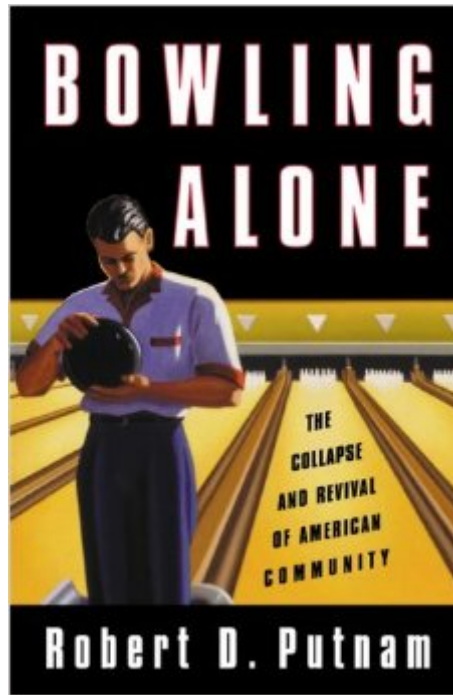


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Bowling Alone



Synopsis

Once we bowled in leagues, usually after work -- but no longer. This seemingly small phenomenon symbolizes a significant social change that Robert Putnam has identified in this brilliant volume, *Bowling Alone*, which *The Economist* hailed as "a prodigious achievement." Drawing on vast new data that reveal Americans' changing behavior, Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from one another and how social structures -- whether they be PTA, church, or political parties -- have disintegrated. Until the publication of this groundbreaking work, no one had so deftly diagnosed the harm that these broken bonds have wreaked on our physical and civic health, nor had anyone exalted their fundamental power in creating a society that is happy, healthy, and safe. Like defining works from the past, such as *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Affluent Society*, and like the works of C. Wright Mills and Betty Friedan, Putnam's *Bowling Alone* has identified a central crisis at the heart of our society and suggests what we can do.

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Customer Reviews

Putnam's commentary on modern American life is frightening at best. I read Putnam's article by the

same title in college and it left a lasting imprint because it crystalized my feeling that Americans are no longer involving themselves in civic and community life. His new book expounds on this depressing thesis and explains, in tremendous detail how Americans no longer value civic engagement or regard relationships with neighbors as worthwhile. He cites declines in participation in public clubs such as the Shriners and Elks clubs as well as more informal social gatherings like poker playing and family dinners. Using statistics and time diaries he plots indicators of civic engagement from its peak in the early 1960's and its subsequent decline thereafter. The greatest casualty throughout this transformation is in social capital, a term which predates Putnam and describes the emotional and practical benefits of personal relationship. Putnam shows that civic clubs that have shown growth in membership since the 1960's have mostly been in massive national organizations whose membership is nothing more than people on mailing lists who pay an annual fee. Furthermore, religious organizations, whose members participate in their communities at greater rates than non church goers, are beginning to change their focus from civic participation to only tending to the needs of their church members. The affects of this disengagement have impacted our health, democracy and safety.

I'm writing this review for non-sociologists and non-policy experts, for people like me who don't generally curl up with a book of sociology. "Bowling Alone" is an important work because it highlights some very disturbing trends at work in America and suggests some solutions. Author Robert Putnam measures "social capital," which is simply the value of people dealing with people--organization and communication, whether it's formal (church council, the PTA), or informal (the neighborhood tavern, the weekly card game). We have suffered a huge drop in such "social capital" over the past 30-35 years; club attendance has fallen by more than half, church attendance is off, home entertaining is off, even card games are off by half. (Yes, there are people who survey for that!) Why is this important? Because a society that is rich in social capital is healthier, both for the group and for the individual. The states that have the highest club membership and voter turnouts also have the most income equality and the best schools (and those that have the lowest, have the worst). And according to Putnam, "if you decide to join [a group], you can cut your risk of dying over the next year in half." Younger people are demonstrably less social than their grandparents in the World War II generation. They also feel more malaise. Lack of sociability makes people feel worse. While "Bowling Alone" is a work of academic sociology, with charts and graphs, Putnam makes it as reader-friendly as possible with a good honest prose style and a straightforward presentation. His message deserves to be heard.

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