



# Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

By Robert D. Putnam

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Robert Putnam—about whom *The Economist* said, “his scholarship is wide-ranging, his intelligence luminous, his tone modest, his prose unpretentious and frequently funny”—offers a personal but also authoritative look at this new American crisis. Putnam begins with his high school class of 1959 in Port Clinton, Ohio. By and large the vast majority of those students—“our kids”—went on to lives better than those of their parents. But their children and grandchildren have had harder lives amid diminishing prospects. Putnam tells the tale of lessening opportunity through poignant life stories of rich and poor kids from cities and suburbs across the country, drawing on a formidable body of research done especially for this book.

*Our Kids* is a rare combination of individual testimony and rigorous evidence. Putnam provides a disturbing account of the American dream that should initiate a deep examination of the future of our country.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“Robert D. Putnam is technically a Harvard social scientist, but a better description might be poet laureate of civil society. In *Our Kids*, Putnam brings his talent for launching a high-level discussion to a timely topic. . . . No one can finish *Our Kids* and feel complacent about equal opportunity.” (Jason DeParle *The New York Times Book Review*)

“Putnam’s new book is an eye-opener. When serious political candidates maintain that there are no classes in America, Putnam shows us the reality — and it is anything but reassuring.” (Alan Wolfe *Washington Post Book World*)

“Much of the current debate about inequality has a strangely abstract quality, focusing on the excesses of the 1 per cent without really coming to terms with what has happened to the American middle class over the past two generations. Into this void steps the political scientist Robert Putnam, with a truly masterful volume that should shock Americans into confronting what has happened to their society.” (Francis Fukuyama *The Financial Times*)

“Robert D. Putnam vividly captures a dynamic change in American society—the widening class-based opportunity gap among young people. The diminishing life chances of lower-class families and the expanding resources of the upper-class are contrasted in sharp relief in *Our Kids*, which also includes compelling suggestions of what we as a nation should do about this trend. Putnam’s new book is a must-read for all Americans concerned about the future of our children.” (William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geysler University Professor, Harvard University)

“Robert Putnam weaves together scholarship and storytelling to paint a truly troubling picture of our country and its future. *Our Kids* makes it absolutely clear that we need to put aside our political bickering and fix how this country provides opportunity for its millions of poor children. This book should be required reading for every policymaker in America, if not every American.” (Geoffrey Canada, President, the Harlem Children’s Zone)

“In yet another path-breaking book about America’s changing social landscape, Robert Putnam investigates how growing income gaps have shaped our children so differently. His conclusion is chilling: social mobility ‘seems poised to plunge in the years ahead, shattering the American dream.’ Must reading from the White House to your house.” (David Gergen)

“With clarity and compassion, Robert Putnam tells the story of the great social issue of our time: the growing gap between the lives of rich and poor children, and the diminishing prospects of children born into disadvantage. A profoundly important book and a powerful reminder that we can and must do better.” (Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*)

“The book’s chief and authoritative contribution is its careful presentation for a popular audience of important work on the erosion, in the past half century, of so many forms of social, economic, and political support for families, schools, and communities. . . . *Our Kids* is a passionate, urgent book.” (Jill Lepore *The New Yorker*)

"A thoughtful and persuasive book." (*The Economist*)

“The irony of the book is contained in its title: The love for ‘our kids’ is driving the destruction of the collective possibilities of other people’s kids. . . . Incredibly useful, essential reading.” (Stephen Marche *Esquire*)

“Putnam writes clear, impassioned, accessible prose. . . . [He] has made a real contribution in calling our attention to a situation of profoundly divergent experiences for different classes that Americans ought to find morally unacceptable, as he obviously does.” (Nicholas Lemann *The New York Review of Books*)

“Charles Dickens used his literary genius to compel his contemporaries to face up to the poverty and violence which afflicted the poor in Victorian England, and Robert Putnam does the same in his newest book, which analyzes ‘The American Dream in Crisis’ not in social science lingo, but through the direct experience of a group of young Americans also struggling with poverty and violence. *Our Kids* shows that we are living in a two-tier social and economic world where the affluent succeed through education and economic opportunity, and the poor struggle unavailingly to rise out of their poverty. The compelling results of Putnam’s research are inescapable. Read this book and discover a new America.” (Jill Ker Conway)

"Highly readable. . . . An insightful book that paints a disturbing picture of the collapse of the working class and the growth of an upper class that seems to be largely unaware of the other's precarious existence." (*Kirkus Reviews (starred review)*)

#### About the Author

Robert D. Putnam is the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. Nationally honored as a leading humanist and a renowned scientist, he has written fourteen books and has consulted for the last four US Presidents. His research program, the Saguaro Seminar, is dedicated to fostering civic engagement in America. Visit [RobertDPutnam.com](http://RobertDPutnam.com).

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Our Kids

## Chapter 1

### THE AMERICAN DREAM: MYTHS AND REALITIES

I went back to Ohio, but my city was gone.<sup>1</sup>

If I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities in the world.

