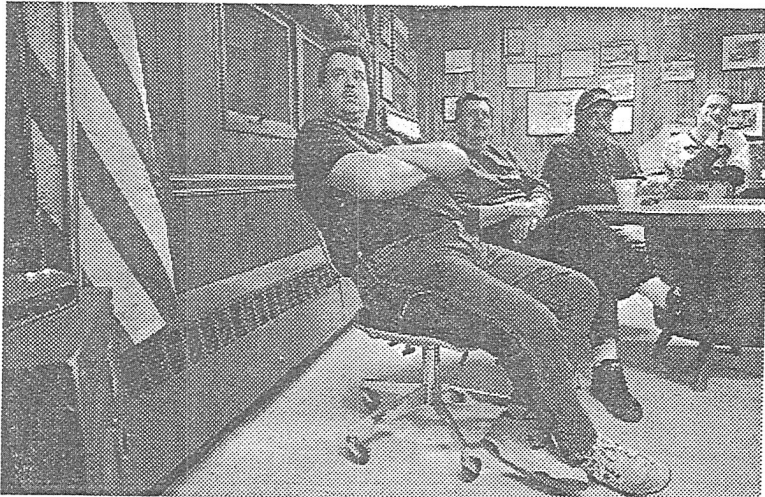


# Fading American Dream Haunts the

2/1/96  
*Fifth in a series*

By Paul Taylor  
Washington Post Staff Writer



BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Volunteer fireman Don Bleistein, in cap, blames crime for extinguishing sense of community that helped spark Levittown, Pa., after World War II.

LEVITTOWN, Pa.

**T**his is where the modern suburb was invented, by a remarkable generation that knew how. Levittown was built at midcentury by men and women who had survived the Depression and won the big war and learned to do big things together. The epic story of their own youth had taught them to trust government, authority and each other.

In Levittown, they applied their relentless civic energy to building a better life. On the curved, alphabetized, meticulously tree-shaded streets, they laid out the proposition that owning a detached house with a patch of grass in front and back should be a normal expectation of the American middle class.

Every man a king. All things ever better. No society had ever set its standards so high.

## 'Civic Generation'

Today, as so many Americans seem gripped by a shapeless anxiety, the members of this "long civic generation" are feeling less all-mastering than they once did. In the dusk of their lives, they're suspended halfway between contentment and melancholy. Their own dreams came true. But they're haunted by the perfect future that didn't, the one they never managed to invent for their children.

"We were the lucky ones," said Martin Sooby, 67, who moved here the day after he was married in 1954. He spent the first nine years of his life in the hard poverty of Pennsylvania's coal region, the next 10 in a Philadelphia orphanage and the next six in the Army in Germany.

"We hit the seam just right," he continued. "When we came back from the war, it was a question of supply and demand. The factories were all booming, and they needed our labor. You look around today, you see what's going on with downsizing and layoffs and

See TRUST, A10, Col. 1

pension rip-offs, not to mention crime, divorce, drugs, and you ask yourself, 'What chance do our kids and grandkids have?'

"I wouldn't trade my time for theirs," agreed Murray Melamed, 82, a retired restaurant equipment salesman who each noon joins Sooby and a small gang of other elderly hunks for a sweaty hour on the Exercycles and Nautilus machines at the Levittown Public Recreation Association.

"We didn't have uncertainty," said Sooby. "You got married, you stayed married. You got a job, you kept it."

Sooby had several jobs, sometimes two at a time. For the last 17 years of his working life he was day shift supervisor at the toll booth at Exit 30 of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, not far from here. He got that job through politics. He'd been active in the local Democratic Party, a union shop steward, and an official of a local consumers group.

Now retired and a widower, Sooby has drifted away from these attachments, and not merely in response to life cycle changes. At some point he can't put his finger on—maybe it was in the 1960s, maybe the '70s, maybe more recently—he began to lose his civic faith. "You can't take Uncle Sam at face value anymore," he now says, more in sorrow than anger.

He is not alone. A recent poll commissioned by The Washington Post, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University has found that over the past generation Americans have lost a substantial amount of trust in their government and in each other.

A leading authority on this decline, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, has advanced a provocative theory to explain it. He parts company with others who place the blame on factors such as residential mobility, wage stagnation, family breakup, social chaos. Instead, he blames television, a medium, he argues, that invites people to think things are worse than they actually are.

America gave birth to television at about the same time it gave birth to Levittown, and the history of each lends support for Putnam's theory. But the view from here also suggests a complex interplay of causes. Three stand out: Expectations for a better tomorrow ran too high. Human nature proved to be too messy to perfect. And television exaggerated the shortfall.

