An Interview with Professor Robert Putnam

On The Potential And Problems Of Community

On Wednesday 26/09/01

Summary:

'More people in America watch 'Friends' than have friends.'

Leading American sociologist Robert Putnam made this semi-serious claim in a talk he gave recently to a large audience at the Brisbane Convention Centre.

Professor Putnam cites public health research which shows that people who are socially isolated are as much at risk of death as people who smoke.

Robert Putnam is the author of the term 'social capital', which refers to community bonds and interpersonal connections. These, he argues, are just as important for the public good as economic wellbeing.

His bestselling book 'Bowling Alone: The Decline and Revival of American Community' described how on many measures social capital has declined dramatically since the 1970s. Putnam analysed factors such as membership of voluntary organisations, how often people went on picnics, and levels of philanthropy, and found sharp declines on all fronts.

He blames television, but not computers - the internet, he says, has rich possibilities for new connections. Commuting long distances by car is seen as one of the most disconnecting developments of the late 20th century. It robs people of time they'd otherwise spend with family and friends.

The solution is not to try and return to the past, Putnam says. The challenge is to re-invent ways for people to connect with each other, just as newly industrialised and urbanised societies had to do at the end of last century.

Transcript:

Geraldine Doogue: Our special guest today, the man with the clever thought of linking the words 'social' and 'capital' and who thus challenged the political agenda.

Today a special broadcast of American sociologist Robert Putnam's address in Brisbane recently (organised by the University of Queensland), where he talked about the importance of social connections, and by that he doesn't mean being invited to high society parties - although he has done research that concluded that your address book is probably more important to your earnings than any number of academic degrees.

Robert Putnam really wants to drive home the idea that it's the day-to-day social connections through membership of organisations, through having friends over to your house, through voluntary work, that make for a strong community. And this, says Putnam, is what social capital is all about. He should know, he invented the term.

Robert Putnam: Here's what I'd like to do in the time that I have this morning: I'd like to talk about four questions. I'm going to be talking primarily about the United States; you all know I'm not an expert on Australia, but I have some reason for believing in work that we've done, that the malady that I'm going to describe is not unique to the United States. So the first

question I'm going to ask is What's been happening to social connectedness, to community, to community bonds and ties in the United States over the course of the last generation or two?

And secondly, because the answer to the first question will be that by many, many different measures, there's been a surprising collapse of community bonds in America, in my adult life time. So the second question will be, why is that? And it's a really interesting puzzle, and we'll explore some of the possible reasons for it.

The third question that I want to address is, Well so what? I mean does it really matter if we're no longer going to the Elks Club, or connecting with our neighbours? Is this mainly just a matter of nostalgia for the '50s and for the kind of society that we really wouldn't want to recreate if we could. And I want to argue there that that's not the case, that in fact there are immeasurable ways our communities work better, and our lives are more satisfying, immeasurable ways, when we do connect and therefore it is a serious problem.

That will lead naturally to the fourth question: What do we do about it? But in my day job I'm a professor, and I thought you might not believe that unless I began with just a few words of social theory before we got to the good stuff. So I want to spend just a minute or two introducing this concept, the concept of social capital.

You all know what physical capital is: physical capital is simply some physical object that makes you more productive than you would otherwise be, a tool. So you save up your money and you buy a screwdriver and you can repair more bicycles, more quickly. About 25 years ago economists taught us to talk about human capital, to say that just as you could invest in a tool, you could also invest in training and education and with that training and education you, the same you, with the same tools, would be more productive than you would be if you lacked that human capital.

And social capital says Yes, and there are features of our communities that are like that; there are features of the organisations that we work in and the communities that we live in that either make us more productive if we live in a community that has a productive pattern of connections among its members, or alternatively, if we live in a community that lacks those kinds of connections, we're less productive. Social capital simply refers to social networks and the value, it calls attention to the value, the value added that comes from very social networks. Social networks have value for the people who are in them first of all. Your networks have value to you; we speak in America, and I guess this is probably international now, we speak of networking as a career strategy and we refer to the fact that most of the research not only in the United States but also in other places, including Australia, says that most people get their jobs more through who they know than from what they know. I'm not talking about nepotism I just mean our connections are valuable to us in making career advancement. Indeed so important is this as a matter of career advancement that an economist at the University of Chicago Business School (that's where they do this kind of work) has calculated that the dollar value to you of your address book in terms of the long-run income, and in fact for most Americans at least, the dollar value of their address book for them in terms of their income is a lot higher than the dollar value of all their degrees. And in that sense, social capital is more valuable than human capital.