In the particular is contained the universal.<sup>2</sup>

MY HOMETOWN WAS, IN THE 1950s, a passable embodiment of the American Dream, a place that offered decent opportunity for all the kids in town, whatever their background. A half century later, however, life in Port Clinton, Ohio, is a split-screen American nightmare, a community in which kids from the wrong side of the tracks that bisect the town can barely imagine the future that awaits the kids from the right side of the tracks. And the story of Port Clinton turns out to be sadly typical of America. How this transformation happened, why it matters, and how we might begin to alter the cursed course of our society is the subject of this book.

The most rigorous economic and social history now available suggests that socioeconomic barriers in

America (and in Port Clinton) in the 1950s were at their lowest ebb in more than a century: economic and educational expansion were high; income equality was relatively high; class segregation in neighborhoods and schools was low; class barriers to intermarriage and social intercourse were low; civic engagement and social solidarity were high; and opportunities for kids born in the lower echelon to scale the socioeconomic ladder were abundant.

Though small and not very diverse racially, Port Clinton in the 1950s was in all other respects a remarkably representative microcosm of America, demographically, economically, educationally, socially, and even politically. (Ottawa County, of which Port Clinton is county seat, is the bellwether county in the bellwether state of the United States—that is, the county whose election results have historically been closest to the national outcome.<sup>3</sup>) The life stories of my high school classmates show that the opportunities open to Don and Libby, two poor white kids, and even to Jesse and Cheryl, two poor black kids, to rise on the basis of their own talents and energy were not so different from the opportunities open to Frank, the only real scion of privilege in our class.

No single town or city could possibly represent all of America, and Port Clinton in the 1950s was hardly paradise. As in the rest of America at the time, minorities in Port Clinton suffered serious discrimination and women were frequently marginalized, as we shall explore later in this chapter. Few of us, including me, would want to return there without major reforms. But social class was not a major constraint on opportunity.

When our gaze shifts to Port Clinton in the twenty-first century, however, the opportunities facing rich kids and poor kids today—kids like Chelsea and David, whom we shall also meet in this chapter—are radically disparate. Port Clinton today is a place of stark class divisions, where (according to school officials) wealthy kids park BMW convertibles in the high school lot next to decrepit junkers that homeless classmates drive away each night to live in. The changes in Port Clinton that have led to growing numbers of kids, of all races and both genders, being denied the promise of the American Dream—changes in economic circumstance, in family structure and parenting, in schools, and in neighborhoods—are surprisingly representative of America writ large. For exploring equality of opportunity, Port Clinton in 1959 is a good time and place to begin, because it reminds us of how far we have traveled away from the American Dream.

• • •

June 1, 1959, had dawned hot and sunny, but the evening was cooler as 150 new graduates thronged down the steps of Port Clinton High School in the center of town, clutching our new diplomas, flushed with Commencement excitement, not quite ready to relinquish our childhood in this pleasant, friendly town of 6,500 (mostly white) people on the shores of Lake Erie, but confident about our future. It was, as usual, a community-wide celebration, attended by 1,150 people.<sup>4</sup> Family or not, the townspeople thought of all the graduates as “our kids.”

## **Don**

Don was a soft-spoken white working-class kid, though no one in our class would have thought of him that way, for he was our star quarterback.<sup>5</sup> His dad had only an eighth-grade education. To keep the family afloat, his dad worked two jobs—the first on the line at the Port Clinton Manufacturing factory, from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and the second, a short walk away, at the local canning plant, from 3:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. His mom, who had left school in the 11th grade, “lived in the kitchen,” Don says, making all of their meals from scratch. Every night, she sat down with Don and his two brothers for dinner. They got used to eating hash, made by frying up everything left in the house with potatoes. The boys were in bed by the time their dad got home from work.

They lived on the poorer side of town, and did not own a car or television until Don went off to college, by which time 80 percent of all American families already had a car, and 90 percent had a TV. Their neighbors drove them to church every week. The family had no money for vacations, but Don's parents owned their home and felt reasonably secure economically, and his dad was never unemployed. "I didn't know that I was poor until I went to college and took Economics 101," Don recalls, "and found out that I had been 'deprived.'?"

Despite their modest circumstances, Don's parents urged him to aim for college, and, like many other working-class kids in our class, he chose the college-prep track at PCHS. His mom forced him to take piano lessons for six years, but his true love was sports. He played basketball and football, and his dad took time off from work to attend every single one of Don's games. Don downplays class distinctions in Port Clinton. "I lived on the east side of town," he says, "and money was on the west side of town. But you met everyone as an equal through sports."

Although none of his closest friends in high school ended up going to college, Don did well in school and finished in the top quarter of our class. His parents "didn't have a clue" about college, he says, but fortunately he had strong ties at church. "One of the ministers in town was keeping an eye on me," he says, "and mentioned my name to the university where I ended up." Not only that, the minister helped Don figure out how to get financial aid and navigate the admissions process.

After PCHS, Don headed off to a religiously affiliated university downstate (where he also played football) and then on to seminary. While in seminary, he developed doubts about whether he could "hack it" as a minister, he says, and came home to tell his parents he was quitting. Back home, he stopped by the local pool hall to say hello. The owner, a longtime friend of his dad's, referred to him as "a future minister," and a customer asked Don to pray for him—which Don interpreted as signs that he should continue on his path.

