

Growing Class Gaps in Social Connectedness among American Youth*

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Executive Summary

This report presents evidence of a growing youth class gap over the last three decades in various precursors of life success. Youth from upper/middle class backgrounds show steady or rising involvement in a wide range of institutions, including family, school, church, and voluntary associations while youth from working class backgrounds are increasingly more disconnected from society and these important institutions. The report brings together findings from several studies conducted by the Saguro Seminar research team. We analyze four nationally representative datasets: the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the American Heritage Time Use Study (AHTUS), Monitoring the Future (MtF), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal cohort studies.

We take a handful of examples among a score of measures that show a growing class gap since the early 1990s:

- Young children of college educated mothers spend increasingly more time with their parents compared to children with high school educated mothers
- Upper/middle class adolescents report increasing engagement in extracurricular activities including sports and academic clubs, whereas working class adolescents report either steady or declining participation rates.
- Upper/middle class adolescents report steadily increasing church attendance, whereas working class adolescents report steadily decreasing church attendance.
- Upper/middle class adolescents increasingly volunteer and are active in community life, whereas working class adolescents report constant levels of civic involvement.
- Upper/middle class adolescents express increasing levels of social trust, whereas working class adolescents' trust in others has remained low.

These growing gaps in “soft skills” are accompanied by growing class gaps in cognitive skills. Recent research shows that the income gap in reading and math test scores has grown since the mid-1970 and is now more than twice as large as the black-white achievement gap (Reardon, 2011). In tandem, the income gap in college admission as well as college completion have grown, as well (Alon, 2009; Bailey and Dynarski, 2011).

Why does this matter?

The very factors (civic and social engagement, social trust, time spent with parents, and academic achievement) in which the youth class divergence is greatest strongly predict life success. Upper/middle class youth have always

had an advantage, but their relative advantage has increased significantly over the last 30 years. Family background is now more predictive of social capital and civic engagement than before. Thus, these data belie the American ideal of the equality of opportunity and instead presage an America heading towards a caste system where social standing and community involvement are inherited from generation to generation, a country cleaved along class lines.

Introduction

Over the past three or four decades, the economic distance between the top and the bottom rungs of the United States has been growing steadily (Piketty and Saez, 2003). The Occupy Wall Street movement brought these increasing income differences between the top and the bottom into the spotlight but confounded inequality with social mobility and opportunity. Although Americans are generally not troubled by income disparities, most people care a lot about social mobility: whether youth from different backgrounds get onto the ladder at similar places and, given merit and energy, are equally likely to scale it.

Historically, America coupled greater inequality of income with greater social mobility. But our lead on mobility has vanished, amidst growing inequality (Levine and Mazumder, 2007). Our big question is whether the moral underpinning of American economic success prevails: do American children have the opportunity to thrive regardless of their class origins? The goal of this paper is to identify trends in the inequality of opportunity over the past five decades. More specifically, we explore class inequality in time spent with parents among young children and in extracurricular participation rates, volunteering, and social trust among high school students. The paper brings together findings from multiple analyses conducted by the Saguaro research team using data from four series of studies: the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the American Heritage Time Use Study (AHTUS), Monitoring the Future (MtF), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal cohort studies.

We find evidence of growing class gaps across multiple measures of social and civic connectedness. Over the past three decades, American children from upper/middle class and working class family backgrounds have sharply diverged on factors that predict life success, including parental investment, social and civic engagement, and preparation for higher education. Whether we measure parents reading *Good Night Moon*, or children attending church, taking part in scouting or Little League, playing high school football or soccer, participating in the school orchestra or other extracurricular activities, socializing with peers, or trusting other people, the differences between kids from upper/middle class backgrounds those from lower or working class backgrounds are steadily increasing. These trends coincide with growing class gaps in math and reading tests (Reardon, 2011), college admission (Alon, 2009), and college graduation (Bailey and Dynarski, 2011).

On some indicators that we examine, the trend for upper middle class youth is increasing while the trend for working class youth is decreasing. On others, trends for both groups may be increasing and on yet others, one the trend for one group remains constant while it changes for the other. In each case, the relative difference, or class gap, in the experiences of upper/middle and lower class youth is growing. We focus on the size of the class gap, rather than the slope of the individual trend lines, because we are interested in the consequences of these trends for future levels of social mobility. There are only so many seats available in competitive colleges and universities, thus, it is one's

performance relative to their peers that matters in determining who has access to these scarce resources. From this point of view, the fact that working class youth may be holding steady or making modest progress is inconsequential if upper/middle class youth are pulling even further ahead.

These sobering trends suggest that working class children will be significantly less likely to climb this ladder than a generation ago. Adolescents of the 1990s and 2000s are yet to show up in standard studies of intergenerational mobility but the fact that working class youth are relatively more disconnected from social institutions, and increasingly so, suggests that mobility is poised to plunge dramatically. Working class children spend less time with their parents and are much less likely to participate in sports, take music lessons, join student clubs, volunteer, attend religious services, and trust others than their upper/middle class peers. Given that these factors predict important outcomes such as income, educational attainment and civic and political participation later in life, the result of current gaps might be an even more polarized and unequal society, where children from upper/middle class families become more socially and civically engaged while working class children become increasingly more disconnected and disengaged (Janoski et al., 1998; McFarland and Thomas, 2006; Cunha and Heckman, 2008; Kuhn and Weinberger, 2005; Borghans et al., 2011). Moreover, if class increasingly predicts participation in activities that, in turn, predict educational attainment and future income, what we might be describing is a vicious cycle that shapes patterns of intergenerational mobility.

The next section of the paper briefly discusses data used in our analyses. Then we turn to our findings on class gaps in social connectedness. First, we examine trends in family structure and time parents spend with their young children. We then examine trends in involvement in school clubs and sports teams, and map out class differences in taking on leadership position in such activities, before turning to class differences in church attendance and volunteering. The findings section concludes with an analysis of trends in generalized trust.

Data

The findings discussed below are based on our analyses of four nationally representative studies that have been repeated across multiple decades: the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the American Heritage Time Use Study (AHTUS), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal cohort studies; and the Monitoring the Future (MtF) survey. Key characteristics of each study are summarized in table 1.

The NSFG is designed and administered by the National Center for Health Statistics, an agency of the US Department of Health and Human Services. The survey has been conducted 7 times since 1973. We use data from 1995, 2002, and the 2006-2010 surveys, which gives us a nationally representative

sample of women aged 15-44 for those years. The purpose of the survey is to produce national estimates of factors affecting pregnancy, including sexual activity, contraceptive use, and infertility; the medical care associated with contraception, infertility, and childbirth; factors affecting marriage, divorce and cohabitation; adoption and caring for non-biological children; father involvement behaviors; and men's and women's attitudes about sex, childbearing, and marriage.

