

Hearing on the State of Social Capital in America

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What is social capital?¹

The central premise of the social capital approach is that social networks have value. Social capital refers to the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other [that is, norms of reciprocity]. The term “social capital” encompasses not just warm, cuddly feelings, but a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks. Social capital creates value for the people who are connected and often for bystanders as well. That is, social networks have both internal and external consequences.

Examples of social capital include neighbors informally keeping an eye on one another's homes; a tightly knit community of Hassidic Jews trading diamonds without having to test each gem for purity; barn-raising on the frontier; and exchanges among members of a cancer support group. Social capital can be found in families, friendship networks, neighborhoods, churches, schools, bridge clubs, civic associations, and even bars. Under what circumstances internet-based networks have the same benefits as face-to-face networks is a matter of considerable scholarly and public debate, but because that debate is still rapidly evolving, I eschew any summary of it in this testimony.

Why is social capital important?

A growing body of hard-nosed literature over the last several years shows that social capital helps provide many important individual and social goods. Individuals who are better connected socially are healthier and happier, find better jobs, live longer. Communities with higher levels of social capital are likely to have higher educational achievement, better government performance, faster economic growth, and less crime. In places with greater social connectedness, it is easier to mobilize people to tackle problems of public concern (a hazardous waste facility, a neighborhood crime problem, or building a community park, to name only a few examples), and easier to arrange things that benefit the group as a whole (a child-care cooperative among welfare mothers or a micro-lending group that enables poor people to start businesses or an effective neighborhood watch group).

However, not all social capital is positive. Just as some forms of human capital (like knowledge of chemistry) can be used for destructive purposes (like building a bomb), so too some forms of social capital (like the KKK or Al-Qaeda) can have bad social consequences. Fortunately, malevolent uses of human and social capital are relatively rare, which is why we continue to teach chemistry in public schools and why we should continue to try to build social capital.

Similarly, not all social capital is equally useful for all purposes. Just as two different forms of physical capital (a screwdriver vs. a hydroelectric dam) are useful for different purposes, so two different forms of social capital (friends who gather at the local bar vs. the local bar association) serve different functions.

What are the different types of social capital?

I won't try to summarize all the different types of social capital, but as an indication of some of the ways in which social capital varies, some social ties stem from informal networks (ordinary socializing, workplace ties, relationships with neighbors, personal support networks) and some from formal networks, such as being a member of an organization. Formal organizations consist of both private-minded organizations (primarily designed to produce fun or fellowship, like a choral society or a softball league) and public-minded organizations (designed to tackle an issue of public concern, like a crime watch group or a community service organization). The social ties can be analyzed both according to the strength of those ties (with strong ties being ones that are regularly used, where the individuals consider each other to be very close friends, and who often provide personal support to each other) and weak ties (where the ties are used only occasionally and tend to be used more for the flow of information). Similarly, the ties can be analyzed as to whether they are *bridging* social capital (that bring individuals together with others who are unlike them, by race, class, ethnicity, education, religion, age, gender, and so on) or whether ties are primarily *bonding* (that bring individuals together with others like them). Most groups are bridging in some ways and bonding in others: the Knights of Columbus is bonding in terms of religion and gender but bridges across class and income. In America religious communities constitute a particularly abundant form of social capital, both bonding and bridging. By some estimates, religious communities constitute up to half of all social capital in the country.

How does social capital work?

Social capital works through multiple channels:

- Information flows (e.g. learning about jobs, learning about candidates running for office, exchanging ideas at college, etc.) depend on social capital.
- Norms of reciprocity (mutual aid) rely on social networks. Bonding networks that connect folks who are similar sustain particularized (in-group) reciprocity. Bridging networks that connect individuals who are diverse sustain generalized reciprocity.
- Collective action depends upon social networks (e.g., the role that the black church played in the Civil Rights movement), although collective action also can foster new networks.
- Broader identities and solidarity are encouraged by social networks that help translate an "I" mentality into a "we" mentality.

Isn't social capital too diverse to be captured in one term?

Capital is an abstract concept that encapsulates huge diversity. Economists initially debated whether you could talk about physical capital (which covers everything from a hammer to a computer to an automobile assembly plant). Similarly, human capital covers everything from piano lessons to a vocational course in cooking or automotive repair, to a graduate degree in Philosophy, and covers education of widely differing quality. So, too, does social capital cover a wide diversity of relationships: a team at the workplace, conversations with one's neighbors, relationships with the teachers of one's children, an alumni network, people you volunteered with a couple of times. The point in all these cases (physical, human, and social capital) is that these underlying attributes can have real value to society: Someone embedded in social networks that foster reciprocity can be more effective than someone who is not in such networks, the same way as someone possessing physical or human capital can be more productive than that same person without this physical or human capital.

How can we identify policy "solutions" to social problems?

When approaching a social or policy problem, moving from cause to cure is not simple. In fact, policy-makers need to make a series of calculations as they consider alternative policies. The following chart helps us understand and frame these calculations:



Identifying an important cause of a problem (like the opportunity gap discussed below) is merely the first step. The next step is to identify some efficacious policy lever that could influence that cause. For example, family instability is generally agreed to be an important cause of the opportunity gap, but most experts across the ideological spectrum agree that it has proved hard to identify a "marriage promotion" policy that can reliably increase family stability. In other words, finding an important cause doesn't guarantee that we know how to fix the problem.

But even identifying a powerful policy lever that can alter an important cause of the problem does not end our search, because we also need to consider the political and administrative feasibility of that policy. For example, the extreme isolation of low income students in low income schools is another well-established cause of the opportunity gap. And in this case, careful evaluation of a program of cross-district busing in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, showed that classroom integration can significantly raise the test scores of poor students without harming the scores of their rich classmates. Sounds like a terrific win-win: an efficacious policy to alter an important cause of the opportunity gap. However, despite these results, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg integration plan proved very controversial among suburban parents. The school board that had instituted the program was thrown out at the next election, and the successful integration policy was reversed.

