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BOWLING ALONE

THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Robert D. Putnam

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CHAPTER 1

Thinking about Social Change in America

No one is left from the Glenn Valley, Pennsylvania, Bridge Club who can tell us precisely when or why the group broke up, even though its forty-odd members were still playing regularly as recently as 1990, just as they had done for more than half a century. The shock in the Little Rock, Arkansas, Sertoma club, however, is still painful: in the mid-1980s, nearly fifty people had attended the weekly luncheon to plan activities to help the hearing- and speech-impaired, but a decade later only seven regulars continued to show up.

The Roanoke, Virginia, chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been an active force for civil rights since 1918, but during the 1990s membership withered from about 2,500 to a few hundred. By November 1998 even a heated contest for president drew only fifty-seven voting members. Black city councillor Carroll Swain observed ruefully, "Some people today are a wee bit complacent until something jumps up and bites them." VFW Post 2378 in Berwyn, Illinois, a blue-collar suburb of Chicago, was long a bustling "home away from home" for local veterans and a kind of working-class country club for the neighborhood, hosting wedding receptions and class reunions. By 1999, however, membership had so dwindled that it was a struggle just to pay taxes on the yellow brick post hall. Although numerous veterans of Vietnam and the post-Vietnam military lived in the area, Tom Kissell, national membership director for the VFW, observed, "Kids today just aren't joiners."[1]

The Charity League of Dallas had met every Friday morning for fifty-seven years to sew, knit, and visit, but on April 30, 1999, they held their last meeting; the average age of the group had risen to eighty, the last new member had joined two years earlier, and president Pat Dilbeck said ruefully, "I feel like this is a sinking ship." Precisely three days later and 1,200 miles to the northeast, the Vassar alumnae of Washington, D.C., closed down their fifty-first—and last—annual book sale. Even though they aimed to sell more than one hundred thousand books to benefit college scholarships in the 1999 event, co-chair Alix Myerson explained, the volunteers who ran the program "are in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. They're dying, and they're not replaceable." Meanwhile, as Tewksbury Memorial High School (TMHS), just north of Boston, opened in the fall of 1999, forty brand-new royal blue uniforms newly purchased for the marching band remained in storage, since only four students signed up to play. Roger Whittlesey, TMHS band director, recalled that twenty years earlier the band numbered more than eighty, but participation had waned ever since.[2] Somehow in the last several decades of the twentieth century all these community groups and tens of thousands like them across America began to fade.

It wasn't so much that old members dropped out—at least not any more rapidly than age and the accidents of life had always meant. But community organizations were no longer continuously revitalized, as they had been in the past, by freshets of new members. Organizational leaders were flummoxed. For years they assumed that their problem must have local roots or at least that it was peculiar to their organization, so they commissioned dozens of studies to recommend reforms.[3] The slowdown was puzzling because for as long as anyone could remember, membership rolls and activity lists had lengthened steadily.

In the 1960s, in fact, community groups across America had seemed to stand on the threshold of a new era of expanded involvement. Except for the civic drought induced by the Great Depression, their activity had shot up year after year, cultivated by assiduous civic gardeners and watered by increasing affluence and education. Each annual report registered rising membership. Churches and synagogues were packed, as more Americans worshiped together than only a few decades earlier, perhaps more than ever in American history.

Moreover, Americans seemed to have time on their hands. A 1958 study under the auspices of the newly inaugurated Center for the Study of Leisure at the University of Chicago fretted that "the most dangerous threat hanging over American society is the threat of leisure," a startling claim in the decade in which the Soviets got the bomb.[4] *Life* magazine echoed the warning about the new challenge of free time: "Americans now face a glut of leisure," ran a headline in February 1964. "The task ahead: how to take life easy."

> As a matter of fact, mankind now possesses for the first time the tools and knowledge to create whatever kind of world he wants. . . . Despite our Protestant ethic, there are many signs that the message is beginning to get through to some people. . . . Not only are Americans flocking into bowling leagues and garden clubs, they are satisfying their gregarious urges in countless neighborhood committees to improve the local roads and garbage collections and to hound their public servants into doing what the name implies.[5]

The civic-minded World War II generation was, as its own John F. Kennedy proclaimed at his inauguration, picking up the torch of leadership, not only in the nation's highest office, but in cities and towns across the land. Summarizing dozens of studies, political scientist Robert E. Lane wrote in 1959 that "the ratio of political activists to the general population, and even the ratio of male activists to the male population, has generally increased over the past fifty years." As the 1960s ended, sociologists Daniel Bell and Virginia Held reported that "there is more participation than ever before in America . . . and more opportunity for the active interested person to express his personal and political concerns."[6] Even the simplest political act, voting, was becoming ever more common. From 1920, when women got the vote, through 1960, turnout in presidential elections had risen at the rate of 1.6 percent every four years, so on a simple straight-line projection it seemed reasonable, as a leading political scientist later observed, to expect turnout to be nearly 70 percent and rising on the nation's two hundredth birthday in 1976.[7]

By 1965 disrespect for public life, so endemic in our history, seemed to be waning. Gallup pollsters discovered that the number of Americans who would like to see their children "go into politics as a life's work" had nearly doubled over little more than a decade. Although this gauge of esteem for politics stood at only 36 percent, it had never before been recorded so high, nor has it since. More strikingly, Americans felt increased confidence in their neighbors. The proportion that agreed that "most people can be trusted," for example, rose from an already high 66 percent during and after World War II to a peak of 77 percent in 1964.[8]

The fifties and sixties were hardly a "golden age," especially for those Americans who were marginalized because of their race or gender or social class or sexual orientation. Segregation, by race legally and by gender socially, was the norm, and intolerance, though declining, was still disturbingly high. Environmental degradation had only just been exposed by Rachel Carson, and Betty Friedan had not yet deconstructed the feminine mystique. Grinding rural poverty had still to be discovered by the national media. Infant mortality, a standard measure of public health, stood at twenty-six per one thousand births—forty-four per one thousand for black infants—in 1960, nearly four times worse than those indexes would be at the end of the century. America in *Life* was white, straight, Christian, comfortable, and (in the public square, at least) male.[9] Social reformers had their work cut out for them. However, engagement in community affairs and the sense of shared identity and reciprocity had never been greater in modern America, so the prospects for broad-based civic mobilization to address our national failings seemed bright.

The signs of burgeoning civic vitality were also favorable among the younger generation, as the first of the baby boomers approached college. Dozens of studies confirmed that education was by far the best predictor of engagement in civic life, and universities were in the midst of the most far-reaching expansion in American history. Education seemed the key to both greater tolerance and greater social involvement. Simultaneously shamed and inspired by the quickening struggle for civil rights launched by young African Americans in the South, white colleges in the North began to awaken from the silence of the fifties. Describing the induction of this new generation into the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, sociologist Doug McAdam emphasizes their self-assurance:

> We were a "can do" people, who accomplished whatever we set out to do. We had licked the Depression, turned the tide in World War II, and rebuilt Europe after the war. . . . Freedom Summer was an audacious undertaking consistent with the exaggerated sense of importance and potency shared by the privileged members of America's postwar generation.[10]

The baby boom meant that America's population was unusually young, whereas civic involvement generally doesn't bloom until middle age. In the short run, therefore, our youthful demography actually tended to dampen the ebullience of civil society. But that very bulge at the bottom of the nation's demographic pyramid boded well for the future of community organizations, for they could look forward to swelling membership rolls in the 1980s, when the boomers would reach the peak "joining" years of the life cycle. And in the meantime, the bull session buzz about "participatory democracy" and "all power to the people" seemed to augur ever more widespread engagement in community affairs. One of America's most acute social observers prophesied in 1968, "Participatory democracy has all along been the political style (if not the slogan) of the American middle and upper class. It will become a more widespread style as more persons enter into those classes."[11] Never in our history had the future of civic life looked brighter.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT to civic and social life in American communities is the subject of this book. In recent years social scientists have framed concerns about the changing character of American society in terms of the concept of "social capital." By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital—tools and training that enhance individual productivity—the core idea of

social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

The term *social capital* itself turns out to have been independently invented at least six times over the twentieth century, each time to call attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties. The first known use of the concept was not by some cloistered theoretician, but by a practical reformer of the Progressive Era—L. J. Hanifan, state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia. Writing in 1916 to urge the importance of community involvement for successful schools, Hanifan invoked the idea of "social capital" to explain why. For Hanifan, social capital referred to

> those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. . . . The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself. . . . If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the coöperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.[12]

Hanifan's account of social capital anticipated virtually all the crucial elements in later interpretations, but his conceptual invention apparently attracted no notice from other social commentators and disappeared without a trace. But like sunken treasure recurrently revealed by shifting sands and tides, the same idea was independently rediscovered in the 1950s by Canadian sociologists to characterize the club memberships of arriviste suburbanites, in the 1960s by urbanist Jane Jacobs to laud neighborliness in the modern metropolis, in the 1970s by economist Glenn Loury to analyze the social legacy of slavery, and in the 1980s by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and by German economist Ekkehart Schlicht to underline the social and economic resources embodied in social networks. Sociologist James S. Coleman put the term firmly and finally on the intellectual agenda in the late 1980s, using it (as Hanifan had originally done) to highlight the social context of education.[13]

As this array of independent coinages indicates, social capital has both an individual and a collective aspect—a private face and a public face. First, individuals form connections that benefit our own interests. One pervasive strategem of ambitious job seekers is "networking," for most of us get our jobs because of whom we know, not what we know—that is, our social capital, not our human capital. Economic sociologist Ronald Burt has shown that executives with bounteous Rolodex files enjoy faster career advancement. Nor is the private return to social capital limited to economic rewards. As Claude S. Fischer, a sociologist of friendship, has noted, "Social networks are important in all our lives, often for finding jobs, more often for finding a helping hand, companionship, or a shoulder to cry on."[14]

If individual clout and companionship were all there were to social capital, we'd expect foresighted, self-interested individuals to invest the right amount of time and energy in creating or acquiring it. However, social capital also can have "externalities" that affect the wider community, so that not all the costs and benefits of social connections accrue to the person making the contact.[15] As we shall see later in this book, a well-connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in a well-connected society. And even a poorly connected individual may derive some of the spillover benefits from living in a well-connected community. If the crime rate in my neighborhood is lowered by neighbors keeping an eye on one another's homes, I benefit even if I personally spend most of my time on the road and never even nod to another resident on the street.

Social capital can thus be simultaneously a "private good" and a "public good." Some of the benefit from an investment in social capital goes to bystanders, while some of the benefit redounds to the immediate interest of the person making the investment. For example, service clubs, like Rotary or Lions, mobilize local energies to raise scholarships or fight disease at the same time that they provide members with friendships and business connections that pay off personally.

Social connections are also important for the rules of conduct that they sustain. Networks involve (almost by definition) mutual obligations; they are not interesting as mere "contacts." Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity: I'll do this for you now, in the expectation that you (or perhaps someone else) will return the favor. "Social capital is akin to what Tom Wolfe called 'the favor bank' in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*," notes economist Robert Frank.[16] It was, however, neither a novelist nor an economist, but Yogi Berra who offered the most succinct definition of reciprocity: "If you don't go to somebody's funeral, they won't come to yours."

Sometimes, as in these cases, reciprocity is *specific:* I'll do this for you if you do that for me. Even more valuable, however, is a norm of *generalized* rec-

iprocity: I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road. The Golden Rule is one formulation of generalized reciprocity. Equally instructive is the T-shirt slogan used by the Gold Beach, Oregon, Volunteer Fire Department to publicize their annual fund-raising effort: "Come to our breakfast, we'll come to your fire." "We act on a norm of specific reciprocity," the firefighters seem to be saying, but onlookers smile because they recognize the underlying norm of generalized reciprocity—the firefighters will come even if *you* don't. When Blanche DuBois depended on the kindness of strangers, she too was relying on generalized reciprocity.

A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter. If we don't have to balance every exchange instantly, we can get a lot more accomplished. Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity. Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligation and responsibility for action. As L. J. Hanifan and his successors recognized, social networks and norms of reciprocity can facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. When economic and political dealing is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism and malfeasance are reduced. This is why the diamond trade, with its extreme possibilities for fraud, is concentrated within close-knit ethnic enclaves. Dense social ties facilitate gossip and other valuable ways of cultivating reputation—an essential foundation for trust in a complex society.

Physical capital is not a single "thing," and different forms of physical capital are not interchangeable. An eggbeater and an aircraft carrier both appear as physical capital in our national accounts, but the eggbeater is not much use for national defense, and the carrier would not be much help with your morning omelet. Similarly, social capital—that is, social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity—comes in many different shapes and sizes with many different uses. Your extended family represents a form of social capital, as do your Sunday school class, the regulars who play poker on your commuter train, your college roommates, the civic organizations to which you belong, the Internet chat group in which you participate, and the network of professional acquaintances recorded in your address book.

Sometimes "social capital," like its conceptual cousin "community," sounds warm and cuddly. Urban sociologist Xavier de Souza Briggs, however, properly warns us to beware of a treacly sweet, "kumbaya" interpretation of social capital.[17] Networks and the associated norms of reciprocity are generally good for those inside the network, but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive. It was social capital, for example, that enabled Timothy McVeigh to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. McVeigh's network of friends, bound together by a norm of reciprocity, enabled him to do what he could not have done alone. Similarly, urban gangs, NIMBY ("not in my backyard") movements, and power elites often exploit social capital to achieve ends that are antisocial from a wider perspective. Indeed, it is rhetorically useful for such groups to obscure the difference between the pro-social and antisocial consequences of community organizations. When Floridians objected to plans by the Ku Klux Klan to "adopt a highway," Jeff Coleman, grand wizard of the Royal Knights of the KKK, protested, "Really, we're just like the Lions or the Elks. We want to be involved in the community."[18]

Social capital, in short, can be directed toward malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital.[19] (McVeigh also relied on physical capital, like the explosive-laden truck, and human capital, like bomb-making expertise, to achieve his purposes.) Therefore it is important to ask how the positive consequences of social capital—mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness—can be maximized and the negative manifestations—sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption—minimized. Toward this end, scholars have begun to distinguish many different forms of social capital.

Some forms involve repeated, intensive, multistranded networks—like a group of steelworkers who meet for drinks every Friday after work and see each other at mass on Sunday—and some are episodic, single stranded, and anonymous, like the faintly familiar face you see several times a month in the supermarket checkout line. Some types of social capital, like a Parent-Teacher Association, are formally organized, with incorporation papers, regular meetings, a written constitution, and connection to a national federation, whereas others, like a pickup basketball game, are more informal. Some forms of social capital, like a volunteer ambulance squad, have explicit public-regarding purposes; some, like a bridge club, exist for the private enjoyment of the members; and some, like the Rotary club mentioned earlier, serve both public and private ends.

Of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important is the distinction between *bridging* (or inclusive) and *bonding* (or exclusive).[20] Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women's reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations.

Bonding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. Dense networks in ethnic enclaves, for example, provide crucial social and psychological support for less fortunate members of the community, while furnishing start-up financing, markets, and reliable labor for local entrepreneurs. Bridging networks, by contrast, are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion. Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter has pointed out that when seeking jobs—or political allies—the

"weak" ties that link me to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from mine are actually more valuable than the "strong" ties that link me to relatives and intimate friends whose sociological niche is very like my own. Bonding social capital is, as Xavier de Souza Briggs puts it, good for "getting by," but bridging social capital is crucial for "getting ahead."[21]

Moreover, bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves. In 1829 at the founding of a community lyceum in the bustling whaling port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Thomas Greene eloquently expressed this crucial insight:

> We come from all the divisions, ranks and classes of society . . . to teach and to be taught in our turn. While we mingle together in these pursuits, we shall learn to know each other more intimately; we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other had fostered. . . . In the parties and sects into which we are divided, we sometimes learn to love our brother at the expense of him whom we do not in so many respects regard as a brother. . . . We may return to our homes and firesides [from the lyceum] with kindlier feelings toward one another, because we have learned to know one another better.[22]

Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40. Bonding social capital, by creating strong in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism, as Thomas Greene and his neighbors in New Bedford knew, and for that reason we might expect negative external effects to be more common with this form of social capital. Nevertheless, under many circumstances both bridging and bonding social capital can have powerfully positive social effects.

Many groups simultaneously bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others. The black church, for example, brings together people of the same race and religion across class lines. The Knights of Columbus was created to bridge cleavages among different ethnic communities while bonding along religious and gender lines. Internet chat groups may bridge across geography, gender, age, and religion, while being tightly homogeneous in education and ideology. In short, bonding and bridging are not "either-or" categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but "more or less" dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital.

It would obviously be valuable to have distinct measures of the evolution of these various forms of social capital over time. However, like researchers on global warming, we must make do with the imperfect evidence that we can find, not merely lament its deficiencies. Exhaustive descriptions of social networks in America—even at a single point in time—do not exist. I have found no reliable, comprehensive, nationwide measures of social capital that neatly distinguish "bridgingness" and "bondingness." In our empirical account of recent social trends in this book, therefore, this distinction will be less prominent than I would prefer. On the other hand, we must keep this conceptual differentiation at the back of our minds as we proceed, recognizing that bridging and bonding social capital are not interchangeable.

"SOCIAL CAPITAL" is to some extent merely new language for a very old debate in American intellectual circles. Community has warred incessantly with individualism for preeminence in our political hagiology. Liberation from ossified community bonds is a recurrent and honored theme in our culture, from the Pilgrims' storied escape from religious convention in the seventeenth century to the lyric nineteenth-century paeans to individualism by Emerson ("Self-Reliance"), Thoreau ("Civil Disobedience"), and Whitman ("Song of Myself") to Sherwood Anderson's twentieth-century celebration of the struggle against conformism by ordinary citizens in *Winesburg, Ohio* to the latest Clint Eastwood film. Even Alexis de Tocqueville, patron saint of American communitarians, acknowledged the uniquely democratic claim of individualism, "a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself."[23]

Our national myths often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort. Historian David Hackett Fischer's gripping account of opening night in the American Revolution, for example, reminds us that Paul Revere's alarum was successful only because of networks of civic engagement in the Middlesex villages. Towns without well-organized local militia, no matter how patriotic their inhabitants, were AWOL from Lexington and Concord.[24] Nevertheless, the myth of rugged individualism continues to strike a powerful inner chord in the American psyche.

Debates about the waxing and waning of "community" have been endemic for at least two centuries. "Declensionist narratives"—postmodernist jargon for tales of decline and fall—have a long pedigree in our letters. We seem perennially tempted to contrast our tawdry todays with past golden ages. We apparently share this nostalgic predilection with the rest of humanity. As sociologist Barry Wellman observes,

> It is likely that pundits have worried about the impact of social change on communities ever since human beings ventured beyond their caves. . . . In the [past] two centuries many leading social commentators have been gainfully employed suggesting various ways in which large-scale social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution may have affected the structure and operation of communities. . . . This ambivalence about the consequences of large-scale changes continued well into the twentieth century. Analysts have kept asking if things have, in fact, fallen apart.[25]

At the conclusion of the twentieth century, ordinary Americans shared this sense of civic malaise. We were reasonably content about our economic prospects, hardly a surprise after an expansion of unprecedented length, but we were not equally convinced that we were on the right track morally or culturally. Of baby boomers interviewed in 1987, 53 percent thought their parents' generation was better in terms of "being a concerned citizen, involved in helping others in the community," as compared with only 21 percent who thought their own generation was better. Fully 77 percent said the nation was worse off because of "less involvement in community activities." In 1992 three-quarters of the U.S. workforce said that "the breakdown of community" and "selfishness" were "serious" or "extremely serious" problems in America. In 1996 only 8 percent of all Americans said that "the honesty and integrity of the average American" were improving, as compared with 50 percent of us who thought we were becoming less trustworthy. Those of us who said that people had become less civil over the preceding ten years outnumbered those who thought people had become more civil, 80 percent to 12 percent. In several surveys in 1999 two-thirds of Americans said that America's civic life had weakened in recent years, that social and moral values were higher when they were growing up, and that our society was focused more on the individual than the community. More than 80 percent said there should be more emphasis on community, even if that put more demands on individuals.[26] Americans' concern about weakening community bonds may be misplaced or exaggerated, but a decent respect for the opinion of our fellow citizens suggests that we should explore the issue more thoroughly.

It is emphatically not my view that community bonds in America have weakened steadily throughout our history—or even throughout the last hundred years. On the contrary, American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, *not just downs*—a story of collapse *and* of renewal. As I have already hinted in the opening pages of this book, within living memory the bonds of community in America were becoming stronger, not weaker, and as I shall argue in the concluding pages, it is within our power to reverse the decline of the last several decades.

Nevertheless, my argument is, at least in appearance, in the declensionist tradition, so it is important to avoid simple nostalgia. Precisely because the theme of this book might lend itself to gauzy self-deception, our methods must be transparent. Is life in communities as we enter the twenty-first century really so different after all from the reality of American communities in the 1950s and

1960s? One way of curbing nostalgia is to count things. Are club meetings really less crowded today than yesterday, or does it just seem so? Do we really know our neighbors less well than our parents did, or is our childhood recollection of neighborhood barbecues suffused with a golden glow of wishful reminiscence? Are friendly poker games less common now, or is it merely that we ourselves have outgrown poker? League bowling may be passé, but how about softball and soccer? Are strangers less trustworthy now? Are boomers and X'ers really less engaged in community life? After all, it was the preceding generation that was once scorned as "silent." Perhaps the younger generation today is no less engaged than their predecessors, but engaged in new ways. In the chapters that follow we explore these questions with the best available evidence.

THE CHALLENGE of studying the evolving social climate is analogous in some respects to the challenge facing meteorologists who measure global warming: we know what kind of evidence we would ideally want from the past, but time's arrow means that we can't go back to conduct those well-designed studies. Thus if we are to explore how our society is like or unlike our parents', we must make imperfect inferences from all the evidence that we can find.

The most powerful strategy for paleometeorologists seeking to assess global climate change is to triangulate among diverse sources of evidence. If pollen counts in polar ice, and the width of southwestern tree rings, and temperature records of the British Admiralty all point in a similar direction, the inference of global warming is stronger than if the cord of evidence has only a single strand. For much the same reason, prudent journalists follow a "two source" rule: Never report anything unless at least two independent sources confirm it.

In this book I follow that same maxim. Nearly every major generalization here rests on more than one body of independent evidence, and where I have discovered divergent results from credible sources, I note that disparity as well. I have a case to make, but like any officer of the court, I have a professional obligation to present all relevant evidence I have found, exculpatory as well as incriminating. To avoid cluttering the text with masses of redundant evidence, I have typically put confirmatory evidence from multiple studies in the notes, so skeptical "show me" readers should examine those notes as well as the text.[27]

I have sought as diverse a range of evidence as possible on continuities and change in American social life. If the transformation that I discern is as broad and deep as I believe it to be, it ought to show up in many different places, so I have cast a broad net. Of course, social change, like climatic change, is inevitably uneven. Life is not lived in a single dimension. We should not expect to find everything changing in the same direction and at the same speed, but those very anomalies may contain important clues to what is happening.

American society, like the continent on which we live, is massive and polymorphous, and our civic engagement historically has come in many sizes and shapes. A few of us still share plowing chores with neighbors, while many more pitch in to wire classrooms to the Internet. Some of us run for Congress, and others join self-help groups. Some of us hang out at the local bar association and others at the local bar. Some of us attend mass once a day, while others struggle to remember to send holiday greetings once a year. The forms of our social capital—the ways in which we connect with friends and neighbors and strangers—are varied.

So our review of trends in social capital and civic engagement ranges widely across various sectors of this complex society. In the chapters that follow we begin by charting Americans' participation in the most public forum—politics and public affairs. We next turn to the institutions of our communities—clubs and community associations, religious bodies, and work-related organizations, such as unions and professional societies. Then we explore the almost infinite variety of informal ties that link Americans—card parties and bowling leagues, bar cliques and ball games, picnics and parties. Next we examine the changing patterns of trust and altruism in America—philanthropy, volunteering, honesty, reciprocity. Finally we turn to three apparent counterexamples to the decline of connectedness—small groups, social movements, and the Internet.

In each domain we shall encounter currents and crosscurrents and eddies, but in each we shall also discover common, powerful tidal movements that have swept across American society in the twentieth century. The dominant theme is simple: For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.

The impact of these tides on all aspects of American society, their causes and consequences and what we might do to reverse them, is the subject of the rest of this book. Section III explores a wide range of possible explanations—from overwork to suburban sprawl, from the welfare state to the women's revolution, from racism to television, from the growth of mobility to the growth of divorce. Some of these factors turn out to have played no significant role at all in the erosion of social capital, but we shall be able to identify three or four critical sources of our problem.

Whereas section III asks "Why?" section IV asks "So What?" Social capital turns out to have forceful, even quantifiable effects on many different aspects of our lives. What is at stake is not merely warm, cuddly feelings or frissons of community pride. We shall review hard evidence that our schools and neighborhoods don't work so well when community bonds slacken, that our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital.

Finally, in section V we turn from the necessary but cheerless task of diagnosis to the more optimistic challenge of contemplating possible therapies. A century ago, it turns out, Americans faced social and political issues that were strikingly similar to those that we must now address. From our predecessors' responses, we have much to learn—not least that civic decay like that around us can be reversed. This volume offers no simple cures for our contemporary ills. In the final section my aim is to provoke (and perhaps contribute to) a period of national deliberation and experimentation about how we can renew American civic engagement and social connectedness in the twenty-first century.

Before October 29, 1997, John Lambert and Andy Boschma knew each other only through their local bowling league at the Ypsi-Arbor Lanes in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Lambert, a sixty-four-year-old retired employee of the University of Michigan hospital, had been on a kidney transplant waiting list for three years when Boschma, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, learned casually of Lambert's need and unexpectedly approached him to offer to donate one of his own kidneys.

"Andy saw something in me that others didn't," said Lambert. "When we were in the hospital Andy said to me, 'John, I really like you and have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn't hesitate to do this all over again.' I got choked up." Boschma returned the feeling: "I obviously feel a kinship [with Lambert]. I cared about him before, but now I'm really rooting for him." This moving story speaks for itself, but the photograph that accompanied this report in the *Ann Arbor News* reveals that in addition to their differences in profession and generation, Boschma is white and Lambert is African American. That they bowled together made all the difference.[28] In small ways like this—and in larger ways, too—we Americans need to reconnect with one another. That is the simple argument of this book.

SECTION TWO

Trends in Civic Engagement and Social Capital

CHAPTER 2

Political Participation

THE CHARACTER of Americans' involvement with politics and government has been transformed over the past three decades. This is certainly not the only alteration in the way we connect with our communities. It is not even the most dramatic and unequivocal example of change. But it is the most widely discussed, and it is thus a good place to begin.

With the singular exception of voting, American rates of political participation compare favorably with those in other democracies. We have multiple avenues for expressing our views and exercising our rights—contacting local and national officials, working for political parties and other political organizations, discussing politics with our neighbors, attending public meetings, joining in election campaigns, wearing buttons, signing petitions, speaking out on talk radio, and many more. Not all of us do all these things, but more of us are active in these ways than are citizens in many other advanced democracies. We are reminded each election year that fewer voters show up at the polls in America than in most other democracies: our turnout rate ranks us just above the cellar—narrowly besting Switzerland, but below all twenty-two other established democracies.[1] Nevertheless, Americans are fairly active politically outside the ballot booth. However, our interest here is not "How are we doing compared with other countries?" but "How are we doing today compared with our own past?" The answer to that question is less encouraging.

We begin with the most common act of democratic citizenship—voting. In 1960, 62.8 percent of voting-age Americans went to the polls to choose between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. In 1996, after decades of slippage, 48.9 percent of voting-age Americans chose among Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, and Ross Perot, very nearly the lowest turnout in the twentieth century. Participation in presidential elections has declined by roughly a quarter over the last thirty-six years. Turnout in off-year and local elections is down by roughly this same amount.[2]

For several reasons, this widely reported fact understates the real decline in Americans' commitment to electoral participation. For most of the twentieth century Americans' access to the voting booth was hampered by burdensome registration requirements. The conventional explanation for our low turnout as compared with other democracies points precisely to the hurdles of registration. Over the last four decades, however, registration requirements in America have been greatly relaxed. The nationwide introduction of "motor voter" registration, on which states have collectively spent $100 million to try to swell the ranks of new voters, is merely the most visible example of this trend. Turnout has declined despite the fact that the most commonly cited barrier to voting has been substantially lowered.[3] Even facing a lower hurdle, fewer Americans are making the jump.

A second qualification is even more important. For much of our history many people in the South, especially blacks, were disenfranchised. To provide an accurate picture of how current voting rates compare with those of the past, figure 1 traces presidential turnout in southern and nonsouthern states over most of the history of the American Republic.

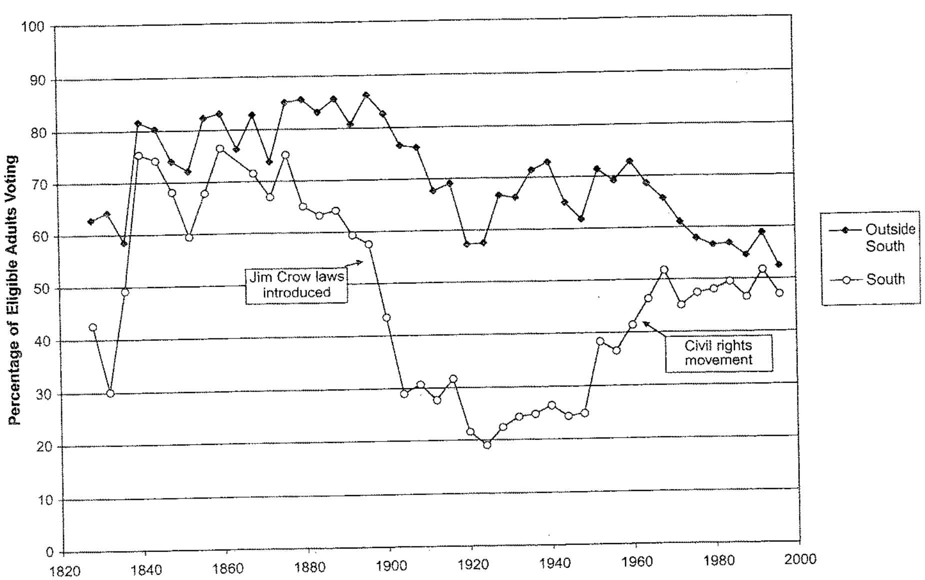

Figure 1: Trends in Presidential Voting (1828–1996), by Region

From the end of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth virtually all African Americans (along with some poor whites) in southern states were prevented from voting by poll taxes, literacy tests, fraud, and violence. This Jim Crow disenfranchisement of southern blacks in the 1890s decimated turnout in the South and artificially depressed the national average for the next seventy years. Since most standard measures of turnout lump those disenfranchised millions with other nonvoters, those measures understate the effective turnout during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century among Americans who were free to vote.[4]

With the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, millions of newly enfranchised men and women in the South were able for the first time in the twentieth century to exercise the right to vote. This influx of new voters partially masked the decline in turnout among the rest of the American electorate.[5] In effect, American national turnout figures took credit for the inclusion of southern blacks in the electorate, obscuring the fact that fewer and fewer of the rest of us who had had the right to vote all along are now actually exercising it.

Outside the South the slide in electoral participation since 1960 is, by now, the longest decline in American history, and voting in the 1996 and 1998 elections was substantially lower than in any other presidential and off-year elections in nearly two centuries.[6] Even within the South, turnout in 1996 was (except for the period of forced disenfranchisement between 1896 and 1964) very nearly the lowest in 164 years. In short, not in nearly two centuries have so many American citizens freely abstained from voting as in the past few years.

Who are these nonvoters, and why are they missing in action? Many explanations have been offered—growing distrust of government, declining party mobilization, fraying social bonds, political dealignment, and many more. Beneath the ups and downs of individual elections, however, virtually all the long-run decline in turnout is due to the gradual replacement of voters who came of age before or during the New Deal and World War II by the generations who came of age later.

Because generational change will be an important theme in our story, we should pause briefly here to consider how social change and generational change are interrelated. As a matter of simple accounting, any social change—from the rise of rap music to the decline of newspapers—is always produced by some combination of two very different processes. The first is for many individuals to change their tastes and habits in a single direction simultaneously. This sort of social change can occur quickly and be reversed just as quickly. If large numbers of Americans, young and old, fall in love with sport utility vehicles, as they did in the 1990s, the automotive marketplace can be quickly transformed, and it can be transformed in a different direction just as quickly. Sociologists sometimes call this type of change "intracohort," because the change is detectable within each age cohort.

The second sort of social change is slower, more subtle, and harder to reverse. If different generations have different tastes or habits, the social physiology of birth and death will eventually transform society, *even if no individual ever changes*. Much of the change in sexual mores over the last several decades has been of this sort. Relatively few adults changed their views about morality, and most of those who did actually became more conservative. In the aggregate, however, American attitudes toward premarital sex, for example, have been radically liberalized over the last several decades, because a generation with stricter beliefs was gradually replaced by a later generation with more relaxed norms. Sociologists call this type of change "intercohort," because the change is detectable only across different age groups. Precisely because the rhythm of generational change is slower paced, it is more nearly inexorable.[7]

Most social change involves both individual and generational processes. The use of new technology, like the telephone or the Internet, illustrates this sort of mixture. When the innovation is introduced, many people try out the new phone or the new Web browser. As individuals change their behavior, virtually none of the early growth in usage is attributable to generational change. Change is, however, easier for young people, so the immediate impetus for growth is dampened by the ingrained habits of older generations. Many middle-aged Americans today recall how reluctantly their parents picked up the phone for a long-distance call, well after long-distance rates had fallen. Gradually, generational differences became the dominant feature of this social change. Virtually all of the decline in personal letter writing over the past several decades is attributable not to individuals' changing their habits, but to the replacement of one generation accustomed to communicating with distant friends and relatives in writing by a younger generation more accustomed to picking up the phone.[8]

The distinction between intracohort and intercohort change is crucial to understanding what's been happening to turnout in America over the last thirty years. Very little of the net decline in voting is attributable to individual change, and virtually all of it is generational. Throughout their lives and whatever their station in life and their level of political interest, baby boomers and their children have been less likely to vote than their parents and grandparents. As boomers and their children became a larger and larger fraction of the national electorate, the average turnout rate was inexorably driven downward.[9]

This generation gap in civic engagement, as we shall see, is common in American communities these days. It is one reason why the decline in turnout continues so ineluctably, seeming to defy all efforts to reverse it (such as motor voter registration) and why the trend is pervasive, affecting not just presidential politics, but also state and local elections and even voting on bond issues. Whatever the ups and downs of individual candidates and issues, each campaign's efforts to get out the vote must begin at a lower base level, for every year the Grim Reaper removes another swath of the most politically engaged generation in the American electorate.

Voting is by a substantial margin the most common form of political activity, and it embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality. Not to vote is to withdraw from the political community. Moreover, like the canary in the mining pit, voting is an instructive proxy measure of broader social change. Compared to demographically matched nonvoters, voters are more likely to be interested in politics, to give to charity, to volunteer, to serve on juries, to attend community school board meetings, to participate in public demonstrations, and to cooperate with their fellow citizens on community affairs. It is sometimes hard to tell whether voting causes community engagement or vice versa, although some recent evidence suggests that the act of voting itself encourages volunteering and other forms of good citizenship. So it is hardly a small matter for American democracy when voting rates decline by 25 percent or more.[10]

On the other hand, in some important respects voting is not a typical mode of political participation. Based on their exhaustive assessment of different forms of participation in American politics, political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady conclude that "it is incomplete and misleading to understand citizen participation solely through the vote. . . . Compared with those who engage in various other political acts, voters report a different mix of gratification and a different bundle of issue concerns as being behind their activity. . . . [V]oting is sui generis." Declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life.[11] Like a fever, electoral abstention is even more important as a sign of deeper trouble in the body politic than as a malady itself. It is not just from the voting booth that Americans are increasingly AWOL.

Political knowledge and interest in public affairs are critical preconditions for more active forms of involvement. If you don't know the rules of the game and the players and don't care about the outcome, you're unlikely to try playing yourself. Encouragingly, Americans in the aggregate at century's end are about as likely to know, for example, which party controls the House of Representatives or who their senators are as were their grandparents a half century ago. On the other hand, we are much better educated than our grandparents, and since civics knowledge is boosted by formal education, it is surprising that civics knowledge has not improved accordingly. The average college graduate today knows little more about public affairs than did the average high school graduate in the 1940s.[12]

Roughly every other month from 1974 to 1998 Roper pollsters asked Americans, "Have you recently been taking a good deal of interest in current events and what's happening in the world today, some interest, or not very much interest?" Popular interest in current events naturally tends to rise and fall with what's in the news, so this chart of attention to public affairs looks like the sawtooth traces left by an errant seismograph. Beneath these choppy waves, however, the tide of the public's interest in current events gradually ebbed by roughly 20 percent over this quarter century. Similarly, another long-term series of annual surveys found that political interest steadily slumped by one-fifth between 1975 and 1999.[13] Scandals and war can still rouse our attention, but generally speaking, fewer Americans follow public affairs now than did a quarter century ago.

