

Social Networks and Geography:
Comments on "How Does Geography Affect Equality of Opportunity"
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I benefitted enormously from both Patrick Sharkey's work and Nathan Hendren's work on geographic effects, and there is much consistency among our approaches. My own remarks should be heard as a commentary from Rip Van Winkle.

Fifty years ago this month I completed an early study of neighborhood effects on political behavior. It was extremely primitive by contemporary standards, as things like two-stage least squares and propensity matching had not yet been invented; and since this was before computers, all the regression analysis was done by hand by me, using IBM cards, a counter-sorter, and pencil and paper. But although the method was primitive, the results have stood up rather well.¹ The key question was deceptively simple: When someone moves from LA to Orange County, they are more likely to vote Republican when they get there. Their political behavior changes as a function of their neighborhood context. Why?

The literature offered several hypotheses beyond self-selection. Perhaps the majority party in the new area did a better job of turning people out, or perhaps people identified with their new community and felt they should conform to its norms. But the answer turned out to be different and simple: People are influenced by the political complexion of their community, *if and only if* they are embedded in social networks in that community. If you have a lot of local connections through local organizations, for example, then your vote is quite influenced by your context, but if you don't belong to any local networks, there's no correlation at all between where you live and how you vote. I don't argue that this result solves all of the questions before this panel, but I think it may help to frame our central question: "How does geography influence economic mobility?"

Sharkey, Hendren, and I are all interested in causal mechanisms. What is it about living in Neighborhood A as opposed to Neighborhood B that affects the likelihood that a child will be upwardly mobile or not? Of course, there are compositional effects, but we always try to control for those first. That's why Nathan Hendren pointed out that it's not just that children of single moms are affected by their family structure, but somehow living around single parent families has a depressing effect on mobility among other kids. In addition, as Patrick Sharkey said, physical amenities may help account for neighborhood effects. He talked about negative physical amenities like pollution, but the same could be said about playgrounds.

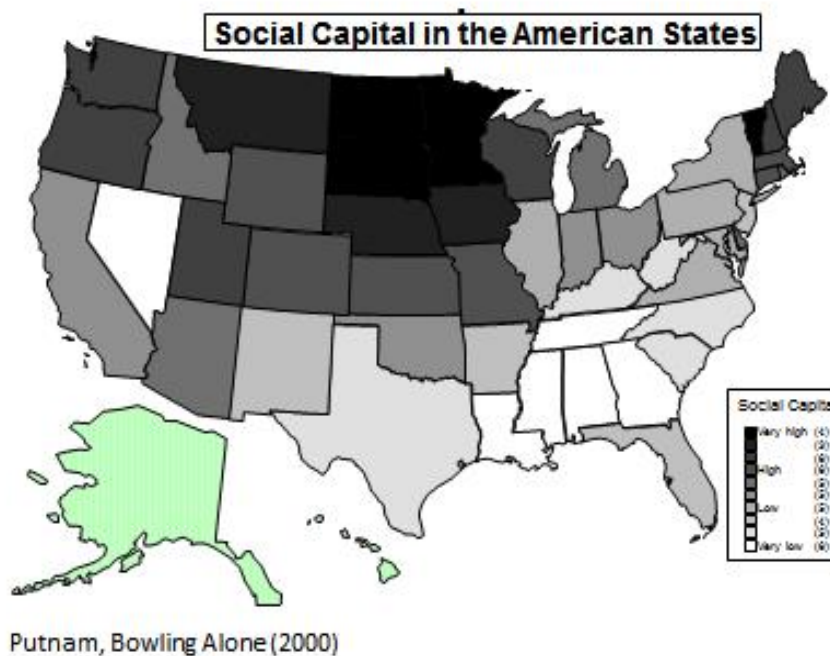
There could also be human capital externalities: living around well educated people might have an effect on kids. Or there might be institutional effects: perhaps some neighborhoods have more youth centers or better schools. Indeed it's my impression from the literature that most of the observed effects of

¹ "Political Attitudes and the Local Community," *American Political Science Review* LX (September 1966) pp. 640-654.

neighborhood context on strictly academic measures (like test scores) are related to school differences. That is, one reason that living in a particular neighborhood affects your likelihood of upward mobility is that better neighborhoods have better schools. And there may be other reasons. We all three agree that this is where we need much more work.

