

The Privatization of Civil Society Across the Life Course

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I. Introduction

“We believe that it is impossible to explain despair through declining material advantage. We believe that much more important for despair is the decline of family, community, and religion ... it was the destruction of a way of life that we see as central.”

– Case & Deaton (2020) in *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*, p. 183

Anne Case and Angus Deaton coined the phrase “deaths of despair” through their groundbreaking research on the rise in drug overdose, suicide, and alcohol-related deaths since the 1990s. They thoroughly documented how these deaths are increasing most among those without college degrees, especially white people. And they hypothesized that the rise in these deaths of despair has been rooted in *social disintegration* within the white working-class. Drawing on the work of Andrew Cherlin (2009, 2014), they define social disintegration as a process by which a decline in economic conditions (i.e., jobs, wages) interacted with a decline in institutions that produce stability and meaning (i.e., marriage, religion, community, unions) to weaken the foundations of working-class life. What emerges from their research is a portrait of America where the more educated have continued to participate in the institutions of work, religion, community, and marriage, while the less educated have not.

In *Understanding the Role of Participation & Relationships in Deaths of Despair* (2022), I made the case that participation in these institutions matter because, in contemporary life, they are our main outlets to cultivate relationships and derive a sense of meaning. According to Henrich (2020), humans evolved to live in extended familial and kinship networks defined by numerous strong ties. Today, in contrast, we organize ourselves as nuclear families in independent, neolocal residences. This arrangement has given primacy to the role of the family, the community, the church, and the workplace in our lives. The process of participation in these institutions creates purpose and meaning, while the outcome of this participation is more and stronger relationships. And these relationships matter. Holt-Lunstad (2010, 2022) finds that our social relationships are among the most important predictors of positive health outcomes and mitigants against negative ones, including deaths of despair. These relationships also matter for economic mobility. Chetty et al. (2022) finds that children who grow up in communities with more *economic connectedness*¹ are much more likely to rise out of poverty, and economic connectedness is, in his words, “the strongest predictor of upward mobility identified to date” (p. 3).

While the strength of Case & Deaton’s research is its expansiveness, this expansiveness is also one of its limitations. Though they identify the social disintegration of working-class life as the primary driver of deaths of despair, they only dedicate one chapter of their book (*Widening Gaps at Home*) to the decline of marriage, religion, community, and unions. This chapter provides limited evidence for the decline of religious and union participation, and it offers no evidence for the decline of civil society institutions and community participation. It also only focuses on adults, thereby missing an opportunity to explore how social disintegration unfolds throughout life. Consequently, those interested in understanding the causes and potential solutions for social disintegration are left with more questions than answers.

In this paper, I take up some of these unanswered questions. *What is the nature of this institutional decline? What caused it? And who is most affected by it?*

¹ Chetty et al. (2022) defines *Economic Connectedness* as the degree to which low-income and high-income people are friends with each other.

I approach these questions by exploring the *institution* of civil society and the *process* of community participation, across the *demographic* line of class, through the *temporal* lens of the life course. First, I focus exclusively on secular *civil society* and *community participation* because, unlike work, unions, and marriage, it is the only form of institutional participation that can be traced across the life course.² I draw on Yuval Levin’s definition of *civil society* as “the institutions and relationships that stand between the isolated individual and the national state” (2016, p. 4). And I define *community participation* as one’s engagement in the groups, organizations, and associations that comprise civil society. Second, my analysis focuses on the dividing line of *class*; this class emphasis is consistent with the analytical approach of the researchers I reference most: Case & Deaton, Robert Putnam, and Raj Chetty. Due to the myriad sources on which I’m drawing, I sometimes define class by educational attainment and other times define it by socioeconomic status (SES). Finally, my research cuts across the life course, from childhood (ages 0-18) to the adult transition (ages 18-22) to adulthood (ages 22+). This life course approach broadens the aperture beyond adulthood and demonstrates the cumulative consequences of community participation at all stages of life.

This paper is based on the overarching hypothesis that secular civil society has become “privatized.” I define “privatization” as a process whereby a mix of financial, geographic, and cultural barriers have replaced once inclusive public institutions and experiences with exclusive private ones—either in fact or in practice. This privatization, I argue, has led to less community participation for those without degrees and has contributed to fewer relationships (absolute and cross-class) for this group. Three sub-hypotheses undergird this claim:

H1: Civil society has become “privatized” across the life course.

H2: Individuals with degrees have sustained or replaced community participation, while those without degrees have not.

H3: Individuals without degrees have fewer absolute and cross-class relationships, both compared to those with degrees and compared to those without degrees in the past.³

My analysis follows the trajectory of the life course, applying these hypotheses at each stage. I begin with childhood, turn to the adult transition, and conclude my inquiry with adulthood. My research paints a clear picture: civil society has become privatized from childhood through adulthood, creating a dynamic of cumulative and compounding disadvantage for those without degrees. They have fewer relationships and lower levels of community participation in childhood, which beget fewer relationships and lower participation levels during the adult transition, which beget fewer relationships and lower participation levels in adulthood. Deaths of despair and economic immobility, it turns out, are downstream from the privatization that begins in our earliest days.

² Throughout this paper, I use *civil society* and *community* interchangeably. However, when I refer to the institutions themselves, I tend to use *civil society*, and when I refer to participation in these institutions, I tend to use *community*.

³ The patterns alluded to in H2 and H3 apply to both parents and their children.

II. Childhood: Privatized Schools, Privatized Activities, Privatized Friends

Most of the advantages or disadvantages that we experience in life take root during our childhood years. Unfortunately, American childhoods are deeply unequal across class lines, and the privatization of civil society in childhood is partially to blame. In this section, I document how K-12 education has become de facto sorted by class, how school-based extracurriculars have become pay-to-play, and how expensive, exclusive non-school activities have replaced affordable, inclusive ones. Consequently, lower SES students form fewer relationships than their higher SES peers. They form fewer of the cross-class relationships key to mobility than they did in the past. And they are less connected to the civil society institutions that foster relationships and meaning in life. This is evidence that the class-based relationship and participation gap starts young.

School

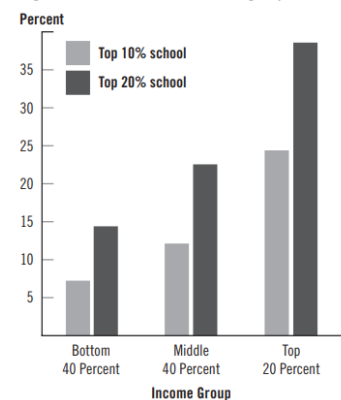
School is the primary institution of civil society with which children interact. Unfortunately, K-12 education has become increasingly privatized and sorted by class, with high SES children attending private schools and top public schools, and lower SES children enrolling in poorer performing public schools (Putnam, 2015; Reeves, 2017). Private schools play a role—albeit a small one—in this privatization story. According to Reeves (2017), 18% of children whose parents are in the top quintile of earners attend private school, compared to 9% for the second and third quintiles of earners and just 4% for the bottom two quintiles. Still, most American students—approximately three in four—attend public schools, not private ones (Reeves, 2017). So, the privatization story in schooling is really about the privatization of America’s best public schools, not the growth of private schools.

