

Recently, I've been reading a book titled *Bowling Alone* by Robert D. Putnam. It was a book published in 2000 and has the subtitle of "The Collapse and Revival of American Community". The book actually has little to do with bowling alone, that is just an idea being explored.

This book is not an easy book to read. It contains a lot of charts and graphs and statistics. The subject matter is also kind of a sad look at where the communities of America have been and where they are going. Sad because as the title of the book alludes to, more Americans are bowling alone rather than in leagues. The author also looks into community engagement, membership in groups, voting turnout, and other interactions.

The findings show that since about the 1950's most measurements of these statistics have seen a significant downward trend. Oh, the 1950's that's easy, that's when TV became more widely available and popular. He has quite a bit of information and statistics on TV watching and although this does have some blame in the lack of community engagement, but it isn't the main driver. As far as I can tell, there is no main driver that he found, it is a lot of little lifestyle changes that made a dramatic decrease in community engagement throughout the US.

Honestly, who cares about that? Why does this even matter? The last section of the book starts to show the dark side of a decrease in community engagement...or on the other hand, a bright side if we can increase community engagement. In one of his examples in Chapter 17, page 301, North Carolina is ranked #41 in SAT scores, and Connecticut is ranked #9. Controlling for all other ways that the states differ, he discovered that to see educational outcomes similar to Connecticut, North Carolina can do one of the following things: Increase presidential voter turnout by 50%, double the frequency of club meeting attendance, triple the number of nonprofit organizations per thousand people, or attend church two more times per month.

What do any of those have to do with student test scores? Social Capital. When a student, or family has connections in the community, expectations change. Parents and teachers interact outside of the school day, parents interact with other parents, kids know each other's parents. These connections lead to better educational results. It is much like Tom Osborne's TeamMates program, adult mentors spend an hour a week with their youth mentee, there's no program, perhaps they talk or play board games, but that hour a week leads to drastic changes in the youth's life because an adult cares. That's the power of social capital or being engaged in your communities. The author even goes so far as to look into some of the chronically underperforming schools and found that a

lack of social capital is the main culprit in the communities rather than race, funding, or school quality.

How does a community build social capital? There are many ways to do this. Open communication, inviting neighbors, community food events, fun, festivals are all options. Just attending local group meetings is a way to build social capital. Rural Prosperity Nebraska has many different programs to build social capital, but they all require people to show up and be involved. Look for ways to be involved in your community, they are all around you. If you still can't figure out anything, stop by any Extension Office in the state and say that you want to volunteer, we'll find something for you!

If your community could benefit from any of the Rural Prosperity Nebraska ideas that I've discussed in this column, please reach out to me. I'd love to speak to your community about these topics. You can reach me at jason.tuller@unl.edu or at the Thayer County office at 402-768-7212.

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