

Growing Class Gaps in Social Connectedness among American Youth, 1975-2009*

Robert D. Putnam
Carl B. Frederick
Kaisa Snellman

Harvard Kennedy School of Government
The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America

July 12, 2012

NOT TO BE REPRODUCED. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Direct correspondence to: robert_putnam@hks.harvard.edu,
carl_frederick@hks.harvard.edu, and kaisa_snellman@hks.harvard.edu.

*We owe a debt of gratitude to Kelly A. Musick for her help with the NSFG data and to our research collaborators Evrim Altintas, Tom Sander, and Matt Wright for the helpful feedback that they provided. We would also like to thank the Spencer Foundation for generously supporting this research. A version of this paper was presented at the Income, Inequality, and Educational Success: New Evidence about Socioeconomic Status and Educational Outcomes conference at Stanford University, May 15-16, 2012.

Executive Summary

This report presents evidence of a growing youth class gap over the last three decades in various precursors of life success. Youth from upper/middle class backgrounds show steady or rising involvement in a wide range of institutions, including family, school, church, and voluntary associations while youth from working class backgrounds are increasingly more disconnected from society and these important institutions. The report brings together findings from several studies conducted by the Saguaro Seminar research team. We analyze four longitudinal national datasets: the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the American Heritage Time Use Study (AHTUS), Monitoring the Future (MtF), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal cohort studies.

We take a handful of examples among a score of measures that show a growing class gap since the early 1990s:

- Young children of college educated mothers spend increasingly more time with their parents compared to children with high school educated mothers
- Upper/middle class adolescents report increasing engagement in extracurricular activities including sports and academic clubs, whereas working class adolescents report either steady or declining participation rates.
- Upper/middle class adolescents report steadily increasing church attendance, whereas working class adolescents report steadily decreasing church attendance.
- Upper/middle class adolescents increasingly volunteer and are active in community life, whereas working class adolescents report constant levels of civic involvement.
- Upper/middle class adolescents express increasing levels of social trust, whereas working class adolescents's trust in others has remained low.

These growing gaps in “soft skills” are accompanied by growing class gaps in cognitive skills. Recent research shows that the class gap in reading and math test scores has grown since the mid-1970s. And it is social class rather than race that matters. The income-achievement gap is now more than twice as large as the black-white achievement gap (Reardon, 2011).

Why does this matter?

The very factors (civic and social engagement, social trust, time spent with parents, and academic achievement) in which the youth class divergence is greatest strongly predict life success. Upper/middle class youth have always had an advantage, but their relative advantage has increased significantly over

the last 30 years. Family background is now more predictive of social capital and civic engagement than before. Thus, these data belie the American ideal of meritocracy and instead presage an America heading towards a caste system where social standing and community involvement are inherited from generation to generation, a country cleaved along class lines.

Introduction

Over the past three or four decades, the economic distance between the top and the bottom rungs of the United States has been growing steadily (Piketty and Saez, 2003). The Occupy Wall Street movement brought these increasing income differences between the top and the bottom into the spotlight but confounded inequality with social mobility and opportunity. Although Americans are generally not troubled by income disparities, most people care a lot about social mobility: whether youth from different backgrounds get onto the ladder at similar places and, given merit and energy, are equally likely to scale it.

Historically, America coupled greater inequality of income with greater social mobility. But our lead on mobility has vanished, amidst growing inequality (Levine and Mazumder, 2007). Our big question is whether the moral underpinning of American economic success prevails: do talented, hardworking kids have the opportunity to thrive regardless of their class origins? The goal of this report is to identify trends in the inequality of opportunity over the past five decades. More specifically, we explore class inequality in time spent with parents among young children and in extracurricular participation rates, volunteering, and social trust among high school students. The report brings together findings from a series of four studies conducted by the Saguario research team analyzing data from four longitudinal national datasets: the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the American Heritage Time Use Study (AHTUS), Monitoring the Future (MtF), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal cohort studies.

We find growing class gaps across multiple measures of social and civic connectedness. Over the past three decades, American kids from upper/middle class and working class family backgrounds have sharply diverged on factors that predict life success, including parental investment, social and civic engagement, and preparation for higher education. Whether we measure parents reading *Good Night Moon*, or kids attending church, taking part in scouting or Little League, playing high school football or soccer, participating in the school orchestra or other extracurricular activities, socializing with peers, or trusting other people, the differences between kids from upper/middle class backgrounds those from lower or working class backgrounds are steadily increasing. These trends coincide with growing class gaps in math and reading tests (Reardon, 2011), college admission (Alon, 2009), and college graduation (Bailey and Dynarski, 2011).

On some indicators that we examine, the trend for upper middle class youth is increasing while the trend for working class youth is decreasing. On others, trends for both groups may be increasing and on yet others, one the trend for one group remains constant while it changes for the other. In each case, the relative difference, or class gap, in the experiences of upper/middle and lower class youth is growing. We focus on the size of the class gap, rather than the slope of the individual trend lines, because we are interested in the consequences of these trends for levels of social mobility. There are only so

many seats available in competitive colleges and university, thus, it is one's performance relative to their peers that matters in determining who has access to these scarce resources. From this point of view, the fact that working class youth may be holding steady or making modest progress is inconsequential if upper/middle class youth are pulling even further ahead.

These sobering trends suggest that working class children will be significantly less likely to climb this ladder than a generation ago. Adolescents of the 1990s and 2000s are yet to show up in standard studies of intergenerational mobility but the fact that working class youth are relatively more disconnected from social institutions, and increasingly so, suggests that mobility is poised to plunge dramatically. Working class children spend less time with their parents and are much less likely to participate in sports, take music lessons, join student clubs, volunteer, and attend religious services than their upper/middle class peers. Given that these factors predict important outcomes such as income, educational attainment and civic and political participation later in life, the result of current gaps might be an even more polarized and unequal society, where children from upper/middle class families become more socially and civically engaged while working class children become increasingly more disconnected and disengaged (Janoski et al., 1998; McFarland and Thomas, 2006; Cunha and Heckman, 2008; Kuhn and Weinberger, 2005). Moreover, if class increasingly predicts participation in activities that in turn predict educational attainment and future income, what we might be describing is a vicious cycle that shapes patterns of intergenerational mobility.

The next section of the report briefly discusses data used in our analyses. Then we turn to our findings on class gaps in social connectedness. We examine trends in family structure and time parents spend with their young children. We then examine trends in involvement in school clubs and sports teams, and map out class differences in taking on leadership position in such activities. We next analyze class differences in church attendance and volunteering. The findings section concludes with an analysis of trends in generalized trust.

Data

The findings discussed below come from our analyses of four longitudinal nationally representative studies: the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the American Heritage Time Use Study (AHTUS), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal cohort studies; and the Monitoring the Future (MtF) survey.

The NSFG is designed and administered by the National Center for Health Statistics, an agency of the US Department of Health and Human Services. The survey has been conducted 7 times since 1973. We use data from 1995, 2002, and the 2006-2010 surveys, which gives us a nationally representative sample of women aged 15-44 for those years. The purpose of the survey is to produce national estimates of factors affecting pregnancy, including sexual

activity, contraceptive use, and infertility; the medical care associated with contraception, infertility, and childbirth; factors affecting marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and adoption; adoption and caring for non-biological children; father involvement behaviors; and men's and women's attitudes about sex, childbearing, and marriage.

