

The terrible loneliness of growing up poor in Robert Putnam's America

“Life is not something you do, it’s something you endure.”

By Emily Badger March 6, 2015



Political scientist Bob Putnam is photographed at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Putnam recently wrote a book about the inequality of opportunity for children titled "Our Kids." (Damian Strohmeyer for The Washington Post)

SWARTHMORE, Pa. — Robert Putnam wants a show of hands of everyone in the room with a parent who graduated from college. In a packed Swarthmore College auditorium where the students have spilled onto the floor next to their backpacks, about 200 arms rise.

“Whenever I say ‘rich kids,’ think *you*,” Putnam says. “And *me*. And my offspring.”

The Harvard political scientist, famous for his book “[Bowling Alone](#)” that warned of the decline of American

community, has returned to his alma mater to talk, this time, about inequality. Not between the 99 percent and the 1 percent, but between two groups that have also fallen further apart: children born to educated parents who are more likely to read to them as babies, to drive them to dance class, to nudge them into college themselves — and children whose parents live at the edge of economic survival.

The distance between the two is deeply personal for Putnam, now 74 and launching a book that he hopes could change what Americans are willing to do about children in poverty. He grew up in a working-class Ohio town on Lake Erie where, in the 1950s, poor kids could aspire to Rotary scholarships or factory jobs. He left Port Clinton for Swarthmore, where he met a woman in his introductory political science class who would raise two children with him. They would go on to Harvard. His grandchildren are college-bound, too, or already there, one of them living on the same floor of the dorm where Putnam once bunked.

Robert Putnam, the Harvard political scientist and author of "Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis," discusses the inequality of opportunity for children and its long-term effects. (Footage courtesy of Simon & Schuster)

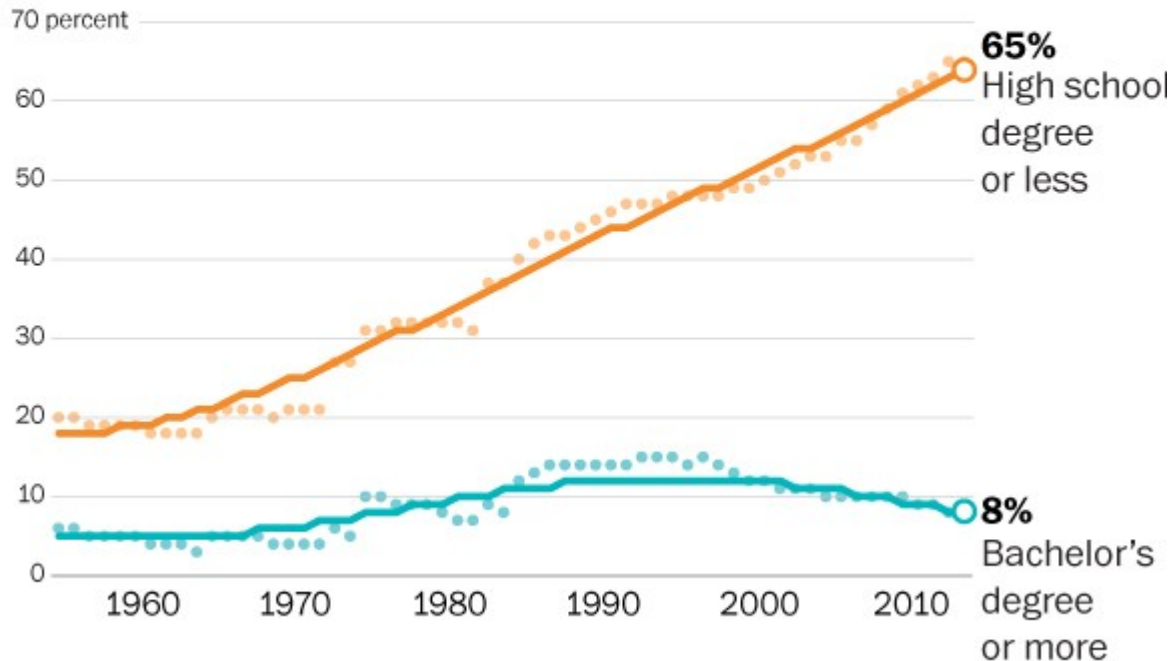
Some of his classmates from Port Clinton in the 1950s, meanwhile, stayed for manufacturing jobs that later disappeared. Their children faced rising unemployment and stagnating wages. A third generation was born poor, often without two parents.

