

2015

Review of *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Robert D. Putnam, and *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America*. Andrew J. Cherlin. Reviewed by Edward U. Murphy

Edward Murphy
Michigan State University, murph367@msu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Murphy, Edward (2015) "Review of *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Robert D. Putnam, and *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America*. Andrew J. Cherlin. Reviewed by Edward U. Murphy," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 42: Iss. 4, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3943>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol42/iss4/11>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



factor in limited resistance. During the Great Recession and its aftermath, Unemployment Insurance increased five-fold and food stamps kept over 40 million people from hunger. A limping welfare state has added to acquiescence, just as Marx would have predicted.

As Fraser recognizes, there are some hopeful signs—like the organization of fast food workers aided by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Moreover, solidarity has indeed been evident in the movements on behalf of the LGBT community, even though economic inequality has not been the main thrust. And who knows where "Black Lives Matter" may lead? In any case, it's hard to predict what and when silent grievance may turn into organized resistance—despite the factors of acquiescence that Fraser has ably identified.

*Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg, Prof. Emerita,
Social Work and Social Policy, Adelphi University*

Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Simon and Schuster (2015), 386 pages, \$28.00 (hardcover), and Andrew J. Cherlin, *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America*. Russell Sage (2014), 272 pages, \$35.00 (paperback).

Robert Putnam and Andrew Cherlin, among the foremost social scientists in the United States, have produced new books that offer us much insight into the present American condition. The former's *Our Kids* examines in great detail the ways in which the promise of equal opportunity has been severely compromised over the past fifty years by multiple changes in American life. The latter's cleverly titled *Labor's Love Lost* traces the rise and decline of the working class family over the course of U.S. history. The two books focus on the profound consequences of increasing economic inequality on family life and children. Although both exhibit admirable scholarly rigor, they are written with different goals and audiences in mind. Putnam aims for a broad, nonacademic readership and clearly hopes to affect current political debates and public policy. Cherlin, by contrast, has produced a more narrowly

academic work that amounts to a fascinating social history of the American family.

In the 1990s, Putnam's article and subsequent book, both entitled *Bowling Alone*, highlighted the importance and changing character of social capital (social networks, social trust) in contemporary America, garnering enormous attention in the academic, political, policy, and foundation worlds. *Our Kids* tries to accomplish nothing less than to depict the failure of the American dream. His collaborator, Jennifer Silva, conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse assortment of families in communities across the U.S. The findings reveal profound and discouraging contrasts in the quality of children's lives and opportunities depending on their parents' income and education. They found profound class differences within Black, Hispanic, and White families. The rich ethnographic data exploring family life, parenting, schooling, and community are supplemented by a close review of relevant literature on how these factors affect children's futures. A eye-opening array of charts, tables, and graphs makes a single and devastating point: inequalities in, for example, time spent reading to children, family meals, etc. are much wider now, by parents' education, than fifty years ago. We know now that these parental efforts are crucial in influencing children's educational and social outcomes. Another startling contrast is how college-educated parents increasingly focus on instilling values of self-reliance in their children, whereas those with high school degrees or less stress obedience. The more affluent children will be, of course, better prepared for more lucrative, autonomous white-collar and professional jobs.

Putnam's findings echo the path-breaking work of Annette Lareau in *Unequal Childhoods* on the growing significance of class differences in family life and parenting styles. Moreover, chapters on schools and communities present similar "scissors" graphs depicting an ever-greater chasm of opportunity. For example, participation in extracurricular activities is important for successful college applications, but schools in poorer and middle-class neighborhoods have routinely reduced those programs in the face of limited budgets and high-stakes tests. In terms of social capital, the data indicate that, compared to lower-income families, affluent families maintain broader

"weak ties" in the community with local leaders, teachers, employers, and others. Their children, then, benefit not only from contacts useful for educational and occupational advancement but also from the deployment of "air bags," including financial resources, that can help them recover from bad choices or even run-ins with the law. These are opportunities that the children of economically struggling parents simply do not have, and the take-home message here is that these gaps are widening in today's America.

Cherlin, a sociologist, is perhaps the preeminent scholar of the American family. *Labor's Love Lost*, a meticulous account of the changing vicissitudes of working class family life, is based on his analysis of census records between 1880, when marriage data began to be recorded, and 2010. He finds, as we would expect, that the heyday of the married male-breadwinner working class family was from 1950-1973. Forty three percent and 51 percent of White and Black husbands with children at home, at their highest points, were employed in blue-collar occupations. Of course, this time was the peak of the American century, characterized by a robust manufacturing sector, strong unions, rising wages, and (in retrospect) relatively narrow levels of inequality. It has been downhill from there, and this is where his analysis becomes especially interesting.