The AHTUS data are comprised of a series of time-use surveys conducted intermittently between the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s and annually since 2003. Respondents record all of their activities over a 24 hour period and these data are then categorized by trained coders into 17 major activity types. This research design provides the most accurate and reliable information on time-use patterns.

The NCES high school cohort studies began with the high school class of 1972 and is currently surveying students who were 9th graders in 2009.¹ Each cohort study collects information from school administrators and parents in addition to the students to provide a rich set of data on many aspects of the students' lives. These data include information on their attitudes and experiences in high school as well as important downstream outcomes such as labor market experiences and postsecondary education enrollment and attainment.

MtF is an annual survey conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. The study is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and is one of the core studies used by the federal government to track drug, alcohol, and cigarette use among adolescents. The questionnaires also deal with a wide range of other subject areas, including attitudes about government, social institutions, race relations, changing roles for women, educational aspirations, occupational aims, and marital and family plans, as well as a variety of background and demographic factors. MtF began surveying 12th graders annually in 1975. Like the NCES studies, MtF first selects a representative sample of schools and within those schools, a representative sample of students.

In this paper, including our charts, dating is drawn from the surveys on which we draw, mostly of successive cohorts of adolescents. Thus, when we note that the class divergence began to be visible in the early 1990s, we are, in effect, referring to the birth cohorts of the late 1970s.

Measuring social class

Because of differences in questions asked and sampling design, our measures of social class vary slightly across the three surveys. Each survey contains the highest level of education completed by at least one parent. The NCES surveys also include information about household income and the occupation of one or both adults in the household. In our analyses, we compare trends between upper/middle class and working class youth. In each figure, the working class youth are represented with the red line and the upper/middle class youth are represented with the black line. The precise definitions of working class and upper/middle class youth in each survey are:

NSFG & AHTUS:

We use the absolute level of mother's education as the measure of social class in these data. *Working Class* mothers are those with a high school diploma/GED or less education and *Upper/middle Class* mothers are those with at least a four-year college degree.

NCES:

We separate the sample into four equal parts based on socioeconomic status (SES) scores. SES is an equally weighted combination of mother's education, father's education, mother's occupation, father's occupation, and household income. *Working Class* youth come from the lowest 25 percent of the SES distribution and *Upper/middle Class* youth come from the highest 25 percent of the SES distribution.

MtF:

We divide the sample into three equal parts based on the average of both parent's level of education (or the education level of the single parent). *Working Class* youth are children from the bottom 33 percent of the education distribution and *Upper/middle Class* youth are children from the top 33 percent of the distribution.

The results we present are based on the best measure of social class available in each survey. The consistent pattern of growing class gaps remains if we were to use the same measure of social class (children of parents with at most a high school diploma compared to children of parents with at least a four-year college degree) for every survey. Similarly, our finding of growing divergence among children from different SES backgrounds does not depend in any way upon our choices of "cut-points" in our indicators of class.

Although there are important race-ethnic differences with respect to each of these measures of social connectedness, the *divergence* common across these measures, and more, is fundamentally about class, not race. The most dramatic evidence in this regard shows that the black-white test score gap was about twice the size of the class gap for the cohort of children born in the 1940s, but the most recent evidence is that the class gap is now about twice as large as the black-white gap (Reardon, 2011). To emphasize our point that these changes are driven by class and not race, we restrict our analyses to samples that only include white youth.

The figures present the unadjusted class gaps in social connectedness, except for the childcare time graphs which show the predicted minutes of childcare net of the number of children under 18 in the household, employment and marital status of the diarist, employment status of spouse, age of youngest child and diary completion day. The growing, unadjusted class gaps shown for church attendance, volunteering and generalized trust remain after controlling for gender, region, urbanicity, mother's employment and family structure

(Wright and Putnam, 2011). Supplemental analyses (available from the authors) indicate that the class gaps in extracurricular participation are robust to controlling for the effects of gender, region of the country, and urbanicity. In exploring these trends we are interested in potential interactions between class on the one hand and gender, race, region, and urbanicity, on the other. For example, is the growing class gap concentrated among men or whites or southerners or urbanites? So far we have discovered no strong and consistent interactions across the range of our dependent variables, but we continue to explore this issue.

Our analysis of high school students use data collected when students were in the 12th grade in order to maintain comparability across the two surveys.² The exception is the trend on living with a single parent which is taken from the NCES 10th grade cohort (and 9th grade in the most recent cohort study) because this is when the family structure information was collected from the parents.³

Working Class Families Fail to Keep Up

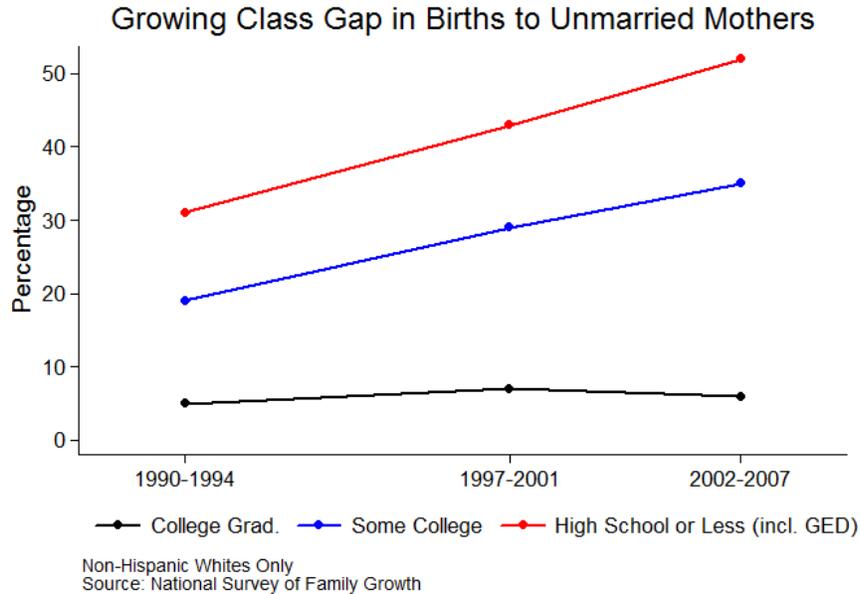
Family structure

Family is the primary institution shaping children's life chances and their ability to move up the income ladder (Massey, 2007; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). Children who grow up in single mother households report poorer grades and test scores, and are less likely to graduate from high school and to attend college. Their family lives are less stable and more stressful, and as a consequence, they are more likely to suffer from behavioral and psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004; Amato, 2005). Moreover, the absence of a biological father is associated with becoming sexually active and having children at a younger age.

In the past four decades, the composition of American families has shifted dramatically. Between 1960 and 2000, the percentage of single mothers tripled, from 8 percent to 24 percent. The increase in nonmarital births was even more pronounced. In 2000, almost 20 percent of births were to unmarried women, up from less than 5 percent in 1960 (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008).