Immediately after college, Don married June, a high school teacher, and they had one child, who became a high school librarian. Don had a long and successful career as a minister and retired only recently. He still helps out in local churches and has coached high school football for many years. Looking back, he says he has been blessed with a very good life. His rise from a poor but close-knit working-class family to a successful professional career reflected his native intelligence and his gridiron grit. But as we shall see, the sort of upward mobility he achieved was not atypical for our class.

## **Frank**

Frank came from one of the few wealthy families in Port Clinton. In the late nineteenth century, his maternal great-grandfather had started a commercial fishing business, and by the time of Frank's birth the family had diversified into real estate and other local businesses. His mother graduated from college in the 1930s and then earned a master's degree at the University of Chicago. While in Chicago she met Frank's father, a college-educated minister's son, and they soon married. As Frank grew up, his father managed the family businesses—fishing, a shopping center, farming, a restaurant, and so forth—and his mother did charity work.<sup>6</sup>

Port Clinton's social elite has long made the Port Clinton Yacht Club its hub. While Frank was growing up, his grandfather, father, and uncle each served a term as the club's "Commodore," and his mother and aunt were elected "Shipmates Captain"—pinnacles of local social status. In short, Frank's parents were the wealthiest, best educated, and most socially prominent parents of the class of 1959.

Nevertheless, the social distance between Frank's family and those at the bottom of the socioeconomic



ladder was much shorter than is common in America (even in Port Clinton) today. Frank (who lived only four blocks away from Don) recalls his neighbors as “a nice mix of everyone”—truck driver, store owner, cashier at the A&P, officer at a major local firm, fire chief, gas station owner, game warden. “We played baseball out in the backyard or kick-the-can down at the corner,” he says. “Everybody just got along.”

Despite his family’s affluence, Frank worked summers at the family restaurant, starting at fifteen, scraping paint and doing cleanup work with his high school buddies. And his family carefully downplayed their social status. “If you’re in Port Clinton with a group of boys who can afford a Coke, that’s what you are to order,” Frank’s grandfather had memorably warned Frank’s uncle. “If we’re in Cleveland or New York, you can order whatever you want, but when you’re with kids in Port Clinton, you do what they can do.”

In high school, Frank interacted with his classmates as a social equal—so ably, in fact, that many of us were unaware of his exceptional family background. But signs of it did appear. He was the first in our class to wear braces. In elementary school he spent winter months at a family home in Florida, attending school there. His grandfather was on the school board. Frank’s parents once invited a teacher over for dinner. Afterward Frank chided his mom, “Why did you embarrass me in front of the whole class?” The suggestion that his parents might ever have intervened to try to alter a grade strikes Frank as absurd: “Are you kidding? Oh, jeez, as far as we kids knew, the teachers are always right.”

Frank was an indifferent student, but that didn’t mean his parents neglected his educational prospects. “My life was programmed from the time I was born until I was through college,” he says. “You knew you were going to go to college, and you better graduate.” With financial support from his parents, he attended a small college in Ohio, graduating with a major in journalism. After college, he enlisted in the Navy and for seven years navigated Navy transport planes around the world. “I loved it,” he recalls.

After his naval service, Frank worked for about twenty-five years as an editor for the Columbus Dispatch, until he objected to some personnel decisions and was fired. At that point he returned to Port Clinton, semiretired, to work in the family businesses—the fish-cleaning operation, dock rentals, and the boutique. He has been helped financially through some difficult years by a trust fund that his grandfather created for him at birth. “It’s not a lot of money,” he says, “but I’ll never starve.” Frank’s family fortune has cushioned him from some of life’s hard knocks, but it was not a trampoline that boosted him ahead of his peers from less affluent homes, like Don.

## **Class Disparities in Port Clinton in the 1950s**

Class differences were not absent in Port Clinton in the 1950s, but as the lives of Frank and Don illustrate, those differences were muted. The children of manual workers and of professionals came from similar homes and mixed unselfconsciously in schools and neighborhoods, in scout troops and church groups. The class contrasts that matter so much today (even in Port Clinton, as we shall shortly see)—in economic security, family structure, parenting, schooling, neighborhoods, and so on—were minimal in that era. Virtually everyone in the PCHS class of 1959, whatever their background, lived with two parents, in homes their parents owned, and in neighborhoods where everyone knew everyone else’s first name.<sup>7</sup>

Our parents, almost universally homemaker moms and breadwinner dads, were not especially well educated. Indeed, barely one in 20 of them had graduated from college, and a full third of them hadn’t even graduated from high school. (For the most part, they had completed their schooling before high school education became nearly universal.) But almost everyone in town had benefited from widely shared postwar prosperity, and few of our families were poverty-stricken. The very few kids in town who came from wealthy backgrounds, like Frank, made every effort to hide that fact.

Some dads worked the assembly lines at the local auto part factories, or in the nearby gypsum mines, or at the local Army base, or on small family farms. Others, like my dad, were small businessmen whose fortunes rose and fell with the business cycle. In that era of full employment and strong unions, few of our families experienced joblessness or serious economic insecurity. Most of my classmates, whatever their social origins, were active in sports, music, drama, and other extracurricular activities. Friday night football games attracted much of the town's population.

