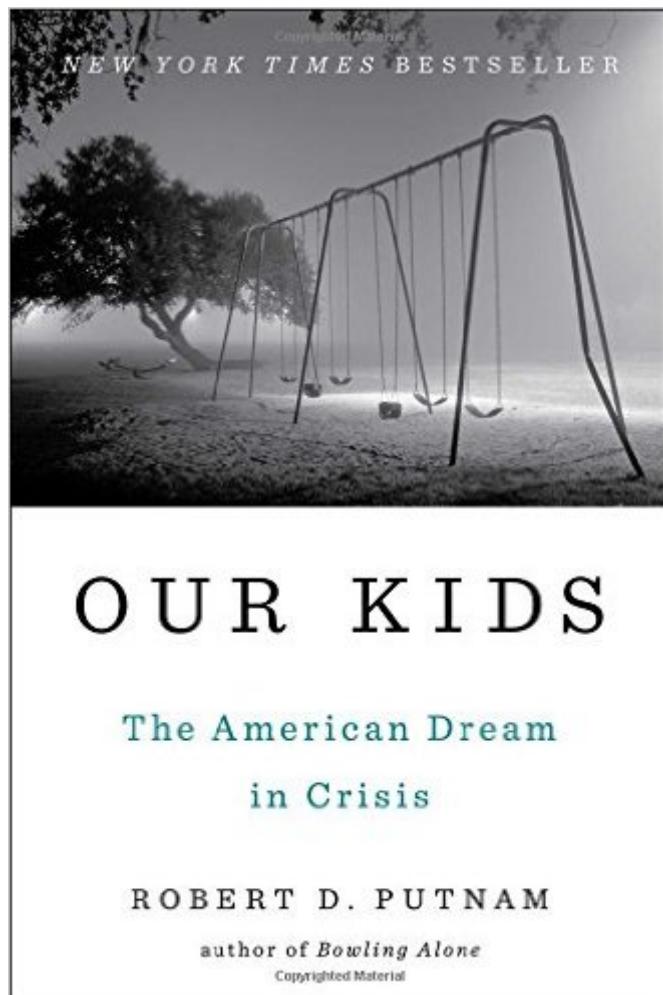


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Our Kids: The American Dream In Crisis



Synopsis

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' own 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.

Book Information

Hardcover: 400 pages

Publisher: Simon & Schuster (March 10, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1476769893

ISBN-13: 978-1476769899

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (189 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #31,234 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #32 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Social Policy #62 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Class #70 in Books > Business & Money > Economics > Economic Policy & Development

Customer Reviews

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.

This book tackles a very important issue in a way that is easy for the general reader. That seems quite rare these days. The issue is the increasing inequality of opportunity for children in American society. Putnam shows that increasingly, upper-middle-class children have opportunities to do well, while lower-class children are often set up for failure. Putnam explores four big themes -- families, parenting, schools and communities. For each, he describes one or two upper-middle-class families and one or two lower-class families, giving for each a four or five page case study, based on interviews with the children and the parents. He then summarizes results of wider studies, to show that his case studies are in fact representative of wider trends. I found this mix of case studies and wider results extremely helpful in bringing issues to life. The stories of individual families were fascinating, including as they did the point of view of the people involved, as well as some lengthy quotes from them. Putnam's main diagnosis is a breakdown in community. Sixty years ago, all of the kids in a town or neighborhood were "our kids" and the whole community would help them. Now, such communities have eroded and few care about other people's kids any more. The upper class can substitute private measures -- expensive extra-curricular activities, guidance counselors,

psychologists and the like. The poor cannot, and their children are increasingly isolated. Putnam doesn't have a single solution. He wants us to rebuild community. To this end, he recommends a variety of programs, from the grandiose to the immediate and practical, e.g. remove fees for participating in extra-curricular activities, and so remove a barrier to poor kids' participation.

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