The AHTUS data, compiled by the Centre for Time Use Research, are comprised of a series of time-use surveys conducted intermittently between the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s and annually since 2003. Respondents record all of their activities over a 24 hour period and these data are then categorized by trained coders into 17 major activity types. This research design provides the most accurate and reliable information on time-use patterns.

The NCES high school cohort studies began with the high school class of 1972 and is currently surveying students who were 9th graders in 2009.¹ Each cohort study collects information from school administrators and parents in addition to the students to provide a rich set of data on many aspects of the students' lives. These data include information on their attitudes and experiences in high school as well as important downstream outcomes such as labor market experiences and postsecondary education enrollment and attainment.

MtF is an annual survey conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. The study is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and is one of the core studies used by the federal government to track drug, alcohol, and cigarette use among adolescents. The questionnaires also deal with a wide range of other subject areas, including attitudes about government, social institutions, race relations, changing roles for women, educational aspirations, occupational aims, and marital and family plans, as well as a variety of background and demographic factors. MtF began surveying 12th graders annually in 1975. Like the NCES studies, MtF first selects a representative sample of schools and within those schools, a representative sample of students.

We have plotted the growing class gaps according to the child's, or adolescent's, birth cohort to facilitate comparing the timing of the trends across the different studies. Therefore, class gaps that have emerged among adolescents in the early 1990s correspond to the birth cohorts of the mid to late 1970s. The only exceptions are the figures that show trends in parental time use using the AHTUS data. The wide age range of the children (0 to 18) and combining the surveys by decade make it unfeasible to isolate any single or modal birth cohort to which the estimates correspond.

Table 1: Summary of the different surveys used in this report.

	NSFG	AHTUS	NCES	MtF
Years ^a	1995 2002 1996-2010	1965-1966 1975-1976 1992-1995 2003-2010	1972 1980 (1982) 1990 (1992) 2002 (2004) 2009 ^b	1976-2009
Approximate Birth Cohorts of Youth ^c	1990-1994 1997-2001 2002-2007	1948-1966 1958-1976 1975-1995 1986-2010	1954 1964 1974 1986 1994	1958-1991
Unit of Analysis	Mothers	Parent with resident children	High school students	High school students
Measure of Class	Mother's education	Mother's education	Socioeconomic status (derived from family income, mother's and father's education and occupational status)	Highest Level of Parental Education

^aThese are the years used for the data presented in this paper.

^bThe years in parentheses represent follow-up studies of the cohort in the preceding year. N.B. the 1990 cohort was originally interviewed as 8th graders in 1988.

^cFor the NCES and MTF studies we assumed the modal 10th and 12th graders are 16 and 18 years old, respectively, at the time of the survey.

Measuring social class

Because of differences in questions asked and sampling design, our measures of social class vary slightly across the four surveys. Each survey contains the highest level of education completed by at least one parent. The NCES surveys also include information about household income and the occupation of one or both adults in the household. In our analyses, we compare trends between upper/middle class and working class youth. In each figure, the working class youth are represented with the red line and the upper/middle class youth are represented with the black line. The precise definitions of working class and upper/middle class youth in each survey are:

NSFG & AHTUS:

We use the absolute level of mother's education as the measure of social class in these data. *Working Class* mothers are those with a high school diploma/GED or less education and *Upper/middle Class* mothers are those with at least a four-year college degree.

NCES:

We separate the sample into four equal parts based on socioeconomic status (SES) scores. SES is an equally weighted combination of mother's education, father's education, mother's occupation, father's occupation, and household income. *Working Class* youth come from the lowest 25 percent of the SES distribution and *Upper/middle Class* youth come from the highest 25 percent of the SES distribution.

MtF:

We use parental education as our measure of class in the MtF data too. The categories are identical to those used in the NSFG and AHTUS data, but we use the highest level of parental education when the respondent lives with two parents or the level of education of the single parent.

The results we present are based on the best measure of social class available in each survey. The consistent pattern of growing class gaps remains if we were to use the same measure of social class (children of parents with at most a high school diploma compared to children of parents with at least a four-year college degree) for every survey. Similarly, our finding of growing divergence among children from different SES backgrounds does not depend in any way upon our choices of "cut-points" in our indicators of class.

Although there are important race-ethnic differences with respect to each of these measures of social connectedness, the *divergence* common across these measures, and more, is fundamentally about class, not race. The most dramatic evidence in this regard shows that the black-white test score gap was about twice the size of the class gap for the cohort of children born in the 1940s, but the most recent evidence is that the class gap is now about twice as large as the black-white gap (Reardon, 2011). These findings resonate with

the argument William J. Wilson made three decades ago in his seminal book on the rise of the black middle class. In *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson (1980) highlighted the growing gap between the black poor and the black middle class and argued that class had become more significant than race in determining black life chances. To emphasize our point that these changes are driven by class and not race, we restrict our analyses to samples that only include white youth.

The figures present the unadjusted class gaps in social connectedness, except for the childcare time graphs which show the predicted minutes of childcare net of the number of children under 18 in the household, employment and marital status of the diarist, employment status of spouse, age of youngest child and diary completion day. The growing, unadjusted class gaps shown for church attendance, volunteering and generalized trust remain after controlling for gender, region, urbanicity, mother's employment and family structure (Wright and Putnam, 2011). Supplemental analyses (available from the authors) indicate that the class gaps in extracurricular participation are robust to controlling for the effects of gender, region of the country, and urbanicity. In exploring these trends we are interested in potential interactions between class on the one hand and gender, race, region, and urbanicity, on the other. For example, is the growing class gap concentrated among men or whites or southerners or urban residents? So far we have discovered no strong and consistent interactions across the range of our dependent variables, but we continue to explore this issue.

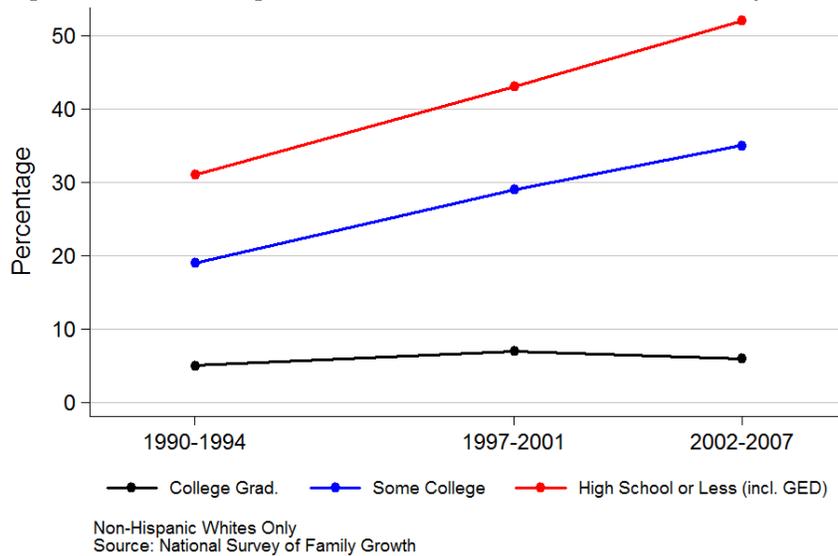
Our analysis of high school students use data collected when students were in the 12th grade in order to maintain comparability across the two surveys.² The exception is the trend on living with a single parent which is taken from the NCES 10th grade cohort (and 9th grade in the most recent cohort study) because this is when the family structure information was collected from the parents.³