Pacing the floor like a preacher, Putnam conjures their fate through the story of a real-life Port Clinton child, whom he calls "Mary Sue." At 5, her parents split. Her mother became a stripper. For days at a time, she was alone and hungry.

"She is a granddaughter of Port Clinton, just as my granddaughter is a granddaughter of Port Clinton," Putnam says. And no matter how often he repeats this line — which he does frequently in front of any group of politicians, students or voters who will listen — it always comes out anguished.

Children living in a single-parent home

In 2012, 65 percent of children whose mothers never made it past high school spent at least part of their early childhood in a single-parent household, up from 20 percent in 1953.



Sources: Robert Putnam and U.S. Census Bureau

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Half an hour into his Swarthmore lecture, Putnam winds into the voice of what an associate calls an “Old Testament prophet with charts.” He starts throwing graphs on the screen behind him that reflect national trends mirrored in Port Clinton: rising income inequality, growing class segregation, the breakdown of the working-class family.

They all look ominously similar. Each graph shows two lines diverging over the past several decades in the experiences of American kids at the top and bottom: in the share born to single mothers, in the chances that they’ll eat family dinners, in the time parents spend reading to them, in the money families invest in their clubs and lessons.

“Every summer camp you went to or every piano lesson you got or every time you went to soccer club, you were getting some advantage,” Putnam says, “that somebody else out there — Mary Sue — was not.”

It’s not an accusation, but a rallying cry, a call to come to the altar and help save someone else’s children.

“If we can begin to think of these poor kids as our kids,” he says, “we would not sleep for a second before we figured out how to help them.”

Starting a discussion

For the past three years, Putnam has been nursing an outlandish ambition. He wants inequality of opportunity for kids to be the central issue in the 2016 presidential election. Not how big government should be or what the “fair share” is for the wealthy, but what’s happening to children boxed out of the American dream.

His manifesto, “ [Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis.](#) ” will be published Tuesday. It places brain science, sociology and census data alongside stories of children growing up on both sides of the divide. Many of the findings draw on the work of other researchers who have long studied families, education or neuroscience. But Putnam has gathered these strands under a single thesis: that instead of talking about inequality of wealth or income among adults, we ought to focus on inequalities in all of the ways children accumulate — or never touch — opportunity.

The gaps he identifies have been widening on both ends: Better-off families are spending ever-more money on their children. They’re volunteering even more at their schools. Their children are pulling away as Mary Sue falls further behind, and her original mistake was simply, as Putnam puts it, that she chose her parents badly.

“Our Kids” picks up many of the themes from “Bowling Alone,” now 15 years later. That book cautioned that Americans were increasingly withdrawing from each other and civic life. Church attendance was in decline. So was union membership, voter turnout, trust in government and participation in civic groups from the Boy Scouts to bowling leagues. As a result, Putnam argued, Americans were losing the kind of “social capital” that helps us solve big, collective problems (how do we pay for our schools?), as well as small, daily ones (who will watch my child tomorrow?).

“At the beginning you don’t know you’re doing a study of the collapse of American social life — you’re doing a study of PTA membership,” says Putnam, who has a grandfatherly presence with a white Abe Lincoln-like beard.



“Our Kids” was like that, too. “The more we investigated, the bigger we realized the problem was.”