A potent combination of residential sorting and exclusionary zoning appear to be the culprits in the privatization of top public schools. According to Putnam (2015), “residential sorting by income over the last 30 to 40 years has shunted high-income and low-income students into separate schools” (p. 171). Putnam explains that school quality, itself, reinforces this pattern of residential segregation, as well-educated parents make significant efforts to identify the best schools for their children and move into those districts. In his words, “upper-class parents generally have better information about school quality than lower-class parents and are better able to afford homes in the right neighborhoods” (p. 172). In *Dream Hoarders*, Reeves (2017) finds that nearly 40% of top-quintile earning families live in areas with public schools ranked in the top 20% of their state and almost one quarter of these families are near a school in the top 10%. This contrasts with the experience of families in the bottom 40% of earners: less than 15% live in areas with a school ranked in the top 20% and only 7% are near a top 10% school (see **Figure 1**). Matthew Stewart (2018) drives this point home in a piece published in *The Atlantic*:

“According to a widely used school-ranking service, out of more than 5,000 public elementary schools in California, the top 11 are located in Palo Alto. They’re free and open to the public. All you have to do is move into a town where the median home value is \$3,211,100.”

Exclusionary zoning reinforces this system of privatizing the public realm. Myriad rules and regulations, such as maximum restrictions on density and minimum restrictions for lot sizes, are designed to preserve

Figure 1. School Sorting by Income

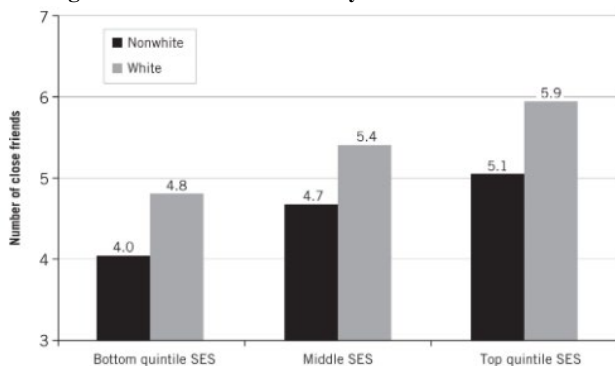


Source: Reeves (2017)

the home values, schools, and neighborhoods of the affluent. This severely curtails who can move into a community and attend its schools. Reeves (2017) puts it bluntly: “Exclusionary zoning ... provides the upper middle class with a way to ‘buy’ a better-quality K-12 education for their children through higher house prices rather than through fees for a private school” (p. 109).

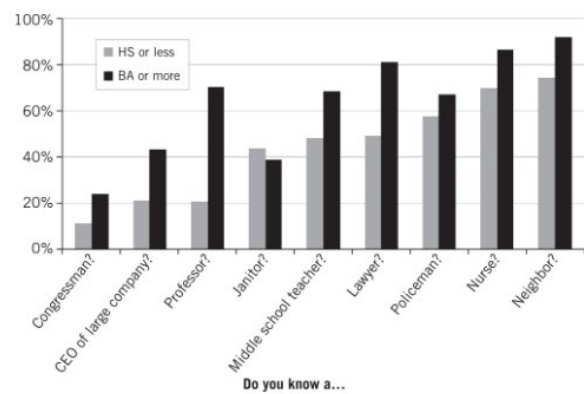
As the top public schools become privatized, cross-class relationships decrease, and this has significant ramifications for lower SES children. These lower SES children benefit from enrolling in the same schools as higher SES children, and much of this benefit is derived through the relationships that accompany higher SES children. The parents of more well-off children are more involved in their schools, investing more time, contributing more financial resources, and demanding more academically rigorous curricula (Putnam, 2015). These more educated parents also bring broader and deeper social networks to support their children and their schools (see **Figures 2** and **3** below). Putnam (2015) explains that they have many more weak ties, and these weak ties “are especially valuable for social mobility and educational and economic advancement, because such ties allow educated, affluent parents and their children to tap a wealth of expertise and support that is simply inaccessible to parents and children who are less well off” (p. 221). When top public schools privatize, lower SES kids cultivate fewer cross-class relationships, fewer overall relationships, and fewer of the relationships that will help them advance in life. This is just part of the story of the privatization in the childhood years.

Figure 2. # of Close Friends by Class



Source: Putnam (2015)

Figure 3. Social Network Breadth by Class



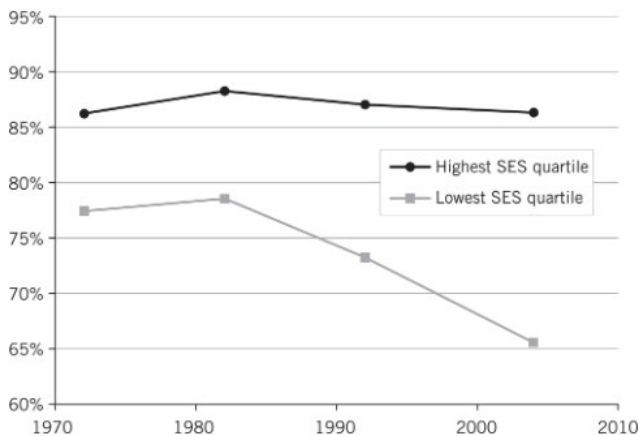
Extracurriculars

While schools, themselves, have become privatized, so too have the communal organizations and activities in which children participate outside of school. The gap in extracurricular participation between lower SES kids and higher SES kids is large and growing (see **Figure 4**). Robert Putnam describes these trends in *Our Kids* (2015):

“Poor kids are three times as likely as their nonpoor classmates to participate in neither sports nor clubs (30% to 10%), and half as likely to participate in both sports and clubs (22% to 44%) ... From 1997 to 2012, the extracurricular gap between poor kids and nonpoor kids aged 6-11 nearly doubled, from 15 to 27 percentage points, while the comparable gap among kids aged 12-17 rose from 19 to 29 percentage points” (p. 186).

