

**We get by with a little help from our friends**  
**Bernie Fabry**  
**Published in *FSWP News*, Family Services of Western PA**  
**Volume 1(4), Second Quarter, 2002**

While Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) have been a mainstay of American community involvement, they are changing. In the middle years of the last century the local PTA was among the most common of community organizations. Membership in local PTAs was as high as almost 50 active members for every 100 families with school age children living in a school district. By the late 1990s the rate had steadily dropped to fewer than 20 members per 100 families. This change in PTA membership is only one aspect of a far reaching trend that is affecting America's health and well being. A steady decline in membership has been occurring in virtually every civic organization (like labor unions, fraternal organizations, community organizations and veterans groups). We also are going to church less often than we did three or four decades ago, and the churches we go to are less engaged with the wider community. Americans have been dropping out in droves from political life and organized community life.

The trend is not just in decreasing membership in civic and social organizations. Evidence also suggests that across a wide range of activities, there has been a striking decrease in the informal contacts with family, friends and neighbors. The percentage of families who report that the whole family usually eats dinner together has declined by a third over the last twenty years, and even then, families report spending less time in conversation over meals. Virtually all forms of family togetherness have become less common.

Perhaps the most revealing trend in our use of leisure time with family and friends is the fate of card games. In a 1940 survey, card games were the nation's favorite form of social recreation. A deck of playing cards was found in 87% of homes. The most popular card games were highly social activities. Projections today indicate that card playing will likely become extinct within 15 or so years. Substitutes for card playing have emerged, including everything from computer and video games to casino gambling. Like cards, these activities provide the spice of chance. Unlike card games, however, they are solitary activities. Not only do neighbors and friends exchange visits less often, we also engage less often in the kinds of leisure activities that encourage casual social interaction. We spend more time *watching life* through electronic media (like TV) and less time actively *participating in life*.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam persuasively argues that Americans are investing less and less in social endeavors. He writes that "the closing decades of the 20th century found Americans growing ever less connected with one another and with collective life. We voted less, joined less, gave less, trusted less, invested less time in public affairs, and engaged less with our friends, our neighbors and even our families."

Sociologists refer to the results of social endeavors as *social capital*. Conceptually, social capital has value very much like physical capital (tools) and human capital (training and experience) have value. Just as a wrench (physical capital) or expertise (human capital) can be used to increase the quality of life, so too social contacts can increase the quality of life for individuals

and groups. Social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.

As long ago as 1916, sociologist L. J. Hanifan wrote that social capital refers to those social activities 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.” He further wrote that “[when a person] 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 social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation 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.” Consider this brief story:

One of the joys of small-town living was revealed to me while vacationing in a northern Michigan village. At the post office, I noticed a poster with a photograph of a woman smiling. Just below the picture was this message:  
“Have you seen this person? If so, give her a hug. Today is her birthday.”

-Raymond Bottom, *Readers Digest*

Unfortunately, stories like this one have become far and few between. As the examples presented at the beginning of this article reflect, social capital has been decreasing in America over the past quarter century. Putnam spends a great number of pages in *Bowling Alone* exploring why social capital is declining. The possible reasons are many and interesting. They include the pressures of time (busyness, two-career families) and money (financial distress), mobility (moving from place to place), commuting and urban sprawl, passive solitary forms of electronic entertainment (TV above all) and changes across generations. Hilary Rodham Clinton in her book, *It Takes a Village*, summarized Putnam’s findings: “Extended families rarely live in the same town, let alone the same house. In many communities, crime and fear keep us behind locked doors. Where we used to chat with neighbors on stoops and porches, now we watch videos in our darkened living rooms. Instead of strolling down Main Street, we spend hours in automobiles and at anonymous shopping malls. We don’t join civic associations, churches, unions, political parties, or even bowling leagues the way we used to.” Technology has rapidly changed our world, but our social conventions have not adapted as rapidly to meet our needs for social capital.

If – as sociologists believe – social capital contributes to the improvement of living conditions in communities, then what are the implications of less and less social capital? In short, not good.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam describes a ‘state social capital index.’ States that score low on the state social capital index – that is, states whose residents trust other people less, join organizations less, volunteer less, vote less, and socialize with friends less – are the same states where children are at greater risk: where babies are born less healthy and where teenagers tend to become parents, drop out of school, get involved in violent crime, and die prematurely due to suicide or homicide. States with less social capital have measurably worse educational outcomes than do states with high state social capital indices. Lower levels of social capital, all else being equal, translates into higher levels of juvenile and adult crime.

Putnam further points out that countless studies document the link between social capital and mental health: people who have fewer close friends and confidants, fewer friendly neighbors, and fewer supportive coworkers are much more likely to experience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem, and problems with eating and sleeping. Social capital has been demonstrated to operate through psychological and biological processes to improve people's lives. Mounting evidence suggests that people whose lives are rich in social capital cope better with traumas and fight illness more effectively.

The Beatles got it right: we all "get by with a little help from our friends." If we are to continue 'getting by' we need to begin reversing the decline in social capital. Putnam offers some solutions as does Clinton. Bottom line: its time to invest in our future by investing in interpersonal relationships. The old ways (joining clubs, playing cards together) may not be the investment strategies for a new century. We do need to be aware of the need for social capital so that we can begin exploring new strategies for a new century. As Yogi Berra put it, "If you don't go to somebody's funeral, they won't come to yours."

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family.  
Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.  
-Jane Howard, *Families*