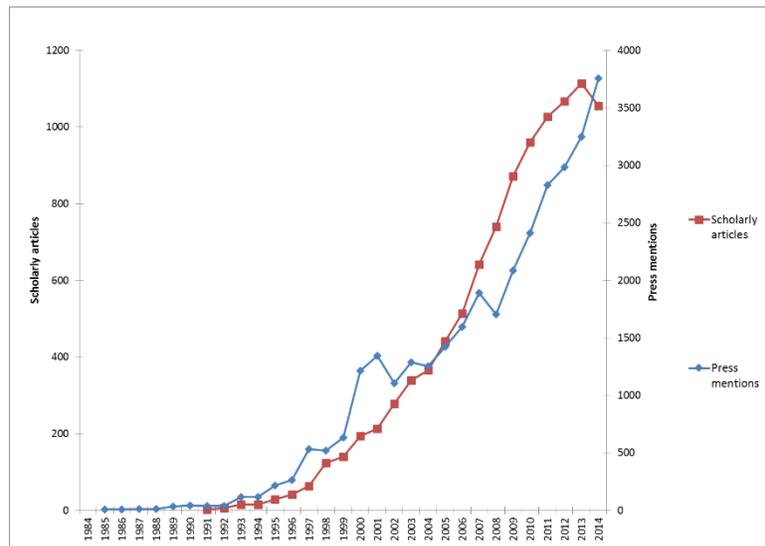
This three-part policy analysis calls attention to the fact that in looking for ways to increase social capital, we should not be looking for perfection at any single stage, but rather looking for a policy initiative that might be reasonably feasible and reasonably efficacious in altering a reasonably important causal factor. We must weigh causality, efficacy, and feasibility all at once. What is politically or administratively feasible may well vary from community to community and may change over time, so policies cannot be mindlessly transferred from one to another, but lessons from one community about causal importance and policy efficacy may be highly relevant to other communities.

Conclusion

Although the first known use of the term “social capital” in its contemporary sense goes back at least a century to the work of L.J. Hanifan, state superintendent of rural schools in West Virginia, its use in both social science and public discourse has exploded in the last 25 years, as shown in the following chart. In 1992 the term appeared in the scholarly literature roughly once every two or three *years*, but nowadays that frequency has been expanded to one citation every two or three *hours*. That exponential increase across many, many disciplines—from Incan history to evolutionary biology among dwarf deer in the Hebrides—has ranked social capital studies among the most rapidly growing fields in all of social science.

Social capital is a “purple” concept, in the sense that its usefulness cuts across conventional partisan and ideological lines. It is particularly appropriate for “purple” public problems—that is, problems that are best examined through a combination of red (conservative) lenses and blue (progressive) lenses. In my remaining remarks, I want to illustrate this usefulness by discussing two important public policy issues—one focused on the early stages of life and one from the later years.

The growth of scholarly and press references to “social capital”



Example 1: Closing the Opportunity Gap: Social Capital in the Early Years of Life

From the very first words of our founding document as a nation – “we believe ... that all men are created equal”—Americans’ most widely shared value has been the principle of equality of opportunity. That is, how well a child does in life should depend on his or her God-given talents and hard work, and should not depend on what his or her parents did or didn’t do.

To be sure, American realities have often fallen short of our ideals. At the beginning, we did not mean “all” men, but all white men, and we did mean men (not women). But those deviations from the egalitarian promise of the Declaration of Independence were increasingly recognized as anachronistic, and in the ensuing years we’ve gradually moved toward a more inclusive interpretation of the promise. As Martin Luther King said at the 1963 March on Washington, “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.”

However, the sad truth, chronicled in my 2015 book *Our Kids*, is that this cherished American Dream is evaporating for over 25 million children born to low income, less educated parents in the last three decades. The economic and social transformations of the last half-century² – rising economic insecurity, growing socioeconomic segregation, the collapse of the low income family, the unraveling of working class neighborhoods, and the decline of a collective sense of responsibility for “our kids” – have created a perfect storm of plummeting prospects for the next generation of Americans. Social capital is not the only factor responsible for this growing opportunity gap, but as we shall see, it is a central factor.

Rich kids and poor kids are now growing up in separate and unequal Americas, their fates increasingly and unfairly tied to their “choice” of parents and the zip code in which they are born. In a gated community in sunny Southern California, for example, Jeannette, a stay-at-home mother of three, spends her summer days driving her daughters to tennis and swimming lessons, shopping for nutritious family meals, researching colleges, and planning charity events. Her youngest daughter, Alyssa, works with a college essay tutor in the morning and then trains 6 hours a day with her elite private swimming coach. Spending \$20,000 a year on her coach is worth it, Jeannette and her 6-figure-earning husband believe, if swimming helps Alyssa get into a prestigious college. Meanwhile, twenty minutes down the freeway, Natalie, a single mom out of work from a back injury, peers anxiously at a fast-food menu, deciding whether to use her last few dollars on lunch or on gas. Her talented daughter, Laila, has won numerous awards at school, and Natalie always makes it to the ceremonies. But unlike Alyssa, Laila doesn’t have a writing tutor, a private coach, or a college fund to help her into the future. She spends her afternoons working at Burger King, pinning her hopes for a better life on a dubious for-profit college and tens of thousands of dollars in loans. And these stories crystallize the growing inequality of opportunity in America, the opportunity gap that is experienced across all stages of a child’s life.

Growing up with two parents is now unusual for working class children (the Lailas of America), while two-parent families are nearly universal among the Alyssas and becoming both more common and more stable as well as providing enhanced connections and support for their children. Whether eating dinner with their families, or participating in extracurricular activities like sports or volunteering (where they learn important “soft” skills), middle-class children come of age supported not only by their parents but also teachers and peers who launch them into adulthood and rush to protect them and give them second chances if they fall. Here is social capital advantage at its most vivid.