Working Class Families Fail to Keep Up

Family structure

Family is the primary institution shaping children's life chances and their ability to move up the income ladder (Massey, 2007; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). Children who grow up in single mother households report poorer grades and lower test scores, and are less likely to graduate from high school and to attend college. Their family lives are less stable and more stressful, and as a consequence, they are more likely to suffer from behavioral and psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004; Amato, 2005). Moreover, the absence of a biological father is associated with becoming sexually active and having children at a younger age (Mendle et al., 2009).

Figure 1: Percentage of Births to Unmarried Mothers by Class



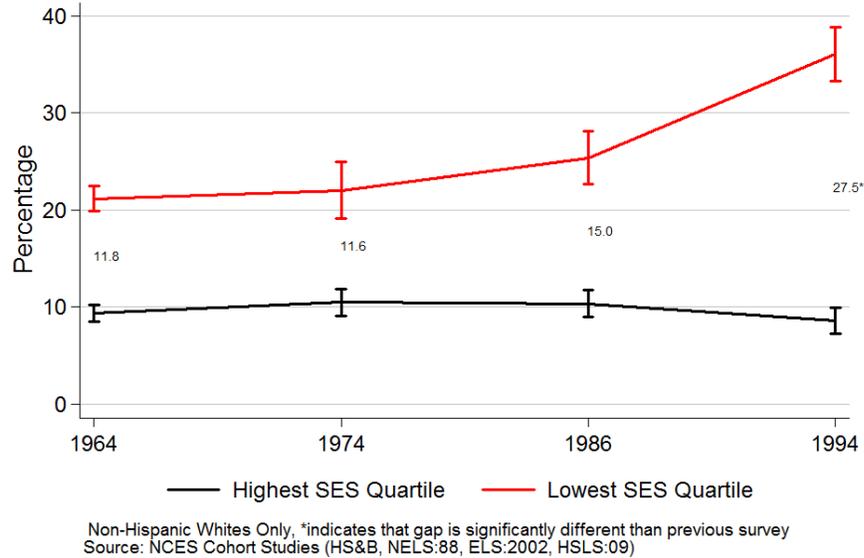
In the past four decades, the composition of American families has shifted dramatically. Between 1960 and 2000, the percentage of single mothers tripled, from 8 percent to 24 percent. The increase in nonmarital births was even more pronounced. In 2000, almost 20 percent of births were to unmarried women, up from less than 5 percent in 1960 (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008).

This steep increase in nonmarital births has been the greatest among children in the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Figure 1 shows this trend by socioeconomic class. In 1990-1994, about 5 percent of the births to mothers with at least a four-year college degree occurred outside marriage, versus 30 percent to mothers with a high school education. In 2002-2007, the proportion of nonmarital births to mothers with a college degree remained at 5 percent but the proportion of nonmarital births to less educated mothers rose above 50 percent. Now, children of mothers with at most a high school education are 10 times more likely to be born outside of marriage than children of college graduates, and majority of all kids born to less-educated mothers are born out of wedlock.

An increasing fraction of the most recent cohorts have begun life without the benefit of married parents, but the trends in nonmarital births alone do not tell us what happens after the children are born. Figure 2 runs the clock forward fifteen years and shows the percentage of high school sophomores who currently live with a single parent. The numbers do not look much better. The percentage of high school students from high SES families living with a single parent has remained stable since 1980, if not slightly decreased. Low SES high school students, on the other hand, are *increasingly* more likely to reside in single parent households; an increase from 20 percent in 1990 to about 35 percent in 2009.

Note that the births in figure 1 correspond to high school cohorts roughly

Figure 2: Percentage of High School Sophomores Currently Living with a Single Parent by Class and Birth Cohort



15 years later in figure 2, so most of the growing gap in figure 1 has not yet begun to appear in figure 2, for kids born in 2002-2007 will not appear in sophomore classes until roughly 2017-2022. Conversely, the sharply greater class gap at the right hand side of figure 2 corresponds to births at the left hand half of figure 1.

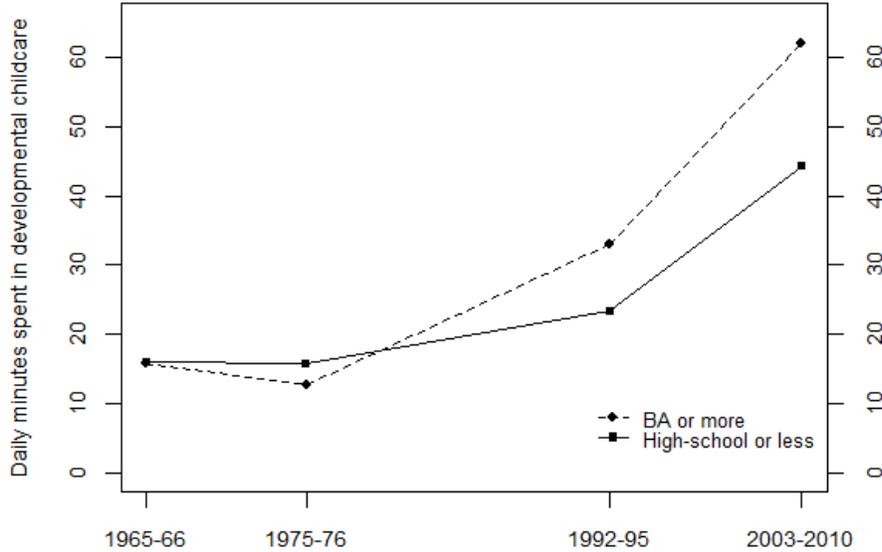
A lot may be happening in the intervening decade and a half between figures 1 and 2, but the evidence suggests that, on average, high SES children are less likely to live with single parents than low SES children at any given time and this gap is clearly growing over time. Moreover, if the disadvantages of growing up in a single parent household accumulate over a child’s development, the gaps that exist at a single time point may underestimate of the true class gaps attributable to class differences in family structure.

Time with parents

The importance of families for socialization does not stop with the composition of the household roster. Recent research shows that the amount of time parents spend on childcare has increased dramatically over the last three decades (Sandberg and Hofferth, 2005; Bianchi et al., 2006; Sayer et al., 2004). Notably, the increase in time spent on childcare is much greater among college-educated parents (Ramey and Ramey, 2010). As a result, there has been a widening class gap in parental time investment between educated and less educated parents.