Seen a half century later, my classmates (now mostly retired) have experienced astonishing upward mobility. Nearly three quarters of us obtained more education than our parents, and the vast majority made it higher up the economic ladder. In fact, some kids from less well-off backgrounds have climbed further up that ladder than kids from more comfortable, better-educated backgrounds. By contemporary standards, our class's absolute level of upward educational mobility was remarkable, a reflection of the high school and college revolutions of the twentieth century. Half the sons and daughters of high school dropouts went on to college. Many of those who were the first in their family to complete high school ended up also being the first to complete college—a remarkable jump in a single generation. Even more striking, although the two black students in our class contended with racial prejudice (as we shall shortly see) and came from homes in which neither parent had completed grade school, both earned postgraduate degrees.

In 1950s Port Clinton, socioeconomic class was not nearly so formidable a barrier for kids of any race, white or black, as it would become in the twenty-first century. By way of comparison, the children of the members of the class of 1959 would, on average, experience no educational advance beyond their parents.<sup>8</sup> The escalator that had carried most of the class of 1959 upward suddenly halted when our own children stepped on.

This high absolute mobility of my class of 1959 could have been consistent with low relative mobility, if everyone had moved upward in lockstep, but actually, even relative mobility was high. In fact, upward mobility among the kids from the lower half of the socioeconomic hierarchy was almost as great as among the most privileged kids. In short, lots of upward mobility from the bottom and a modest amount of downward mobility at the top.

To be sure, less educated parents, with narrower cultural horizons and less familiarity with advanced education, sometimes had lower educational aspirations for their kids. However, if they, or our teachers, or informal mentors in the community (like Don's pastor), or our friends encouraged us to attend college, we invariably did—with virtually no trace of economic or financial or neighborhood bias in our college going.<sup>9</sup> Low costs at public and private institutions across Ohio were supplemented by a wide array of locally raised scholarships—from the Rotary Club, the United Auto Workers Union, the Junior Women's Club, and the like. Of all college grads in the PCHS class of 1959, two thirds of them were the first in their families to attend college, and one third were the first in their families even to graduate from high school. As the 1960s opened in Port Clinton, a single modest reform—better counseling for talented kids from poor backgrounds—would have seemed to hold the key to a truly remarkable degree of equality of opportunity, but instead (as we shall see) social history was about to reverse course.

Of the kids from lower- and middle-class backgrounds who did not immediately attend college, roughly one third later found on-ramps to postsecondary education, such as community college, with no trace of bias against kids from humbler backgrounds. The net effect of these late-blooming successes was to weaken still further the link between family background and eventual educational attainment.

This evidence from a survey of my classmates proves beyond a reasonable doubt that Port Clinton in the 1950s was a site of extraordinary upward mobility. Because the transmitters of socioeconomic status that are

so potent today (economic insecurity, family instability, neighborhood distress, financial and organizational barriers) were unimportant in that period, the transmission process from generation to generation was weaker, and thus mobility was higher. Over and over again members of the class of 1959 use the same words to describe the material conditions of our youth: “We were poor, but we didn’t know it.” In fact, however, in the breadth and depth of the community support we enjoyed, we were rich, but we didn’t know it.

But how about gender and race? To open our discussion of those critical issues, let’s listen first to the stories of three more of my classmates.

## **Libby**

Libby’s father worked as a farmer and a skilled craftsman at Standard Products, while her mother was a full-time housewife. Both parents had left school in tenth grade. The family lived in a large hardscrabble farmhouse outside town. Libby, the sixth of ten children, often wore hand-me-downs. With many mouths to feed, money was tight. Libby never learned to bike or skate: “those things,” she says, “were not in the family budget.” On the other hand, with thirty acres, hardworking parents, and strong young arms, the family raised vegetables, kept chickens and cows, and was never destitute.

Libby’s parents were good role models and nurtured an unusually cohesive family unit. The family always ate supper together, praying before the meal. Her parents insisted that the kids say “please” and “thank you,” and stay at the table until everyone had finished. That spirit of togetherness has endured: Libby says that as septuagenarians she and her siblings still “circle the wagons and take care of each other” when adversity strikes.

Social life for this close-knit family revolved around school and church. Libby’s parents were involved in the PTA and the kids’ extracurricular pursuits, and each week the family sat together in church. Students from the church youth group occasionally took responsibility for adult services, and after Libby preached, she received cards from congregation members telling her what a good job she’d done. She was hired on the spot for her first job when a downtown store owner recognized her from the pulpit.

Academically, Libby’s parents set high expectations for their children, and Libby lived up to them: she was an honors student in the college-prep track. Equally important, she made friends easily and could be counted on to get things done. “If you find enough people to help,” she recalls her mother saying, “you can accomplish just about everything.” A natural politician, Libby was elected president of the German Club, the Future Teachers of America, the Honor Society, and the Junior Class. Nearly 60 years later, Libby remembers high school as one of the most rewarding periods in her life. “I was in my element,” she says.