Sooby's disillusionment is both poignant and instructive, given that his own life passage has affirmed the American dream of perpetual progress.

But not his children's. For the past four years, he has been playing host to his daughter, son-in-law and their three children, who have been living with him ever since they lost their own house when the son-in-law lost his job in the massive layoffs at the nearby Fairless Works steel plant.



BY BRAD WYE—THE WASHINGTON POST



Located in four local jurisdictions, Levittown has 17,311 houses that were sold in six models and priced from \$10,999 to \$16,999.

When it opened in 1951, Fairless Works was the largest steel mill ever built. For two generations its open hearths spit out a seemingly endless bounty of high-paying union jobs. Then it succumbed to new technology and international competition, dealing a blow that still reverberates four years later in nearby blue-collar suburbs like Levittown.

Sooby's daughter is a barkeep at the local Sheraton. His son-in-law has been trying to make it as an artist. Sooby provides shelter and child care. He enjoys their company, but he feels for them. "This isn't the way things were supposed to work out," he said.

For Sooby, the suspicion that things weren't working began to dawn long before the steel plant closed. He talked about the 1960s.

"Those kids who were protesting the Vietnam War, I thought they were pains in the asses at the time. Hippies. We believed [Vietnam-era Defense Secretary Robert S.] McNamara. We thought he was brilliant man, and now he's crying over what he did. Hey, why cry, Bob? You can't bring back the dead.

"It turns out those hippies were right. They had the guts to take on authority. Our generation never did. We took the hurts and the pains and just got on with it. They had guts, but I don't know what it got them."

Melamed: "But the '60s, that's when the drugs started."

Sooby: "Yeah, when you have escapism through drugs, something's wrong in society."

### 'Everybody Is Suspicious'

Something's wrong in society. A familiar refrain in Levittown these days, with many variations on the theme.

Town Manager John Burke of Middletown Township (one of four political units into which Levittown falls) copes with a tax base that

hasn't kept pace with inflation, township services that have lagged and a citizenry that keeps getting grumpier:

"Everybody is suspicious. Everybody thinks you're trying to rip them off. Ten years ago I could meet with people and have a high-minded conversation. Now everyone comes right at you from the get-go. Idiots like Rush Limbaugh have emboldened people. Everyone's hostile and rude. My secretary fields the phone calls and it's gotten to where she's thinking of quitting."

Richard Heierling, 67, a retired 3M technician, is trying to organize local residents to persuade Bristol Township officials (whose budget woes are more dire than neighboring Middletown's) to start filling potholes:

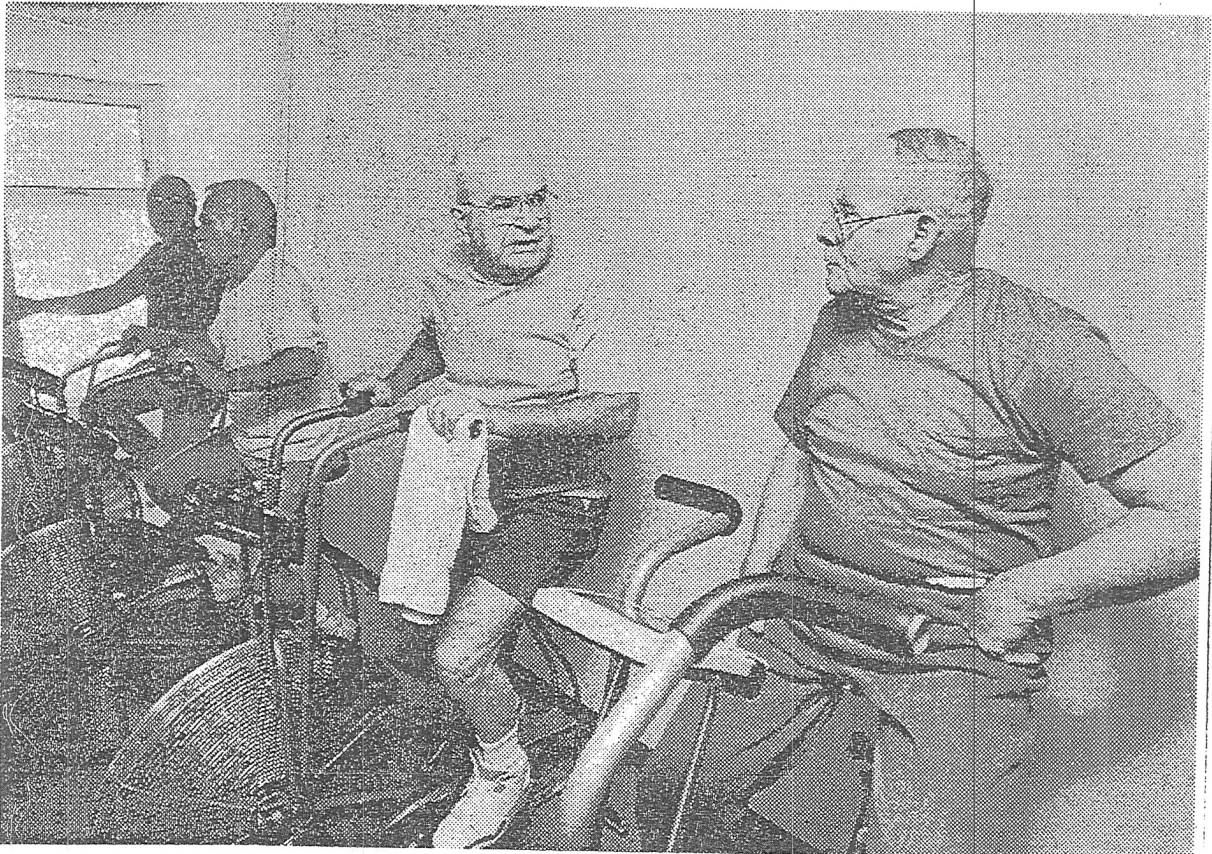
"There are a lot of I've-got-miners around here now. There's not nearly as much community activity as there used to be. Everybody's working; everyone's busy. And everyone thinks government is worse than it is. Sure there are inefficiencies, too many \$400 hammers and that



