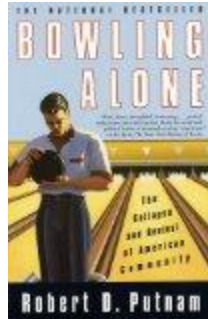


Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community by Robert D. Putnam



[North Dakota, South Dakota, And Minnesota High Levels Of Social Capital?](#)

Few people outside certain scholarly circles had heard the name Robert D. Putnam before 1995. But then this self-described obscure academic hit a nerve with a journal article called *Bowling Alone*. Suddenly he found himself invited to Camp David, his picture in *People* magazine, and his thesis at the center of a raging debate. In a nutshell, he argued that civil society was breaking down as Americans became more disconnected from their families, neighbors, communities, and the republic itself. The organizations that gave life to democracy were fraying. Bowling became his driving metaphor. Years ago, he wrote, thousands of people belonged to bowling leagues. Today, however, they're more likely to bowl alone: Television, two-career families, suburban sprawl, generational changes in values--these and other changes in American society have meant that fewer and fewer of us find that the League of Women Voters, or the United Way, or the Shriners, or the monthly bridge club, or even a Sunday picnic with friends fits the way we have come to live. Our growing social-capital deficit threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty, and even our health and happiness. The conclusions reached in the book *Bowling Alone* rest on a mountain of data gathered by Putnam and a team of researchers since his original essay appeared. Its breadth of information is astounding--yes, he really has statistics showing people are less likely to take Sunday picnics nowadays. Dozens of charts and graphs track everything from trends in PTA participation to the number of times Americans say they give the finger to other drivers each year. If nothing else, *Bowling Alone* is a fascinating collection of factoids. Yet it does seem to provide an explanation for why we tell pollsters that we wish we lived in a more civil, more trustworthy, more collectively caring community. What's more, writes Putnam, Americans are right that the bonds of our communities have withered, and we are right to fear that this transformation has very real costs. Putnam takes a stab at suggesting how

things might change, but the books real strength is in its diagnosis rather than its proposed solutions. Bowling Alone wont make Putnam any less controversial, but it may come to be known as a path-breaking work of scholarship, one whose influence has a long reach into the 21st century. --
John J. Miller

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Putnams Bowling Alone examines modern American society and the erosion of the good life. America has a fondness for nostalgia but it is misunderstood and/or it is not placed in its proper context. The feeling of nostalgia is in actuality a feeling that something is wrong within our society. The yearning to escape back to a time when crime was low, people cared for one and another, happiness was widespread, etc. is the fuel that will ignite a social movement that will not recreate the good ole days but will transform modern society into one that is socially, politically, economically, and moralistically at peace with our intrinsic view of a collective utopia.

Putnam begins this book by proving, with a mountain of evidence, that current trends in civic engagement and social capital have eroded to such a level that modern society has become a cesspool of ill morality, crime, poverty, and inequality. He correlates a decrease in social capital to the pre-mentioned ills of society while associating an increase in social capital to such positive aspects such as education, childrens welfare, safe neighborhoods, productive neighborhoods, economic prosperity, health and happiness, and most importantly democracy. The evidence is unquestionable in terms of correlation but even Putnam cautions that simple correlation can not be automatically substituted for causation. However, he goes to great lengths to discredit any possible critical objections based on his specific correlations leading to causations. This leaves the reader completely at the mercy of the evidence, it is what it is.

This evidence is summarized to include pressures of time and money, specifically with the modern American family consisting of two wage earners. Suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl contribute by increasing the time restraints through longer commutes to work and the distance to coworkers and friends. Electronic entertainment or TV in particular has resulted in the largest erosion of social capital. According to Putnam, as a result of TV we have become a society of watchers rather than doers. He particularly addresses the psychological dilemma of watching TV in which the viewer attaches oneself to the characters of the show. They become a part of characters persona thus substituting real world interaction with real people with that of fake TV characters. This has an enormous effect on the decrease in social capital via less engagement. Putnam attributes as much as 25% of the overall decline in social capital to the watching of TV. Generational change accounts for almost 50% of the decline in social capital, however, there is an approximately one third of that percentage

that is interrelated with the 25% decline from TV. He does address the absent piece of this puzzle as something that can not be accounted for, whether it is modern society's level of intelligence or technology. This piece accounts for approximately 15-20%.

Putnam address the distinct difference between offering a theory to academic peers which concentrate on what caused such a phenomenon versus the general public which will want a solution to this problem. Putnam offers such a solution and seems to be optimistic to its approaching realization; however, I do have some reservations concerning his optimism. His recommendations, short of a war, depression or natural disaster, to increase social capital are as follows. Society must recognize that there is a problem and to understand the problem and its implications. This is very reasonable and I have no qualms with it. Public discourse concerning this issue must be relegated to the forefront of our political, economical, and social agenda. America must increase civic engagement through education of our children concerning civics to include theory and application. Participation in extracurricular activities in school will also increase social engagement. These too seem reasonable and achievable if not fully then to a degree that should force change.

Putnam insists that the workplace must become more family friendly, allowing for the social growth of its workers through application of diversity and the bridging of race and ethnicity. Americans need to spend less time traveling to distant recreational sites and more time enjoying the pleasures in our local surrounding community. He would rather one spend a Sunday afternoon at the local park in one's suburb versus traveling 10 miles to watch a movie at a giant mega-plex theater. The Internet will be used to increase face to face interaction versus substituting for it. The digital divide must be eliminated allowing for equal access to all regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, or social status. The emphasis that Putnam places on increasing political involvement is vital to any chance of reversing the trend of declining social capital. However, one of his recommendations seems like a mountain that I am not sure can be climbed. He states that campaign reform should emphasize social capital building versus financial capital. This in my opinion would require a grassroots movement so momentous that it would take on the look of a mini revolution. I have a hard time believing that campaign reform can eliminate or reduce effectively campaign finances for the established infrastructure that feeds this machinery is very powerful. Similar to the big oil companies controlling the type of fuel guzzling vehicles that are produced the same can be said for big politics. The large corporations and institutions will no doubt put up a fight. A real solution to crime will place many in the criminal justice system out of work. Imagine all the attorneys fearing a loss of their very significant financial compensation. I think the capitalistic society we live in will naturally fight the solution that Putnam offers.

He concludes that social capital is the single most important contribution to a healthy society that must be understood, nurtured, and maintained. I

couldnt agree more although as I noted previously, I am not sure I hold the same enthusiasm as he does that it can be reversed to a point that can be maintained. The one bright spot concerning any attempts to reverse this trend is that it may be cyclically attributed to our type of society. History repeats itself, if it holds true, is a blessing not usually associated with this saying.

I did find an interesting little oddity within his research that I am sure has been studied. Higher levels of social capital are found in the upper Midwest states of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota where a very large concentration of Scandinavian immigrants settled. He also states that the Scandinavian counties in Europe have the highest levels of social capital of western democracies while also being the biggest spending welfare states. This he cant explain other to say that maybe social capital encourages welfare spending or that welfare spending encourages social capital or maybe both of these possibilities are the result of something else. I wonder if that something else could be of a socio-biological nature. Scandinavians are more predisposed culturally to Altruism, Honesty, Trust, and Reciprocity?

Overall I enjoyed this well written and researched book. I purchased this book as it was a recommended reading for a course on Community Development but never made the attempt to read it until I used it for a course on Sociological Theory.

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