When the time came for college, an English teacher helped Libby win an academic scholarship to the University of Toledo. Libby planned to become a teacher, but almost as soon as she arrived at college, she and her high school sweetheart found themselves overwhelmed by how much they missed each other. And so, like so many of her female peers, Libby dropped out of college, returned home, got married, started a family, and settled down as a civic-minded housewife.

When the marriage ended after 20 years, however, Libby was left on her own. Suddenly, she found her lack of a college degree and work experience, and society’s pervasive gender bias, were holding her back. For the only time in her life, she became frightened about her future.

She proved resilient, however. Libby’s decades in the social life of this small town had given her a wide reputation for dependability and congeniality. Beginning as a clerk in the lumberyard, she quickly became a

writer for the local newspaper and then the head of a nonprofit group. Libby's father, always supportive, encouraged her to enter electoral politics, and within little more than a decade she had been elected to the county-wide office that she still holds, nearly thirty years later. As Libby's track record in PCHS demonstrated, her emotional intelligence and civic spirit were well matched for public life.

As she entered her 70s, Libby had become widely respected statewide as a public official and a quiet power in local party politics. Still feeling the call of service, she began training as a minister and now also serves as a part-time pastor in several area churches.

This farm girl with hand-me-down clothes and exceptional people skills was, beyond doubt, held back by the cultural norms of the 1950s, particularly after she left high school. Born a few decades later, Libby would probably have trained for a profession and might well have risen to the top of Ohio politics. Libby's gender was a serious impediment to upward mobility. But her modest class origins were not.

Libby's experience was typical of women in the class of 1959. Men and women in our cohort were equally likely to attend high school, equally involved in academic and nonacademic activities, equally qualified in terms of academics and extracurriculars, equally likely to aspire to college, and equally likely to attend college. Until we left PCHS, our class experienced no gender differences in opportunity for advancement.

Gender massively affected who completed college, however, and thus just like Libby, the women in my high school class were deprived of what would turn out to be the most important credential for upward mobility—a college degree. Equal numbers of men and women of the class of 1959 went off to college, but 88 percent of the men got a degree, compared to 22 percent of the women! In short, no gender winnowing at all until college, and then extreme gender winnowing.

Exactly as in Libby's story, that extraordinary difference was due almost entirely to women dropping out of college to get married. Women in my class were three times more likely to marry during college than men, and marriage was six times more of a barrier to finishing college for women than for men. Men were less likely to marry, and if they did, they stayed in school. Half a century later, my female classmates explain that whatever their academic or professional inclinations, they followed the social norms of the era—marriage, home, and a family. Of course, their world would change dramatically in the ensuing decades, as Libby recounts, but most of them (including Libby) say they don't regret leaving college to start a family.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, self-imposed or not, the personal and social costs of having to choose between family and career were extraordinary.

The contrast with educational winnowing in twenty-first-century America could not be starker. Nowadays, women are more likely to graduate from college than men. On the other hand, 50 years ago family background had very little to do with who finished college, and nowadays it makes a huge difference, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

What about race, then and now?

## **Jesse and Cheryl**

“Your then was not my then, and your now isn't even my now.”

Even in a group that collectively experienced remarkable upward mobility in life, two of our 1959 classmates stand out—the only two black students, Jesse and Cheryl. Their experiences were in many respects parallel.

- Both arrived in Port Clinton as children of families fleeing physical violence in the South, part of what historians call “the Great Migration.”<sup>11</sup> Jesse’s family fled Mississippi after his sister was killed, while Cheryl’s family were forced to leave Tennessee after an altercation between her father and a white man.
- Though none of their parents had a formal education beyond elementary school in the Jim Crow South, both Jesse and Cheryl benefited from tightly knit, hardworking, religiously observant, two-parent families.
- Both lived in poorer sections of town. Jesse’s father loaded boxcars for a local manufacturer, while his mother worked as a seasonal maid in a nearby hotel. Cheryl’s father worked in the gypsum mines and in a fruit-packing plant, while her mother cleaned houses. However, neither considered their families poor. “When we got to Ohio,” Jesse recalls, “my dad always had a job, so we always had food and a place to live.”
- Both excelled in high school. Jesse, perhaps the best all around athlete in school, was named MVP of the football team and was elected president of the student council. Cheryl was an elected officer of our senior class and ranked very near the top academically.
- Immediately after graduation, both went to good nearby colleges on partial scholarships, obtained graduate degrees, entered the field of public education, and recently retired after long and successful careers. That leap from elementary-school-educated laborers to graduate-school-educated professionals in a single generation is a remarkable testament to their native talent and fortitude, and also to the relative weakness of class barriers to advancement in that era.

This bare biographical recital might suggest that Jesse and Cheryl lived trouble-free childhoods in Port Clinton and achieved their successes in life relatively easily. But they were two black kids living in a predominantly white small town in the pre–Civil Rights 1950s, and inevitably race became the most salient part of their identities, imposed on them by their social environment.

