

The Isolation of Poverty

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In this section of the haggadah, we don't only invite the poor to share our food; we invite them to join our tables (כל דכפין ייתי ויכיל, כל דצריך ייתי ויפסח) , to break bread with us (literally, in Yachatz). Poverty is not only something that impacts the stomach. Robert Putnam, the author of the book Bowling Alone, argues in his new book Our Kids that poor kids lack the social networks that rich kids use to their advantage. In what ways does your community make you rich? For an additional, extended write-up of this, see The Washington Post's "The terrible loneliness of growing up poor in Robert Putnam's America"

NPR: 'Bowling Alone' Author Tackles The American Dream

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SIMON: Can you explain what you call the savvy gap in this day and age?

PUTNAM: Yeah. It's one of the things that we discovered when we talked to rich kids and poor kids around America, that we didn't expect - but kids, like my grandchildren and, like, you know, probably, like, your children or grandchildren, all across America have a lot of adults in their life that are reaching out to help them. They tell them about what it means to go to college.

SIMON: Yeah.

PUTNAM: They describe, you know, how you can get through high school properly and where you can find a fellowship and - the bottom line of all of the statistics in our study is that poor kids are increasingly isolated from everyone. They just don't have stable, responsible adults in their lives much of the time. And that means they're just really ignorant. Not because they're stupid, but because they don't have mentors and adult helpers that most of us had when we were growing up.

SIMON: I have to step in for a moment, professor. Did you mean to call poor people ignorant?

PUTNAM: What I meant to say was that they were unaware of the opportunities and challenges around them. They lack savvy. They don't lack IQ, they lack savvy.

SIMON: Does the Internet, this powerful force in our lives, level some of these gaps or irritate them?

PUTNAM: All kids nowadays, rich and poor, have smartphones and access to the Internet, and that you might think levels the playing field. But kids coming from well-off homes tend to use the Internet in ways that are helpful to their upward mobility. They learn about jobs, and they learn about schools and so on. And poor kids tend to use it really much more for just entertainment. So the Internet, in effect, kind of mirrors the disadvantages poor kids have in the real world.

SIMON: Wasn't the hope that good public schools would somehow level the playing field of opportunity and make upward mobility possible?

PUTNAM: Yes, historically that's been the role from the very beginning. That's less true in America now. Rich kids are mostly now going to school with other rich kids, and poor kids are going to school with other poor kids. And that is putting a wedge in the ability that the schools have to narrow that gap.

SIMON: I was startled by - to read the words of a young woman named Mary Sue in your book who says, I'll quote it, "Love gets you hurt, trust gets you killed."

PUTNAM: Yeah. In her experience, she can't trust other people. That's not paranoia, that's real experience. And this shows up in national data. We see nationally that poor kids are much less likely to trust anybody.