Even more worrying are intergenerational differences in political knowledge and interest. Like the decline in voting turnout, to which it is linked, the slow slump in interest in politics and current events is due to the replacement of an older generation that was relatively interested in public affairs by a younger generation that is relatively uninterested. Among both young and old, of course, curiosity about public affairs continues to fluctuate in response to daily headlines, but the base level of interest is gradually fading, as an older generation of news and politics junkies passes slowly from the scene. The fact that the decline is generation-specific, rather than nationwide, argues against the view that public affairs have simply become boring in some objective sense.

The post–baby boom generations—roughly speaking, men and women who were born after 1964 and thus came of age in the 1980s and 1990s—are substantially less knowledgeable about public affairs, despite the proliferation of sources of information. Even in the midst of national election campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, these young people were about a third less likely than their elders to know, for instance, which political party controlled the House of Representatives.[14]

Today's generation gap in political knowledge does not reflect some permanent tendency for the young to be less well informed than their elders but is instead a recent development. From the earliest opinion polls in the 1940s to the mid-1970s, younger people were at least as well informed as their elders were, but that is no longer the case. This news and information gap, affecting not just politics, but even things like airline crashes, terrorism, and financial news, first opened up with the boomers in the 1970s and widened considerably with the advent of the X generation. Daily newspaper readership among people under thirty-five dropped from two-thirds in 1965 to one-third in 1990, at the same time that TV news viewership in this same age group fell from 52 percent to 41 percent. Today's under-thirties pay less attention to the news and know less about current events than their elders do today or than people their age did two or three decades ago.[15]

• • •

So voting in America is down by about a quarter, and interest in public affairs by about one-fifth, over the last two or three decades. Not all measures of political interest are declining. Americans seem to follow national election campaigns no less today than three or four decades ago. During the national elections of the 1990s, as many of us said that we "talked about politics" or tried to persuade someone else how to vote as people did in the 1950s and 1960s. But this surface stability conceals a growing generation gap. Members of today's older generation are slightly *more* interested in electoral campaigns than were their predecessors four decades ago, while youths today are *less* interested than youths were in the 1950s and 1960s.[16] This generation gap in civic engagement, if it persists, will further depress political participation in the future.

Voting and following politics are relatively undemanding forms of participation. In fact, they are not, strictly speaking, forms of social capital at all, because they can be done utterly alone. As we have seen, these measures show some thinning of the ranks of political spectators, particularly at the end of the stadium where the younger generation sits. But most of the fans are still in their seats, following the action and chatting about the antics of the star players. How about the grassroots gladiators who volunteer to work for political parties, posting signs, attending campaign rallies, and the like? What is the evidence on trends in partisan participation?

On the positive side of the ledger, one might argue, party organizations themselves are as strong as ever at both state and local levels. Over the last thirty to forty years these organizations have become bigger, richer, and more professional. During presidential campaigns from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, more and more voters reported being contacted by one or both of the major political parties. After a slump from 1980 to 1992, this measure of party vitality soared nearly to an all-time high in 1996, as GOTV ("Get out the vote") activities blossomed.[17]

Party finances, too, skyrocketed in the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1976 and 1986, for example, the Democrats' intake rose at more than twice the rate of inflation, while the Republicans' rose at more than four times the rate of inflation. More money meant more staff, more polling, more advertising, better candidate recruitment and training, and more party outreach. The number of political organizations, partisan and nonpartisan, with regular paid staff has exploded over the last two decades. Nearly every election year since 1980 has set a new record by this standard of organizational proliferation, and the pace of growth has clearly tended to accelerate. The growth chart for this political "industry" (see figure 2) exhibits an ebullience more familiar in Silicon Valley. The business of politics in America has never been healthier, or so it would seem.[18]

Yet viewed by the "consumers" in the political marketplace, this picture of vigorous health seems a bizarre parody. The rate of party identification—the

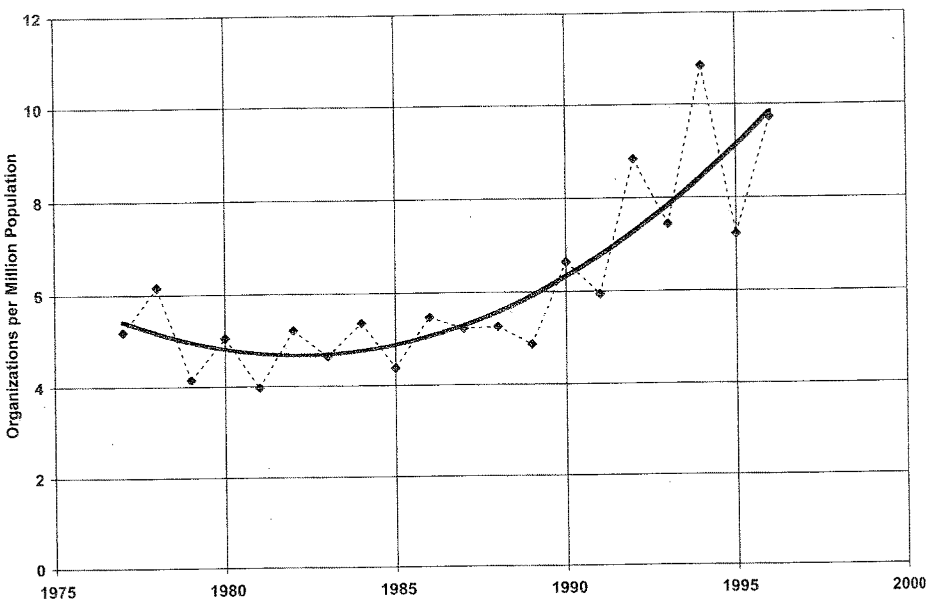

Figure 2: Political Organizations with Regular Paid Staff, 1977–1996

voter's sense of commitment to her own team—fell from more than 75 percent around 1960 to less than 65 percent in the late 1990s. Despite a partial recovery in the late 1980s, at century's end party "brand loyalty" remained well below the levels of the 1950s and early 1960s. What is more, this form of political engagement is significantly lower in more recent cohorts, so that as older, more partisan voters depart from the electorate to be replaced by younger independents, the net attachment to the parties may continue to decline.[19] Again, the Grim Reaper is silently at work, lowering political involvement.

Beyond party identification, at the grassroots level attending a campaign meeting or volunteering to work for a political party has become much rarer over the last thirty years. From the 1950s to the 1960s growing numbers of Americans worked for a political party during election campaigns, ringing doorbells, stuffing envelopes, and the like. Since 1968, however, that form of political engagement has plunged, reaching an all-time low for a presidential election year in 1996. Attendance at political meetings and campaign rallies has followed a similar trajectory over the last half century—up from the 1950s to the 1960s, instability in the 1970s, and general decline since the 1980s.[20] (Figure 3 charts these trends.) In short, while the parties themselves are better financed and more professionally staffed than ever, fewer and fewer Americans participate in partisan political activities.

How can we reconcile these two conflicting pictures—organizational

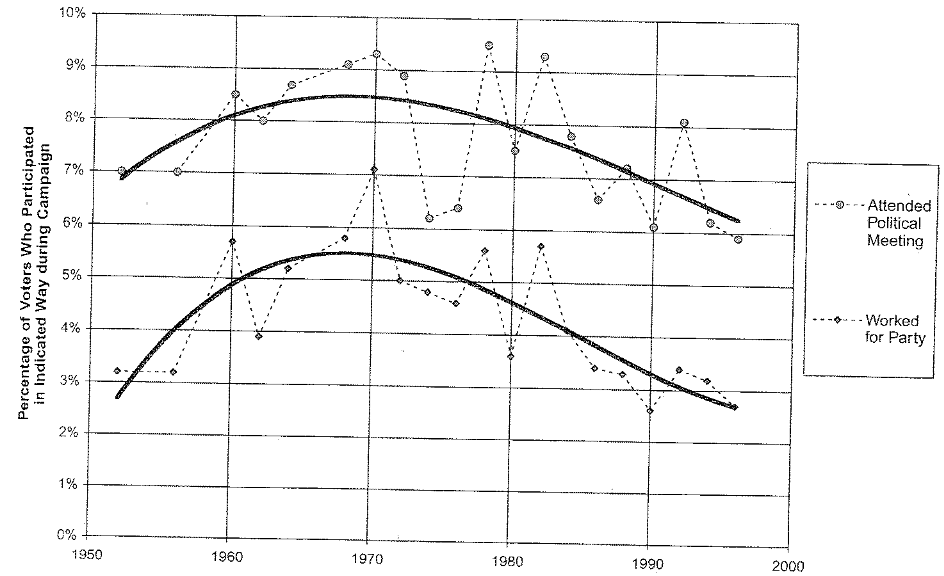

Figure 3: Citizen Participation in Campaign Activities, 1952–1996

health, as seen from the parties, and organizational decay, as seen from the voters' side? One clue to this paradox is the ratio of voters who say they have been *contacted by* a party in the latest campaign to voters who say that they have *worked for* a party in that same campaign. The last three decades of the twentieth century witnessed an accelerating trend toward more and more voter contacts but fewer and fewer party workers. By 1996 this ratio was 2.5 times greater than the equivalent figure in 1968.[21]

At first blush one might admire the growing "productivity" in this flourishing industry. Each "worker" seems to be producing more and more "contacts." In reality, however, this trend is evidence of the professionalization and commercialization of politics in America. The "contacts" that voters report are, in fact, less and less likely to be a visit from a neighborhood party worker and more and more likely to be an anonymous call from a paid phone bank. Less and less party activity involves volunteer collaboration among committed partisans. More and more involves the skilled (and expensive) techniques of effective mass marketing. This trend goes hand in hand with the explosive growth of direct-mail fund-raising and political action committees (PACs) formed to channel financial support to party organizations. During the same period that citizen involvement in party activities was slumping by more than half, spending on presidential nomination and election campaigns exploded from $35 million in 1964 to over $700 million in 1996, a nearly fivefold increase even in constant dollars. The bottom line in the political industry is this:

Financial capital—the wherewithal for mass marketing—has steadily replaced social capital—that is, grassroots citizen networks—as the coin of the realm.[22]

On reflection, then, the contrast between increasing party organizational vitality and declining voter involvement is perfectly intelligible. Since their "consumers" are tuning out from politics, parties have to work harder and spend much more, competing furiously to woo votes, workers, and donations, and to do that they need a (paid) organizational infrastructure. Party-as-organization and party-in-government have become stronger, even as the public has grown less attached to the parties.[23] If we think of politics as an industry, we might delight in its new "labor-saving efficiency," but if we think of politics as democratic deliberation, to leave people out is to miss the whole point of the exercise.

Participation in politics is increasingly based on the checkbook, as money replaces time. While membership in a political club was cut in half between 1967 and 1987, the fraction of the public that contributed financially to a political campaign nearly doubled. "Nationalization and professionalization have redefined the role of citizen activist as, increasingly, a writer of checks and letters," conclude political scientist Verba and his colleagues. "Whatever puzzles there may be concerning the trajectory of participation over the past few decades, there was an unambiguous increase in the amount of money donated to politics over the period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s."[24] There may be nearly as many fans in the political stadium nowadays, but they are not watching an amateur or even a semipro match. Whether the slick professional game they have become accustomed to watching is worth the increasingly high admission price is another matter.

So FAR we have been considering political participation from the important but limited perspective of partisan and electoral activities. For most Americans, however, national election campaigns occupy only a small part of their time and attention. What about trends in political participation outside the context of national elections, especially at the local level? Until recently we lacked any systematic evidence of long-term trends in how involved Americans are in community affairs. However, a recently retrieved archive of unparalleled depth enables us to track in great detail a wide range of civic activities.

Roughly every month from 1973 through 1994 the Roper survey organization presented thousands of Americans with a simple checklist of a dozen different civic activities—from signing a petition or attending a public meeting to working for a political party or running for office.[25] "Which, if any, of these things have you happened to do in the past year?" the pollsters asked. Some of the activities are relatively common: each year across these two decades roughly one in three of us has signed a petition and roughly one in six has attended a public meeting on town or school affairs. On the other hand, some items on the checklist are quite rare. For example, fewer than one American in a hundred has run for public office in the past twelve months. Altogether these more than four hundred thousand interviews provide exceptionally rich raw material for compiling detailed civic statistics for Americans over more than two decades.

How did patterns of civic and political participation change over this period? The answer is simple: *The frequency of virtually every form of community involvement measured in the Roper polls declined significantly, from the most common—petition signing—to the least common—running for office.* Americans are playing virtually every aspect of the civic game less frequently today than we did two decades ago.

Consider first the new evidence on trends in partisan and campaign activities. (Figure 4 charts these trends.)[26] In round numbers, Americans were roughly half as likely to work for a political party or attend a political rally or speech in the 1990s as in the 1970s. Barely two decades ago election campaigns were for millions of Americans an occasion for active participation in national deliberation. Campaigning was something we did, not something we merely witnessed. Now for almost all Americans, an election campaign is something that happens around us, a grating element in the background noise of everyday life, a fleeting image on a TV screen. Strikingly, the dropout rate from these campaign activities (about 50 percent) is even greater than the dropout rate in the voting booth itself (25 percent).

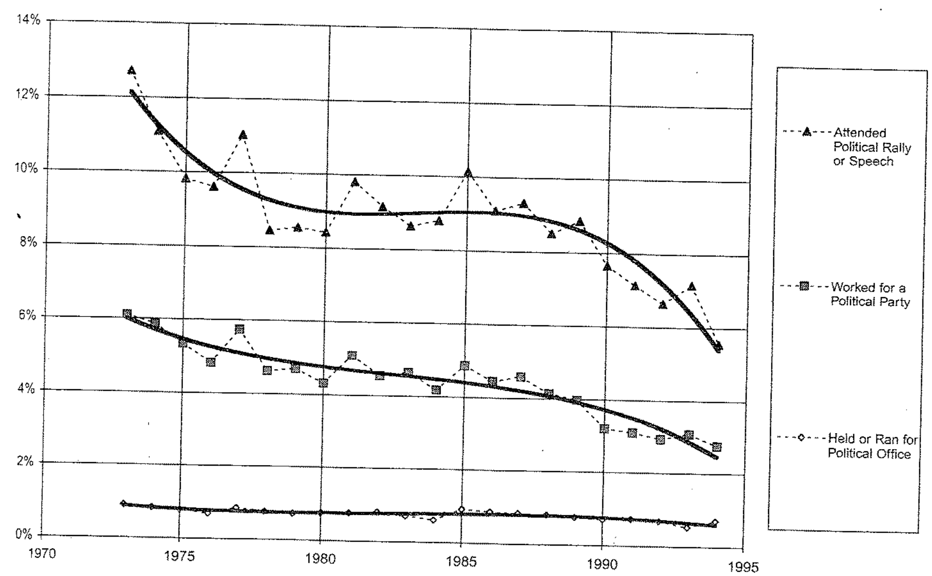

Figure 4: Trends in Civic Engagement I: Partisan Activities

The new evidence also includes a much more demanding measure of political involvement—that is, actually running for or holding office. So few people ever become this involved politically that it takes a social microscope like that provided by the Roper archive to discover that even this intense form of participation has faded. Over the last two decades the number of office seekers in any year at all levels in the American body politic—from school board to town council—shrank by perhaps 15 percent.[27] As a result of this decline, Americans lost more than a quarter million candidates annually to choose among. It is impossible to know what price we paid collectively for the loss of those potential grassroots leaders—not only in terms of talent and creativity, but also in terms of competitive pressure on incumbent officeholders—but it is hard to believe that there was no loss at all.

That Americans in recent years have deserted party politics is perhaps not astonishing news, for antiparty sentiments had become a commonplace of punditry even before Ross Perot rode the antiparty bandwagon to national prominence in 1992. But how about communal forms of activity, like attending local meetings, serving local organizations, and taking part in "good government" activities? Here the new evidence is startling, for involvement in these everyday forms of community life has dwindled as rapidly as has partisan and electoral participation. (The relevant evidence is summarized in figure 5.) The pattern is broadly similar to that for campaign activities—a slump in the late 1970s, a pause in the early 1980s, and then a renewed and intensified decline from the late 1980s into the 1990s.

Between 1973 and 1994 the number of Americans who attended even one public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year was cut by 40 percent. Over the same two decades the ranks of those who had served as an officer or a committee member for a local club or organization—*any* local club or organization—were thinned by an identical 40 percent. Over these twenty years the number of members of "some group interested in better government" fell by one-third.[28]

Like battlefield casualties dryly reported from someone else's distant war, these unadorned numbers scarcely convey the decimation of American community life they represent. In round numbers every single percentage-point drop represents two million fewer Americans involved in some aspect of community life every year. So, the numbers imply, we now have sixteen million fewer participants in public meetings about local affairs, eight million fewer committee members, eight million fewer local organizational leaders, and three million fewer men and women organized to work for better government than we would have had if Americans had stayed as involved in community affairs as we were in the mid-1970s.

Keep in mind, too, that these surveys invited people to mention *any* local organization—not only "old-fashioned" garden clubs and Shriners lodges with their odd hats, but also trendy upstarts, like environmental action committees

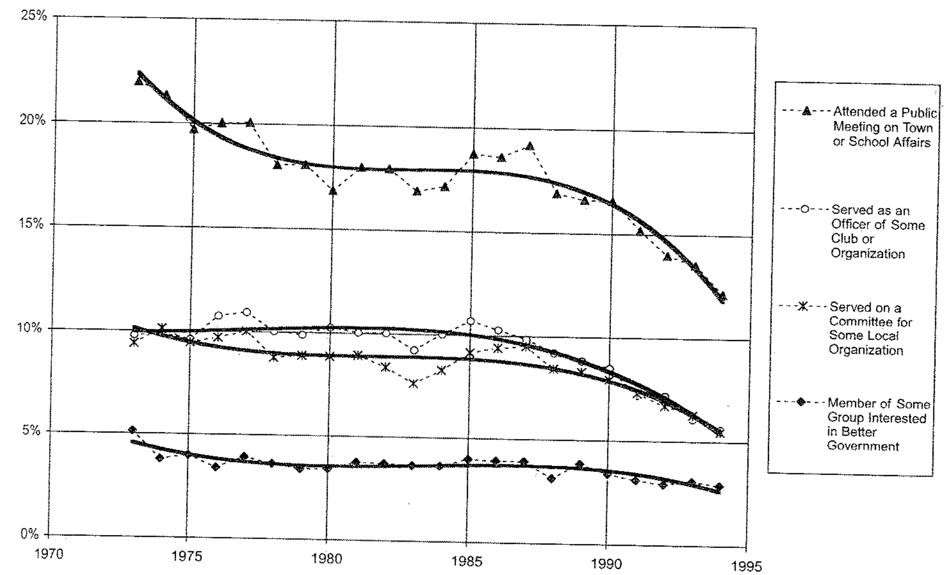

Figure 5: Trends in Civic Engagement II: Communal Participation

and local branches of the antiabortion movement. People were asked whether they had attended *any* public meeting on town or school affairs in the last year—not merely droning sessions of the planning board, but also angry protests against condom distribution in the high school or debates about curbside recycling. Year after year, fewer and fewer of us took part in the everyday deliberations that constitute grassroots democracy. In effect, more than a third of America's civic infrastructure simply evaporated between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s.

Finally, the Roper surveys also shed light on trends in various forms of public expression—signing petitions, writing Congress, writing an article or a letter to the editor, and making a speech. Once again, each of these types of activity has become less common over these twenty years. (See figure 6 for details.) This is most visible in the case of petition signing, because it is the single most common form of political activity measured in the Roper surveys, but the decline is also clear in the case of letters to Congress. In both cases, however, the chart is essentially flat for the first half of this period and then steadily downward in the second half. Much smaller proportions of the population claim to have given a speech or written a letter to the editor or an article for a newspaper or magazine within the previous year, so clear trends are harder to spot at this degree of magnification, though here too the general tendency is downward.[29]

The changes in American political participation traced in the Roper

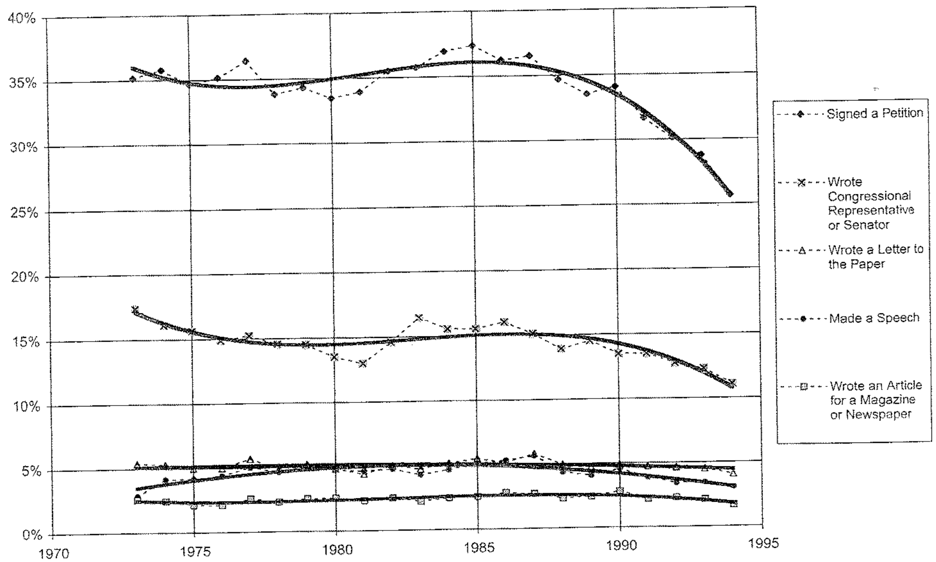

Figure 6: Trends in Civic Engagement III: Public Expression

archive are not identical across all forms of involvement. In some cases, such as attending a public meeting or a political rally, the trend is more or less steadily downward across the two decades, but in other cases, such as signing a petition, the drop is concentrated in the latter half of the period. And in some cases, such as running for office or writing an article for a magazine or newspaper, the decline is quite modest. Across the entire repertoire, however, the decline appears to have accelerated after 1985. Across the twelve separate activities, the average decline was 10 percent between 1973–74 and 1983–84, compared with 24 percent between 1983–84 and 1993–94.

The fraction of the American public utterly uninvolved in any of these civic activities rose by nearly one-third over these two decades. In 1973 most Americans engaged in at least one of these forms of civic involvement every year. By 1994 *most did not engage in any.* Thirty-two million fewer American adults were involved in community affairs in the mid-1990s than would have been involved at the proportional rate of two decades earlier.

We can get a better clue as to the implications of this loss of community life by arraying the dozen activities according to the degree of decline. (See table 1.) Strikingly, the forms of participation that have withered most noticeably reflect organized activities at the community level. The verbs describing these modes of involvement in the top half of the table reflect action in cooperation with others: "serve," "work," "attend." Each of these activities can be undertaken only if others in the community are also active. Conversely, the activities (in the bottom half of the table) that have declined most slowly are, for the most part, actions that one can undertake as an individual. Indeed, most of these activities merely require a pen or a keyboard, for the most common verb in this section of the list is "write."

In other words, the more that my activities depend on the actions of others, the greater the drop-off in my participation.[30] Even if everyone else in my town is a civic dropout, I can still write my congressman—or even run for Congress myself. On the other hand, if I'm the only member of a committee, it's not a "committee," and if no one else comes to a meeting on the bond issue, it is not a "meeting," even if I show up. Knowing that, I may well back out, too. In other words, it is precisely those forms of civic engagement most vulnerable to coordination problems and free riding—those activities that brought citizens *together,* those activities that most clearly embody social capital—that have declined most rapidly.[31]

One politically important consequence is that "cooperative" forms of behavior, like serving on committees, have declined more rapidly than "expressive" forms of behavior, like writing letters. It takes (at least) two to cooperate, but only one to express himself. Collaborative forms of political involvement engage broader public interests, whereas expressive forms are more individualistic and correspond to more narrowly defined interests. Any political system needs to counterpoise moments for articulating grievances and moments for resolving differences.

The changing pattern of civic participation in American communities

Table 1: Trends in political and community participation

	Relative change 1973–74 to 1993–94
served as an officer of some club or organization	−42%
worked for a political party	−42%
served on a committee for some local organization	−39%
attended a public meeting on town or school affairs	−35%
attended a political rally or speech	−34%
participated in at least one of these twelve activities	−25%
made a speech	−24%
wrote congressman or senator	−23%
signed a petition	−22%
was a member of some "better government" group	−19%
held or ran for political office	−16%
wrote a letter to the paper	−14%
wrote an article for a magazine or newspaper	−10%

Source: Roper Social and Political Trends surveys, 1973–1994 over the last two decades has shifted the balance in the larger society between the articulation of grievances and the aggregation of coalitions to address those grievances. In this sense, this disjunctive pattern of decline—cooperation falling more rapidly than self-expression—may well have encouraged the single-issue blare and declining civility of contemporary political discourse.[32]

These declines in participation appear all along the spectrum from hyperactivists to civic slugs. The fraction of the public who engaged in *none* of these dozen forms of civic participation rose by more than one-third over this period (from 46 percent in 1973 to 64 percent in 1994), while the band of civic activists who engaged in at least three different types of activity was cut nearly in half (from 20 percent to 11 percent). Moreover, these trends appear consistently in all sections of the population and all areas of the country—men and women, blacks and whites, central cities, suburbs, and rural areas, Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, upper class and lower class, and so on.

In absolute terms, the declines are greatest among the better educated. Among the college educated, attendance at public meetings was nearly halved from 34 percent to 18 percent. On the other hand, because the less educated were less involved to begin with, in relative terms their rates of participation have been even harder hit. Attendance at public meetings fell from 20 percent to 8 percent among those whose education ended in high school and from 7 percent to 3 percent among those who attended only elementary school. The last several decades have witnessed a serious deterioration of community involvement among Americans from all walks of life.

Let's sum up what we've learned about trends in political participation. On the positive side of the ledger, Americans today score about as well on a civics test as our parents and grandparents did, though our self-congratulation should be restrained, since we have on average four more years of formal schooling than they had.[33] Moreover, at election time we are no less likely than they were to talk politics or express interest in the campaign. On the other hand, since the mid-1960s, the weight of the evidence suggests, despite the rapid rise in levels of education Americans have become perhaps 10–15 percent less likely to voice our views publicly by running for office or writing Congress or the local newspaper, 15–20 percent less interested in politics and public affairs, roughly 25 percent less likely to vote, roughly 35 percent less likely to attend public meetings, both partisan and nonpartisan, and roughly 40 percent less engaged in party politics and indeed in political and civic organizations of all sorts. We remain, in short, reasonably well-informed spectators of public affairs, but many fewer of us actually partake in the game.

Might all this be explained as a natural consequence of rising public alienation from politics and declining confidence in political activity of all sorts? Perhaps the trends we have reviewed thus far simply reflect the fact that more Americans than ever before are "turned off" and "tuned out" from politics. Certainly political unhappiness of all sorts has mushroomed during these

past three decades. Americans in the mid-1960s were strikingly confident in the benevolence and responsiveness of their political institutions. Only about one in four agreed then with sentiments like "People like me don't have much say in government" and "Public officials don't care what people like me think." Three in four said that you *could* "trust the government in Washington to do what is right all or most of the time." Whether or not they were fooling themselves, Americans in the 1960s felt politically effective.

Such views nowadays seem antiquated or naive. In virtually every case the proportions agreeing and disagreeing with such ideas essentially have been reversed. In the 1990s roughly three in four Americans *didn't* trust the government to do what is right most of the time. A single comparison captures the transformation: In April 1966, with the Vietnam War raging and race riots in Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta, 66 percent of Americans *rejected* the view that "the people running the country don't really care what happens to you." In December 1997, in the midst of the longest period of peace and prosperity in more than two generations, 57 percent of Americans *endorsed* that same view.[34] Today's cynical views may or may not be more accurate than the Pollyannaish views of the early sixties, but they undermine the political confidence necessary to motivate and sustain political involvement.

So perhaps because of the dysfunctional ugliness of contemporary politics and the absence of large, compelling collective projects, we have redirected our energies away from conventional politics into less formal, more voluntary, more effective channels. Whether the story of our disengagement from public affairs is as straightforward as that depends on what we find when we turn next to trends in social and civic involvement.

CHAPTER 3

Civic Participation

> Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. . . . Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.[1]

THESE LINES from Alexis de Tocqueville, a perceptive French visitor to early-nineteenth-century America, are often quoted by social scientists because they capture an important and enduring fact about our country. Today, as 170 years ago, Americans are more likely to be involved in voluntary associations than are citizens of most other nations; only the small nations of northern Europe outrank us as joiners.[2]

The ingenuity of Americans in creating organizations knows no bounds. Wandering through the *World Almanac* list of 2,380 groups with some national visibility from the Aaron Burr Society to the Zionist Organization of America, one discovers such intriguing bodies as the Grand United Order of Antelopes, the Elvis Presley Burning Love Fan Club, the Polish Army Veterans Association of America, the Southern Appalachian Dulcimer Association, and the National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History. Some of these groups may be the organizational equivalent of vanity press publications, but surveys of American communities over the decades have uncovered an impressive organizational vitality at the grassroots level. Many Americans today are actively in-

volved in educational or school service groups like PTAs, recreational groups, work-related groups, such as labor unions and professional organizations, religious groups (in addition to churches), youth groups, service and fraternal clubs, neighborhood or homeowners groups, and other charitable organizations. Generally speaking, this same array of organizational affiliations has characterized Americans since at least the 1950s.[3]

Official membership in formal organizations is only one facet of social capital, but it is usually regarded as a useful barometer of community involvement. What can we learn from organizational records and social surveys about Americans' participation in the organized life of their communities? Broadly speaking, American voluntary associations may be divided into three categories: community based, church based, and work based. Let us begin with the most heterogeneous, all those social, civic, and leisure groups that are community based—everything from B'nai B'rith to the Parent-Teacher Association.

The record appears to show an impressive increase in the sheer number of voluntary associations over the last three decades. The number of nonprofit organizations of national scope listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations* more than doubled from 10,299 to 22,901 between 1968 and 1997. Even taking account of the increase in population during this period, the number of national organizations per capita has increased by nearly two-thirds over the last three decades (see figure 7). Excited by this fact, some observers speak, perhaps too hastily, of a "participation revolution" in American politics and society. This impression of a rapid growth in American organizational life is reinforced—but also qualified—by numerous recent studies of the explosion of interest groups represented in Washington since the 1960s. What these studies reveal is ever more groups speaking (or claiming to speak) on behalf of ever more categories of citizens.[4]

In fact, relatively few of the tens of thousands of nonprofit associations whose proliferation is traced in figure 7 actually have mass membership. Many, such as the Animal Nutrition Research Council, the National Conference on Uniform Traffic Accident Statistics, and the National Slag Association, have no individual members at all. A close student of associations in America, David Horton Smith, found that barely half of the groups in the 1988 *Encyclopedia of Associations* actually had individual members. The median membership of national associations in the 1988 *Encyclopedia* was only one thousand. A comparable study of associations represented in the 1962 *Encyclopedia of Associations* had found a median size of roughly ten thousand members.[5] In other words, over this quarter century the number of voluntary associations roughly tripled, but the average membership seems to be roughly one-tenth as large—more groups, but most of them much smaller. The organizational eruption between the 1960s and the 1990s represented a proliferation of letterheads, not a boom of grassroots participation.

Also revealing is the increasing geographic concentration of national

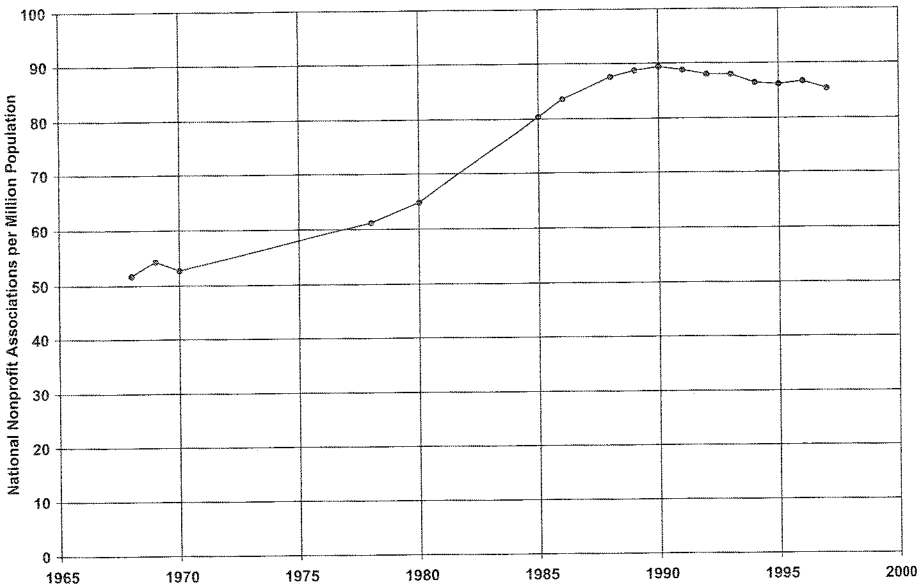

Figure 7: The Growth of National Nonprofit Associations, 1968–1997

headquarters. Membership organizations with local chapters and substantial grassroots activity are headquartered in places like Irving, Texas (Boy Scouts); New Haven, Connecticut (Knights of Columbus); Indianapolis, Indiana (American Legion and Kiwanis); Birmingham, Alabama (Civitan); Tulsa, Oklahoma (Jaycees); Oak Brook, Illinois (Lions Clubs); St. Louis, Missouri (Optimists); Baltimore, Maryland (NAACP); Kansas City, Missouri (the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Camp Fire Boys and Girls); Atlanta, Georgia (Boys and Girls Clubs); or even New York City (Hadassah and Alcoholics Anonymous). These venerable organizations are headquartered near important concentrations of their members.

The headquarters of the nation's largest organization and one of the most rapidly growing, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), however, is not in Florida or California or Arizona (where its constituents are concentrated), but at 6th and E Streets in Washington, a few minutes' walk from Capitol Hill. Similarly, the most visible newcomers to the national associational scene are headquartered within ten blocks of the intersection of 14th and K Streets in Washington: the Children's Defense Fund, Common Cause, the National Organization for Women, the National Wildlife Federation, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Wilderness Society, the National Right to Life Committee, and Zero Population Growth. The "new associationism" is almost entirely a denizen of the Washington hothouse.[6] The proliferating new organizations are professionally staffed advocacy organizations, not member-centered, locally based associations.[7] The newer groups focus on expressing policy views in the national political debate, not on providing regular connection *among* individual members at the grass roots.

Though these new groups often depend on financial support from ordinary citizens and may speak faithfully on their behalf, they are not really composed of citizen members in the same sense that a church congregation or a reading group or a fraternal organization is. One distinctive feature of a social-capital-creating formal organization is that it includes local chapters in which members can meet one another. Of eighty-three public-interest groups in the early 1970s (including virtually all such organizations at the national level, from the Agribusiness Accountability Project to Zero Population Growth and from the American Civil Liberties Union and Common Cause to the Liberty Lobby and Young Americans for Freedom), two-thirds had no local chapters at all, and another 12 percent had no more than twenty-five chapters nationwide, or an average of one for every two states. Only nine of the eighty-three groups had as many as one hundred local chapters nationwide.[8] By way of comparison, there are seven thousand local Rotary chapters in America, to take a typical "old-fashioned," chapter-based civic organization. In other words, *Rotary alone has nearly twice as many chapters as all eighty-three public-interest groups combined.*

Another survey of 205 national "citizens groups" in 1985 confirmed that less than one-third of them had chapters to which individual members belonged and paid dues. Moreover, the more recently founded the citizens group, the *less* likely it was to be chapter based, so that among all citizens' groups founded after 1965, barely one in four had chapters with individual members.[9] These are mailing list organizations, in which membership means essentially contributing money to a national office to support a cause. Membership in the newer groups means moving a pen, not making a meeting.

These new mass-membership organizations are plainly of growing political importance. Probably the most dramatic example is the AARP, which grew from four hundred thousand card-carrying members in 1960 to thirty-three million in the mid-1990s. But membership in good standing in the AARP requires only a few seconds annually—as long as it takes to sign a check. The AARP is politically significant, but it demands little of its members' energies and contributes little to their social capital. Less than 10 percent of the AARP's members belong to local chapters, and according to AARP staff, the organization's grassroots activities were on life support even during the period of maximum membership growth. In many respects, such organizations have more in common with mail-order commercial organizations than with old-fashioned face-to-face associations. Some of the new organizations actually have their roots in commercial ventures. The AARP, for example, was originally founded as a mail-order insurance firm.[10] Similarly, although the American Automobile Association has the form of an association with members, it is essentially a commercial organization, providing services in exchange for fees.

The national administrators of such organizations are among the most feared lobbyists in Washington, in large part because of their massive mailing lists. Ironically, group involvement with government has exploded at the same time that citizen involvement with both government and groups has diminished. To be sure, political representation is not a new role for voluntary associations. Among the most energetic examples of voluntary association in American history are the abolitionist and temperance movements of the early nineteenth century. Much of the best (as well as some of the worst) in our current national politics is embodied in those advocacy organizations around 14th and K Streets.

From the point of view of social connectedness, however, the new organizations are sufficiently different from classic "secondary associations" that we need to invent a new label—perhaps "tertiary associations."[11] For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter.[12] Few ever attend any meetings of such organizations—many never have meetings at all—and most members are unlikely ever knowingly to encounter any other member. The bond between any two members of the National Wildlife Federation or the National Rifle Association is less like the bond between two members of a gardening club or prayer group and more like the bond between two Yankees fans on opposite coasts (or perhaps two devoted L. L. Bean catalog users): they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other's existence. Their ties are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but *not* to each other.

