

Taking On the Opportunity Gap

Solutions must target home and school

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

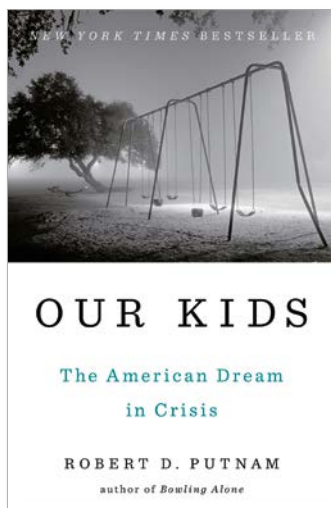
by Robert D. Putnam

Simon & Schuster, 2015, \$28; 400 pages.

As reviewed by Isabel Sawhill

A child born in America has many advantages compared to those born in, say, Somalia, China, or Mexico. But those advantages are far more dependent on family background in the U.S. than we might wish. It's not only that some kids are rich and others are poor. It's also that some have educated parents, including both a mother and a father in the home, who possess the social capital as well as the resources of time and money to ensure that their children are prepared for school by the time they reach age four or five. At the other end of the spectrum is a group of children whose early home life, or lack thereof, makes it far more difficult for them to succeed in school. These are the kids whose fathers may be incarcerated, whose mothers may be working long hours at low-wage jobs, who live in troubled neighborhoods with little to occupy them in their free time, and whose parents lack the connections and knowledge needed to put them on a path to the middle class. These gaps between rich and poor, between the privileged and the disadvantaged, are growing, suggesting that whatever degree of social mobility has existed in the U.S. in the past may now be threatened. Such growing gaps also have profound implications for educators and for the idea that schools can compensate for what children do not receive at home or in their communities.

To me, this is the message of Robert



Putnam's new book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Through a series of interviews and family portraits of today's kids, backed up by an impressive array of data and a synthesis of the available research, he shows that we are dividing into two very different Americas. As a society, we are sorting ourselves by income, by family structure and parenting styles, and by the kinds of communities in which we live. Class-based residential segregation is increasing, leading inevitably to more class-based school segregation as well. That means some schools and classrooms are filled with healthy and well-cared-for children, who are curious, engaged, and ready to learn, while others are populated with too many kids whose ability to learn is seriously constrained by a host of difficulties—from lack of proper nutrition to disruptive or withdrawn behavior. Of course, minority children, whether black or Latino, are disproportionately represented among the latter, but Putnam also sketches a portrait of large class disparities within the black and Latino communities. At one point, he compares two Latino families whose children attend high

schools in Orange County, California. Both schools spend about the same per pupil, have similar teacher-student ratios, similar numbers of guidance counselors, and well-qualified teachers (as measured by education and experience). Thus, on the measures that schools can control, the two schools are roughly comparable. But they are serving very different student populations, reflecting all of the aforementioned class divisions. And the result is huge disparities in dropout rates, in truancy and suspensions, in college aspirations, and in SAT scores. The Orange County story is a microcosm of what is now a national pattern. Differences in school resources, although they matter, can't begin to explain the widening differences in educational outcomes. What does matter is the socioeconomic backgrounds of a child's classmates. As Putnam says, "whom you go to school with matters a lot."

The postsecondary story is, if anything, even more bleak. Children from higher-income families are much more likely to go to college and especially to complete a degree than those from lower-income families. And these class gaps in college attendance and graduation have been growing. The usual response among many observers of this trend is to argue for greater needs-based financial aid. But, as Putnam argues, "the burdens on poor kids have been gathering weight since they were very young. Rising tuition costs and student debt are the final straw, not the main load."

In the end, Putnam raises the question of whether schools contribute to growing disparities, or whether they are simply the sites where these disparities play out in the life of a child. Do schools make the opportunity gap

better or worse? His conclusion: “the gap is created more by what happens to kids before they get to school, by things that happen outside of school, and by what kids bring (or don’t bring) with them to school...than by what schools do to them.” He argues, however, that even if schools aren’t part of the problem, they could be a bigger part of the solution.

In his final chapter, Putnam recommends a variety of well-known school-based reforms, such as moving poor children into better schools, compensatory financing for schools in poor neighborhoods to enable them to attract the best teachers and counselors, more school-based extracurricular activities and social services, and more effort to engage the whole community in the education process. These approaches all seem sensible enough, but whether they will actually make much of a dent in the growing gaps that Putnam identifies

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is unclear. For instance, although he cites one successful example of an effort to move poor kids into schools in better neighborhoods, the Moving to Opportunity program—a randomized, controlled trial of this approach—has not had much success in boosting school achievement among poor kids. (A just-published study suggests a positive effect for very young kids, however.)

In sum, the book is a treasure trove of research and of stories of how the opportunity gap plays out in the lives

of real people. It is carefully argued, and written in an accessible style. It makes clear that schools face formidable challenges over which they have very limited, if any, control. The final chapter lays out a familiar agenda of steps that might be taken to improve the lives of the disadvantaged, from strengthening the safety net to boosting earnings in low-wage jobs. My own view is that these kinds of measures are fine, but unless we can make progress in affecting the home environments of today’s children, any progress will be modest at best, and the job of the schools will only become more difficult. Schools cannot compensate for problems that begin in the home. These problems, too, are getting worse.

Isabel Sawhill is senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage.



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