

Churched Kids Fare Better

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By Eric Metaxas

MANHATTAN, N.Y.—Religion is good for you: emotionally, physically and economically. Who knew? Not the secularists.

In 2000, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam published his groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone*.

Putnam argued that Americans’ reduced interest in civic engagement—by which he meant not only things of a political nature but also things like the PTA, Boy Scouts, groups like the Elks and, yes, bowling leagues—had reduced the store of what is called “social capital.”

“Social capital” is what sociologists call “the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.”

This is more than theory. It gets to the heart of one of the pressing issues of our time: social and economic inequality. And while Americans, as a whole, prefer to bowl alone, this solitude isn’t equally distributed.

As Putnam documents in his most recent book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, one thing that separates children from families in the top 25 percent of households measured by income and education from their counterparts in the bottom 25 percent is social capital.

The well-off parents featured in *Our Kids* were, if anything, exhaustingly engaged and enmeshed in far-reaching networks that made life better for their kids.

While we shouldn’t be surprised that good connections offer better-off kids a significant advantage over their poorer counterparts, there’s something else that provides another significant advantage: religious participation.

Churchgoing kids “are less prone to substance abuse (drugs, alcohol and smoking), risky behavior (like not wearing seat belts), and delinquency (shoplifting, misbehaving in school, and being suspended or expelled).”

But the benefits of regular church attendance do not stop there.

As Putnam tells us, “Compared to their unchurched peers, youth who are involved in a religious organization take tougher courses, get higher grades and test scores, and are less likely to drop out of high school.”

They also “have better relations with their parents and other adults, have more friendships with high-performing peers, are more involved in sports and other extracurricular activities.”

In fact, churchgoing is so beneficial to academic performance that “a child whose parents attend church regularly is 40 to 50 percent more likely to go on to college than a matched child of nonattenders.”

Now, this is true regardless of socioeconomic status. The problem is that regular church attendance is increasingly tied to socioeconomic status.

According to Putnam, while “weekly church attendance” among college-educated families since the late 1970s has remained more or less the same, it has dropped by almost a third among those with a high-school diploma or less.

The result is “a substantial class gap that did not exist” 50 years ago. It’s yet another way that poorer kids are falling behind their more affluent counterparts.

Given the benefits of regular church attendance, the insistence on minimizing the role of religion in American public life is, to put it mildly, perverse. Society hasn’t figured out how to reliably give poor kids access to the kinds of advantages, both material and intangible, that better-off kids take for granted.

But we, the Church, do know how to reach out to them and their families in Jesus’ name. We have millennia of experience in ministering to the least, the last and the lost. And now we have evidence that this kind of ministry has benefits that few people, Christians or non-Christians, ever suspected.

Will today’s “cultured despisers” of religion pay heed? Probably not. But we owe it to the kids—all kids—to ignore those naysayers and to freely give them what we have freely received.