Moreover, the main source of the widening gap is the steady increase in

Figure 3: Average Daily Minutes of Developmental Time with Mothers by Mother’s Education

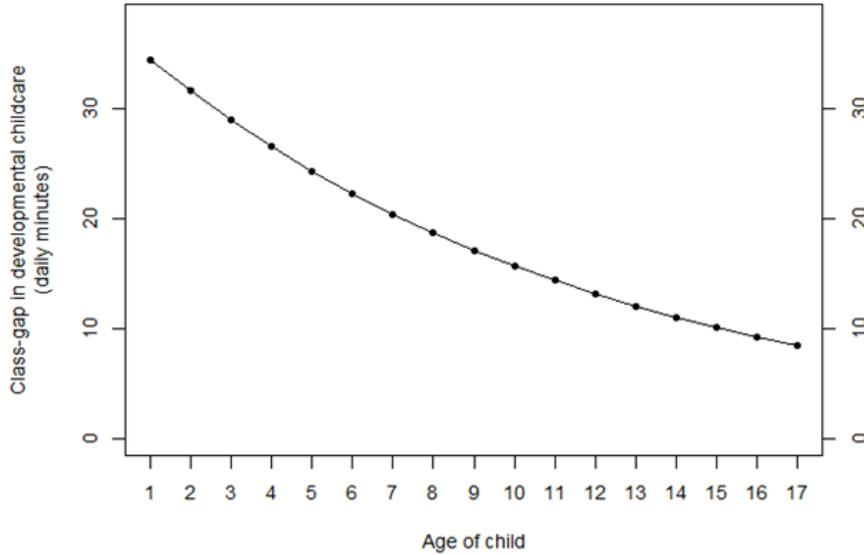


Source: Altintas (2012) Note: Weights are applied to represent the population distribution accurately and to correct for distribution of the days of the week.

college educated parents’ time in developmental care, rather than basic childcare (Altintas, 2012). Developmental time includes time spent in activities that develop children’s social, cognitive or linguistic skills. Examples of such activities include reading to children, playing with them, taking them to soccer practice or ballet, and going to the library for story time.⁴ As shown in Figure 3, the gap in developmental time emerged during the 1990s and grew even wider in the 2000s.⁵ Among potential explanations for the increase in the amount of time spent by college-educated parents on childcare is the growing societal recognition of the importance of one-on-one parental engagement for cognitive development and increased competition for college admissions (Hays, 1996; Schaub, 2010; Sayer et al., 2004; Ramey and Ramey, 2010).

As Figure 4 shows, the class gap in maternal time is greatest among young children. Given the importance of parental investments in early childhood for cognitive development, the differences in developmental care are likely to continue to shape children’s educational trajectories long after these early years (Cunha and Heckman, 2008). As the children age, parental care is increasingly replaced by out-of-home developmental activities. Middle class parents supplement time spent directly with children with high-quality childcare for preschool children and extracurricular activities for school-aged children (Kaushal et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2006). And, as we show in this paper, when the children reach adolescence, inequalities in parental time investment are replaced by inequalities in participation in extracurricular activities, such as school clubs

Figure 4: Class difference in developmental childcare by age of child, 2003-2010



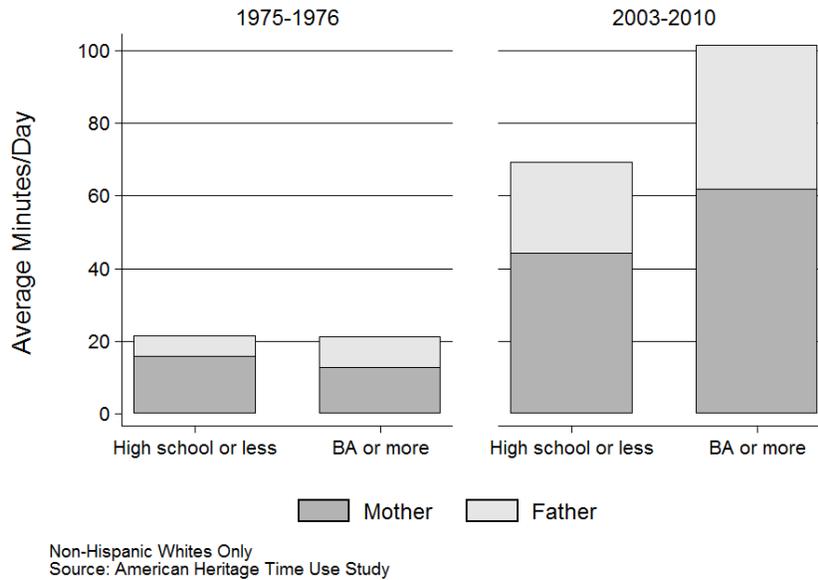
Source: Altintas (2012) Note: Sample is limited to non-Hispanic white mothers only in AHTUS (2003-2010) . The class gap shown on the Y-axis is calculated by subtracting the predicted daily developmental childcare time of a low-educated mother from the predicted developmental childcare time of a high-educated mother. Predicted minutes are estimated based on a gamma regression model which controls for the number of children under 18, number of children under 18 squared, employment, respondent’s marital status, employment status of spouse, age of youngest child and diary completion day. The predictions are based on a mother who is not employed, is married to an employed spouse, and has one child.

and sport teams.

If anything, the growing class gap in parental developmental time that we have documented is likely to be an underestimate. Middle class mothers tend to divorce less, marry at later ages, and have fewer children. In addition, middle class children are more likely to live in safer neighborhoods and attend better schools with more resources. Moreover, highly-educated women are more likely to marry highly-educated men, who are also more likely to spend more time on childcare (Cabrera et al., 2011). Thus, the maternal and paternal class advantages are often compounded.

To estimate the effects of changes in family structure, we simulated the total amount of time a child spends with his or her parents in developmental activities by mother’s education. To do this, we use data from two sources. Using AHTUS data, we calculated the average time parents spent in developmental childcare separately by gender, education and time period. An important limitation of AHTUS data is that it drastically under-represents non-residential

Figure 5: Simulated Developmental Time Spent with Parents, by Mother's Education



dads. To adjust for the missing non-residential fathers, we use the March CPS to calculate the percentage of households with resident children under the age of 18 headed by two parents, single mothers and single fathers. Figure 5 combines information about the minutes per day resident mothers and fathers spend with their children as well as the likelihood that the child has a resident mother and/or father.

