

*In this essay, Kahan argues that Robert Putnam's emphasis on family circumstance and community norms to explain the education gap is incomplete. Drawing evidence from a wide range of scholarly and journalistic sources, she contends that responsibility for education needs to be understood in broader, more collective terms. (Instructor: Gerard O'Donoghue.)*

## THE POVERTY LINK: SCHOOL, HOME, AND A LIFETIME OF FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

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**A**labama's Livingston Junior High School is in a state of utter disrepair. The majority of the girls' bathroom stalls are out of order. The ceiling over one classroom leaks when it rains, leading to the spread of mold and the buckling of floor tiles. The room can no longer be used for classes; garbage buckets fail to catch all of the rainwater, and the mold poses a health hazard. Paint peels off the walls, and broken windows remain unfixed (Turner et al. "Money Problem"). The school district, which serves low-income and minority students, is unable to extract enough taxpayer dollars from the community to finance basic repairs, and the hundreds of students in the district suffer as a result (Turner et al. "Money Problem").

According to a 2015 study by the Southern Education Foundation, low-income children comprise the majority of students attending American public schools (Suits). Students who experience financial hardship at home may attend local public schools that are severely under-funded and under-resourced. Failing schools constitute one of many factors that perpetuate cyclical, intergenerational poverty and low social mobility. The U.S.'s decentralized public schools are part of a system that contributes to widening class disparities and decreased opportunities for children to surpass the socioeconomic status of their parents.

The role of money in the success of schools is a surprisingly controversial research subject, and some academics propose that family

traditions and home life are more influential in a child's educational success than well-funded schools. For example, parents who take time to read with their children and encourage intellectual growth will raise more highly achieving youth (Caucutt, Burtless). However, the school and the home are two crucial components of a community that are inextricably linked, typically either in relative wealth or in relative poverty. Poor neighborhoods are frequently plagued by failing public schools, because these schools rely, at least in part, on the revenue of district taxpayers for funding (Turner et al. "Money Problem"). The interconnectedness of this 'school-home link' creates a vicious cycle for low-income residents: taxpayers are unable to financially contribute to quality local schooling, and, as a result, poor children are educationally disadvantaged compared to their peers in richer districts. This double bind decreases the likelihood that poor children will be able to escape the financial hardship of their upbringings, since achieving the 'American Dream' requires at least a "good education— [one that is] good enough to command a job that pays a non-poverty wage" (AEI-Brookings).

The consequences of poverty are severe. Robert D. Putnam, political scientist and author of *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, explains the phenomenon of America's expanding inequality gap between the rich and poor by using specific children as case studies. David, a young man from Port Clinton, Ohio, (Putnam's hometown), has endured an "obviously chaotic" family life: his father has served time in prison, his mother's perpetual absence from the home has been filled by several women his father has dated, and now he feels as though he is the sole responsible caregiver for his younger half-siblings (Putnam 859-860). David's academics and job prospects suffer as a result of his volatile home life. Putnam starkly contrasts David's difficult upbringing with that of Chelsea, who lives in the same city as David but hails from a considerably wealthier family. In addition to enjoying "fancy themed birthday parties" and nightly family dinners, Chelsea was privileged enough to attend a high school that offered her the opportunity to work as the editor-in-chief for the school yearbook, receive scholarship money, and serve as the student body president (Putnam 857-858).

Putnam places a great deal of focus on the erosion of social norms, family stability, and community ties after Port Clinton's manufacturing sector collapsed over the latter half of the twentieth century. He cites increasing rates of juvenile delinquency, single-parent households, divorce, and unwed births to help explain the stagnation of working class progress there (855-856). When describing David's life in the poorer area of Port Clinton, Putnam discusses the incarceration of David's father, the separation of his parents, the presence of drugs in his home, and his "diverse brood of younger half-siblings" (859-860). However, in a narrative of Chelsea's life in the wealthier part of Port Clinton, Putnam describes her protective mother Wendy, who cooks dinner in the kitchen while her children do their homework, encourages her children to "read, read, read, read," and installs a diner in the basement of the family home where Chelsea can socialize with friends (857).