When Jesse first arrived in Port Clinton, he was stared at by classmates who had never gone to school with a black person, just as he had never gone to school with a white person. But he soon began to make friends, especially after he turned out to be good at sports. The son of Jesse’s father’s white supervisor at work persuaded his father, a Little League coach, to invite Jesse to join their team. “I got on the Little League team,” he says, “and started making friends. When you become an athlete, and you’re good, and you help the team, people start liking you. I felt welcome on my team, but the other teams didn’t like me being on the team.”

A talented four-sport athlete, Jesse focused on athletics in high school. Aside from his parents, the most influential person in his life was his football coach—but not because he was particularly sympathetic or close to Jesse. “He was a figurehead,” Jesse says, “whose values you wanted to emulate—the hard work, discipline, drive, work together, win. Given where he came from, this guy didn’t particularly care to interact with me, but he liked me because of my skills. He could give me an assignment, and I would do it.”

Jesse was even-tempered and avoided confrontations. “That’s the way you had to be in Mississippi to survive,” he says. “If I had responded to white people in Mississippi, I probably wouldn’t be here talking with you.” In high school, Jesse recalls, “I had such a good personality that they elected me president of the student council.” He recalls with pleasure that the candidate he defeated was the author of this book.

During high school Jesse assumed he would not go to college, because his family had no money, but a football coach from a nearby college showed up at his home during his senior year to offer him a generous scholarship. When Jesse discussed the offer with his parents, his father told him, “Son, if you don’t get an

education, you'll have to work as hard as I work." His father agreed to loan him the \$500 in costs not covered by the scholarship, and Jesse went off to college.

After college Jesse hoped to go to law school, but he didn't have the money. He hitchhiked to California, where he was only able to find a job as a utility worker in an electronics company. A friend suggested that he seek a teaching job and work for his teaching credentials. In the end he got a master's degree and spent more than four decades as a teacher, dean, vice principal, principal, and regional director in the Los Angeles education system.

Reflecting on his childhood in Port Clinton, Jesse notes that although he felt uncomfortable about entering a few business establishments, his experience in town was generally positive. "There were so many nice people in Port Clinton," he says, "some of the most pleasant, accepting, and tolerant I ever met. We would go fishing, and they would let us take out the boat."

His family lived in a poor, racially mixed neighborhood. "We had a lot of white neighbors who we walked to school with every day," he recalls, "and we were friends. We never had problems. Everybody was trying to live, and it wasn't about what color you were." A white teammate on the football team who knew that Jesse's family didn't have money took to inviting Jesse over to his house for lunch.

On the other hand, the backdrop to Jesse's good relations with his closest peers was racial prejudice and polarization in the wider society. "The hardest part was not being accepted as a human being. Some people would like you, but others would ostracize you when you never did anything to them."

Jesse says he lived between "two worlds—a black world and a white world. Black kids didn't like it because I got along so well with white kids, [and] when I was with the black kids, the white kids was mad. I'm out there trying to appease both sides and trying to get them to understand that we are all human beings. My white friends would want me to go to a white party in a nearby town, but other kids there, or their parents, might not be so tolerant. My friends were welcome, but I was not welcome, all because I was black."

Cheryl has a different story. Her strong role model was her mother, a savvy and competent woman who insisted that Cheryl not use the word can't. "From watching Mama," she says, "I grew up knowing I could do anything. Some things are more caught than taught."

Cheryl's family had first moved to a village near the gypsum mines, where they lived in company housing without indoor toilets. When that housing was closed as unhealthy, the family bought a lot in Port Clinton at the edge of a mostly black neighborhood and moved an older house onto it, though in response to neighbors' protests they were forced to shift the house on its foundation so that it would face away from the adjacent white neighborhood. Subsequently, one of her mother's housecleaning clients arranged for them to buy a better house in a nearby white area, but the sale was aborted after somebody erected a cross in the yard.

Cheryl says she encountered little overt racism as she grew up. She doesn't recall hearing racial epithets. "You could go anywhere and no one was going to bother you," she says. She could ride her bike all over town and take books out from the public library on her own.

What did bother her was the lack of socializing across racial lines. "Port Clinton had a wonderful education system that prepared people [including her, she adds] for college, but 50 percent of high school is socializing," she says, "and that's what we missed. When I was at school with my white classmates, we talked, and after that it was over. I didn't go home with them; they didn't come home with me. So whatever I had to do, I did by myself." A white friend in elementary school once refused to acknowledge her when

Cheryl encountered the girl and her mother on the street. “I was happy to see her,” Cheryl recalls, “but she acted like she didn’t even know who I was. I was really hurt by that.”

Cheryl and her older sister wanted to join a girls’ majorettes group, but they knew they couldn’t, because the group traveled to places that wouldn’t be so tolerant as Port Clinton. “We never tried to join,” she says, “because there’s some things you just know that you can’t be part of.” She and Jesse double-dated with a popular white couple, but they couldn’t go to the local skating rink, because they expected to be refused admittance—a reasonable fear, a white classmate would much later confirm. “It wasn’t like anybody stood outside and said you couldn’t come,” she says. “You just knew that you don’t even try.”

An avid and precocious reader, Cheryl got good grades, and wound up in college prep at PCHS, she says, “because my white friends were going to college.” Her parents did not particularly encourage her to pursue higher education, however. “It wasn’t on their radar screen. They didn’t ever talk much about school.” At one point, she wrote to a business school in Cleveland, but her mother shut that down, saying, “We don’t have any money for you to go to college”—a response that stung.