Here I want to emphasize the role of social networks in the neighborhood as a key transmitter of whatever it is that causes high or low mobility. Without even thinking about it, we often assume that propinquity is associated with social networks, that is, the closer you live to other people, the more likely you are to be connected to them. But while it's generally true that you are more likely to know someone who lives next to you than someone who lives on the other side of the world, it's certainly not always true. Indeed, the degree to which ones social networks are spatially concentrated varies by social class. For example, I have more friends in Oxford than I do in my census tract of Cambridge. The social networks of people in lower classes are more concentrated in their immediate spatial environment, and this turns out to be relevant to upward mobility.

But before turning to individual social networks, I want to consider the geographic distribution of what I have called "social capital," that is, the density of social and civic networks and the associated norms of reciprocity, trustworthiness, and trust. In *Bowling Alone* (published more than a decade ago), I developed a state-level composite index of social capital, based on measures of organizational density, how many friends people have, how often they go to meetings, how often they volunteer, how much they trust others, and so forth.²

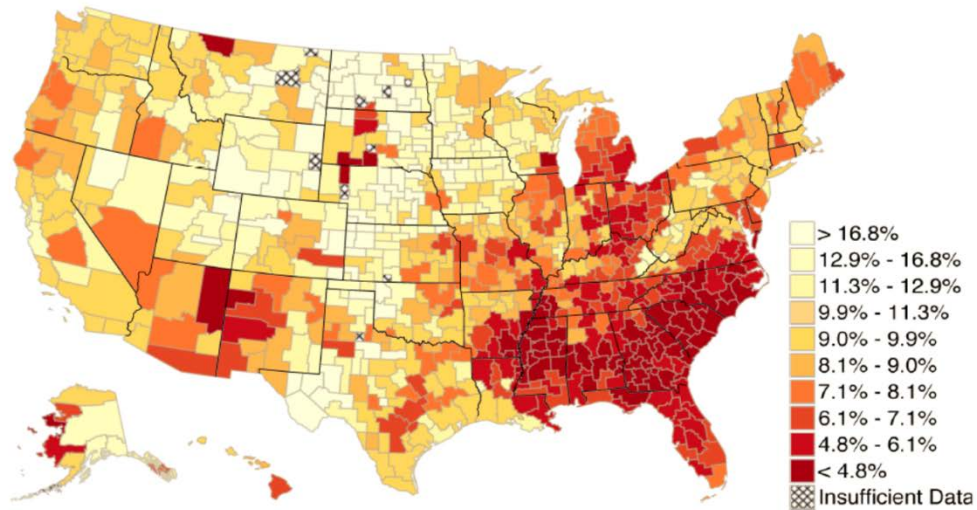


² *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), chap. 16.

Note: Darker color = more social capital

The Geography of Upward Mobility in the United States

Odds of Reaching the Top Fifth Starting from the Bottom Fifth



Note: Lighter Color = More Upward Mobility

If you compare my 2000 map of social capital with the 2014 map of social mobility from Chetty, Hendren, and their colleagues, you will see an uncanny resemblance. The Southeast that is very low in social mobility is also very low in social capital. The upper Midwest that is very high in upward mobility is also very high in social capital. This same correlation is true even at the level of particular cities. For example, one of the highest cities in measured social mobility is Salt Lake City, and it's also one of the very highest places in social capital in America. So I think that there's presumptive evidence that something about social connections is relevant to the problem of geographic effects on social mobility—that social networks or social capital may be a key mechanism through which these effects occur.

Let's distinguish, very crudely, between a few different combinations of propinquity and social networks, as outlined in the following chart. In the top left quadrant we have high propinquity and dense social networks; traditional, working-class neighborhoods illustrate this combination. Such neighborhoods are high in what Robert J. Sampson calls "collective efficacy"³, the degree to which people in the neighborhood cooperate with one another in deterring crime, cleaning up graffiti, and so on. This may even include "collective parenting," in which neighbors feel some responsible for other kids in the neighborhood. Researchers often find strong effects on crime, child welfare, and other facets of social life in neighborhoods that combine propinquity and social networks.

³ Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Propinquity and social networks

		Propinquity	
		Yes	No
Social networks	Yes	Traditional lower class neighborhood ties Neighborhoods with "collective efficacy"	Upper class weak ties Mentors, "Connections"
	No	Yonkers (Xav Briggs), Mixed income housing (Erin Graves) MTO	

However, in the lower left quadrant we find cases that have high propinquity but no social networks, and I suspect that such cases account for many of the null findings about neighborhood effects in the literature. Many mobility experiments (including MTO) fail to look closely at social networks in the receiving place, but when they do, the failure of the new neighborhood to produce effects is often attributable to the fact that the people who moved to the new neighborhood actually didn't connect with anybody there. As Xavier de Souza Briggs' study of the Yonkers experiment showed, the reason that opportunity didn't increase when families moved to Yonkers is that most of the kids, especially the boys, kept their friendship networks back at their original neighborhoods rather than joining social networks in Yonkers.⁴ In effect, although their residence had changed, their social networks were still in the old neighborhood. No neighborhood effect because no change in social networks.

Another illuminating study—coincidentally, by a researcher now on the staff of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Erin Graves—rested on an ethnographic account of a mixed income housing development in East Boston.⁵ This development housed affluent yuppies who worked in the financial district and paid market rates for their houses, and lived next door to welfare mothers who paid subsidized rental rates. (It's worth confessing that, back in the '90s under the Clinton Administration, I was one of those who said "Propinquity will work. Put people next to each other and they'll become friends." In retrospect, of course, that was nuts.) The yuppies had absolutely nothing in common with the welfare moms. What Erin Graves found while living there was that these people virtually never talked to one another. The idea that propinquity alone would produce social connections was, in retrospect, silly. I channel Erin when I say: it wasn't the hardware, it was the software. Only when there

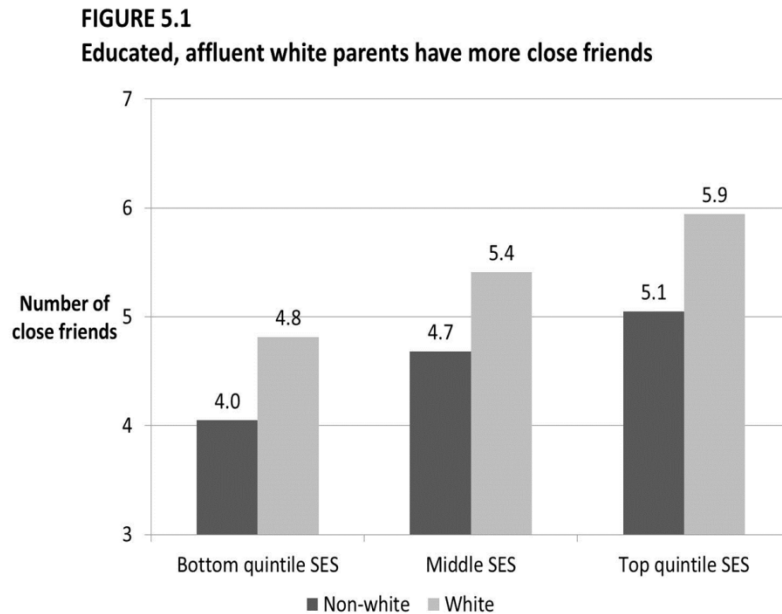
⁴ X. de Souza Briggs, "Brown Kids in White Suburbs: Housing Mobility and the Many Faces of Social Capital," *Housing Policy Debate* 9 (1998): 177-221.

⁵ Erin Graves, "The Structuring of Urban Life in a Mixed-Income Housing 'Community'," *City & Community* 9.1 (2010): 109-131.

were *programs* designed to integrate these two groups, there were some modest effects. (In fact, I believe there's also some evidence from the MTO data that it's social integration, not geographic location, that matters most.)

I conclude by examining the upper right hand quadrant: Social networks that are *not* primarily place-based. Not all important social networks are spatially determined. It's very important to recognize that, as I said before, many upper class parents have ties spread over a broader geographic area that are highly relevant to their kids' prospects. In that vein, I want to present five charts on class differences in the intensity of non-spatial social networks, to illustrate how non-spatial social networks might also be part of the mobility story.⁶

- First, educated, affluent white parents have more friends than poor non-white parents. There's a lot more to be said about that fact, why it's so, and what difference it makes, but it illustrates that the romantic view we sometimes hear that poor folks, white or non-white, have a comfortable network of close relations, is false. Being poor is socially isolating.