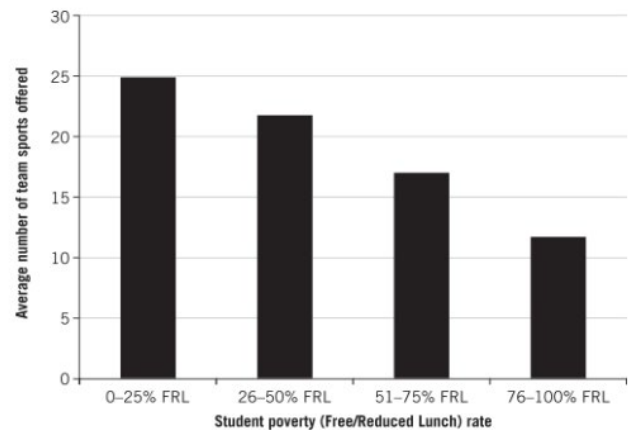
Part of this growing extracurricular gap is being driven by the increasing privatization of school-based activities. The increased sorting between high SES and low SES public schools has significant implications for access to school-based extracurriculars. Putnam (2015) shows that high schools with affluent students offer twice as many sport and non-sport activities as high-poverty schools (see **Figure 5**). Fewer activities available for lower SES students means fewer opportunities to participate in extracurriculars—and this is a direct result of de facto school privatization. But even within schools, a form of privatization is occurring through the proliferation of pay-to-play policies. These policies, which force students to pay fees to participate in school-based activities, are imposed in more than half of U.S. high schools (Putnam, 2015). According to Putnam (2015), “the total costs of extracurricular participation might be \$400 per student per activity per year, or roughly \$1,600 for two kids in a family participating in two activities each year ... for a household in the bottom quintile, [this] cost would amount to nearly 10 percent (or more) of their annual income” (p. 192). A recent study found that, prior to the institution of fees, roughly half of all kids were playing sports. When fees were introduced, one in three athletes from homes with annual incomes of \$60,000 or less dropped out due to the increased cost, compared to one in ten athletes from families with incomes of over \$60,000 (Putnam, 2015). Pay-to-play policies are a form of privatization that makes community participation less accessible to lower SES students.

Figure 4. Participation in School-Based Extracurriculars by Class



Source: Putnam (2015)

Figure 5. # of Sports Teams by School's Student Poverty Rate



The other significant contributor to this growing extracurricular gap is the near complete privatization of non-school activities. Examples of such extracurriculars include travel sports teams, music lessons, and experiential learning trips, to name a few. As Putnam explains in *Our Kids* (2015):

Children in low-income families are even less likely to participate in organized non-school activities ... than they are in school-based activities. Among these non-school programs, moreover, researchers have found greater class disparities in participation in expensive activities like sports or music lessons than in low-cost programs run by churches or community organizations (p. 193).

But the problem is not just that higher SES families are paying for their kids to participate in expensive soccer clubs and music lessons. It is that these private extracurricular activities are replacing the public, non-school activities that were once available for children of all class backgrounds. Nowhere is this

process of privatization and replacement more extreme than in youth sports. Derek Thompson (2018) describes this dynamic in *The Atlantic*: “Expensive travel leagues siphon off talented young athletes from well-off families, leaving behind desiccated local leagues with fewer players, fewer involved parents, and fewer resources.” As a result, child enrollment and overall availability of local recreational programs has declined by upwards of 50% over the past 15 years (Valencia, 2022). With fewer low-cost options, low SES kids drop out of sports altogether. Research from the Aspen Institute (2020) found that youth ages 6-18 from low-income homes quit sports due to financial costs at six times the rate of kids from high-income homes. The rise of privatized, expensive travel teams coupled with the decline of public, affordable recreational leagues has driven significant disparities in sports participation between higher and lower SES children. In 2011, 66% of children from families earning more than \$100,000 played team sports, compared to 42% of children from families earning less than \$25,000. By 2017, that gap had grown by 11%, as 69% of high-income children continued to participate versus only 34% of low-income children (Thompson, 2018). Simply put, non-school activities have become increasingly privatized, resulting in growing access and participation gaps between higher SES and lower SES kids.

How are lower SES youth spending their time if they are not participating in extracurriculars? The answer: alone and in front of screens. Over the past two decades, several studies have shown that lower SES children watch TV and play video games at significantly greater rates than their higher SES peers (Carson et al., 2010; Tandon et al., 2012; Abdel Magid et al., 2021). More recent research has found that these class-based patterns extend to contemporary screen time use, with children in lower income families messaging, watching online videos, and using social media at higher levels than more well-off children (Nagata et al., 2022). Rideout and Robb (2019) quantify these screen time disparities in the 2019 *Common Sense Census*: lower income tweens spend 1 hour and 50 minutes more on screens than higher income tweens (5:49 versus 3:59), and lower income teens have 1 hour and 43 minutes more of screen time than their higher income counterparts (8:32 versus 6:49). Compared to extracurricular activities—which are almost always in-person and with other peers—these screen-based activities overwhelmingly take place at home, virtually, and in isolation. So, as higher SES kids are actively playing sports or learning new skills with peers, lower SES kids are sitting alone staring at screens.

The privatization of extracurricular activities is to the direct detriment of lower SES children. Beyond school, extracurriculars are the primary outlets for students to cultivate peer and mentor relationships, build soft skills, and derive a sense of meaning in their lives (Putnam, 2015). Extracurricular participation is even highly predictive of educational advancement and economic mobility—and this is largely mediated by the skill and relationship development that this type of participation fosters (Putnam, 2015). While higher SES kids continue to participate in privatized extracurriculars, lower SES kids have been engaging at decreasing rates over the past 40 years and replacing their active extracurricular participation with sedentary, isolated screen time. The result: lower SES kids have fewer friends, fewer cross-class friendships, are less socially connected (see **Figure 6**), are less engaged in civic life (see **Figure 7**), and face increasingly longer odds of experiencing upward mobility as adults (Hjalmarsson & Mood, 2015; Putnam et al., 2012; Chetty et al., 2022).

Figure 6. Class Gaps in Social Connectedness

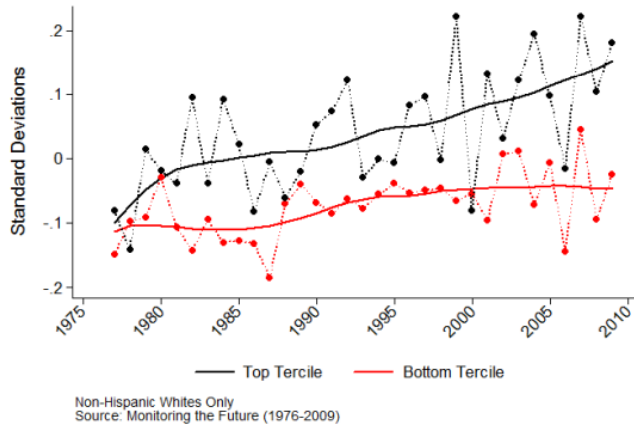
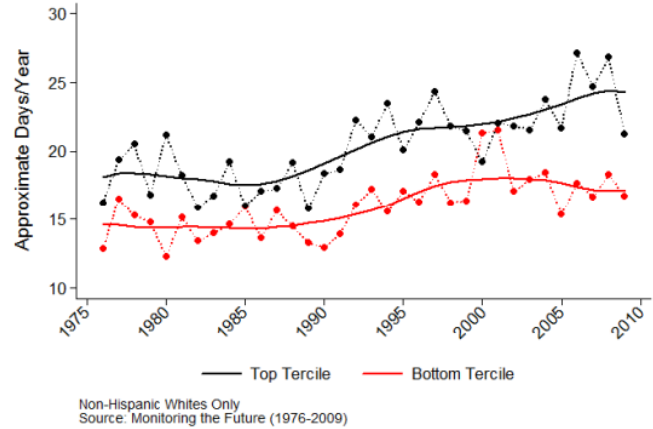


Figure 7. Participation in Community Affairs/Volunteering in 12th Grade



Source: Putnam et al. (2012)

Conclusion

In this section, I have thoroughly documented the trends, causes, and consequences of community privatization within childhood. I return now to our three hypotheses and apply them to the childhood experience.