This steep increase in nonmarital births has been the greatest among children in the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Figure 1 shows this trend by socioeconomic class. In 1990-1994, about 5 percent of the births to mothers with at least a four-year college degree occurred outside marriage, versus 30 percent to mothers with a high school education. In 2002-2007, the proportion of nonmarital births to mothers with a college degree remained at 5 percent but the proportion of nonmarital births to less educated mothers rose above 50 percent. Now, children of mothers with at most a high school education are 10 times more likely to be born outside of marriage than children of college

Figure 1: Percentage of Births to Unmarried Mothers by Class



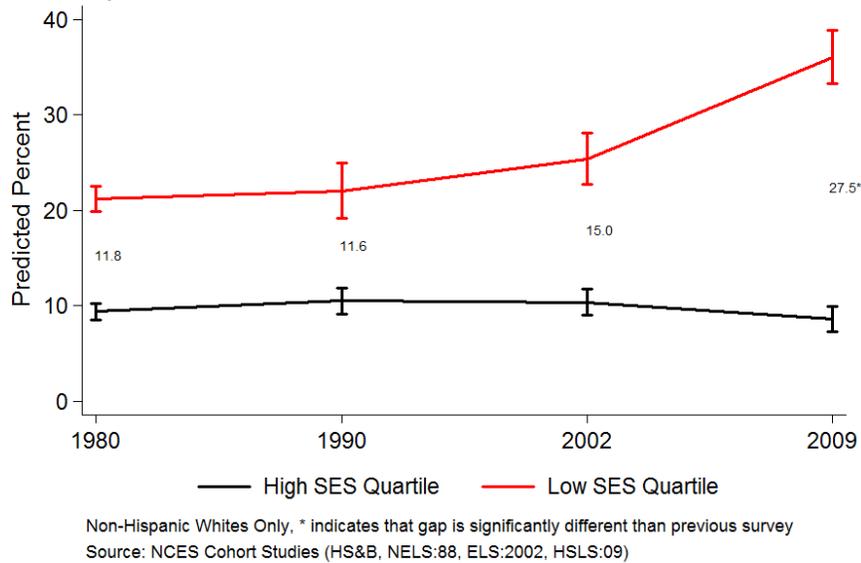
graduates, and majority of all kids born to less-educated mothers are born out of wedlock.

An increasing fraction of the most recent cohorts have begun life without the benefit of married parents, but the trends in nonmarital births alone do not tell us what happens after the children are born. Figure 2 runs the clock forward fifteen years and shows the percentage of high school sophomores who currently live with a single parent. The numbers do not look much better. The percentage of high school students from high SES families living with a single parent has remained stable since 1980, if not slightly decreased. Low SES high school students, on the other hand, are *increasingly* more likely to reside in single parent households; an increase from 20 percent in 1990 to about 35 percent in 2009.

Note that the births in figure 1 correspond to high school cohorts roughly 15 years later in figure 2, so most of the growing gap in figure 1 has not yet begun to appear in figure 2, for kids born in 2002-2007 will not appear in sophomore classes until roughly 2017-2022. Conversely, the sharply greater class gap at the right hand side of figure 2 corresponds to births at the left hand half of figure 1.

A lot may be happening in the intervening decade and a half between figures 1 and 2, but the evidence suggests that, on average, high SES children are less likely to live with single parents than low SES children at any given time and this gap is clearly growing over time. Moreover, if the disadvantages of growing up in a single parent household accumulate over a child's development, the gaps that exist at a single time point may underestimate of the true class gaps attributable to class differences in family structure.

Figure 2: Percentage of High School Sophomores Currently Living with a Single Parent by Class



Time with parents

The importance of families for socialization does not stop with the composition of the household roster. A child living with two parents who sit her in front of the television all day may be worse off than that same child would be if she lived with a single mother who limited TV time and spent an hour and a half reading to her every night. Figure 3 addresses this point by showing the amount of developmental childcare received by the average child of mothers with at least a four year college degree compared to the average child of mothers with no more than a high school diploma over time. Each bar combines information about the minutes per day mothers and resident fathers spend with their children as well as the likelihood that the child has a resident father.

The dark gray portion of the bars show the time that the average child spends with his or her mother and the light gray portion shows the time with his or her father. Mothers are spending more time with their children now than they were in the mid-1970s, but this increase is much larger among children of mothers with college degrees. Adding in the additional time the average child spends with their father exacerbates the gap even further. What was a slight advantage (about 4 minutes) for children of high school educated mothers in the mid-1970s becomes a 50 minute gap favoring children of mothers with a college degree in the second half of the 2000s. Middle class children receive almost one hour more time of direct involvement with their parents each day.

This gap in developmental time begins to show up in data from the 1990s and grows even larger in the 2000s, see Figure 4. Developmental time includes

Figure 3: Average Developmental Time Spent with Parents by Class

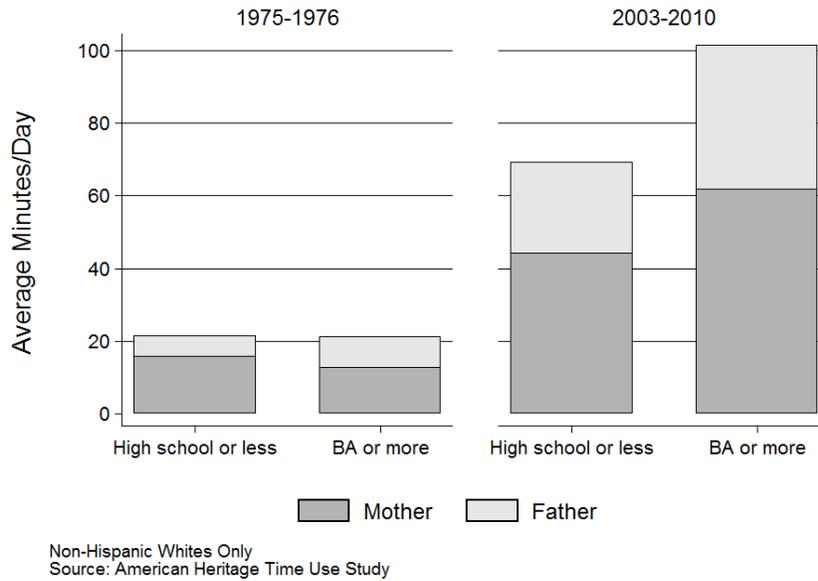
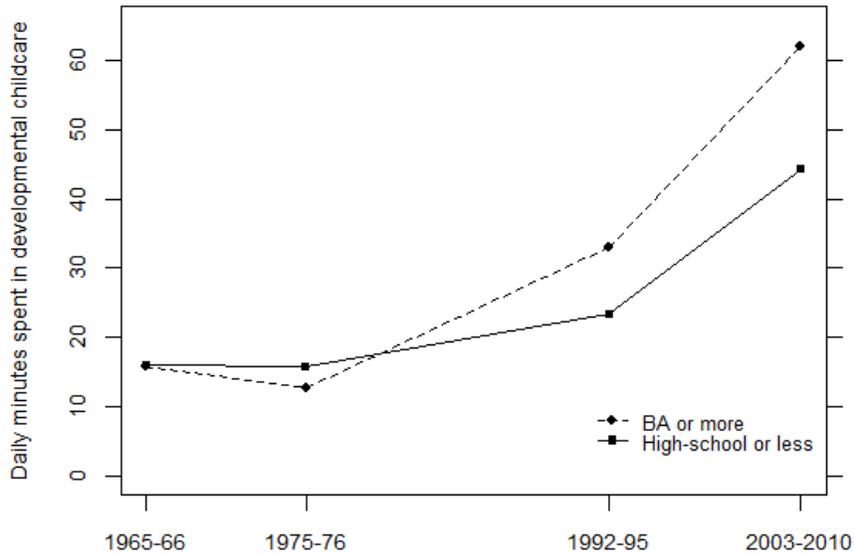
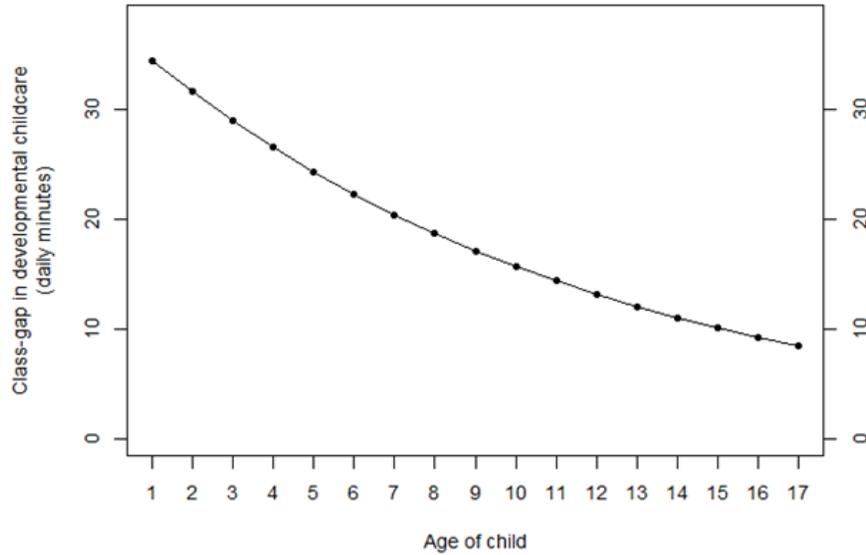


