



# Better Together: Restoring the American Community

*Robert D. Putnam , Lewis Feldstein , Donald J. Cohen (With)*

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**Better Together: Restoring the American Community** Robert D. Putnam , Lewis Feldstein , Donald J. Cohen (With)

In his acclaimed *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam describes the United States as a nation in which we have become increasingly disconnected from one another and in which our social structures have disintegrated. But in the final chapter of that book he detects hopeful signs of civic renewal. In *Better Together* Putnam and coauthor Lewis Feldstein tell the inspiring stories of people who are reweaving the social fabric by bringing their own communities together or building bridges to others.

*Better Together* examines how people across the country are inventing new forms of social activism and community renewal. An arts program in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, brings together shipyard workers and their gentrified neighbors; a deteriorating, crime-ridden neighborhood in Boston is transformed by a determined group of civic organizers; an online "virtual" community in San Francisco allows its members to connect with each other as well as the larger group; in Wisconsin schoolchildren learn how to participate in the political process to benefit their town. As our society grows increasingly diverse, say Putnam and Feldstein, it's more important than ever to grow "social capital," whether by traditional or more innovative means. The people profiled in *Better Together* are doing just that, and their stories illustrate the extraordinary power of social networks for enabling people to improve their lives and the lives of those around them.

### Better Together: Restoring the American Community Details

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## From Reader Review Better Together: Restoring the American Community for online ebook

### Shad says

Bowling Alone was much better. The foreward sums up the differences between the two. Bowling alone was a work of academic excellence, and this was a compilation of a few examples/stories from which some preliminary observations were made.

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### Becca says

Social Capital, Community, and the importance of Human Relationships. This is the modern day interpretation of why non-profits and other community orgs do what they do, why it matters, and how we're all a part of it.

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### Michael Ryan says

I did not approach the book with high expectations. After reading the reviews on here I was prepared for it to be a hopeless sequel trading of the brand name of 'Bowling Alone.'

However, I did not find it like that at all. True, it has a narrative style rather than presenting hard data. But I found the stories really interesting and thought provoking. A number of them contained ideas that I think I can use around here in the future. And it confirmed to me that I was 'on the money' with many of my instincts and attitudes.

You can read this book as a 'How To' manual for building community. As such it is one of those books that I should re-read every couple of years. That makes it a pretty valuable book!

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### Janet says

This book was a gift in more ways than one. While the examples of communities working together are a bit old news, the good news is that the reasons these communities are functioning so well. In fact, the reasons are even more important today. The conclusion of the book pulls together the lessons learned from UPS, Portland, Criagslist, Saddleback Church, Chicago Libraries, and more. It is true that most people do not act unless there is personal gain on the horizon. However, there are usually catalysts that spark people to move forward to "do something!" However, the bottom line is to "build social capital." Small groups and much communication between people make the difference. People feel connected and begin to care more. This cuts down on isolation for the members of the community. Likewise, it is important to support public foundations that give to non-profits, for so much impetus can come from them. Do not ignore the arts!! Connect groups with each other as well. Connect older people with younger people. So much to glean here. Whether or not you are involved with your community or foundation, this deserves reading as a how-to book or a pep talk! Put down the phone, talk to your neighbors!

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## Rachel says

A bit dated at this point, but it was my fault for not reading it earlier. However, it was remarkably enjoyable and a quick read for being something work-related. Well, it was a gift, so it's not something I bought for work, but I'm glad it was gifted to me.

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## Caleb says

I had this on my shelf for two years. It is not in the same league as Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, a seminal sociology book, but some of the case studies are quite good. That said, I will admit to skimming sections when I felt like I had already that lesson elsewhere.

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## Eric Chappell says

This is Robert Putnam's follow-up to his seminal research on the loss of American community, *Bowling Alone*. Some reviews I read of *Bowling Alone*, while mostly positive, did offer the critique that Putnam failed to account for new kinds of community that have developed since the 60's, of which his study did not take into account. Though I think that criticism is largely unfair, *Better Together* does seek to demonstrate some of the new forms of community taking place in our schools, neighborhoods, religious institutions, and workplaces. Putnam's method here in *Better Together* is the exact opposite of *Bowling Alone*. His former work was characterized by lots of sociological jargon, hard data, and objective analysis. *Better Together* tells a story, or, more accurately, tells stories.