H1: Has civil society become “privatized” in childhood? Yes, the forces of community privatization have reached all facets of children’s social lives—from schools, to school-based activities, to non-school extracurriculars. Our schools have become de facto sorted by class, our school-based activities have become pay-to-play, and expensive and exclusive non-school extracurriculars have displaced affordable, accessible ones.

H2: Have higher SES children sustained or replaced community participation, while lower SES children have not? Yes, there is a growing chasm in extracurricular participation between higher SES children and lower SES children. Children of more well-off parents continue to engage in extracurriculars, while less well-off children do not. There is ample evidence that this broadening gap is being driven by declines in access to and affordability of these activities.

H3: Do lower SES children have fewer absolute and cross-class relationships, both compared to those higher SES children and compared to lower SES children in the past? Yes, lower SES children have fewer relationships overall and fewer cross-class relationships than they had in the past. I have also documented a growing gap in social connectedness between high SES and low SES children. And, I have shown how this is a result of the increasing privatization of civil society throughout childhood.

The privatization of civil society in childhood contributes to a cumulative disadvantage that follows individuals throughout their lives. Lower SES children leave childhood with fewer social relationships and less attachment to the institutions that promote these relationships and meaning in life. They, thus, approach the adult transition with a relational and participation deficit.

III. Adult Transition: From Collective Service to the College Divide

The adult transition—the transitional years between 18 and 22-ish—is a modern construct that emerged around the mid-20th century. Prior, America’s standing military was relatively small, four-year college was almost exclusively reserved for the aristocratic elite, and most youth went to work on farms or in factories after completing grade school (Krebs, 2009; Sandel, 2020). World War II (WWII) established the adult transition, as we know it today, in two ways. First, the mass mobilization of troops in WWII created a shared, transitional experience for an entire generation of young men. Then, the passing of the G.I. Bill of Rights opened up four-year colleges to millions of returning veterans (Tough, 2019). In *The Years That Matter Most* (2019), Paul Tough describes the sea change that the G.I. Bill helped to usher in: “In the public imagination, college came to be seen, for the first time, not as an exclusive privilege of the moneyed elite but as the most promising path for ordinary Americans to reach new opportunities in life” (p. 315). With a large standing military of young men and the opening of four-year colleges to the masses, the adult transition had arrived.

In this section, I describe how the collective, cross-class experience of the military as the bedrock of the adult transition has been replaced by four-year colleges that mostly serve the upper middle class. I start by documenting the changes in military and civilian life that contributed to this shift. I then thoroughly demonstrate the degree to which four-year colleges—both private and public—have become de facto privatized. I conclude by discussing the consequences of this privatization for the lower SES youth who do not have the opportunity to attend college. What emerges is a portrait of continually accruing disadvantage among this group in terms of their human and institutional connections.

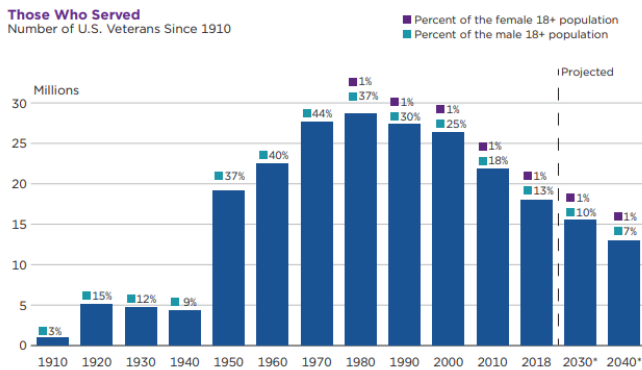
The Military

Military service was a near ubiquitous, cross-class experience of the adult transition from WWII through Vietnam. **Figure 8** shows just how many men, both overall and compared to the U.S. population, served in the military during this period. By 1960, 40% of men over age 18—and the vast majority of men in their 20s, 30s, and 40s—had military experience (PBS, 2000). While the military during this period was largely composed of men, service was a collective experience, as men from all regions, all classes, and all races came together to serve their nation. Further, the newly created G.I. Bill enabled these men to have a path toward upward mobility through free four-year college (Tough, 2019). I do not intend to glorify the military experience during this period. Hundreds of thousands of young men died across WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. The military was plagued with the racial strife afflicting American society. And the cross-class nature of the military started to erode in Vietnam, as lower-income people and minorities bore the brunt of the sacrifice. But, as a foundational pillar of the adult transition, the military of this era was a remarkably public institution for a shared, cross-class experience. As a result, these men forged lifelong relationships and habits of institutional participation that carried over to civilian life.

The creation of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) and elimination of the draft in 1973 changed the nature of the military and, thus, the adult transition. Service, an obligation between WWII and Vietnam, now became a choice. This has had implications for the size of the military, who serves in it, and the nature of the military experience. The number of people on active duty at any given time has shrunk significantly (see **Figure 9**). From the military’s peak of 12 million active-duty service members in WWII (Vespa, 2020), it has now leveled off at approximately 1.4 million active-duty personnel (Barroso, 2019). The composition of this smaller military has also shifted. The military is now mostly made up of a “warrior class” of families for whom military service is a tradition and middle-class people seeking opportunities for upward mobility (Grogan, 2020). Most of these individuals come from a select number of states

concentrated in the Southeast and Southwest (Savell and McMahon, 2019). Military service is still a meaningful, cross-class experience of the adult transition for some young people—an experience where they build skills, cultivate relationships, and participate in an institution that promotes meaning in life. However, these young people represent an increasingly narrow slice of 18- to 22-year-olds. *So, what has replaced the military as the anchor of the adult transition?* The answer: *college*, the institution that the G.I. Bill helped open to the broader public 75 years ago.

Figure 8. U.S. Veterans Since 1910 by # and % of Population



Source: Vespa (2020)

Figure 9. Size of U.S. Armed Forces Since 1915



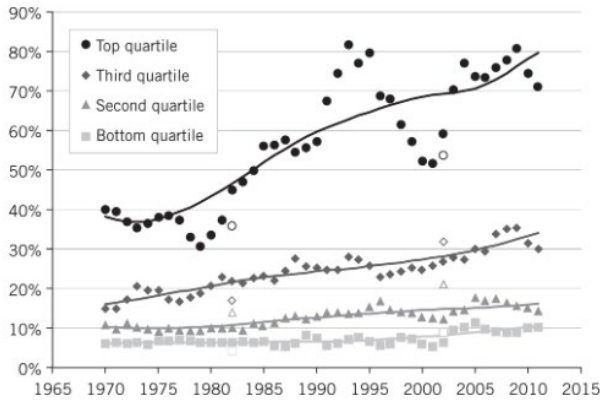
College

College has replaced the military as the primary institution of civil society for the adult transition. But unlike the military, today’s four-year colleges are privatized institutions reserved for the children of the affluent and educated. The evidence, in this regard, could not be clearer. Here are a few key data points on college access and participation by class:

- *A massive class gap has emerged in rates of college completion.* In 1970, approximately 40% of students in the top quartile of family earnings graduated from college, compared to 5% of those in the bottom quartile. By 2011, 77% of students from the top quartile of family earnings graduated from college, while only 9% of students in the bottom quartile had finished (Putnam, 2015). Similarly, Reeves (2017) finds that only a third of those from the middle 40% of parental income and one in 10 of those in the bottom 40% had earned a bachelor’s degree by age 25.
- *Selective colleges are dominated by higher SES students.* Putnam (2015) describes this growing trend: “The fraction of kids from the bottom quartile of the income distribution who ended up at a selective college ... rose from 4% in 1972 to 5% three decades later, but for kids from the top quartile, the equivalent figures were 26% and 36%. By 2004, in the nation’s ‘most competitive’ colleges ... kids from the top quartile of the socioeconomic scale outnumbered kids from the bottom quartile by about 14 to one” (p. 197). Reeves (2017) finds that about 50% of students at the most selective colleges (480 schools) come from the top quintile.
- *Elite colleges are almost completely the domain of the most well-off students.* In most of the Ivy League, at least two-thirds of every class come from the top income quintile (Westover, 2019). Chetty et al. (2017) reports that, “among ‘Ivy-Plus’ colleges ... more students come from families in the top 1% of the income distribution (14.5%) than the bottom half of the income distribution

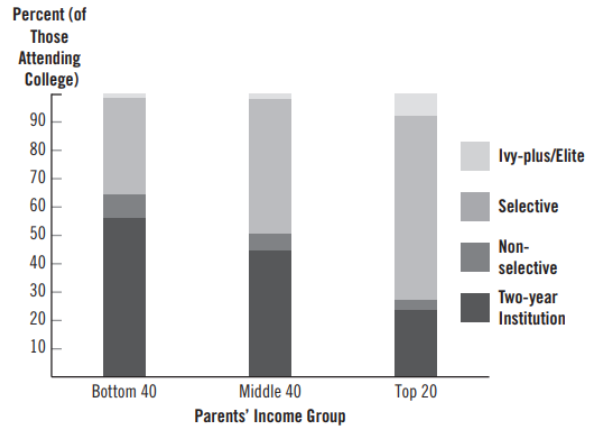
(13.5%). Only 3.8% of students come from the bottom quintile of the income distribution at Ivy-Plus colleges. As a result, children from families in the top 1% are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy-Plus college compared to the children from families in the bottom quintile” (p. 1).

Figure 10. College Degree Completion by Family Income



Source: Putnam (2015)

Figure 11. College Attendance by Parents' Income Group



Source: Reeves (2017)

The causes of this de facto privatization of four-year colleges are multifold. A large part of the story can be explained by the privatization of K-12 education and extracurriculars described in the prior section. Top schools—both exclusive privates and residentially sorted publics—are feeders into selective colleges. More well-off children can participate in the increasingly privatized sports and extracurricular activities that admissions officers prize. And, higher SES children receive all the academic support they need, from tutors to test prep classes, to ensure their grades and test scores hit the marks. But it doesn't end there. Children of educated parents often benefit from legacy admission to the schools that their parents attended. Plus, many colleges reserve spots for athletes who play sports, such as squash and rowing, that are only available at the most well-resourced schools. The result is a system of college admissions that is both explicitly designed to advantage higher SES students and easily gamed to their benefit (Sandel, 2020; Tough, 2019; Reeves, 2017; Putnam, 2015). College, once a private institution of the hereditary aristocracy, is now a private institution of the hereditary meritocracy (*The Economist*, 2015).

If most higher SES students are attending these de facto privatized colleges during the adult transition, where do lower SES emerging adults go? While a fortunate few are admitted to highly selective colleges or less selective state schools that produce high rates of mobility (Chetty et al., 2017), the vast majority end up enrolling in community colleges, for-profit colleges, or no school at all. Community colleges are often touted as engines of upward mobility. However, Putnam (2015) finds that only 12% of community college students complete four-year degrees, even though 81% say they plan to get one when they start. For-profit colleges have been the fastest growing sector of higher education—attracting 13% of all full-time graduates today compared to 2% in 1992—and much of this growth has been driven by enrollment among lower SES students (Putnam, 2015). Unfortunately, these “lower ed” institutions, as Tressie McMillan Cottom (2017) calls them, saddle students with debt while producing abysmal graduation rates. But poor completion rates are not the only shortcoming of community colleges and for-profit colleges. Compared to four-year colleges, these schools have more part-time students, more commuters, and less of a cohort-based experience—all factors that make participating in community and cultivating new relationships more difficult.

What about those who don't go to college at all? The majority just don't have an adult transition. Here, the U.S. is an outlier. The OECD reports that most of its member nations enroll 33% to 55% of their upper secondary students in vocational education. The U.S., in contrast, is the only member country with "no distinct vocational path at the upper secondary level" (American Compass, 2022). As a result, most non-college bound high school grads immediately join the workforce after graduating, encountering a labor market of precarious work with poor pay, benefits, and working conditions (Schneider & Harknett, 2019; Song et al., 2019). The rest may not enter the labor force altogether. Indeed, in parts of the Rust Belt, Appalachia, South, and West, not-working rates for prime-age males ranges from 20% to 30% (Austin et al., 2018). For the lower SES 18- to 22-year-olds who do not go to four-year college, their experience is one of incompleteness, fragmentation, and disconnection.

While the adult transition started as a shared experience of military service, it has become a privatized experience mostly reserved for children of college-educated parents. When lower SES kids do not enroll in four-year colleges or join the military, they miss out on opportunities to build new skills, participate in new institutions, and cultivate new friendships—both in general and across class. Meanwhile, more well-off students entrench their privilege, securing a valued credential, expanding their friendship and mentorship networks, and even meeting fellow well-off life partners through the assortative mating process (Reeves, 2017; Tough, 2019; Mandel, 2020). This divergence in experiences between those who complete college and those who don't is borne out in the data on relationships and community participation. Compared to those without degrees, college graduates are more likely to have met close friends at school (55% versus 34%) and have five or more friends (47% versus 34%) (Orrell et al., 2022; Cox, 2021). Moreover, Flanagan et al. (2008) documents a growing gap between college youth and non-college youth in terms of their connection to institutions, group membership and meeting attendance, and civic engagement. Indeed, Putnam (2015) shows that college-educated 20–25-year-olds are more than twice as likely to engage in two or more civic activities as their peers without degrees, while high-school-educated 20–25-year-olds are more than twice as likely to engage in no civic activities. The participation and relationship disadvantages that lower SES children experience in childhood are thus compounded by the privatized adult transition.

Conclusion

In this section, I demonstrated how the adult transition began as a shared experience of military service during WWII and has been replaced by the privatized experience of college today. Let us now return to our three hypotheses and apply them to the adult transition.

H1: Has civil society become "privatized" during the adult transition? Yes. College has replaced the military as the defining institution of the adult transition. Four-year colleges have become privatized institutions mostly accessible to the children of top-earning families.