The poor children in “Our Kids” are missing so much more than material wealth. They have few mentors. They’re half as likely as wealthy kids to trust their neighbors. The schools they attend offer fewer sports, and they’re less likely to participate in after-school activities. Even their parents have smaller social networks. Their lives reflect the misfortune of the working-class adults around them, who have lost job prospects and financial stability.

More than 60 percent of children whose mothers never made it past high school will now spend at least some of their life by age 7 in a single-parent household. In the 1970s, there was virtually no difference in how much time educated and less-educated parents spent on activities like reading to infants and toddlers, which we now know matter tremendously for their brain development. Today, well-off children get 45 minutes more than poor kids every day of what Putnam calls “ ‘Goodnight Moon’ time.”

His hope that “our kids” would rise to national debate is not entirely far-fetched. Over the past year, several prominent Republicans including Rep. Paul Ryan (Wis.) have begun to

talk more about poverty and inequality. Jeb Bush gave a speech in Detroit in February on declining economic

OUR KIDS

The American Dream
in Crisis

ROBERT D. PUTNAM

author of *Bowling Alone*

mobility for the low-income, calling the opportunity gap “the defining issue of our time.”

Now Bush is one of several likely 2016 candidates to whom Putnam has sent his book. He has discussed its findings with Hillary Rodham Clinton’s staff, with President Obama in the White House, with Ryan in his office on Capitol Hill, and with the House Democratic caucus at its annual retreat. He doesn’t come bearing new solutions but with a crusade to put the problem out in the open.

That moment would come after years of what John Carr, who has long lobbied on behalf of Catholic interests and who introduced Putnam to Ryan, calls “an ominous silence about poverty” in Washington.

“I think the two people who have the potential to break that silence,” says Carr, now the director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, “are the pope and Putnam.”

Bewildering childhoods

Southeast of Los Angeles, in a heavily Latino part of Orange County invisibly partitioned by gang lines, two sisters in Putnam’s book have grown up with no parents to speak of. Their mother, a heroin addict and prostitute, died when they were young. Their fathers were unknown or absent. Their grandmother kept them on track, but then she died, too.

Lola and Sofia, as Putnam names them (all of the ethnography subjects in the book are anonymous), have navigated life without coaches, pastors, tutors, friends’ parents, counselors, neighbors, community groups, parents’ co-workers and family friends. They feel abandoned even by the one group of adults we like to think poor kids can always count on — their teachers.

“In junior high,” Lola, the older sister, explains to Putnam’s team, “the teachers actually cared.”

“In high school, teachers don’t care,” Sofia says.

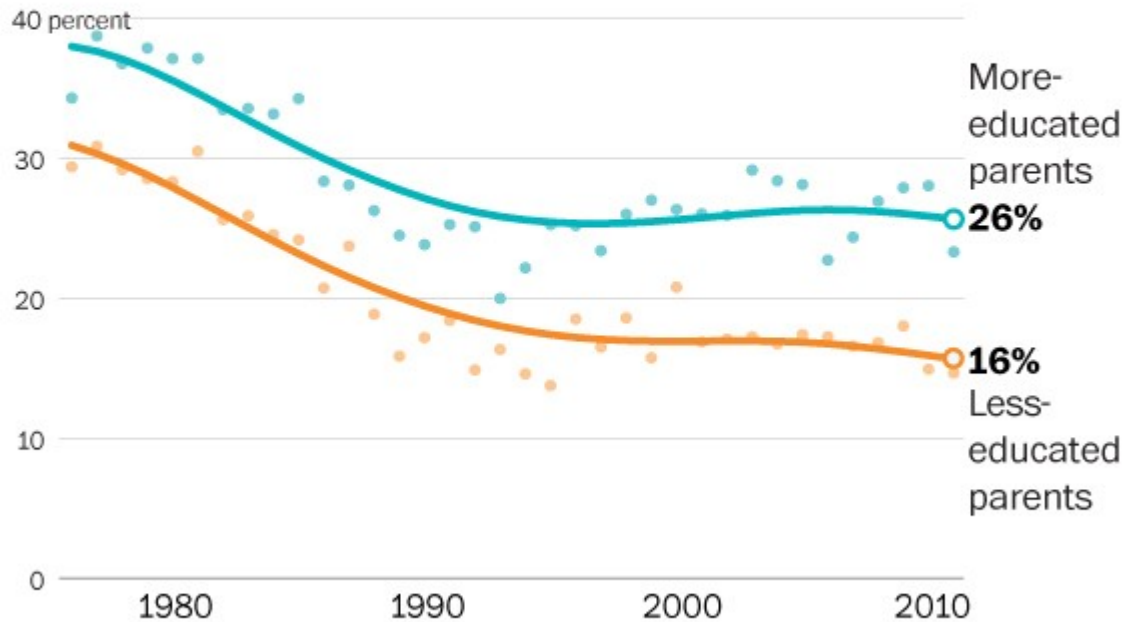
“The teachers would even say out loud that they get paid to be there,” Lola says.