So the vigor of the new Washington-based organizations, though they are large, proliferating, and powerful, is an unreliable guide to the vitality of social connectedness and civic engagement in American communities. Several illustrations may clarify.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, the number of independent veterans' organizations nearly tripled between 1980 and 1997. This was the single most vigorous sector of organizational growth during this period, at least measured by numbers of organizations. In fact, however, careful national surveys over this same period show that the rate of membership in veterans' organizations among American men and women *fell* by roughly 10 percent. This slump is not surprising, since the number of living veterans fell by 9 percent across these same eighteen years. Explosive growth of organizations claiming to speak on behalf of veterans coincided with declining involvement by veterans. Similarly, the number of trade unions cataloged in the *Encyclopedia of Associations* grew by 4 percent between 1980 and 1997, while the fraction of employees belonging to unions plummeted by more than 35 percent.[13] More organizations do not mean more members.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS have been among the growth stocks in the associational world over the last several decades. In tracking the expansion of several of the most dynamic associations, we noted several periods of rapid growth, presumably reflecting major shifts in grassroots engagement with environmental issues. Probing further reveals that mail-order "membership" turns out to be a poor measure of civic engagement. For example, membership in the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) tripled from one hundred thousand in 1988 to three hundred thousand in 1995. EDF officials, however, attribute this breathtaking expansion to "better marketing efforts," including a switch to "front-end prospecting" (providing a free gift to nonmembers and then asking for a donation) instead of "back-end prospecting" (sending the gifts after donations have been received). Greenpeace became the largest environmental organization in America, accounting for more than one-third of all members in national environmental groups at its peak in 1990, through an extremely aggressive direct-mail program. At that point Greenpeace leaders, concerned about the spectacle of an environmental group printing tons of junk mail, temporarily cut back on direct-mail solicitation. Almost immediately their membership began to hemorrhage, and by 1998 Greenpeace membership had plummeted by 85 percent.[14]

Trends in numbers of voluntary associations nationwide are not a reliable guide to trends in social capital, especially for associations that lack a structure of local chapters in which members can actually participate. What evidence can we glean from organizations that *do* involve their members directly in community-based activity? The membership rolls of such associations across the twentieth century reveal a strikingly parallel pattern across many different civic associations. This pattern is summarized in figure 8, which is a composite of the changing membership rates for thirty-two diverse national, chapter-based organizations throughout the twentieth century, ranging from B'nai B'rith and the Knights of Columbus to the Elks club and the Parent-Teacher Association.[15] In each case we measure membership as a fraction of the pool of members in the population—4-H membership as a fraction of all rural youth, Hadassah membership as a fraction of all Jewish women, and so on. Embodied in the broad outline are a number of crucial facts about associational life in American communities throughout the twentieth century.

For most of the twentieth century growing numbers of Americans were involved in such chapter-based associations.[16] Of course, the U.S. population was growing, too, but our analysis here eliminates that inflation factor by considering the membership rate as a percentage of the relevant population. So the

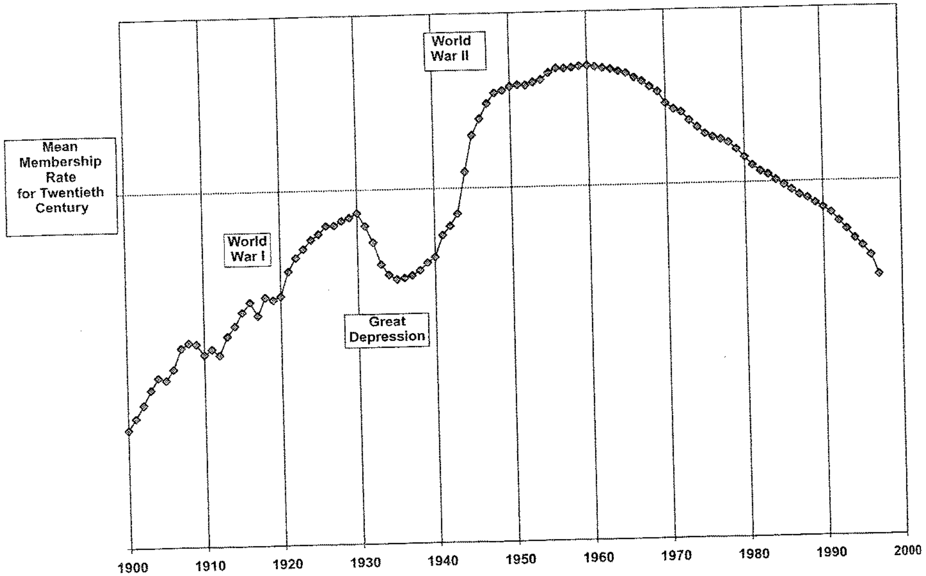

Figure 8: Average Membership Rate in Thirty-two National Chapter-Based Associations, 1900–1997

long upward wave in this figure reflects the fact that more and more women belonged to women's clubs, more rural residents belonged to the Grange, more youths belonged to the Scouts, more Jews belonged to Hadassah and B'nai B'rith, and more men belonged to service clubs. Probably one important factor in this steady growth was the continuing rise in educational levels, but in the aggregate the increase in membership exceeded even that. As the decades passed, America seemed more and more to fit Tocqueville's description.

The sharp dip in this generally rising line of civic involvement in the 1930s is evidence of the traumatic impact of the Great Depression on American communities. The membership records of virtually every adult organization in this sample bear the scars of that period. In some cases the effect was a brief pause in ebullient growth, but in others the reversal was extraordinary. Membership in the League of Women Voters, for example, was cut in half between 1930 and 1935, as was membership in the Elks, the Moose, and the Knights of Columbus. This period of history underlines the effects of acute economic distress on civic engagement, a topic to which we shall return in chapter 11.

Most of these losses had been recouped, however, by the early 1940s. World War II occasioned a massive outpouring of patriotism and collective solidarity. At war's end those energies were redirected into community life. The two decades following 1945 witnessed one of the most vital periods of community involvement in American history. As a fraction of potential membership, the "market share" for these thirty-two organizations skyrocketed. Because of growing population, the increase was even more dramatic. The breadth of this civic explosion encompassed virtually every organization on the list, from "old-fashioned" ones like the Grange and the Elks (roughly a century old in the 1960s) to the newer service clubs like the Lions and the League of Women Voters (roughly four decades old in the 1960s).

By the late 1950s, however, this burst of community involvement began to tail off, even though absolute membership continued to rise for a while. By the late 1960s and early 1970s membership growth began to fall further behind population growth. At first, club secretaries long accustomed to announcing new membership records with monotonous annual regularity did not notice that their organizations were failing to keep pace with population growth. As the decline deepened, however, absolute membership began to slip and then to plummet. By century's close the massive postwar boom in membership rates in these organizations had been eliminated.[17]

On average, across all these organizations, membership rates began to plateau in 1957, peaked in the early 1960s, and began the period of sustained decline by 1969. On average, membership rates more than doubled between 1940–45 and the peak and were slightly less than halved between the peak and 1997. These averages conceal some important differences among the experience of the various organizations. For example, the effects of the Great Depression varied from organization to organization, with massive declines in the Masons and Hadassah, while membership in youth organizations like the 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts seems to have been immune to the economic distress affecting adults. The postwar boom appears in virtually every case, but for the Grange and the General Federation of Women's Clubs the good times had ended by the mid-1950s, whereas other organizations, like Rotary and Optimists, remained on a higher plateau until the 1980s. NAACP membership spiked sharply during World War II, collapsed in the early 1950s, regained its highest levels in the early 1960s, and then stagnated and slumped again from the 1970s onward. These organizational peculiarities remind us that behind each of these membership declines are scores of individual tales of leadership success and failure, organizational tenacity and strategic blunders, and the vicissitudes of social life and politics.

One useful illustration is provided by the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). In the middle years of the twentieth century the local PTA was among the most common of community organizations. For example, one grassroots survey of associational membership in the early 1960s found that the PTA had more members than any other secular organization. More than one in every six adult Nebraskans reported membership in their local PTA.[18] That the absolute number of PTA members was relatively high during the baby boom is, of course, no surprise at all—more parents, more PTA members. What is more striking, however, is that the *percentage* of parents nationwide who joined the PTA more than doubled between 1945 and 1960, continuing the vertiginous and almost uninterrupted growth of this organization since its founding in 1910. On average, every year throughout the quarter century up to 1960 another 1.6 percent of all American families with kids—more than 400,000 families a year—was added to the PTA membership rolls. Year after year, more and more parents became involved in this way in their children's education.

The reversal of six decades of organizational growth—captured graphically in figure 9—came with shocking suddenness in 1960. When the subsequent decline finally leveled off two decades later, membership in the PTA had returned to the level of 1943, utterly erasing the postwar gains. A brief rebound in the 1980s had all but vanished by the late 1990s. On average, every year throughout the quarter century after 1960 another 1.2 percent of all American families with kids—more than 250,000 families a year—dropped out of the PTA. The best recent study of the PTA concludes that

> membership declined from a high in the early 1960s of almost fifty members per 100 families with children under eighteen to fewer than twenty members per 100 families with children under eighteen in the early 1980s. Although participation rebounded somewhat in the 1980s and the early 1990s, the organization never recaptured its membership heights of the late 1950s and early 1960s. [Recently the organization has experienced renewed decline.] Between 1990 and 1997, the PTA lost half a million members, even though the number of families with children under eighteen grew by over 2 million and public school enrollment grew by over 5 million.[19]

The explosive growth of the PTA was one of the most impressive organizational success stories in American history, its unabated, almost exponential growth over the first six decades of the twentieth century interrupted with only the briefest of pauses during the Great Depression and for a single year during World War II. This success—membership encompassing eventually nearly half the families in America—was due no doubt to the fact that this form of connectedness appealed to millions of parents who wanted to be engaged in some way in their children's education. It is easy in our cynical era to sneer at cookies, cider, and small talk, but membership in the PTA betokened a commitment to participate in a practical, child-focused form of community life.

Yet the PTA's collapse in the last third of the century is no less sensational than its earlier growth. What could account for this dramatic turnaround? Some part of the decline in rates of membership in the PTA is an optical illusion. Parental involvement in local school service organizations (not all of which are affiliated with the national Parent-Teacher Association) did not fall as rapidly as membership in PTA-affiliated groups. First, during the 1970s, following disagreements about school politics, as well as about national dues,

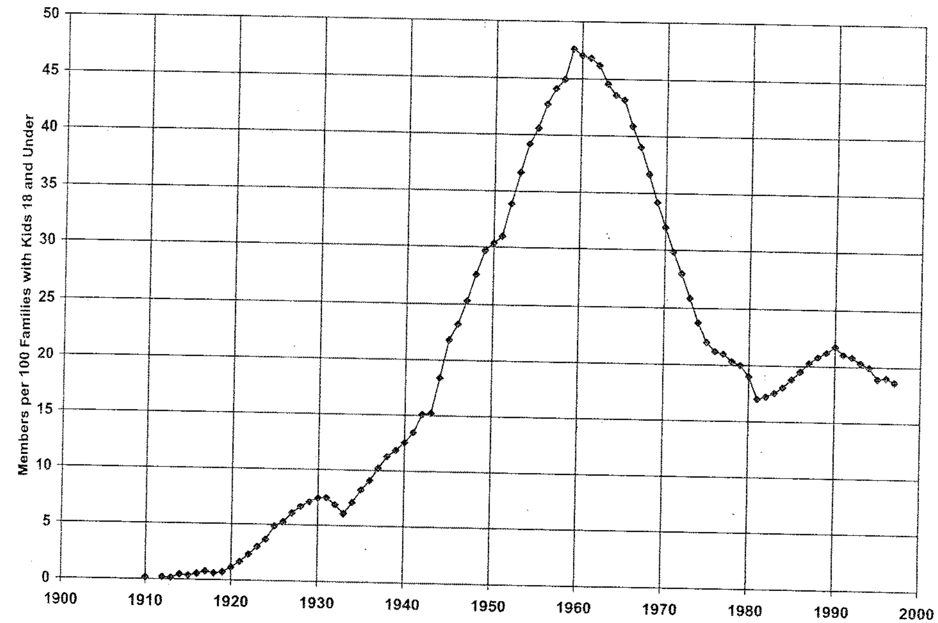

Figure 9: The Rise and Fall of the PTA, 1910–1997

some local parent-teacher organizations disaffiliated from the national PTA either to join competing organizations or to remain wholly independent. As a result, many of the missing local PTAs reappeared as local PTOs (parent-teacher organizations unaffiliated with the national PTA), although many of these now independent local associations themselves subsequently withered. Moreover, bitter battles over school desegregation in the 1960s caused wholesale disaffiliation from the national PTA in several southern states. While a genuine organizational loss, this development may not have marked the withdrawal of southern parents from the organizational life of local schools. Nevertheless, after accounting for all these specific gains and losses, it is reasonably clear that parental participation in parent-teacher groups of all sorts suffered a substantial decline in the decades after 1960.[20] One need not romanticize PTA meetings of the 1950s to recognize that many Americans nowadays are less involved with their kids' education.

No doubt diligent detective work would turn up equally interesting and nuanced stories behind each of the plunging memberships, but the common features across these very diverse organizations—rapid growth to the 1960s, abruptly halted, followed by rapid decline—is a significant piece in the mosaic of evidence on changing civic involvement in American communities. Even after we had explored the details of each organization's rise and decline, we would be left with the remarkable fact that each of these organizations—very different from one another in its constituency, age, and leadership—seems to have entered rough water at about the same time in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

In TWO IMPORTANT RESPECTS, however, membership figures for individual organizations are an uncertain guide to trends in Americans' involvement in voluntary associations. First, the popularity of specific groups may wax and wane quite independently of the general level of community engagement. Even though our historical analysis so far has cast as wide a net as possible in terms of different types of organizations, it is certainly possible that newer, more dynamic organizations have escaped our scrutiny. If so, the picture of decline that we have traced may apply only to "old-fashioned" organizations, not to all community-based organizations. As sociologist Tom Smith has observed, "Ultimately, if we want to know whether group membership *in general* has been increasing [or decreasing], we have to study group membership *in general*."[21]

Second, formal "card-carrying" membership may not accurately reflect actual involvement in community activities. An individual who "belongs to" half a dozen community groups may actually be active in none. What really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership, but active and involved membership. To address these two issues, we need to turn from formal organizational records to social surveys, which can encompass organizational affiliations of all sorts and can distinguish formal membership from actual involvement.

Several reviews of national surveys conducted between the early 1950s and the early 1970s found evidence of steady and sustained growth in organizational memberships of all sorts, but other scholars have questioned whether changes in survey wording might undermine this conclusion.[22] In other words, subtle shifts in the lens of our social time-lapse camera may have sufficiently blurred the successive images that we cannot be sure about the trends during the 1950s and 1960s. However, in 1957 a team of University of Michigan researchers conducted a careful nationwide survey on behalf of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and in 1976 a group led by one of the earlier researchers replicated the 1957 study, taking great care to make the studies as nearly identical as possible.[23] The first wave of surveys was carried out roughly a decade before what organizational records suggest was the postwar peak of civic engagement, whereas the second was conducted roughly a decade after the peak.

In many respects, the Michigan-NIMH study found considerable stability in the life experiences of Americans across these two turbulent decades. Nevertheless, one of their central findings was a "reduced integration of American adults into the social structure."[24] Over these two decades informal socializing

with friends and relatives declined by about 10 percent, organizational memberships fell by 16 percent, and church attendance (a topic that we shall address more directly in a moment) declined by 20 percent. Examined more closely, these surveys found significant declines in membership in unions; church groups; fraternal and veterans organizations; civic groups, such as PTAs; youth groups; charities; and a catch-all "other" category.[25] Thus the best available survey evidence is consistent with the organizational record that membership in voluntary associations among ordinary Americans declined modestly between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s.

For the years after the mid-1970s, the survey evidence becomes substantially richer, and our judgments about trends in this quarter century can be fuller and more confident. Three major survey archives contain relevant information: the General Social Survey (GSS), the Roper Social and Political Trends archive, and the DDB Needham Life Style archive.[26]

How has group membership in general changed over the last quarter century? The GSS provides the most comprehensive measure of trends in Americans' formal membership in many different types of groups. The short answer is that formal membership rates have not changed much, at least if we ignore rising educational levels. The percentage of the public who claim formal membership in at least one organization has fallen a bit, but that trend has been glacial so far, from a little less than 75 percent in the mid-1970s to a little less than 70 percent in the early 1990s.[27] Membership in church-related groups, labor unions, fraternal organizations, and veterans groups has declined, but this decline has been mostly offset by increases in professional, ethnic, service, hobby, sports, school fraternity, and other groups. To be sure, the only substantial increase is in the domain of professional organizations, and as we shall see later, that growth has barely kept pace with occupational growth in the professions themselves. If we take into account the rise in educational levels in this period—on the assumption that many more Americans nowadays have the skills and interests that traditionally brought people into civic life—the overall declines are more marked. Among college graduates, for example, organizational membership has declined by roughly 30 percent, while among high school dropouts the decline has been roughly the same. Nevertheless, the net decline in formal organizational membership is modest at best.

This ambiguous conclusion, however, is drastically altered when we examine evidence on more active forms of participation than mere card-carrying membership. Service as an organizational officer or committee member is very common among active members of American organizations. In 1987, 61 percent of all organization members had served on a committee at some time or other, and 46 percent had served as an officer.[28] Among self-described "active" members—roughly half of the adult population—73 percent had served at some time as a committee member, 58 percent had served at some time as an officer, and only 21 percent had never served as either an officer or a committee member. Sooner or later, in short, the overwhelming majority of active members in most voluntary associations in America are cajoled into playing some leadership role in the organization.

How has the number of Americans who fit this bill changed over the last few decades? Between 1973 and 1994 the number of men and women who took *any* leadership role in *any* local organization—from "old-fashioned" fraternal organizations to new age encounter groups—was sliced by more than 50 percent.[29] (Figure 10 summarizes this evidence by showing the changing fraction of the population who have been actively involved in organizational life as either a local officer or a local committee member.) This dismaying trend began to accelerate after 1985: in the ten short years between 1985 and 1994, active involvement in community organizations in this country fell by 45 percent. By this measure, at least, nearly half of America's civic infrastructure was obliterated in barely a decade.

Eighty percent of life, Woody Allen once quipped,[30] is simply showing up. The same might be said of civic engagement, and "showing up" provides a useful standard for evaluating trends in associational life in our communities. In twenty-five annual surveys between 1975 and 1999 the DDB Needham Life Style surveys asked more than eighty-seven thousand Americans, "How many times in the last year did you attend a club meeting?" Figure 11 shows how this form of civic engagement has dwindled over the last quarter of the twentieth

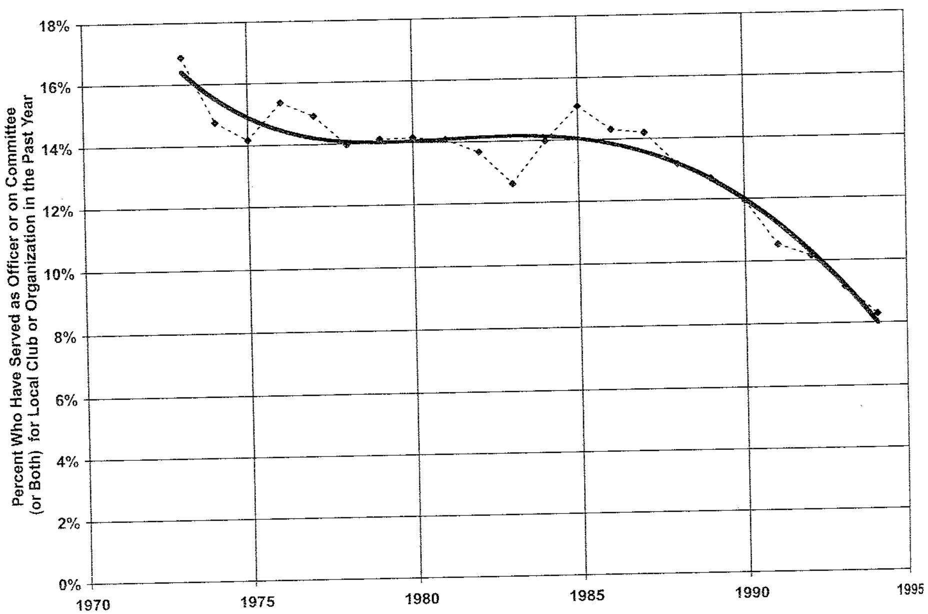

Figure 10: Active Organizational Involvement, 1973–1994

century. In 1975–76 American men and women attended twelve club meetings on average each year—essentially once a month.[31] By 1999 that figure had shrunk by fully 58 percent to five meetings per year. In 1975–76, 64 percent of all Americans still attended at least *one* club meeting in the previous year. By 1999 that figure had fallen to 38 percent. In short, in the mid-1970s nearly two-thirds of all Americans attended club meetings, but by the late 1990s nearly two-thirds of all Americans *never* do. By comparison with other countries, we may still seem a nation of joiners, but by comparison with our own recent past, we are not—at least if "joining" means more than nominal affiliation.

Thus two different survey archives suggest that active involvement in local clubs and organizations of all sorts fell by more than half in the last several decades of the twentieth century. This estimate is remarkably consistent with evidence of an entirely unexpected sort. Each decade between 1965 and 1995, national samples of Americans were asked to complete "time diaries," recording how they spent every minute of a randomly chosen "diary day." From these sets of diaries we can reconstruct how the average American's use of time gradually evolved over the three decades between 1965 and 1995.[32]

Broadly speaking, as John Robinson, director of the time diary project, has shown, our time allocations have not changed dramatically over this period—we have averaged just about exactly eight hours of sleep a night throughout the decades, for example—but there are some important exceptions. Watching

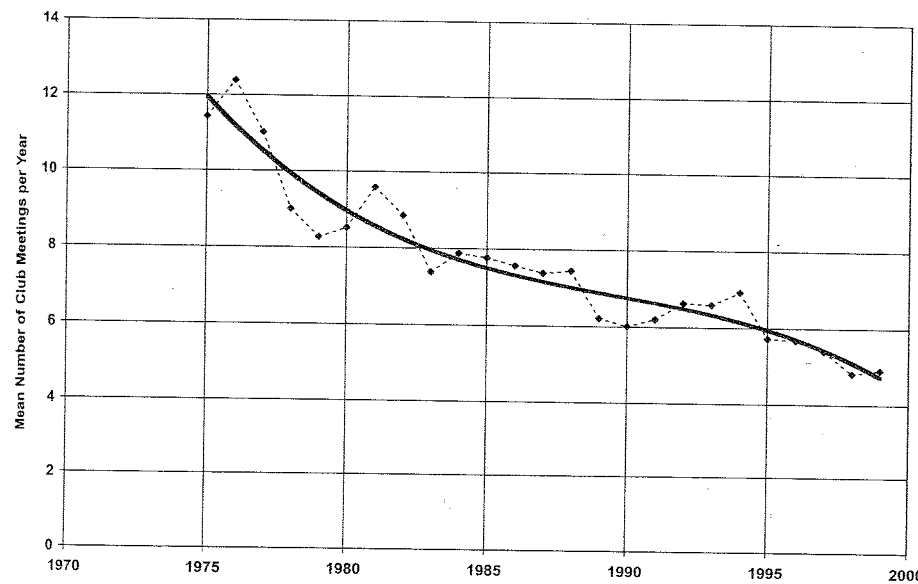

Figure 11: Club Meeting Attendance Dwindles, 1975–1999

TV consumes more time now than it used to, while we spend less time now on housework and child care. The slice of time devoted to organizational activity has always been relatively modest on any given day, since even faithful reading groups or service clubs usually meet only once a week or once a month, not once a day. Nevertheless, the diaries show clearly that the time we devote to community organizations has fallen steadily over this period.[33]

Measured in terms of hours per month, the average American's investment in organizational life (apart from religious groups, which we shall examine separately) fell from 3.7 hours per month in 1965 to 2.9 in 1975 to 2.3 in 1985 and 1995. On an average day in 1965, 7 percent of Americans spent some time in a community organization. By 1995 that figure had fallen to 3 percent of all Americans. Those numbers suggest that nearly half of all Americans in the 1960s invested some time each week in clubs and local associations, as compared to less than one-quarter in the 1990s.[34] Further analysis of the time diary evidence suggests that virtually all of this decline is attributable to generational replacement: members of any given generation are investing as much time in organizational activity as they ever were, but each successive generation is investing less.

If we take into account the rapid growth in educational levels over this period, all these slumps in associational involvement (leadership involvement, meeting attendance, time spent, and so on) are even more dramatic. Among the burgeoning numbers of college graduates, the average number of club meetings per year fell by 55 percent (from thirteen meetings per year to six), while among high school graduates, the drop in annual meeting attendance was 60 percent (from ten meetings per year to four), and among the dwindling number of Americans who had not completed high school, the drop in annual meeting attendance was 73 percent (from nine meetings per year to two per year).

In absolute terms the declines in organizational activity and club meeting attendance were roughly parallel at all educational and social levels. However, because the less well educated were less involved in community organizations to begin with, the relative decline was even greater at the bottom of the hierarchy. A similar pattern appears in the time diary data—declines at all levels in the educational hierarchy, though slightly greater in this case among the more educated. In other words, the gross decline in community involvement has been masked to some degree by the fact that more and more Americans have the skills and social resources that traditionally encouraged participation in community affairs.

In community life, as in the stock market, past performance is no guarantee of future performance, so it is hazardous to assume that trends over the next several decades will mirror those over the last several. Nevertheless, the downtrend shown in figure 11 has been more or less uninterrupted for more than a quarter century, and if the current rate of decline were to continue, clubs

would become extinct in America within less than twenty years. Considering that such local associations have been a feature of American community life for several hundred years, it is remarkable to see them so high on the endangered species list.

The organizational slumps reported here come from four entirely different streams of evidence—different sampling techniques, different survey organizations, different questions—but each is based on tens of thousands of interviews in scores of independent surveys, and together they cover associational involvement of all sorts. That they converge so closely in their estimate that active involvement in local organizations fell by more than half in the last several decades of the twentieth century is as striking and persuasive as if southwestern tree rings and Arctic ice cores and British Admiralty records all confirmed the same rate of global warming.

Another "hard" indicator of the priority Americans attribute to organizational involvement is the fraction of our leisure dollar that we spend on dues, a measure that the Commerce Department has tracked for the last seventy years. In 1929, 6 cents of every dollar of consumer spending for leisure and recreation was for club and fraternal dues. With the arrival of television in the 1950s (and the nationwide explosion in sales of TV sets), this figure fell to 4 cents, but by the end of that decade it had risen back to 5 cents, in accord with the 1950s–1960s civic boom that appears repeatedly in our evidence. During the last three decades of the century, however, this figure fell to 3 cents, so that by 1997 this measure of the relative priority that Americans give to our organizational commitments was down 40 percent from its postwar peak in 1958.[35]

To summarize: Organizational records suggest that for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century Americans' involvement in civic associations of all sorts rose steadily, except for the parenthesis of the Great Depression. In the last third of the century, by contrast, only mailing list membership has continued to expand, with the creation of an entirely new species of "tertiary" association whose members never actually meet. At the same time, active involvement in face-to-face organizations has plummeted, whether we consider organizational records, survey reports, time diaries, or consumer expenditures. We could surely find individual exceptions—specific organizations that successfully sailed against the prevailing winds and tides—but the broad picture is one of declining membership in community organizations. During the last third of the twentieth century formal membership in organizations in general has edged downward by perhaps 10–20 percent. More important, active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations has collapsed at an astonishing rate, more than halving most indexes of participation within barely a few decades.

Many Americans continue to claim that we are "members" of various organizations, but most Americans no longer spend much time in community organizations—we've stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officers, and stopped going to meetings. And all this despite rapid increases in education that have given more of us than ever before the skills, the resources, and the interests that once fostered civic engagement. In short, Americans have been dropping out in droves, not merely from political life, but from organized community life more generally.

Before reaching any firm conclusion about trends in Americans' involvement in formal social organizations, however, we need to consider changes in the worlds of religion and work. Religion remains today, as in the past, an extremely important sector of American civil society, and work has come to occupy an ever more important place in the lives of many Americans, so trends in those two domains will have an important effect on our collective stock of social capital.

CHAPTER 4

Religious Participation

CHURCHES AND OTHER religious organizations have a unique importance in American civil society. America is one of the most religiously observant countries in the contemporary world. With the exception of "a few agrarian states such as Ireland and Poland," observes one scholar, "the United States has been the most God-believing and religion-adhering, fundamentalist, and religiously traditional country in Christendom," as well as "the most religiously fecund country" where "more new religions have been born . . . than in any other society."[1]

American churches* over the centuries have been incredibly robust social institutions. Tocqueville himself commented at length on Americans' religiosity. Religious historian Phillip Hammond observes that "ever since the nation's founding, a higher and higher proportion of Americans have affiliated with a church or synagogue—right through the 1950s."[2] Although most often we think of the colonists as a deeply religious people, one systematic study of the history of religious observance in America estimates that the rate of formal religious adherence *grew* steadily from 17 percent in 1776 to 62 percent in 1980.[3] Other observers, such as E. Brooks Holifield, argue that the meaning of church "membership" has become less stringent over time and conclude that "from the seventeenth century through the twentieth, participation in congregations has probably remained relatively constant. For most of the past three

* *For simplicity's sake I use the term* church *here to refer to all religious institutions of whatever faith, including mosques, temples, and synagogues.*

ing is in fact increasing rapidly, facilitated by the ease of intercepting electronic communications. A private employer may fire workers for what they say, as well as for their political views or activities. According to a 1999 survey by the American Management Association, two-thirds of employers record employee voice mail, e-mail, or phone calls, review computer files, or videotape workers, and such surveillance is becoming more common. Rights of free speech and privacy that are essential to public deliberation and private solidarity are, to put it mildly, insecure in the workplace. Substantial reforms in public law and private practice would be necessary before the water cooler could become the equivalent of the back fence or the town square.[37]

Most of us nowadays are employed, and most of the time most of us work with other people. In that fundamental sense, the workplace is a natural site for connecting with others. However, the balance of the evidence speaks against the hopeful hypothesis that American social capital has not disappeared but simply moved into the workplace. Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century are demonstrably less likely than our parents were to join with our co-workers in formal associations. New forces that might foster socializing in the workplace are counterbalanced by equally new forces that inhibit the types of social ties, durable yet flexible and wide-ranging, that are important to civic life and personal well-being. In addition, for the one American adult in three who is not employed, workplace ties are nonexistent. The workplace is not the salvation for our fraying civil society.

CHAPTER 6

Informal Social Connections

SO FAR we have mostly explored the formal ways in which Americans connect with their communities—through political parties, civic associations, churches, unions, and the like. Far more frequent, however, are the informal connections that we strike up—getting together for drinks after work, having coffee with the regulars at the diner, playing poker every Tuesday night, gossiping with the next-door neighbor, having friends over to watch TV, sharing a barbecue picnic on a hot summer evening, gathering in a reading group at the bookstore, even simply nodding to another regular jogger on the same daily route. Like pennies dropped in a cookie jar, each of these encounters is a tiny investment in social capital.*

In Yiddish, men and women who invest lots of time in formal organizations are often termed *machers*—that is, people who make things happen in the community. By contrast, those who spend many hours in informal conversation and communion are termed *schmoozers*. This distinction mirrors an important reality in American social life.[1] *Machers* follow current events, attend church and club meetings, volunteer, give to charity, work on community projects, give blood, read the newspaper, give speeches, follow politics, and frequent local

* *Experimental social psychologists have uncovered striking evidence that even the most casual social interaction can have a powerful effect on reciprocity. When a confederate "stranger" speaks briefly in the hallway to an unwitting subject, the subject is quicker to provide help when she subsequently "overhears" the confederate having an apparent seizure than if there had been no previous contact. See Bibb Latané and John M. Darley,* The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help? *(Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 107–109.*

meetings. Statistically speaking, doing any one of these activities substantially increases your likelihood of doing the others. People who work on community projects are likely to be churchgoers, newspaper readers to be volunteers, clubgoers to be interested in politics, and blood givers to attend meetings. *Machers* are the all-around good citizens of their communities.

Schmoozers have an active social life, but by contrast to *machers*, their engagement is less organized and purposeful, more spontaneous and flexible. They give dinner parties, hang out with friends, play cards, frequent bars and night spots, hold barbecues, visit relatives, and send greeting cards. Again, doing any one of these things is significantly associated with doing the others, too. All involve, in the felicitous expression of Alexander Pope, "the flow of soul."

The two types of social involvement overlap to some extent—major-league *machers* are often world-class *schmoozers*, and vice versa. Some social settings fall into a gray area between the formal and the informal—a bridge club or a Shriners gathering, for example. Nevertheless, as an empirical matter, the two syndromes are largely distinct—many people are active in one sphere but not the other. And many people do neither; they are not involved in community affairs, and they don't spend much time with friends and acquaintances.

This distinction between *machers* and *schmoozers*—between formal and informal social connectedness—reflects differences in social standing, life cycle, and community attachment.[2] *Machers* tend to be better educated and to have higher incomes, whereas informal social involvement is common at all levels in the social hierarchy. Formal community involvement is relatively modest early in life, peaks in late middle age, and then declines with retirement. Informal social involvement follows the opposite path over the life cycle, peaking among young adults, entering a long decline as family and community obligations press in, then rising again with retirement and widowhood. Single people spend more time and energy in *schmoozing*. For both men and women, marriage increases time spent at home and in formal community organizations, while reducing the time spent with friends. Having children cuts further into informal social connectedness, while adding to formal community involvement. *Machers* are disproportionately homeowners and longtime residents, *schmoozers* are renters and frequent movers. "Settling down" means, among other things, exchanging informal ties for more formal ones, shifting the balance between hanging out with friends and participating in community affairs.

Historically, *machers* (except for those involved in religious life) have tended to be disproportionately male, but the entry of women into the paid labor force has shown that employment, not gender, is the primary key to formal community involvement. Informal social connections are much more frequent among women, regardless of their job and marital status. Married or

single, employed or not, women make 10–20 percent more long-distance calls to family and friends than men, are responsible for nearly three times as many greeting cards and gifts, and write two to four times as many personal letters as men. Women spend more time visiting with friends, though full-time work blurs this gender difference, by trimming friendship time for both sexes. Keeping up with friends and relatives continues to be socially defined as women's work.* Even in adolescence (and not only in the United States), women are more likely to express a sense of concern and responsibility for the welfare of others—for example, by doing volunteer work more frequently. Although American boys and girls in the 1990s used computers almost equally, boys were more likely to use them to play games, while girls were more likely to use them for e-mail. Sociologist Claude S. Fischer concludes that "discounting their fewer opportunities for social contact, women are more socially adept and intimate than men, for whatever reasons—psychological constitution, social structure, childhood experiences, or cultural norms." In short, women are more avid social capitalists than men.[3]

Both the *macher* and the *schmoozer* can be found in all corners of our society. Businessmen *schmooze* in country clubs in Palm Springs, and young welfare moms are *machers* in community-based organizations in Appalachia. The highest frequency of card playing in America is among working-class housewives of the Great Plains.[4] When philosophers speak in exalted tones of "civic engagement" and "democratic deliberation," we are inclined to think of community associations and public life as the higher form of social involvement, but in everyday life, friendship and other informal types of sociability provide crucial social support. To be sure, informal connections generally do not build civic skills in the ways that involvement in a club, a political group, a union, or a church can, but informal connections are very important in sustaining social networks. So in our inventory of social capital in America, we need to pay special attention to trends in *schmoozing*.

VISITING WITH FRIENDS and acquaintances has long been one of the most important social practices in America. The early nineteenth century in New England, as historian Karen V. Hansen has shown, was "a very social time."

> The many types of visiting ranged from pure socializing to communal labor: visitors took afternoon tea, made informal Sunday visits, attended maple sugar parties and cider tastings, stayed for extended visits, offered assistance in giving birth, paid their respects to the family of the deceased, participated in quilting parties, and raised houses and barns. Vis-

* *While marriage increases the frequency with which women send greeting cards, it cuts in half the frequency with which men do so, regardless of whether their wives work or not. This sociological "finding" will hardly be news to most couples.*

its lasted from a brief stopover, or a "call," to a leisurely afternoon, to a month-long stay. Visitors frequently stayed overnight. The difficulty of travel—particularly in winter, by foot, horse, stage, wagon, or train—created barriers to visiting but did not deter visitors who highly valued their contact with neighbors and kin. It was through visiting, in fact, that they created their communities.[5]

Some early sociologists thought that this thicket of informal social connection would not survive a transplant to the anonymous city, that urbanization would doom both friendship and extended kinship. However, experience showed that even in the most densely populated urban settings, social filaments linking residents were steadily regenerated.[6] The density of social connections is lower in cities—the average resident of Los Angeles knows a smaller fraction of her neighbors than does the average resident of a farming village in the Central Valley, and the Angeleña's friends are likely to live farther away—but twentieth-century urbanization was not fatal to friendship. Urban settings sustain not a single, tightly integrated community, but a mosaic of loosely coupled communities. As mobility, divorce, and smaller families have reduced the relative importance of kinship ties, especially among the more educated, friendship may actually have gained importance in the modern metropolis.[7] The passage in popular culture from *I Love Lucy* and *All in the Family* to *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends* exalts informal social ties.