H2: Have higher SES 18- to 22-year-olds sustained or replaced community participation, while lower SES ones have not? Yes. College itself is an institution of civil society in which higher SES children participate at significantly greater rates than lower SES children. There is also evidence that college students—who are mostly from well-off backgrounds—participate in their communities at much higher rates than their non-college peers.

H3: Do lower SES 18- to 22-year-olds have fewer absolute and cross-class relationships, both compared to higher SES peers and compared to lower SES 18- to 22-year-olds in the past?

Most likely. I have documented how the military, which is an institution with high cross-class engagement, has been replaced by college, an institution with low cross-class engagement. Still, no data exists for comparing cross-class friendships between the WWII era and today. I have also presented evidence that people without degrees have significantly fewer relationships than people with degrees, and that this gap has grown over time. However, this relationship data is inclusive of adults of all age ranges. I was not able to find data comparing relationships between 18- to 22-year-old students and non-students. Future research would benefit from collecting and analyzing data to compare the relationships of these two groups.

The relational and participation disadvantages that lower SES children experience in childhood are exacerbated during the adult transition. By attending “lower ed” institutions, or no college at all, these 18- to 22-year-olds have limited opportunities to cultivate new relationships. Most leave high school already less institutionally connected than their higher SES peers, and, without a stable institution to anchor their adult transition, this institutional connection withers further. Consequently, this group enters adulthood with fewer relationships and weaker ties to the relationship- and meaning-promoting institutions of civil society. The cycle of cumulative, reinforcing disadvantage continues.

IV: Adulthood: When Community Privatization Leads to Social Isolation

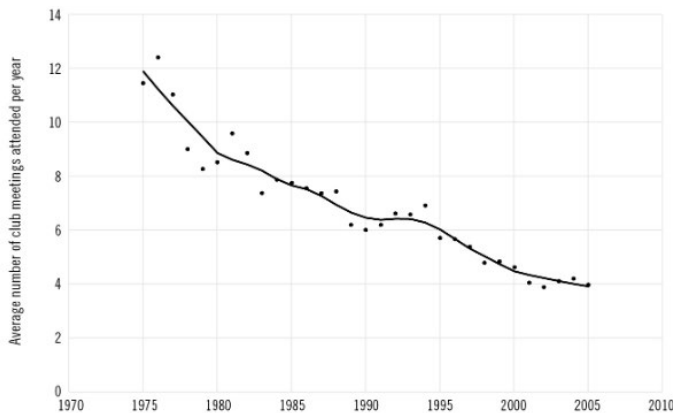
By the time folks without degrees enter adulthood, they are already less engaged with civil society institutions and have fewer relationships. Unfortunately, these participation and relationship gaps are reinforced in adulthood. I start this section by describing how accessible, cross-class institutions of civic life began to significantly decline in the late 1960s and have continued to decline since. I then provide evidence for how America's communities became increasingly sorted by class. Amidst this decline in associational life and increase in geographic sorting, market forces have entered the fold, creating a civil society that is increasingly privatized by class and place. I show how this de facto privatization has extended to our neighborhoods, third places, and social activities. I conclude by documenting how this community privatization in adulthood has exacerbated the class divide in participation and relationships, culminating in the rising rates of deaths of despair among those without degrees.

Civic Decline & Geographic Sorting

Throughout the mid-20th century, participation in civic groups was a defining feature of adult life in America's communities. This was true in wealthier communities and poorer communities, urban places and rural ones, and across all demographic groups (Putnam, 2020). However, membership and participation in the groups that define secular civil society has significantly decreased over the past 50 years. Putnam (2000, 2020) describes how membership in chapter-based associations peaked in the late 1960s and has continued to decline since, reaching the lowest rates ever measured. Putnam (2020) also finds a significant decline in club meeting attendance. In 1975, 64 percent of Americans attended at least one club meeting in the previous year. By 2005, that number had fallen to 33 percent (see **Figure 12**). Between 1965 and 1995, the average American's time investment in non-religious organizational life fell by 38%, from 3.7 hours per month to 2.3 hours per month (Putnam, 2020). Civil society involvement of all kinds appears to have dwindled since the mid-20th century.

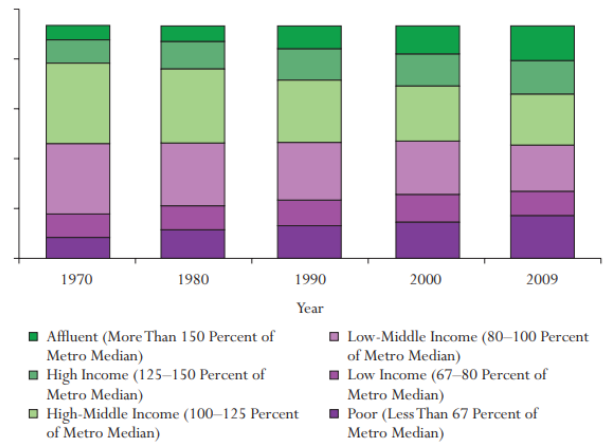
During the same period that America's civic life has been declining, our communities have become increasingly sorted by class. This sorting is occurring both between regions and within specific regions and cities. At the regional level, America has become increasingly defined by *superstar* and *distressed* regions. Superstar regions, such as the San Francisco Bay Area, have agglomeration economies that include outsized shares of the college-educated, high-paying jobs, high-growth firms, and social amenities. Meanwhile, distressed regions, such as Southwest Virginia, have de-agglomeration economies defined by population decline, job loss, firm closures and exits, and civil society erosion (Moretti, 2012; Autor et al., 2016). A similar dynamic of class-based sorting is occurring within regions and cities. Bischoff and Reardon (2014) found that, between 1975 and 2009, "the proportion of families living in poor or affluent neighborhoods doubled, from 15% to 33%, and the proportion of families living in middle-income neighborhoods declined, from 65% to 42%" (p. 225). Massey et al. (2009) explained this dynamic, "During the late 20th century ... the well-educated and the affluent increasingly segregated themselves off from the rest of American society" (p. 6). This increasing geographic isolation of the well-off means that a growing proportion of society's resources are concentrated in a shrinking proportion of its neighborhoods (Bischoff & Reardon, 2014). As these affluent places have become increasingly inaccessible and rich with resources, much of the rest of America has become increasingly distressed and depleted. This geographic sorting has severe consequences for the strength of civil society in these places.

Figure 12. Average # of Club Meetings Attended Annually



Source: Putnam (2015)

Figure 13. Neighborhood Composition by Class (1970-2009)



Source: Bischoff & Reardon (2014)

Privatized Places, Privatized Activities

As traditional civic groups have declined and places have become increasingly sorted by class, civil society has become, as Timothy Carney (2019) puts it, “a high-end good that most people can’t afford” (p. 140). Market forces have interacted with the decline in associational life and the increase in geographic sorting to create a civil society that is privatized by class and place. Consequently, the more public, accessible institutions of civil society that peaked in the mid-20th century have been largely replaced with privatized institutions in privatized places that have higher barriers to entry (Cox, 2021).

