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Thoughts on *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*
by Robert Putnam

Ever since the crisis of lead-tainted water in Flint broke into the news, people have said such a disaster could never happen in a community like Bloomfield Hills, perhaps the most upscale suburban community in metropolitan Detroit. We can use the type of analysis of economic and social factors found in Professor Robert Putnam's important book *Our Kids* to underscore this casual comparison.

Using data from the 2010 Census and the most recent American Community Survey, we can highlight the stark social and economic differences between Flint and Bloomfield Hills. First the economics. The poverty rate in Flint recently topped 41 percent, while in Bloomfield Hills it's a negligible 3.3 percent. Median household income in Flint stands at \$24,679, while the figure in Bloomfield Hills is several times greater at \$163,462. More than 90 percent of Bloomfield Hills residents live in an owner-occupied home, while only about half of Flint residents do, thereby failing to achieve the "American Dream" of home ownership.

But we can use the social factors that hold back the lower- and working-class families portrayed in *Our Kids* to highlight even more dramatically the stark differences between Flint and Bloomfield Hills. Single-parent households make up 36 percent of Flint households, but only 2.7 percent of households in Bloomfield Hills. Only 11 percent of Flint residents 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree or higher, while nearly 79 percent of Bloomfield Hills adults have reached that level of educational achievement. In one of the most dramatic comparisons of the difference between upscale and working-class communities, two-thirds of adults in Bloomfield Hills are married; in Flint, two-thirds of adults are never married, divorced, or separated.

The causes of the Flint water crisis are still being debated. But isn't it fair to ask whether some of the stark social and economic challenges afflicting Flint probably made it harder to resolve the problem of lead-tainted water more quickly? It should come as no

surprise that Flint residents, mired in poverty, lacking advanced education, bereft of home equity and other financial resources, beset with the problems that attend single-parent households, were less able to make their voices heard than residents would be in places like Bloomfield Hills.

Children growing up in places like Bloomfield Hills expect, indeed they *know*, that they'll go to college and enjoy decent careers as long as they fulfill their potential. That knowledge, that expectation of future success, is often lacking in poor and working-class households, which, beset by divorce, poor schools, lack of transportation and an indifferent political establishment, often must cope with their problems in isolation, on their own.

The challenge for Americans is what to do about this social and economic class divide that appears to continue to widen, placing millions of children at risk. There are no easy answers, but the book *Our Kids* should certainly arouse an apathetic nation to the crisis at hand.