Rich kids enter kindergarten almost a full year ahead of bottom-third kids, having had almost 1400 more hours of developmental time with their parents (think *Good Night Moon* or patty cake time), having experienced more personalized daycare or the presence of stay-at-home moms, having received \$5,700 more in annual parental expenditures on categories like musical instruments or books or summer camp or trips to Paris, and having heard 30 million more words than their poorer counterparts.

Schools did little to cause the opportunity gap but are sites of widening inequality nonetheless due to differential resources and challenges that kids bring with them to school. As a result of increased residential segregation, rich kids increasingly attend schools with other rich kids, and poor kids with other poor kids. This furthers the social capital divide. In their backpacks, rich kids bring parental aspirations and parental resources, benefitting all their classmates, wealthy or not. In their backpacks poor kids bring gang violence, disarray at home, and stunted aspirations, and those things hamper education for all their classmates. Poorer schools increasingly are unsafe, provide fewer extracurricular activities, lack a strong academic culture and quality counseling, and are often staffed by less able, less experienced teachers who teach students who need greater help.

Poor and working-class kids like Laila increasingly grow up in fragile families and neighborhoods where food and housing are insecure, resources are scarce, crime is high, relationships are volatile, and stress is toxic, leaving them too isolated and distrustful to develop the skills, knowledge, and social networks crucial for success. The affluence or poverty of neighborhoods is concentrated at the differing schools that the Lailas and Alyssas attend. The test score gap between rich kids and poor kids is large but exists well before kids even enter school.

The Lailas of the world leave high school without the social connections and resources to land unpaid internships or quality jobs, without the test prep, lacking quality counseling from family or professionals to navigate college applications, and without the financial aid and “savvy” to choose realistic and economically productive careers.

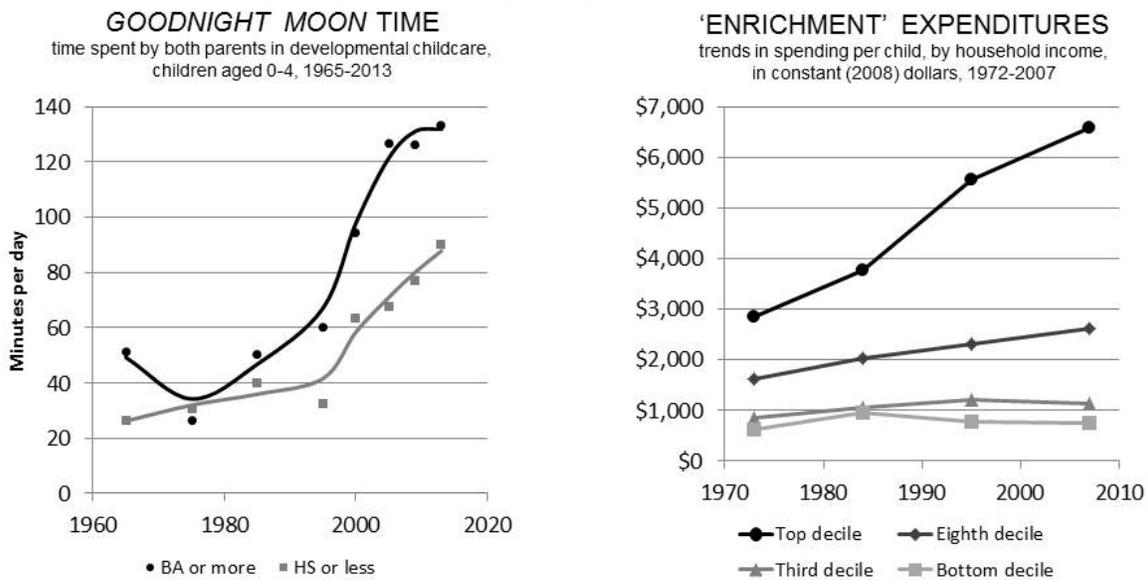
The following four “scissors graphs,” drawn from dozens that appear in *Our Kids*, illustrate some of the growing gaps among American youth in the resources and opportunities available

to kids from affluent, educated homes and those available to kids from low-income, less educated homes.

Although time spent by parents interacting with their children in developmental ways (e.g., reading to them) has been increasing in both college-educated homes and high-school-educated homes, the increase has been so much greater for affluent kids that the average “rich kid” now gets about 45 minutes per day more in “Goodnight Moon time” than his or her poor counterpart. The latest brain science shows that this difference powerfully affects children’s brain development and school readiness.

Rich parents have long been able to invest more in “enrichment” for their children—for summer camp, piano lessons, trips to the zoo, and private education—but this gap too has dramatically widened in the last forty years.