This privatization of civil society can be observed in our neighborhoods and our gathering places. As our neighborhoods have become sorted by class, we increasingly interact with neighbors who have similar educational and socioeconomic backgrounds as our own. But not all neighborhoods are created equal. The exclusive, privatized neighborhoods of the upper middle class have significantly higher levels of social interaction, trust, and connectedness than lower-income neighborhoods (Putnam, 2015; Carney, 2019). Therefore, the self-segregation of the wealthy in certain places also contributes to the hoarding of social capital in these places. Physical spaces matter, too. These more well-off neighborhoods, cities, and regions are also more likely to have *third places*—that is, places where people spend time between home (first place) and work (second place), such as libraries, parks, and cafes (Brookings, 2016). According to Cox (2021), 66% of Americans with a college degree have such a place, compared to just 46% of those without a college education. But the problem is not just that these third places are increasingly found in privatized communities, it is that third places themselves are becoming privatized. These “ersatz third places,” such as the growing realm of co-working spaces and private clubs, are designed to be exclusive (Conti, 2022; Zettl, 2022). And these third places are not neutral spaces: people who frequent third places experience several positive outcomes, including increased social connectedness and lower levels of loneliness (Cox, 2021). So, when these spaces become privatized by place and class, it is lower SES people who lose out.

Our social activities have also become increasingly privatized and decreasingly accessible to lower SES adults. Through the *Mapping the Modern Agora Project*, Han et al. (2022) is finding that the density of

civil society in a specific community is positively correlated with the urbanicity, educational attainment, and earnings of that place. The community groups with which we engage to serve, learn, connect, and grow are, therefore, more concentrated in the places that have become more exclusive. Still, Han's research is only limited to nonprofits, and, just as youth extracurriculars have become pay-to-play, so too have adult social activities. Any parent will tell you that the social activities of their children turn into their own social activities. In this way, the privatized extracurriculars of children have become the privatized extracurriculars of their adult parents. Writing in *America*, John Miller (2022) describes this dynamic among a travel team he coached:

I realized that the parents were not just buying baseball instruction for their children ... they were paying for community. At a time when this sprawling country lacks shared public spaces, private sports clubs are a great way for people to share time together. But that community should not be available only for those who can pay for it (p. 4).

It's not just about children's activities, though: pay-to-play, adult social activities represent a growing community outlet in America—but only for those who can afford it. Over the past decade, CrossFit has expanded exponentially to 13,000 boxes in the U.S., adult sports leagues have grown to 1.6 million members, and yoga participation has doubled (Landsverk, 2019; *Outside* Podcast, 2019; Wei, 2016). In *How We Gather* (2015), the authors explain that private fitness classes—particularly SoulCycle and CrossFit—are fulfilling the same role that religious and civic institutions once served, providing outlets for community, personal transformation, and accountability. The same can be said of community arts programs, such as improv and creative writing classes. But these forms of community are prohibitively expensive: SoulCycle costs \$40 per session, a CrossFit membership goes for \$250 per month, and a multi-week arts course will run you anywhere from \$250 to \$500. And these organizations are often located in more well-off cities and regions, particularly in the privatized neighborhoods where people can pay. These substantial financial and geographic barriers are having predictable consequences. Studies on participation in these activities suggest that participants are overwhelmingly college-educated, urban-dwelling, and high-income (Stulburg, 2017; NEA, 2019). When the CrossFit box replaces the Lion's Club, it is, yet again, lower SES adults who lose access to community.

In adulthood, the privatization of civil society is acutely affecting Americans who are lower on the socioeconomic ladder. In 2019, Pew found that 70% of college graduates are active in at least one community group, compared to just 48% of high school graduates. This divide in community participation has contributed to a friendship divide between those with and without degrees. Cox (2021) finds that college graduates are more likely than those with no college education to have activity-based friendships (60% versus 41%)⁴ and place-based friendships (78% versus 62%).⁵ Cross-class friendships appear to be on the decline as well: according to Chetty et al. (2022), American adults are mostly forming friendships with those in their same social class. And Americans without degrees are becoming increasingly socially isolated. Among those with no college education, the portion who reported having two or fewer friends doubled over the last 30 years, from 19% in 1990 to 37% in 2021. In comparison, just 25% of college graduates say they have two or fewer friends (Cox, 2021). When it comes to social connections,⁶ the college divide is even starker. Approximately 25% of Americans without college degrees report having no immediate social connections, compared to just 9% of college graduates (Cox,

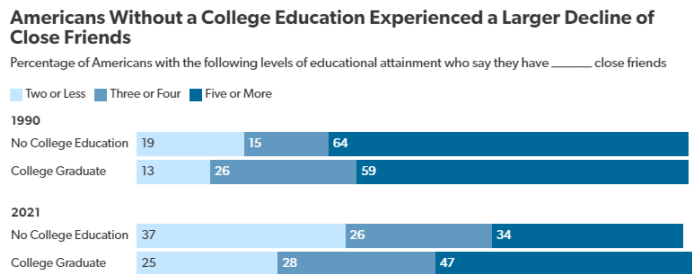
⁴ Activity-based friendships include friends from sports, hobbies, or community service.

⁵ Place-based friendships include friends that people mostly see in certain places (i.e., work, school, gym, café).

⁶ This survey defined a "social connection" as someone who you talked to about an important personal matter within the past six months.

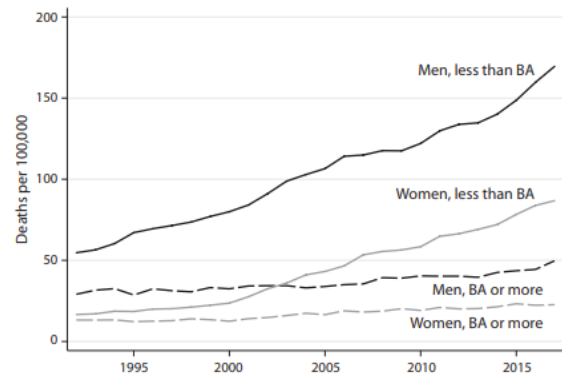
2021). This college divide in social isolation has significant implications for mortality. Building on Holt-Lunstad’s finding that weak social relationships increase individuals’ risk of mortality by 50%, Zoorob and Salemi (2017) found that high levels of social isolation and low levels of social capital within communities are significantly associated with deaths of despair. Indeed, by 2017, white people without degrees were more than three times more likely to die a death of despair than their more educated counterparts (Case & Deaton, 2020). The privatization of civil society may seem innocuous in childhood—lower SES kids having fewer opportunities to learn the flute or play soccer. But it ends in a dark place in adulthood—contributing to social isolation and deaths of despair.

Figure 14. Friendships by Educational Attainment (1990 & 2021)



Source: Cox (2021)

Figure 15. Deaths of Despair, White Non-Hispanics, Age 45-54



Source: Case & Deaton (2020)

Conclusion

This section articulates how the accessible, cross-class community life that peaked in the mid-20th century has been replaced by privatized places and activities. I apply our three original hypotheses to adulthood.

