

BOWLING ALONE

By Robert D. Putnam
 Simon & Schuster, © 2000
 541 pages



As Reviewed by
Bowen H. "Buzz" McCoy, CRE

RELATED READING RECOMMENDED BY THE REVIEWER

- DIETRICH BONHOEFFER
Life Together
 Harper & Row, 1954
- JOHN GARDNER
Self Renewal
 Harper & Row, 1963
- THOMAS PETERS &
 ROBERT H. WATERMAN
In Search of Excellence
 Harper & Row, 1982
- DAVID STEINDLE-RAST
Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer
 Paulist Press, 1980
- PAUL TILLICH
The Courage To Be
 Yale University Press, 1952
- GEORGE E. VALLIANT
Adaptation to Life
 Little Brown & Co, 1977

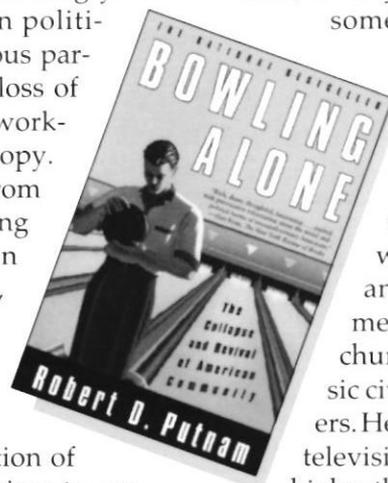
Robert D. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard and president of the American Political Science Association, chose the rather flip title, *Bowling Alone*, for his treatise on the decline of “social capital” in America. He defines social capital as connections among individuals, or social networking, and the norm of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. We CREs are well aware of the trust and reciprocity which arises from networking among professionals of the highest standing; and it is unlikely those of us who are active CREs would agree with Putnam that there has been a serious decline in social capital.

In the first section of his book, Putnam painstakingly defines the decline in political, civic, and religious participation, as well as loss of social capital in the workplace and in philanthropy. His research ranges from the decline in bowling leagues to decreases in voter participation, church attendance, bridge clubs, book reading groups, and the like.

In the second section of the book, Putnam claims to analyze the reasons for the decline in sociability. He concludes that the decline may be apportioned as follows: pressure of time and money, including two-career families (10

percent); suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl (10 percent); television (25 percent); and the replacement of the civic generation venerated by Tom Brokaw by their less involved children and grandchildren—the “baby boomers” and the “gen-X” (50 percent). Miscellaneous other factors cited might include higher divorce rates, growth of the welfare state, globalization, and the social turmoil of the 1960s.

Television viewing is thus cited as a major factor in the decline in social capital. Putnam quotes T.S. Eliot: “Television is a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.” Putnam cites



statistics depicting negative correlations between television watching and volunteering, letter writing to friends and relatives, club meeting attendance, churchgoing, and basic civility towards others. He states that chronic television watchers have higher than usual incidents of headaches, indigestion, and sleeplessness. After reading this book, one ponders why Lydia Pinckham’s potion is not advertised on television. Putnam states