“Just to be there,” Sofia says. “Just to babysit.”

“Yeah,” Lola adds, “that they’re there just to babysit, that they don’t care if we learn or not.”

Can people be trusted?

A survey given from 1976 to 2011 asked high school seniors whether they agree that most people can be trusted. Students with more-educated parents were more likely to respond yes.



Sources: Robert Putnam and Monitoring the Future survey

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They believe the honors classes at their high school got all the good teachers, but they don't understand how students were chosen for those classes. Only the smart kids, they say, were told about the SATs. They tried to join after-school activities — the very venue where they might find structure and mentors — but Lola was told her reading wasn't good enough for a reading club, and Sofia that her grades weren't high enough to play volleyball.

Through their eyes, coaches and teachers were gatekeepers who extended opportunity only to chosen students.

Their view of the world around them is a deeply lonely one. And it exposes an inverse reality among the privileged that Putnam admits he did not previously see even in the lives of his own children: Take away the parents who drive you to soccer, the peers you know who went off to college, the neighbor who happens to need a summer intern — and childhood is bewildering. A task as simple as picking the right math class becomes another trapdoor to failure.

The privileged kids don't just have a wider set of options. They have adults who tailor for them a set of options that excludes all of the bad ones.

Meanwhile, for a child like Sofia, "she's just completely directionless, because life happens to her," Putnam says. "What she's learned her whole life is that life is not something you do, it's something you endure."

'A form of isolation'

In July 2013, Putnam came to Washington to receive a National Humanities Medal at the White House for deepening the country's "understanding of community." During the visit, Carr, took him to meet Paul Ryan.

Putnam brought his “scissors graphs,” as he calls them, on printed handouts. The graph showing the steep rise of single motherhood speaks to a conservative interpretation of the causes of poverty. Putnam doesn’t dispute that we need to fix families to fix poverty.

But he pairs that with the economic argument more often advanced on the left: that declining real wages and the disappearance of blue-collar jobs have undermined families. That no amount of marriage promotion can repair broken homes when fathers can’t find work, mothers can’t afford day care and the utility bills are past due.

“Bob Putnam’s work helped me understand a key insight,” Ryan says by e-mail. “Poverty isn’t just a form of deprivation; it’s a form of isolation, too.”

On that same visit, Putnam spoke as well to the president, whom he has known for years. As an Illinois state senator, Obama served on a group Putnam created to ponder solutions in response to “Bowling Alone.” The group, for all its ideological diversity, never hit on any grand answers. But some old-fashioned social capital emerged among its members. To this day, Putnam keeps in his office what looks like a grade-school class photo of the “Saguaro Seminar,” a young Obama grinning in the back row.

