

Bowling Alone. Robert Putnam

In Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam, a sociologist at Harvard, offers a provocative thesis. He argues that our society's health is being threatened by the erosion of relationships, networks, and interactions, what Putnam calls social capital. Not unlike financial capital or human capital, social capital is created by human interaction, which is often fostered by clubs, organizations and other forms of interactions. Social capital allows greater productivity, promotes volunteerism, and encourages concern for the greater good.

Putnam argues that social capital is created as human beings interact, and one of the ways social capital is created is through voluntary organizations. Some organizations only admit people who already think alike, creating what Putnam calls "bonding" social capital. Other organizations bring together people from very different backgrounds and beliefs, creating "bridging" social capital. While both bonding and bridging social capital are useful in a society, it is bridging capital that is particularly useful in a pluralistic democracy. A society that only has bonding social capital might look like Bosnia.

The book, however, is not a treatise on social capital theory but a description of a troubling trend in modern America. Putnam describes a widespread decline across an entire spectrum of groups and organizations in the United States, from bowling leagues to the Boy Scouts, from card clubs to the Lions, from the PTA to the NAACP. Indeed, the story is even more dramatic. The pattern of development is essentially the same across all groups. Most of today's organizations and groups began in the last days of the 19th

century or first part of the 20th century, grew to their largest memberships in the late 1950s or early 1960s, and have been in steady decline since, with many finally ending their operations as we approached the 21st century. In the second part of the book, Putnam examines the possible explanations for this decline. While he considers a number of factors, several stand out as potential contributors, including television, both parents working, and the growth of suburbs with longer commutes. Indeed, Putnam argues that for every 10 minutes of additional commuting time, there is a corresponding 10% decline in all forms of interaction, including participation in memberships.

Putnam argues that our social fabric, and especially our capacity to work together as a society, is threatened by declining social capital. For example, the best predictor of the crime rate in a neighborhood is how many people know one another's first name, a measure of social capital. The greater the level of social capital, the lower the level of political corruption. There are countless other examples, not only for community health but even personal health. Social isolation increases mortality risks.

Putnam's analysis is not a nostalgic yearning for the past. The bowling leagues and various other social clubs and organizations of another era will not likely return.

However, Putnam asserts that new organizations and structures must be developed, if the social capital necessary to preserve our democracy is to be regenerated. The end of the 19th century, not unlike the end of the 20th century, was a time of great wealth, rapid technological change, rising immigration, and social dislocation. Yet in a brief period of 20 years, America created a wonderful collection of groups and organizations that

nurtured social capital, sustaining this country for 100 years. The question for us is:
what are the new organizations that will sustain our society, and our democracy, in the
century to come?

Putnam, Robert D. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.
New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000