
SOCIETY

Schools and 'Social Capital'

"The Creation and Destruction of Social Capital: Implications for the Law" by James S. Coleman, in *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, & Public Policy* (No. 3, 1988), Notre Dame Law School, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556.

Two years ago, in a controversial study comparing 1,015 public and private high schools, Coleman, a University of Chicago sociologist, found that private schools, particularly Catholic schools, frequently outperformed public schools.

Less widely noted at the time were differences among the private schools. The "independent" private schools Coleman studied had one thing in common with the public schools: high dropout rates (close to 15 percent). By contrast, Catholic high schools had only four percent dropout rates. (Likewise, other religious schools had very few dropouts.) The rates for Catholic schools were virtually the same whether the students themselves were Catholics or not.

Why should this be so?

Coleman believes that the explanation lies in something he calls "social capital." Financial and physical capital are familiar concepts. During the last 30 years, economists have recognized the importance of "human capital"—skills and education. Social capital, says Coleman, "exists in the *relations* between persons."

The chief source of social capital (e.g., trust, shared values and standards) is the family: the bonds among and between parents and children. But the "community surrounding the school" is also a source of social capital. Sometimes, it seems to pro-

vide enough to compensate for weak families: Catholic school students from one-parent families, unlike their public school counterparts, have the same (low) dropout rate as their classmates from two-parent families.

Until recently, Coleman believes, public schools were backed by enough community "social capital" to function well. But non-working mothers were the backbone of these communities; now that many have taken jobs, the communities (and families) have weakened. Indeed, says Coleman, the United States has been depleting its "social capital" for two centuries, ever since men began leaving their farms for jobs away from home.

Families and communities have no monopoly on the production of "social capital," according to Coleman, nor are the schools the only institutions where it matters. "Social capital" is vital to the functioning of business, for example, especially in Japan.

What can be done to replenish America's "social capital?" Schools can actively organize parent "communities"; corporations can grant parental leaves and take other measures to strengthen families. But it may be, Coleman says, that other institutions—perhaps the large corporation—will have to perform some of the functions that families once did.

Crime and Community

"Making Neighborhoods Safe" by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (Feb. 1989), 8 Arlington St., Boston, Mass. 02166.

Most urban crime-fighting is "incident-oriented": a citizen reports a burglary; the police arrive as quickly as possible, record the relevant information, and try to track down the burglar.

Police chiefs in many cities now realize that this traditional strategy is insufficient, according to Wilson, a UCLA professor and noted specialist on crime, and Kelling, a Northeastern University criminologist.