When Putnam walked up to receive his humanities medal from the president in a White House ceremony, he playfully chided Obama in a way that only people who knew him before he was president can. “When we first met in Cambridge,” Putnam told him, “I couldn’t have imagined I was going to be seeing you in this place at this time. But I bet you knew you were going to be here.”

An Associated Press photographer captured the president’s reaction, his eyes tightly drawn in laughter. After the ceremony, the president asked Putnam what he was working on.

“Actually, I think you might be interested,” Putnam said.

“Send me something,” the president offered.



President Obama laughs with Robert Putnam as he awards him the the 2012 National Humanities Medal during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House on July 10, 2013. (Carolyn Kaster/AP)

“Putnam was the academic who caught the president’s attention right at that post-election moment when he was

feeling both liberated and committed to expressing his views on economic inequality,” says Gene Sperling, director of Obama’s National Economic Council at the time. “You might say that Putnam was President Obama’s Piketty,” Sperling added, referring to Thomas Piketty, the French economist who grabbed the world’s attention last year with his writings on inequality.

Putnam that summer sent the White House a six-page memo summarizing “Our Kids,” scissors graphs and all, with a cover letter urging the president to give a speech on inequality.

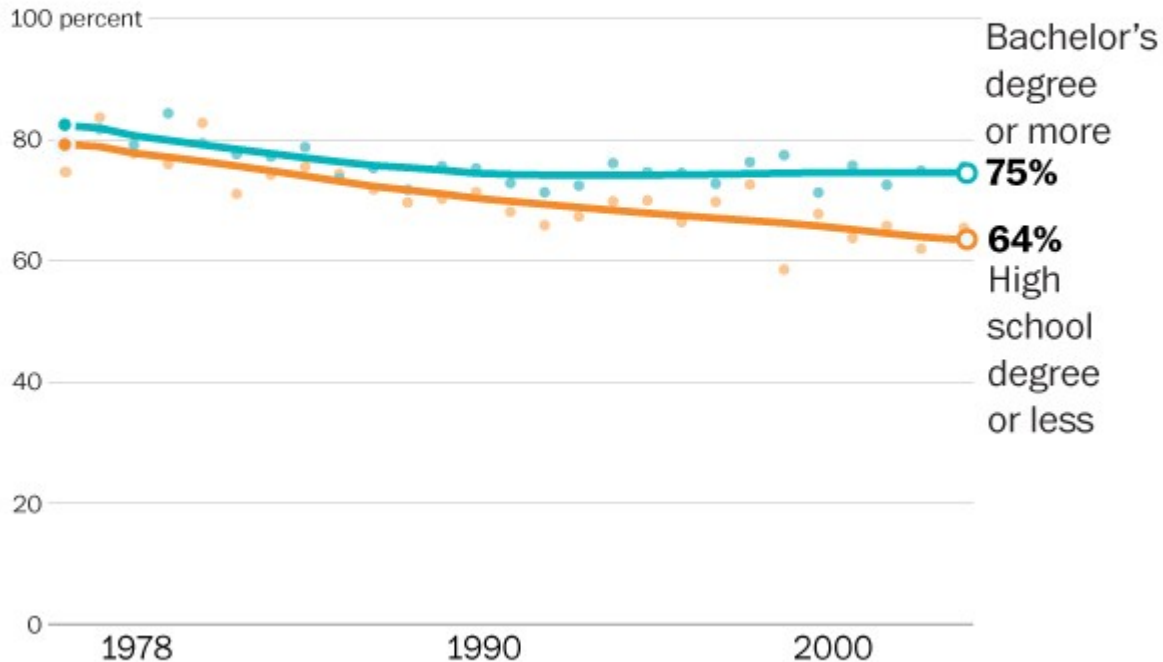
That memo circulated among the president’s domestic and economic policy advisers, who put together a meeting for the president devoted to inequality. During that session, Putnam sat opposite Obama at a long table in the Roosevelt Room surrounded by national experts and advocates, including basketball-star-turned-urban-entrepreneur Magic Johnson. The meeting opened with Putnam’s research, and he began, as he often does, by summarizing a line he had typed in the president’s memo: “Deeply troubling racial gaps remain, of course, but this opportunity gap is about class, not race, and it is growing.”