The dark gray portion of each bar is the average time spent by mothers weighted by the number of households with a mother present. Likewise, the light gray portion is the average minutes of developmental childcare multiplied by the proportion of households with a resident father. The assumption in this simulation is that nonresident parents contribute zero minutes of developmental childcare.⁶ Mothers are spending more time with their children now than they were in the mid-1970s, but this increase is much larger among children of mothers with college degrees. Adding in the additional time the average child spends with their father exacerbates the gap even further. What was a slight advantage (about 4 minutes) for children of high school educated mothers in the mid-1970s becomes a 50 minute gap favoring children of mothers with a college degree in the second half of the 2000s. Middle class children receive almost one hour more time of direct involvement with their parents each day. We continue to investigate other ways to account for differential trends in family structure and fertility by class in order to estimate what these trends look like from the child's perspective.

Extracurricular Participation Rates are Headed in Opposite Directions

Involvement in extracurricular activities in high school shapes the lives of adolescents in many important ways. Participation in chess clubs, debate teams, school bands, and student councils bolster self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, boost high school grade point average, shape educational aspirations and attainment, as well as wages and occupational choice (Lamborn et al., 1992; Newmann et al., 1992; Eccles and Barber, 1999; Borghans et al., 2011). The effects of participation in these activities on political participation occur not just in the short term, but also in the long term. Involvement in high school extracurricular activities is associated with adult educational attainment (Eccles and Barber, 1999; Lleras, 2008) and income (Lleras, 2008). It also stimulates political and civic engagement in adulthood and is predictive of mental and physical health (Hart et al., 2007; McFarland and Thomas, 2006; Nie et al., 1996; Putnam, 2000).

Clubs

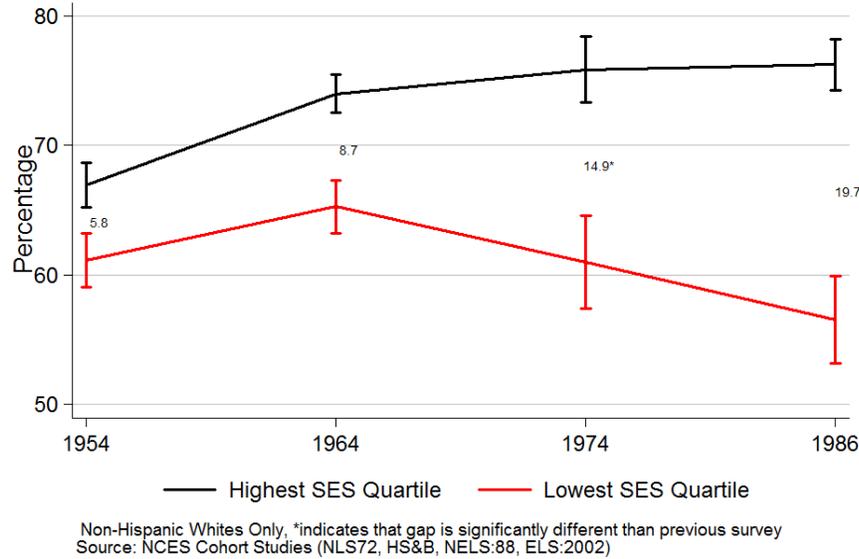
Participation in non-athletic extracurricular activities, or clubs for short, in high school cultivates leadership and negotiation skills, bolsters self-esteem, and increases educational aspirations. Figure 6 shows the gap in participating in one or more school sponsored, non-athletic extracurricular activity in 12th grade. The upper/middle class line trends steadily upward toward a plateau at about 75 percent. Working class participation increases between the first two cohorts but drops off after that to about 55 percent for students born in the mid-1980s.

This general pattern of participation by social class holds when we focus on individual categories of extracurricular activities. The two exceptions are student government, where upper/middle class participation has decreased and working class participation is flat but at a lower level, and vocational clubs, where working class participation has decreased steadily and upper/middle class participation has remained constant at a lower level.

Sports

Participation in interscholastic athletics is theorized to teach perseverance and a strong work ethic and increase the level of social capital available to student athletes through coaches, teachers and academically oriented peers (Broh, 2002). Team sports also teach students how to work together to achieve a common goal. Unsurprisingly, student athletes also have higher test scores (Broh, 2002), lower dropout rates (McNeal, 1995), and higher rates of college enrollment and completion (Marsh and Kleitman, 2003; Troutman and Dufur, 2007). The trend lines for participation in at least one team or individual

Figure 6: Participation in One or More Extracurricular Activities (excluding sports) in 12th Grade by Class and Birth Cohort



interscholastic sport are shown in Figure 7. Again, the participation rate of upper/middle class youth increases from about 44 to near 50 percent between the birth cohorts of 1964 and 1986. While the participation rates of working class youth were lower, they kept pace with the upper/middle class youth born between 1964 and 1974. The participation rate of working class youth born in 1986 dropped back to level of the of their counterparts born in 1964 at just less than 25 percent.

Leadership

The benefits of extracurricular participation are magnified for students taking on a leadership role. Team captains and club leaders are more likely to occupy managerial occupations as adults and command a higher wage premium within managerial occupations than elsewhere (Kuhn and Weinberger, 2005). Figure 8 shows the class gap in 12th graders who report being team captains. Again, upper/middle class youth show increasing participation over time: the proportion of upper/middle class youth who are team captains almost doubles from 13 percent among the birth cohort of 1954 to 25 percent for those born in 1986. The decrease in the percentage of working class team captains is not as dire as it is in either sports or club participation, but the class gap has grown dramatically.

Figure 7: Participation in One or More Interscholastic Sports in 12th Grade by Class and Birth Cohort

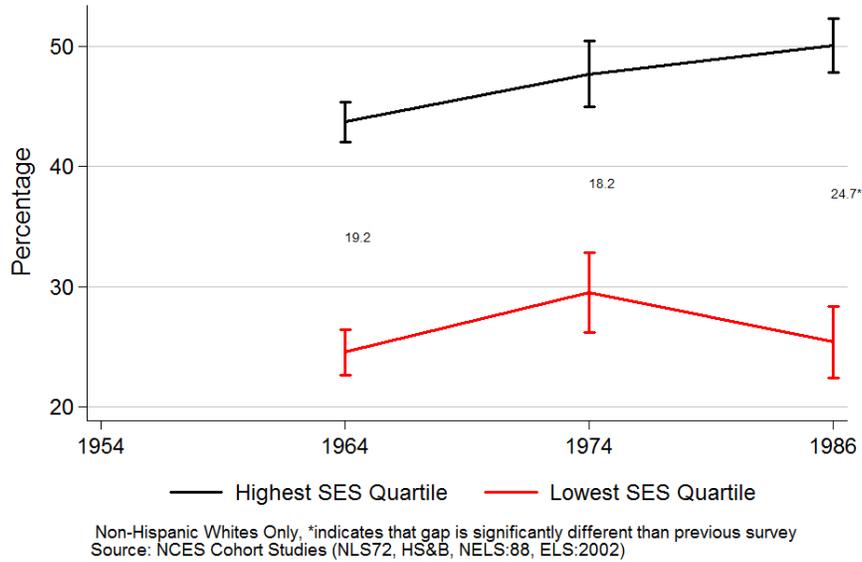


Figure 8: Percentage of 12th Graders Who are Team Captains by Class and Birth Cohort