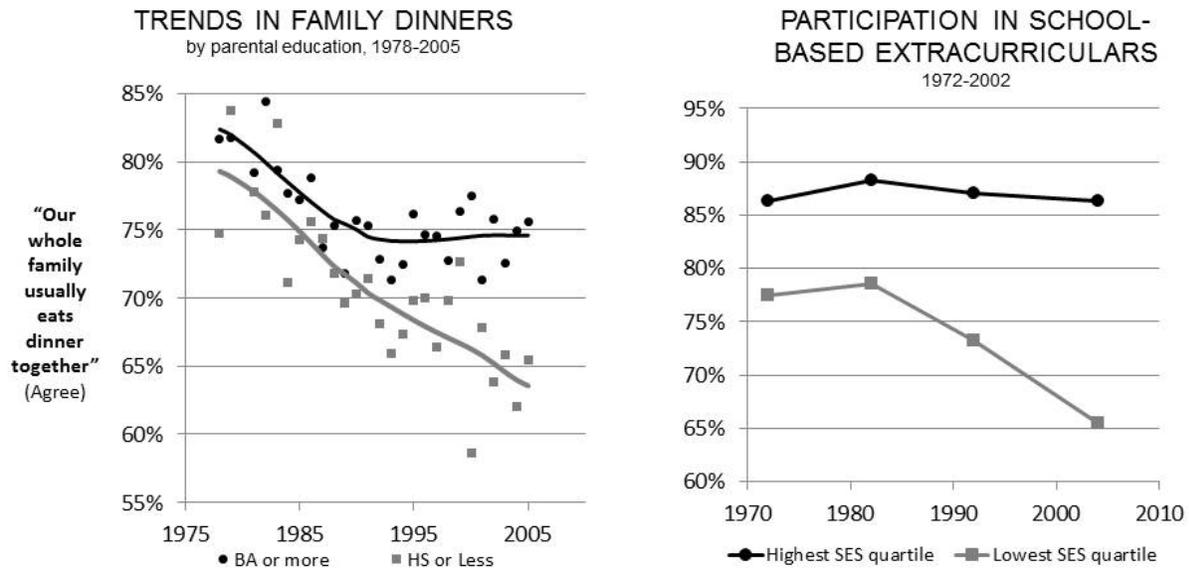
GROWING CLASS GAPS IN PARENTAL INVESTMENTS IN CHILDREN



Family dinners (and conversations about “how did your day go?”) have been shown to predict children’s success later in life, but the stresses of everyday life, especially for less educated single moms, have produced a growing gap in this indicator of family encouragement for children’s development.

Extracurricular activities were initiated in American schools more than a century ago, precisely as a way of inculcating what we now call “soft skills”—grit, teamwork, “stick-to-it-iveness”—and hard evidence confirms that extracurricular participation does have those effects, leading to greater success later in life. But privatization of extracurriculars in recent years (as exemplified by “pay to play”) has increasingly deprived poor kids of these opportunities.

GROWING CLASS GAPS IN FAMILY DINNERS & EXTRACURRICULARS



These and many similar scissors graphs trace a growing *opportunity gap* between kids from affluent, educated homes and their poorer counterparts. Over time, these trends will add up to diminished rates of upward mobility.

The contrasts in these stories and charts accurately highlight the growing importance of social class differences in America, but that should not blind us to the continuing importance of racial disparities. Race and class have long overlapped in America. Most people of color have always started several rungs down on the ladder of opportunity, and they do today. But added to those longstanding consequences of racism in America, in recent decades purely class disparities have grown, affecting poor kids of all races and appearing *within* each major racial category.

The shriveling of the American Dream of opportunity for all is economically unproductive, democratically ominous, and morally unjust.

- America's economic health has always been powered by a healthy middle class of productive employees and consumers, and we can't afford to write off one third of our future workforce. Economists estimate that our failure to invest in today's poor kids will cost the rest of us \$5 trillion over the course of their lifetimes (attributable to criminal justice system costs, health care expenses, and the opportunity cost of wasting the talents of gifted poor kids).
- Over time, increasing numbers of Americans left completely outside "the system"—socially isolated, economically frustrated and politically alienated—contribute to political inequality and civic alienation, and could even pose challenges to America's democratic stability.³

- Most important, this opportunity gap is deeply unfair because it violates the core values of American meritocracy and opportunity for all.

As I have emphasized, social capital is not the only factor that has fostered the opportunity gap, but it is pervasive in the stories and analysis that I am summarizing. Most fundamentally, this set of changes reflects a drastically diminished sense of shared destiny and mutual obligation. Two generations ago, when people used the expression “our kids,” they meant our community’s or our nation’s children, but now the term has shriveled to refer only to our own biological children. That is, at root, a consequence of a decline in bridging social capital. America has never thrived with such a narrow vision of the public weal, and we can’t let it be our future.

The opportunity gap represents a perfect storm with multiple, interrelated causes, including: 1) the collapse of the white working-class nuclear family; 2) the unraveling of the social fabric in working-class communities; 3) the rapidly increasing segregation of American society along class lines; and 4) increased economic insecurity among the working-class.

Growing up with two parents is now unusual in the white (as well as nonwhite) working class, while two-parent families are normal and becoming more common among the upper middle class (both white and nonwhite). Most Americans are unaware that the white working class family is today more fragile than the black family was at the time of the famous alarm-sounding 1965 “Report on the Negro Family” by Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

In the 1960s and 1970s working class schools and neighborhoods had vibrant extracurricular offerings and strong social institutions, like the Catholic Church or Scouts or the Polish-American society or simply older neighbors. Those institutions, in effect, provided a “social safety net” that could help catch and sustain kids experiencing problems at home. Today, that array of institutions and the ranks of “assistant moms” have essentially collapsed in working class neighborhoods. Moreover, in that era poor kids were often living in mixed or moderate income neighborhoods and going to school with more affluent classmates.

At the same time, kids from the upper third of American families are less likely to experience jarring developmental jolts (e.g., a family health problem, parental divorce, parental stress, an unwanted pregnancy, obesity) and much more likely than the bottom third to have “air bags” that cushion this jolt (e.g., their family hiring a tutor or a counselor, one of the parents taking time off from work to get the child back on track, arranging an unpaid internship, or even remodeling their house to cope with a special needs child).

The long economic stagnation for the lower half of the population (ever since the mid-1970s) has weakened the ability of working class families to invest time, energy, money, and love in their kids. As First Lady Laura Bush told me and her husband in a White House meeting: “George, if you don’t know how long you’re going to keep your house and your job, you have less energy to invest in the kids.” Working class families are more tenuously attached to the job market, and working class kids are ten times more likely than upper middle class kids to

experience periods in which their families have no income; moreover, the working class family (prototypically a single-parent family) is far less likely to have savings or friends to buffer these economic shocks and support their kids.