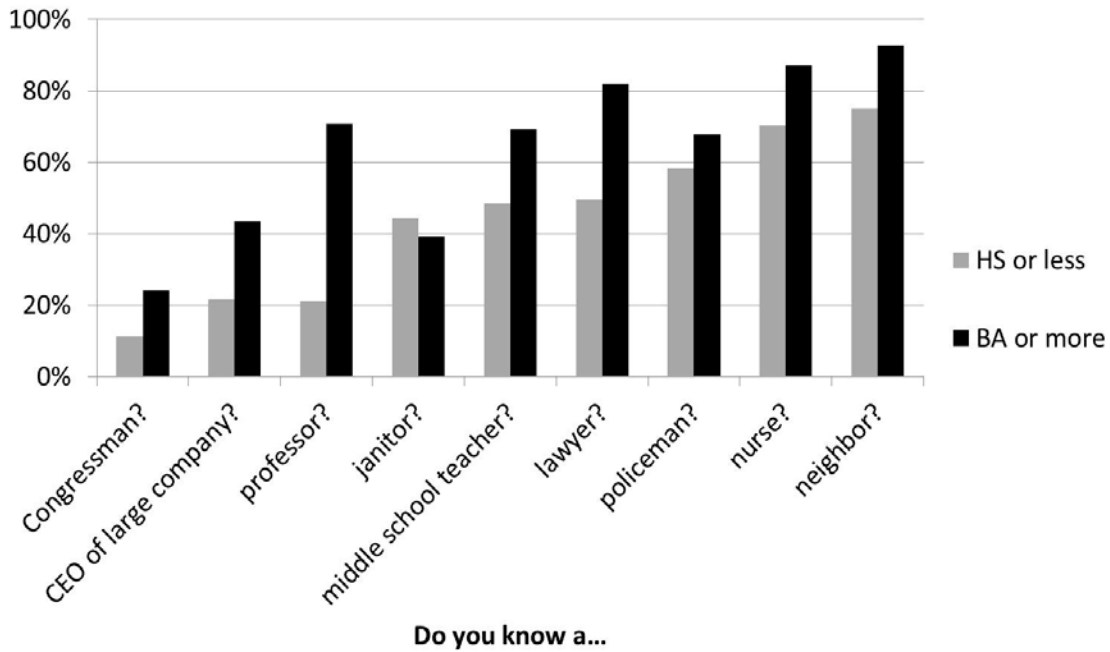


- Second, there are stark class differences in the degree to which parents have friends who can be helpful to their kids. (For simplicity's sake I term parents who have college degrees "rich" and parents who did not get past high school "poor."). Roughly twice as many rich parents as poor parents say they "know" a congressman, a CEO of a large company, or (even more starkly) a professor. Out of 30 different occupations, one of the very few in which poor people seem to have a modest edge is janitors, and even that modest edge is not statistically significant. Rich parents know more middle school teachers and lawyers and policemen and nurses and even neighbors. Note that this upper class edge in social connections is especially great for

⁶ These charts and the associated analyses are drawn from my *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

