the ideal time was the year of the author's high school graduation.

The 1950s preceded the Civil Rights era. Jim Crow and, where I live, racial segregation still prevailed. In case I had forgotten about that, I happened to see the musical *Memphis*--set in the 1950s and focusing on segregation and its ills--while I was reading this book.

The author gives lip service to recognizing the difference between causality and correlation.

> To be sure, few of these studies were true experiments, randomly assigning some kids to participate and excluding others, so we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the robust correlation between extracurricular involvement and life success might be due, at least in part, to some unmeasured variable...

Nevertheless, he routinely tells a causal story. He routinely implies causality, even in the face of a mishmash of variables. So, we have poverty leading to inequality of opportunity. Having money would buffer against stress, from which poor children inequitably suffer. Even inspired parenting can't be effective in the face of poverty. Their communities lead them in downhill directions. Their institutions fail them. Their schools cannot cope. They attend church less often.

The overall picture may be something like Charles Murray's in *Coming Apart*, which has the upper classes behaving conservatively--attending church, staying together, and pursuing long-term goals--while poor families disproportionately disintegrate. The result is a two-tier society.

This author is fingering inequality of opportunity.

The book is a fast read. For each chapter--family, parenting, schooling, community--the author describes two families, one of which represents a securely middle-class situation, while the other struggles with poverty and various social ills. Those stories can be skimmed. Then the author gives studies and opinions in support of his conclusions.

On one hand he seems "conservative," in that he seems to think people could make better decisions. And he says that, despite financial disparities, Americans don't begrudge the successful their rewards.

On the other, he thinks more money and expensive programs would do the trick. And at one point he goes on about the evils of wealth.

After all the opinions, discussion, and citations, what can he advise?

> We must pursue a strategy of trial and error.... So my criterion is not whether any given proposal has already proven effective, but whether the best available evidence suggests that it has promise.

I think he confuses "the best available evidence" with the conventional wisdom, the latter being a function of the prevailing winds. And he capitalizes on our human tendency to project causality onto everything. This book is an opinion piece, a sermon of sorts.

This is a case in which the author already knew what he wanted to find. So all his references, stories, statistics, and examples lead in the preordained direction. He already believes what he believes. In other words, the book is, I think, an example of *confirmatory* (rather than *exploratory*) thinking. That would be the case if out of the universe of facts and observations he has selected those in line with his beliefs while leaving inconvenient truths in the darkness. In that way he carves out a reasonable-sounding thesis by eliminating from consideration what doesn't fit. Thus come the questions that don't easily fit within the boundaries of his narrative, such as: How have immigrant classes in abject poverty been able to pull themselves up? Why does the underclass, in contrast, get stuck there?

When an example arises that argues against some aspect of his explanatory theory, the author disavows or dismisses it by coming up with some elaboration of his narrative. In that way, plot adjustment masquerades as factual explanation. That is the sense in which theologian Karen L. King asks, "What work is this narrative doing?" And that should tell us something about the nature of confirmatory thinking.

For example, Robert Putnam's use of term "social capital:" for him, social capital consists of connections that the rich have but the poor don't. And it's those connections that matter. The example that might challenge his argument is that of connections through social media. The author simply waves his hand regarding the possibility that those connections matter. Case dismissed. But I'm not sure the poor are defined by their lack of connections, although, by definition, they do lack money.

For Putnam, poor children don't have their share of something of which the rich have more than their share: especially money, but also including social capital, which, for him, means connections. I read him as saying the poor must be given their share, and that's what would fix things.

Nicholas Lemann reviewed *Our Kids* in the *New York Review of Books* and found the author hadn't supported his conclusions and recommendations. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi... Perhaps in the '50s, what was beneficial to all was the booming postwar economy, imbuing rich and poor alike with the magic fairy dust of hope and spurring all and sundry to their best efforts.

Putnam espouses what in another review (of Miss Lonelyhearts) I recently called the "social work" approach: just put people in touch with the resources they need and everything will be all right. The problem is that so very often the "social work" approach doesn't work, although according to our logic, it should. After being linked up with programs and resources, people often revert.

What about equality of opportunity, the decline of which I questioned at the beginning?

In the essay Capitalism and Inequality, Jerry Muller asserts that although there are both formal and informal barriers to equality of opportunity, formal barriers have been gradually lowered. So the issue is no longer unequal opportunity but the inability to *use* it, even when it is placed in front of the deprived. In that connection, Muller looks not at social capital, in Putnam's sense, but at *human* capital: cognitive ability, character, knowledge, social skills. It is human capital than enables people to cope with today's economy, as there are fewer and fewer lucrative jobs requiring unskilled labor. For Muller, the factory that produces human capital is the family.