Putnam is always quick to say that he doesn’t believe we’ve solved racial inequality. But many of the advocates in the Roosevelt Room that day worried that his message would sound that way, that it would appear as if a country that had overlooked poor black kids should rally to the cause of poverty now that many of the poor kids were white, too.

Race is, in fact, where Putnam is most vulnerable to criticism: His opportunity gap thesis is grounded in the idea that we’ve lost a sense of communal responsibility for children that we had back in the 1950s. But he deals only briefly with the severe racism at that time that no doubt kept many white adults from viewing black children as “their own.”

Families who eat dinner together

A social science survey taken from 1978 to 2005 shows that the percentage of families who eat dinner together declined across parental education groups, but the fall was more rapid for less-educated parents.



Sources: Robert Putnam and DDB Lifestyle surveys, 1978-2005

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“You can say politically or strategically that we can set aside race and just look at class differences,” says Robert J. Sampson, a sociology colleague of Putnam’s at Harvard. “But analytically, based on the data, the black-white gap is just too big and too persistent to set aside.”

The poverty black children experience is compounded by their surroundings, as well as by history. Black children are far more likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods, for instance, and their families are far more likely to have lived in poverty for generations. The more complex reality is that Putnam’s opportunity gap is layered atop this picture — that this new inequality widening along class lines exacerbates for black children the severe disadvantages they face along racial lines.

In the Roosevelt Room debate, the president argued, as he has publicly, for a kind of middle ground: that poverty and family breakdown aren’t uniquely black problems, but ones that hit the black community before the white working class and that acknowledging this unites more people behind the problem.

That December, at an arts and education center in Southeast Washington, Obama delivered a speech on inequality, in which he warned that the opportunity gap in America was now “as much about class as it is about race.” But Putnam’s primary influence appears in another passage.

“The idea that so many children are born into poverty in the wealthiest nation on Earth is heartbreaking enough,” the president said. “But the idea that a child may never be able to escape that poverty because she lacks a decent education or health care, or a community that views her future as their own, that should offend all of us.”

A problem that's everywhere

Putnam's reception back in Port Clinton has been more complicated. In 2013, he published an [opinion piece in the New York Times](#) summarizing the book's first chapter, its most autobiographical.

His research team studied his Port Clinton High School class of 1959. Nearly three-quarters of the class earned more education than their parents had, suggesting what Putnam calls "astonishing upward mobility." The working-class kids in town today, he worries, are "locked into troubled, even hopeless lives." The headline, "Crumbling American Dreams" ran over the photo of a crumbling school.

Many in the town balked at the piece, and the photo (it turns out that school was demolished to build a new one). Christine Galvin, the area director for United Way in Ottawa County, organized a public meeting at a local library where Putnam video-chatted with residents to explain that the trends his research described were not Port Clinton's fault or unique to it.

"He painted an awful picture of the town I live in, but he just paints reality," Galvin says. In a letter to the local paper, she implored the town to do something. Could you take a child, she wanted to know, to a story time? Could you mentor a single mom? Could your group sponsor a community potluck? If the answer was yes, she published her cellphone number.

