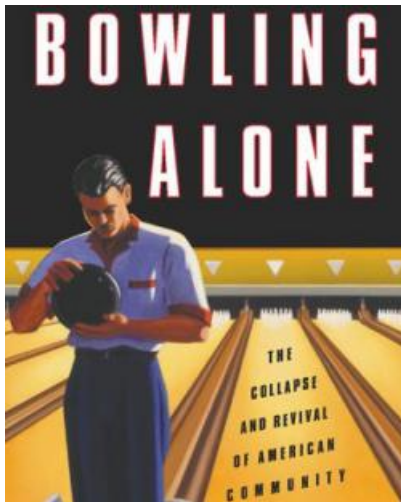


## ESSENTIAL READING

03/17/2014



# **Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community - by Robert D. Putnam**

Conversations, trust and neighbourliness in mobile lives

By **Javier Caletrío** (Social Scientist)

17 March 2014

*Bowling Alone* documents the decline in the USA of different expressions of 'social capital' such as mutual trust and cooperation which are essential for democracy. It is argued that such erosion of social capital is partly related to the expansion of car-dependent urban sprawl.

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## **Book Review**

### **The decline of public engagement**

A defining aspect of modern societies has been the emergence of a public realm, that set of physical spaces and institutional settings for communication between strangers. By the end of the eighteenth century, western European cities such as London and Paris saw the proliferation of parks, pubs, markets, coffeehouses and theatres, spaces where strangers were likely to meet through ritualized exchanges and to engage in conversations.

A more or less vibrant public life sustained by this public geography developed, advancing a fragile balance between intimacy and public interest in the lives of citizens. Over the last four decades of the twentieth century North American commentators from all sides of the

political spectrum have observed a decline in interest on public issues and a retreat into the self which some identify with narcissistic individualism. In the USA but increasingly also in other western countries, the spread of car-dependent urban sprawl and the emergence of ghettos in city centres with a poor presence of the state have often been identified as both a reflection and a cause of this decline in the vibrancy of civil society.

## **Bowling Alone: an influential contribution to the debate**

Bowling Alone has been one of the most influential recent contributions to this debate. It documents with extensive qualitative and quantitative data the decline in civic engagement in the USA since the 1960s and argues that this is a matter for concern because norms and networks of civic participation are essential for economic prosperity and personal and democratic health. Although the main focus of the book is not **mobility**, an increase in commuting is discussed as preventing people from spending more time meeting neighbours and talking about matters of common interest.

## **The lonely bowler: a paradigm of private social life**

Putnam takes the lonely bowler as emblematic of a malaise affecting the USA, the loss of the art of conversation. A popular past-time during much of the twentieth century, bowling was played largely in leagues fostering regular contact between members of a neighbourhood. By the end of the twentieth century bowling is still more popular, but it is practiced as an individual activity rather than in teams. Hence the image of the lonely bowler as the symbol of a generalized retreat from public life evinced by all sorts of indicators such as voter turnout, newspaper readership, and active membership of football clubs and choral societies.

## **The concept of social capital**

Putnam argues that participation in collective activities such as bowling leagues and other leisure, faith and political associations fosters norms of reciprocity through which people develop an orientation to cooperate and trust others. Surveys have consistently shown that members of associations tend to trust others and have more friends in the neighbourhood than non-members. Such norms and networks of civic engagement constitute what sociologists have called 'social capital'. Drawing on theoretical insights developed in his previous book *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam argues that social capital is important because the high levels of trust and cooperation that characterize socially and civically engaged communities are positively associated with the performance of social institutions, economic prosperity, and individuals' well being and longevity.

Following the introduction in section one of the book, section two presents an astounding range of data reflecting the decline of civic enthusiasm. Section three examines possible explanations for this decline and section four elaborates the implications for health, education, safe neighbourhoods, economic prosperity and democracy. In the final section Putnam proposes a number of initiatives to reverse such trends.

## **Bowling Alone and mobility**

Among the possible explanations for the erosion of social capital, Putnam discusses in detail the role of mobility and sprawl. He begins by referring to a common concern among social commentators regarding **residential mobility** which he summarizes as follows:

*For people, as for plants, frequent repotting disrupts root systems. It takes time for a mobile individual to put down new roots. As a result, residential stability is strongly associated with civic engagement. Recent arrivals in any community are less likely to vote, less likely to have supportive networks of friends and neighbours, less likely to belong to civic organizations. ... Just as frequent movers have weaker community ties, so too communities with higher rates of residential turnover are less well integrated. Mobile communities seem less friendly to their inhabitants than do more stable communities. Crime rates are higher, and school performance is lower, in high-mobility communities. In such communities, even longtime residents have fewer ties with their neighbours. So mobility undermines civic engagement and community-based social capital. (p. 204)*

This, as noted, is the concern often voiced by certain social commentators. Putnam asks whether this widely held concern is sustained by evidence: 'Could this rising mobility thus be the central villain of our mystery [of the declining social capital]? The answer', he states, 'is unequivocal: No.' Residential mobility both long and short-distance has not increased at all over the last fifty years in the USA. If anything, Putnam suggests, it has decreased: 'Americans today are ... slightly more rooted residentially than a generation ago' (p. 205). Thus, in searching for the causes of the decline in social connectedness, Putnam suggests to shift the focus from the frequency with which Americans change residence to the type of place they move to. And since the 1960s Americans have increasingly moved to socially and ethnically homogeneous, car-dependent suburban areas. The proliferation of 'more and more finely distinguished "**lifestyle** enclaves"' has reduced social conflict that once used to bring people out into the public arena. Along with the reduced possibility of encountering neighbours different from oneself, suburbia has also reduced the time people spend talking to each other partly as a result of longer commuting times.