But of course I'm not talking only about the monetary returns that come from networks. Our networks are valuable to us in many different ways. I'm going to be talking about some of those ways later in these remarks. But the more interesting thing is that sometimes social networks have value not merely for the people who are in them, but also for the bystanders. There are, in other words, external effects of social networks that can be quite important. An example that I'm very much aware of at the moment comes from the fact that criminologists have found in the US and many other countries that a strong predictor of low crime rates is the number of neighbours who know one another's first name. If there's a lot of social capital, if there's a dense network of connectedness in a neighbourhood, that has an effect on lowering crime rates. It's a very powerful relationship. My wife and I, Rosemary, happen to live in Lexington, Massachusetts, and we live in a little neighbourhood that has a lot of social

capital. People are always going on picnics and barbecues and sledding parties and so on, and therefore my wife and I are able to be here in Brisbane today, quite confident that our home in Lexington is being protected by all that social capital in our neighbourhood, even though (now this is the moment for confession) I actually never go to any of the picnics and barbecues and sledding parties, I'm on the road often. But I'm able to benefit from those networks, even though I didn't contribute to them.

What I've just said, those of you who know economics will know that I've just said social capital is in some respects a public good; that is, there are external effects that rebound to people even though they're not themselves in the networks, and that occurs in part because it turns out that in a community, or in a neighbourhood, but in a community let's say, in which there is a dense network of connection, where people are connected to one another, what tends to evolve is a norm of reciprocity. Reciprocity simply means I'll do this for you, now, without expecting anything immediately back from you, because down the road you'll do something for me and you'll do something for him, and we're all connected anyhow.

I recognise that the term reciprocity is a kind of an abstract term; it was actually however best defined of all things, by an American baseball player that one or two of you might have heard of, because he's rather famous for his misuse of the English language. He's a person named Yogi Berrer, who was a catcher for the New York Yankees baseball team, and he said, 'If you don't go to somebody's funeral, they won't come to yours.' Actually that's a deep thought; the more you think about that, the deeper that thought becomes. And he captured in that idea, the basic concept of reciprocity, and there's more reciprocity in the community or an organisation that has lots of social connectedness, and that's one of the reasons why social networks have such powerful effects. And we'll talk some more about examples of it later.

But all you need remember now is social capital simply means social networks and the norms of reciprocity that emerge from them, and there's reason to think that those social networks have values, and therefore that led me to ask a few years ago, Well I wonder what has been the state of the social capital accounts of the United States? How is our social capital doing in communities across America? And that led me to try to figure out Well, how would you know, how would you measure if there were trends in connectedness, up trends or down trends in connectedness. And if you think about your own community, and you were asked to say Well what have been the trends over the last 30 or 40 years in your community in connectedness? And if you think about what things you could measure, pretty soon it'll occur to you that one way of getting at that question would be to take advantage of the fact that club secretaries keep membership records, and that an important form of social capital is membership in organisations, and therefore we could look at trends in organisational membership as a rough measure of social capital. I want to emphasise at the moment that it's by no means the only form of social capital, but it has the advantage that I've just described, that records are kept and therefore we don't have to rely on people's fallible memories. And therefore we began gathering data on membership in many, many different kinds of organisations in America, 30 or 40 different kinds of very common organisations: parent/teacher organisations and Scouts and so on, and we didn't want to know just how many members there were year by year, but we wanted to know of the people would could have belonged to an organisation, how many did. In other words, when you have more kids in a baby boom, you have more parents obviously, when you have more parents you obviously have more members of parent/teacher organisations but the question is not just Does the rise and fall turn on the number of people who could belong to the organisation, but what business people would call the market share, what fraction of the people, what fraction of all parents year by year belonged to what we call PTA, Parent/Teacher Associations. What fraction of all doctors belong to the American Medical Association year by year; what fraction of all kids belong to the Scouts; what fraction of all African Americans belong to the NAACP, the main civil rights organisation for black Americans. What fraction of all Catholic men belong to the Knights of Columbus, which is a Catholic men's organisation; what fraction of all middle-aged men belong to one of the animal clubs, that is, men's organisations, that's a technical term; it refers to the fact that all men's, we discovered when we began doing this research, that all men's organisations in America

are named for animals, the Lion's Club, and the Moose Club and the Elks Club and the Eagles Club, so we gathered data on market share of the animal clubs year by year. And for most of the first two-thirds of the 20th century, year by year, Americans were becoming not only were we a joining people, as Tofler had said, but we were becoming more and more a joining people, more and more kids belonging to the Scouts, more and more parents belonging to the PTA and so on. There's only one exception to that during the first two-thirds of the 20th century, and that is between 1930 and 1935, the Great Depression, many American organisations lost half of their members in five years, big effect of the Depression on civic engagement.