H1: Has civil society become “privatized” during adulthood? Yes. Civil society privatization touches all aspects of adult community life—from our neighborhoods, to our third places, to our social activities. Our neighborhoods—like our schools—have become de facto sorted by class. Our third places and social activities have become increasingly privatized—unaffordable to those with fewer means and inaccessible to those who don’t live in certain geographies.

H2: Have college-educated adults sustained or replaced community participation, while those without degrees have not? Yes. Adults with degrees have sustained their community participation at much higher rates than their peers without degrees. Macro-level data on engagement in private social activities like CrossFit and improv classes are not available. However, the demographics reported in the available studies indicate that participation is dominated by the college-educated.

H3: Do adults without degrees have fewer absolute and cross-class relationships, both compared to peers with degrees and compared to adults without degrees in the past? Yes. Cox’s research provides clear evidence that adults without degrees have fewer friendships than the college-educated and fewer friendships than those without degrees had in the past. While there is

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limited data on trends in cross-class friendships among adults over time, Chetty's research demonstrates just how sorted by class our friendships have become.

The cycle of cumulative disadvantage around community participation and relationship formation culminates in adulthood. Lower SES children leave childhood with lower participation rates and fewer relationships. Then, they miss out on the opportunity to participate in college and cultivate new relationships during the adult transition. Finally, throughout adulthood, they encounter many of the similar dynamics that constrained their participation and limited their friendships in childhood—neighborhoods sorted by class, privatized gathering places, and pay-to-play social activities. The result is a class of civically detached, economically immobile adults who are connected to few, if any, of the activities and relationships that make life worth living.

V. Discussion

Civil society appears to have become privatized at each stage of the life course. As neighborhoods become increasingly sorted by class and exclusive, the highest social capital neighborhoods with the strongest public schools and densest civil society become de facto privatized and largely inaccessible to lower SES people. As the cross-class institution of the military has been replaced by four-year colleges largely reserved for America's most affluent children, the adult transition has shifted from an experience defined by collectivism and mobility to one defined by exclusivity and entrenched privilege. And as youth extracurriculars and adult social activities become increasingly pay-to-play, less well-off kids and adults in less well-off places lose access to these forms of community. Consequently, lower SES individuals experience disadvantages in community participation and relationship formation that begins in childhood, compounds during the adult transition, and is further reinforced throughout adulthood. These compounding, cumulative disadvantages have contributed to significant disparities between those with and without degrees—particularly in terms of institutional participation and attachment, friendships and social connections, economic mobility, and health outcomes, such as deaths of despair.

There are, of course, no simple solutions to this complex and interlocking set of problems. Chetty et al. (2022), Reeves (2017), and Putnam (2015) all propose the elimination of exclusionary zoning and the promotion of abundant, mixed-income housing to reduce residential sorting. But this is easier said than done. Zoning decisions are almost entirely controlled at the local level, and while state-level legislation mandating the development of *missing middle* housing has passed in Oregon, the headwinds of NIMBYism show few signs of letting up. When it comes to extracurricular activities, Putnam (2015) suggests that schools should eliminate pay-to-play policies for school-based extracurriculars. Though this would result in some progress in increasing access to extracurriculars within schools, it would do nothing to address the growing problem of privatized non-school based activities. And, to reverse the privatization of adult social activities, Eric Klinenberg (2018) and Putnam (2020) both believe it will require a renaissance in community-building for the common good. This could take the form of revitalizing *social infrastructure*, such as libraries and parks, as Klinenberg suggests in *Palaces for the People*. Or, as Putnam (2020) envisions in *The Upswing*, it could involve creating new institutions of civil society that are accessible across class and generate strong attachment—much like what occurred during the Progressive Era, when institutions like the Rotary Club and YMCA were formed. Presently, the prospects for this type of community renaissance remain unclear.

Perhaps the greatest problem of all is the defining role of college during the adult transition. It drives the competitive forces in childhood that contribute to residential sorting and the extracurricular arms race. And it shapes many facets of adulthood, from where we live, to what we do, to who we call friends. Here, Sandel (2020), Case and Deaton (2020), and Cass (2022) all advocate for a shift away from the *college-for-all* system, which, through its class-driven sorting process, glorifies supposed “winners” and shames supposed “losers” under the false pretenses of merit. The creation of legitimate alternative pathways through vocational training and apprenticeships could provide more opportunities for mobility and reduce the centrality of four-year college in American life. Advocates for national public service believe that a mandatory, shared experience of service could offer similar benefits. In their eyes, service could both recreate a cross-class experience of the adult transition (akin to the military) and, potentially, reduce the importance of college as the orienting institution for emerging adults. When viewed through the lens of reducing college's centrality, both of these proposals seem destined to fail. So long as the economic, social, and cultural returns to receiving a bachelor's degree remain significant, it is difficult to imagine college's centrality diminishing, especially for children whose parents have degrees. However, if these

proposals are assessed based on their potential to bolster community participation, institutional attachment, and relationship development, both seem to hold promise.

Despite the contributions of this paper, it comes with several limitations. For one, I relied on the analysis of other researchers, so I did not have a consistent set of metrics around community participation or relationships to compare across the life course. I also treated socioeconomic status and educational attainment as if they were the same category. By taking this shortcut, I may have obscured meaningful differences in outcomes that could have emerged if I treated them as separate categories. For my analysis of the adult transition, I was not able to find good data on friendship differences between college students and non-college students in the 18-22 age range. While the relationship data I used implied that college students accumulated more friendships due to their college experience, these data applied to all adults and, thus, were imperfect replacements. I encountered similar data challenges in my attempt to describe the privatization of adult social activities. Unfortunately, no macro-level data exists that would allow me to show how exclusive, private institutions like CrossFit or SoulCycle have replaced the open, civic institutions of the mid-20th century that Robert Putnam often describes. Further, demographic data from private companies are difficult to access, so I made generalizations about their demographics based on a small number of studies. Finally, my exclusive focus on secular civil society was a self-imposed limitation. However, other institutions—including religion, work, unions, and marriage—significantly influence the type and number of relationships that people have in life. The exclusion of these institutions from my analysis limits its explanatory power. As such, the connection between civil society privatization and declines in participation and relationships should be viewed as correlative, not causal.

Despite these limitations, this paper meaningfully contributes to the literature on public health, civil society, and democracy. Social relationships and social isolation are two sides of the same coin. Our social relationships are major mitigants against deaths of despair, while social isolation meaningfully increases our risks of dying these kinds of deaths (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010; Holt-Lunstad, 2022; Case & Deaton, 2020). I have shown how lower SES Americans confront consistent disadvantages in community participation and relationship cultivation that compound at each stage of the life course. Consequently, by the time these Americans reach adulthood, they are significantly more disconnected from civil society and their fellow Americans than they were a half-century ago. In light of this data, the rise in deaths of despair and decline in economic mobility among those without college degrees should not come as a surprise. When we lose friends, we lose a much-needed source of social support. When we lose our community, we lose the activities and relationships that make life meaningful. We live for others—and, as civil society has become privatized, more of us have fewer others to live for.

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