Like our New England forebears, Americans spend lots of time visiting. Five times during the 1980s and 1990s Roper pollsters asked Americans, "During the past week, how many times would you say you have gone out for entertainment—to a movie, to visit friends, to a sports event, to dinner, or whatever?" Nearly two-thirds of us reported going out at least once in the last week, and of those, fully half had gone to the home of friends for dinner, visiting, playing cards, and the like. Among other destinations for a night out, 4 percent had gone to a play or live concert, 11 percent to a sports event, 17 percent to a bar, disco, or other place of public entertainment, 18 percent to a movie, and slightly more than half to a restaurant for dinner.[8] Across America, from big cities to tiny hamlets, spending an evening at home with friends is five to ten times more common than is going to the theater or a ball game.

Several surveys between 1986 and 1990 also showed that *schmoozers* are more common than *machers* in contemporary America.[9] (Figure 16 summarizes these results, highlighting the most relevant social activities.) Slightly more than one-quarter of all Americans had attended at least one meeting of a club or civic organization in the preceding month, and slightly more than one-third had gone to a church social function in that period—a respectable showing for such civic-minded events. During that same month, more than half of all Americans had had friends in for an evening, and nearly two-thirds had gone out to a friend's home for an evening.[10] One way or another, three-

quarters of all Americans got together at home with friends at least once during that month, and the national average was three such soirees per month. Similarly, according to time diary data collected between 1965 and 1995, the average American spent roughly half an hour each week on organizational activity (not counting religion), but more than three hours a week visiting with friends.[11]

Comparable estimates of a broader array of social connections (as summarized in figure 17) show that, on average, during the last quarter of the twentieth century Americans attended church services and visited with relatives nearly every other week; ate dinner out, sent a greeting card to someone, and wrote a letter to a friend or relative about once every three weeks; played cards about once a month and entertained at home just about that often; attended a club meeting about every other month and had a drink in a bar almost that often; gave or attended a dinner party, went to the movies, and attended a sporting event roughly every two or three months; worked on some community project and played some team sport roughly twice a year; and wrote a letter to the editor every other year.[12]

The average American in recent decades has been far from isolated civically or socially, but we seem more engaged with one another as friends (or *schmoozers*) than as citizens (or *machers*). We get together with friends about twice as often as we attend organized meetings, we hang out in bars about

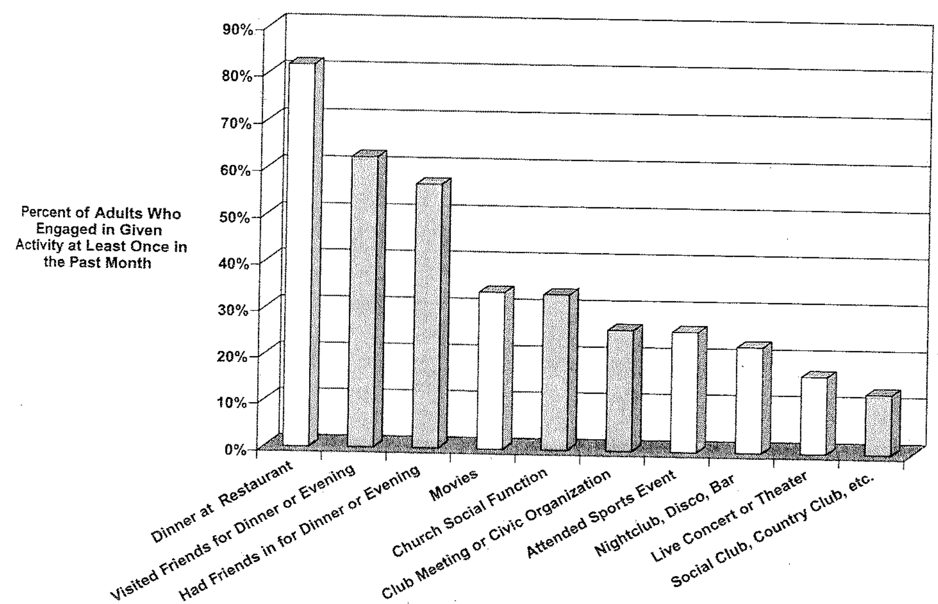

Figure 16: Social and Leisure Activities of American Adults (1986–1990)

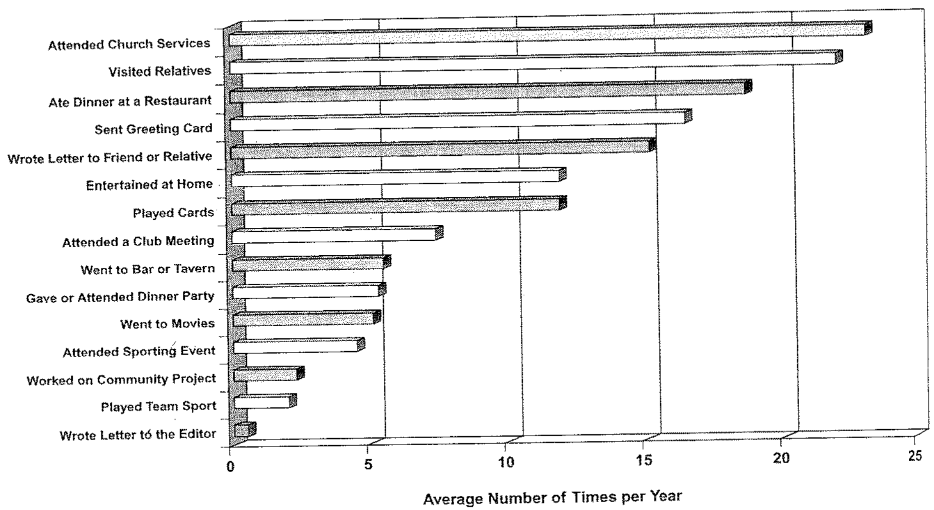

Figure 17: Frequency of Selected Formal and Informal Social Activities, 1975–1998

three times as often as we work on community projects, and we send a greeting card to a friend about thirty-five times more often than we send a letter to the editor.

Of course, hardly anyone is "average." Some people socialize continuously and join every group in sight, whereas others are more detached. Nearly everyone is a "specialist" in some type of activity. Some of us write our parents every week, some are movie fanatics, and some attend a lot of civic-minded meetings. To take an extreme example of specialization, 1/300 of the adult population writes a letter to the editor at least once a month, but this infinitesimal group accounts for roughly 20 percent of all letters to all editors in America.[13] Nevertheless, homey ways of connecting with our friends and neighbors are remarkably widespread. Despite the much hyped allure of Hollywood, for example, Americans play cards more than twice as often as we go to the movies.[14] In sum, the good news is that Americans connect with one another.

The bad news is that we are doing so less and less every year. Consider some of the startling evidence of change over the last quarter century. In the mid- to late 1970s, according to the DDB Needham Life Style archive, the average American entertained friends at home about fourteen to fifteen times a year. By the late 1990s that figure had fallen to eight times per year, a decline of 45 percent in barely two decades. An entirely independent series of surveys from the Roper Social and Political Trends archive confirms that both going out to see friends and having them over to our home declined from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. (See figure 18 for details.) Yet a third archive (that of

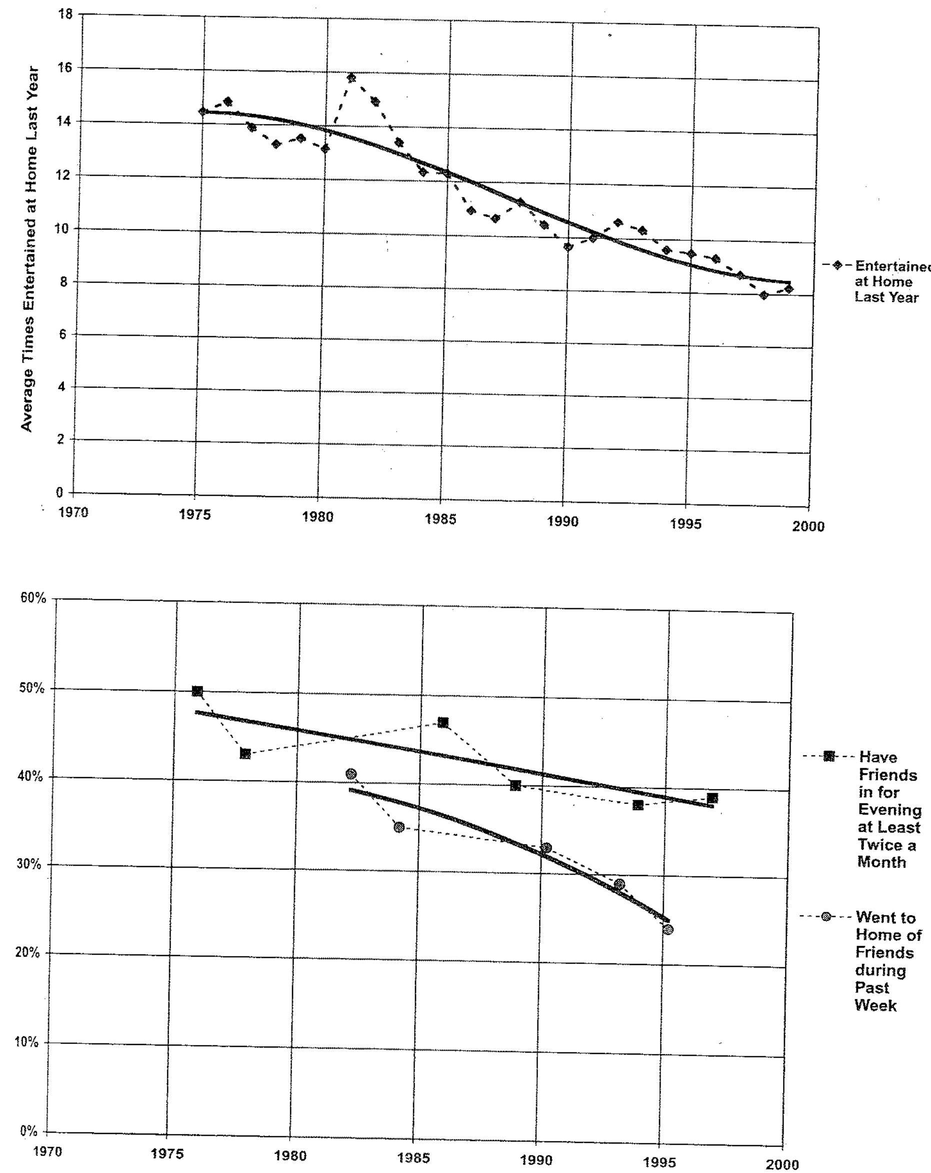

Figure 18: Social Visiting Declines, 1975–1999

Yankelovich Partners) reports a decline of nearly one-third between 1985–86 and 1998–99 in the readiness of the average American to make new friends.[15] Visits with friends are now on the social capital endangered species list. If the sharp, steady declines registered over the *past* quarter century were to continue at the same pace for the *next* quarter century, our centuries-old practice of entertaining friends at home might entirely disappear from American life in less than a generation. Of course, it would be foolhardy to predict that outcome, since many things in American life will surely change over the next twenty-five years, but the pace of decline in social visiting over the last twenty-five years has been extraordinary.

Recognizing the scheduling conflicts of two-career families, one might conjecture that this decline in reciprocal home visits and dinner parties is simply an optical illusion. Perhaps more people are dining out with friends, thus shifting the venue for their prandial encounters from the dining room to the restaurant but still making the same social capital investment. In fact, contrary to widespread impression, dining out (alone or with others) has increased very little if at all over the last several decades.[16] Moreover, faced explicitly with the choice of going out with friends or getting together with them at home, Americans say they prefer staying home by more than two to one, and that stay-at-home margin is rising, not falling.[17] Thus the practice of entertaining friends has not simply moved outside the home, but seems to be vanishing entirely. Informal outings, like picnics, also seem on the path to extinction. The number of picnics per capita was slashed by nearly 60 percent between 1975 and 1999.[18] Americans are spending a lot less time breaking bread with friends than we did twenty or thirty years ago.

Even more startling, this same trend can be observed closer to home. As figure 19 reports, the past two decades have witnessed a dramatic change in one traditionally important form of family connectedness—the evening meal. The fraction of married Americans who say "definitely" that "our whole family usually eats dinner together" has declined by a third over the last twenty years, from about 50 percent to 34 percent.[19] Conversely, the number who disagree with the proposition that "our whole family usually eats dinner together"—in other words, those for whom this is definitely not a customary practice—has increased by half (from 16 percent to 27 percent) over this same period. The ratio of families who customarily dine together to those who customarily dine apart has dropped from more than three to one in 1977–78 to half that in 1998–99. In fact, striking as these data are, they understate the real change in American dining customs, since they refer only to the behavior of married couples, whereas the proportion of adults living (and therefore presumably dining) alone has roughly doubled during this period.[20] Since the evening meal has been a communal experience in virtually all societies for a very long time, the fact that it has visibly diminished in the course of a single generation in our

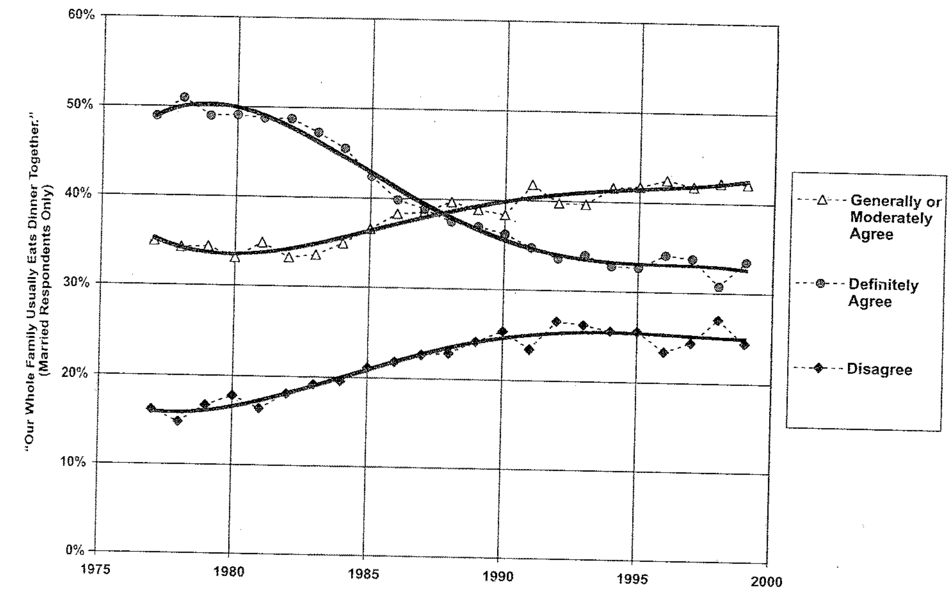

Figure 19: Family Dinners Become Less Common, 1977–1999

country is remarkable evidence of how rapidly our social connectedness has been changing.

Beyond mealtime, virtually all forms of family togetherness became less common over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Between 1976 and 1997, according to Roper polls of families with children aged eight to seventeen, vacationing together fell from 53 percent to 38 percent, watching TV together from 54 percent to 41 percent, attending religious services together from 38 percent to 31 percent, and "just sitting and talking" together from 53 percent to 43 percent. It is hard not to read these figures as evidence of rapidly loosening family bonds.[21]

How about *schmoozing* at the real-life equivalent of *Cheers*, the neighborhood bar "where everybody knows your name"? That, too, is becoming a thing of the past. Three independent series of surveys from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s substantiate that conclusion: the frequency with which Americans, both married and single, went out to bars, nightclubs, discos, taverns, and the like declined by about 40–50 percent over the last decade or two.[22] Whether we live alone or not, Americans are staying home in the evening, and *Cheers* has become a period piece.

Since good food and drink are often accompaniments of good *schmoozing*, trends in the numbers of various sorts of eating and drinking establishments in America over the last quarter century are both startling and suggestive. (See figure 20.) Between 1970 and 1998 the number of full-service restaurants per one hundred thousand population fell by one-quarter, and the numbers of bars and luncheonettes were cut in half. Meanwhile the per capita number of fast-food outlets, those "personal refueling stations" of modern society, doubled. From the point of view of conversational opportunities, the decline of conventional eating places has to some extent been offset by the proliferation of new wave coffee bars, like the cappuccino bar in Minneapolis that hosts neighborhood discussion groups. As figure 20 shows, however, even accounting for such growth, the net decline in eating and drinking establishments has been substantial.[23]

Unlike the "regulars" at the local bar or café, few of the other people waiting impatiently in line at McDonald's are likely to know your name or even to care that they don't.[24] These cold numbers confirm the gradual disappearance of what social commentator Ray Oldenburg calls "the great good place," those hangouts that "get you through the day."[25] In effect, Americans have increasingly chosen to grab a bite and run rather than sit a while and chat.

Perhaps the most revealing trend in our use of leisure time is the fate of card games. A survey of residents in twenty-four American cities in 1940 found

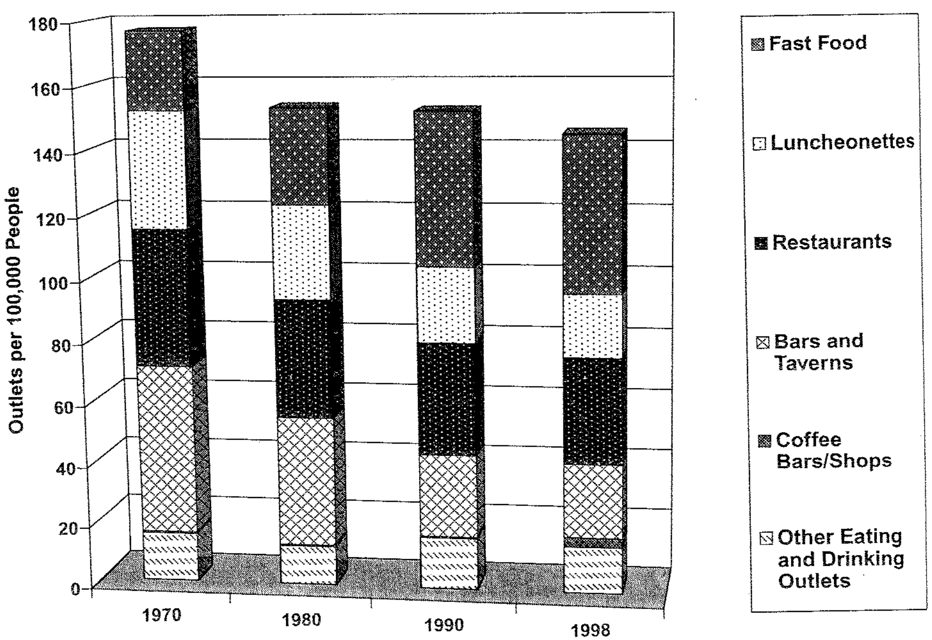

Figure 20: Bars, Restaurants, and Luncheonettes Give Way to Fast Food, 1970–1998

that cards were the nation's favorite form of social recreation. According to that survey, a deck of playing cards was found in 87 percent of American homes, as compared, for example, to radios (83 percent) and telephones (36 percent). On average, over the first half of the twentieth century one pack of cards was sold *each year* for every two Americans aged fourteen and over.[26] Strikingly, trends in playing card sales track almost precisely the trends we spotted earlier in formal civic involvement—steady growth in the first three decades of the century, a slump during the Great Depression, and then explosive growth in the years after World War II. (See figure 21.)

Although poker and gin rummy were popular, the biggest boom was in bridge, a four-handed game that had become extremely popular by the 1950s. By 1958, according to the most modest estimate, thirty-five million Americans—nearly one-third of all adults—were bridge players. Millions of Americans, both men and women, belonged to regular card clubs—in fact, one of the earliest scientific surveys of social involvement found that in 1961 nearly one in every five adults (in Nebraska, at least) was a member of a regular foursome. In dorms and student unions of the 1960s and 1970s hundreds of thousands of college students spent millions of nights in seemingly endless games of bridge. The primary attraction of bridge and other card games was that they were highly social pastimes. "Mixed doubles" clubs were, in that more gen-

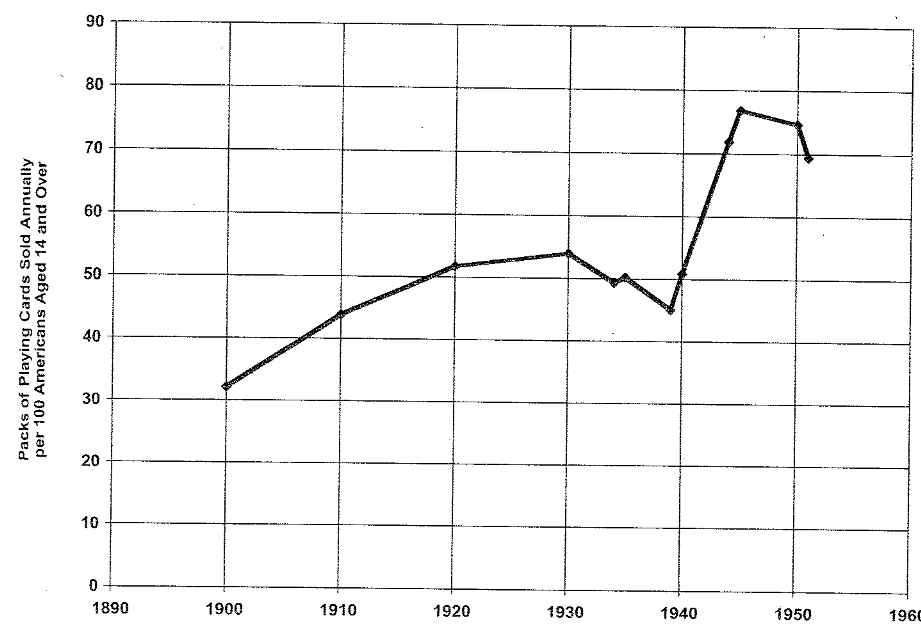

Figure 21: The Rise of Card Games in America, 1900–1951

dered world, one of the most important sites for men and women to gather informally. The rules encouraged conversation about topics other than the game itself, since "table talk" about the state of play was generally frowned on. "Serious" bridge players played in silence, but for most players, the weekly or monthly evening of bridge provided a valued opportunity to *schmooze* with friends and neighbors, mostly about personal matters but occasionally about issues of broader concern, including politics.[27]

As recently as the mid-1970s nearly 40 percent of all American adults played cards at least once a month, and the ratio of monthly card players to monthly moviegoers was four to one. Between 1981 and 1999, however, the average frequency of card playing among American adults plunged from sixteen times per year to eight times per year. By 1999 card playing still outdrew movies four to three, but the gap was closing fast. Were this same steady rate of annual decline to continue unabated, card playing would disappear entirely in less than two decades. For a social practice that is more than six centuries old—and one that was booming only a few decades ago—the end is coming with dramatic suddenness.[28] American adults still play five hundred million card games a year, but that figure is falling by twenty-five million games a year.[29] Even if we assume, conservatively, that community issues come up in conversation only once every ten card games, the decline of card playing implies fifty million fewer "microdeliberations" about community affairs each year now than two decades ago.

In fact, because card playing is necessarily a social activity (except for a few solitaire addicts), its demise will probably accelerate toward the end. If no one else in your social circle plays cards, there is no reason for you to bother learning the game. For precisely the same reason that populations of endangered species often implode, so too card playing seems likely to become extinct even more rapidly than a straight-line projection would suggest. The number of card players is rapidly falling below a self-sustaining level. In 1999 the average age of members of the American Contract Bridge League was sixty-four and rising steadily, a sure sign that the decline is generational in nature. The decline in card playing is concentrated among baby boomers and their children. A growing fraction of all card games occurs in retirement communities, the sociological equivalent of isolated ecological niches where endangered species often make a last stand.[30] To college students in the 1990s, "bridge" had the same antique sound that "whist" had to their parents.

Substitutes for card playing have emerged, of course, everything from computer and video games to casino gambling. Like cards, these pastimes provide the spice of chance. Unlike card playing, however, these successors are distinguished by their solitary nature. My informal observation of Internet-based bridge games suggests that electronic players are focused entirely on the game itself, with very little social small talk, unlike traditional card games. Even fanatics of Microsoft Solitaire rarely play in a group, and any visitor to the

new megacasinos that dot the land has chilling memories of acres of lonely "players" hunched in silence over one-armed bandits. (Figure 22 summarizes illustrative trends in card playing, casino going, video games, and moviegoing over the last quarter century.) Bridge, poker, gin rummy, and canasta are not being replaced by some equally "*schmoozable*" leisure activity.[31]

Yet another unobtrusive indicator of social connectedness is the practice of sending greeting cards. Sending greeting cards has declined by about 15–20 percent among both married and single people over the last decade or two. (This downtrend predates the advent of the Internet and e-mail by at least a decade, so it represents more than merely a shift from real to virtual greetings.) Individuals send more greeting cards as they age, especially if they are living alone, so card sales have been boosted in an aging America. However, at any given age Americans are now sending fewer greeting cards than people of that age did a generation ago.[32] Yet again we see evidence of generational differences underlying the transformation of social customs in contemporary America.

So much for friends. How about neighbors? According to the General Social Survey, between 1974 and 1998 the frequency with which Americans "spend a social evening with someone who lives in your neighborhood" fell by about one-third—from about thirty times a year to about twenty times a year among married people and from about fifty times a year to about thirty-five times a year among single people.[33] (See figure 23.) Scattered evidence further

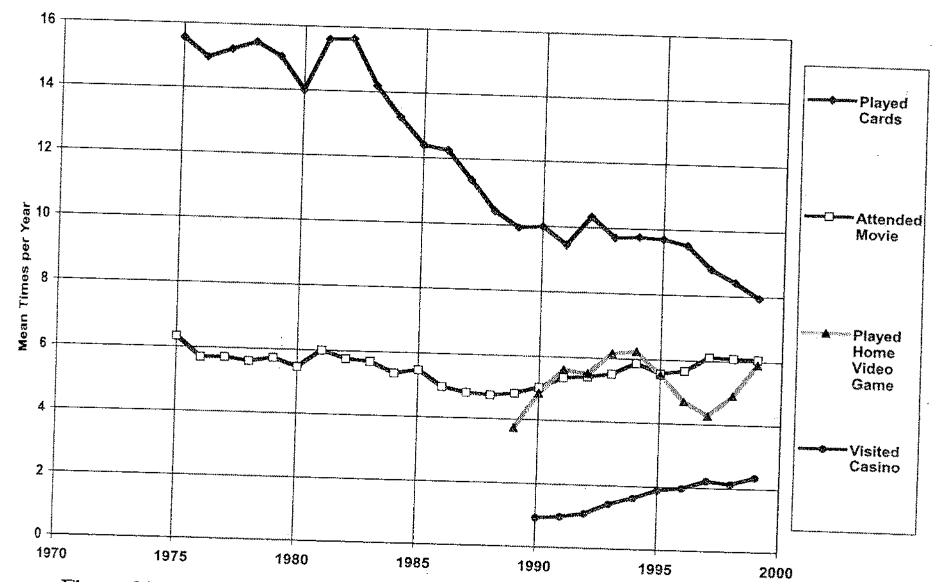

Figure 22: Card Playing and Other Leisure Activities, 1975–1999

suggests that this decline had actually begun twenty years earlier, so that when compared with neighborliness in the mid-1950s, neighborhood ties in the 1990s are perhaps less than half as strong.[34] The average American still socializes with her neighbors every couple of weeks, but as in the case of friendship, these ties are measurably more feeble now than a generation ago.

Recent years have seen much publicity given to "neighborhood associations," and some observers claim that these are more common now than some years ago. One recent survey suggests that as many as one adult in eight is involved with a neighborhood, community, homeowners association, or block club.[35] However, similar associations were frequent in the earlier decades, too; recall that *Life* magazine paean to Americans of the 1960s "satisfying their gregarious urges in countless neighborhood committees." Urban sociologist Barrett A. Lee and his colleagues point out that

> recent proliferation of social science literature on neighborhood organizations implies that these groups are newcomers to the urban scene. However, even the slightest amount of digging will suffice to correct that misleading impression. . . . [N]eighborhood organizations first appeared near the end of the last century and were well represented in most large cities prior to the Great Depression.

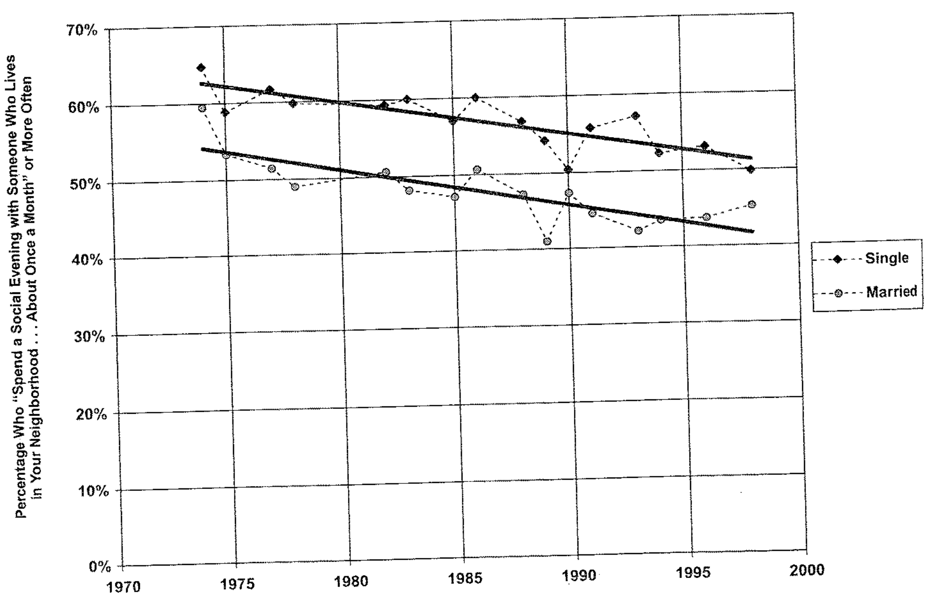

Figure 23: The Decline of Neighboring, 1974–1998

Long-term studies of neighborhood life from Boston to Seattle show that although neighborhoods at the end of the twentieth century were occasionally mobilized for *political* purposes, organized *social* life at the neighborhood level—street carnivals, amateur theatricals, picnics, potlucks, dances, and the like—was much more vibrant in the first half of the twentieth century than in its waning years.[36]

"Neighborhood watch" groups have become more common over the last twenty years, and they often have an immediate impact in reducing crime. A 1998 Department of Justice survey of twelve cities nationwide found that 11 percent of all residents had ever attended a neighborhood watch meeting to help protect themselves from crime (6 percent in the last year), as compared with 14 percent who kept a weapon at home, 15 percent who owned a guard dog, and 41 percent who installed extra locks.[37] In short, we invest more in guns, dogs, and locks than in social capital for crime defense. Perhaps partly for this reason, participation in neighborhood watch programs almost always decays after an initial burst of enthusiasm, unless rooted in neighborhood organization of a more comprehensive sort.[38] Crime watch groups may have become more common, but they provide a frail replacement for the vanished social capital of traditional neighborhoods—sociological AstroTurf, suitable only where the real thing won't grow.

As is true of formal social involvement, the picture that has emerged thus far of waning investments in *schmoozing* is wholly confirmed by studies of American time budgets over the last thirty years. The percentage of Americans who on a "diary day" recorded any time at all spent in informal socializing (including visiting with friends, attending parties, hanging out at bars, informal conversation, and so on) fell steadily from about 65 percent in 1965 to 39 percent in 1995. The average daily time devoted to such activities fell from about eighty to eighty-five minutes in 1965 to fifty-seven minutes in 1995. (See figure 24.) We spent only two-thirds as much time on informal socializing at century's end as we had three decades earlier.[39]

This striking shift in the way we allocate our time—toward ourselves and our immediate family and away from the wider community—is confirmed by a survey of twenty-four thousand time diaries conducted by the NPD Group between 1992 and 1999.[40] Over the course of the 1990s the average American came to spend nearly 15 percent more time on child or pet care (probably because of the "baby echo"—the recent spurt of children of the baby boomers) and roughly 5–7 percent more time each on personal grooming, entertainment, sleep, exercise, and transportation. By contrast, the largest changes of all involve time spent at worship and visiting with friends, both of which fell by more than 20 percent, according to this evidence.

The density of informal social connections varies somewhat, as we noticed earlier, among different social categories—higher among women than

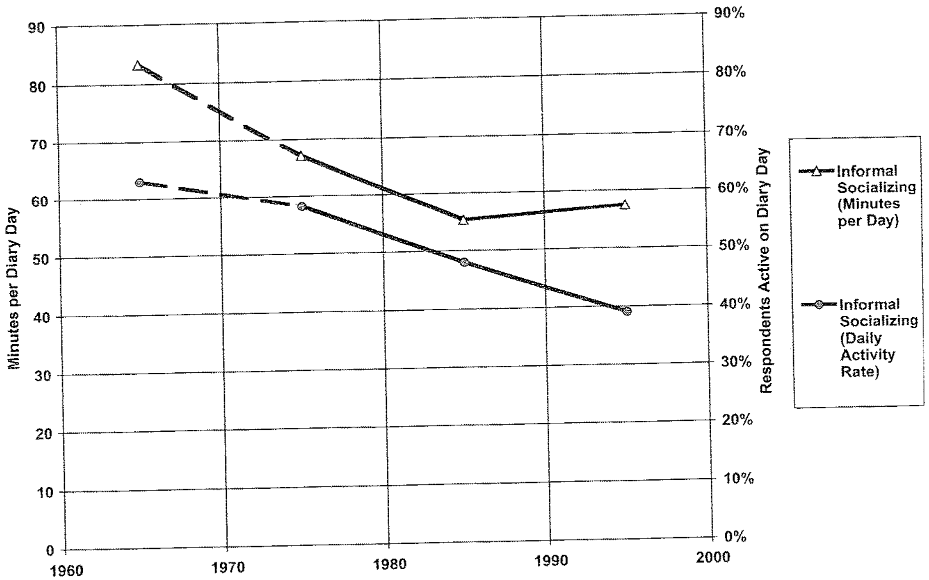

Figure 24: Informal Socializing as Measured in Time Diary Studies, 1965–1995

among men, higher among young people and retired people than among the middle-aged, and so on. Even though the *level* of *schmoozing* differs across these categories, however, the *trends* in *schmoozing* (namely, downward) are very similar in all segments of society—down among both women and men, down in all age categories, down in all social classes, down in all parts of the country, down in big cities and suburbs and small towns, down among both married couples and single people.[41] In short, informal social connectedness has declined in all parts of American society.

We noted earlier the paradox that the strongest predictor of formal community involvement—education—had expanded sharply over the last twenty years and that nevertheless formal community involvement is down sharply. One implication is that without the boost provided by higher educational levels, formal involvement might have declined even more rapidly. We see a similar paradox in the case of informal social involvement: *schmoozing* is higher among single and childless people, and the number of single and childless people has risen significantly over the last two decades.[42] Other things being equal, these trends should have led to *increased* informal social interaction, exactly the opposite of what we have found. As conventional family life has become rarer, we might have expected the real-life equivalent of *Cheers* and *Friends* to take the place of civic organizations and dinner parties, but in fact

we have witnessed the decline of the latter without a compensating increase in the former. The implication: Something else must be even more powerfully depressing the rate of *schmoozing* in contemporary America.

SO WE ARE SPENDING significantly less time nowadays with friends and neighbors than we used to do. What might we be doing instead that has implications for social capital? One common form of leisure activity is participation in sports. What can we learn about trends in social capital from an examination of Americans at play? Have we perhaps shifted the locus of our social encounters from the card table or the neighborhood bar to the softball diamond or the exercise class?