Figure 4: Average Daily Minutes of Developmental Time with Mothers by Mother's Education



Source: Altintas (2012) Note: Weights are applied to represent the population distribution accurately and to correct for distribution of the days of the week.

Figure 5: Class difference in developmental childcare by age of child, 2003-2010



Source: Altintas (2012) Note: Sample limited to non-Hispanic white mothers only in AHTUS (2003-2010) . Mother is not employed, married to an employed spouse, and has one child. The model controls for the number of children under 18, number of children under 18 squared, employment, respondent’s marital status, employment status of spouse, age of youngest child and diary completion day.

time spent in activities that develop children’s social, cognitive or linguistic skills (Altintas, 2012; Sayer et al., 2004).⁴ Examples of such activities include reading to children, playing with them, taking them to soccer practice or ballet, and going to the library for story time.⁵ Scholars attribute the rise in developmental childcare to growing societal recognition of the importance of one-on-one parental engagement for cognitive development (Hays, 1996; Schaub, 2010; Sayer et al., 2004).

Figure 5 plots the class gap in predicted developmental childcare of mothers by the age of the child. The good news is that the class gap in maternal time shrinks as the child ages. The bad news is that given the importance of parental investments in early childhood for cognitive development, the gap in developmental care by social class is likely to affect children’s educational trajectories long after these early years (Cunha and Heckman, 2008). As the children age, parental care is increasingly replaced by out-of-home developmental activities. Middle class parents supplement time spent directly with children with high-quality childcare for pre-school children and extracurricular activities for school-aged children (Kaushal et al., 2011). And as this report shows, as the children reach adolescence, inequalities in parental time investment are replaced by inequalities in participation in extracurricular activities, such as school clubs and sport teams.

For all these reasons, the growing class gap in parental developmental time is likely to be an underestimate. Middle class mothers tend to divorce less, marry at later ages, and have fewer children. Middle class children are more likely to live in safer neighborhoods and attend better schools with more resources. Moreover, highly-educated women are more likely to marry highly-educated men. Thus, the maternal and paternal class advantages are often compounded.

Extracurricular Participation Rates are Headed in Opposite Directions

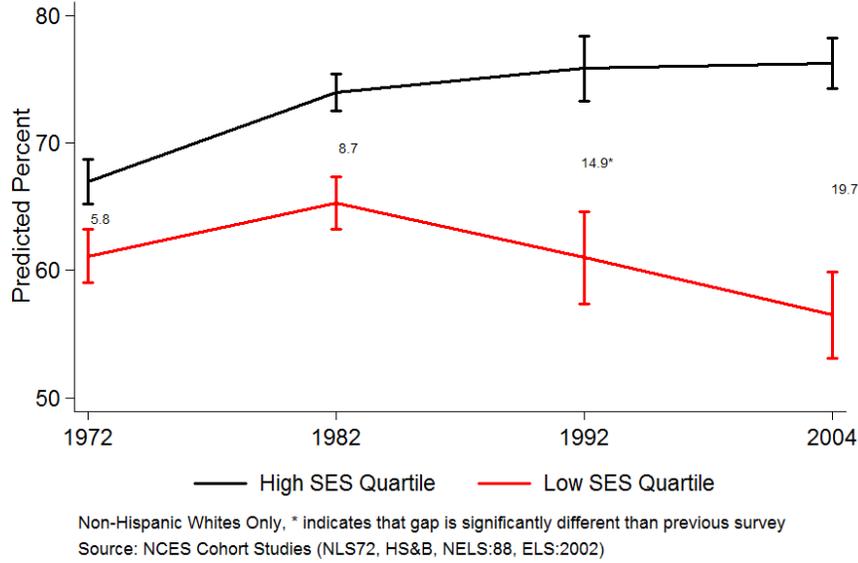
Involvement in extracurricular activities in high school shapes the lives of adolescents in many important ways. Participation in chess clubs, debate teams, school bands, and student councils bolster self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, boost high school grade point average, and shape educational aspirations and attainment (Lamborn et al., 1992; Newmann et al., 1992; Eccles and Barber, 1999). The effects of participation on political participation occur not just in the short term, but also in the long term. Involvement in high school extracurricular activities is associated with adult educational attainment (Eccles and Barber, 1999; Lleras, 2008) and income (Lleras, 2008). It also stimulates political and civic engagement in adulthood and is predictive of mental and physical health (Hart et al., 2007; McFarland and Thomas, 2006; Nie et al., 1996; Putnam, 2000).

Clubs

Participation in non-athletic extracurricular activities, or clubs for short, in high school cultivates leadership and negotiation skills, bolsters self-esteem, and increases educational aspirations. Figure 6 shows the gap in participating in one or more school sponsored, non-athletic extracurricular activity in 12th grade. The upper/middle class line trends steadily upward toward a plateau at about 75 percent. Working class participation increases between the first two cohorts but drops off after that to about 55 percent in 2004.

This general pattern of participation by social class holds when we focus on individual categories of extracurricular activities. The two exceptions are student government, where upper/middle class participation has decreased and working class participation is flat but at a lower level, and vocational clubs, where working class participation has decreased steadily and upper/middle class participation has remained constant at a lower level.