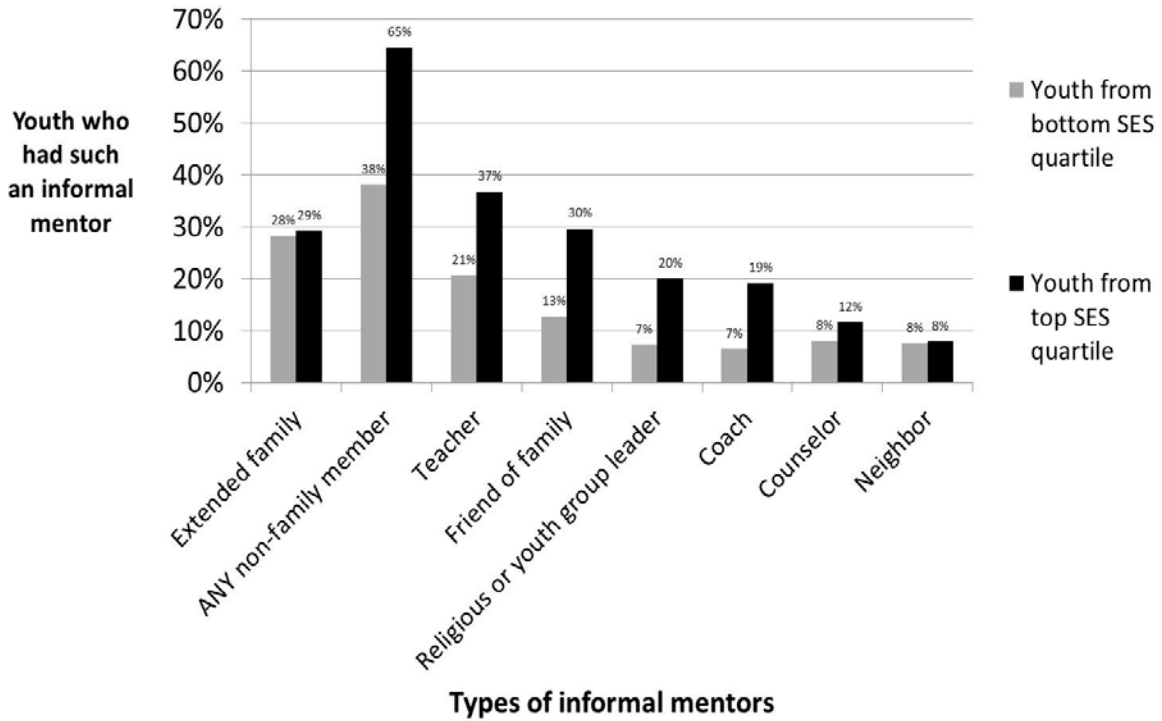
occupations that are relevant to kids doing well. This is just another way of saying that more educated people have a lot of social capital, especially in roles that are relevant to the fate of their kids.

FIGURE 5.2
More educated parents have broader social networks



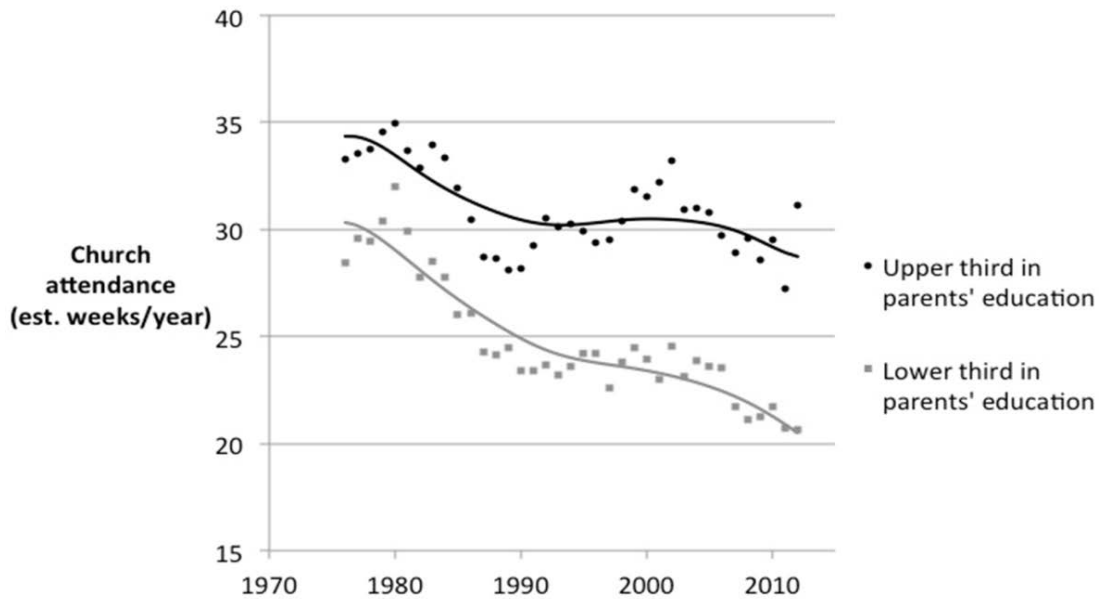
- Third, switching now to the point of view of the kids, a recent national study asked kids whether—apart from their parents or the adults who lived with them—“Are there any other people in your lives who have been helpful to you?” The survey distinguished between formal mentoring like Big Brother/Big Sister, and informal mentoring, that is, other “people in your life who have been helpful.” Of all mentoring relationships reported by these kids, 85% are informal, and only 15% are formal. Notably, in virtually every category except their extended family and neighbors, kids from the upper SES quartile are more than twice as likely to have a teacher, or a coach, or a religious leader as a mentor.