Larry Raffle, right, goes over police budget with Mayor Tony Cippulo, left. A township official complains that no one has time for the community.

PHOTOS BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

## REALITY CHECK: *The Politics of Mistrust*



PHOTOS BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST



Levittown's original generation, Martin Sooby, Murray Melamed, Ben Killan and William Thompson, all above left, works out daily at recreational center. Another, fitness instructor Ruth Munro, left, holds one of her 10 grandchildren.

1,850. Most other civic groups in Levittown have disappeared. And many of the home lots now have fences.

In 1960, 26 percent of Levittown's women worked; by 1990, 61 percent did. In 1960, 120 Levittown families had three cars; by 1990, 4,076 did. In 1960, there were 33,750 children in Levittown under age 16. By 1990, there were just 13,202.

Levittown, in short, has gotten busier, older, more mobile and more suspicious, a pretty good description of how the entire American middle class has changed over the last generation.

In most other ways that can be measured, Levittown has remained resolutely middle class.

House values have risen with inflation to about \$120,000, and medium family income to \$43,000, pretty close to the national middle. Education levels have gone up, wages have stagnated, but with more family members working standards of living have inched forward though not nearly as fast as they did in the 1950s and 1960s.

People here feel as if the slack has been taken out of life.

### Television Induces Passivity

In one of his scholarly whodunits about social distrust and civic disengagement, Putnam acknowledges these changes in society. But he also finds that as suspects to the crime, they offer some pretty good alibis.

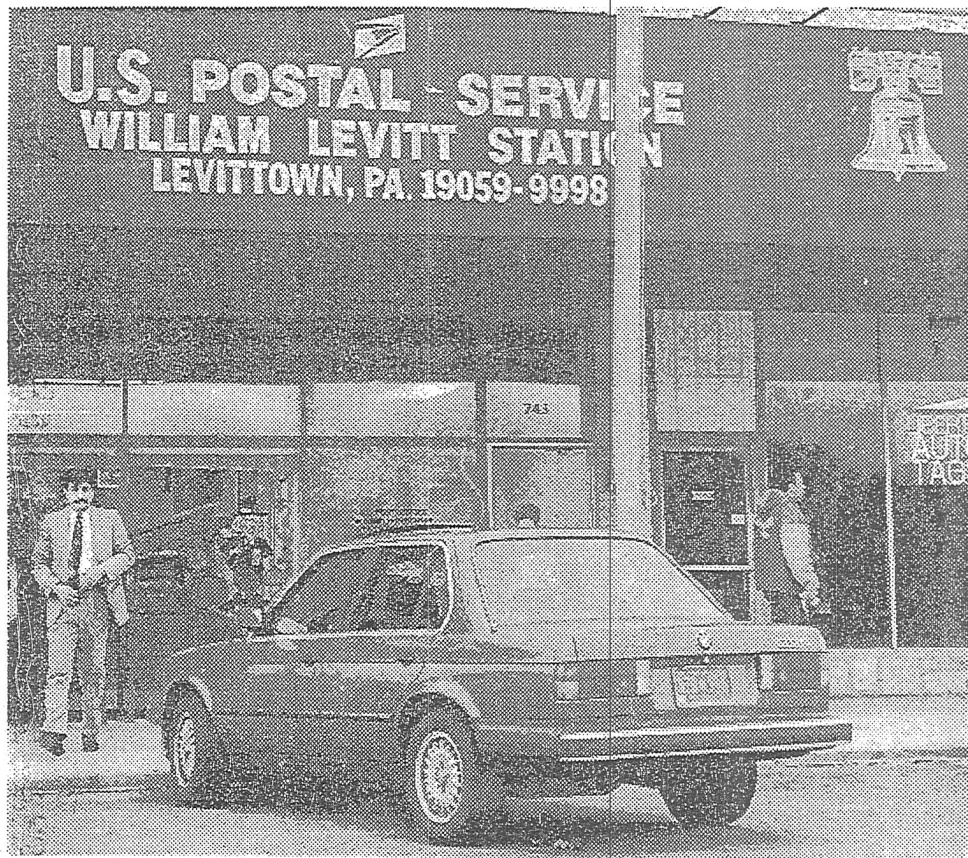
For example, he finds that social trust has declined most among the affluent, raising doubts that the phenomenon is associated with wage stagnation. And he finds that the longer hours people work, the more likely they are to participate in community activities, raising doubts that busyness or women in the work force is the explanation.