Figure 6: Participation in One or More Extracurricular Activities (excluding sports) in 12th Grade



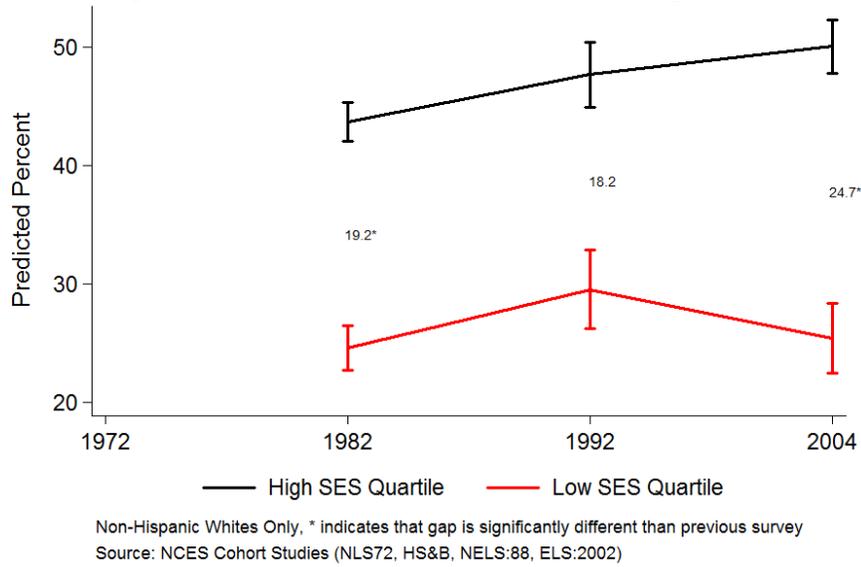
Sports

Participation in interscholastic athletics is theorized to teach perseverance and a strong work ethic and increase the level of social capital available to student athletes through coaches, teachers and academically oriented peers (Broh, 2002). Team sports also teach students how to work together to achieve a common goal. Unsurprisingly, student athletes also have higher test scores (Broh, 2002), lower dropout rates (McNeal, 1995), and higher rates of college enrollment and completion (Marsh and Kleitman, 2003; Troutman and Dufur, 2007). The trend lines for participation in at least one team or individual interscholastic sport are shown in Figure 7. Again, the participation rate of upper/middle class youth increases from about 44 to near 50 percent between 1982 and 2004. While the participation rates of working class youth were lower, they kept pace with the upper/middle class youth between 1982 and 1992. By 2004, the working class participation rate dropped back to its 1982 level of just less than 25 percent.

Leadership

The benefits of extracurricular participation are magnified for students taking on a leadership role. Team captains and club leaders are more likely to occupy managerial occupations as adults, and command a higher wage premium within managerial occupations than elsewhere (Kuhn and Weinberger, 2005). Figure 8 shows the class gap in 12th graders who report being team captains. Again, upper/middle class youth show increasing participation over time: the proportion of upper/middle class youth who are team captains almost doubles

Figure 7: Participation in One or More Interscholastic Sports in 12th Grade



from 13 percent in 1972 to 25 percent in 2004. The decrease in the percentage of working class team captains is not as dire as it is in either sports or club participation, but the class gap has grown dramatically.

Youth Church Attendance Drops More Among Working Class

Like schools, religious congregations act as a bridge between families and society, at least for those who belong to one. Also like schools, participating in a religious community offers benefits beyond those associated with other sorts of formal organizational membership. The social connections formed in religious communities appear to foster additional, secular social connections. These include doing volunteer work for a charity and informal social connections such as helping others around their houses, helping someone find a job and offering their seat to a stranger (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Frequent churchgoers are also more likely to learn civic skills (Verba et al., 1995), engage in higher levels of healthy behaviors and lower levels of risky behaviors (Regnarus et al., 2003), and experience more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions on a daily basis (Lim, 2012).

Figure 9 shows the trend in the approximate times per year that high school seniors report attending religious services (hereafter shortened to church attendance).⁶ At the beginning of the period, the class gap in church attendance was small, about three times per year. Churchgoing among upper/middle class high school seniors showed a modest drop from 34 times per year to around 30 times per year during the 1980s and has leveled off since. The drop in church

Figure 8: Percentage of 12th Graders Who are Team Captains

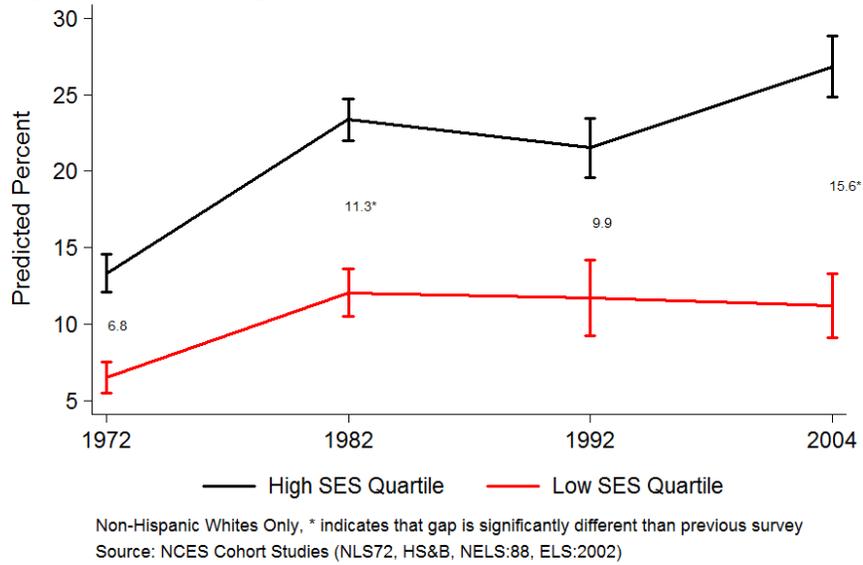
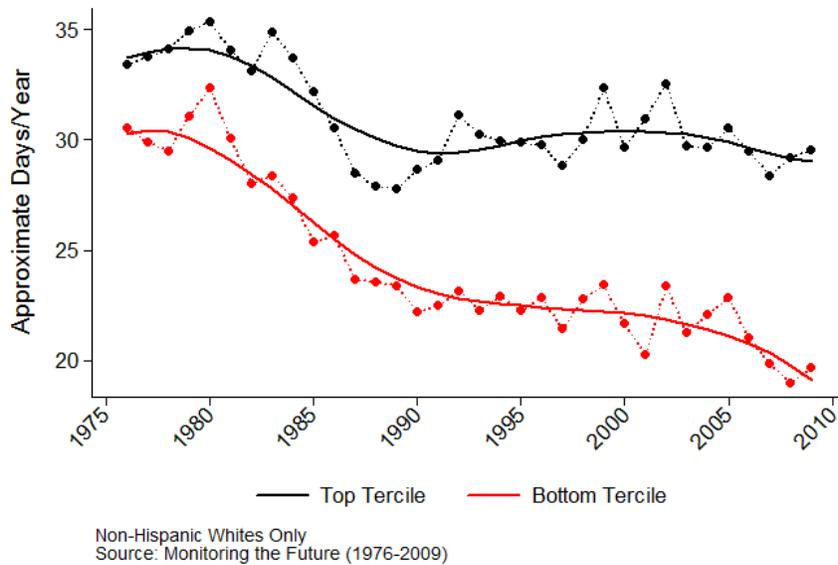


Figure 9: Approximate Days per Year Attending Religious Services in 12th Grade



attendance was more severe among working class students. In the mid-1970s, working class youth reported attending church 30 times per year; the most recent figures put their annual attendance below 20 times per year. So the youth class gap in church attendance over these years has ballooned from 3 times a year to 11 times a year.

