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Thoughts on *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*
by Robert Putnam

"The American Dream" was coined by historian James Truslow in his one-volume history, *The Epic of America*. His definition is as follows:

A dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

I grew up in Detroit's inner city in the 1950s and '60s. My acceptance at a middle-class high school was clearly a step in the fulfillment of my American Dream. Well, I learned a lot. When I went to Immaculata High school in northwest Detroit, I became acutely aware of boundaries and status. I learned that when I said I grew up by Briggs Stadium (that in 1961 was renamed Tiger Stadium), I would hear the response "oh, you live in the inner city." I thought I grew up by the baseball and football stadium and became very uneasy about what the appellation "inner city" really meant. I learned that when the Second Avenue bus crossed West Grand Boulevard, I was in a different world-- the Outer City. The inner city was the place where all poor people lived, where black people and Mexican and Puerto Rican people lived regardless of class position. I learned that we were different and that difference was not celebrated but feared.

I learned to embrace my status as the first "inner city" girl to go this middle-class high school. I learned that my responsibility to clean the biology lab to help pay for my tuition set me apart from my schoolmates who babysat on the weekends so they could go shopping at Northland. This led me to explore the differences between me and my schoolmates. I really hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about the "American Dream" until I lived the experience of "otherness." I concluded that the 1960s American Dream was to grow up, get

married, have five kids (I went to a Catholic girl's high school), live in a suburb with a white picket fence and no crabgrass.

My educational experience in an inner-city grade school reflected the disparities that Professor Putnam outlines so forcefully in *Our Kids*. His focus on inequality of opportunity, upward mobility and income gaps in the America is laudable. His storytelling methodology makes the lives of children accessible to his readers. Poor kids, middle-class and rich kids from Port Clinton, Ohio become familiar and accessible to the reader. His empathy is palpable.

His emphasis on social capital and civil society is important, but I believe the conversation is enriched by an economic analysis. A two-parent household with parental involvement in their children's education and extracurricular activities is a good social norm. An understanding of how the nature of income inequality in the United States impedes the possibility of families trapped in poverty to reach this social norm requires a linkage to an economic analysis.

What is the connection between social mobility and income inequality? How do we close the income gap? There needs to be an exploration of how tax policy can be used to close the gap. Progressive tax rates, raising the minimum wage, universal health care and progressive monetary policies are all tools to change the trajectory of income inequality.

The central question remains: Are people who have achieved the American Dream willing to pay more in taxes in order to create the possibility of mobility for others? Are those whose two-parent families have benefited from the concentration of poverty in cities (not just in the inner city anymore) willing to welcome poor children into their schools?

Professor Putnam's analysis provides us a way to examine our local real-time experience of "post bankruptcy resurgence and renaissance." Do we have one Detroit or two Detroits? And why?