Some evidence suggests that sports clubs have become slightly more common over the last two decades; according to the General Social Survey, membership in such clubs grew from 19 percent in 1974–75 to 21 percent in 1993–94. On the other hand, many studies have found, somewhat surprisingly, that participation rates in most sports have actually fallen in recent decades.[43] Since the population is growing, the gross number of participants is also growing in some cases, but as a fraction of the population, participation in all of the following sports has fallen by 10–20 percent over the last decade or two: softball, tennis (and other racket games, like table tennis), volleyball, football, bicycling, skiing (downhill, cross-country, and water), hunting, fishing, camping, canoeing, jogging, and swimming. For example, long-term surveys from the National Sporting Goods Association, the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, the DDB Needham Life Style studies, and the National Center for Health Statistics all agree that nationwide participation in softball dropped by roughly one-third between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s.[44]

A few new sports have become popular—in-line skating and snowboarding among younger, more agile Americans, fitness walking and gym activities among the more health-conscious, golf among senior citizens. However, most of the new sports are not as "social" as many traditional athletic activities. Indeed, the most dramatic increases in sports-related purchases over the last decade have involved "in-home" activities, like treadmills and workout equipment.[45] Moreover, except for walking, none of them attracts nearly as many participants as the declining traditional sports. Among team sports, soccer and basketball are up, but not enough to offset simultaneous falloffs in all other major team sports—softball, baseball, volleyball, and football. All in all, sports participation is modestly but unambiguously down over the last decade or so, and this decline has particularly affected team and group sports.[46]

This decline in sports participation is not due to the aging of the U.S. population. On the contrary, the declines are sharpest among the young, whereas athleticism is actually growing among older Americans. Among twenty-somethings, average attendance at exercise classes was more than halved from eight times a year in the mid-1980s to three in 1998, whereas over this same period attendance doubled from two to four among Americans sixty and over. Swimming and attendance at health clubs display this same generational discrepancy—down among the younger, steady or up among the older. For physiological reasons, sports participation (except for exercise walking) declines with age, but overlaid on that life cycle pattern is the same generational profile (down among boomers and X'ers, up among their parents and grandparents) that we noted earlier for other forms of social and political participation. There is, in fact, some reason to believe that these twin trends—rising recreational activity among the older generation, falling among the younger generation—have been under way since the early 1960s.[47]

Although it is not our primary concern here, rates of participation in most youth sports seem to have been stagnant or declining over the last several decades.[48] Surprisingly, after an exponential increase in youth soccer in the 1980s, even participation in that fashionable sport slowed in the 1990s.[49] At the same time, most other major sports suffered significant declines in adolescent participation in recent years. One important exception to this general picture is growth in organized school-based sports for women, in part as a consequence of Title IX requiring equal opportunity for women in federally funded athletic programs; but even this major initiative has not offset the more general decline in formal and informal sports participation among American youth.[50] Because of the "baby echo" the absolute number of participants in many youth sports has risen, but what is relevant to our story is that *rates* of participation have been declining.

Fitness was discussed more in the 1990s than it was in the 1970s, and health clubs are all the rage.[51] Could this trend perhaps offset the slumps in other forms of social connection? The empirical evidence suggests not. First, all fitness activities combined (apart from walking) are much less common than the more prosaic activities of card playing or dinner parties. Even with the 1990s' bust in card playing and boom in health clubs, for example, three times as many Americans play cards regularly as visit a health club regularly. Only among single, twenty-something, college graduates are visits to a health club more common than card games, and despite what one might infer from the mass media, only one American adult in every fifteen falls into that demographic category. Even if health clubs offered limitless opportunities for *schmoozing* (rather than merely staring at a monitor while working out in silence), the growth in health clubs is dwarfed by the collapse of less trendy forms of informal connectedness.

Second, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed no net gain in the number of times that the average American jogs, attends exercise and aerobic classes, or visits a health club. The rise in health clubs in these years was offset by a decline in jogging and exercise classes. (See figure 25.) The less fashionable activity of

"walking more than a mile for exercise" is more common than all other forms of workout combined, and in fact, walking for exercise has increased by about one-third over the last decade. However, the increasing popularity of walking (and golf, too) is due entirely to the fitness boom among older Americans, precisely the group that has most resisted the nationwide decline in connectedness. The trends in athletic activity that we have reviewed—down nationwide, down even faster among young adults, down least (or not at all) among senior citizens—have their visible counterpart in the "obesity epidemic" that has swept over America in recent decades—up nationwide, up even faster among young adults, up least of all among older Americans. Fitness is not a domain that has offset the erosion of social capital elsewhere in American society.[52]

Virtually alone among major sports, only bowling has come close to holding its own in recent years.[53] Bowling is the most popular competitive sport in America. Bowlers outnumber joggers, golfers, or softball players more than two to one, soccer players (including kids) by more than three to one, and tennis players or skiers by four to one.[54] Despite bowling's "retro" image, in 1996 even twenty-somethings went bowling about 40 percent more often than they went in-line skating. More recently, even greater numbers of young people have reportedly been attracted by a high-tech combination called "cosmic bowling" or "Rock 'N' Bowl." Moreover, participation in all other major sports is more highly concentrated among either young men, or the upper middle class, or

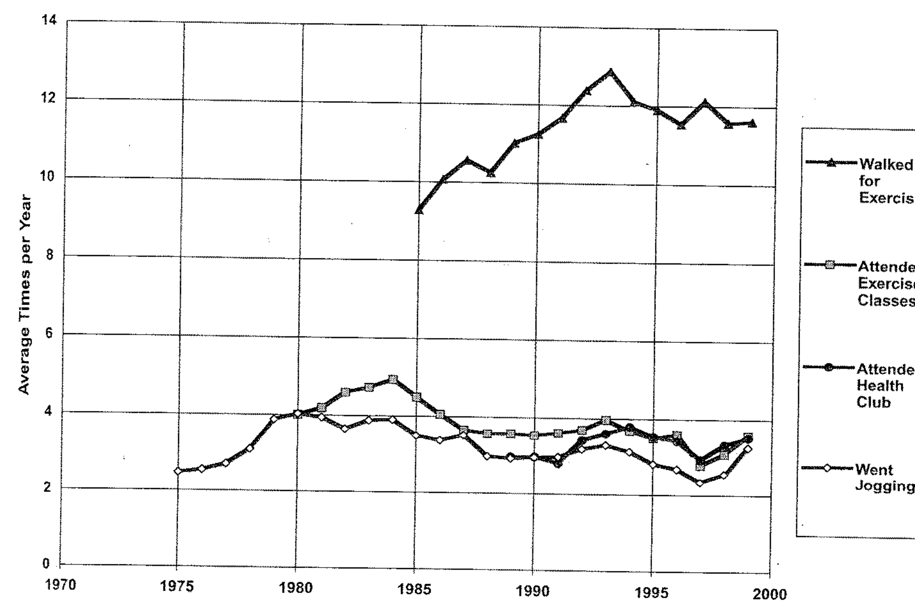

Figure 25: Stagnation in Fitness (Except Walking)

both. Unlike health clubs, bicycling, jogging, exercise, swimming, tennis, golf, softball, and all other major sports, bowling is solidly middle-American—common among both men and women, couples and singles, working-class and middle-class, young and old.[55]

Given population growth, more Americans are bowling than ever before, but *league* bowling has plummeted in the last ten to fifteen years. Between 1980 and 1993 the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by more than 40 percent.[56] Figure 26 shows the long-run trend in league bowling in America, a profile that precisely matches the trends in other forms of social capital that we have already examined—steady growth from the beginning of the century (except during the Depression and World War II), explosive growth between 1945 and 1965, stagnation until the late 1970s, and then a precipitous plunge over the last two decades of the century. At the peak in the mid-1960s, 8 percent of all American men and nearly 5 percent of all American women were members of bowling teams. Yet as the projections in figure 26 indicate, if the steady decline in league bowling were to continue at the pace of the last fifteen years, league bowling would vanish entirely within the first decade of the new century.

Lest bowling be thought a wholly trivial example, I should note that, according to the American Bowling Congress, ninety-one million Americans

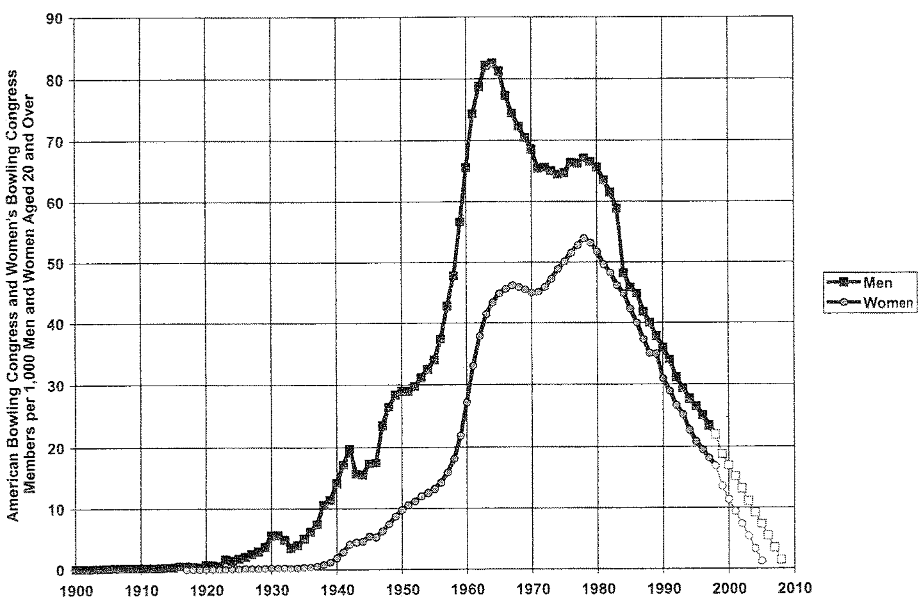

Figure 26: The Rise and Decline of League Bowling

bowled at some point during 1996, *more than 25 percent more than voted in the 1998 congressional elections.*[57] Even after the 1980s' plunge in league bowling, between 2 and 3 percent of American adults regularly bowled in leagues, although as we have seen, that figure was dropping fast. The decline in league bowling threatens the livelihood of bowling lane proprietors, because according to the owner of one of the nation's largest bowling lane chains, league bowlers consume three times as much beer and pizza as do solo bowlers, and the money in bowling is in the beer and pizza, not the balls and shoes. The broader social significance, however, lies in the social interaction and even occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza that solo bowlers forgo. Whether or not bowling beats balloting in the eyes of most Americans, bowling teams illustrate yet another vanishing form of social capital.

Strictly speaking, only poetic license authorizes my description of nonleague bowling as "bowling alone." Any observant visitor to her local bowling alley can confirm that informal groups outnumber solo bowlers. Insofar as such informal groups represent what I have called *schmoozing*, the fact that participation in bowling has held more or less steady in recent years actually represents an exception to the general diminishment of informal ties. On the other hand, league bowling, by requiring regular participation with a diverse set of acquaintances, did represent a form of sustained social capital that is not matched by an occasional pickup game.

While Americans are spending less time *doing* sports, we are spending more time and money *watching* sports now than we were only a few decades ago. Sports spectatorship has been rising rapidly, which helps explain the rapid rise in the salaries of professional athletes. In part, the growth in spectatorship reflects our television viewing habits, but it is also reflected in live attendance figures. Adjusted for population growth, attendance at major sporting events has nearly doubled since the 1960s.[58] The year-to-year fortunes of individual sports have varied with the excitement of the season and the vicissitudes of labor-management relations, but virtually all major sports have seen growth in per capita attendance over the last four decades—professional baseball, basketball, football, hockey, and stock-car racing, as well as college football and basketball. Figure 27 summarizes this trend—at last, a trend line that is rising, if only for the passive spectator.

This increase in sports spectatorship is not a dead loss from the point of view of social capital.[59] Sitting with friends in the bleachers for a Friday night high school football game might be just as productive of community as sitting across a poker table. Moreover, at least for the fans of winning teams, the sense of shared enthusiasm for a common passion can generate a certain sense of community. As long-suffering Red Sox fans know, even shared adversity can build community. On the other hand, it is striking that the same changing balance between active participation and passive spectatorship that

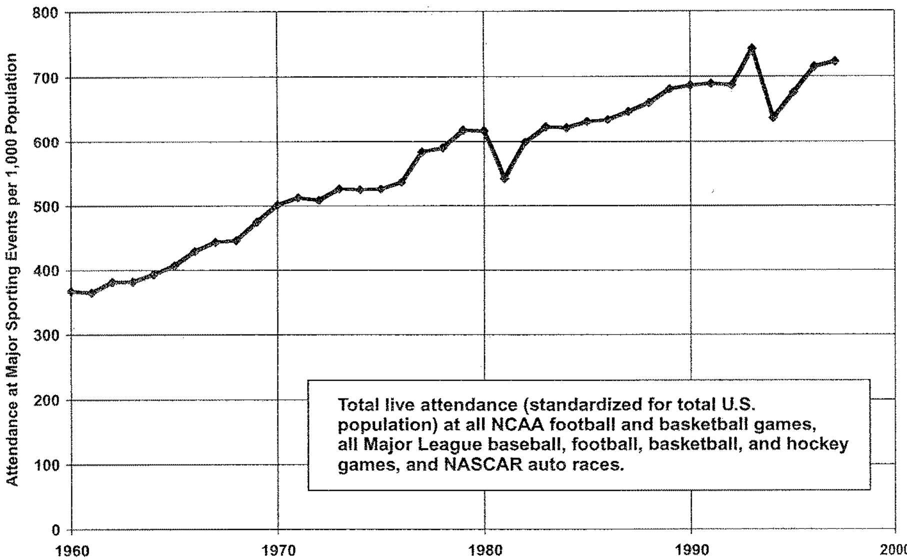

Figure 27: The Growth of Spectator Sports, 1960–1997

we earlier noted in the political sphere can be found in the sphere of sports itself. In football, as in politics, watching a team play is not the same thing as playing on a team.

This same phenomenon—observing up, doing down—appears in other spheres of American life. In both popular and high culture, audience growth has generally matched or exceeded population growth. Surveys suggest steady or even increasing per capita attendance at art museums, pop and rock concerts, and movies. Between 1986 and 1998, while churchgoing was falling by 10 percent, museumgoing was up by 10 percent; while home entertaining was down by a quarter, moviegoing was up by a quarter; and while club meeting attendance was down by a third, pop/rock concert attendance was up by a third.[60]

On the other hand, by many measures, "doing" culture (as opposed to merely consuming it) has been declining. Take town bands or jazz jamming or simply gathering around the piano, once classic examples of community and social involvement. According to surveys conducted every year over the last quarter century, the average frequency of playing a musical instrument has been cut from nearly six times per year in 1976 to barely three times per year in 1999. The percentage of Americans who play an instrument at all has fallen by fully one-third (from 30 percent to 20) percent over this period, and exposure to music lessons has been dropping in recent generations.[61] According to surveys commissioned by the National Association of Music Merchants, the fraction of households in which even one person plays an instrument has fallen

steadily from 51 percent in 1978 to 38 percent in 1997.[62] We certainly have not lost our taste for *listening* to music, any more than for watching sports, but fewer and fewer of us play together.

When Aristotle observed that man is by nature a political animal, he was almost surely not thinking of *schmoozing*. Nevertheless, our evidence suggests that most Americans connect with their fellows in myriad informal ways. Human nature being what it is, we are unlikely to become hermits. On the other hand, our evidence also suggests that across a very wide range of activities, the last several decades have witnessed a striking diminution of regular contacts with our friends and neighbors. We spend less time in conversation over meals, we exchange visits less often, we engage less often in leisure activities that encourage casual social interaction, we spend more time watching (admittedly, some of it in the presence of others) and less time doing. We know our neighbors less well, and we see old friends less often. In short, it is not merely "do good" civic activities that engage us less, but also informal connecting. Whether this silent withdrawal from social intercourse has affected our propensity to pitch in on common tasks and to show consideration for bystanders is the question to which we turn in the next two chapters.

powerfully positive—of what we used to call "the war," without at the same time glorifying martial virtues or mortal sacrifice. (This is precisely the dilemma addressed so effectively by director Steven Spielberg in *Saving Private Ryan.*) When a generation of Americans early in the twentieth century reflected on both the horrors of war and the civic virtues that it inculcated, they framed their task as the search for "the moral equivalent of war."[59] Insofar as the story of this chapter contains any practical implication for civic renewal, it is that.

CHAPTER 15

What Killed Civic Engagement? Summing Up

WE ARE ABOUT READY to sum up our conclusions about the complex of factors that lies behind the erosion of America's social connectedness and community involvement over the last several decades. First, however, we must review the evidence for and against several additional suspects.

First, the American family structure has changed in several important and potentially relevant ways over the last several decades. The downturn in civic engagement coincided with the breakdown of the traditional family unit—mom, dad, and the kids. Since the family itself is, by some accounts, a key form of social capital, perhaps its eclipse is part of the explanation for the reduction in joining and trusting in the wider community. What does the evidence show?

Evidence of the loosening of family bonds is unequivocal. In addition to the century-long increase in divorce rates (which accelerated from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s and then leveled off), and the more recent increase in single-parent families, the incidence of one-person households has more than doubled since 1950, in part because of the rising number of widows living alone. According to the General Social Survey, the proportion of all American adults who are currently married fell from 74 percent in 1974 to 56 percent in 1998, while the proportion of adults who have children at home fell from 55 percent to 38 percent. The Census Bureau reports that the fraction of adults who are both married and have kids at home—the archetypal Ozzie and Harriet family—was sliced by more than one-third from 40 percent in 1970 to 26 percent in 1997.[1]

It is a commonplace of cocktail conversation that we meet people through our spouses and our children. To what extent has the transformation of American family structure and home life over the last thirty years (fewer marriages, more divorces, fewer children, more people living alone) contributed to the decline of civic engagement? The surprising answer is "Probably not much."

Marriage and children do change the kinds of social networks to which one belongs. Both marriage and children increase time spent in community organizations and at home and decrease time spent in informal socializing with friends. Only two types of organizational affiliations, however, are sufficiently strongly related to marital and parental status to make a real difference in the aggregate: church- and youth-related activities.

Americans who are married and those with children are much more likely to be involved in religious activities, including church membership, church attendance, and church-related social activities. As I will explain momentarily, it is not clear which is cause and which effect, but the link is strong. Not surprisingly, parents are also more involved in school and youth groups (PTA, Scouts, and so on), and they are more likely to "attend public meetings on town *or school* affairs" (emphasis added). Finally, since church- and youth-related activities are the two most common sites for volunteering in America, parents are more likely to volunteer than people of the same age and social status who are single and childless.

On the other hand, neither marital nor parental status boosts membership in other sorts of groups. Holding other demographic features constant, marriage and children are *negatively* correlated with membership in sports, political, and cultural groups, and they are simply unrelated to membership in business and professional groups, service clubs, ethnic organizations, neighborhood associations, and hobby groups. Married people attend *fewer* club meetings than demographically matched single people.

Married people are slightly (but only slightly) more likely to give and attend dinner parties, to entertain at home, and to take an active role in local organizations. On the other hand, married people are *less* likely to spend time informally with friends and neighbors. Married people tend to be homebodies. As the marriage rate declined, therefore, the main effect on social life should have been to move social activities from the home into more public settings, but there should have been no generic effects on civic engagement as such. Interest in politics is actually slightly higher among single and childless adults than among married people and parents, other things being equal. Having kids is more important in inducing local involvement (leadership, meetings, volunteering), as we have seen. Parenthood is marginally more important than marriage per se as an entrée to community life, but the effect does not appear to extend beyond school- and youth-related activities themselves.

Divorce per se is negatively related to involvement in religious organizations but appears to be unrelated (positively or negatively) to other forms

of civic involvement, formal or informal. Compared to demographically matched never married people, divorced people don't entertain friends less often (though they do give slightly fewer dinner parties), don't volunteer less, don't attend club meetings less often, don't work on fewer community projects, and actually sign slightly more petitions, attend slightly more public meetings, and write to Congress slightly more often. Divorce itself does not seem to be seriously implicated in the general trend toward civic disengagement.

The traditional family unit is down (a lot) and religious engagement is down (a little), and there is probably some link between the two. However, the nature of that link is quite unclear. It might be that the dissolution of the traditional family has led to lower religious involvement, or it might be that lower religious involvement has led to greater acceptance of divorce and other nontraditional family forms. In other words, the decline of the traditional family may have contributed to the decline of traditional religion, but the reverse is equally possible. In any event, the evidence is *not* consistent with the thesis that the *overall* decline in civic engagement and social connectedness is attributable to the decline in the traditional family. On the contrary, to some extent the decline in family obligations ought to have freed up time for more social and community involvement.

If we could rerun the last thirty or forty years, holding the traditional family structure constant—which we can do statistically by giving extra weight to the married people and parents who appear in our surveys—we might produce more religious participation and we surely would produce more involvement in school and youth groups. For those two reasons, that bit of hypothetical social engineering would modestly increase the average level of volunteering. (Ironically, volunteering is one of the few forms of civic engagement for which there is no decline to explain.) *However,* tinkering with family structure in this way would have virtually no effect on membership or activity in secular organizations (from Kiwanis to the NAACP to the AMA), nor would it halt the decline in political activities such as voting or party work. It would tend to *decrease* the time we spend with friends and neighbors even more than we have in fact witnessed. In short, apart from youth- and church-related engagement, *none* of the major declines in social capital and civic engagement that we need to explain can be accounted for by the decline in the traditional family structure.[2] In my view, there are important reasons for concern about the erosion of traditional family values, but I can find no evidence that civic disengagement is among them.

Race is such a fundamental feature of American social history that nearly every other feature of our society is connected to it in some way. Thus it seems intuitively plausible that race might somehow have played a role in the erosion of social capital over the last generation. In fact, the decline in social connectedness and social trust began just after the greatest successes of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. That coincidence suggests the possibility of a kind of civic "white flight," as legal desegregation of civic life led whites to withdraw from community associations. This racial interpretation of the destruction of social capital is controversial and can hardly be settled within the compass of these brief remarks. Nevertheless the basic facts are these.

First, racial differences in associational membership are not large. At least until the 1980s, controlling for educational and income differences, blacks belonged to more associations on average than whites, essentially because they were more likely than comparably situated whites to belong to both religious and ethnic organizations and no less likely to belong to any other type of group.[3] On the other hand, as we saw in chapter 8, racial differences in social trust are very large indeed, even taking into account differences in education, income, and so on. Clearly these racial differences in social trust reflect not collective paranoia, but real experiences over many generations.

Second, the erosion of social capital has affected all races. This fact is inconsistent with the thesis that "white flight" is a significant cause of civic disengagement, since African Americans have been dropping out of religious and civic organizations and other forms of social connectedness at least as rapidly as white Americans. In fact, the sharpest drop in civic activity between the 1970s and the 1990s was among college-educated African Americans. Even more important, among *whites* the pace of civic disengagement has been uncorrelated with racial intolerance or support for segregation. Avowedly racist or segregationist whites have been no quicker to drop out of community organizations during this period than more tolerant whites. The decline in group membership is essentially identical among whites who favor segregation, whites who oppose segregation, and blacks.[4]

Third, if civic disengagement represented white flight from integrated community life after the civil rights revolution, it is hard to reconcile with the generational differences described in chapter 14. Why should disengagement be hardly visible at all among Americans who came of age in the first half of the century, when American society was objectively more segregated and subjectively more racist than in the 1960s and 1970s? If racial prejudice were responsible for America's civic disengagement, disengagement ought to be especially pronounced among the most bigoted individuals and generations. But it is not.

This evidence is not conclusive, but it does shift the burden of proof onto those who believe that racism is a primary explanation for growing civic disengagement over the last quarter century, however virulent racism continues to be in American society. Equally important, this evidence also suggests that reversing the civil rights gains of the last thirty years would do nothing to reverse the social capital losses.

• • •

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE, particularly the timing of the downturn in social connectedness, has suggested to some observers that an important cause—perhaps even *the* cause—of civic disengagement is big government and the growth of the welfare state.[5] By "crowding out" private initiative, it is argued, state intervention has subverted civil society. This is a much larger topic than I can address in detail here, but a word or two is appropriate.

On the one hand, some government policies have almost certainly had the effect of destroying social capital. For example, the so-called slum clearance policies of the 1950s and 1960s replaced physical capital but destroyed social capital, by disrupting existing community ties. It is also conceivable that certain social expenditures and tax policies may have created disincentives for civic-minded philanthropy. On the other hand, it is much harder to see which government policies might be responsible for the decline in bowling leagues, family dinners, and literary clubs.

One empirical approach to this issue is to examine differences in civic engagement and public policy across different political jurisdictions to see whether swollen government leads to shriveled social capital. Among the U.S. states, however, differences in social capital appear essentially uncorrelated with various measures of welfare spending or government size.[6] Citizens in free-spending states are no more engaged than citizens in frugal ones. Cross-national comparison can also shed light on this question. Among the advanced Western democracies, social trust and group membership are, if anything, *positively* correlated with the size of government; social capital appears to be highest of all in the big-spending welfare states of Scandinavia.[7] This simple analysis, of course, cannot tell us whether social connectedness encourages welfare spending, whether the welfare state fosters civic engagement, or whether both are the result of some other unmeasured factor(s). Sorting out the underlying causal connections would require much more thorough analysis. However, even this simple finding is not easily reconciled with the notion that big government undermines social capital.

Examining trends in the size of American government over the last half century reinforces doubts about the thesis that the welfare state is responsible for our declining social capital. Figure 78 shows that only two things have really changed with respect to the size of government relative to the size of the U.S. economy over the last half century: 1) defense spending generally declined, more or less steadily, from 1951 to 1998; and 2) state and local spending rose steadily from 1947 to 1975. On the other hand, two things have *not* really changed: 1) the size of federal domestic spending (it averaged 2.2 percent of GNP in the late 1940s and in the late 1990s and 2.7 percent at the peak in the mid-1960s); and 2) the relative size of federal vs. state and local spending in the last twenty-five years.

Meanwhile social capital in virtually all its forms increased a lot between 1947 and 1965 and decreased a lot between 1965 and 1998. Thus figure 78

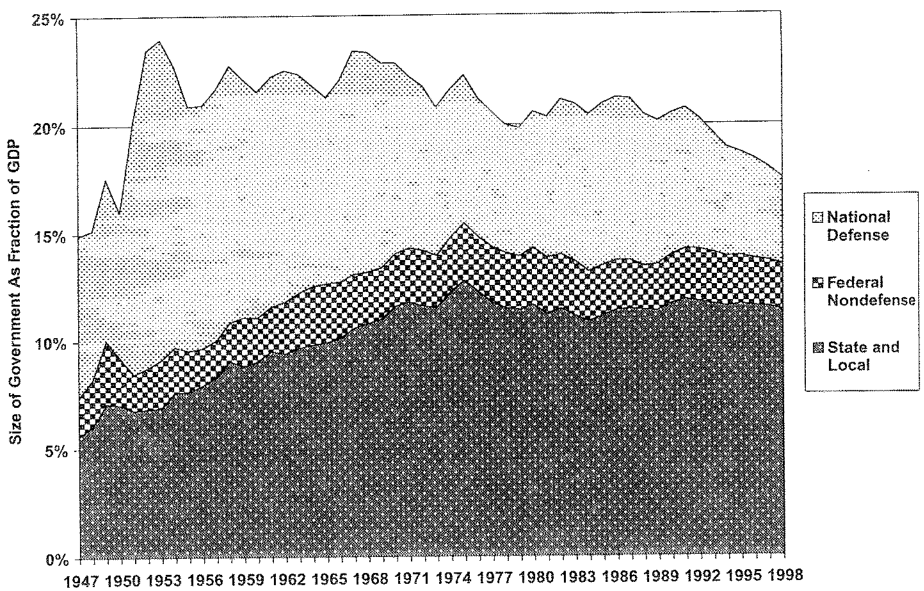

Figure 78: Government Spending, 1947–1998: State and Local Government Up, National Defense Down

seems to me inconsistent with any theory that blames the decline of social capital or civic engagement on either big government or the relative size of the federal government, compared with state and local government.

IF BIG GOVERNMENT is not the primary cause of declining civic engagement in contemporary America, how about big business, capitalism, and the market? Thoughtful social critics have long feared that capitalism would undermine the preconditions for its own success by eroding interpersonal ties and social trust.[8] Many of the grand masters of nineteenth-century social theory, from Georg Simmel to Karl Marx, argued that market capitalism had created a "cold society," lacking the interpersonal warmth necessary for friendship and devaluing human ties to the status of mere commodities. The problem with this generic theory of social disconnectedness is that it explains too much: America has epitomized market capitalism for several centuries, during which our stocks of social capital and civic engagement have been through great swings. A constant can't explain a variable.

One version of economic determinism, however, may have more validity—the gradual but accelerating nationalization and globalization of our economic structures. The replacement of local banks, shops, and other locally

based firms by far-flung multinational empires often means a decline in civic commitment on the part of business leaders. As Wal-Mart replaces the corner hardware store, Bank of America takes over the First National Bank, and local owners are succeeded by impersonal markets, the incentives for business elites to contribute to community life atrophy. Urbanist Charles Heying has shown, for example, how such "corporate delocalization" in the last third of the twentieth century tended to strip Atlanta of its civic leadership. The social cohesion and civic commitment of Atlanta's elite rose from the 1930s to a peak in the 1960s and then declined to the 1990s, very much the same trajectory as our other measures of social capital. Heying offers suggestive evidence of similar trends in places as diverse as Chicago, Philadelphia, Dayton, and Shreveport. One of Boston's top developers complained to me privately about the demise of "the Vault," a celebrated cabal of local business leaders. "Where are the power elite when you need them?" he said. "They're all off at corporate headquarters in some other state."[9]

I have no doubt that global economic transformations are having an important impact on community life across America. The link is most direct, however, as regards larger philanthropic and civic activities. It is less clear why corporate delocalization should affect, for example, our readiness to attend a church social, or to have friends over for poker, or even to vote for president. Nevertheless, the connection between civic disengagement and corporate disengagement is worth exploring.[10]

LET US SUM UP what we have learned about the factors that have contributed to the decline in civic engagement and social capital traced in section II.

First, pressures of time and money, including the special pressures on two-career families, contributed measurably to the diminution of our social and community involvement during these years. My best guess is that no more than 10 percent of the total decline is attributable to that set of factors.

Second, suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl also played a supporting role. Again, a reasonable estimate is that these factors together might account for perhaps an additional 10 percent of the problem.

Third, the effect of electronic entertainment—above all, television—in privatizing our leisure time has been substantial. My rough estimate is that this factor might account for perhaps 25 percent of the decline.

Fourth and most important, generational change—the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren—has been a very powerful factor. The effects of generational succession vary significantly across different measures of civic engagement—greater for more public forms, less for private *schmoozing*—but as a rough rule of thumb we concluded in chapter 14 that this factor might account for perhaps half of the overall decline.

Slightly complicating our accounting for change is the overlap between generational change and the long-term effects of television. Not all of the effects of television are generational—even members of the long civic generation who are heavy TV watchers reduce their civic involvement—and not all of the effects of generational succession can be traced to television. (We speculated that the fading effects of World War II are also quite important, and other factors too may be lurking behind the "generational effect.") Nevertheless, perhaps 10–15 percent of the total change might be attributed to the joint impact of generation and TV—what we might term in shorthand "the TV generation."[11]

All of these estimates should be taken with a few grains of salt, partly because the specific effects vary among different forms of community involvement. Generation is more important in explaining the decline of churchgoing, for example, and less important in explaining the decline in visiting with friends. Nevertheless, figure 79 represents a rough-and-ready image of the relative importance of the factors we have explored. The missing chunk from the pie chart accurately reflects the limits of our current understanding. Work, sprawl, TV, and generational change are all important parts of the story, but important elements in our mystery remain unresolved.

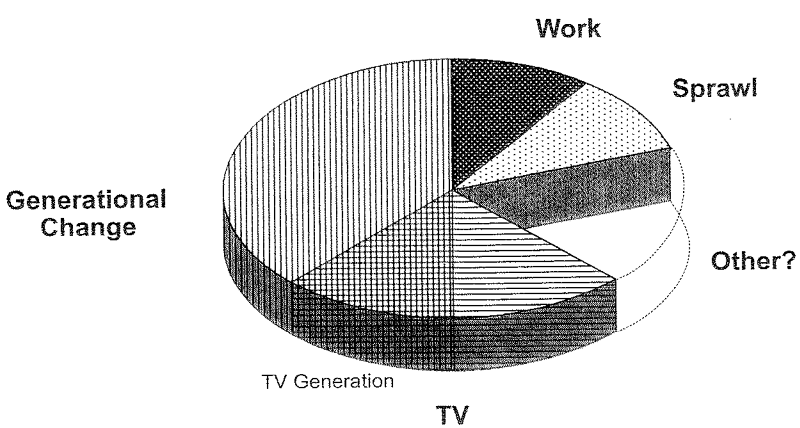

Figure 79: Guesstimated Explanation for Civic Disengagement, 1965–2000

SECTION FOUR

So What?

With the assistance of Kristin A. Goss

CHAPTER 17

Education and Children's Welfare

CHILD DEVELOPMENT is powerfully shaped by social capital. A considerable body of research dating back at least fifty years has demonstrated that trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group, and larger community have wide-ranging effects on the child's opportunities and choices and, hence, on his behavior and development.[1] Although the presence of social capital has been linked to various positive outcomes, particularly in education, most research has focused on the bad things that happen to kids who live and learn in areas where there is a deficit of social capital. The implication is clear: Social capital keeps bad things from happening to good kids.

One indication of the strong connection between social capital and child development is the remarkable convergence between the state-by-state Social Capital Index that we have constructed and a popular measure of child well-being (the Kids Count indexes published annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation).[2] (Table 5 summarizes the measures that make up the Kids Count index of child welfare.)

STATES THAT SCORE HIGH on the Social Capital Index—that is, states whose residents trust other people, join organizations, volunteer, vote, and socialize with friends—are the same states where children flourish: where babies are born healthy and where teenagers tend not to become parents, drop out of school, get involved in violent crime, or die prematurely due to suicide or homicide. (See figure 81.) Statistically, the correlation between high social

Table 5: Kids Count Index of Child Welfare

Percent low-birth-weight babies
Infant mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)
Child death rate (deaths per 100,000 children ages 1–14)
Deaths per 100,000 teens ages 15–19 by accident, homicide, and suicide
Teen birth rate (births per 1,000 females ages 15–17)
Percent of teens who are high school dropouts (ages 16–19)
Juvenile violent crime arrest rate (arrests per 100,000 youths ages 10–17)
Percent of teens not attending school and not working (ages 16–19)
Percent of children in poverty
Percent of families with children headed by a single parent

capital and positive child development is as close to perfect as social scientists ever find in data analyses of this sort.[3] States such as North Dakota, Vermont, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Iowa have healthy civic adults and healthy well-adjusted kids; other states, primarily those in the South, face immense challenges in both the adult and youth populations.

Of course, the mere fact that social capital is correlated with good outcomes for kids does not mean that social capital *causes* these outcomes or, conversely, that a social-capital deficit is leading kids to take wrong turns in life. Besides social capital, states also differ in many other ways that might influence child well-being—parental education levels, poverty rates, family structure, racial composition, and so forth. To make matters more complicated, social capital itself is associated with these factors. Thus states with disproportionately large numbers of poorly educated adults and low-income single-parent families tend not to have as many vibrant civic communities as do states where residents have the economic luxury and practical skills to participate. Because of this complicated set of relationships among child outcomes, social capital, and demographics, we must be vigilant not to draw spurious conclusions from the data. What we really want to know is whether the observed differences across states in child well-being are linked directly to social capital itself or to some other factor or factors that influence both child well-being and social capital.

Fortunately modern statistical tools help us to sort through the confusion by allowing us to hold constant other factors while examining the specific links between social capital and child well-being. In essence, our analysis finds that socioeconomic and demographic characteristics do matter—but so does social capital.[4] Indeed, across the various Kids Count indicators, social capital is second only to poverty in the breadth and depth of its effects on children's lives. While poverty is an especially potent force in increasing youth fertility, mortality, and idleness, community engagement has precisely the opposite effect. Social capital is especially important in keeping children from being born unhealthily small and in keeping teenagers from dropping out of school, hang-

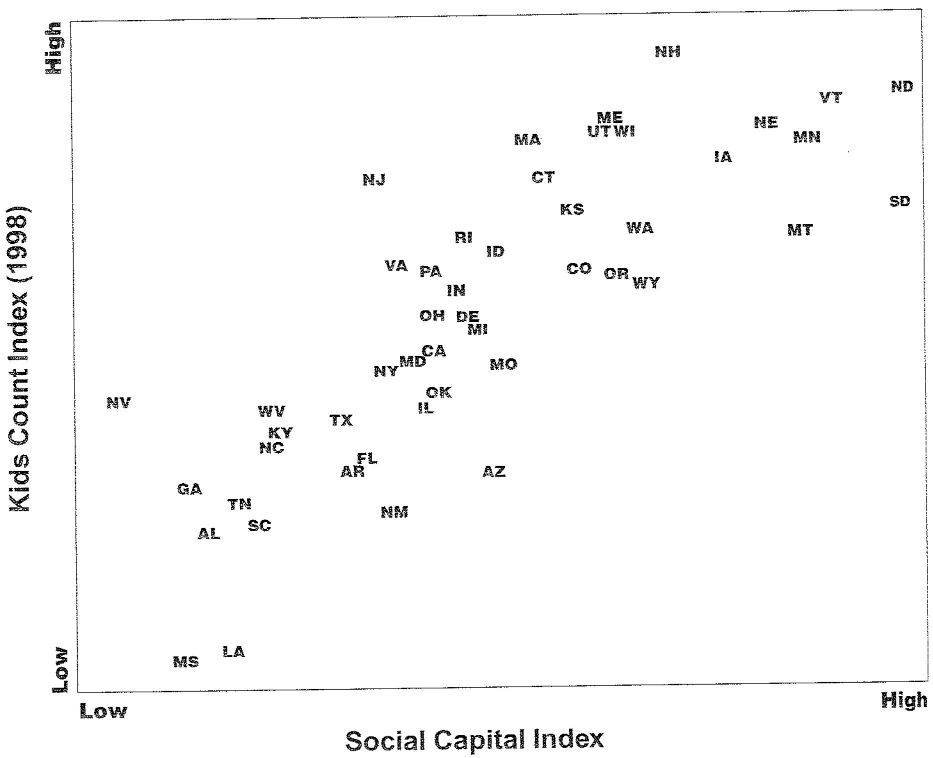

Figure 81: Kids Are Better Off in High-Social-Capital States

ing out on the streets, and having babies out of wedlock. A state's racial composition and rate of single-parent families also affect child well-being, though far less consistently or strongly than do poverty and low social capital. In general, the education level of the adult population does not have a significant independent influence on child outcomes, after poverty, social capital, and demographics are taken into account. A state's social infrastructure is far more important than anyone would have predicted in ensuring the healthy development of youth.