But then coming out of the Depression, and especially coming out during the 20 years after World War II, probably the sharpest civic boom in American history actually. Most American organisations doubled their market share and then suddenly, silently, mysteriously, all of those organisations began to experience levelling market share, and then slumping market share, and then plunging market share. So that by the end of the 20th century all of those organisations were back down to Depression levels in terms of their membership.

Now not every organisation hit the peak at exactly the same time. The earliest organisation actually to hit its maximum in terms of market share was the American Medical Association, the fraction of doctors who belonged to the AMA hit its peak in 1957; the last organisation to reach a peak, appropriately, was a civic group in America called The Optimists. They kept going until 1980 but then they just plunged and they're now down back with the rest of us. And I believe that that chart is actually not a bad summary of trends in social capital in America over the course of the 20th century.

I know that this is a very intelligent audience, and I know that already two or three questions have already begun to surface. First of all you'd say, But wait a minute, that's talking only about membership, card-carrying membership, but that doesn't measure how active people were in their organisations. Secondly, those are all organisations that have been around for a hundred years, that's how they got into the graph, but maybe those are just the old-fashioned organisations, maybe that just shows the rise and decline of a particular set of old-fashioned organisations, what we could call the Funny Hat organisations; maybe they've been replaced by another set of new organisations that have grown up, so maybe it's not the joining-ness that's down, maybe it's just joining-ness in those organisations, maybe we're all now joining New Age poetry clubs, or we're belonging to Alcoholics Anonymous or something, and maybe that doesn't show a decline in organisational membership at all. At thirdly you would say, and I know this is an important point, Wait a minute Bob, you just said two minutes ago, you told us that not all social capital was organisational, that that's only organisations. Maybe people have stopped joining organisations but maybe are connecting in other ways. I mean for example bars, Cheers, the bar you know, where everybody knows your name, that's pure social capital. I mean it isn't actually, it's a TV show, but if it were a real place it would be real social capital, so maybe we stopped going to the Elks Club and we're going to bars; or maybe we're hanging out with friends, or maybe we're going on picnics more often than we used to, and maybe it's just the organisations that we've stopped going to.

Now I've known for some time that that was a possibility. My problem was I couldn't figure out where the National Picnic Registry was kept so I could figure how would you actually know if we were going on more or fewer picnics than we used to. And then the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me, well the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me my professional life, I discovered two massive new data archives. The first comes from a poll that it turns out has been asked of national samples of Americans every month for the last 25 years and more, large numbers of people, a couple of thousand people a month have been asked about their community involvement.

Let me illustrate the questions by asking you these questions. Think of the last 12 months. How many of you in the room over the course of the last 12 months have been to any public meeting where people talked about local affairs or school affairs. Let me see your hands if

you've been to any public meeting, Wow! Jeff, this is a very civic room. OK, put your hands down. I'm becoming a little intimidated by this audience.

Another question they asked was, Have you in the course of the last 12 months been an officer, or a committee member of any local organisation, not just one of the old Funny Hat organisations, New Age poetry counts here, so let me see your hands if you've been an officer or a committee member of any local organisation. Incredible. OK, now keep your hands down. This is probably the most civic room in the Western world at this moment, and I congratulate you on that. Don't keep raising your hands, but I'll keep on with the questions. Have you in the course of the last 12 months, signed a petition. No, keep your hands down. Have you in the course of the last 12 months written a Letter to the Editor? Have you in the course of the last 12 months run for office? And I can summarise for you very simply the results of all of the 12 different ways in which people were asked about their community involvement, being an officer or going to a meeting or writing a letter or whatever. Every single one of those types of behaviour is down a lot over the course of the last quarter of the 20th century. What the data show is that over the course of the 25 years after 1975, or 1970 roughly speaking, roughly half of the civic infrastructure of all American communities, the meetings and the clubs and the connections and so on, roughly half of the community infrastructure simply evaporated.