Despite Putnam's heavy emphasis on family, a discrepancy in family behavior (as is evident in Chelsea's and David's stories) is not the only—or even the primary—culprit behind the widening divide between the rich and the poor. Poverty is cyclical, and its catalysts extend far beyond just family life and social norms. A critical factor in David's unstable upbringing is the lack of guidance he received in school:

"I really want to get a higher education," he says. "I need one. It's hard to get a job without one anymore." But he has no idea how to get there. He can recall no helpful guidance counselor or teacher from his school years, and his parents are obviously useless. (Putnam 860)

Although Chelsea's supportive family was a significant factor in her academic success, with her mother constantly advocating for her when Chelsea was denied something she thought she deserved, her school in the wealthy part of Port Clinton offered her the opportunities and tools she needed to thrive. David may have experienced a better childhood if he had a more loving and encouraging family, but a higher quality school system could have mitigated his angst and anger, encouraged him academically, and paired him with guiding adults to

help him succeed. Chelsea's need for these services was never as great as David's, because his chaotic home left a gaping hole in his life that needed to be filled by some positive force like school. To have a more comprehensive understanding of inequality, it is necessary to consider how inadequate public education systems, combined with low wages and high costs of living, keep people trapped in poverty and hardship.

Roughly 300 miles away from Putnam's hometown of Port Clinton, in Chicago, Illinois, is the Ridge School District, which serves predominantly low-income families. Ridge Superintendent Kevin Russell notes, "We don't have a lot of the extra things that other districts may have, simply because we can't afford them" (qtd. in Turner et al. "Money Problem"). However, the Rondout School, located just one hour north of Ridge, spends nearly three times as much money per student and boasts small class sizes, individualized student learning plans, freshly cooked lunches, and well-paid teachers (Turner et al. "Money Problem"). The funding discrepancy between Ridge and Rondout stems partly from differences in their tax bases: the successful businesses near Rondout contribute funding for the local schools via their tax dollars, while "Ridge simply has less to work with . . . fewer businesses, lower property values" (Turner et al. "Money Problem"). Whether a school like Ridge can provide students with new textbooks or specialized teachers depends "at least in part on the property wealth around them" (Turner et al. "Money Problem"). The state of Illinois provides some aid to Ridge and other struggling schools in an effort to compensate for the disadvantages faced by its poor students, but low-income schools have historically been denied adequate financial support by federal and state governments.\*

Clearly, public schools in low-income areas are hard-pressed to find adequate sources of funding in order to maintain quality academic programs. The social woes of drugs, crime, and broken families that Putnam describes are symptomatic of larger issues that have tangled and deeply ingrained roots in poor communities. The deficit

\* The unfair appropriation of school funding is often linked to racial bias and discrimination (see, for example, Gillian B. White). The role of race in perpetuating inequality is undeniable. It would be unjust, however, to hastily squeeze in an examination of racism and poverty; this paper will thus focus on economic factors that sustain the poverty cycle and the wealth gap in the U.S.

of tax-payer money in working class areas is a complex issue that is difficult to remedy because individuals who are struggling financially are often unable to simply ‘lift themselves up by their bootstraps’ and aggregate more wealth by ‘trying harder’ at work. To live in poverty is to grapple with daily expenses that can balloon into ever-more costly expenditures. Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, decided to intentionally experience living in poverty by forsaking her comfortable life and working low-wage jobs to survive. She describes the stories of other people she has met who are struggling to financially stay afloat: “Gail is sharing a room in a . . . flophouse for \$250 a week. . . . [T]he rent would be impossible alone. . . . [And] Joan . . . lives in a van parked behind a shopping center at night” (508-509). Ehrenreich explains how living in poverty—on a minimum-wage salary—is ironically *expensive*, creating a cycle of financial insecurity and stress that is difficult to escape. For example, “if you can’t put up the two months’ rent you need to secure an apartment, you end up paying through the nose for a room by the week. If you have only a room, with a hot plate at best, you can’t save by cooking up huge lentil stews that can be frozen for the week ahead” (509). These are part of “a host of special costs” that the poor must pay, which Ehrenreich describes to assert that there are “no secret economies that nourish the poor” (509). The inability to pay larger expenses up-front ultimately costs poor people more in the long run, preventing them from aggregating wealth over time and breaking the cycle of poverty.

While Putnam describes how difficult it is for David to live in a state of poverty in Port Clinton, Ehrenreich’s work expounds on the intricacies of financial and time management, proving to readers that the working poor face an economic system that is essentially rigged against them. With vivid language, she notes the “gross improvidence in some of these arrangements [in which the poor are forced to live]. . . . In poverty, as in certain propositions in physics, starting conditions are everything” (509). A few hundred dollars more in the bank—an amount of money that would likely seem trivial to a wealthier individual—makes a potentially life-changing difference to a person struggling to pay for rent or groceries. David, Putnam’s case study, cannot expunge his juvenile record because he is unable to

afford the “couple hundred dollars” required to do so, and thus he must cope with the difficulties of finding a well-paying job despite criminal charges against him (Putnam 860).