After dismissing several other suspects in similar fashion, Putnam fingers television. He argues that it privatizes leisure time; it induces (or at least reinforces) passivity; and it may increase pessimism about human nature. He cites studies showing that each hour of increased television viewing is associated with less social trust, less group membership, less voting, etc. And that's not just a result of time displacement. Heavy newspaper reading, he notes, is associated with increases in social trust and civic engagement.

How does television have such a dramatic impact? Here's one way:

In scores of interviews conducted for this article, the leading concern people in Levittown expressed about their community was increased crime. Unsurprisingly so: over the past decade,

See TRUST, A11, Col. 1



U.S. Postal Service station serves the suburbanites who reside in Levittown, Pa., which was a development constructed by William J. Levitt from 1952 to 1958 for postwar America.

crime has been the No. 1 worry national polls as well.

But guess what? Violent crime in Levittown today is lower than it was a generation ago, about 20 percent lower, according to Bristol Township Police Chief Tom Mills. Back in "the old days," there was more crime because there were more young adults here. They're the criminals.

How to square this disparity between perception and reality? Television. On television, crime is everywhere. It dominates news as well as entertainment because it supplies everything the little box consumes: danger, drama and great visuals.

When crimes committed in Philadelphia, New York or Hollywood scribble keep turning up on the television screens of Levittown, small wonder that Levittowners develop an outsized estimate of the perils of modern life. Or that husbands (jokingly?) issue shoot-to-kill orders to their spouses.

One can push this tentative analysis into other realms of modern life. Numerous academic studies have shown that on television, the public square is presented as a dysfunctional place where insincere politicians angle for narrow tactical advantage. Why would citizens want to participate in such a spectacle?

Social scientists say that television invites citizens to view politics and government with a postmodern smirk. "Television teaches us to prefer Dana Carvey's George Bush to George Bush's George Bush," writes media scholar Roderick Hart.

### No Pay Raise in 5 Years

The civic generation that built Levittown mastered just about every challenge its members faced. But they never perfected tomorrow, and they never tamed television.

Still, that's not the last word on Levittown. It comes from the home of Alex and Ruth Munro.

They moved into their "Levittowner" in 1958. Alex had immigrated to this country as a child from Ireland; Ruth came from Norway. He's a carpenter. As a young man he helped build some of Levitt's houses.

They have three grown children and 10 grandchildren. All live nearby.

Alex "retired" last month but still works six days a week, and expects to until he dies. He thinks he lives in "the greatest country in the world."

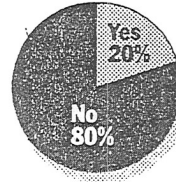
Ruth isn't sure anymore. She re-



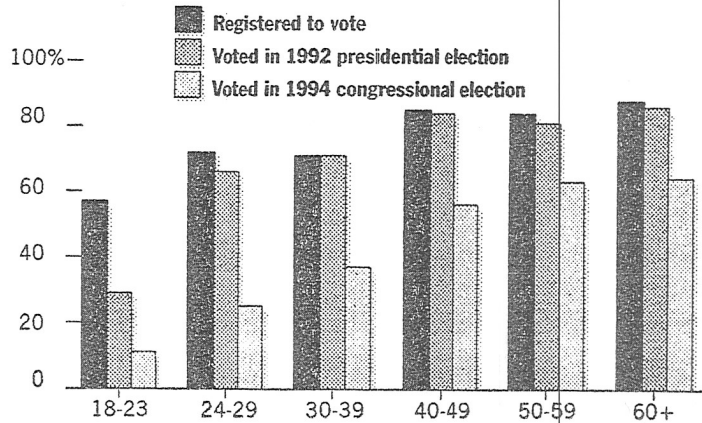
## GENERATIONAL DISTINCTIONS

Only 1 in 5 Americans participates in community civic organizations.