A turning point came for Cheryl during her senior year in high school, when a white woman for whom she and her mother worked as housecleaners and who had come to respect Cheryl’s work ethic learned about her outstanding academic record, and was shocked to discover that nobody at school had talked to her about college. This woman—the wife of the CEO of one of Port Clinton’s largest firms—energetically took up Cheryl’s case. “I wouldn’t have gotten anywhere without that lady going to bat for me,” she recalls, “putting on that fur coat of hers and marching down to the principal’s office. Twice!” The reluctant principal finally agreed to take Cheryl to visit a nearby state university.

She was admitted to that university, got a partial academic scholarship, and worked summers for four years in menial jobs to cover the rest of the cost. She enjoyed college much more than high school, she says, because there were more blacks, so that “the social part that was missing in high school was available in college.” Still, looking back at her time in college, Cheryl regrets that she didn’t explore careers beyond teaching or social work. “Some kids say, ‘I’m going to be a lawyer, because my dad’s a lawyer,?’” she says. “If I had had some exposure, I would not have been a teacher, because there are so many other things that you could do. But not in the 1960s.”

Cheryl’s brothers had more trouble navigating Port Clinton than she did. “If you didn’t cross the line, which I never did,” Cheryl says, “you could avoid trouble, but if you did cross the line, you would run into some problems.” That happened to her younger brother, she recalls. In a history class on slavery, “he went ballistic and got in real trouble,” she says, after his teacher said that black people don’t have souls. The teacher had made the same remark when Cheryl had been in this class, but she had seethed in silence. For one of her older brothers, simply trying to buy a house upon his return from the Korean War amounted to crossing a line. “I don’t care how much money you have,” the most prominent real estate agent in town told him, “you’re not going to buy a house here.”

Her sense of not belonging still haunts Cheryl when she looks back on Port Clinton, even though she emphasizes that she was helped and befriended by individual white people in town. “Invisible Man, by Ralph Ellison, best describes my experience at PCHS,” she says. “As an African American student in the graduating class of 1959, I participated in but never felt a part of the student body.” America, for her, is a deeply racist system that did not—and still does not—allow her or her family to participate fully in economic and social life. For white kids, Port Clinton in the 1950s was a great place to grow up, but she tells me, amicably but accurately, “Your then was not my then, and your now isn’t even my now.”

• • •

There was much racism in Port Clinton in the 1950s, less violent and more subtle than in other parts of America at the time, but painful and deeply wounding nonetheless, as Jesse and Cheryl make clear. Port Clinton, like America, has made hard-won, halting progress toward racial equity in the last half century, and we must not sugarcoat race relations in the 1950s. On the other hand, as Jesse and Cheryl also emphasize, in Port Clinton of the 1950s humble class origins did not prevent them from using their talents and work ethic to achieve great upward mobility, any more than comparably modest family backgrounds prevented Don and Libby from gaining success in life.

In the half century since Libby, Cheryl, and Jesse came of age, the power of race, class, and gender to shape life chances in America has been substantially reconfigured.<sup>12</sup> Inequality in the United States increasingly operates through education—a scarce resource in our knowledge-based economy and a measure that is closely correlated with parental socioeconomic status. Gender inequality, very high in the 1950s, has fallen sharply, so that women are now more likely to graduate from college than men, and gender gaps in pay are shrinking, though still present.

Progress on racial difference has been less encouraging. To be sure, controlling for education, racial gaps in income are modest, and racial gaps in family structure and test scores, though high, are falling. On the other hand, racial gaps in schooling and involvement with the criminal justice system remain immense. Black parents in America remain disproportionately concentrated among the poor and less educated, so black children continue to be handicapped from the start. Whether their parents are rich or poor, black children live in poorer neighborhoods than white children at that income level, and black children experience less upward mobility and more downward mobility than their white counterparts who started at the same income level.<sup>13</sup>

So, gender and racial biases remain powerful, but as barriers to success they would represent less burdensome obstacles for Libby, Jesse, and Cheryl today than they did in the 1950s. By contrast, in modern America one barrier would loom much larger than it did back then: their class origins. That nationwide increase in class inequality—how the class-based opportunity gap among young people has widened in recent decades—is the subject of this book.

## **Class Disparities in Port Clinton in the Twenty-first Century**

As my classmates and I marched down the steps after graduation in 1959, none of us had any inkling that change was coming. Almost half of us headed off to college, and those who stayed in town had every reason to expect they would get a job (if they were male), get married, and lead a comfortable life, just as their parents had done. For about a decade those expectations were happily met.

But just beyond the horizon an economic, social, and cultural whirlwind was gathering force nationally that would radically transform the life chances of our children and grandchildren. For many people, its effects would be gut-wrenching, for Port Clinton turns out to be a poster child for the changes that have swept across America in the last several decades.