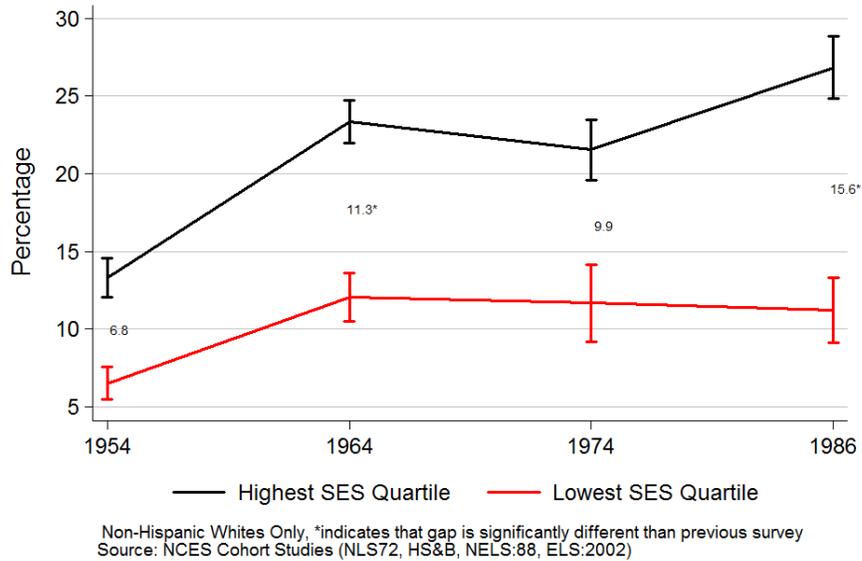
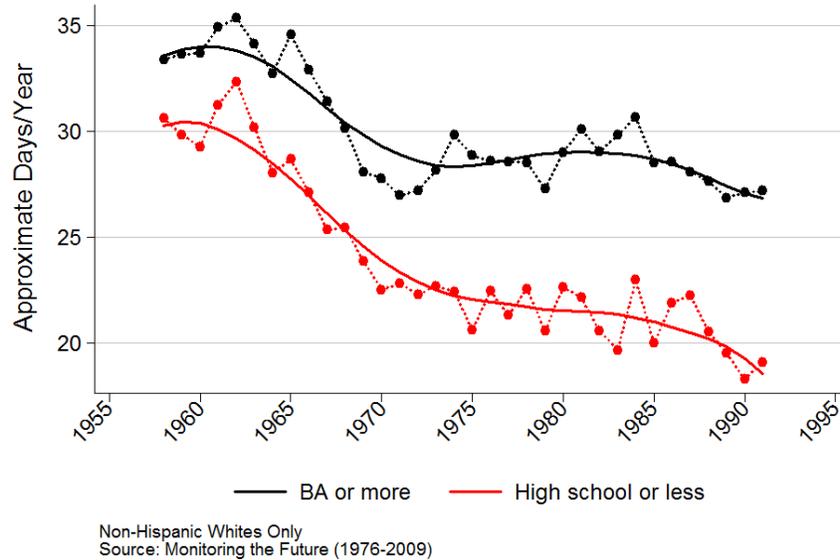


Figure 9: Approximate Days per Year Attending Religious Services in 12th Grade by Class and Birth Cohort



Youth Church Attendance Drops More Among Working Class

Like schools, religious congregations act as a bridge between families and society, at least for those who belong to one. Also like schools, participating in a religious community offers benefits beyond those associated with other sorts of formal organizational membership. The social connections formed in religious communities appear to foster additional, secular social connections. These include doing volunteer work for a charity and informal social connections such as helping others around their houses, helping someone find a job and offering their seat to a stranger (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Frequent churchgoers are also more likely to learn civic skills (Verba et al., 1995), engage in higher levels of healthy behaviors and lower levels of risky behaviors (Regnarus et al., 2003), and experience more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions on a daily basis (Lim, 2012).

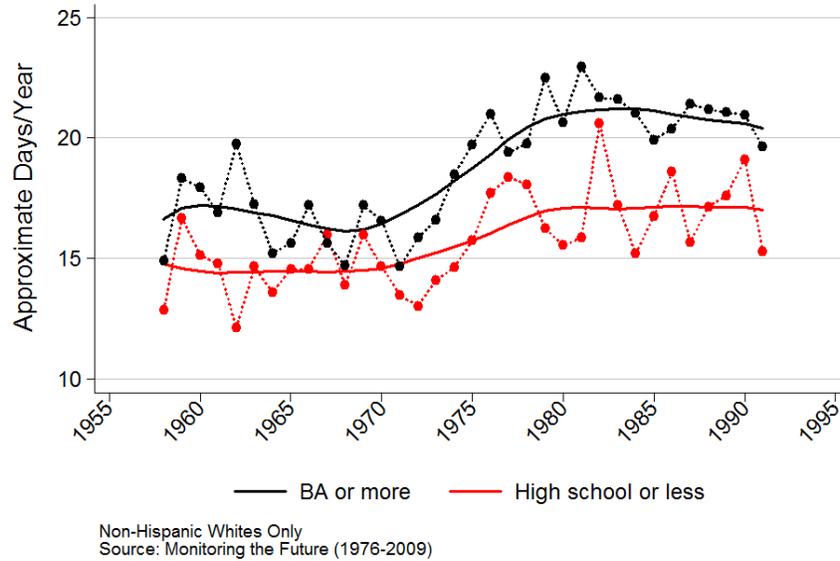
Figure 9 shows the trend in the approximate times per year that high school seniors report attending religious services (hereafter shortened to church attendance).⁷ Among the earliest birth cohorts in these data, the class gap in church attendance was small, about three times per year. Churchgoing among upper/middle class high school seniors showed a modest drop from 34 times per year to less than 30 times per year for those born around 1970 and has leveled off since. The drop in church attendance was more severe among working class students. The earliest working class youth cohorts reported attending church 30 times per year; the most recent cohorts attend church less than 20 times per year. So the youth class gap in church attendance over these years has

ballooned from 3 times a year to 10 times a year.

More Upper/Middle Class Youth Volunteer While Fewer Working Class Youth Trust Others

The term “public engagement” refers to the interaction between youth and institutions broader than those we have covered so far: family, schools and churches. Whether it is a city, state, nation, or world, the important feature of public engagement is that includes “other” people in it.⁸ Public engagement during adolescence is important because this is the period in which the seeds of lifetime civic attitudes and behaviors are sown (see Miller, 1992; Plutzer, 2002, for voting; Putnam, 2000, for generalized trust; and Janoski et al., 1998, for volunteering).