Similar conclusions have been reached by scholars studying family life at the level of the neighborhood and even the individual family. Community psychologists have long noted that child abuse rates are higher where neighborhood cohesion is lower.[5] For example, in a widely cited study of two neighborhoods, one with a high child maltreatment rate and the other with a low rate, social capital turned out to be the main factor that distinguished the two communities. These neighborhoods had similar income levels and similar rates of working women and single-parent households. However, in the high-

risk neighborhoods, residents were far more reluctant to ask for help from a neighbor. Parents in the high-abuse area were also far less likely to report exchanging child care with a neighbor or allowing their kids to play with others in the neighborhood. Kids in low-risk neighborhoods were more than three times as likely as kids in high-risk areas to find a parent home after school. The authors of the study concluded that in areas with high abuse rates, a "family's own problems seem to be compounded rather than ameliorated by the neighborhood context. Under such circumstances strong support systems are most needed, but least likely to operate."[6] Informal social networks help shield children from their parents' worst moments.

Individual children at risk have proved particularly vulnerable to social-capital deficits. More hopefully, precisely such children are most susceptible to the positive benefits of social connectedness, if it can be provided. Pediatrician Desmond K. Runyan and his colleagues, for example, followed a large group of preschool children identified as at high risk of abuse and neglect. After several years fully 87 percent of these at-risk children were suffering from behavioral and emotional problems. However, the best predictor of which children successfully avoided such problems was the degree to which they and their mothers were enmeshed in a supportive social network, lived in a socially supportive neighborhood, and attended church regularly. As the authors conclude, even in these preschool years "the parents' social capital . . . confers benefits on their off-spring, just as children benefit from their parents' financial and human capital. Social capital may be most crucial for families who have fewer financial and educational resources." Another study found that inner-city African American adolescents living in neighborhoods with relatively high levels of social capital were less depressed than those living in less close-knit neighborhoods; this positive effect of neighborhood support was especially marked for kids who lacked strong family ties. Similar results have been found in both urban and rural settings.[7]

Social capital matters for children's successful development in life. We can draw the same conclusion about the link between social capital and school performance. The quality of American education has been of growing concern in recent decades; in fact, many knowledgeable observers believe that public schooling has reached a crisis.[8]

Yet not all states are faring poorly. Mirroring our findings on healthy children, those states with high social capital have measurably better educational outcomes than do less civic states. The Social Capital Index is highly correlated with student scores on standardized tests taken in elementary school, junior high, and high school, as well as with the rate at which students stay in school.[9] (See figure 82.) The beneficial effects of social capital persist even after accounting for a host of other factors that might affect state educational success—racial composition, affluence, economic inequality, adult educational levels, poverty rates, educational spending, teachers' salaries, class size,

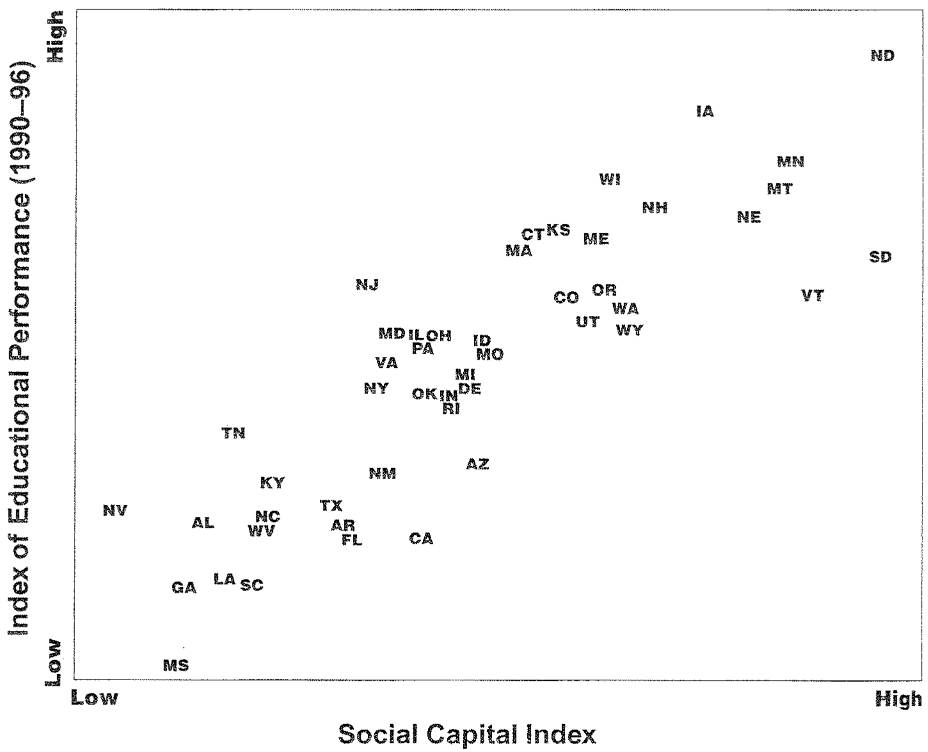

Figure 82: Schools Work Better in High-Social-Capital States

family structure, and religious affiliation, as well as the size of the private-school sector (which might "cream" better students from public schools). Not surprisingly, several of these factors had an independent effect on state test scores and dropout rates, but astonishingly, social capital was the single most important explanatory factor. In fact, our analysis suggests that for some outcomes—particularly SAT scores—the impact of race, poverty, and adult education levels is only indirect. These factors seem to influence the level of social capital in a state, and social capital—not poverty or demographic characteristics per se—drives test scores.[10]

Unexpectedly, the level of *informal* social capital in the state is a stronger predictor of student achievement than is the level of *formal* institutionalized social capital. In other words, level of social trust in a state and the frequency with which people connected informally with one another (in card games, visiting with friends, and the like) were even more closely correlated with educational performance than was the amount of time state residents devoted to club meetings, church attendance, and community projects. That is not to say

that formal activities were unimportant. Rather, what this admittedly crude evidence is saying is that there is something about communities where people connect with one another—over and above how rich or poor they are materially, how well educated the adults themselves are, what race or religion they are—that positively affects the education of children. Conversely, even communities with many material and cultural advantages do a poor job of educating their kids if the adults in those communities don't connect with one another. Sadly, the evidence of section II is that more and more American communities are like that.

One can see the importance of social capital by comparing specific examples. Take two medium-size states on the East Coast: North Carolina (ranked number forty-one in the nation in terms of SAT scores, achievement tests, and dropout rates) and Connecticut (ranked number nine). Controlling for all the other ways in which the two states differ (wealth and poverty, race, adult educational levels, urbanism, and so on), for North Carolina to see educational outcomes similar to Connecticut's, according to our statistical analysis, residents of the Tar Heel State could do any of the following: increase their turnout in presidential elections by 50 percent; double their frequency of club meeting attendance; triple the number of nonprofit organizations per thousand inhabitants; or attend church two more times per month. These may seem like daunting challenges, requiring a great deal of community organizing, and in any event I do not mean to imply that the link between, say, adult club attendance and school performance is simple, direct, and mechanical. On the other hand, the data also suggest how hard it would be for North Carolina to match Connecticut's performance simply through traditional educational reforms—by decreasing class size, for example. Because the effect of class size on state-level performance is modest by comparison to the effects of social capital, it would be virtually impossible to achieve the same progress simply by reducing class size.[11] In reality, of course, a multipronged approach to improving education is needed, for there are no magic bullets; my point is merely that the potential leverage offered by social capital is surprisingly great compared to more conventional approaches.[12]

Why does the density of social connectedness in a state seem to have such a marked effect on how well its students perform in school? The honest answer is that we are not yet entirely sure, but we have some important clues. First, where civic engagement in community affairs in general is high, teachers report higher levels of parental support and lower levels of student misbehavior, such as bringing weapons to school, engaging in physical violence, playing hooky, and being generally apathetic about education. The correlation between community infrastructure, on the one hand, and student and parental engagement in schools, on the other hand, is very substantial even after taking into account other economic, social, and educational factors, like poverty, racial composition, family structure, educational spending, class size, and so forth. In light of the rash of deadly school violence in 1999 it is worth noting that among all these factors the strongest predictors of student violence across the states are two-parent families and community-based social capital, dwarfing the importance of such social conditions as poverty, urbanism, or levels of parental education. In short, parents in states with high levels of social capital are more engaged with their kids' education, and students in states with high levels of social capital are more likely than students in less civic states to hit the books rather than to hit one another.[13]

A second reason why students perform better in states with high social capital may be that they spend less time watching TV. As figure 83 shows, the negative correlation between the average time that kids spend watching TV and the average level of adult civic engagement and social connectedness is quite powerful. (As always, we have checked to confirm that this relationship is not simply a spurious reflection of some other factor, such as poverty or race.) It seems likely that where community traditions of social involvement remain high, children are naturally drawn into more productive uses of leisure than where social connectedness and civic engagement among adults is limited.

This state-by-state analysis reconfirms decades of research showing that community involvement is crucial to schools' success. These studies have found that student learning is influenced not only by what happens in school and at home, but also by social networks, norms, and trust in the school and in the wider community.[14] Indeed, Parent-Teacher Associations were created to institutionalize social capital among parents, and between parents and teachers, so that schools could better meet their educational goals.

The decline in PTA membership over the past several decades reflects many parents' disengagement from their children's schooling. That decline is a shame, because research suggests that when parents and the wider community work with schools, students benefit in concrete and measurable ways. One of the earliest and most influential studies linking social capital to education was done by James Coleman, the late University of Chicago sociologist who laid the intellectual foundations for the study of social capital and its effects. Coleman was puzzled by the low dropout rates at Catholic and other religiously based high schools. Students in public high schools, for example, were three times as likely as Catholic high school students to drop out; students at non-Catholic private schools were more than twice as likely to drop out. In addition, Catholic schools were shown to be more effective in teaching mathematics and verbal skills to students. Coleman hypothesized that Catholic school success is due not to the particular characteristics of the individual students, but rather to the social structure enveloping the school: the students' parents have multistranded relations with one another, both as fellow members of the local church and as parents of school chums. And these parent communities provide social resources to at-risk students and insulate the schools from pressures to water down their core curricula. In short, Coleman

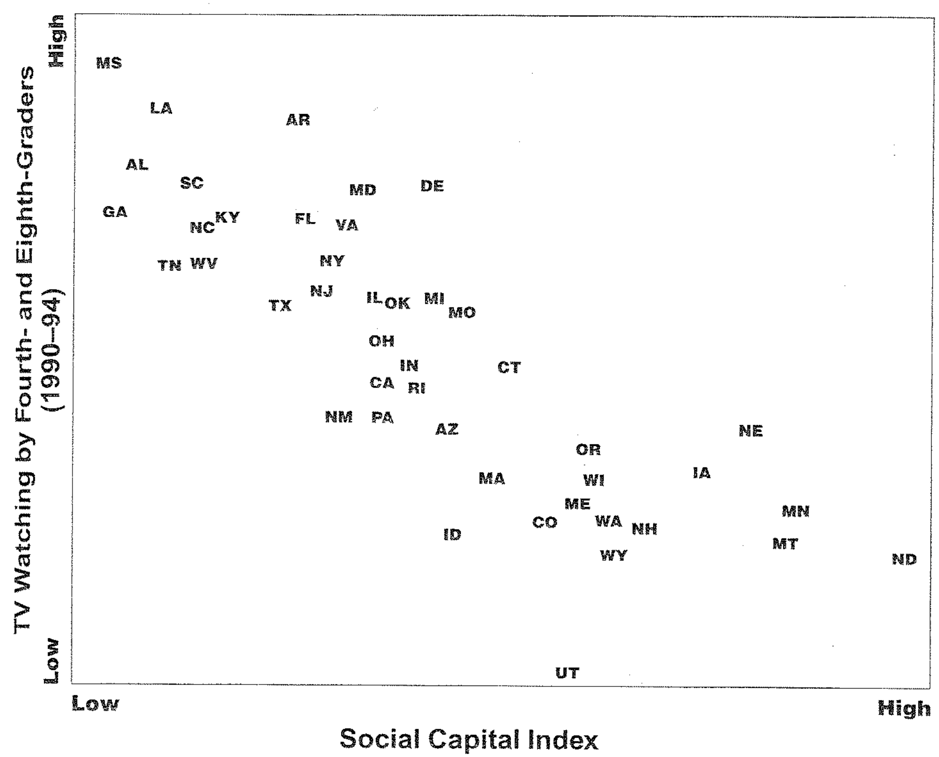

Figure 83: Kids Watch Less TV in High-Social-Capital States

warned, we cannot understate "the importance of the embeddedness of young persons in the enclaves of adults most proximate to them, first and most prominently the family and second, a surrounding community of adults (exemplified in all these results by the religious community)."[15] Unfortunately, the "functional communities" from which Catholic school students benefit have been eroding, because both the church and the family have lost strength and cohesion. This trend can be expected to harm kids of all socioeconomic groups, but especially the disadvantaged.

Educational researchers Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla have summarized a large number of studies tending to show that when parents are involved with their children's education, children do better in school and the schools they attend are better. They conclude that "[t]he evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life. . . . When parents are involved in their children's education at home, their children do better in school. When parents are involved at school, their children go further in school, and the schools they go to are better."[16]

Moving from the community to the school level, other research has found that social capital within the school walls has a plethora of benefits to students, teachers, and administrators. Studies going back at least thirty years have shown that smaller schools tend to outperform large schools in large part because smaller schools afford more opportunities and encouragement for students to engage with one another in face-to-face extracurricular activities and to take responsibility for school clubs and so forth.[17]

In large, multiyear studies of Chicago schools and of Catholic schools nationwide, Anthony S. Bryk and his colleagues have concluded that "communal" social capital and "relational trust" give some schools an enormous edge, even after accounting for differences in teacher backgrounds and student demographics. As communities of learning, Catholic schools differ in many ways from public high schools. Catholic schools are smaller, provide for more high-quality relationships between students and teachers in diverse settings, offer a wider range of interactive extracurricular programs, and are characterized by a high level of internal agreement about the school's mission and values. According to Bryk and his colleagues, if an "average" public school adopted a "communal organization" similar to that of a demographically comparable Catholic school, the public school would see significant improvements in teacher and staff morale and in student interest in academics. The public school would also enjoy significant reductions in class cutting and classroom disorder.[18] Like Coleman, Bryk and his colleagues conclude that Catholic schools do better than public schools not because the teachers or students are more qualified, but because "Catholic schools benefit from a network of social relations, characterized by trust, that constitute a form of 'social capital.' "[19]

Some cities are using these insights to build social capital and citizen participation within their public schools. In one of the earliest, most successful, and longest-running school reform initiatives, the Yale child psychiatrist James Comer has developed a model of effective linkage among schools, parents, and the community. Two of the guiding principles of a Comer school include "[c]oordination and cooperation among all adults concerned with the child's best educational interests" and "active involvement of parents every step of the way."[20] Comer and his colleagues found that parental participation can improve school performance and family support for kids' achievement—but only if parents are given real decision-making responsibility and are placed in positions suited to their knowledge and skills.[21] Where these elements aren't present, parents tend to become disillusioned and distrustful, undermining the community-based social capital so vital to public schools.

In the late 1980s Chicago launched a path-breaking education reform initiative whose cornerstone is parent participation in decision making. Although the reform plan did not work as well as hoped, evaluators still found

that social capital within schools can make a difference. When there is a high level of trust among teachers, parents, and principals, these key players are more committed to the central tenets of school improvement. Teachers in high-trust settings feel loyal to the school, seek innovative approaches to learning, reach out to parents, and have a deep sense of responsibility for students' development. Even after taking into account all the other factors that influence the odds of successful reform, trust remains a key ingredient.[22]

As these studies suggest, parental and community engagement are at the center of current efforts to improve schooling. Indeed, two of the more controversial reform approaches—the creation of charter schools and the provision of publicly financed vouchers for kids to attend private schools—may be viewed as attempts by parents to give their kids the benefits of the "communal orientation" that produces exceptional student behavior and performance. Critics of "choice" programs fear they will only exacerbate existing educational inequities. Supporters argue that putting schooling into the invisible hand of the free market will improve quality for everyone because schools will be forced to compete on outcomes. While it is too soon to tell which side is right, we do have evidence that if "choice" programs work, their success may turn less on the magic of the marketplace than on the magic of social capital. School reform initiatives that encourage kids to attend smaller, more communal schools may have the unintended result of increasing both student and parental involvement in clubs, classroom activities, governing bodies, and education lobbying groups.[23] In this way, such education reform could be an engine of civic reengagement, although if only the most engaged parents removed their children to the new schools, thus also removing the "positive externalities" that their engagement produces for other kids, the net effect could be to exacerbate inequality.

Social capital at the neighborhood or community level clearly has an impact on child learning. But social capital *within* families also powerfully affects youth development.[24] Families that enjoy close social bonds and parents who instill the value of reciprocity in their kids are more likely to "gain a greater degree of compliance and adherence to their values."[25] Even holding constant many other things that affect educational achievement, including parents' education and income, race, family size, region, and gender, children whose parents are closely involved with their kids and their kids' schools are much less likely to drop out of high school than children who lack these forms of social capital. Kids of parents who attend programs at their kids' school, help with homework, and monitor their kids' behavior outside school are likely to have higher grade-point averages, to be more engaged in the classroom, and to shun drugs and delinquent activity.[26] One long-term study of low-income teen mothers in Baltimore found that in those families where high levels of emotional support existed between a mom and her child, and where the mom had a strong support network, the child was dramatically more likely to graduate from high school, go on to college, and have a steady job. In other words, "at risk" children can succeed in life if their mothers have enough social capital.[27]

The beneficial effects of social capital are not limited to deprived communities or to primary and secondary education. Indeed, precisely what many high-achieving suburban school districts have in abundance is social capital, which is educationally more important even than financial capital. Conversely, where social connectedness is lacking, schools work less well, no matter how affluent the community. Moreover, social capital continues to have powerful effects on education during the college years. Extracurricular activities and involvement in peer social networks are powerful predictors of college dropout rates and college success, even holding constant precollegiate factors, including aspirations.[28] In other words, at Harvard as well as in Harlem, social connectedness boosts educational attainment. One of the areas in which America's diminished stock of social capital is likely to have the most damaging consequences is the quality of education (both in school and outside) that our children receive.

CHAPTER 18

Safe and Productive Neighborhoods

As WE SAW in the previous chapter, the healthy development of kids depends in large part on the social context in which they come of age. Neighborhoods with high levels of social capital tend to be good places to raise children. In high-social-capital areas public spaces are cleaner, people are friendlier, and the streets are safer. How do trust, social networks, and citizen engagement translate into nice, safe neighborhoods?

Scholars, especially criminologists, have puzzled over these questions for years. Most of the early work was concerned with why some neighborhoods seemed to have so much more vandalism, graffiti, street crime, and gang scuffles than did others. These neighborhood characteristics persisted over many decades, despite population turnover. Beginning in the 1920s, some of the nation's leading criminologists began to develop "ecological" theories of crime and juvenile deliquency. The theories varied in their particulars but generally focused on "social disorganization" as the engine of bad behavior. Such disorganization marked many urban communities where population turnover was high, neighbors anonymous, ethnic groups uneasily mixed, local organizations rare, and disadvantaged youths trapped in "subcultures" cut off from the adult world.

Noted criminologist Robert J. Sampson, summarizing many empirical studies, concludes that even controlling for poverty and other factors that might encourage criminal behavior, "communities characterized by (a) anonymity and sparse acquaintanceship networks among residents, (b) unsupervised teenage peer groups and attenuated control of public space, and (c) a weak organizational base and low social participation in local activities face an increased risk of crime and violence." For example, comparing neighborhoods matched on other social and economic factors, national surveys show that living in a neighborhood of high mobility doubles your risk of becoming a victim of crime, compared to living in a more stable neighborhood. However, Sampson adds, the "social disorganization" school did not adequately explain how and why these neighborhood characteristics seemed to produce increased levels of crime.[1]

Jane Jacobs, the great scholar of urban life, offered an answer in her now classic 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* Jacobs noted that "social capital"—a term of which she is one of the inventors—is what most differentiated safe and organized cities from unsafe and disorganized ones. In a scathing indictment of twentieth-century urban planning and renewal efforts, she argued that where cities are configured to maximize informal contact among neighbors, the streets are safer, children are better taken care of, and people are happier with their surroundings. To Jacobs, regular contact with the local grocer, the families on the front stoop, and the priest walking the blocks of his parish, as well as the presence of street fairs and conveniently traversed parks, developed a sense of continuity and responsibility in local residents. "The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level—most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone—is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal and neighborhood need."[2]

In the decades since these influential studies, many other scholars across a range of disciplines have elaborated the basic insights. The conclusions of this work are straightforward and just as Jacobs and the early criminologists would have predicted: Higher levels of social capital, all else being equal, translate into lower levels of crime.

A state-level analysis of homicide statistics is illustrative. (Murder rates are generally accepted as the most reliable index of the incidence of crime, the least susceptible to distortion from one jurisdiction to another.) States with more social capital have proportionately fewer murders. (See figure 84.) This inverse relationship is astonishingly strong—as close to perfect as one might find between any two social phenomena.[3] Of course, there are many reasons why states high in social capital might happen to have low homicide rates. States rich in social capital, for example, tend to be wealthier, better educated, less urban, and more egalitarian in their distribution of income. But further analysis, which takes account of these and other factors, finds that the relationship between social capital and safe streets is real. In fact, social capital is about as important as poverty, urbanism, and racial composition as a determinant of homicide prevalence. Surprisingly, social capital is *more important* than a state's education level, rate of single-parent households, and income inequality

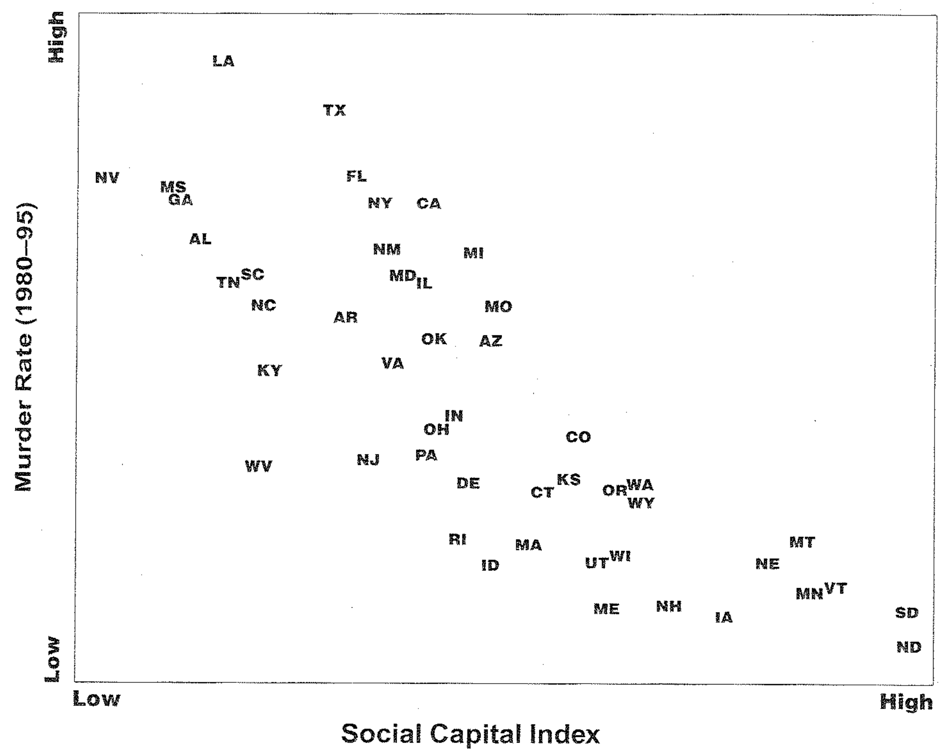

Figure 84: Violent Crime Is Rarer in High-Social-Capital States

in predicting the number of murders per capita during the 1980–95 period. Intriguingly, this correlation remains strong when we control for statewide levels of fear about crime; that unexpected fact implies that the causal arrow runs, at least in part, from social capital to crime.[4]

Our story here intersects with an age-old historical puzzle—why is the South different? Historians have known for more than a century that lethal violence is much more common in the states of the former Confederacy than in the rest of the country. In fact, murder rates have been much higher in the South since well before the Civil War, and this difference continued more or less undiluted throughout the twentieth century. During the 1980s and 1990s, for example, the murder rate in the South was roughly twice that in the North. Moreover, the same regional distinction is found both among whites and among blacks. Many interpretations have been offered—psychological, cultural, societal, economic, even racial. However, the regional difference persists even when we hold constant race, age, economic inequality, urbanization, education, poverty, and other established predictors of murder rates. Something about "southernness" seems to be associated with high potential for lethal violence.

Some observers have blamed "a southern world view that defines the social, political, and physical environment as hostile . . . the symbiosis of profuse hospitality and intense hostility toward strangers." Others suggest that the key to the puzzle is a distinctive southern "culture of honor," manifest in the nineteenth-century tradition of dueling and traceable perhaps to eighteenth-century immigration patterns.[5] Figure 84 suggests instead that social capital (or, rather, its absence) may be the missing link. Once differences in social capital are taken into account, the hoary regional difference vanishes. The South is no more violent than you would expect it to be, given its well-established social-capital deficit. This explanation accounts not only for the gross difference between North and South, but also for differences *within* the North and South.[6] In other words, lethal violence is endemic wherever social capital is deficient.

To probe further the link between social capital and violence, we can take advantage of a charming question posed in the DDB Needham Life Style surveys over the last several decades. "Do you agree or disagree with the following sentence?" respondents were asked: "I'd do better than average in a fist fight." On average, 38 percent of all Americans pick the pugnacious alternative. (Men are twice as likely to agree as women, 53 percent to 26 percent, but women have slowly narrowed the truculence gap, rising steadily from 20–25 percent agreement in the late 1970s to 30 percent in the late 1990s.) More to the point, there turn out to be significant differences from state to state. At the top of the scale, nearly half of the residents of Louisiana, West Virginia, and New Mexico agree with that sentence, as compared with less than a third of residents in South Dakota, Maine, Iowa, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Nebraska. As figure 85 shows, pugnacity is strongly correlated with low social capital, perhaps because in the absence of the emollient effects of community connectedness and social trust a self-help system of enforcing social order has emerged. In any event, citizens in states characterized by low levels of social capital are readier for a fight (perhaps because they need to be), and they are predisposed to mayhem.[7]

These state differences dovetail nicely with a body of research that has examined crime and delinquency rates at the local or even census-tract level. Besides looking at criminal misbehavior, these studies have used sophisticated statistical techniques to explore "neighborhood effects" on other problems that beset American cities—everything from child abuse, to dropout rates, to teen pregnancy, to drug use.[8] The unifying premise of these studies is that a person's behavior depends not only on his own characteristics, but also on the characteristics of those around him—his neighbors, school peers, and so forth.

These studies have been at the center of a rigorous debate, mostly over whether they have actually proven anything besides the tendency of like-

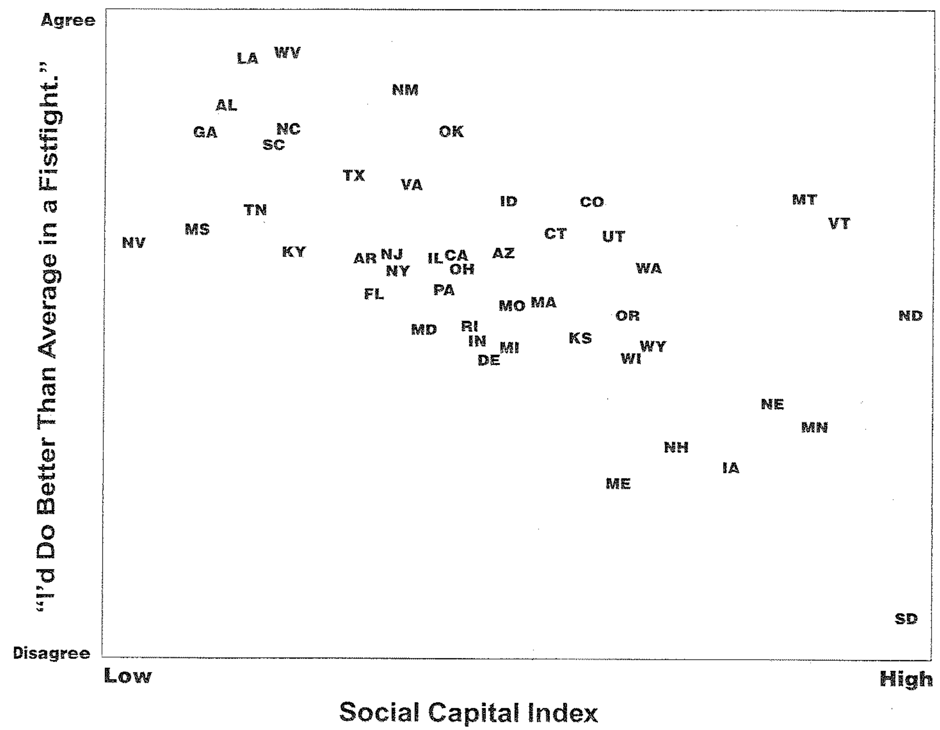

Figure 85: States High in Social Capital Are Less Pugnacious

minded people to congregate in the same places. This criticism is as follows: Sure, teenage dropouts tend to be found in the same neighborhoods, but it's not because these kids are influencing each other to leave school. Rather, the clustering appears because families with similar values or parenting practices feel more comfortable living near one another. Critics rightly note that the most sophisticated statistical analysis has trouble identifying the invisible forces that might cause "birds of a feather" to flock together. What is more, even if neighborhood effects do exist, they might be trivial compared to "family effects" such as parental nurturing and guidance.[9]

I take these critiques seriously. Nonetheless, the sheer number and diversity of studies that have found neighborhood effects on crime have persuaded me that these effects are real. Although the magnitude of the neighborhood influence varies, scholars have been able to demonstrate that, over and above their individual predisposition to engage in risky behaviors, kids who live amid other risk-taking kids are more likely to fall into bad patterns. In Boston, for example, kids whose neighborhood peers use drugs, commit crimes, and befriend gang members are themselves substantially more likely to do so as well, regardless of their initial proclivities. In Chicago young black men who live in neighborhoods with lots of white-collar professionals are more than three times as likely to graduate from high school than are comparable young men who live in neighborhoods with less educated residents.[10] These and dozens more studies suggest that people are profoundly motivated not merely by their own choices and circumstances, but also by the choices and circumstances of their neighbors. My fate depends on not only whether *I* study, stay off drugs, go to church, but also on whether my neighbors do these things.

Although the methods of analysis have not always allowed researchers to pinpoint how neighborhood effects work, there have been recent scholarly efforts to understand those processes better.[11] Researchers have come to believe that social capital—or lack of it—is a big piece of the puzzle. On one hand, the presence of social capital—individuals connected to one another through trusting networks and common values—allows for the enforcement of positive standards for youths and offers them access to mentors, role models, educational sponsors, and job contacts outside the neighborhood.[12] Social networks may also provide emotional and financial support for individuals and supply political leverage and volunteers for community institutions.[13] By contrast, the absence of positive norms, community associations, and informal adult friendship and kin networks leaves kids to their own devices. It is in such settings that youths are most likely to act on shortsighted or self-destructive impulses.

It is in such settings too that youths are most prone to create their own social capital in the form of gangs or neighborhood "crews." As sociologist Robert Sampson states: "Lack of social capital is one of the primary features of socially disorganized communities."[14] The best evidence available on changing levels of neighborhood connectedness suggests that most Americans are less embedded in their neighborhood than they were a generation ago.[15] This is due in part to the fact that women—long the stalwart neighborhood builders—are now much more likely to be away at work during the day than their mothers were. And professional men, who once lent their skills to neighborhood associations, are spending longer hours on the job than their fathers did. As we noted in section II, people are less likely today to socialize with neighbors and to work on community projects.

Indeed, the decline in neighborhood social capital—community monitoring, socializing, mentoring, and organizing—is one important feature of the inner-city crisis, in addition to purely economic factors. Many students of urban life have commented on the flight of jobs and middle-class families from American cities. Their departure represents a drain of both human and financial capital and, by extension, social capital. The nation's leading urban sociologist, William Julius Wilson, described the downward spiral in his 1987 classic *The Truly Disadvantaged:* "The basic thesis is not that ghetto culture went unchecked following the removal of higher-income families in the inner city, but that the removal of these families made it more difficult to sustain the basic

institutions in the inner city (including churches, stores, schools, recreational facilities, etc.) in the face of prolonged joblessness. And as the basic institutions declined, the social organization of inner-city neighborhoods (defined here to include a sense of community, positive neighborhood identification, and explicit norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior) likewise declined."[16]

Based on years of studying inner-city Philadelphia, the urban ethnographer Elijah Anderson also has documented a steady erosion in the "moral cohesion" of low-income neighborhoods. He, too, links the decline of social capital to the exodus of financial and human capital. The departure of middle-class blacks, he concludes, "has diminished an extremely important source of moral and social leadership within the black community." Meanwhile the senior statesmen and stateswomen of the neighborhood—the "old heads," as Anderson calls them—have stuck around, but their numbers are dwindling, and they have lost their moral authority. The male "old head" was "a man of stable means who was strongly committed to family life, to church, and, most important, to passing on his philosophy, developed through his own rewarding experience with work, to young boys he found worthy." He has "been losing prestige and credibility as a role model" as legitimate jobs have disappeared and illicit economic activity has proved highly lucrative. At the same time, the community "mothers," who once occupied porch stoops and served as the neighborhood's eyes and ears, have become "overwhelmed by a virtual proliferation of 'street kids'—children almost totally without parental supervision, left to their own devices." These women no longer enjoy the informal permission they once had to intervene on behalf of neighbors. "As family caretakers and role models disappear or decline in influence, and as unemployment and poverty become more persistent," Anderson concludes, "the community, particularly its children, becomes vulnerable to a variety of social ills, including crime, drugs, family disorganization, generalized demoralization, and unemployment."[17]

People who live and work in inner cities recognize the people and processes that Anderson describes. Moreover, it is not only in minority and impoverished neighborhoods that social-capital deficits lead to crime and other social pathologies. Anderson's ground-level insights about how social capital underpins healthy neighborhoods have been quantified in scores of sophisticated analyses of neighborhood and individual data.

One of the best is a widely noted study of Chicago neighborhoods by Robert J. Sampson, Stephen Raudenbush, and Felton Earls. Based on extensive survey and crime data, the study found that two characteristics—mutual trust and altruism among neighbors, and their willingness to intervene when they see children misbehaving—went a long way to explain why some neighborhoods are less crime prone than are others. Indeed, a neighborhood's "collective efficacy" was a better predictor than was its poverty or residential instability of whether a person is likely to be victimized in the neighborhood.

In this Chicago study other measures of social capital—such as individual participation in local organizations, number of neighborhood-based programs, and extent of kin and friendship ties in the neighborhood—didn't seem to make much of a difference. Rather, the authors conclude, "Reductions in violence appear to be more directly attributable to informal social control and cohesion among residents."[18]

An earlier study by Sampson and W. Byron Groves found that organizational participation and social ties did make a difference in reducing crime levels. Their analysis of British crime data found that in areas where people are connected through tight bonds of friendship and looser yet more diverse acquaintanceship ties, and where people are active in local committees and clubs, there are fewer muggings, assaults, burglaries, auto thefts, and so forth.[19] What is most interesting about this research is its finding that traditional neighborhood "risk factors"—such as high poverty and residential mobility—may not be as big a part of the crime problem as most people assume. Sampson and Groves's analysis suggests that while poorer, less stable areas do have substantially higher rates of street robbery, this is not simply because of poverty and instability per se. Rather, these places have higher crime rates in large part because adults don't participate in community organizations, don't supervise teenagers, and aren't linked through networks of friends. Similarly, a study of a dozen New York neighborhoods found that participation in community organizations helped to lessen the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on juvenile delinquency.[20] Put another way, young people rob and steal not only because they are poor, but also because adult networks and institutions have broken down.

Just as neighborhoods can affect families, so can families affect neighborhoods. In economists' terms, family social capital has "positive externalities," spilling out of the home and into the streets. In Northern California scholars have found that the presence of lots of stable families in a neighborhood is associated with lower levels of youthful lawbreaking, not because the adults serve as role models or supervisors, but because the adults rear well-adjusted and well-behaved kids. Thus "good families" have a ripple effect by increasing the pool of "good peers" that other families' kids can befriend.[21] If we think of youthful troublemaking as a communicable disease—a sort of behavioral chicken pox that spreads through high schools and friendship groups—then stable families provide the vaccines that reduce the number of contagious kids capable of infecting others.

Yet the integration of families into neighborhoods may not always be beneficial. If the neighborhood norms and networks are at odds with what ethnographer Anderson calls "decent" values,[22] then families who become enmeshed in the community may run afoul of their own better natures. One study of Northern California high school students found that the extent to which parents knew their child's friends, and knew the parents of those friends, was a

strong indicator of the child's classroom engagement and refusal to use alcohol and drugs. But such positive effects of "parents knowing parents" were found only in areas where school engagement and substance abuse were not a problem. In areas where students were more troubled, the social integration of parents actually exacerbated the problems of living in a community with poorly adjusted peers.[23] In other words, social integration into a community of bad actors may not produce good results.