FIGURE 5.3
Affluent kids have a wider range of informal mentors



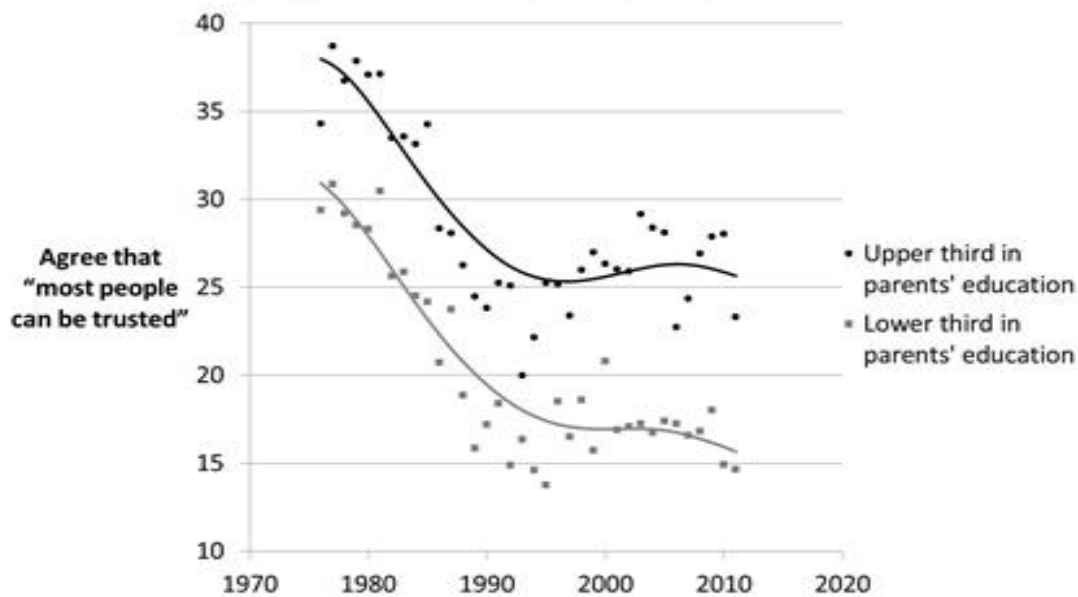
- Fourth, church attendance is another important indicator of whether a child is integrated into the community or not, and involvement in religious communities has been shown to have significant effects on mobility. Over the last 30 years, we can clearly see a growing class gap in church attendance among kids, and other research shows the same basic pattern for their parents. More generally, the degree to which rich kids have better access to high-value social capital and social networks than poor kids is growing over time.

FIGURE 5.7
Church attendance by parent's education, 12th graders, 1976-2012



- Finally, a measure of general social trust, tapping kids' impressions of the benevolence of their social environment, has fallen among all kids in America, but it's collapsing more rapidly for poor kids than for rich kids. In one sentence I'm going to summarize the overall conclusion of multifaceted research that I'm about to publish—poor kids in America are increasingly isolated from everybody. Compared to their more affluent counterparts, they have weaker ties with parents, teachers, mentors, churches, community organizations, neighbors, and even peers. That fact has powerful implications for social mobility.

FIGURE 5.5
Social trust, by parents' education, 12th graders, 1976-2011



In short, I've argued that the topic of this panel—geographic effects on mobility—is to a great extent a special case of a broader phenomenon: the effects of social ties on mobility. For more of the details, see my forthcoming book *Our Kids*. Here's why I entitled it *Our Kids*.

Fifty years ago, in my hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio, when my parents talked about “our kids”—when they said, for example, “we’ve got to pass a bond issue for a new school for our kids”—they did not mean my sister and me. By “our kids”, adults in Port Clinton meant all the kids in Port Clinton. People in town felt that all the kids in the community were worth working for and looking after. Over the last fifty years in America the meaning of “our” has shriveled. Nowadays, when you ask people “how are your kids doing?” you no longer mean all the kids in town; you mean “how are your biological kids doing?” So to my mind, the fundamental explanation for the growing opportunity gap in America is the decline in our concern for other people’s kids. Ironically, our own kids will pay a price for this transformation—but that is a story for a later panel.



OUR KIDS

The American Dream
in Crisis

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