I think this book's appeal varies on how interested you are in diverse kinds of community and the stories that gave rise to them. Every chapter other than the introduction and conclusion is a story about how a certain population or group of people or individuals found that social capital was necessary to reach their objectives. This was true in labor unions, large companies, churches, neighborhoods, and cities. For myself, I found that some chapters were incredibly dull and others quite fascinating. For example, I learned that though libraries should be a dead and dying industry, they are actually on the rise, and in some cases, as in Chicago, contributing to community life in metropolitan areas. Or, a chapter on the rise of Craigslist as a virtual community and how technology is hurting, helping, and shaping the way we think about community. As I think through particularly how the church is called to foster a place of relationships and community in the image of a Triune God, this was an interesting, though not incredible, conversation partner.

Here's some of my takeaways:

1. Social capital refers to social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness. It involves (or should involve) both bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding is inward-looking; bridging is outward-looking. Bonding=super glue; Bridging=WD-40. Social capital is not all sweetness, but has a certain tartness.
2. Build community by sharing stories.
3. Social capital takes time and effort.
4. Chapter 1: Tell a story! Organizing is all about building relationships. It's a conversation. Leave yourself open to be changed by the conversation. Relationship-building is a way of looking at the world, not just a strategy. Relationships are not just the engine of reform, they are one of the goals of reform. Stories build relationships. People learn to lead by leading.

4. Chapter 2: On Libraries. Residents of Cabrini Green--I thought nobody cared, so I didn't care. When I saw someone caring, trying to make things better, I am trying to make things better. New libraries are "a place to be known and a place to get to know others." Libraries are resource and meeting place. Same book, same time. Library became a "third place."
  5. Chapter 3: knowledge and sympathy gap--people have no sympathy for what they don't know.
  6. Chapter 4: listen to stories first. Ask residents.
  7. Chapter 6: Saddleback Church
  8. Conclusion: sometimes supposed inefficiency is essential for creating place of human connectivity. Bridging is not about "kumbaya" cuddling, but coming together to argue or share. Community is not just about broccoli, but about chocolates too--interests and needs, but also fun and fellowship. Building social capital is neither all-or-nothing nor once-for-all. It is incremental and cumulative.
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### **Gretch Engelson says**

This book has lots of wonderful and rich illustrations of ways that communities have been working to bring Americans closer together. It shows the ways in which our independent, capitalist society has slowly been pulling apart our connections with one another, and how Americans are working on unique and artistic ways to bring us together once again.

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### **Hannah says**

I thought this was a disappointing follow-up to Putnam's sensational "Bowling Alone." The book consists of vignettes about different community-involving projects and organizations around the country as a sort of "optimistic" take on the opportunities we have to increase our social capital. Unfortunately, I found myself dozing off while working my way through the scholarly prose, and I thought it was a little preachy. Nonetheless, I will say that more people should be thinking along these lines.

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### **Orton Family Foundation says**

Robert Putnam's signature work, *Bowling Alone*, has become part of the culture's vocabulary when we talk about declining social connectedness and civic participation in American society. "Beginning, roughly speaking, in the late 1960s, Americans in massive numbers began to join less, trust less, give less, vote less, and schmooze less." Suburban sprawl, the rise of video game playing, television, web networking, and a host of other societal changes contributed to this trend, and we've begun to use Putnam's language and concepts to describe community trends in many fields. In community development circles, "social capital" may have even beat out the word, "subprime" as the 2007 word of the year.

Yet where *Bowling Alone* reviewed the vast body of evidence of declining social capital in America, Putnam's 2003 book, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, co-authored with Lewis Feldstein and Don Cohen, highlights case studies where "creative social entrepreneurs were moving against the nationwide tide and creating vibrant new forms of social connectedness." These diverse, compelling stories originate from mega-churches in California to blighted urban neighborhoods – but they all reveal common themes and lessons learned. To their credit, the authors also point out the challenges inherent in building social capital and admit that they are not "free of conflict or controversy."

The book is not meant to be a rigorous scientific review of social capital methodology, but a collection of stories and protagonists that inspire and highlight places where community building has bucked the trend. The use of storytelling reinforces the most common theme within the case studies: that personal storytelling is a powerful, if not essential, technique for building trust and empathy. The fundamentals of community organizing include starting with what a constituency cares most about. In a chapter on the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, the authors write, “getting people together to tell their own stories in their own words seemed to create the mutual understanding and sympathy that made collective action possible.” This was as true for Portsmouth, NH’s Shipyard Project, which used art to bridge cultures and communities, as it was for Valley Interfaith in Texas, where a coalition of churches and schools organized to improve conditions for low income and immigrant families. “Abstract ideas do not connect people and social action when it is not rooted in the heart of people’s life experience withers in the face of opposition and disappointment.” Stories build relationships.