Figure 10: Participation in Community Affairs/Volunteering in 12th Grade by Class and Birth Cohort



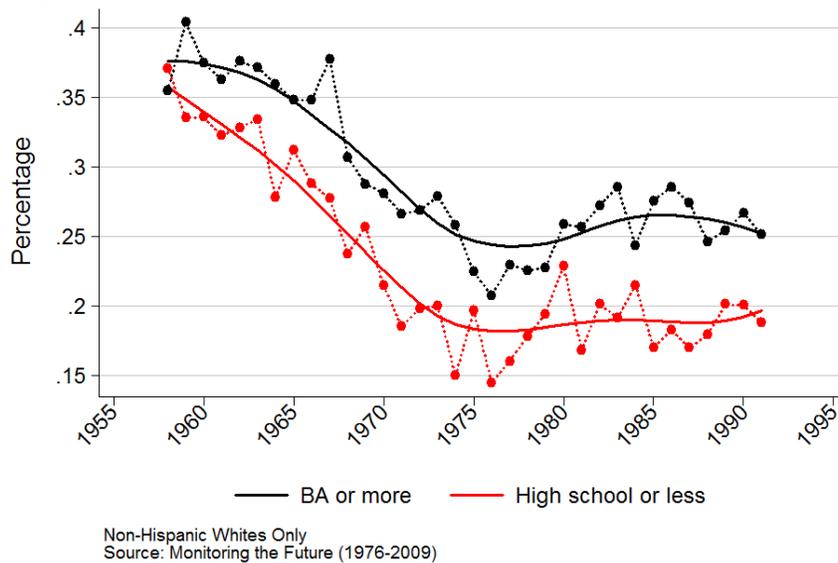
Volunteering

While youth civic and political involvement declined steadily through 2000, youth volunteering rates have been increasing since 1990 (Grimm Jr. et al., 2006; Porterfield and Winkler, 2007). However, the overall increases in youth volunteering mask troubling differences in volunteering by social class. Estimates from the recent Current Population Survey show that the volunteering rates for adults age 25 and older are 42 percent for college graduates and 30 percent for those with some college experience, compared with only 19 percent for high school graduates and 9 percent of adults with no high school diploma

(Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship, 2010). Moreover, while volunteering has increased over the last 15-20 years among children of college-educated parents, it has not increased among children whose parents have not gone beyond high school. Figure 10 shows the trend in the approximate days per year that high school seniors report participating in community affairs or volunteer work.⁹ Both groups of high school seniors report increasing rates of volunteering and participation in community affairs beginning with cohorts born around 1970 (surveyed in the late 1980s) through the cohorts born around 1980 (surveyed in the late 1990s). This good news is attenuated by the fact that the increase was larger among upper/middle class students, thereby increasing the class gap in volunteering.

The implications of the class gap in volunteering among high school seniors extend beyond high school. Brand (2010) finds that college graduates volunteer in higher numbers than non-college graduates, even after controlling for preexisting differences in one's likelihood to graduate from college. Her analysis goes on to show that the civic returns to a college education are highest among those with the lowest initial propensity to graduate from college. That colleges contribute to a virtuous circle of volunteering that has the potential to reverse this growing class gap is good news. The bad news only becomes apparent when we look at the entire process. Working class students, who would benefit the most from this virtuous circle, are less likely to attend college and reap the economic and civic rewards that come with a college education. The end result is an even larger class-gap in volunteering when these cohorts enter young adulthood.

Figure 11: Percentage of 12th Graders who Report that “Most People Can Be Trusted” by Class and Birth Cohort

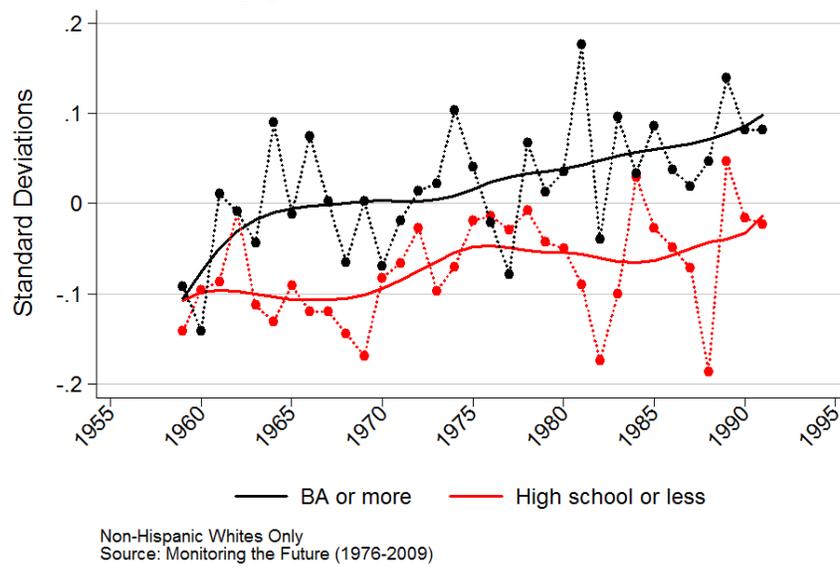


Generalized Trust

Generalized trust is best thought of as an individual-level proxy for the aggregate level of social capital in a community. Communities with high levels of generalized trust are more efficient because of their residents “standing decision to give most people – even those whom one does not know from direct experience – the benefit of the doubt,” (Rahn and Transue, 1998, p. 545). Children who report a higher level of generalized social trust are likely to have lived in more trustworthy surroundings. Figure 11 shows the trend in generalized, or social, trust among youth from different backgrounds. Specifically, it shows that the percentages of upper/middle and working class 12th graders who report that most people can be trusted declined steadily between the cohorts born in the late 1950s and those born around 1975.¹⁰ Beginning with the cohort of students born around 1980, the levels of generalized trust rebounded somewhat for upper/middle class youth, but not for their working class counterparts.

Many of the working class youth who have low levels of generalized trust (quite likely because the “others” with whom they interact are less trustworthy) already do or will live in neighborhoods with other working class Americans like themselves (Reardon and Bischoff, 2011). At the community level, these residents will find that crime is higher, life is more stressful, local government works less well and the barriers to collective action are greater. To the extent that the recent rebound in trust among upper/middle class youth is a product of the increase in class-based residential segregation, it may herald another virtuous circle of increasing social connectedness from which working class youth are increasingly less likely to benefit.