**Q:** Do you regularly attend or participate in a civic organization or service club, like the Chamber of Commerce, the Kiwanis Club, or the PTA?



Americans' political participation differs markedly by generation.



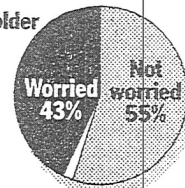
Older Americans are less worried about the threat of violent crime than younger Americans.

**Q:** How worried are you, if at all, that you might become a victim of violent crime during the coming year?

Under 45



45 and older



The results of this Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University national survey are based on telephone interviews with 1,514 randomly selected adults, and was conducted Nov. 28 to Dec. 4, 1995. The margin of sampling error for the overall results is plus or minus 3 percentage points; the margin of error for subgroup populations is larger. Sampling error is but one source of many potential errors in this or any other opinion poll. Interviewing was done by Princeton Survey Research Associates of Princeton, N.J.

THE WASHINGTON POST

members that when her children were infants she'd let them nap outside in their baby carriages on warm afternoons. Now whenever she rolls her youngest grandkids to the grocery store, she straps them in a harness. "That won't stop the kidnapper, but it may slow him down."

The Munro's oldest child, Alex

Jr., 38, is also a carpenter. He hasn't seen a raise in five years "and I don't know anybody who has." Some of the men laid off from the steel plant have become cut-price carpenters, so it can be hard for him to get work. His wife Susan is a waitress, studying to be a nurse. Asked about politics, she said, "The public isn't in control anymore. The lobbyists are. The older I get, the more powerless

feel." Neither she nor Alex Jr. votes.

The Munro's youngest daughter, Michelle, worries about cancer sites, which she suspects are being given up in her neighborhood by a nearby incinerator. "I'm keeping an eye on that," she said. "We may have to move."

Joy, the middle child, says she takes her political cues from her husband, Chris, a plumber. He grew up in a Democratic family, then switched when he decided that "the Republicans do a better job of following the Bible." Any political heroes? He thought he liked House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), but now he isn't sure. "I've been hearing some bad things about him lately."

Isn't there anyone in this healthy, happy, warm, loving, resilient, hard-working family who shares grandpa's unshakable faith in the idea of America?

Yes—just skip a generation. The youngest Munros are growing up in

a Levittown where life looks a little tough. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they aren't being taught by circumstance of time, place and plenty to expect a perfect tomorrow.

And that seems all right to them.

They're already honing their survival skills. "I think I'll try white-collar stuff," said Alex III, 16. "Maybe teaching or social work. I'll do alright."

They're also learning to take their pleasures where they find them. "If grandma didn't move to this country," said Ryan, 9, "we wouldn't have known about these!" With great gusto, he reached into his grandma's kitchen cabinet and pulled out a bag of Mr. Tater Crisps.

*SUNDAY: Overcoming mistrust*

---

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** 

To read the full text of the survey, see *Digital Ink*, The Post's on-line service. To learn about *Digital Ink*, call 202-334-4740.

## ABOUT THIS SERIES

**T**his survey is the second in a series of polls that The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University are conducting to measure the ways that information shapes how people think and act.

Representatives of the three sponsors worked closely to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results on which this series of articles is based. The Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation with Harvard University are publishing independent summaries of the survey findings; each organization bears the sole responsibility for the work that appears under its name. The Kaiser Family Foundation and The Post paid for the survey and related expenses. The survey data will be sent later this year to the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut, where computer tapes of the informa-

tion will be available. A copy of results from the Post/Kaiser/Harvard survey may be obtained by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation at 1-800-656-4533 and asking for report No. 1110.

A total of 1,514 randomly selected adults were interviewed Nov. 28 to Dec. 4, 1995, for this project. Margin of sampling error for the overall results was plus or minus 3 percentage points and larger when results are based on part of the sample. Sampling error is, however, only one source of error in public opinion polls. Telephone interviewing for this survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates of Princeton, N.J.

Additional results reported in these articles were based on questions asked on other national surveys with samples of about 1,000 each conducted by ICR Research of Media, Pa.