More Upper/Middle Class Youth Volunteer While Fewer Working Class Youth Trust Others

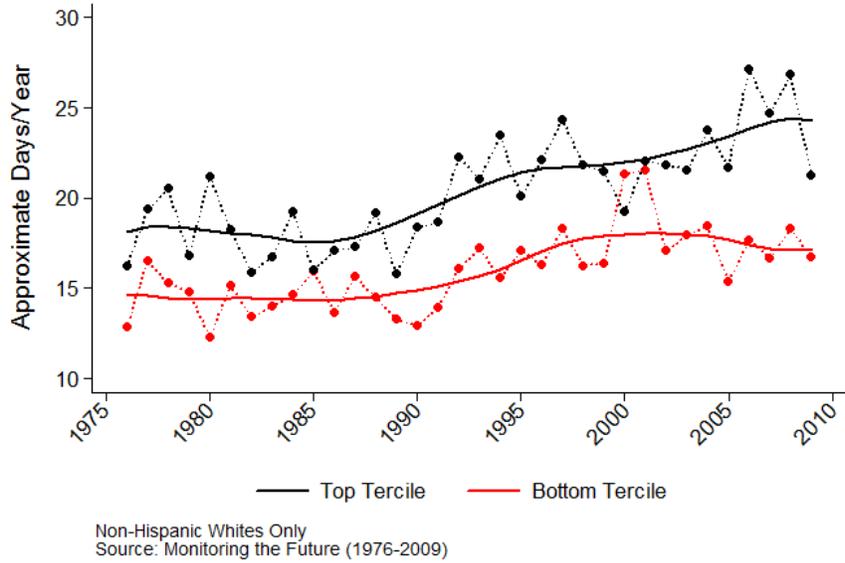
The term “public engagement” refers to the interaction between youth and institutions broader than those we have covered so far: family, schools and churches. Whether it is a city, state, nation, or world, the important feature of public engagement is that includes “other” people in it.⁷ Public engagement during adolescence is important because this is the period in which the seeds of lifetime civic attitudes and behaviors are sown (see Miller, 1992; Plutzer, 2002, for voting; Putnam, 2000, for generalized trust; and Janoski et al., 1998, for volunteering).

Volunteering

While youth civic and political involvement declined steadily through 2000, youth volunteering rates have been increasing since 1990 (Grimm Jr. et al., 2006). However, the overall increases in youth volunteering mask troubling differences in volunteering by social class. Estimates from the recent Current Population Survey show that the volunteering rates for adults age 25 and older are 42 percent for college graduates and 30 percent for those with some college experience, compared with only 19 percent for high school graduates and 9 percent of adults with no high school diploma (Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship, 2010). Moreover, while volunteering has increased over the last 15-20 years among children of college-educated parents, it has not increased among children whose parents have not gone beyond high school. Figure 10 shows the trend in the approximate days per year that high school seniors report participating in community affairs or volunteer work.⁸ Both groups of high school seniors report increasing rates of volunteering and participation in community affairs beginning in the late 1980s through the late 1990s. This good news is attenuated by the fact that the increase was larger among upper/middle class students, thereby increasing the class gap in volunteering.

The implications of the class gap in volunteering among high school seniors extend beyond high school. Brand (2010) finds that college graduates volunteer in higher numbers than non-college graduates, even after controlling for preexisting differences in one’s likelihood to graduate from college. Her analysis goes on to show that the civic returns to a college education are highest among those with the lowest initial propensity to graduate from college. That

Figure 10: Participation in Community Affairs/Volunteering in 12th Grade



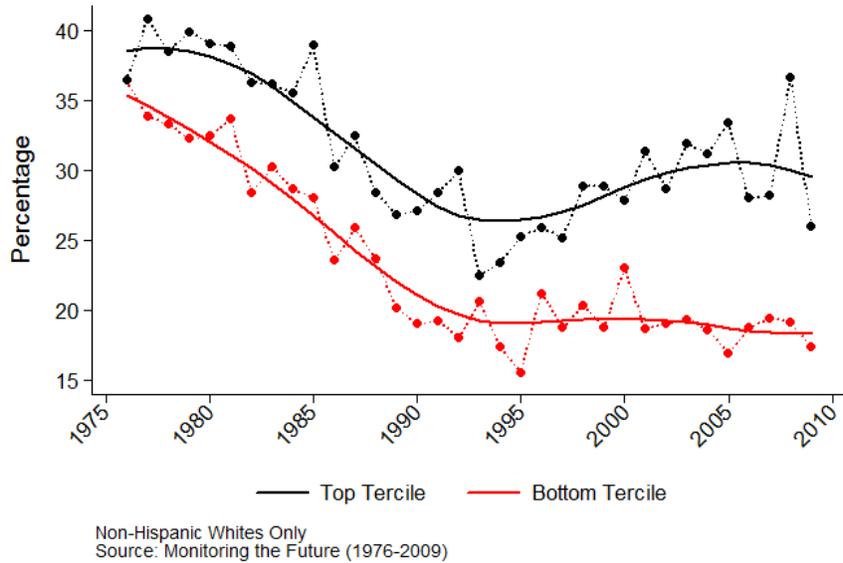
colleges contribute to a virtuous circle of volunteering that has the potential to reverse this growing class gap is good news. The bad news only becomes apparent when we look at the entire process. Working class students, who would benefit the most from this virtuous circle, are less likely to attend college and reap the economic and civic rewards that come with a college education. The end result is an even larger class-gap in volunteering when these cohorts enter young adulthood.

Generalized Trust

Generalized trust is best thought of as an individual-level proxy for the aggregate level of social capital in a community. Communities with high levels of generalized trust are more efficient because of their residents “standing decision to give most people – even those whom one does not know from direct experience – the benefit of the doubt,” (Rahn and Transue, 1998, p. 545). Children who report a higher level of generalized social trust are likely to have lived in more trustworthy surroundings. Figure 11 shows the trend in generalized, or social, trust among youth from different backgrounds. Specifically, it shows that the percentages of upper/middle and working class 12th graders who report that most people can be trusted declined until the mid-1990s.⁹ After 1995, the levels of generalized trust rebounded for upper/middle class youth, but not for their working class counterparts.

Many of the working class youth who have low levels of generalized trust (quite likely because the “others” with whom they interact are less trustworthy) already do or will live in neighborhoods with other working class Americans like themselves (Reardon and Bischoff, 2011). At the community level, these residents will find that crime is higher, life is more stressful, local government

Figure 11: Percentage of 12th Graders who Report that “Most People Can Be Trusted”



works less well and the barriers to collective action are greater. To the extent that the recent rebound in trust among upper/middle class youth is a product of the increase in class-based residential segregation, it may herald another virtuous circle of increasing social connectedness from which working class youth are increasingly less likely to benefit.