That is however not the most interesting of the two archives that we discovered. We also discovered purely by accident actually, that a commercial firm, a marketing firm in America called the DDB Company had been collecting since 1975 every year, a large sample of interviews of people about their consumer preferences. You know, do you prefer Nike or Adidas, or if you eat yoghurt what brand of yoghurt do you prefer and so on. But about 25 years ago somebody in the marketing office there got the idea, a nifty idea, that if you tried to write an ad for yoghurt it's helpful to know something about the target audience, besides the fact the fact that they eat yoghurt. So you have to have a picture in your mind, are yoghurt eaters also skiiers or surfers, or do they jog a lot or do they ski a lot, or do they go to church a lot, what are they like, what's the lifestyle of people in these various categories. And therefore they began asking the people they were surveying about their lifestyle for their purposes, but accidentally they were creating an extremely interesting set of rigorous data about trends in various aspects of American social and personal behaviour.

Many of the questions they asked had the following form: How many times last year did you go to church, for example. They had the thought, which turns out to be true, that one of their big clients is Hallmark greeting card company and they had the idea which turns out to be true, that people who go to church a lot send more greeting cards, so that's why they asked about churchgoing. How many times last year, they asked, did you go to a club meeting, any kind of club meeting. How many times last year did you have friends over to the house. How many times last year did you go to a dinner party. How many times last year did you go on a picnic. I had discovered the National Picnic Registry, and I can report to you therefore as a certifiable fact that in 1975 the average American went on five picnics. Last year the average American went on two picnics. There is a national picnic crisis that has swept over America. In short there are a lot of really interesting questions asked in this survey about different aspects of people's social and personal behaviour. And once again, I can summarise for you the results of that survey archive very simply. Virtually every form, formal and informal, type of social involvement out of the dozens and dozens mentioned in this survey declined dramatically between 1975 when the survey begins, and today.

Another form, a very important form of social capital in America, I know this is less true in other parts of the world, other advanced developed parts of the world, but in the United States it still is true that we are very religious people. Not only do we say we believe in God, but Americans more than almost any other advanced industrial country, are still involved in their communities of faith, churches and synagogues and so on, and as a rough rule of thumb even today, about half of all social capital in America is religious actually. About half of all club memberships are religious, about half of all philanthropy is religious, about half of all volunteering is in a religious context. So it matters a lot for our social capital accounts what

the state of play is with respect to involvement in church and other religious organisations and one way of testing that is to use a question that appears in this survey, and in lots of other surveys actually, which is very simple: Did you go to church or other religious services last week? Just about the same time that we began not so often joining clubs, we also began not going to church quite as often, that begins in the early '60s and then there's a long slow slump of about 25% in the frequency with which we go to church.

There's been a huge decline in the frequency of dinner parties in America, a decline of about 60% in the frequency of dinner parties. That actually was sort of comforting to my wife Rosemary and me because we actually hadn't been invited to any dinner parties in the last three years, we thought it was something about us but we know that nobody else is having dinner parties either, that was sort of comforting.

Going to bars is down by about 35% or 40%. Playing cards is way down. Card playing is still a pretty important – is card playing a common social practice in Queensland, in Australia? No, it isn't. OK. Well it is pretty common in America. The average American even today plays cards three times more often than he or she goes to the movies for example, so card playing is quite common. But if I showed you the graph for card playing, it is such a steep decline, I mean you know, playing cards I don't mean professionally, I just mean playing bridge or poker or something like that. The decline in that kind of social activity has declined so sharply that the last card will be played in America in 2010 actually, you'll be able to see it, it'll be broadcast globally.

So in many different ways – by the way one of the things that most shocked me was that this is true not only of friends and neighbours and wider communities, it's even true within our own family. One of the questions that was asked is How often do you have dinner with your own family? There's been a decline of about a third, maybe even as much as 40% in the frequency with which people eat with their own family. That's a startling change because the practice of breaking bread in the evening with your immediate family is a really universal phenomenon. It's kind of interesting that in our lifetime we're actually watching the – it's like watching, being around when the dodo became extinct, being around when the family dinner became extinct, if you didn't really care about the state of American families, it would be kind of an interesting thing to observe, but I do care about the state of American families and therefore it's a troubling fact.

Now there are a lot of other examples of evidence for the decline that I've talked about. I'm only going to show just one or two more because then I want to get on to the other questions that I mentioned. But one way in which you can see this effect in the broader social effects of this, is that America, which has historically been by comparison to most other countries quite generous, Americans give away compared to most other countries, a large fraction of our – well not a large, but larger than most other places, a fraction of our income in philanthropy, to churches and civic good causes and so on, but if you ask what fraction of our total income do we give away year by year, how we give it away year by year, you see a long steady decline in the importance of philanthropy in America.

For most of the 20th century, American communities were becoming more and more, better and better connected. We were joining more, we were praying together more, we were giving more, we were voting more, we were schmoozing more, we were hanging out more, and then suddenly, mysteriously, beginning about 30 years ago we began doing all of those things less and the decline now over the last 30 years, in all of those measures, has been really quite substantial. So that poses the next question that I want to address which is Well why is that? What could possibly explain that?

