

Poverty and Our Kids, continued

Poverty and lower levels of education are almost always synonymous. Between 1989 and 2013 the net-worth of college-educated American households rose by 47 percent, whereas among high-school and below educated households, net worth actually fell by 17 percent. Parental wealth is especially important because this support provides informal insurance that allows kids to take more risks in search of more reward. For example, a student who can borrow living expenses from Mom and Dad can be more selective when choosing colleges and looking for a job, whereas a child without a parent-provided life preserver must work during college and choose the first job available. Similarly, family wealth allows for college investments without massive student debt.

Is it morally unacceptable as well as fiscally detrimental to our country to take a passive stance as the high-risk youth continue down a counterproductive path? Putnam shares strategies to help these youth such as having them attend school with more affluent students where they may have more positive peer influences and where the school may emphasize academic preparation, providing mentors for them, putting the best teachers with the most challenging students, not charging for extra curricular activities such as sports and clubs, and providing resources and guidance to families and to students transitioning to the workforce.

The city of Newport News recognized the importance of working with at-risk youth and developed interventions in the City's Strategic Plan to reduce the number of violent gangs and gang-related crime by youth. One initiative is S.T.E.P. (Summer Training and Enrichment Program), now in its second year of operation. In 2015, S.T.E.P. served 287 (up from 168 last summer) youth ages 16-24 through 67 local businesses, City Departments, and for-profit and non-profit businesses by exposing them to the world of work and career options. Participants were paid minimum wages and learned about a world outside of their neighborhoods plus received mentoring through their employers. Many youth have been asked to remain in employment after the 10-week program ends (M. Echols, Youth and Gang Violence Prevention Coordinator for the City of Newport News, personal communication, August 3, 2015). This program takes hard work and coordination to access media coverage, to visit community centers and to match youth to positions. Analysis of pre and post-surveys completed by participants and business owners, as well as tracking of youth and future employment outcome results will reveal the program's success. Making a difference for at-risk youth will promote the overall progress and health of their city.

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis is an interesting read as well as a thought provoking reminder that we can and must provide more promise and support to our disadvantaged children. VASCD will sponsor a professional development institute, Teaching, Learning, and Poverty: Meeting the Needs of a New Demographic, this fall. See program and registration information elsewhere in this newsletter.

Putnam, R. (2015). *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. New York. NY: Simon & Schuster. ISBN 9781476769899

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