In short, this problem is a quintessential purple problem. Parts of the problem (like the collapse of the working class family) one can see more clearly through red conservative lenses, but parts of the problem (like the long stagnation of working class wages) one can see more clearly through blue progressive lenses. The ideal of equal opportunity has been widely shared across partisan and ideological divisions throughout our history. According to the latest polls, 95 percent of us say that “everyone in America should have equal opportunity to get ahead”—a level of consensus that is virtually never reached in contentious contemporary America. So closing the opportunity gap offers a chance for us—and probably *requires* us—to come together across our partisan polarization to restore the American Dream.

What are possible approaches for narrowing the opportunity gap?

During 2015 my team (the Saguaro Seminar at the Harvard Kennedy School) convened five working groups, composed of roughly 50 experts in all, who were diverse in their disciplines, political orientations, and geographic and demographic backgrounds. The groups considered five important realms in which we might narrow the opportunity gap: family structure and parenting; early childhood; the K-12 years; community institutions and neighborhoods; and “on ramps” for success.

Concerted progress is possible in other domains, but these domains seemed ones where we could most advance the discussion. Two potential areas of interest were left aside for reasons of time and expertise.

1. Successful economic and job development policies in communities are likely to have important positive effects on the local opportunity gap, but assessing such economic strategies was outside the scope of our expertise.
2. Though we discussed community colleges at some length, for the most part we halted our exploration at the doorstep to four-year post-secondary education, partly because we assess that by the time kids enter college, most of the gap has already grown full-size. To use a different metaphor, examining college tuition and other college policies—however important in absolute terms—is like assessing the results of a marathon by focusing on the last 200 yards of the race. In any event, college costs and college policies are outside the scope of our work.

Here is a tasting menu of promising approaches in each area.

FAMILY AND PARENTING: We focused on strategies to improve family stability and effective parenting that undergirds children’s success and yields lifelong advantages. The group emphasized the need for both *economic changes* (e.g., helping low income Americans enter the

labor market and making their wages and hours more stable) and *cultural changes* (communicating broadly the importance of relationship stability and the sequence of events that predict children’s economic success —graduate from high school, hold a full-time job or have a partner who does, and only have children if married and older than 21). The group recommended strategies to reduce unwanted and unplanned births by developing alternative appealing identities for low income girls besides being a young mom and providing better access to more effective forms of birth control. The group also recommended technological nudges to improve parenting.

EARLY CHILDHOOD: Ages birth to five (especially the first two years) set the foundation for effective later learning and self-regulation and is the most promising period for investments, but America underinvests in these early years relative to most developed countries. Our working group recommended changes across four domains: parenting, early childhood education, economic security, and supports for parents such as paid leave. The working group advised high quality home visiting for first-time moms and noted strategies to ensure the provision of effective early childhood education. The group recommended changes to reduce food insecurity for low income children and provide increased economic stability to their parents.

THE K-12 YEARS, BOTH IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL: Schools and education embody the American Dream, but schools today are too often segregated by socioeconomic status and are places of unequal rather than equal opportunity. Our working group noted the importance of good teaching over physical plant or technology in equalizing opportunity and highlighted strategies to improve this teaching. The group advocated supplementing the K-12 curricula through extracurricular activities, wraparound student support, tutoring, and a stronger school-to-work linkage. The group noted that accountability measures need to expand beyond mere test scores. They noted that charters writ large are not a panacea, but useful lessons from successful charter schools can be extracted for all schools.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES: Over the last several decades we’ve witnessed an increase in the rich living in rich enclaves and the poor living in poor enclaves. Since adversity has become more geographically concentrated, low income children are systematically exposed to fewer mentors, fewer economic opportunities, greater violence, and more toxic environments. The working group recommended strategies to reduce economic segregation through land trusts, more mixed income-housing through housing vouchers plus counseling, and economic development that promotes affordability. The group noted that the effects of residential segregation can be reduced through anchor institutions like hospitals, schools and police, and applauded approaches like workforce development and workforce supports that help low-income residents obtain and keep jobs. The group also recommended strategies to reconnect disconnected low-income youth through more systematic mentoring and an increased role for religious institutions as community partners.

“ON RAMPS” FOR SUCCESS: About 1 in 7 young adults (16-24) are both out-of-school and out-of-work. Our “on ramps” working group focused on strategies both to enable them to be more successful economically and to stem this problem for future cohorts. The group recommended a greater linking of the world of work and education (with earlier exposure to work internships for all), and revamping community colleges to make them easier institutions to navigate and from which to graduate. The group also recommended strategies to smooth transitions both between high school and community college and between community colleges and 4-year institutions. The group gave guidance on how to rethink community college “remediation” for inadequately prepared high school graduates.

These five baskets of policy suggestions are interconnected. Relevant reforms of *K-12 schools* cannot be considered in isolation from the starkly contrasting *neighborhoods* in which rich and poor kids live. *Early childhood education* appears to be most effective when combined with *parental coaching* and *home visiting*. Improved *mentoring* must be part of any strategy for lowering the dropout rate from *community colleges*. Few of our participants think there is a single magic bullet, so focusing only on any one basket while ignoring the wider web of causes and solutions is likely to be ineffective and perhaps even counterproductive.

Reports like ours are often written by and for policy advisors to national leaders—presidential candidates, Congressional leaders, Cabinet officials, and so on—and we hope that national leaders will find our report interesting. Our set of white papers, however, was aimed primarily at a different audience of grassroots leaders and activists: state and local public officials, community foundations, state and local philanthropists, school and health officials, local civic, business, religious, and non-profit leaders. We targeted that audience for three related reasons.

First, American federalism is a great strength of our country, since states and localities—“laboratories of democracy,” as Justice Brandeis famously put it—can pursue experimental policies and learn from one another. As we shall illustrate momentarily, major social reforms in this country have historically typically begun as state and local experiments. When they proved successful, such innovations have rapidly diffused horizontally to other states and localities and have risen vertically to become embodied in national policy.