Now I don't know how many of you have either read the murder mystery by Agatha Christie, 'Murder on the Orient Express' or seen the movie, you know the story, and if you had, you know that the answer to the question whodunnit in that, is that basically everybody done it, or that there were multiple causes at least. And this is a mystery like that, the mystery of the declining social capital of America is a mystery like that. And so what I'd like to ask you actually right now is to help me think about this mystery by suggesting culprits. I don't want

the whole indictment, I just want the name of a suspect. So I want to hear, if you raise your hand and call out what could possibly be the explanation for this trend. Yes, Ma'am.

Computers and television, OK. More time on computers, more screen time as we call it, less face time with other people, that's the story I guess, is that right, basically? Good. Other suggestions about possible causes, Yes, Ma'am here. Longer hours at work, more time at work, less time for friends. Yes Ma'am. Right..... Picnics, dinner parties and so on had to be given up because now both parents work outside the home. Good suggestion. Yes Sir. Right. ....Greater emphasis especially greater political emphasis on me and material self interest, rather than on wider values. Yes right here?.... Economic rationalism, as we become more focused on economic efficiency and so on we've sort of lost sight of these broader, fuzzier community ideas.

Someone over had a suggestion, yes Ma'am? .... The welfare state brought this on, before the welfare state you're suggesting, we had to take care of our friends and neighbours and family, but with the welfare state that's kind of had the effect, economists would call that crowding out the State has crowded out social capital. OK. Yes, Sir? ..... Driving cars instead of public transportation and walking, which were more communal forms of connectedness. OK I want to make sure I'm not missing any at the back. Yes, along the row? Right..... The disintegration of the family, the family being a natural unit for leading you into the broader community because if you have kids, if the kids get involved with other kids and that gets you involved as the family itself, the basic unit became fractured, that then led to disintegration of these broader social ties. OK, last suggestion? .....Moving around a lot. OK, as we move around a lot more than our parents did let's say, and that causes us to be less connected.

Well, a lot of really good suspects have been named, I'm sure there are others but let me see if I can very quickly now – I'm not going to be able to deal with all of them, there are some very interesting suggestions, some of which had not occurred to me before, but some of these actually I am able to exonerate. Some of the suspects that have been named I think are just innocent. And a couple I think are guilty as sin and I'm going to indicte them publicly here and then a couple I'm just going to be unsure about whether they are relevant or not.

Let me begin with a couple of exonerations. The last one, mobility. Geographic mobility, that is moving where you live, moving from Sydney to Melbourne or Brisbane or whatever. It's an interesting suspect because it is true that people who move around a lot are less connected, that is very true, it's like potting or repotting a plant, I don't know if any of your are gardeners, but every time you re-pot the plant, the roots gets broken off and you have to give the plant time to put down roots in its new setting and people are like that. That part of the story is true, but the problem is that America at least, has become steadily less mobile, less geographically mobile over the course of the last 50 years. That's true whether we mean that moving across the country or moving across the street. In other words, when our parents were joining up a storm in the '50s and '60s they were moving more often than Americans are today. So mobility looks suspicious but actually is nothing, no part of the story.

Let me take a couple of the suspects that I think are demonstrably part of the story. The car turns out to be an important part of the story, and I didn't expect this when I began doing the research but it turns out that urban sprawl, suburban sprawl and commuting and so on is an important part of the story in America. There's a rough rule of thumb that's quite general in America, it would be interesting for me to know whether anything like this could be discovered in Australia, but in America every ten minutes more of additional commuting time cuts all forms of social connection by 10%. So ten minutes more commuting time means 10% less churchgoing, 10% for your dinner parties, 10% for your dinners with the family, 10% for your club meetings and so on, and 20 minutes more commuting time means 20% less of all of those things. So that's an important part of the story because America has become, our

cities have become more sprawling and that's had an effect on just time and sense of locality. It's not just time, it's also where is home when you're living in a metropolis like Los Angeles.