Social connectedness

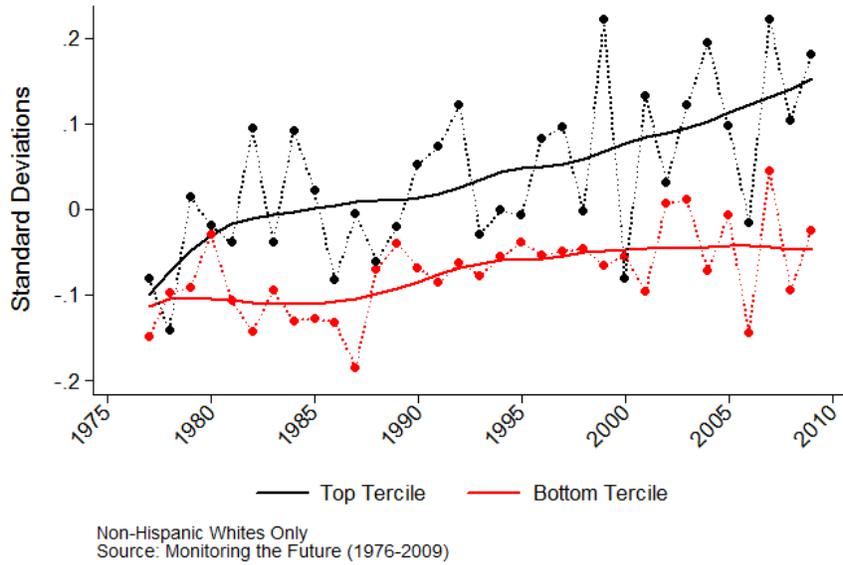
Social connectedness refers to the relationships people have with others. People who feel socially connected are generally happier, healthier, and better off than people who feel socially isolated. Figure 12 plots trends in social connectedness over time among youth from different class backgrounds, as proxied by a six-item scale measuring feelings of social support.¹⁰ There is steady increase in social connectedness among the upper/middle class youth. The working class youth, on the other hand, have made only slight gains in their social connectedness.

Conclusion

In *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, Lemann (1999) pegged education as a new watershed dividing the American society:

Here is what American society looks like today. A thick line runs through the country, with people who have been to college on one side of it and people who haven't on the other. This line gets brighter all the time. Whether a person is on one side of the line

Figure 12: Class gaps in social connectedness, 1976-2009



or the other is now more indicative of income, of attitudes, and of political behavior than any other line one might draw: region, race, age, religion, sex, class.

But education not only predicts the income, attitudes, and social connectedness of the current generation. It increasingly, as we are learning, predicts the test scores, income, attitudes, and social connectedness of one's children. Upper/middle class parents spend more time reading to their children and taking them to parks, museums, and soccer practice. As these upper/middle class children age, they spend more time in extracurricular activities, both sports and clubs, and attend church more frequently than their working class peers. Upper/middle class students are also increasingly more active in community life and express higher levels of social trust. In contrast, working class students report steadily declining involvement in voluntary associations and their trust in others has plummeted. In sum, children from upper/middle class backgrounds are more connected with family, friends, schools and social institutions, while working class children are increasingly more isolated and disconnected from society and its institutions.

The very factors on which the youth class divergence is greatest are, themselves, strong predictors of life success. Thus, these data belie the American ideal of meritocracy and instead presage an America heading towards a caste system where social standing and community involvement are inherited from generation to generation, a country cleaved along class lines. Middle class youth have always had an advantage, but their relative advantage has increased significantly over the last several decades. Going forward, life success will increasingly depend on how wisely one chose parents, violating the transcendent American value that one's social origins should not determine one's

social destination.

Individually, the existence of growing class gaps in youth social connectedness is worrying. Together, the consistency of this pattern across a wide array of social connectedness indicators suggests that each gap is a symptom of an underlying process. Currently we are looking into what these processes may be; among the contenders are the changes in the working class family structure, increasing economic insecurity for working class households, decay of the informal social safety net in working class neighborhoods, and the increased competition (real or perceived) in the college admissions process. Diagnosing the origins of the growing class gap among American youth will, in turn, be central to any discussion of how to reverse this ominous trend.

Notes

¹Each of the five NCES studies has a unique name. In order, the studies we use are: the National Longitudinal Study of 1972 (1972), High School and Beyond (1980, 1982), the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (1990, 1992), the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (2002, 2004), and the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (2009). In this report we will refer to the studies by the year in which the data were collected.

²Focusing on 12th graders eliminates data from the most recent cohort study because the modal student will not be in the 12th grade until 2013.

³We lack 10th grade data in the first cohort study because data collection did not begin until students were in the 12th grade.

⁴We interpret this graph with three important concerns in mind. First, the point estimates for the 1990s may underestimate childcare time due to an error in the sampling design (Allard et al., 2007). Second, it is plausible that part of the increased developmental time in the 1990s and 2000s may be attributable to social desirability bias: parents being sensitive to the dominant norms of intensive parenting. The time diary methodology is less prone to such social desirability bias compared to stylized questions since it asks individuals to report sequence of activities rather than estimate the total amount of time spent with children (Bianchi et al., 2006; Gershuny, 2000; Harvey, 1993; Juster and Stafford, 1985; Robinson and Godbey, 1997). Finally, childcare coding in the 2003-10 ATUS is far more detailed than the coding in the earlier surveys. Based on this, some researchers argue that high estimates of childcare time in the 2003-10 survey might partially be a data artifact (Egerton et al., 2005), while others disagree (Allard et al., 2007). However, none of these concerns threatens the validity of our claims because we are focused on the size of the gap, not the increase in the absolute number of minutes per day.

⁵The AHTUS studies also gather information about physical childcare (e.g. feeding children and changing diapers) and secondary childcare, which includes in which activities the primary activity was something else but the person was also ultimately responsible for the children. Examples of secondary childcare include: doing housework while the children play in another room or going grocery shopping with your children. Unfortunately, the secondary childcare estimates are not comparable over time so we cannot investigate trends in secondary childcare over time. We do not include physical childcare because it does not contribute to the growth in the class gap in childcare time.

⁶The original coding of the variable asked respondents how frequently they attend religious services and had the following response categories: never, rarely, once or twice a month, and about once a week or more. We converted these categories into days per year: 0, 7, 18, 65. The results are not sensitive to the precise numbers used.

⁷“Other” is in quotes to emphasize that the public is a collection of people across multiple

salient social groups (i.e., it includes in-group and out-group people), not that it is any grouping of more than one person.

⁸See note 6 for an explanation of how we measure approximate days per year.

⁹The question asked whether most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people. The answer categories were "most people can be trusted", "don't know/undecided", and "you can't be too careful".

¹⁰We collapsed the following set of five five-category agree/disagree items tapping social connectedness: "A Lot of Times I Feel Lonely," "There is Always Someone I Can Turn to if I Need Help," "I Often Feel Left Out of Things," "There is Usually Someone I Can Talk to if I Need To," "I Often Wish I Had More Good Friends," and "I Usually Have a Few Friends Around That I Can Get Together With." Cronbach's Alpha for the scale is .72.