Second, as we have emphasized, solutions to the opportunity gap will need to be holistic and interdisciplinary, involving cooperation and coordination among different agencies. That is easier to do at the state and local level than in Washington.

And finally, we live in an age of extreme, maybe even unprecedented political polarization, stymieing efforts at addressing public problems in every sphere of life, including the opportunity gap. That polarization now extends to states and localities, but seems somewhat less intense and paralyzing locally than it is nationally. Local leaders can work in purple.

The reason that grassroots leaders can be expected to play such a crucial role in narrowing the existing opportunity gaps is that they’ve surmounted such problems before. The period at the

end of the 19th century – the Gilded Age – was a period very much like ours today. The Gilded Age was a time of high immigration, high political alienation, rapid technological change, and concentrated wealth.

Then, as now, new concentrations of wealth and corporate power raised questions about the real meaning of democracy. Then, as now, massive urban concentrations of impoverished ethnic minorities posed basic questions of social justice and social stability. Then, as now, the comfortable upper-middle class was torn between the seductive attractions of escape and the deeper demands of redemptive social solidarity.

Then, as now, new forms of commerce, a restructured workplace, and a new spatial organization of human settlement threatened older forms of solidarity. Then, as now, waves of immigration changed the complexion of America and seemed to imperil the *unum* in our *pluribus*. Then, as now, materialism, political cynicism, and a penchant for spectatorship rather than action seemed to thwart idealistic reformism. Then, as now, older strands of social solidarity were being abraded—even destroyed—by technological and economic and social change. Then, as now, the dominant public philosophy (then termed “social Darwinism”) lauded selfish-centeredness as the prime virtue. Then as now, America had become more of an “I” society and less of a “we” society. Serious observers understood that the path from the past could not be retraced, but few saw clearly the path to a better future.

Enter some intrepid social reformers. They had national spokespeople like Teddy Roosevelt and Jane Addams, but most of the creative innovators worked at the state and local level. Instead of embracing the trend toward ideological individualism, reformers saw the problems as societal flaws, not individual failings. Growing numbers of Americans began to recognize the problem, and gradually many began to seek solutions. Among the harbingers of change was a book by a Danish-American journalist *How the Other Half Lives*. As a photojournalist, Jacob Riis set out to describe the plight of poor tenement dwellers in the slums of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, aiming his words at the affluent readers in the Silk Stocking district on the Upper East Side. Enough of his readers were moved by this desecration of the American Dream that political reformers in both parties (TR chief among them) moved to institute practical improvements, beginning with clean water and clean streets. As this movement spread, it crossed party lines and crossed the continent.

In the Progressive Era, social entrepreneurs often experimented with home-grown ideas, such as social and fraternal organizations (Rotary, the Moose, Kiwanis) or extracurricular activities like high school band and football (as alluded to earlier). They also imported innovative ideas from abroad: e.g., kindergartens from Germany; settlement houses and the Boy Scouts from England.

Progressive Era innovation was galvanized by a conscious practitioner-academic dialogue. Dialogues among business and community leaders, academics, and political officials in places like Toledo and Galveston led to some of the most successful and enduring innovations.

Chicago's Hull House, founded by Jane Addams, fostered dialogue between the worlds she seamlessly spanned: the Hull House community and leading academics at University of Chicago. These conversations spread powerful, successful ideas and won national attention. For example, Addams and Florence Kelley partnered with academics on the 1909 White House Conference on Children which led to the U.S. Children's Bureau and to urban reform policies.

The Progressive Era included many reforms (not all of them effective or even beneficent)—too many to list here. But the single most important—or at least the most instructive for our times—was aimed at the opportunity gap of that era.

The High School was *invented* by American reformers around 1910, beginning in small towns in the Heartland. Until that time, nowhere in the world had any community decided that all kids in town would get—just because they were kids in town—a free, comprehensive, four-year secondary education. Prior to that, only those families who could afford it obtained secondary education. But beginning in small towns in the Midwest and spreading out from there, a grassroots “High School movement” demanded that all children, regardless of their family background, have the opportunity to earn a secondary education.

This was a hard sell. Reformers had to convince the wealthier folks in town (whose kids likely had already received a private secondary education) that they should pay higher taxes so that all the other kids in town could get a free secondary education. Slowly but surely, citizens in these towns and then in towns and cities across America agreed to invest in *other* people's children. And it turned out to be the best public policy decision America has ever made.

That decision – to make sure everyone in America had a chance to get a free secondary education – meant our workforce became the best trained in the world. That huge boost in productivity accounted for most of America's economic growth in the twentieth century. At the same time, that decision also leveled the playing field for all kids across America, raising social mobility for at least half a century. This grassroots-born innovation combined two values that economists sometimes tell us are incompatible—it increased both efficiency (improving national productivity for all) and equity (helping the less well-off even more). It renewed the American promise from the bottom up.

Our challenge now is to be as creative and experimental as the people who dreamed up the idea of free secondary education and to be as convincing to our fellow citizens of the need to make change in our society. In the Progressive Era, breakthrough ideas typically did not come from Washington. There was a national conversation happening about these larger issues of opportunity and education, but the role of the national conversation was to give oxygen to local reformers across the U.S. and thus to breathe life into the reforms that began to equalize opportunity in America.

Our working groups aimed mostly to confine our recommendations to interventions for which there is good evidence of effectiveness. But we note that free high schools in America were never subjected to rigorous quantitative evaluation before they were introduced, so our list of

potential approaches should not limit the imaginations and creativity of local social entrepreneurs committed to addressing this growing opportunity gap.