Inner-city gangs might also be seen as a misguided attempt at neighborhood-based social capital building in areas where constructive institutions are sadly lacking. Although experts agree that gangs are hard to identify and even harder to count, most evidence suggests that their numbers are growing.[24] Some of these gangs are hierarchical enterprises whose sole business is business, especially marketing drugs and guns. But other gangs are closer to mutual aid societies based on horizontal bonds of interpersonal trust, reciprocity, and friendship that is defended to the death.[25] In many cases gang members are tolerated and well integrated into the mainstream community.[26]

In her excellent study of Latino gangs in Chicago, Ruth Horowitz describes the extensive social capital that existed within them:

> The Lions have been together as a group for almost ten years and during that time there has been a continual exchange, both individual and collective, of goods, services, and personal information. Small exchanges have occurred continuously but the larger obligations often take years to fulfill. The constant lending of money or buying of rounds of beer provides a daily continuity of social relationships and the flow of exchanges. Whoever has cash pays for the beer; no questions are asked, no accounts are recorded. The same is true of small loans and meals. The more serious mutual obligations, such as owing someone for help in an ongoing struggle for precedence or for going to jail without revealing the names of the other participants, are often continued over an extended period.[27]

A former Los Angeles gang member, Sanyika Shakur, explained such long-term obligations in the language of the streets: "If you are in this 'hood, and you leave and . . . are successful, you're obligated. You have double indemnity: you have the cultural obligation, and . . . you have the *'hood* obligation. . . . So, the cultural obligation: If you don't come back and . . . contribute, you'll get your 'guild pass' revoked. Then you have the responsibility for the 'hood thing, which can get you murdered if you don't come back."[28]

The reciprocal obligations described in these accounts of gang life represent, I must underline, forms of social capital. In many respects these networks and norms of reciprocity serve the interests of the members in much the same way that social capital embodied in bowling teams helps their members. The purposes to which gang solidarity are directed are, however, typically more harmful to bystanders. This example reminds us that not all the *external* effects of social capital are beneficial.

Other students of gang activity have suggested that gangs represent an important social institution in neighborhoods where young men have little chance of connecting with wider society[29] and where other "mainstream" institutions, such as neighborhood associations and fraternal societies, are debilitated or absent.[30] Gang members have been used by ward politicians as soldiers in political organizing,[31] by organized crime syndicates as entry-level employees in illicit enterprises,[32] and by community groups as sources of volunteer labor, money, and protection.[33] The latter point is particularly telling. One study of women activists in Washington, D.C., public-housing developments found that drug gangs were important benefactors, providing crucial money for children's after-school programs that the women were organizing. One activist invited the drug dealers to tour her fledgling children's center, and they reciprocated by putting out the word that the woman's organizing was to go forward without any trouble from the street toughs.[34] In short, even as they sell drugs and carry out violent wars on the streets, gangs represent a form of social capital, providing networks of reciprocity, charity, organizing, and social control—albeit on their own, often destructive, terms. Where constructive social capital and institutions are allowed to wither, gangs emerge to fill the void.

All this is not to suggest that America's inner cities lack constructive forms of social capital. American ghettos are far more diverse than is commonly appreciated. Most residents work; most families are not on welfare; most teenagers are in school.[35] And ethnographers of minority communities, especially in American cities, have found rich spiritual and emotional networks that sustain people stung by economic dislocations and the indifference of "mainstream" white institutions. More than two decades ago Carol Stack's classic study, *All Our Kin*, introduced white America to the elaborate and nurturing support networks developed by the black families of "the Flats," an inner-city neighborhood in the Midwest. Most of the people Stack met and lived among for three years were second-generation northerners. Most were single women raising children, and most were on public assistance. Stack discovered numerous "alliances of individuals trading and exchanging goods, resources, and the care of children." She was impressed by "the intensity of their acts of domestic cooperation, and the exchange of goods and services among these persons, both kin and non-kin."[36]

Although students of urban life frequently note the high level of distrust that exists among the urban poor, Stack countered that residents of the Flats must have high levels of trust to maintain their exchange networks, since a gift is rarely repaid right away. And far from being *disorganized*, Stack argued, inner cities are (or at least were then) marked by well-organized, though often invisible, networks of altruism and obligation.[37] These networks took the form of extended, socially constructed, and well-recognized "kin groups," made up of one's relatives, one's romantic partners and their family members, one's friends, and the family members and friends of one's friends. Stack noted how the urban poor, knowing that they cannot make it on their own, are constantly seeking to expand their network. Network members might provide child care, cash assistance, temporary shelter, and other forms of assistance. Meanwhile members of the network monitored one another for evidence of shirking, imposing strong sanctions against those who take more than they give. In sum, the Flats offered a richly textured depiction of a wealth of social capital among the struggling poor.[38]

Unfortunately, more recent studies suggest that inner-city social networks are not nearly as dense or effective as those Stack found in the late 1960s,[39] for like the sprawling suburbs and small villages in the heartland, inner cities too have less social capital nowadays than they once did. Where these reciprocity systems persist, however, they remain an important asset to poor people, an asset that is too often overlooked in popular accounts of the urban underclass.

In short, social capital is a good thing, far more often than not, for disadvantaged neighbors. In areas where social capital is lacking, the effects of poverty, adult unemployment, and family breakdown are magnified, making life that much worse for children and adults alike. As we have seen, there is preliminary yet intriguing evidence that social trust, organizational participation, and neighborhood cohesion can help to break the link between economic disadvantage and teenage troublemaking. The problem, of course, is that social capital is often lacking in disadvantaged areas, and it is difficult to build. A review of "neighborhood crime watch" programs found that they are most likely to succeed in areas where they are least needed—middle-class, stable neighborhoods that already benefit from social trust and networks of association.[40] Instead of a "virtuous circle," in which existing social capital facilitates the creation of more social capital, inner cities are too often marked by a vicious circle, in which low levels of trust and cohesion lead to higher levels of crime, which lead to even lower levels of trust and cohesion. Social-capital-intensive strategies may help to "unwind" this negative spiral, but they are challenging strategies to pursue.

During the 1980s, under the rubric of "community policing," police departments across the country began to implement a kind of "applied social capitalism," seeking to fight crime by building working partnerships between law enforcement officials and community residents. Some evidence suggests that community policing does reduce social disorder and crime, at least in part through the creation and activation of local social capital. Evaluating the Chicago experiment in community policing, the so-called Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS), Wesley Skogan and Susan Harnett report that "by creating relatively uniform opportunities for participation, CAPS took the first step toward mobilizing wider participation among all segments of the community." Similarly, Jenny Berrien and Christopher Winship report promising results from Boston's 10-Point Coalition, a working partnership between the police and the public, brokered by local ministers. Only these local ministers, they argue, had the connections and trust within the community—the social capital—to make the strategy work. One reason for the drop in crime in America's big cities in the 1990s may well be that their residents and their leaders have learned to capitalize more effectively on local stocks of social capital, dwindling or not.[41]

In this chapter we have reviewed some of the most salient evidence that social capital contributes to safe and productive neighborhoods, while its absence hampers efforts at improvement. (Of course, social capital is not the only factor that affects crime rates, so a decline in social capital will lead to a rise in crime only if other relevant factors remain unchanged.) Much of my evidence has been drawn from studies of inner cities and their residents, because for more than a generation scholarly energies have been invested in studying the problems of those settings. In seeking evidence of the impact of social connectedness on community well-being, I have found in this body of literature a wealth of empirical evidence and sensitive interpretation. However, it is worth underlining that had the "culture of suburbia" and the social pathologies of middle-class white communities attracted equal attention, we would be able to draw a more balanced assessment of the impact of social-capital deficits in Grosse Point as well as in the central city of Detroit. There is no reason to suppose that the effects (good and bad) of social capital on neighborhood life are limited to poor or minority communities.

A second reason for emphasizing the role of social capital in poor communities is this: Precisely because poor people (by definition) have little economic capital and face formidable obstacles in acquiring human capital (that is, education), *social* capital is disproportionately important to their welfare. Thus, while our evidence in sections II and III makes clear that the erosion of social capital and community engagement has affected Grosse Point in essentially the same degree as inner-city Detroit, the *impact* of that development has so far been greater in the inner city, which lacks the cushioning of other forms of capital. The shooting sprees that affected schools in suburban and rural communities as the twentieth century ended are a reminder that as the breakdown of community continues in more privileged settings, affluence and education are insufficient to prevent collective tragedy.

CHAPTER 19

Economic Prosperity

JUST AS AREAS HIGH IN SOCIAL CAPITAL are good at maintaining livable spaces, they are also good at getting ahead. A growing body of research suggests that where trust and social networks flourish, individuals, firms, neighborhoods, and even nations prosper.[1] What's more, as we have seen in the previous chapter, social capital can help to mitigate the insidious effects of socioeconomic disadvantage.

At the individual level, social connections affect one's life chances. People who grow up in well-to-do families with economically valuable social ties are more likely to succeed in the economic marketplace, not merely because they tend to be richer and better educated, but also because they can and will ply their connections. Conversely, individuals who grow up in socially isolated rural and inner-city areas are held back, not merely because they tend to be financially and educationally deprived, but also because they are relatively poor in social ties that can provide a "hand up."[2]

Economists have developed an impressive body of research suggesting that social ties can influence who gets a job, a bonus, a promotion, and other employment benefits.[3] Social networks provide people with advice, job leads, strategic information, and letters of recommendation. In his pioneering work on job searchers during the 1970s, Mark Granovetter documented the counterintuitive fact that casual acquaintances can be more important assets than close friends and family for individuals in search of employment.[4] My closest friends and kin—my "strong ties"—are likely to know the same people and hear of the same opportunities I do. More distant acquaintances—my "weak ties"—are more likely to link me to unexpected opportunities, and thus those weak ties are actually more valuable to me.

Granovetter's "strength of weak ties" finding has been replicated and expanded upon by other researchers interested in social mobility. Recently studies have found that such "weak ties" have an especially strong impact on the fortunes of people at the margins of mainstream economic and social institutions.[5] As is usually the case, there is a lively debate over precisely how much job networks—or isolation therefrom—really influence the employment prospects of inner-city residents. Skeptics have argued that employer racism,[6] the educational requirements of new urban jobs,[7] and city dwellers' lack of access to suburban growth centers[8] are equally or more important obstacles. Yet a mounting body of evidence suggests that social capital does matter, and its presence may help to surmount these employment barriers.[9]

For example, researchers have shown that when social networks and institutions are present, unemployed people take advantage of them to good ends. One sees this most in ethnic immigrant communities, where employers rely on their employees to recruit and train new workers. This social-capital approach is said to speed training, improve employee morale, and enhance loyalty to the company. The practice of using ethnic networks as employment networks goes a long way to explain why certain ethnic groups perennially dominate certain services and industries, the Chinese "rag trade" in New York being a good example. One study of niche economies found that for most ethnic groups such solidaristic hiring practices actually boosted immigrants' wages to the level of similarly skilled whites. Immigrant networks also provide financing to entrepreneurs, whether in the form of gifts from family members or loans from rotating credit associations.[10] (A rotating credit association is a group, often ethnically based, in which members make regular contributions to a common fund, which is then made available, in whole or in part, to each contributor in rotation. Such self-help microlending arrangements are widespread throughout the world wherever formal credit institutions are unwilling or unable to provide credit to small borrowers.) A study of Korean business owners found that about 70 percent used debt financing to start their enterprises and that of those who borrowed, 41 percent got their money from family and 24 percent from friends (compared with 37 percent from a financial institution).

The economic advantages of social ties extend beyond ethnic enclaves. Surveys of unemployed people have found, for example, that they look first to friends and relatives for leads on job openings. Fully 85 percent of young men in one survey used personal networks to find employment, compared with just 54–58 percent who said they used state agencies and newspapers. In Los Angeles two-thirds of white and black women who had looked for a job in the past five years landed their latest or current position with the help of someone they knew in the firm. Interestingly, for most of these women, the person who was of the most direct help lived outside their own neighborhoods.[11] All told, data

from diverse surveys suggest that roughly one-half of people get their jobs through a friend or relative.[12] Other studies have examined the importance of institutionalized social-capital networks for job attainment. For example, the frequency of church attendance is one of the strongest predictors of whether inner-city black youths will become gainfully employed. The youths' religious beliefs have almost no impact on employment, suggesting that it is the social networking aspect of churchgoing, not the religious aspect, that is behind these youths' economic success.[13]

Nor is the economic value of social networks limited to the have nots. Sociologist Ronald S. Burt has demonstrated that the social and organizational ties embodied in a business executive's Rolodex are at least as important in determining her career success as her educational qualifications and experience. Dozens of studies from Albany to Singapore and from Dresden to Detroit have found that at all levels in the social hierarchy and in all parts of the economy, social capital is a powerful resource for achieving occupational advancement, social status, and economic rewards—perhaps even more important than human capital (education and experience). Studying banking in Chicago, Brian Uzzi found that "firms that embed their commercial transactions with their lender in social attachments receive lower interest rates on loans." Even in buying and selling, especially for major purchases or risky transactions, we prefer to deal with people we know. Sociologists Paul Dimaggio and Hugh Louch found that "people who transact with friends and relatives report greater satisfaction with the results than do people who transact with strangers."[14]

These studies provide solid evidence that social capital matters because our networks, if they are extensive enough, connect us to potential economic partners, provide high-quality information, and vouch for us.[15] Moreover, for many white-collar jobs, our connections—our access to other people and institutions—is what our employer actually is hiring us for. In short, social networks have undeniable monetary value.

One problem, as the leading scholars of urban life have noted, is that these social networks are absent in precisely the places where they are needed most. In Chicago, for example, blacks who live in extreme poverty—Wilson's "truly disadvantaged"—were substantially less likely than blacks in low-poverty areas to have a current partner or best friend. If the extreme poverty resident did have a partner or best friend, that partner/friend was substantially less likely to have completed high school or to have steady work than the partners and friends of blacks in less destitute neighborhoods. The data suggest "that not only do residents of extreme-poverty areas have fewer social ties but also that they tend to have ties of less social worth, as measured by the social position of their partners, parents, siblings, and best friends, for instance. In short, they possess lower volumes of social capital."[16] Scholars in other cities have reached similar conclusions. A study of the impoverished and socially isolated Red Hook section of Brooklyn, for example, has documented the deterioration of neighborhood associations and church activities. Their decline has inhibited the growth of social networks just as employers were making most of their hires through "word of mouth."[17] And a study of Los Angeles County found that neighborhood poverty kept workers' wages down not because they lacked transportation to well-paying jobs, but because these workers lacked access to networks of people who could tell them about good job opportunities in the first place.[18] Social contacts can be extremely lucrative in theory—an Atlanta study found that each employed person in one's social network increases one's annual income by $1,400.[19] But networks tend to be more lucrative for whites than for members of minority groups. Blacks who gain job information from their neighbors tend to earn less than blacks who obtain their jobs through contacts outside the neighborhood.[20] This suggests that among the disadvantaged, "bridging" social capital may be the most lucrative form. All told, people in economically disadvantaged areas appear to suffer doubly. They lack the material resources to get ahead, and they lack the social resources that might enable them to amass these material resources.

In some ways social capital may be economically counterproductive. Some scholars who study ethnic "niche" economies—retail, manufacturing, or service sectors dominated by one immigrant group—have questioned whether their tight bonds of trust and solidarity might restrict growth and mobility. Although ethnic enclaves provide start-up capital and customers to their own entrepreneurs, the pressures of solidarity can drag down individuals and businesses that succeed "too much" or that try to expand beyond the immediate ethnically based market.[21] Some sociologists have also noted that less successful members of the community sometimes take advantage of the bonds of obligation and responsibility felt by more successful members. Thus, fast-rising entrepreneurs often face excessive demands for jobs, money, and other favors from struggling family members and neighbors. To realize their full potential, entrepreneurs may have to reach beyond their own ethnic groups or neighborhoods and forge ties to the broader world—customers, financial institutions, and civic associations.[22] Where social capital is not productive, it must be sought elsewhere.

Tight networks also may be exploited by commercial concerns seeking easy profits. For example, Amway and other businesses rely on quasi-independent agents to recruit others into merchandising. In these cases agents are asked to call upon friends and neighbors to buy and sell products, a situation that some view as anathema to the tacit norms of reciprocity and altruism that govern good social relations. These exceptions aside, however, most researchers agree that social capital does help individuals to prosper. The only real debate is over how big a role social capital plays relative to human or financial capital.

Given that social capital can benefit individuals, it is perhaps no surprise that it also can help neighborhoods, and even entire nations, to create wealth. This happens in many different ways. At the neighborhood level social capital

is a marketable asset for homeowners. A Pittsburgh study found that, other things being equal, neighborhoods with high social capital were far less likely to decline than were low-social-capital areas.[23] In areas where residents vote, sustain vibrant neighborhood associations, feel attached to their neighborhood, and see it as a good place to live, other people want to move in, and housing values therefore remain comparatively high. The positive impact of social engagement held even after accounting for other factors that might affect housing prices, such as proximity to downtown, racial composition, and residents' socioeconomic status. The lesson is clear: Homeowners who are also good neighbors take their social capital to the bank.

At the local or regional level, there is mounting evidence that social capital among economic actors can produce aggregate economic growth. This is not to say that having more bowling leagues and PTAs will necessarily cause the town economy to prosper. But it is to say that, under certain conditions, cooperation among economic actors might be a better engine of growth than free-market competition. Consider two telling examples.

In 1940 Tupelo, Mississippi, was one of the poorest counties in the poorest state in the nation.[24] It had no exceptional natural resources, no great university or industrial concern to anchor its development, no major highways or population centers nearby. What was worse, in 1936 it had been ravaged by the fourth deadliest tornado in U.S. history, and the following year its only significant factory closed after a deeply divisive strike. A university-trained sociologist and native son, George McLean, returned home around this time to run the local newspaper. Through exceptional leadership he united Tupelo's business and civic leaders around the idea that the town and surrounding Lee County would never develop economically until they had developed as a community. Concerned about the dim prospects of the county's cotton economy, McLean initially persuaded local business leaders and farmers to pool their money to buy a siring bull. That move proved the start of a lucrative dairy industry that improved local incomes and therefore made businesses more prosperous. To create a less hierarchical social order, the town's elite Chamber of Commerce was disbanded and a Community Development Foundation open to everyone was started in its place. The foundation set to work improving local schools, starting community organizations, building a medical center, and establishing a vocational education center. At the same time, businesses were welcomed into town only if they paid high wages to all employees and shared this as a goal. Rural Development Councils were set up in outlying areas to encourage self-help collective action—from technical training to local cleanup campaigns—in a setting in which cooperative action for shared goals had been countercultural.

Over the next fifty years under McLean's and his successors' leadership Tupelo has become a national model of community and economic development, garnering numerous awards and attracting a constant stream of visitors eager to copy the town's success in their own communities. Since 1983 Lee County has added one thousand industrial jobs a year, garnered hundreds of millions of dollars of new investment, produced arguably the best school system in Mississippi, constructed a world-class hospital, and kept unemployment and poverty rates well below the state (and sometimes even the national) average. The community's success was based on its unwavering commitment to the idea that citizens would not benefit individually unless they pursued their goals collectively. Today it is unthinkable that one could enjoy social prominence in Tupelo without also getting involved in community leadership. Tupelo residents invested in social capital—networks of cooperation and mutual trust—and reaped tangible economic returns.

Another, slightly different "social-capital approach" is at the root of the economic miracle in California's Silicon Valley. Led by a small group of computer entrepreneurs, and aided by a resource-rich university community, Silicon Valley emerged as the world capital of high-tech development and manufacturing. The success is due largely to the horizontal networks of informal and formal cooperation that developed among fledgling companies in the area. Although nominally competitors, these companies' leaders shared information, problem-solving techniques, and, perhaps just as important, beers after work. They developed trade associations, industry conferences, and even a "Homebrew Computer Club," a hobbyists' group from whose ranks came the leaders of more than twenty computer companies. In an industry where job turnover is high, the key players had repeated interactions with one another in a variety of settings: "a colleague might become a customer or a competitor; today's boss could be tomorrow's subordinate." Far from producing anxiety and distrust, this "continual shuffling and reshuffling tended to reinforce the value of personal relationships and networks."[25] These informal networks expanded to include firms on the periphery of the high-tech nexus: lawyers specializing in intellectual property and business incorporation, venture capitalists, suppliers, and so forth. In the early 1990s, when Silicon Valley's economic condition began to slip, local businesses under the aegis of the San Jose Chamber of Commerce traded on their existing stock of social capital and created Joint Venture: Silicon Valley. That nonprofit networking organization helped to enhance public-private cooperation on everything from taxes to building permits to literacy.[26]

Silicon Valley's major U.S. competitor, the route 128 corridor outside Boston, did not develop such interfirm social capital. Rather it maintained traditional norms of corporate hierarchy, secrecy, self-sufficiency, and territoriality. Employees rarely went out after work with one another or with people from other firms. Route 128's "I'll succeed on my own" philosophy is largely responsible for its poor performance relative to Silicon Valley's, according to the leading study of the two high-tech centers. "The contrasting experience of Silicon Valley and Route 128 suggests that industrial systems built on regional networks are more flexible and technologically dynamic than those in which experimentation and learning are confined to individual firms."[27] The great British economist Alfred Marshall long ago recognized the advantages of such "industrial districts," which allow for information flows, mutual learning, and economies of scale.[28] Even before Silicon Valley, the model had succeeded in north-central Italy (crafts and consumer goods), western Michigan (furniture), and Rochester, New York (optics).

These are cooperative models for an increasingly competitive global economy. Social commentator Francis Fukuyama has argued that economies whose citizens have high levels of social trust—high social capital—will dominate the twenty-first century. When we can't trust our employees or other market players, we end up squandering our wealth on surveillance equipment, compliance structures, insurance, legal services, and enforcement of government regulations.[29] Conversely, studies of the biotech industry by organization theorists like Walter Powell and Jane Fountain have shown that social networks that embody a norm of reciprocity—that is, social capital—are "key enablers" of innovation, mutual learning, and productivity growth, as important as physical and human capital, particularly in rapidly evolving fields.[30]

Understanding the detailed linkages between social capital and economic performance is a lively field of inquiry at the moment, so it would be premature to claim too much for the efficacy of social capital or to describe exactly when and how networks of social connectedness boost the aggregate productivity of an economy. Research on social capital and economic development in what we once called the "Third World" is appearing at a rapid rate, based on work in such far-flung sites as South Africa, Indonesia, Russia, India, and Burkina Faso. Similarly rich work is under way on how Americans might improve the plight of our poorest communities by enabling those communities to invest in social capital and empowering them to capitalize on the social assets they already have.[31] For the moment, the links between social networks and economic success at the individual level are understood. You can be reasonably confident that you will benefit if you acquire a richer social network, but it is not yet entirely clear whether that reflects merely your ability to grab a larger share of a fixed pie, or whether if we all have richer social networks, we all gain. The early returns, however, encourage the view that social capital of the right sort boosts economic efficiency, so that if our networks of reciprocity deepen, we all benefit, and if they atrophy, we all pay dearly.

CHAPTER 20

Health and Happiness

OF ALL THE DOMAINS in which I have traced the consequences of social capital, in none is the importance of social connectedness so well established as in the case of health and well-being. Scientific studies of the effects of social cohesion on physical and mental health can be traced to the seminal work of the nineteenth-century sociologist Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*. Self-destruction is not merely a personal tragedy, he found, but a sociologically predictable consequence of the degree to which one is integrated into society—rarer among married people, rarer in more tightly knit religious communities, rarer in times of national unity, and more frequent when rapid social change disrupts the social fabric. Social connectedness matters to our lives in the most profound way.

In recent decades public health researchers have extended this initial insight to virtually all aspects of health, physical as well as psychological. Dozens of painstaking studies from Alameda (California) to Tecumseh (Michigan) have established beyond reasonable doubt that social connectedness is one of the most powerful determinants of our well-being. The more integrated we are with our community, the less likely we are to experience colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature death of all sorts. Such protective effects have been confirmed for close family ties, for friendship networks, for participation in social events, and even for simple affiliation with religious and other civic associations. In other words, both *machers* and *schmoozers* enjoy these remarkable health benefits.

After reviewing dozens of scientific studies, sociologist James House and his colleagues have concluded that the *positive* contributions to health made

by social integration and social support rival in strength the *detrimental* contributions of well-established biomedical risk factors like cigarette smoking, obesity, elevated blood pressure, and physical inactivity. Statistically speaking, the evidence for the health consequences of social connectedness is as strong today as was the evidence for the health consequences of smoking at the time of the first surgeon general's report on smoking. If the trends in social disconnection are as pervasive as I argued in section II, then "bowling alone" represents one of the nation's most serious public health challenges.[1]

Although researchers aren't entirely sure why social cohesion matters for health, they have a number of plausible theories. First, social networks furnish tangible assistance, such as money, convalescent care, and transportation, which reduces psychic and physical stress and provides a safety net. If you go to church regularly, and then you slip in the bathtub and miss a Sunday, someone is more likely to notice. Social networks also may reinforce healthy norms—socially isolated people are more likely to smoke, drink, overeat, and engage in other health-damaging behaviors. And socially cohesive communities are best able to organize politically to ensure first-rate medical services.[2]

Finally, and most intriguingly, social capital might actually serve as a physiological triggering mechanism, stimulating people's immune systems to fight disease and buffer stress. Research now under way suggests that social isolation has measurable biochemical effects on the body. Animals who have been isolated develop more extensive atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) than less isolated animals, and among both animals and humans loneliness appears to decrease the immune response and increase blood pressure. Lisa Berkman, one of the leading researchers in the field, has speculated that social isolation is "a chronically stressful condition to which the organism respond[s] by aging faster."[3]

Some studies have documented the strong correlation between connectedness and health at the community level. Others have zeroed in on individuals, both in natural settings and in experimental conditions. These studies are for the most part careful to account for confounding factors—the panoply of other physiological, economic, institutional, behavioral, and demographic forces that might also affect an individual's health. In many cases these studies are longitudinal: they check on people over many years to get a better understanding of what lifestyle changes might have caused people's health to improve or decline. Thus researchers have been able to show that social isolation *precedes* illness to rule out the possibility that the isolation was caused by illness. Over the last twenty years more than a dozen large studies of this sort in the United States, Scandinavia, and Japan have shown that *people who are socially disconnected are between two and five times more likely to die from all causes, compared with matched individuals who have close ties with family, friends, and the community.*[4]

A recent study by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health provides an excellent overview of the link between social capital and physical health across the United States.[5] Using survey data from nearly 170,000 individuals in all fifty states, these researchers found, as expected, that people who are African American, lack health insurance, are overweight, smoke, have a low income, or lack a college education are at greater risk for illness than are more socioeconomically advantaged individuals. But these researchers also found an astonishingly strong relationship between poor health and low social capital. States whose residents were most likely to report fair or poor health were the same states in which residents were most likely to distrust others.[6] Moving from a state with a wealth of social capital to a state with very little social capital (low trust, low voluntary group membership) increased one's chances of poor to middling health by roughly 40–70 percent. When the researchers accounted for individual residents' risk factors, the relationship between social capital and individual health remained. Indeed, the researchers concluded that if one wanted to improve one's health, moving to a high-social-capital state would do almost as much good as quitting smoking. These authors' conclusion is complemented by our own analysis. We found a strong positive relationship between a comprehensive index of public health and the Social Capital Index, along with a strong negative correlation between the Social Capital Index and all-cause mortality rates.[7] (See table 6 for the measure of public health and health care and figure 86 for the correlations of public health and mortality with social capital.)

Table 6: Which State Has the Best Health and Health Care?

Morgan-Quitno Healthiest State Rankings (1993–1998):

1. Births of low birth weight as a percent of all births (−)
2. Births to teenage mothers as a percent of live births (−)
3. Percent of mothers receiving late or no prenatal care (−)
4. Death rate (−)
5. Infant mortality rate (−)
6. Estimated age adjusted death rate by cancer (−)
7. Death rate by suicide (−)
8. Percent of population not covered by health insurance (−)
9. Change in percent of population uninsured (−)
10. Health care expenditures as percent of gross state product (−)
11. Per capita personal health expenditures (−)
12. Estimated rate of new cancer cases (−)
13. AIDS rate (−)
14. Sexually transmitted disease rate (−)
15. Percent of population lacking access to primary care (−)
16. Percent of adults who are binge drinkers (−)
17. Percent of adults who smoke (−)
18. Percent of adults overweight (−)
19. Days in past month when physical health was "not good" (−)
20. Community hospitals per 1,000 square miles (+)
21. Beds in community hospitals per 100,000 population (+)
22. Percent of children aged 19–35 months fully immunized (+)
23. Safety belt usage rate (+)

The state-level findings are suggestive, but far more definitive evidence of the benefits of community cohesion is provided by a wealth of studies that examine individual health as a function of individual social-capital resources. Nowhere is the connection better illustrated than in Roseto, Pennsylvania.[8] This small Italian American community has been the subject of nearly forty years of in-depth study, beginning in the 1950s when medical researchers noticed a happy but puzzling phenomenon. Compared with residents of neighboring towns, Rosetans just didn't die of heart attacks. Their (age-adjusted) heart attack rate was less than half that of their neighbors; over a seven-year period not a single Roseto resident under forty-seven had died of a heart attack. The researchers looked for the usual explanations: diet, exercise, weight, smoking, genetic predisposition, and so forth. But none of these explanations held the answer—indeed, Rosetans were actually more likely to have some of these risk factors than were people in neighboring towns. The researchers then began to explore Roseto's social dynamics. The town had been founded in the nineteenth century by people from the same southern Italian village. Through local leadership these immigrants had created a mutual aid society, churches, sports clubs, a labor union, a newspaper, Scout troops, and a park and athletic field. The residents had also developed a tight-knit community where conspicuous displays of wealth were scorned and family values and good behaviors reinforced. Rosetans learned to draw on one another for financial, emotional, and other forms of support. By day they congregated on front porches to watch the comings and goings, and by night they gravitated to local social clubs. In the 1960s the researchers began to suspect that social capital (though they didn't use the term) was the key to Rosetans' healthy hearts. And the researchers worried that as socially mobile young people began to reject the tight-knit Italian folkways, the heart attack rate would begin to rise. Sure enough, by the 1980s Roseto's new generation of adults had a heart attack rate above that of their neighbors in a nearby and demographically similar town.

The Roseto story is a particularly vivid and compelling one, but numerous other studies have supported the medical researchers' intuition that social cohesion matters, not just in preventing premature death, but also in preventing disease and speeding recovery. For example, a long-term study in California found that people with the fewest social ties have the highest risk of dying from heart disease, circulatory problems, and cancer (in women), even after accounting for individual health status, socioeconomic factors, and use of preventive health care.[9] Other studies have linked lower death rates with membership in voluntary groups and engagement in cultural activities;[10] church attendance;[11] phone calls and visits with friends and relatives;[12] and general sociability such as holding parties at home, attending union meetings, visiting friends, participating in organized sports, or being members of highly cohesive

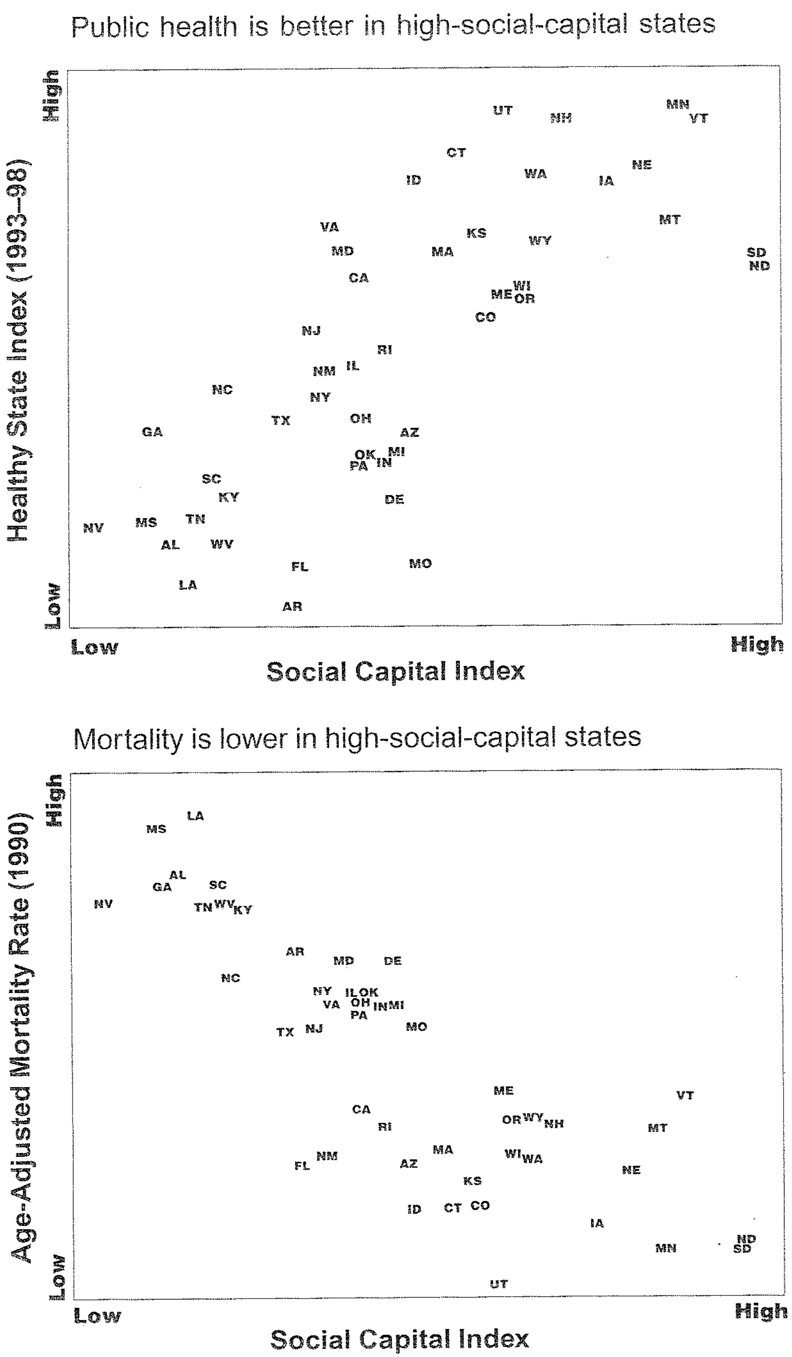

Figure 86: Health Is Better in High-Social-Capital States

military units.[13] The connection with social capital persisted even when the studies examined other factors that might influence mortality, such as social class, race, gender, smoking and drinking, obesity, lack of exercise, and (significantly) health problems. In other words, it is not simply that healthy, health-conscious, privileged people (who might happen also to be more socially engaged) tend to live longer. The broad range of illnesses shown to be affected by social support and the fact that the link is even tighter with death than with sickness tend to suggest that the effect operates at a quite fundamental level of general bodily resistance. What these studies tell us is that social engagement actually has an independent influence on how long we live.

Social networks help you stay healthy. The finding by a team of researchers at Carnegie Mellon University that people with more diverse social ties get fewer colds is by no means unique.[14] For example, stroke victims who had strong support networks functioned better after the stroke, and recovered more physical capacities, than did stroke victims with thin social networks.[15] Older people who are involved with clubs, volunteer work, and local politics consider themselves to be in better general health than do uninvolved people, even after accounting for socioeconomic status, demographics, level of medical care use, and years of retirement.[16]

The bottom line from this multitude of studies: As a rough rule of thumb, if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year *in half.* If you smoke and belong to no groups, it's a toss-up statistically whether you should stop smoking or start joining. These findings are in some ways heartening: it's easier to join a group than to lose weight, exercise regularly, or quit smoking.

But the findings are sobering, too. As we saw in section II, there has been a general decline in social participation over the past twenty-five years. Figure 87 shows that this same period witnessed a significant decline in self-reported health, despite tremendous gains in medical diagnosis and treatment. Of course, by many objective measures, including life expectancy, Americans are healthier than ever before, but these self-reports indicate that we are feeling worse.[17] These self-reports are in turn closely linked to social connectedness, in the sense that it is precisely less connected Americans who are feeling worse. These facts alone do not *prove* that we are suffering physically from our growing disconnectedness, but taken in conjunction with the more systematic evidence of the health effects of social capital, this evidence is another link in the argument that the erosion of social capital has measurable ill effects.