Speaking of capitalism and inequality, it is noteworthy that in 2015 Robert Putnam has written a whole book

on inequality and never once mentioned Thomas Piketty.

Disagreeing with the author's theory doesn't necessarily entail offering one of my own, but the mind does turn to what it is that will make people change or permit them to do so. Surely, heavy-duty confrontation with their alleged wrongness is ineffective and paradoxically may have the opposite effect. (Think of the Aesop's fable about how the winter wind couldn't make the traveler take off his coat, no matter how hard it blew!)

My whimsical reference above to "the fairy dust of hope" gives a clue to my thinking: narrative is important--but not just any free-floating narrative. To be sustaining, it has to ring true. The facts on the grounds are not without importance, but in addition a sustaining narrative can seem counterfactual a great deal of the time.

I see now that I must abbreviate this line of inquiry. The "ring true" aspect alone could entail lengthy exposition! But when it comes to how change occurs, a narrative of blame won't work. It may lead me to revolution, in the sense of my taking from you the share I think should be mine, but it won't take me where I want to go. As with driving a car, one must focus on the road ahead and not on the driver in the other lane.

I do think there has to be some income redistribution, but making it effective seems to come with complications.

Then, too, in that musical, *Memphis*, it wasn't just that the poor black people were lacking. In that story, they possessed aspects that the white folks coveted.

Sociology is involved here. Whatever "free will" is, it doesn't lie in doing whatever I choose (or "feel like"), but in some sort of wider view, in which I have some recognition of the impinging forces.

I have had past discussions right here on Goodreads about whether participating in organized religion, for one example, or having children, for another, are deeply individual and personal choices. People think so, but if I stop and think about it, I see we're carried along in huge waves of which we're barely aware.

Consider the recent US "marriage map:" http://nyti.ms/1IC8fuh Surely all the people who have made the deeply personal decision to remain single didn't move to New York City!

Any modicum of free will requires that the wave in which we are swimming not remain invisible. Boko Haram has a point, right? If we spread Western education there, the women will certainly become uppity and reduce the number of children they're willing to have.

So, do we aim to change the wave?

Or maybe we advocate for all to become expert surfers.

Why did I give the book two stars? I didn't respect the way he argued, but he did point out the inequities of a two-tier society (although not so clearly as is done elsewhere).

Kathryn says

The non-fiction genre is not a favorite of mine -- it doesn't even rank in the top ten -- but I was compelled to read this book by my sister-in-law, a recently retired, highly-respected public school teacher, who slid it into my hands the last time I saw her and told me she had already purchased four more copies for her grown children.

The book is about an opportunity gap that has emerged over the past five or six decades between children born to educated and uneducated parents. Putnam and his Harvard team have pulled together and analyzed hundreds of studies (referenced in 84 pages of notes at the back of the book which I only felt the need to consult once or twice) and they have humanized the data by including some of the stories they heard while interviewing upper and lower class families in Ohio, Oregon, California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania. The result is an academic book that does not stray too far or often over the line into overly pedantic. Solutions are suggested.

I had a hard time falling asleep in the week I spent reading this book. Putnam has been called "the most influential academic in the world" by The Sunday Times of London. I hope and pray that is true in this case.

Esil says

Thank you to the Publisher and Netgalley for an opportunity to read Our Kids. I usually read fiction and mysteries with an occasional foray into history and memoirs so this was not within the scope of my usual reading. But the description was really interesting and I am glad I took the chance. Through a combination of personal stories and an extensive review of recent research, Putnam describes the growing economic gap between rich and poor, with an emphasis on the declining opportunities for upward mobility. He looks at a variety of factors, including changing trends in schools, families and communities that have the effect of making it harder for poorer kids to develop the skills -- including soft skills like savvy and resilience -- to move up the economic ladder. The personal stories are very powerful, making this a book that at times I found hard to put down. And the trends Putnam described really resonated for me -- even from the Canadian side of the border. Things I thought of as idiosyncratic aspects of my childhood and my kids' experience growing up turn out not to be so idiosyncratic. Perhaps the weakest aspect of the book are the solutions Putnam proposes at the end -- but realistically it's hard to fault him for not proposing a magic bullet solution to such a complex problem. This was a very readable and thought provoking book. I recommend it even if it takes you out of your comfort zone.