We don't know for sure what the equivalent innovation for the 21st century will be—universal early childhood education, or universal college (2-year or 4-year), or some other bold innovation as yet unimagined. But our set of policy approaches is designed to help stimulate an intense period of civic renewal and policy experimentation that will begin to narrow the opportunity gap that threatens America today. We recognize the value of learning lessons from abroad, but our aspiration is not to make America Sweden, but to do in today's America what Americans have done before.⁴

Example 2: How Bowling Alone leads to Aging Alone: Social Capital in the Later Years of Life

Providing care for aging Americans is a major (and growing) nationwide problem. One widely recognized reason is simply the massive number of baby boomers who are now retiring, but one *unrecognized* part of the problem is that boomers (from the generation that brought us Bowling Alone) will almost certainly require substantially more paid eldercare per person than their parents' generation. Long-term generational differences in social capital turn out to have massive implications for policy (public and private) in this domain.

Although many aging Americans spend their later years in some form of paid/institutionalized care (e.g. nursing homes and home healthcare aides), many more receive unpaid, informal care from family, friends, neighbors, and civic organizations (i.e. social capital). The best estimate from recent decades is that roughly three quarters of all care for Americans over 65 is provided through such unpaid, informal channels.⁵

However, current estimates of the amount of informal care that will be required in the next 20 years (that is, for the boomer or "Bowling Alone" generation) are based almost exclusively on our experience with eldercare over the previous three-four decades, when the elderly were in fact the boomers' parents, a generation with historically high levels of social capital.⁶

Crucially, however, the boomer generation is entering their sunset years with much less social capital than their parents had at the same age. Therefore, our current estimates substantially underestimate the amount of paid/institutional care that will be required in the next 20 years. Consider in turn each source of informal social support for aging Americans.

- **Spouses:** The boomers are the generation that experienced the divorce epidemic beginning in the 1970s, whereas their parents were members of one of the most stably married cohorts in recent history. Thus, roughly 12 percent fewer of the mid-boomer birth cohort of 1955 will be living with spouses when they reach age 65 than was true of the birth cohort of 1930 (roughly speaking, the boomers' parents) when *they* reached 65.⁷

- Children: Boomers had many fewer children than their parents (who were, after all, the parents of the baby boom). Assuming similar midlife mortality rates among those children, the birth cohort of 1955 will reach retirement age with roughly 36% fewer children than the birth cohort of 1930 had.⁸
- Close friends: the birth cohort of 1950–59 had an average of 2.1 close friends in 2004, when they were about 50, compared to 3.0 close friends for the birth cohort of 1930–39 in 1985, when they were about 50, i.e., about 30% fewer close friends.⁹
- Community involvement: On measures like dinner parties, club meetings, and church-going the boomers reported about roughly 40% fewer community ties when they were in their 40s than their parents had reported when they were in their 40s.¹⁰

Thus, in round numbers the boomers are entering retirement with one third less social support than their parents had at the same stage of life. This is the history that lies behind recent headlines like “How an Epidemic of Loneliness is Killing the Men We Love” and “Loneliness among Seniors.”¹¹ The generation that “bowled alone” will now “age alone.”

Social isolation is widely recognized as a strong predictor of morbidity and mortality, especially among the elderly. What is seldom recognized is that the trend toward increasing social isolation among boomers, compared to their parents, will inevitably impair their health and reduce the degree to which the elderly over the next two decades will be able to rely on informal care as they age. Conversely, the burden on paid, institutionalized care will rise sharply above current expectations, not simply because there are more boomers¹² (for which current projections already account), but because proportionally more of them will need paid, institutionalized care (for which current projections do not account). As illustrated in the set of charts below, over the coming decades this factor alone will mean that paid eldercare per boomer will, on average, have to double, as compared to their parents.

This analysis does not show how that massive increase in formal, paid eldercare will be paid for—through public or private mechanisms or in some other way—and in any event I would not want to stake my reputation on the precise decimal points in these calculations.^{13,14} But this issue illustrates that ignoring trends in social capital can blind us to massively important public policy issues. One could imagine more “progressive” approaches or more “conservative” approaches to the problem, or a combination of both, but the problem itself is not going to vanish.

This threat to our national accounts, financial as well as moral, stems directly from the fact that 40-50 years ago younger Americans began bowling alone. Social capital is an underappreciated dimension of this issue (as well as of the opportunity gap) for national decision-makers.

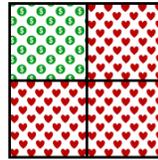
How Aging Alone may affect the costs of eldercare

Total elderly Americans needing care in 2010-11



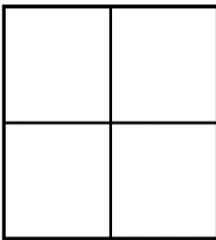
In 2010-11, Americans 65 and over totaled 40.2 million people, of whom 29% (11.5 million) needed care.

How that care was provided in 2010-11



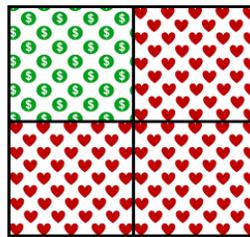
In 2010-11, 24% of all eldercare was paid care, while 77% was provided informally.

Total elderly Americans needing care in 2030



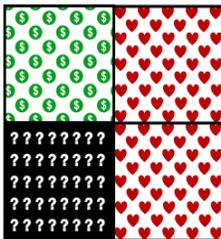
Americans 65 and over are projected to total 72 million people, of whom at least one quarter (18 million) are projected to need care.

Current projections of how that care will be provided in 2030



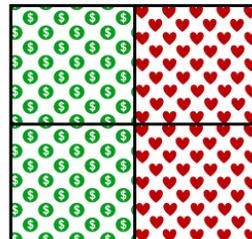
Current projections assume that retired boomers will enjoy as much informal [unpaid] care as their parents' generation.

How that care can be provided in 2030



As the "Bowling Alone" generation, Boomers have 1/3 less social support than their parents, and thus will likely enjoy 1/3 less informal elder care than currently projected.