We observed in chapter 14 the remarkable coincidence that during the same years that social connectedness has been declining, depression and even suicide have been increasing. We also noted that this coincidence has deep generational roots, in the sense that the generations most disconnected socially also suffer most from what some public health experts call "Agent Blue." In any given year 10 percent of Americans now suffer from major depression, and

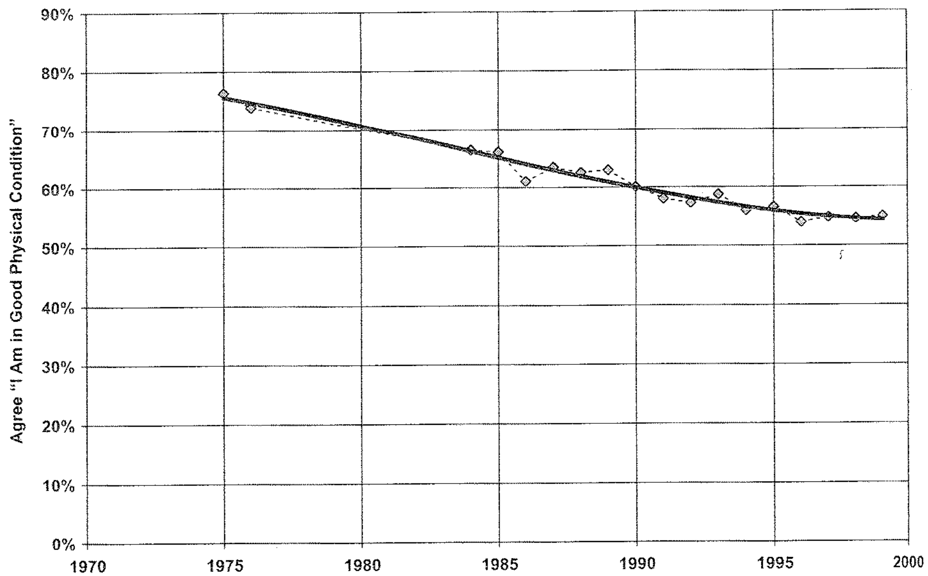

Figure 87: Americans Don't Feel As Healthy As We Used To

depression imposes the fourth largest total burden of any disease on Americans overall. Much research has shown that social connections inhibit depression. Low levels of social support directly predict depression, even controlling for other risk factors, and high levels of social support lessen the severity of symptoms and speed recovery. Social support buffers us from the stresses of daily life. Face-to-face ties seem to be more therapeutic than ties that are geographically distant. In short, even within the single domain of depression, we pay a very high price for our slackening social connectedness.[18]

Countless studies document the link between society and psyche: people who have close friends and confidants, friendly neighbors, and supportive coworkers are less likely to experience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem, and problems with eating and sleeping. Married people are consistently happier than people who are unattached, all else being equal. These findings will hardly surprise most Americans, for in study after study people themselves report that good relationships with family members, friends, or romantic partners—far more than money or fame—are prerequisites for their happiness.[19] The single most common finding from a half century's research on the correlates of life satisfaction, not only in the United States but around the world, is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections.[20]

We can see how social capital ranks as a producer of warm, fuzzy feelings

by examining a number of questions from the DDB Needham Life Style survey archives:

> "I wish I could leave my present life and do something entirely different."
> "I am very satisfied with the way things are going in my life these days."
> "If I had my life to live over, I would sure do things differently."
> "I am much happier now than I ever was before."

Responses to these items are strongly intercorrelated, so I combined them into a single index of happiness with life. Happiness in this sense is correlated with material well-being. Generally speaking, as one rises up the income hierarchy, life contentment increases. So money can buy happiness after all. But not as much as marriage. Controlling for education, age, gender, marital status, income, and civic engagement, the marginal "effect" of marriage on life contentment is equivalent to moving roughly seventy percentiles up the income hierarchy—say, from the fifteenth percentile to the eighty-fifth percentile.[21] In round numbers, getting married is the "happiness equivalent" of quadrupling your annual income.[22]

What about education and contentment? Education has important indirect links to happiness through increased earning power, but controlling for income (as well as age, gender, and the rest), what is the marginal correlation of education itself with life satisfaction? In round numbers the answer is that four additional years of education—attending college, for example—is the "happiness equivalent" of roughly doubling your annual income.

Having assessed in rough-and-ready terms the correlations of financial capital (income), human capital (education), and one form of social capital (marriage) with life contentment, we can now ask equivalent questions about the correlations between happiness and various forms of social interaction. Let us ask about regular club members (those who attend monthly), regular volunteers (those who do so monthly), people who entertain regularly at home (say, monthly), and regular (say, biweekly) churchgoers. The differences are astonishingly large. Regular club attendance, volunteering, entertaining, or church attendance is the happiness equivalent of getting a college degree or more than doubling your income. Civic connections rival marriage and affluence as predictors of life happiness.[23]

If monthly club meetings are good, are daily club meetings thirty times better? The answer is no. Figure 88 shows what economists might call the "declining marginal productivity" of social interaction with respect to happiness. The biggest happiness returns to volunteering, clubgoing, and entertaining at home appear to come between "never" and "once a month." There is very little gain in happiness after about one club meeting (or party or volunteer effort) every three weeks. After fortnightly encounters, the marginal correlation of ad-

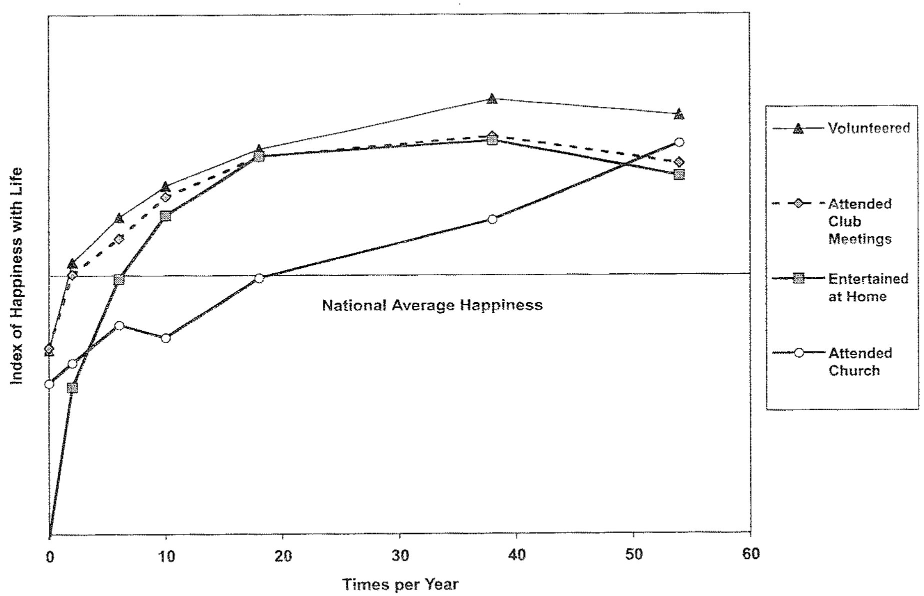

Figure 88: Social Connectedness (at Least in Moderation) Fosters Happiness

ditional social interaction with happiness is actually negative—another finding that is consistent with common experience! Churchgoing, on the other hand, is somewhat different, in that at least up through weekly attendance, the more the merrier.

This analysis is, of course, phrased intentionally in round numbers, for the underlying calculations are rough and ready. Moreover the direction of causation remains ambiguous. Perhaps happy people are more likely than unhappy people to get married, win raises at work, continue in school, attend church, join clubs, host parties, and so on. My present purpose is merely to illustrate that social connections have profound links with psychological well-being. The Beatles got it right: we all "get by with a little help from our friends."

In the decades since the Fab Four topped the charts, life satisfaction among adult Americans has declined steadily. Roughly half the decline in contentment is associated with financial worries, and half is associated with declines in social capital: lower marriage rates and decreasing connectedness to friends and community. Not all segments of the population are equally gloomy. Survey data show that the slump has been greatest among young and middle-aged adults (twenty to fifty-five). People over fifty-five—our familiar friends from the long civic generation—are actually *happier* than were people their age a generation ago.[24]

Some of the generational discrepancy is due to money worries: despite ris-

ing prosperity, young and middle-aged people feel less secure financially. But some of the disparity is also due to social connectedness. Young and middle-aged adults today are simply less likely to have friends over, attend church, or go to club meetings than were earlier generations. Psychologist Martin Seligman argues that more of us are feeling down because modern society encourages a belief in personal control and autonomy more than a commitment to duty and common enterprise. This transformation heightens our expectations about what we can achieve through choice and grit and leaves us unprepared to deal with life's inevitable failures. Where once we could fall back on social capital—families, churches, friends—these no longer are strong enough to cushion our fall.[25] In our personal lives as well as in our collective life, the evidence of this chapter suggests, we are paying a significant price for a quarter century's disengagement from one another.

CHAPTER 21

Democracy

THE PLAYWRIGHT OSCAR WILDE is said to have mused, "The trouble with socialism is that it would take too many evenings."[1] Fair enough, but how many evenings does liberal democracy take? That democratic self-government requires an actively engaged citizenry has been a truism for centuries. (Not until the middle of the twentieth century did some political theorists begin to assert that good citizenship requires simply choosing among competing teams of politicians at the ballot box, as one might choose among competing brands of toothpaste.)[2] In this chapter I consider both the conventional claim that the health of American democracy requires citizens to perform our *public* duties and the more expansive and controversial claim that the health of our *public* institutions depends, at least in part, on widespread participation in *private* voluntary groups—those networks of civic engagement that embody social capital.

The ideal of participatory democracy has deep roots in American political philosophy. With our experiment in democracy still in its infancy, Thomas Jefferson proposed amending the Constitution to facilitate grassroots democracy. In an 1816 letter he suggested that "counties be divided into wards of such size that every citizen can attend, when called on, and act in person." The ward governments would have been charged with everything from running schools to caring for the poor to operating police and military forces to maintaining public roads. Jefferson believed that "making every citizen an acting member of the government, and in the offices nearest and most interesting to him, will attach him by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country, and its republican constitution."[3]

Visiting American shores a decade later, Alexis de Tocqueville struck a similar note, suggesting that even in the absence of Jeffersonian ward governments, Americans' local civic activity served as the handmaiden of their national democratic community: "It is difficult to draw a man out of his own circle to interest him in the destiny of the state," Tocqueville observed, "because he does not clearly understand what influence the destiny of the state can have upon his own lot. But if it is proposed to make a road cross the end of his estate, he will see at a glance that there is a connection between the small public affair and his greatest private affairs; and he will discover, without its being shown to him, the close tie that unites private to general interest."[4]

British political philosopher John Stuart Mill lauded the effects of participatory democracy on character. Without shared participation in public life, Mill wrote, a citizen "never thinks of any collective interest, of any objects to be pursued jointly with others but only in competition with them, and in some measure at their expense. . . . A neighbour, not being an ally or an associate, since he is never engaged in any common undertaking for joint benefit, is therefore only a rival." The engaged citizen, by contrast, "is called upon . . . to weigh interests not his own; to be guided, in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities. . . . He is made to feel himself one of the public, and whatever is for their benefit to be for his benefit."[5]

The eminent Progressive philosopher John Dewey grappled with a conundrum that remains timely today—how to reconcile modern, large-scale, technologically advanced society with the exigencies of democracy. "Fraternity, liberty and equality isolated from communal life are hopeless abstractions. . . . Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community." "Only in local, face-to-face associations," adds Dewey's biographer Robert Westbrook, "could members of a public participate in dialogues with their fellows, and such dialogues were crucial to the formation and organization of the public."[6]

Many of America's Founding Fathers, however, didn't think much of voluntary associations. They were famously opposed to political parties and local political committees, as well as to any other group whose members might combine to threaten political stability. James Madison called groups organized around particular interests or passions "mischiefs of faction," whose presence must be tolerated in the name of liberty, but whose effects must be controlled.[7] Madison's fear, which reverberates among today's critics of Washington lobbyists and special interest groups, was that elected representatives, swayed by these "factions," would sacrifice the good of the whole for the pet projects of the few. In his comprehensive history of civic life in America Michael Schudson concludes that the Founders "were far from sharing a pluralist vision, still attached as they were to the notions of consensus, property, virtue, and deference that came naturally to them."[8] As we shall shortly see, the Founders' concerns about "the mischiefs of faction" reappear in the contemporary debate about social capital and democracy.

Echoing Tocqueville's observations, many contemporary students of democracy have come to celebrate "mediating" or "intermediary" associations, be they self-consciously or only indirectly political, as fundamental to maintaining a vibrant democracy.[9] Voluntary associations and the social networks of civil society that we have been calling "social capital" contribute to democracy in two different ways: they have "external" effects on the larger polity, and they have "internal" effects on participants themselves.

Externally, voluntary associations, from churches and professional societies to Elks clubs and reading groups, allow individuals to express their interests and demands on government and to protect themselves from abuses of power by their political leaders. Political information flows through social networks, and in these networks public life is discussed. As so often, Tocqueville saw this point clearly: "When some view is represented by an association, it must take clearer and more precise shape. It counts its supporters and involves them in its cause; these supporters get to know one another, and numbers increase zeal. An association unites the energies of divergent minds and vigorously directs them toward a clearly indicated goal."[10]

When people associate in neighborhood groups, PTAs, political parties, or even national advocacy groups, their individual and otherwise quiet voices multiply and are amplified. "Without access to an association that is willing and able to speak up for our views and values," writes political philosopher Amy Gutmann, "we have a very limited ability to be heard by many other people or to influence the political process, unless we happen to be rich or famous."[11] Citizen connectedness does not require formal institutions to be effective. A study of the democracy movement in East Germany before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, for example, found that recruitment took place through friendship networks and that these informal bonds were more important than ideological commitment, fear of repression, or formal organizing efforts in determining who joined the cause.[12]

Internally, associations and less formal networks of civic engagement instill in their members habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness, as well as the practical skills necessary to partake in public life. Tocqueville observed that "feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another."[13] Prophylactically, community bonds keep individuals from falling prey to extremist groups that target isolated and untethered individuals. Studies of political psychology over the last forty years have suggested that "people divorced from community, occupation, and association are first and foremost among the supporters of extremism."[14]

More positively, voluntary associations are places where social and civic skills are learned—"schools for democracy." Members learn how to run meetings, speak in public, write letters, organize projects, and debate public issues

with civility.[15] William Muraskin's description of the effects of Prince Hall Masonry on the civic skills of African Americans applies much more broadly:

> Masonry as an institution has been concerned with . . . inspiring and training its membership in leadership roles. Through the fraternity, members have learned to perform many bourgeois social roles with which they have limited or no prior experience. By teaching these roles, and by promoting an arena for their enactment, Masonry has worked to bring leadership potential within its membership to practical fruition.[16]

The most systematic study of civic skills in contemporary America suggests that for working-class Americans voluntary associations and churches offer the best opportunities for civic skill building, and even for professionals such groups are second only to the workplace as sites for civic learning. Two-thirds or more of the members of religious, literary, youth, and fraternal/service organizations exercised such civic skills as giving a presentation or running a meeting.[17] Churches, in particular, are one of the few vital institutions left in which low-income, minority, and disadvantaged citizens of all races can learn politically relevant skills and be recruited into political action.[18] The implication is vitally important to anyone who values egalitarian democracy: without such institutions, the class bias in American politics would be much greater.[19]

Just as associations inculcate democratic habits, they also serve as forums for thoughtful deliberation over vital public issues. Political theorists have lately renewed their attention to the promise and pitfalls of "deliberative democracy."[20] Some argue that voluntary associations best enhance deliberation when they are microcosms of the nation, economically, ethnically, and religiously.[21] Others argue that even homogeneous organizations can enhance deliberative democracy by making our public interactions more inclusive. When minority groups, for example, push for nondiscrimination regulations and mandatory inclusion of ethnic interests in school curricula and on government boards, they are in effect widening the circle of participants.[22]

Voluntary associations may serve not only as forums for deliberation, but also as occasions for learning civic virtues, such as active participation in public life.[23] A follow-up study of high school seniors found that regardless of the students' social class, academic background, and self-esteem, those who took part in voluntary associations in school were far more likely than nonparticipants to vote, take part in political campaigns, and discuss public issues two years after graduating.[24] Another civic virtue is trustworthiness. Much research suggests that when people have repeated interactions, they are far less likely to shirk or cheat.[25] A third civic virtue acquired through social connectedness is reciprocity. As we saw repeatedly in chapter 7, the more people are involved in networks of civic engagement (from club meetings to church picnics to informal get-togethers with friends), the more likely they are to display concern for the generalized other—to volunteer, give blood, contribute to charity, and so on. To political theorists, reciprocity has another meaning as well—the willingness of opposing sides in a democratic debate to agree on the ground rules for seeking mutual accommodation after sufficient discussion, even (or especially) when they don't agree on what is to be done.[26] Regular connections with my fellow citizens don't *ensure* that I will be able to put myself in their shoes, but social isolation virtually guarantees that I will not.

On the other hand, numerous sensible critics have raised doubts about whether voluntary associations are necessarily good for democracy.[27] Most obviously, some groups are overtly antidemocratic—the KKK is everyone's favorite example. No sensible theorist has ever claimed that *every* group works to foster democratic values. But even if we restrict our attention to groups that act within the norms of democracy, one common concern is that associations—or interest groups—distort governmental decision making. From Theodore Lowi's *End of Liberalism* in the 1960s to Jonathan Rauch's *Demosclerosis* in the 1990s, critics of American pluralism have argued that the constant and conflicting pleas of ever more specialized lobbies have paralyzed even well-intentioned public officials and stifled efforts to cut or improve ineffective government programs.[28] This complaint is reminiscent of Madison's worry that mischievous "factions" would profit at the expense of the commonweal. Contrary to the pluralists' ideal, wherein bargaining among diverse groups leads to the greatest good for the greatest number, we end up instead with the greatest goodies for the best-organized few.

A second concern is that associational ties benefit those who are best equipped by nature or circumstance to organize and make their voices heard. People with education, money, status, and close ties with fellow members of their community of interest will be far more likely to benefit politically under pluralism than will the uneducated, the poor, and the unconnected.[29] In our words, social capital is self-reinforcing and benefits most those who already have a stock on which to trade. As long as associationalism is class biased, as virtually every study suggests it is,[30] then pluralist democracy will be less than egalitarian. In the famous words of the political scientist E. E. Schattschneider: "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent."[31]

Finally, critics of pluralism have suggested that it can trigger political polarization and cynicism. Political scientists concerned about the decline in mass political parties as forces for organizing politics argue that citizen group politics is almost by nature extremist politics, since people with strongly held views tend to be the leaders and activists. Evidence from the Roper Social and Political Trends archives indeed suggests that ideological extremism and civic participation are correlated, although as we shall shortly see, that fact turns out to have unexpected implications for our current predicament.

If participation and extremism are linked, there are a number of important repercussions. First, voluntary organizations that are ideologically homogeneous may reinforce members' views and isolate them from potentially enlightening alternative viewpoints.[32] In some cases such parochialism may nurture paranoia and obstruction. In a polarized voluntary group universe, reasonable deliberation and bargaining toward a mutually acceptable compromise is well nigh impossible, as each side refuses "on principle" to give ground. Moreover, political polarization may increase cynicism about government's ability to solve problems and decrease confidence that civic engagement makes any difference.[33]

These are all serious concerns. Voluntary associations are not everywhere and always good. They can reinforce antiliberal tendencies; and they can be abused by antidemocratic forces. Further, not everyone who participates will walk away a better person: some people who join self-help groups, for example, will learn compassion and cooperation, while others will become more narcissistic. In the words of political theorist Nancy Rosenblum: "The moral uses of associational life by members are indeterminate."[34]

Voluntary groups are not a panacea for what ails our democracy. And the absence of social capital—norms, trust, networks of association—does not eliminate politics. But without social capital we are more likely to have politics of a certain type. American democracy evolved historically in an environment unusually rich in social capital, and many of our institutions and practices—such as the unusual degree of decentralization in our governmental processes, compared with that of other industrialized countries—represent adaptations to such a setting. Like a plant overtaken by climatic change, our political practices would have to change if social capital were permanently diminished. How might the American polity function in a setting of much lower social capital and civic engagement?

A politics without face-to-face socializing and organizing might take the form of a Perot-style electronic town hall, a kind of plebiscitary democracy. Many opinions would be heard, but only as a muddle of disembodied voices, neither engaging with one another nor offering much guidance to decision makers. TV-based politics is to political action as watching *ER* is to saving someone in distress. Just as one cannot restart a heart with one's remote control, one cannot jump-start republican citizenship without direct, face-to-face participation. Citizenship is not a spectator sport.

Politics without social capital is politics at a distance. Conversations among callers to a studio in Dallas or New York are not responsible, since these "participants" need never meaningfully engage with opposing views and hence learn from that engagement. Real conversations—the kind that take place in community meetings about crack houses or school budgets—are more "realistic" from the perspective of democratic problem solving. Without such face-to-face interaction, without immediate feedback, without being forced to examine our opinions under the light of other citizens' scrutiny, we find it easier to hawk quick fixes and to demonize anyone who disagrees. Anonymity is fundamentally anathema to deliberation.

If participation in political deliberation declines—if fewer and fewer voices engage in democratic debate—our politics will become more shrill and less balanced. When most people skip the meeting, those who are left tend to be more extreme, because they care most about the outcome. Political scientist Morris Fiorina describes, for example, how a generally popular proposal to expand a nature reserve in Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived, became bogged down in protracted and costly controversy perpetuated by a tiny group of environmentalist "true believers."[35]

The Roper Social and Political Trends surveys show that Fiorina's experience is typical: Americans at the political poles are more engaged in civic life, whereas moderates have tended to drop out. Controlling for all the standard demographic characteristics—income, education, size of city, region, age, sex, race, and job, marital, and parental status—Americans who describe themselves as "very" liberal or "very" conservative are more likely to attend public meetings, write Congress, be active in local civic organizations, and even attend church than their fellow citizens of more moderate views. Moreover, this correlation between ideological "extremism" and participation strengthened over the last quarter of the twentieth century, as people who characterize themselves as being "middle of the road" ideologically have disproportionately disappeared from public meetings, local organizations, political parties, rallies, and the like.[36]

In the 1990s self-described middle-of-the-roaders were about *one-half* as likely to participate in public meetings, local civic organizations, and political parties as in the mid-1970s. Participation by self-described "moderate" liberals or conservatives declined by about *one-third*. The declines were smallest—averaging less than *one-fifth*—among people who described themselves as "very" liberal or "very" conservative. Writing to a newspaper, writing to Congress, or even giving a speech declined by a scant 2 percent among people who described themselves as "very" liberal or conservative, by about 15 percent among people who described themselves as "moderately" liberal or conservative, and by about 30 percent among self-described "middle-of-the-roaders."[37]

Ironically, more and more Americans describe their political views as middle of the road or moderate, but the more polarized extremes on the ideological spectrum account for a bigger and bigger share of those who attend meetings, write letters, serve on committees, and so on. The more extreme views have gradually become more dominant in grassroots American civic life as more moderate voices have fallen silent. In this sense civic disengagement is exacerbating the classic problem of "faction" that worried the Founders.

Just as important as actual engagement is psychic engagement. Social

capital is also key here. Surveys show that most of our political discussions take place informally, around the dinner table or the office water cooler. We learn about politics through casual conversation. You tell me what you've heard and what you think, and what your friends have heard and what they think, and I accommodate that new information into my mental database as I ponder and revise my position on an issue. In a world of civic networks, both formal and informal, our views are formed through interchange with friends and neighbors. Social capital allows political information to spread.[38]

However, as political scientists Cathy J. Cohen and Michael C. Dawson have pointed out, these informal networks are not available to everyone. African Americans who live in clusters of poverty in American inner cities suffer not only from economic deprivation, but also from a dearth of political information and opportunity. Their study of Detroit neighborhoods with concentrated poverty found that even residents not themselves destitute are far less likely to attend church, belong to a voluntary organization, attend public meetings, and talk about politics than similar people in more advantaged neighborhoods.[39] People in high-poverty neighborhoods feel cut off from their political representatives and see political and community engagement as futile. In part a realistic assessment of the nation's long-standing inattention to the truly disadvantaged, this alienated apathy also reflects the fact that inner-city neighborhoods often lack institutions to mobilize citizens into political action. In other words, people don't participate because they're not mobilized, and not mobilized, they can never savor the fruits of participation.

But perhaps face-to-face mobilization isn't necessary for effective democracy. It is sufficient, the argument goes, for large national membership groups, such as the American Association of Retired Persons, the Audubon Society, and the NAACP, to represent the interests of their diffuse membership. Just as you and I hire a mechanic to fix our cars and money managers to husband our wealth, so, too, one might argue, it is simply a sensible division of labor for us to hire the AARP to defend our interests as prospective retirees, the Audubon Society our environmentalist views, the NAACP our sympathies on racial issues, and so on. "This is not Tocquevillian democracy," concedes Michael Schudson, "but these organizations may be a highly efficient use of civic energy. The citizen who joins them may get the same civic payoff for less personal hassle. This is especially so if we conceive of politics as a set of public policies. The citizen may be able to influence government more satisfactorily with the annual membership in the Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association than by attending the local club luncheons."[40] To some intellectuals, citizenship by proxy has a certain allure.[41]

But if we have a broader conception of politics and democracy than merely the advocacy of narrow interests, then the explosion of staff-led, professionalized, Washington-based advocacy organizations may not be as satisfactory, for it was in those local luncheons that civic skills were honed and genuine give-and-take deliberation occurred. As Theda Skocpol argues:

> In classic civic America, millions of ordinary men and women could interact with one another, participate in groups side by side with the more privileged, and exercise influence in both community and national affairs. . . . In recent times the old civic America has been bypassed and shoved to the side by a gaggle of professionally dominated advocacy groups and nonprofit institutions rarely attached to memberships worthy of the name. Ideas of shared citizenship and possibilities for democratic leverage have been compromised in the process.[42]

Peter Skerry has argued that broad national membership organizations tend to be dominated not by member input—which is, after all, usually just a check sent in for their dues—but by headquarters staff. These people are inevitably pulled toward the wishes of their major patrons: wealthy individuals, foundations, even the government agencies that indirectly fund many of them. Because the voluntary organizations' members are geographically dispersed, these organizations also tend to rely on media strategies to push their agendas. Media strategies to generate more contributions often emphasize threats from the group's "enemies" and in the process give us a politics fraught with posturing and confrontation, rather than reasoned debate.[43]

There is another reason why large "tertiary" organizations are no substitute for more personal forms of political engagement: Most political decision making does not take place in Washington. To be effective, therefore, political activity cannot be confined to mailing one's dues to an inside-the-Beltway interest group. For example, economist James T. Hamilton discovered that neighborhoods where people owned their homes and voted were (holding constant many other factors) less likely to get hazardous waste plants than neighborhoods where people rented and rarely voted. He concluded that in deciding where to locate, hazardous waste companies look to locate in places in which they can expect the least locally organized opposition.[44] In this way, civic disengagement at the local level undermines neighborhood empowerment. Of course, the reverse is true as well, for disengagement and disempowerment are two sides of the same coin.

Social capital affects not only what goes into politics, but also what comes out of it. The best illustration of the powerful impact of civic engagement on government performance comes not from the United States, but from an investigation that several colleagues and I conducted on the seemingly arcane subject of Italian regional government.[45]

Beginning in 1970, Italians established a nationwide set of potentially

powerful regional governments. These twenty new institutions were virtually identical in form, but the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts in which they were implanted differed dramatically, ranging from the preindustrial to the postindustrial, from the devoutly Catholic to the ardently Communist, from the inertly feudal to the frenetically modern. Just as a botanist might investigate plant development by measuring the growth of genetically identical seeds sown in different plots, we sought to understand government performance by studying how these new institutions evolved in their diverse settings. As we expected, some of the new governments proved to be dismal failures—inefficient, lethargic, and corrupt. Others were remarkably successful, however, creating innovative day care programs and job training centers, promoting investment and economic development, pioneering environmental standards and family clinics—managing the public's business efficiently and satisfying their constituents.

What could account for these stark differences in quality of government? Some seemingly obvious answers turned out to be irrelevant. Government organization was too similar from region to region for that to explain the contrasts in performance. Party politics or ideology made little difference. Affluence and prosperity had no direct effect. Social stability or political harmony or population movements were not the key. None of these factors was correlated with good government as we had anticipated. Instead the best predictor is one that Alexis de Tocqueville might have expected. Strong traditions of civic engagement—voter turnout, newspaper readership, membership in choral societies and literary circles, Lions Clubs, and soccer clubs—were the hallmarks of a successful region.

Some regions of Italy, such as Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, have many active community organizations. Citizens in these regions are engaged by public issues, not by patronage. They trust one another to act fairly and obey the law. Leaders in these communities are relatively honest and committed to equality. Social and political networks are organized horizontally, not hierarchically. These "civic communities" value solidarity, civic participation, and integrity. And here democracy works.

At the other pole are "uncivic" regions, like Calabria and Sicily, aptly characterized by the French term *incivisme*. The very concept of citizenship is stunted there. Engagement in social and cultural associations is meager. From the point of view of the inhabitants, public affairs is somebody else's business—that of *i notabili*, "the bosses," "the politicians"—but not theirs. Laws, almost everyone agrees, are made to be broken, but fearing others' lawlessness, everyone demands sterner discipline. Trapped in these interlocking vicious circles, nearly everyone feels powerless, exploited, and unhappy. It is hardly surprising that representative government here is less effective than in more civic communities.

The historical roots of the civic community are astonishingly deep. Enduring traditions of civic involvement and social solidarity can be traced back nearly a millennium to the eleventh century, when communal republics were established in places like Florence, Bologna, and Genoa, exactly the communities that today enjoy civic engagement and successful government. At the core of this civic heritage are rich networks of organized reciprocity and civic solidarity—guilds, religious fraternities, and tower societies for self-defense in the medieval communes; cooperatives, mutual aid societies, neighborhood associations, and choral societies in the twentieth century.

Civic engagement matters on both the demand side and the supply side of government. On the demand side, citizens in civic communities expect better government, and (in part through their own efforts) they get it. As we saw earlier in the hazardous waste study, if decision makers expect citizens to hold them politically accountable, they are more inclined to temper their worst impulses rather than face public protests. On the supply side, the performance of representative government is facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens. In the language of economics, social capital lowers transaction costs and eases dilemmas of collection action. Where people know one another, interact with one another each week at choir practice or sports matches, and trust one another to behave honorably, they have a model and a moral foundation upon which to base further cooperative enterprises. Light-touch government works more efficiently in the presence of social capital. Police close more cases when citizens monitor neighborhood comings and goings. Child welfare departments do a better job of "family preservation" when neighbors and relatives provide social support to troubled parents. Public schools teach better when parents volunteer in classrooms and ensure that kids do their homework. When community involvement is lacking, the burdens on government employees—bureaucrats, social workers, teachers, and so forth—are that much greater and success that much more elusive.

Civic traditions seem to matter in the United States as well. As I explained briefly in chapter 16, in the 1950s political scientist Daniel Elazar did a pathbreaking study of American "political cultures."[46] He concluded that there were three cultures: a "traditionalistic" culture in the South; an "individualistic" culture in the mid-Atlantic and western states; and a "moralistic" culture concentrated in the Northeast, upper Midwest, and Pacific Northwest. Strikingly, Elazar's political-culture map looks much like the distribution of social capital portrayed in figure 80. The traditionalistic states, where politics tends to be dominated by elites resistant to innovation, are also the states that tend to be lowest in social capital. The individualistic states, where politics is run by strong parties and professional politicians and focused on economic growth, tend to have moderate levels of social capital. The moralistic states—in which "good government," issue-based campaigning, and social innovation are prized—tend to have comparatively high levels of social capital. The correlation between the political-culture index derived from Elazar's study[47] and our Social Capital Index is strikingly large.[48]

Do civic traditions also predict the character of governments in the United States? Suggestive studies have found that the social capital–rich "moralistic" states tend to be unusually innovative in public policy and to have merit systems governing the hiring of government employees. Politics in these states is more issue oriented, focused on social and educational services, and apparently less corrupt. Preliminary studies suggest that states high in social capital sustain governments that are more effective and innovative.[49]

At the municipal level, too, research has found that high levels of grassroots involvement tend to blunt patronage politics[50] and secure a fairer distribution of federal community development grants.[51] And cities that have institutionalized neighborhood organizations, such as Portland (Oregon) and St. Paul (Minnesota), are more effective at passing proposals that local people want. These cities also enjoy higher levels of support for and trust in municipal government.[52]

The connection between high social capital and effective government performance begs an obvious question: Is there a similar link between declining social capital and declining trust in government? Is there a connection between our democratic discontent and civic disengagement? It is commonly assumed that cynicism toward government has caused our disengagement from politics, but the converse is just as likely: that we are disaffected because as we and our neighbors have dropped out, the real performance of government has suffered. As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Social capital affects government in many ways. We all agree that the country is better off when everyone pays the taxes they owe. Nobody wants to subsidize tax cheats. The legitimacy of the tax system turns in part on the belief that we all do our share. Yet we know that the IRS cannot possibly audit everyone, so rational citizens have every reason to believe that if they pay their share, they will indeed be subsidizing those who are not so honor bound. It is a recipe for disillusionment with the IRS and the tax system in general.

Yet not everyone is equally disillusioned. It turns out that in states where citizens view other people as basically honest, tax compliance is higher than in low-social-capital states. (See figure 89.) If we consider state differences in social capital, per capita income, income inequality, racial composition, urbanism, and education levels, *social capital is the only factor that successfully predicts tax compliance.*[53] Similarly, surveys have found that individual taxpayers who believe that others are dishonest or are distrustful of government are more likely themselves to cheat.[54] My willingness to pay my share depends crucially on my perception that others are doing the same. In effect, in a community rich in social capital, government is "we," not "they." In this way social capital reinforces government legitimacy: I pay my taxes because I believe that most other people do, and I see the tax system as basically working as it should.

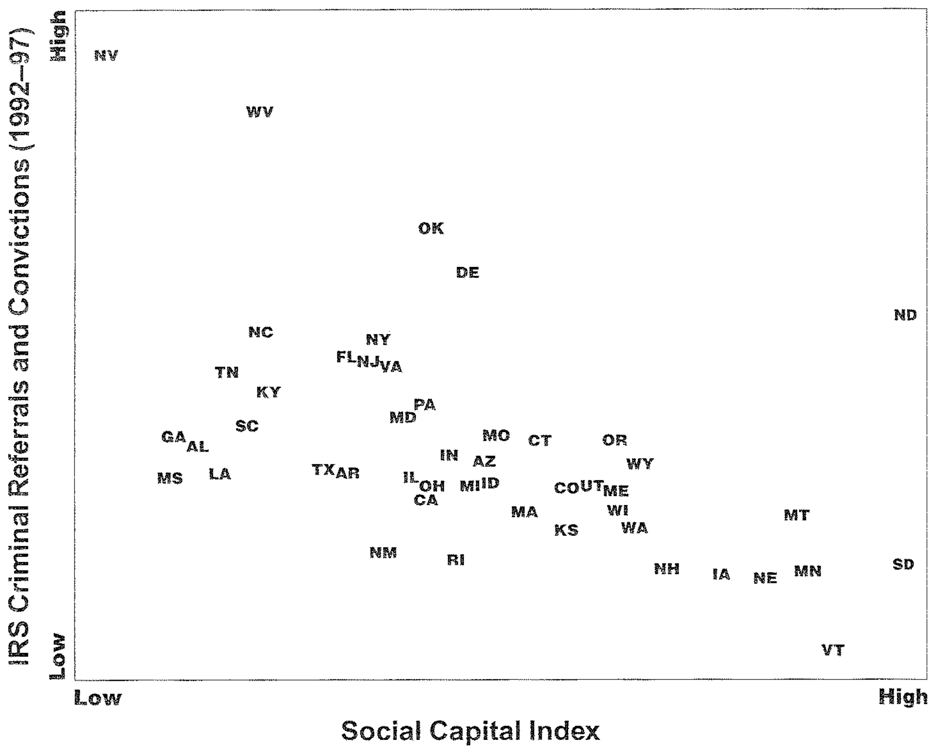

Figure 89: Tax Evasion Is Low Where Social Capital Is High

Conversely, in a community that lacks bonds of reciprocity among its inhabitants, I won't feel bound to pay taxes voluntarily, because I believe that most people cheat, and I will see the tax system as yet another broken government program, instituted by "them," not "us."

In this context it is not surprising that one of the best predictors of cooperation with the decennial census is one's level of civic participation. Even more striking is the finding that communities that rank high on measures of social capital, such as turnout and social trust, provide significantly higher contributions to public broadcasting, even when we control for all the other factors that are said to affect audience preferences and expenditures—education, affluence, race, tax deductibility, and public spending.[55] Public broadcasting is a classic example of a public good—I obtain the benefit whether or not I pay, and my contribution in itself is unlikely to keep the station on the air. Why should any rational, self-interested listener, even one addicted to Jim Lehrer, send off a check to the local station? The answer appears to be that, at least in communities that are rich in social capital, civic norms sustain an expanded

sense of "self-interest" and a firmer confidence in reciprocity. Thus if our stocks of social capital diminish, more and more of us will be tempted to "free-ride," not merely by ignoring the appeals to "viewers like you," but by neglecting the myriad civic duties that allow our democracy to work.

Similarly, research has found that military units are more effective when bonds of solidarity and trust are high, and that communities with strong social networks and grassroots associations are better at confronting unexpected crises than communities that lack such civic resources.[56] In all these instances our collective interest requires actions that violate our immediate self-interest and that assume our neighbors will act collectively, too. Modern society is replete with opportunities for free-riding and opportunism. Democracy does not require that citizens be selfless saints, but in many modest ways it does assume that most of us much of the time will resist the temptation to cheat. Social capital, the evidence increasingly suggests, strengthens our better, more expansive selves. The performance of our democratic institutions depends in measurable ways upon social capital.