Women in the workforce. My daughter is a professional woman and a mom, and someone I'm very close to. We're intellectual collaborators, and she tells me I have to be really careful in the next three sentences so that I don't leave you with the impression that she personally is responsible for the collapse of American civilisation. But it is true that for people, for guys my age our moms were terrific social capitalists, that is they were spending lots of time in making social connections, community connections, and our wives and our daughters are doing other great things and we guys have not picked up the slack. And so part of the story here is a story of two-career families. I want to be sure that you don't misunderstand me, I'd be really upset if my daughter dropped out of a professional career, so I'm not for a moment arguing here that this is a reason for reversing the movement of women into the professional labour force, but it is true that this is a part of the story. It's actually a much smaller part of the story than most Americans at least think. When I ask this question the question I asked you, of American audiences is by far the most common suggestion is actually women in the labour force. But it is a factor, but it's much less important than that. You can see this because the trends are down among stay-at-home moms, and among bachelors, and among all parts of the American society. So it's not just working women that exemplify this problem. It is a small part of the problem.

Television on the other hand, well let me take television and computers because they're interesting. Computers actually have nothing to do with this problem, they didn't have anything to do with causing the problem. Remember the trends began going down in the middle 1960s. Bill Gates was in diapers when the trends began going down, and the Internet had nothing to do with this problem. Now it's an interesting question as to whether the Internet will make the problem better or make the problem worse, and the answer to that question is Yes. And I'd enjoy talking with you more about that, it's a really quite interesting question as to what the future will bring with respect to the Internet and social connectivity, very interesting question, but it's not part of the causal background.

Television on the other hand is a quite different story. I did not begin life as a cultural grouch and I don't like having to make this point, but the fact of the matter is the evidence is overwhelming, television is bad for social connection. Actually public affairs television, public broadcasting, public affairs television, is actually good for your civic health, but most Americans don't watch public affairs broadcasting, most Americans watch Friends, rather than having friends. And demonstrably, entertainment, commercial entertainment television is lethal for various forms of social connection both within the family and outside the family. I'd be glad to talk with you more about that, but let me see if I can sort of bring to us a bit of a conclusion.

There are a number of other interesting suggestions that have been made, for example the welfare state, it's a commonly suggested cause for this. I don't actually think that that's a significant factor. The reason it makes me think it's not a significant factor is that across American States for example, the larger the size of the welfare budget of a given State, the higher the level of social capital, not the lower the level of social capital, and that's also true across countries. The countries of the world where there is the highest level of social capital are also the countries that have a relatively large welfare state, like Scandinavia. So in general there doesn't seem to be the kind of negative correlation between welfare state activities and social capital that would lead to that interpretation.

One of the features of a social scientist exploring a puzzle like this is you look for hot spots in the population. You look for parts of the population where the trends are concentrated, but this is a very strange phenomenon in America because it's an amazingly widely spread phenomenon. The trends that I'm talking about in connecting, all these various forms of connecting, the trends are down among rich folks, and they're down among poor folks and they're down at all levels in between. They're down among white folks and they're down among people of colour and ethnic minorities and they're down about the same rate. They're

down in big cities and they're down in suburbs and they're down in small towns and they're down in rural areas, and they're down about the same. They're down among men and down among women and down among PhDs and down among high school dropouts, so they're down everywhere. There's only one exception to that generalisation. The trends are not down among older people where older means older than me. Actually if you listen carefully that's what the word 'older' always means, it means older than the speaker, and what the data made quite clear, it's a really interesting pattern, is that the group of Americans born in the first third of the 20th century, and the group of people, basically sometimes called the World War II generation, the people who came of age before or during World War II, all their lives that has been a remarkably civic social generation. It's basically my parents' generation, and all of their lives, the data amazingly consistent here, they join more, they trusted more, they schmoozed more with friends, they gave more, they gave more blood, they gave more money, they volunteered more, they spent more time with their family, that is an amazingly civic, social engaged generation.

The only problem is they didn't pass it on, those habits, on to their kids, the baby boomers, or to their grandchildren, what we call the X-generation, and the differences between the grandparents and the kids are enormous in terms of, now if you think about the generational arithmetic of that, what that means is that every year now America is losing another slice of the most civically, most socially engaged people in the population and is being replaced by a slice of people who are great people, it's my kids, my own kids, but they don't have their grandparents' habits of social connecting, and therefore every year the generational arithmetic means we're on an escalator down, the problem's going to get worse actually if we don't do something about it, because we're losing the most civically engaged people.

Now that might not be a problem if this were all just a matter of nostalgia, and I'm now turning to the third question, So what? Who cares if we're not going to the Elks Club any more, or we're not having dinner with our family, let's not hyperventilate about the missing '50s one might say. No, that's wrong. The data here are quite clear in many measurable ways there are powerful effects of social capital on things we all care about. If you care about education, if you care for example about test scores of kids graduating from secondary school, you might have one or two strategies. You might say, Well OK, we're going to invest 10% more in the schools, we're going to have smaller classes, or computers or whatever. Or we're going to have 10% more parental involvement with the schools. The evidence in the United States at least is very clear: this is the more effective strategy for raising test scores. I'm not saying we shouldn't spend money on schools, my wife is a public school teacher I have a vested interest in paying teachers well, I am saying that much of what gets called a schools problem in America is not a schools problem, it's a parents' problem, parents have dropped out of their kids lives.