How that care will have to be provided in 2030



*To replace the missing informal, unpaid eldercare will require paid elder care roughly to **double** from current projections.*

¹ This section is based on <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/programs/saguaro/about-social-capital/faqs>, as well as a number of my publications over the quarter century, including *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti; *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003) with Lewis Feldstein and Don Cohen; and *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010) with David E. Campbell. Second edition with new Epilogue, 2011.

² A landmark overview of these trends is Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*. (New York: Crown, 2012).

³ “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 anti-democratic demagogues at the ideological extremes.” Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

⁴ For more information on the working group process, visit www.theopportunitygap.com. A coalition of community foundations—the Community Foundation Opportunity Network—is currently undertaking a nationwide array of, locally-based, evidence-based projects to test and implement the strategies outlined in the Closing the Opportunity Gap report. For more on that initiative, see <https://www.theopportunitygap.com/about-us/>.

⁵ The 2011 National Health and Aging Trends Study found that, of the 38.2 million Americans over age 65, 2.9 percent live in a nursing home. The remaining 71.3 percent did not [yet] require living assistance. Of the 25.8 percent who required assistance with self-care, mobility, and/or household activities but did not live in a nursing home, 95 percent received unpaid help, while 34.5 percent received paid help. Of the mean 169.7 hours of help each person received monthly, 143.8 hours or 85 percent were unpaid. Vicki Freedman and Brenda Spillman, “Disability and Care Needs Among Older Americans,” *Milbank Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (2014): 509-41. If we assume that all care provided in nursing homes is paid, then $\{[.029 \times 1.00] + [.258 \times 0.15]\} / .287 = 23.5\%$ of all care was paid care, while 76.5% is provided informally.

⁶ *Bowling Alone*, chapter 14.

⁷ In the 1990 Census, 73% of 60-year-olds were living with their spouse. In the 2015 American Community Survey, that figure had fallen to 64%, a decline of 12% (9 percentage points). Own analysis of Census and ACS data from IPUMS.

⁸ In 1980, women born in 1930 (thus then 50 years old) had had an average of living 3.1 children. In 2005, women born in 1955 had had an average of 1.98 living children. CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics System, “Table 2. Cumulative birth rates, by live-birth order, exact age, and race of women in each cohort from 1911 through 1991: United States, 1961–2006,” https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/cohort_fertility_tables.htm.

⁹ Our analysis of General Social Survey data from 1985 and 2004. For a detailed methodological debate about these data, see Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and Matthew E. Brashears, “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (Jun., 2006), pp. 353-375; Claude S. Fischer, “The 2004 GSS Finding of Shrunken Social Networks: An Artifact?” *American Sociological Review* 74 (August, 2009): 657-69; and Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and Matthew E. Brashears, “Reply to Fischer: Models and Marginals: Using Survey Evidence to Study Social Networks,” *American Sociological Review* 74, (Aug., 2009): 670-681.

¹⁰ Using DDB Lifestyle data, as analyzed in *Bowling Alone*, we compared the 1995–98 behavior of the cohort born in 1950–59 with the 1975–78 behavior of the cohort born 1930–39. That comparison approximates the behavior of the boomer generation and their parents’ generation when each cohort was in their 40s. The older cohort had attended 6.8 dinner parties in the previous 12 months, compared with 3.8 for the younger cohort, a decline of 45 percent. The older cohort attended 11.1 club meetings in the previous 12 months, compared with 5.1 for the

younger cohort, a decline of 54 percent. The older cohort attended church or another place of worship 27.3 times in the previous 12 months, compared with 19.7 for the younger cohort, a decline of 28 percent.

¹¹ Social isolation is a risk factor for several adverse health outcomes, including death and elements of functional decline, including stair climbing, upper extremity tasks, daily living activities, and other mobility functions. In older people, the effect is independent from the emotional experience of loneliness and appears to be caused by isolation itself, perhaps because of the lack of social support to prompt medical attention to an acute condition or because of biological consequences from lack of social engagement. In addition to changes in health-related behavior, greater loneliness is also linked to more stress exposure, greater feelings of helplessness, more severe physiological responses to stress, and lower quality of sleep. Isolation may be particularly problematic for older people because they face new challenges unique to their age, such as life transitions, declining health, and new disabilities. Conversely, social connectedness can provide access to material resources, such as information; promote healthy behaviors; and discourage risky activities such as smoking. Among many other sources, see Carla M. Perissinotto, Irena Stijacic Cenzer, and Kenneth E. Covinsky, "Loneliness in Older Persons: A Predictor of Functional Decline and Death," *Archives of Internal Medicine* 172, no. 14 (July 23, 2012): 1078–84, doi:10.1001/archinternmed.2012.1993; Andrew Steptoe et al., "Social Isolation, Loneliness, and All-Cause Mortality in Older Men and Women," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 15 (April 9, 2013): 5799, doi:10.1073/pnas.1219686110; John T. Cacioppo, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 99–108; Erin York Cornwell and Linda J. Waite, "Social Disconnectedness, Perceived Isolation, and Health among Older Adults," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 50, no. 1 (2009): 31–48.

¹² In 2010, 40.2 million Americans were aged 65 or older, but that number is forecast to be 72.1 million in 2030, an increase of about 79 percent. Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Projected Future Growth of the Older Population," September 2014, available at https://aoa.acl.gov/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/future_growth.aspx.

¹³ An important caveat: Although I have carefully tried to establish the basis for my calculations, I report here research in progress which has not yet been subjected to formal peer review. Much of this work was done in collaboration with Chaz Kelsh, a graduate student at the Harvard Kennedy School, but responsibility for any errors rests entirely with me.

¹⁴ In 2004, about 46 percent of Americans' nursing home expenses were paid for by Medicaid. Georgetown University Long-Term Care Financing Project, "National Spending for Long-Term Care" fact sheet, January 2007, available at <https://hpi.georgetown.edu/ltc/papers.html>.