

Reweaving the Social Fabric of America

By Susan Hill, Board Member and past President, Texas Neighborhoods Together

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Several months ago, I was searching the Internet, getting ready to write an outline for a workshop about neighborhood involvement. For years I have been preaching about know to increase voluntarism, and I know the suggestions I've made in the past have worked somewhat. But for all this time, I've been puzzled as to why it takes so much effort to get them to work. And why in the world it takes even more effort to keep the activity going. I ran across a reference on the web to a book called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. The blurb about the book was intriguing. "In this alarming and important study, Robert Putman charts the grievous deterioration over the past two generations of the organized ways in which people relate to one another and partake in civil life in the United States." Here possibly were the answers to my questions of why. So I ordered it and I started reading. It was an eye-opener.

Putnam got his title from the fact that in his research he discovered that people no longer join bowling leagues in the numbers that they used to – which to him was but one sign of our current lack of connection. You see, bowling is the most popular competitive sport in America. 91 million people bowled in 1996 – 25% more than the number of people who voted in the 1998 congressional elections! Unlike health clubs, tennis, golf, softball and other kinds of sports, bowling is strictly middle American, and it is common among men and women, you and old, couples and singles. 20-somethings have even taken it up with the new Rock-n-Bowl type venues. More people evidently are bowling now than ever before. Yet, bowling alleys are having problems staying afloat financially. Why? Because the bowling leagues – the organized regulars – are not there in the numbers they used to be, buying beer and pizzas and the other stuff that make the business profitable. While there are more individual bowlers and extempor-

neous groups enjoying the sport, the ole faithful are gone. Bowling has become a sport for drop-ins – just like many other activities in today's America.

Like the caged canary in the mine, Putnam saw what's happening to bowling as a sign that something's amiss. So he embarked on a research project, gathering data from huge numbers of sources. The result was *Bowling Alone*. In his book he attempts to lay out the causes of why public participation has tanked, centering on a concept called "social capital" – the connections or networks among individuals and groups and the norms that generate reciprocity and trustworthiness, which, taken all together, make it easier to coordinate and cooperate for mutual benefit.

Like the other forms of capital we usually think about – physical capital and human capital – social capital has value. The more you have, Putnam says, the better off you are.

Social capital makes us more productive and efficient. If we live in a community with lots of social capital, we produce more with less effort. If we live in one where there's little social capital, we produce less.

Social capital exists through networks of people who know people. Each of us uses individual social capital for the benefit of our own private interest by "networking," maintaining fat Rolodex files and address books, offering and taking a helping hand. In this way social capital acts as a "private good." However, social capital is also a public good because networks create value for the people in them as well as those outside them. For example, when neighbors watch each other's property, they act through individual self-interest. In doing so, they also lower crime, which then provides value to those outside the network. As Martha Stewart would say, that's a good thing.

Social capital lubricates trustworthiness,

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encourages reciprocity, and provides the basis for altruism and cooperation. If it's so good, then why does it seem to be declining? Putnam's exhaustive research yielded a list of "usual suspects":

- Women in the labor force, sapping voluntary organizations of their leadership
- Mobility
- Changing nature of the family – single parenthood, fewer children, more divorces
- Increasing pressure to work long hours and weekends
- Proliferation of suburbs and exurbs with car-focused culture and absence of community spaces where people can casually interact.

Surprisingly though, Putnam discovered that the usual suspects weren't really the main culprits in our loss of community participation. Indeed, he asserts that there are two strikingly predominant causes that account for a majority of the decline. First, television, which he calls the "death ray of civic life," has become our preferred form of social life. Second, an exceptionally civic generation of older Americans who came of age during World War II is slowing down and dying off. Far less civic-minded generations of Baby Boomers and Baby Busters are taking their place.

Our deficit in social capital is getting worse, Putnam says, and it is a very big deal that deserves our attention. Without it, we will lose these very important benefits.

Social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily. It provides a solution to the dilemma of collective action. Supporting government by paying taxes is a dilemma of collective action. So is limiting lawn sprinklers during droughts. Social capital proves norms and networks with the power to ensure compliance with desirable behavior.

Social capital greases the wheels. When people trust and are trustworthy, everyday business and social transactions are less costly.

People whose lives are rich with social connections cope better with traumas and fight illness better. As a rule of thumb, if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year by 50% — roughly the same benefit if you decided to quit smoking or lose weight.

Neighborhoods with high levels of social capital tend to be good places to raise kids. Public spaces are cleaner, people are friend-

lier, streets are safer. The effects of poor social capital on neighborhoods life are not limited to poor inner city or minority communities. It happens in suburbia too — witness the Columbine killings.

What do we do about turning the social capital decline around? We as individuals must change and the organizations we are affiliated with must change too. We need to look at everything we do through a "social capital lens." That is, we must consider our choices and decisions on the basis of whether or not they contribute to creating and sustaining social capital. When we use social capital, we don't use it up. We generate more. That means our neighborhood groups must organize more community activities that involve person-to-person face time. We must find ways to bring people together for any reason at all. Any and every excuse will do.

President George Bush said in state of union address this year: "*After America was attacked on September 11, it was as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves. We were reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, and to history. We began to think less of the goods we can accumulate, and more about the good we can do. For too long our culture has said, 'If it feels good, do it.' Now America is embracing a new ethic and new creed: 'Let's roll.' In the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters, and the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens, we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self. We've been offered a unique opportunity, and we must not let this moment pass.*"

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