Americans increasingly drive to work over longer periods every day and they usually do so alone. On arriving home after ever-longer journeys from work, Americans are also likely to spend more time indoors watching TV. In an exercise of 'guesstimation', Putnam attributes 10% of the decline of social and civic engagement to urban sprawl and 25% to TV.

## **Impact of Putnam's work in political and academic debates**

The concept of social capital was coined at the beginning of the twentieth century and has since only intermittently been part of academic discussions, coming in and out of fashion within specific domains. Along with his previous book *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam has not only revived academic interest in what was until then an obscure concept but has also given it currency in the policy-making world, where it has become a buzzword in social and development agendas of a range of actors from small NGOs to the World Bank. In academia the book has been praised and contested with equal intensity. Further analysis of the same data sets have led to a qualification some of Putnam's findings and concerns have been raised about the lack of rigour in its historical analysis (especially in *Making Democracy Work*), or a loose use of the term social capital or even, as with other studies on social capital, for the lack of analytical value of such a term. The book has also received criticisms from all sides of the political spectrum. Progressive commentators have focused on the lack of attention paid to the way in which new forms of capitalism involving flexibility, downsizing, new corporate cultures and employment regimes are affecting dispositions to cooperate and trust each other. More conservative reviewers meanwhile have reinterpreted the data to suggest that the decline of civic enthusiasm is caused by federal expenditure on social programmes.

## **Bowling Alone and mobilities research**

In the mobilities field, a critical discussion of *Bowling Alone* can be found in John Urry's book *Mobilities* (2007). Urry notes that Putnam's notion of social capital presumes physical propinquity and that social capital is generated in places of residence as opposed to places of work or travel. This, he argues, is too narrow a conceptualization of social capital. Urry refers to research showing that casual relations of friendship also generate social capital and that trust and reciprocity can also be generated at-a-distance through meetings and conversations punctuated in time and across scattered locations, such as for example the practice of academic research involving transnational teams, frequent research and conference trips and regular on-line communication with colleagues across the world. If such relations at-a-distance generate individual and collective benefits, then it is plausible to think of the potential to move and maintain social bonds across space as a form of capital as convincingly argued by Kaufmann (Kaufmann et al. 2004). Urry proposes to substitute the notion of social capital by what drawing on Kaufmann he calls 'network

substitute the notion of social capital by what, drawing on Putnam's, he calls 'network capital' which refers to the 'capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit' (2007: 197). Network capital involves technologies and means of travel and networking. Putnam's findings that Americans spend less time with neighbours but tend to socialize with friends outside the neighbourhood supports Urry's claim that social networks are increasingly personalized and geographically scattered, hence making network capital an increasingly necessary and valuable asset in contemporary western societies.

## About the author

Robert Putnam is Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University and an influential public intellectual in the USA. His books *Making Democracy Work* and *Bowling Alone* figure amongst the most cited in the social sciences in the last five decades.

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### Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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### Residential mobility

Broadly speaking, residential mobility refers to a household's change of residence within a life basin.

[More](#)

## Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

[More](#)

## Motility

Every person, every group can be characterised by greater or lesser propensities for moving around a geographic, economic and social space. "Motility" has been the name given to these aptitudes, a reference to the use of this term in biology.

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Keywords : [Identity](#), [Lifestyles](#), [Networks](#), [Peri-urban](#), [Car](#), [Migration](#)

Disciplines : [Social sciences](#), [Urban studies](#), [Economy](#), [law and management](#)

Transport mode(s) : [Automobile](#)

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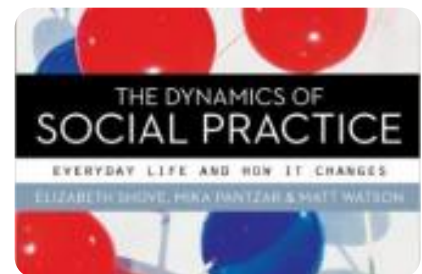
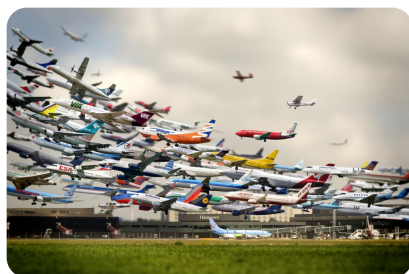


### Javier Caletrío

Social Scientist

Javier Caletrío is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology, Lancaster) . He is a researcher with a background in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, he also has a strong interest in the natural sciences, especially ecology and ornithology. His research lies broadly in the areas of environmental change and sustainability transitions, especially in relation to mobility and inequality. Javier was based at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University from 1998 to 2017.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/residential-mobility-3204>

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