

Hearing on the State of Social Capital in America

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Charles Murray
WH Brady Scholar
American Enterprise Institute

Members of the Committee have before them the excellent report, “What We Do Together,” from the Social Capital Project, and the presence of Robert Putnam, who knows more about American social capital than anyone else in the world. So what am I supposed to add?

I’ve decided to emphasize how complicated are the effects of the deterioration of social capital on human behavior. Statistics on the decline of marriage and of male labor force participation are important. But they tend to make the task of solving those problems sound too straightforward. Fewer people are getting married? Maybe that can be fixed, or at least ameliorated, by higher working-class wages so that people can more easily afford to get married. Males aren’t in the labor force? We need more and better job opportunities.

I am not saying such solutions would have *no* good effects. But the actual problems reach deeply into the ways that humans are socialized into institutions such as marriage and the labor force. A good way to get a grip on those actual problems is Prof. Putnam’s book, *Our Kids*. The heart of that book consists of five accounts of real people and real families in Atlanta; Philadelphia; Orange County, California; Big Bend, Oregon; and Port Clinton, Ohio. Those stories provide ammunition for Bernie Sanders and Charles Murray alike. We hear the voices of the unemployed whose manufacturing jobs were exported abroad—a real problem—and the voices of people who quit good jobs because they didn’t feel like working or who got fired because they showed up late, shirked their tasks, and got in fights with coworkers—another real problem. We hear stories of unmarried low-income parents who were fiercely devoted to their kids and of other parents who created children casually and walked away from them casually.

But if I had to pick one theme threaded throughout all of these superbly told stories, it is the many ways in which people behaved impulsively—throwing away real opportunities—and unrealistically, possessing great ambitions, but were oblivious to the steps required to get from point A to point B to point C to point D in life. The same theme appears in steroids in J. D. Vance’s best-selling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*. He describes an America that is still the land of opportunity; we know it is, because his parents and extended family squandered a prodigious number of opportunities. You read Vance’s account and keep saying to yourself, “Why are they behaving so self-destructively?”

It comes down to the age-old problem of getting people, especially young people, not to do things that are attractive in the short term but disastrous in the long term and, conversely, to do things that aren’t fun right now but that will open up rewards later in life. The problem is not confined to any socioeconomic class. The mental disorder known as adolescence afflicts rich and poor alike. And adolescence can extend a long time after people have left their teens. The most common way that the fortunate among us manage to get our priorities straight—or at least not irretrievably screw them up—is by being cocooned in the institutions that are the primary resources for generating social capital: a family consisting of married parents and active membership in a faith tradition.

I didn’t choose my phrasing lightly. I am not implying that single parents are incapable of filling this function—millions of them are striving heroically to do so—nor that children cannot grow up successfully if they don’t go to church. With regard to families, I am making an empirical statement: As a matter of statistical tendencies, biological children of married parents do much better on a wide variety of important life outcomes than children growing up in any other family structure, even after controlling for income, parental education, and ethnicity. With regard to religion, I am making an assertion about a resource that can lead people, adolescents and adults alike, to do the right thing even when the enticements to do the wrong thing are strong: a belief that God commands them to do the right thing. I am also invoking religion as a community of faith—a phrase that I borrow from, guess who, Robert Putnam. For its active members, a church is far more than a place where they go to worship once a week. It is a form of community that socializes the children growing up in it in all sorts of informal ways, just as a family socializes children.

This is not a preface to a set of policy recommendations. I have none. Rather, I would argue that it is not a matter of ideology but empiricism to conclude that, unless the traditional family and traditional communities of faith make a comeback, the declines in social capital that are already causing so much deterioration in our civic culture will continue and the problems will worsen. The solutions are unlikely to be political but cultural. We need a cultural Great Awakening akin to past religious Great Awakenings. How to bring about that needed cultural Great Awakening is a task above my pay grade.