Relationship building takes time – lots of it. Better Together acknowledges that it takes a lot of time to go door-to-door, neighbor to neighbor, and listen. In Portsmouth, nearly two years of preparation preceded a one-week performance. Trust building between factions on Dudley Street went on for five years. The account of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) tells of the union’s successful organizing approach: go to employees for conversation and trust and relationship building one at a time. The HUCTW story also reveals the challenges of organizing people in the absence of a demonized enemy or a threat. These are the exact challenges of participation in planning processes – how do we galvanize the public to create a vision for the future when we are not reacting to a controversial or immediate development proposal?

Better Together also offers interesting perspectives on the involvement of local government. In some cases government simply responds to organized turnout. With the Chicago Public Library case, mayoral support and adequate funding contributed to success. In Portland, OR, a story of growing civic engagement, the Mayor’s leadership was instrumental in the widespread creation of neighborhood associations and a willingness on the part of government to share decision-making with residents. What stands out in the story of Portland is “the evolving capacity of public officials and government to respond and adapt to citizen initiatives. Just as citizens honed their civic skills and vociferously pressed their views, government developed a culture of responding to and learning from, rather than rejecting, many grassroots initiatives.

Better Together acknowledges the challenge of bridging diverse social networks versus working within more homogenous groups. Organizers of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative have worked hard to ensure that representation and leadership reflect the diverse cultures of the neighborhood. And the compelling story of the Chicago Public Library demonstrated the importance of providing common ground to minimize class and race differences between neighborhoods. Without offering advice, the authors note that “social capital strategists need to pay special attention to the tougher task of fostering social ties that reach across social divisions.”

The authors tip their hats briefly in their conclusion to the role of urban planning and architecture in contributing to social capital. They write, “Common spaces for commonplace encounters are prerequisites for common conversations and common debate,” thus allowing places for diverse networks to intersect, foster opportunities and create a common sense of purpose.

Sometimes, when I think of the Foundation’s focus on a deeper, “heart & soul” method of community planning, I am reminded of how the most intuitive and effective approaches to citizen engagement have become lost within our institutional structures and formal processes - processes that make no sense as the basis for determining our future or that of the next generation. How often does public discourse about a community’s future leave out the youth who will inherit and lead this future? How often does a discussion of community resilience occur without the wisdom of those who have lived through generations of change? Reading Better Together was both an inspiration for leadership and a grounding for community development

activities.

Read more reviews by the Orton Family Foundation in our Scenarios e-journal at <http://www.orton.org/resources/public...>

-Betsy Rosenbluth

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### **Scott says**

Many of you may have read Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone," about his research on the gradual disintegration of broad social ties and networks in civil society in the United States. This book, "Better Together," highlights group-scale problem and issue resolution through means that can be characterized as a "social capital strategy," i.e. building interpersonal relationships and social capital as a key distinguishing characteristic/determinant of success. Examples include safety meetings of UPS employees; the growth and vitality of a large Evangelical megachurch in Orange County, California; grass roots community building on Dudley Street in Roxbury, Mass.; the work of the Experience Corps in tutoring in schools in North Philadelphia; and many others. I was interested by the case study presented regarding the Near North Branch library of the Chicago Public Library system. Even though the book was published in 2003, there is much good information to glean and profit from in these stories. Very worthwhile to anyone who seeks to build better communities through better relationships (that is, to my mind, a recommendation of this book to everyone!).

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### **Elizabeth Aguilar says**

Interesting concept, eh execution.

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### **Josh Paul says**

Not as good as Bowling Along, but that's to be expected as it's typically easier to make a compelling case that a problem exists than it is to explain the solution. Still, a worthwhile effort and one that contains some interesting ideas.

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### **Lynette Hague says**

I thought the book started off slow, but then I found the case studies fascinating. Although the book was published in 2003, I thought the points made about social capital were still valid. I googled several of the organizations and places mentioned to see how some of them were doing 15 years later.

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### **Crystal says**

The case studies are by now a little old, but the important lessons are timeless. Community building takes

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time and personal connections, and successful social movements allow participants to share their stories.

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