Book review: 'Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis' paints bleak picture of growing income gap

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER | Posted: Sunday, April 26, 2015 12:00 am

In 1968, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, chaired by Otto Kerner, the governor of Illinois, declared that “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal.”

Fifty years later, the United States has made some progress toward racial equality. However, Robert Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard and the author of “Bowling Alone,” suggests that America is still moving toward two societies: rich and poor — separate and unequal.

In “Our Kids,” Putnam documents the huge and growing gap between the highest and lowest reaches of the income hierarchy and the “opportunity gap” that has emerged between “have” and “have not” children. His book is an immensely important — and compelling — contribution to one of the most urgent public policy issues of our time.

Convinced that “some of us learn from numbers, but more of us learn from stories,” Putnam draws extensively and effectively on interviews with parents and children from cities and suburbs around the country. That said, the quantitative data he presents demonstrates the breadth and depth of the crisis.

The massive decline in the number of children raised in two-parent families, he indicates, is class-based. So are differences in parenting styles, with affluent moms and dads providing more affection, cognitive stimulation and social engagement than their economically disadvantaged counterparts.

And, of course, rich parents spend far more money on (and make more informed decisions about) child care and education. These days, moreover, more and more poor kids live in neighborhoods that foster behavioral problems, poor health, delinquency, violence and risky sexual behavior.

And church attendance, which is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes, has fallen twice as rapidly among children from the lower third of the socioeconomic hierarchy as among those from the...
As inequality has grown, Putnam points out, supportive institutions, public and private, have served poor kids less well. Citing studies that estimate the cost of child poverty to society at $500 billion a year, he recommends an expansion of earned income tax credits, child tax credits, anti-poverty programs, food stamps, housing vouchers, pre-school programs, and child care support; reduced sentencing for nonviolent crimes and more funds for the education and job training of inmates; an end to pay-to-play for extracurricular activity in schools; and the development of mentoring programs (by AmeriCorps, churches and other institutions), committed to training and quality control.

Putnam understands that he has laid out a problem (the existence of millions of children who, through no fault of their own, are ill-equipped to develop their God-given talents) for which there is no simple solution — and that his recommendations are likely to be endorsed by liberals and dismissed by conservatives.

However, Americans across the political spectrum may agree with Jay Ash, the city manager of Chelsea, Massachusetts, that “If our kids are in trouble — my kids, our kids, anyone’s kids — we all have a responsibility to look after them.” And, maybe, just maybe, they will do just that.