The same thing is true of crime. Crime, as I said at the very outset, crime is best predicted, low crime is best predicted by how many neighbours know one another's first name. Many, many other examples especially having to do with child welfare, child welfare in a community is powerfully conditioned by the level of social capital in that community. If you compare for example the effect of financial poverty and what you might call social poverty by that I mean having low social capital, and you get to choose where you're born, it's bad to be born in a place that's financially poor, I'm not saying that poverty is great for kids, it's not, it's bad for kids. But so too is social disconnection, social poverty in that sense, and statistically speaking in terms of various measures of child welfare, low social capital is just about as bad as low economic wellbeing in a community.

There are many other examples I'd be delighted to talk at greater length in response to questions about, the questions about Well does it matter, I mean or is this just nostalgia. But I want to conclude this part of the remarks by saying it matters in measurable ways to your physical health, whether you're connected. There are powerful physical health effects, and I know that some people in the room are specialists in public health and they'll be able to come in on and extend and maybe correct what I'm about to say, but the evidence, very good evidence actually and the evidence here is stronger than in any other domain, because it's

based on by now more than a dozen studies in different countries, the US and Finland and Japan and so on, lots of different studies, which control for all the standard risk factors for ill health, that is, how old you are and whether you jog and what gender you are and whether you smoke and all the standard risk factors. Controlling for all those factors, your chances of dying actually your chances of dying are high, your chances of dying over the next year are cut in half by joining one group, cut in three quarters by joining two groups, I'm not cheating this is not the case of people who join are healthier to begin with, the studies are generally prospective which means we measure people's health and joining-ness and so on now, and then we watch them. As a risk factor for ill health and death, social isolation, I don't mean living in a cave some place, I mean simply not knowing your neighbour, social isolation is as big a risk factor for death as smoking. If you smoke and belong to no groups, it's a close call as to which is the more dangerous behaviour, and if you do smoke by all means you should join a group to make up for that, and as many of you may know, the evidence on mental health, the mental health effects and social isolation are even greater I don't know how many people no doubt there are experts in the room who know about this, much of the Western world is in the midst of a depression epidemic by which I mean, I don't mean just feeling a little blue in the morning, clinically measured, disabling depression has increased tenfold in the United States and in a number of other countries over the course of the last generation or two. And if you have not experienced clinical depression in your immediate circle, you probably don't realise this is a serious disease. In America it's the third worst, in terms of the total disease burden, it's the third worst disease now after heart disease and cancer, and almost certainly a major risk factor for this epidemic in depression, and a related epidemic in youth suicide, is linked to social isolation. I want to be careful here I don't want to be practising medicine without a licence, but I do think the evidence is pretty clear that there are reasons to worry about these trends in social capital, not just a matter of nostalgia.

So last question, What do we do about it? I've described this great catastrophe that's swept over the United States and much of the, perhaps other parts of the Western world, I know how to fix it but I've run out of time. I don't know quite how to fix it but I do have a way of thinking about it, and if you'll forgive me I'll end with these remarks about how to think about the problem.

What I've said is that over the course of the last generation or so in America, a variety of technological and economic and social changes have rendered obsolete a stock of American social capital. That's just my jargon for working families and television and urban sprawl and maybe some other things, mean we no longer feel comfortable going to the PTA or the Elks Club or the church social. And I think a lot of bad things flow from that.

Now go back 100 years. We get out of our time machine, it's 1900, 1901, we're in some American community, of course the first thing we would ask as we got out of the time machine is how's social capital doing, and what we would find astonishingly, is the same thing was true then. They had just been through 30 or 40 years of dramatic social changes that had rendered obsolete a stock of their social capital. In that case it was the Industrial Revolution, and urbanisation and immigration, which meant that when people moved from the farm, and whether the farm was in Iowa or the village was in Russia or Italy or whatever, when they moved to the city they left behind a lot of their family and friends and community institutions, and America at the turn of the last century suffered from many of the same symptoms of the social capital deficit that we do today. High, and then rising crime rates, a growing gap between rich and poor, the only two times in American history when there's been a growing gap between rich and poor, was at that time at the turn of the last century, and now. It felt a lot like our lives feel to us, that is remember, they'd been through the Industrial Revolution so most people in the country were much better off materially than their parents could have dreamed of. They had lots of nifty new inventions, the telephone was a niftier new invention for them than the Internet is for us, they felt materially better off but they felt disconnected, they talked about it this way, they said, 'We just don't know anybody any more', and an American journalist, Walter Lipman, said 'We've changed things faster than we know how to change ourselves.'