For those without college education, three of the most notable developments since the mid-1970s have been falling wages and employment opportunities, declining rates of marriage, and rising percentages of births to unmarried parents. To what may we attribute these trends? Should we be worried about the effects on family life and children?

In his 2012 book *Coming Apart*, Charles Murray painted a bleak portrait of family life among White Americans. He blamed the disintegration of marriage in the White working class exclusively on cultural trends that, beginning with the expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s, undermined "traditional" values. Cherlin begs to differ, and *Labor's Love Lost* can be read as a considered response to *Coming Apart*. He offers convincing evidence, based on 130 years of census data, that marriage rates have indeed varied according to the ability of men to make a decent living. Affluent men have been consistently more likely to marry than their blue-collar brethren, but

the size of that gap closely tracks differences in earnings over time. In the Gilded Age of the late 1800s, the gap in marriage rates between affluent and working class men was large. At midcentury, it shrank significantly, as relative wages rose for working class men. In the New Gilded Age, the gap has surged again as blue collar fortunes have fallen. Although Black men do marry at lower rates than Whites, these trends apply to both. Cherlin acknowledges that culture does matter, but contends that explanations for the rise of non-marital childbearing that dismiss the importance of the worsening situation of working class families lack plausibility. In other words, marriage inequality and economic inequality go hand in hand.

Should we be concerned for the children? Putnam offers numerous stories of struggling children of working class and poor parents facing severe financial constraints, high stress at home, irregular or rigid work schedules, the lack of a reliable co-parent, residence in lower-income neighborhoods with poor schools, and many other challenges. The contrast between these children's lives and those of affluent families is heartbreaking. Cherlin does not provide such vivid detail, but his conclusions are entirely consistent with Putnam's. Children from marginally employed, disrupted, and single parent families face far greater obstacles to achieve economic security and fulfilling lives than do their better-off peers.

Deeply concerned about the worsening inequality in children's opportunity they have described in their books, Putnam's and Cherlin's concluding chapters are both called "What is to be done?" They offer thoughtful proposals to expand early childhood education, enhance parenting skills, develop stronger community-school links, strengthen community colleges, and so on. They are skeptical, based on the available evidence, of favorite conservative ideas such as charter schools and programs to promote marriage and relationship skills. Neither believes that we can return to the attitudes of the 1950s with respect to marriage and childbearing. Both ponder ways to persuade or assist young adults to delay pregnancy, with programs tied to labor market programs or based at community colleges.

The portrait of America painted by Putnam is deeply disturbing, yet he offers no convincing explanation of how we arrived at this sorry state of affairs. Jobs disappeared, wages

fell for the less educated, racial and class segregation worsened, political participation by the poor declined, and children suffered. His anodyne analysis of the causes of growing inequality leaves out politics, power, and policy dynamics. However, it clear that this is an intentional strategy to help *Our Kids* find a readership beyond the usual liberal and academic circles. He hopes that those who read it will be shocked into supporting the programmatic remedies he suggests. Compared with Putnam's, Cherlin's discussion of causal factors and policy solutions is more satisfying. In a careful nonpartisan tone, he considers the need for broader institutional and political changes that would rebalance the relationship between capital and labor in the United States.

With their powerful narratives and analytical insights into a widening chasm at the heart of the American family, both books are highly recommended to academic and nonacademic audiences alike.

*Edward U. Murphy, Department of Global Studies
& International Relations, Northeastern University*

Douglas S. Massey, Len Albright, Rebecca Casciano, Elizabeth Derickson & David N. Kinsey, *Climbing Mount Laurel: The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb*. Princeton University Press (2013), 288 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover).

Climbing Mount Laurel assesses the effects of the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes, an affordable housing development in Mount Laurel Township, New Jersey, on the lives of its residents and surrounding neighborhoods. The rental apartment complex was named after the lead plaintiff in the Mount Laurel case and is located in a White affluent suburb near the city of Camden; it opened in 2000 after three decades of historic litigation. In a series of lawsuits against Mount Laurel Township, the plaintiffs argued that the town's large lot, single-family zoning had systematically excluded low-income and minority residents from obtaining housing. The suits resulted in two ground breaking court rulings: in Mount Laurel I (1975), the