The manufacturing foundation upon which Port Clinton's modest prosperity had been built in the 1950s and 1960s began to tremble in the 1970s. The big Standard Products factory at the east end of town had provided nearly 1,000 steady, well-paying blue-collar jobs in the 1950s, but in the 1970s the payroll was trimmed to less than half that, and after more than two decades of layoffs and givebacks, the plant gates on Maple Street finally closed in 1993. Twenty years later, only the hulking ruins of the plant remain, with EPA signs on the barbed wire fence warning of environmental hazard. But the closing of the Standard Products factory, the



Army base, and the gypsum mines were merely the most visible symbols of the town's pervasive economic collapse.

Manufacturing employment in Ottawa County, of which Port Clinton is by far the largest town, plummeted from 55 percent of all jobs in 1965 to 25 percent in 1995 and kept falling.<sup>14</sup> Unemployment rose and fell with the national economic tides, but the local booms were never as good as the national booms, and the local hard times were much worse. As late as the 1970s, real wages locally were slightly above the national average, but during the next four decades they fell further and further behind, bottoming out at 25 percent below the national average. By 2012 the average worker in Ottawa County had not had a real raise for nearly half a century, and is now paid 16 percent less in inflation-adjusted dollars than his or her grandfather (or grandmother) was in the early 1970s.

The Port Clinton population, which had jumped 53 percent in the three decades prior to 1970, suddenly stagnated in the 1970s and 1980s, and then fell by 17 percent in the two decades after 1990. Commutes to jobs got longer and longer, as desperate local workers sought employment elsewhere. Most of the downtown shops of my youth stand empty and derelict, driven out of business partly by the Family Dollar and the Walmart on the outskirts of town, and partly by the gradually shrinking paychecks of Port Clinton consumers.

The social impact of those economic hammer blows was initially softened by the family and community bonds that had been so strong in my youth. But as successive graduating PCHS classes entered an ever-worsening local economy, the social norms that had undergirded Port Clinton's community in the 1950s and 1960s gradually eroded. Juvenile delinquency rates had been just about at the national average in the 1980s but then began to skyrocket, and by 2010 were three times the national average. Increasingly, any PCHS graduate who could escape did. Net departures from Ottawa County among 30-somethings more than doubled from the 1970s to the 2010s, from 13 percent to 27 percent.

Not surprisingly, given the economic stresses and strains, single-parent households in Ottawa County doubled from 1970 to 2010, from 10 percent to 20 percent, and the divorce rate quintupled. The incidence of unwed births in the county rose sharply between 1990 and 2010, from less than 20 percent to nearly 40 percent, outpacing a similar increase among whites nationwide and portending a continuing increase in single parenting in the years ahead. In Port Clinton itself, epicenter of the local economic collapse of the 1980s, the rate of unwed births absolutely exploded in little more than a decade. Between 1978 and 1990, the rate jumped from 9 percent (about half the race-adjusted national average) to about 40 percent (nearly twice the national average). And in the decades that followed, child poverty skyrocketed from less than 10 percent in 1999 to nearly 40 percent in 2013.<sup>15</sup>

But the story of Port Clinton over the last half century—like the history of America over these decades—is not simply about the collapse of the working class, because the same years have witnessed the birth of a new upper class.

Port Clinton occupies a lovely site on the shores of Lake Erie. In my youth, small summer cottages and modest resorts and fishing camps dotted those shores, interspersed among fruit orchards, and the shoreline felt available to us all. In the past two decades, however, while the traditional economy of Port Clinton was imploding, wealthy lawyers and doctors and businesspeople from Cleveland and Columbus and other major cities of the Midwest have discovered the charms of the lakeshore and the nearby offshore islands and have begun to take these areas over—for second homes, for retirement, and occasionally even for a better quality of life, at the expense of longer commutes to their well-paying jobs back in the city.

Joined by some fortunate local developers, the newcomers have built elaborate mansions and gated communities. These now line the shore almost uninterrupted for 20 miles on either side of town. Luxury condos ring golf courses and lagoons filled with opulent yachts. One home along the shore in the upscale Catawba area includes an indoor theater and an athletic court. Nowadays you can read ads in adjacent columns of the real estate pages of the Port Clinton News-Herald for near-million-dollar mansions and dilapidated double-wides, and it is possible to walk in less than ten minutes from wealthy estates on the shoreline to impoverished trailer parks inland.

The distribution of income in Ottawa County, once among the most egalitarian in the country, began to skew over these decades: the number of residents at both the top and the bottom increased, and the middle slumped. In 2010, the median household income in the Catawba Island area was more than twice the median household income in the adjoining census tract. Moreover, the pace and concentration of the transformation has been stunning, as the maps in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 reveal. Census tracts with relatively more poor kids are darker, so the maps show that Port Clinton itself (especially outside the immediate downtown) had many more poor kids in 2008–2012 than two decades earlier, but the Catawba residential area along the shore experienced virtually no such change over those decades. In 2011 in the aftermath of the Great Recession, if you drove east from downtown Port Clinton along East Harbor Road, the census tract to your left along the Catawba lakeshore had a child poverty rate of 1 percent, whereas the census tract on the other side of the road had a child poverty rate of 51 percent.

Let's explore what life is like today for two white kids who live on different sides of that road.

## **Users Review**

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