For author Linda Tirado, living paycheck to paycheck from multiple low-wage jobs in between bouts of unemployment creates an economically impossible and emotionally exhausting cycle of pain (ix). In *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*, Tirado asserts that “we [too often] look at academic problems of poverty and have no idea of the why,” and thus she takes the burden upon herself to explain how she and other people living in poverty “know that the very act of being poor guarantees that [they] will never not be poor” (xvi). How could an individual in such a dire personal economic situation possibly be capable of providing an adequate sum of tax dollars to support her child’s local school system?

Children who are raised in households struggling with perpetual poverty likely face long-term repercussions. A poor child’s success is closely tied to the academic credentials of their parents. Caroline Ratcliffe of the Urban Institute explains: “Compared with ever-poor children whose parents do not have a high school education, ever-poor children whose parents have a high school education or more than a high school education are 11 and 30 percent, respectively, more likely to complete high school” (Ratcliffe). Furthermore, the Institute reports that the longer children live in poverty (labeled “persistently poor”), the greater the negative impact they will suffer:

Although 93 percent of never-poor children complete high school, and 83 percent of ever-poor, nonpersistently poor children complete high school, only 64 percent of persistently poor children do so. . . . This disadvantage can erode employment prospects and wages *throughout a lifetime*. (Ratcliffe; emphasis added)

A lack of educational opportunity in low-quality schools contributes to the vicious ‘school-home’ cycle that perpetuates and exacerbates the status quo—poor taxpayers, poor schools, and poor children who become poor taxpaying adults—thus explaining how poverty can become intergenerational.

The effects of the 'school-home cycle' are evident in the personal stories of Putnam's case studies, Chelsea and David. Chelsea's maternal grandfather was a "prominent lawyer"; her mother Wendy has a graduate degree and works in private practice as a special educator; her father Dick is "a sales manager for a major national corporation," a position that no doubt requires a particular level of education, expertise, and competence in the field (Putnam 857). In contrast, David's father is a high school dropout and "tried in vain to make a living as a truck driver, like his own father, but as an adult has been employed only episodically" (858-859). It is no coincidence that Chelsea and her brother both attend a Big Ten university, with their parents paying full tuition, while David lives on paychecks from temporary jobs just to survive (860-861). Educational opportunity and relative wealth are clearly linked across generational lines.

A sudden increase in public school funding in low-income areas may not raise test scores or eliminate the achievement gap that can exist between poor and wealthy students. Some insist that the real indicator of schools' success is not how much money they have to spend, but how the schools spend what they have, and that families have greater influence over their child's success than do schools (Turner et al. "More Money"). These alternative theories legitimize Putnam's emphasis on family unity and values in the development of a successful, well-balanced child. Nevertheless, if extra funding for schools is used properly (for example, funneled primarily to the most needy students) and is steadily increased annually, data shows that money does indeed make a difference in education (Turner et al. "More Money"). A working paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research supports this conclusion:

Event-study and instrumental variable models reveal that a 10 percent increase in per-pupil spending each year for all twelve years of public school leads to 0.27 more completed years of education, 7.25 percent higher wages, and a 3.67 percentage-point reduction in the annual incidence of adult poverty. . . . Exogenous spending increases were associated with sizable improvements in measured school quality. (Jackson et al. 2)

Thus, although more money is not a cure-all for failing public schools, research shows that needy schools and students would benefit significantly from more educational funding. Better quality schools will help to dismantle at least part of the cycle of poverty and give children the opportunity to improve their socioeconomic status as adults.

Putnam portrays the widening gap between the rich and the poor as an issue fueled by differences in social values and family traditions. But more disturbing and pressing is the fact that low-income people are increasingly unable to escape the cycle of poverty, even through the avenue of education. Putnam's focus on seemingly self-destructive social norms in impoverished communities is not misguided, but it warrants a more comprehensive discussion of the relationship between cyclical poverty and failing schools. Ehrenreich, Tirado, and researchers from a variety of institutions corroborate the conclusion that upward mobility is difficult to achieve today in the U.S.—and public schools in poor neighborhoods can often do little to change that. The title of Putnam's book, *Our Kids*, refers to tight-knit community ties that motivate people to view their neighbors' children as their own. However, as a result of harsh economic realities and the structure of local school districts, it is simply not enough for families within the same public school district and of the same socioeconomic status to care for one another. Instead, the 'our' in Putnam's title needs to apply more broadly to counties and states wherein the rich and poor live together and care for *one another's* children. Only then can society strengthen inter-community ties, expand educational opportunities, and improve social mobility.

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