References

- Allard, Mary D., Suzanne M. Bianchi, Jay Stewart, and Vanessa R. Wight. 2007. "Comparing Childcare Measures in the ATUS and Earlier Time-Diary Studies." *Monthly Labour Review* 130:27–36.
- Alon, Sigal. 2009. "The Evolution of Class Inequality in Higher Education." *American Sociological Review* 74:731–755.
- Altintas, Evrim. 2012. "Lost Time: The Growing and Multifaceted Parenting Gap Facing Low-Income Youth."
- Amato, Paul R. 2005. "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation." *The Future of Children* 15:75–96.
- Bailey, Martha J. and Susan M. Dynarski. 2011. "Inequality in Postsecondary Education." In *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*, edited by Greg J. Duncan and Richard Murnane, pp. 117–132. Thousand Oaks, CA: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bianchi, Suzanne M., John P. Robinson, and Melissa A. Milkie. 2006. *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.
- Brand, Jennie E. 2010. "Civic Returns to Higher Education: A Note on Heterogeneous Effects." *Social Forces* 89:417–417–433.
- Broh, B.A. 2002. "Linking extracurricular programming to academic achievement: Who benefits and why?" *Sociology of Education* 75:69–91.
- Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship. 2010. "Civic Life in America: Key Findings on the Civic Health of the Nation." Technical report.
- Cunha, Flavio and James J. Heckman. 2008. "Formulating, Identifying and Estimating the Technology of Cognitive and Noncognitive Skill Formation." *Journal of Human Resources* 43:738–782.

- Eccles, J. S. and B. L. Barber. 1999. "Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kind of extracurricular involvement matters?" *Journal of Adolescent Research* 14:10–43.
- Egerton, Murial, Kimberly Fisher, and Jonathan I. Gershuny. 2005. "American time use 1965-2003: the construction of a historical comparative file, and consideration of its usefulness in the construction of extended National Accounts for the USA." Technical Report ISER Working Paper 2005-28, University of Essex, Colchester.
- Gershuny, Jonathan. 2000. *Changing Times: Work and Leisure in Postindustrial Society*. Oxford: Ox.
- Grimm Jr., Robert, Nathan Dietz, John Foster-Bey, David Reingold, and Rebecca Nesbit. 2006. "Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974." Technical report, Coportation for National and Community Service, Washington DC.
- Hart, Daniel, Thomas M. Donnelly, James Youniss, and Robert Atkins. 2007. "High school community service as a predictor of adult voting and volunteering." *American Educational Research Journal* 44:197–219.
- Harvey, Andrew S. 1993. "Guidelines for Time use Data Collection." *Social Indicators Research* 30:197–228.
- Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Have, CT: Yale University Press.
- Janoski, T., M. Musick, and J. Wilson. 1998. "Being volunteered? The impact of social participation and pro-social attitudes on volunteering." *Sociological Forum* 13:495–519.
- Juster, Thomas F. and Frank P. Stafford (eds.). 1985. *Time, Goods, and Well-being*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Kaushal, Neeraj, Katherine Magnusen, and Jane Waldfogel. 2011. "How Is Family Income Related to Investments in Children's Learning?" In *Whither Opportunity: Rising Inequality, Schools and Children's Life Chances*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kuhn, Peter and Catherine Weinberger. 2005. "Leadership Skills and Wages." *Journal of Labor Economics* 23:pp. 395–436.
- Lamborn, Susie D., B. Bradford Brown, Nina S. Mounts, and Laurence Steinberg. 1992. "Putting School in Perspective: the Influence of Family, Peers, Extracurricular Participation, and Part-Time Work on Academic Engagement." In *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*, edited by Fred M. Newmann, pp. 153–181. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Lemann, Nicholas. 1999. *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Levine, David I. and Bhashkar Mazumder. 2007. "The Growing Importance of Family: Evidence from Brothers' Earnings." *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society* 46:7–21.
- Lim, Chaeyoon. 2012. "In U.S., Churchgoers Boast Better Mood, Especially on Sundays." Website. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153374/Churchgoers-Boast-Better-Mood-Especially-Sundays.aspx>. Last Accessed 3 May 2012.
- Lleras, Christy. 2008. "Do skills and behaviors in high school matter? The contribution of noncognitive factors in explaining differences in educational attainment and earnings." *Social Science Research* 37:888 – 902.
- Marsh, H. and S. Kleitman. 2003. "School athletic participation: Mostly gain with little pain." *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 25:205–229.
- Massey, Douglas S. 2007. *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- McFarland, Daniel A. and Reuben J. Thomas. 2006. "Bowling young: How youth voluntary associations influence adult political participation." *American Sociological Review* 71:401–425.
- McLanahan, Sara and Christine Percheski. 2008. "Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequalities." *Annual Review of Sociology* 34:257–276.
- McLanahan, Sara S. and Gary Sandefur. 1994. *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press.
- McNeal, Ralph B., Jr. 1995. "Extracurricular Activities and High School Dropouts." *Sociology of Education* 68:pp. 62–80.
- Miller, Warren E. 1992. "The puzzle transformed: Explaining declining turnout." *Political Behavior* 14:1–43.
- Newmann, Fred M., Gary G. Wehlage, and Susie D. Lamborn. 1992. "The Significance and Sources of Student Engagement." In *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*, edited by Fred M. Newmann, pp. 11–39. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nie, Norman H., Jane Junn, and Stehlik-Barry. 1996. *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Piketty, Thomas and Emmanuel Saez. 2003. "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118:1–39.

- Plutzer, Eric. 2002. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." *The American Political Science Review* 96:41–56.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Putnam, Robert D. and David E. Campbell. 2010. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rahn, Wendy M. and John E. Transue. 1998. "Social Trust and Value Change: The Decline of Social Capital in American Youth, 1976-1995." *Political Psychology* 19:545–565.
- Reardon, Sean F. 2011. "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations." In *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*, edited by Greg J. Duncan and Richard Murnane, pp. 91–116. Thousand Oaks, CA: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Reardon, Sean F. and Kendra Bischoff. 2011. "Growth in the Residential Segregation of Families by Income, 1970-2009." Technical report, Russell Sage Foundation and American Communities Project of Brown University.
- Regnarus, Mark, Christian Smith, and Melissa Fritsch. 2003. "Religion in the Lives of American Adolescents: A Review of the Literature." Technical report, National Study of Youth & Religion, Chapel Hill, NC.
- Robinson, John P. and Geoffrey Godbey. 1997. *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans use their Time*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Sayer, Liana C., Suzanne M. Bianchi, and John P. Robinson. 2004. "Are Parents Investing Less in Children? Trends in Mothers' and Fathers' Time with Children." *American Journal of Sociology* 110:1–43.
- Schaub, Maryellen. 2010. "Parenting for Cognitive Development from 1950 to 2000: The Institutionalization of Mass Education and the Social Construction of Parenting in the United States." *Sociology of Education* 83:46–66.
- Sigle-Rushton, Wendy and Sara McLanahan. 2004. "Father Absence and Child Wellbeing: A Critical Review." In *The Future of the Family*, pp. 116–155. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Troutman, Kelly P. and Mikaela J. Dufur. 2007. "From High School Jocks to College Grads." *Youth & Society* 38:443–462.

Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wright, Matthew and Robert D. Putnam. 2011. "Class Polarization in Social Capital Among American High School Youth, 1976-2009."