Figure 12: Class gaps in social connectedness by Birth Cohort



Social connectedness

Social connectedness refers to the relationships people have with others. People who feel socially connected are generally happier, healthier, and better off than people who feel socially isolated. Figure 12 plots trends in social connectedness over time among youth from different class backgrounds, as proxied by a six-item scale measuring feelings of social support. We constructed the measure by collapsing five five-category items tapping social connectedness: “A Lot of Times I Feel Lonely,” “There is Always Someone I Can Turn to if I Need Help,” “I Often Feel Left Out of Things,” “There is Usually Someone I Can Talk to if I Need To,” “I Often Wish I Had More Good Friends,” and “I Usually Have a Few Friends Around That I Can Get Together With.”¹¹ There is a steady increase in social connectedness among the upper/middle class youth. The working class youth, on the other hand, have made only slight gains in their social connectedness.

Conclusion

In *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, Lemann (1999) pegged education as a new watershed dividing the American society:

Here is what American society looks like today. A thick line runs through the country, with people who have been to college on one side of it and people who haven't on the other. This line gets brighter all the time. Whether a person is on one side of the line or the other is now more indicative of income, of attitudes, and of political behavior than any other line one might draw: region, race, age, religion, sex, class.

But education not only predicts the income, attitudes, and social connectedness of the current generation. It increasingly, as we are learning, predicts the test scores, income, attitudes, and social connectedness of one's children. Upper/middle class parents spend more time reading to their children and taking them to parks, museums, and soccer practice. As these upper/middle class children age, they spend more time in extracurricular activities, both sports and clubs, and attend church more frequently than their working class peers. Upper/middle class students are also increasingly more active in community life and express higher levels of social trust. In contrast, working class students report steadily declining involvement in voluntary associations and their trust in others has plummeted. In sum, children from upper/middle class backgrounds are more connected with family, friends, schools and social institutions, while working class children are increasingly more isolated and disconnected from society and its institutions.

The very factors on which the youth class divergence is greatest are, themselves, strong predictors of life success. Thus, these data belie the American

ideal of meritocracy and instead presage an America heading towards a caste system where social standing and community involvement are inherited from generation to generation, a country cleaved along class lines. Middle class youth have always had an advantage, but their relative advantage has increased significantly over the last several decades. Going forward, life success will increasingly depend on how wisely one chose parents, violating the transcendent American value that one's social origins should not determine one's social destination. Individually, the existence of growing class gaps in youth social connectedness is worrying. Together, the consistency of this pattern across a wide array of social connectedness indicators suggests that each gap is a symptom of an underlying process.

Decreasing social mobility represents a perfect storm with multiple, interrelated causes, such as widening income gap and increasing economic insecurity for working class households, changes in the working class family structure, unraveling of the informal social safety net in working class neighborhoods, and the increased competition (real or perceived) in the college admissions process.

Extracurricular activities, designed precisely in the late 1800s to teach soft life skills to working class Americans are becoming endangered species in working class schools and communities. More schools have jettisoned these "soft" extracurricular activities to focus the budget on "hard" tested subjects like math or reading. And as more schools have instituted "pay to play" regimes to participate in band or football or debate, working class kids not only face fewer such offerings but are less able financially to participate. The long economic stagnation for the lower half of the population has weakened the ability of working class families (even intact families) to invest time, energy, and money in their kids. Working class families are more tenuously attached to the job market and working class kids are ten times more likely than upper middle class kids to experience periods in which their families have no income; moreover, the working class family (prototypically a single-parent family) is far less likely to have savings or friends to buffer these economic shocks and support their kids. At the same time, middle class families have steadily increased their spending in enrichment activities.

In the not-so-distant past, working class schools and neighborhoods had vibrant extra-curricular offerings and strong social institutions, like the Catholic Church or Scouts or the Polish-American society. Those institutions, in effect, provided a "social safety net" that could help catch and sustain kids experiencing problems at home. That array of institutions and the ranks of "assistant moms" have essentially collapsed in working class neighborhoods.

Diagnosing the origins of the growing class gap among American youth will, in turn, be central to any discussion of how to reverse this ominous trend.

Notes

¹Each of the five NCES studies has a unique name. In order, the studies we use are: the National Longitudinal Study of 1972 (1972), High School and Beyond (1980, 1982), the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (1990, 1992), the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (2002, 2004), and the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (2009). In this report we will refer to the studies by the year in which the data were collected.

²Focusing on 12th graders eliminates data from the most recent cohort study because the modal student will not be in the 12th grade until 2013.

³We lack 10th grade data in the first cohort study because data collection did not begin until students were in the 12th grade.

⁴The AHTUS studies also gather information about physical childcare (e.g. feeding children and changing diapers) and secondary childcare, which includes in which activities the primary activity was something else but the person was also ultimately responsible for the children. Examples of secondary childcare include: doing housework while the children play in another room or going grocery shopping with your children. Unfortunately, the secondary childcare estimates are not comparable over time so we cannot investigate trends in secondary childcare over time. We do not include physical childcare because it does not contribute to the growth in the class gap in childcare time.

⁵We interpret this graph with three important concerns in mind. First, the point estimates for the 1990s may underestimate childcare time due to an error in the sampling design (Allard et al., 2007). Second, it is plausible that part of the increased developmental time in the 1990s and 2000s may be attributable to social desirability bias: parents being sensitive to the dominant norms of intensive parenting. The time diary methodology is less prone to such social desirability bias compared to stylized questions since it asks individuals to report sequence of activities rather than estimate the total amount of time spent with children (Bianchi et al., 2006; Gershuny, 2000; Harvey, 1993; Juster and Stafford, 1985; Robinson and Godbey, 1997). Finally, childcare coding in the 2003-10 AHTUS is far more detailed than the coding in the earlier surveys. Based on this, some researchers argue that high estimates of childcare time in the 2003-10 survey might partially be a data artifact (Egerton et al., 2005), while others disagree (Allard et al., 2007). However, none of these concerns threatens the validity of our claims because we are focused on the size of the gap, not the increase in the absolute number of minutes per day.

⁶For example, the simulated time spent with parents for children whose mothers had a high school education or less in the 1970s is calculated as follows: (15.8 minutes per day spent by resident mothers \times 97% of households with resident mothers)+(5.7 minutes per day spent by resident fathers \times 84% of households with resident fathers) = 15.3 (dark gray portion) + 4.8 (light gray portion) = 21.1 simulated minutes per day.

⁷The original coding of the variable asked respondents how frequently they attend religious services and had the following response categories: never, rarely, once or twice a month, and about once a week or more. We converted these categories into days per year: 0, 7, 18, 65. The results are not sensitive to the precise numbers used.

⁸“Other” is in quotes to emphasize that the public is a collection of people across multiple salient social groups (i.e., it includes in-group and out-group people), not that it is any grouping of more than one person.

⁹See note 7 for an explanation of how we measure approximate days per year.

¹⁰The question asked whether most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people. The answer categories were “most people can be trusted”, “don't know/undecided”, and “you can't be too careful”.

¹¹Cronbach's Alpha for the scale is .72.

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