And then they fixed it. They fixed the problem in a very short period of time. In about 20 years between roughly 1890-1910, most of the major civic institutions in American communities today were invented, the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross and the League of Women Voters, and the NAACP and the Urban League and the Knights of Columbus, and Hadas and Rotary and the Community Chest which became the United Way, the local community philanthropic organisations, most labour unions, most professional organisations, it's hard to name actually, a major civic institution in American communities today that was not invented in this very short period of time.

By the way let me interrupt just one second to say I did a kind of a mis-step in what I just said that you probably caught, I said that America invented the Boy Scouts and the Salvation Army and the YMCA and so on, that's not true, you know that's not true. We actually borrowed those from Britain, but Britain had invented them in exactly the same way in response to the same crisis in the era of mid-Victorian social reforms. So in fact that time in that period of social change, the basic transforming social economic event, the Industrial Revolution, hit Britain first, they then had this concentrated period of social reform that produced the Y and the Boy Scots and so on. We, coming along the same track a few decades later, partly simply borrowed their inventions and partly invented new things of our own, Rotary and so on were our inventions in dealing with that crisis. Now if you'd been around then, it would have been tempting to say, indeed some people did say, life was much nicer back on the farm where everybody knew everybody, back to the farms please. But that's not what they did. What they did and said was to accept the challenge of inventing new forms of connection that fitted the way they had come to live. Indeed to my horror, some people have thought I was saying life was much nicer back in the '50s, would all women please report to the kitchen. And turn off the television. In a grouchy kind of way. And that's not what I'm saying. I'm not saying would you turn back the clock to the 1950s, instead I'm saying We need to reinvent new ways of connecting that fit the way we've come to live. We need to emulate those people at the turn of the last century. Now it won't be, I'm not saying we just need a new organisation, indeed it may not be organisations at all this time, it may be other ways of connecting. It no doubt will in some respects involve the Internet, I don't know for sure what the new forms will be, but I do know one last thing that we need to pay attention to as we go about this task of reinvention.

But, and here's the last qualification, I've been talking all morning about social capital as if it were an undifferentiated thing, you can either have lots of social networks, or few social networks, but that's wrong. There are different kinds of social networks, and one important distinction that's very relevant here, and maybe even relevant in Australia now, certainly relevant in my country, is the distinction between connections that link you to people like you, I call that bonding social capital, and connections that link you to people unlike you, which I call bridging social capital. Now I'm making the simple point, bridging good, bonding bad, because bonding social capital, your links to people like you can be very valuable, indeed if you get sick the person who brings you chicken soup is likely to represent some form of bonding social capital. But a society that has only bonding social capital looks a lot like Bosnia. Democratic societies need lots of bridging social capital. So far, so good except that bonding social capital is a lot easier to build than bridging social capital. Your grandmother knew that. She told you birds of a feather flock together. What she meant was bonding social capital is easier to build than bridging social capital, she didn't think you'd understand that, which is why she said birds of a feather flock together. But because bridging social capital is so valuable as a social resource for democracies and because it's so hard to build, it deserves special attention from social reformers, and so the challenge that I have posed to Americans and that may be relevant in other countries too, that's up to you to say, is that over the course of the next 10 or 15 years we need to be about the task of a sustained period of social entrepreneurial inventiveness, in which we invent new ways of connecting, that fit the way we've come to live, don't require my daughter to give up her professional career, but that nevertheless meet our needs for connecting, and especially new forms of connection that reach out to bridge different parts of American society, different races, different ethnic groups, different generations, different social classes and so on, because if there's a single problem

I'm most worried about in my own country, and I repeat some of the news from other parts of the world suggest this may not be limited to America, the temptations of bonding social capital make it easier for us to forget about the need to build new forms of bridging social capital.

You've been a terrific audience I thank you very much for your attention.

APPLAUSE

Geraldine Doogue: Robert Putnam, both quality and sparkling, an academic who knows how to perform as well. Robert Putnam's book, 'Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community' is a Simon & Schuster publication, not easily available in Australia, you have to order it through a good bookstore, so you might like to tackle that. Good Christmas present maybe.

Guest on this program was:

Robert Putnam

Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University