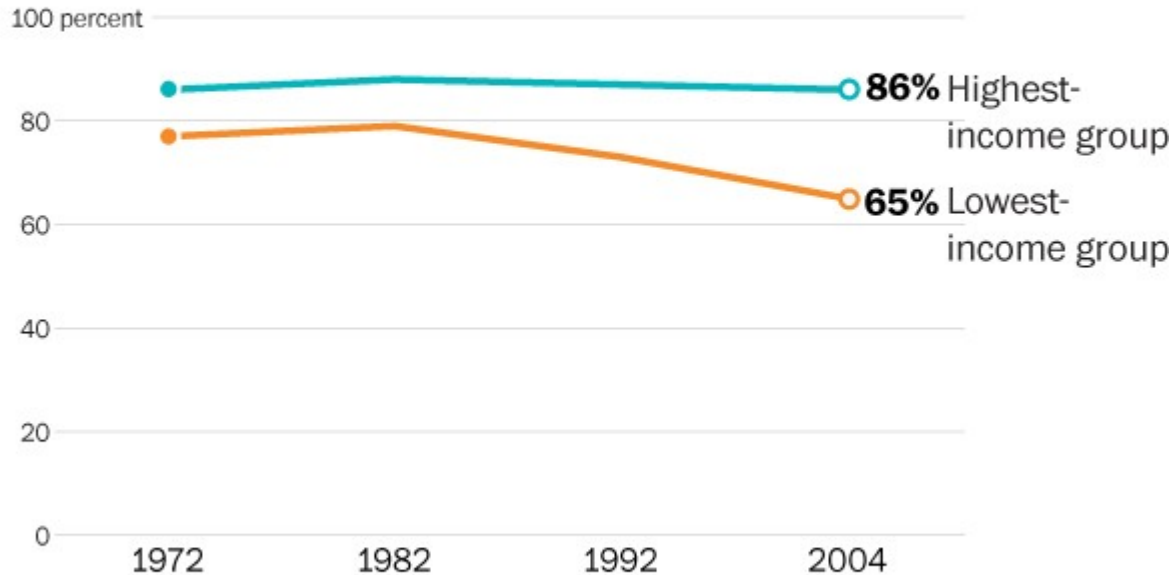
"He named the problem," she says of Putnam.

That is, in fact, what Putnam does.

And one of the benefits — or burdens — of having something identified for you is that you cannot then shake the sight of it. Spend any time listening to Putnam talk, and suddenly evidence of the phenomenon he's describing pops up everywhere. It's on the bus, when a frazzled young mother doesn't have the patience to play "I Spy" with her child. It's in the news, when another study confirms that children from single-parent homes finish fewer years of school. It's at the local school board meeting, where taxpayers don't want to pay for full-day kindergarten.

Participation in extracurricular activities

Among students who graduated from high school in 1972, 1982, 1992 and 2004, the rate of participation in extracurricular activities has declined since 1982 for those from the lowest-income families.



Sources: Robert Putnam, 1972 National Longitudinal Study, 1980 High School & Beyond, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002
THE WASHINGTON POST

Putnam's solutions are not particularly novel. He wants more investment in early childhood education and criminal justice reform so more low-income men can find work and raise their own babies. He wants religious groups to take up the problem of mentoring. He wants public schools to end "pay to play" fees for after-school sports.

Many of these things will require money, though, and that is where the fight brews. In Port Clinton, his team interviewed one mother from the wealthy community that has grown up on the town's lakefront, as neighborhoods just inland have collapsed into poverty. She is wary of the idea of special education funding for poor kids in town.

"If my kids are going to be successful," she says, "I don't think they should have to pay other people who are sitting around doing nothing for their success."

She doesn't recognize that her children are successful precisely because of their advantages of a stable home, regular homework help and college expectations. The fact that Americans increasingly live as they do in Port Clinton now — the rich in their enclave, the poor in another — means that adults who might fund the answers may never come in contact with poor children to recognize the problem. They may never overcome their suspicion that poor people are to blame for their own poverty.

"Look at the economic profile of Congress: where members went to school, what kinds of families they came from, their net worth," says Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D), who represents Port Clinton. "You say to yourself, could this group of people really walk in the shoes of these families?"

This question has long pained poverty crusaders with less optimism than Putnam.

“I’m basically calculating that it’s harder to be dismissive of poor kids than poor adults,” he says, considering what might happen once his book is out. “But maybe that’s not true.”