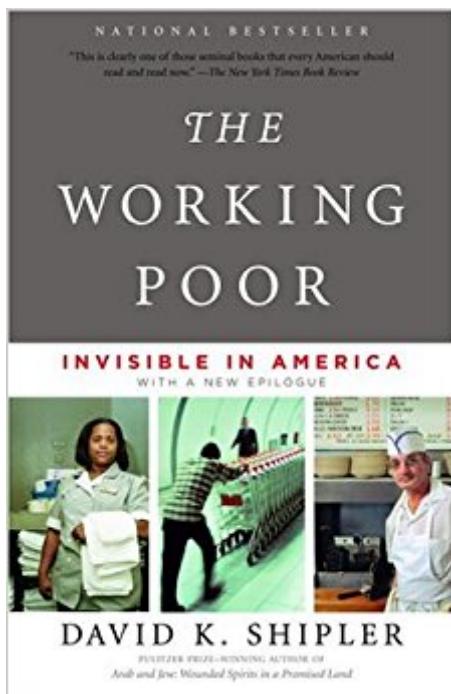


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The Working Poor: Invisible In America



Synopsis

From the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Arab and Jew*, an intimate portrait unfolds of working American families struggling against insurmountable odds to escape poverty. As David K. Shipler makes clear in this powerful, humane study, the invisible poor are engaged in the activity most respected in American ideology—hard, honest work. But their version of the American Dream is a nightmare: low-paying, dead-end jobs; the profound failure of government to improve upon decaying housing, health care, and education; the failure of families to break the patterns of child abuse and substance abuse. Shipler exposes the interlocking problems by taking us into the sorrowful, infuriating, courageous lives of the poor—white and black, Asian and Latino, citizens and immigrants. We encounter them every day, for they do jobs essential to the American economy. This impassioned book not only dissects the problems, but makes pointed, informed recommendations for change. It is a book that stands to make a difference.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The *Working Poor* examines the "forgotten America" where "millions live in the shadow of prosperity, in the twilight between poverty and well-being." These are citizens for whom the American Dream is out of reach despite their willingness to work hard. Struggling to simply survive, they live so close to the edge of poverty that a minor obstacle, such as a car breakdown or a temporary illness, can lead to a downward financial spiral that can prove impossible to reverse. David Shipler interviewed many such working people for this book and his profiles offer an intimate

look at what it is like to be trapped in a cycle of dead-end jobs without benefits or opportunities for advancement. He shows how some negotiate a broken welfare system that is designed to help yet often does not, while others proudly refuse any sort of government assistance, even to their detriment. Still others have no idea that help is available at all. "As a culture, the United States is not quite sure about the causes of poverty, and is therefore uncertain about the solutions," he writes. Though he details many ways in which current assistance programs could be more effective and rational, he does not believe that government alone, nor any other single variable, can solve the problem. Instead, a combination of things are required, beginning with the political will needed to create a relief system "that recognizes both the society's obligation through government and business, and the individual's obligation through labor and family." He does propose some specific steps in the right direction such as altering the current wage structure, creating more vocational programs (in both the public and private sectors), developing a fairer way to distribute school funding, and implementing basic national health care. Prepare to have any preconceived notions about those living in poverty in America challenged by this affecting book. --Shawn Carkonen --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

This guided and very personal tour through the lives of the working poor shatters the myth that America is a country in which prosperity and security are the inevitable rewards of gainful employment. Armed with an encyclopedic collection of artfully deployed statistics and individual stories, Shipler, former New York Times reporter and Pulitzer winner for Arab and Jew, identifies and describes the interconnecting obstacles that keep poor workers and those trying to enter the work force after a lifetime on welfare from achieving economic stability. This America is populated by people of all races and ethnicities, whose lives, Shipler effectively shows, are Sisyphean, and that includes the teachers and other professionals who deal with the realities facing the working poor. Dr. Barry Zuckerman, a Boston pediatrician, discovers that landlords do nothing when he calls to tell them that unsafe housing is a factor in his young patients' illnesses; he adds lawyers to his staff, and they get a better response. In seeking out those who employ subsistence wage earners, such as garment-industry shop owners and farmers, Shipler identifies the holes in the social safety net. "The system needs to be straightened out," says one worker who, in 1999, was making \$6.80 an hour 80 cents more than when she started factory work in 1970. "They need more resources to be able to help these people who are trying to help themselves." Attention needs to be paid, because Shipler's subjects are too busy working for substandard wages to call attention to themselves. They do not, he writes, "have the luxury of rage." Copyright © Reed Business

"The Working Poor" by David Shipler is not an easy read. Densely written, it covers the lives of many poor people living in the U.S., struggling to subsist. The book's title is apt, because in many cases people in poverty truly do work. They work hard in their menial jobs where they often aren't promoted; they work hard to escape brutal pasts; in short, lots of them work hard to keep their lives together. Shipler conveys in a stark way how common social issues can lead to poverty and how various problems within poor families affect each other negatively, like dominoes falling down. A woman who is sexually abused as a child may have a habit of picking bad men later in life or getting pregnant as a teenager, which leads to monetary problems in adulthood. Hardened men with rough, criminal pasts may have difficulty getting hired for jobs and experience low self-esteem. A lady who suffers through a lifetime of poverty forgoes dental work, leading to a mouth with no teeth, hindering her chances of getting promoted at work. Then there are the babies and kids who are severely malnourished because food is a more flexible expense -- these hardships just scratch the surface of Shipler's book. Shipler reveals that poverty is prevalent across ethnicities. Some of these people have made foolish decisions in life that have resulted in bad outcomes. Sometimes, however, social policies are out of whack or companies fleece the poor, leading to further degradation. Shipler shows how those who don't have money problems can be condescending, unforgiving and cruel, though he also writes about people who extend helping hands. Luckily, the author doesn't lionize the poor or overly criticize the powers that be. He simply tells one dismal story after another, presenting hidden lives in a matter-of-fact way that resonates. I found Chapter 9, "Dreams," to be interesting. It talks about bright-eyed poor kids in less than ideal schools. One of the teachers, labeled in the book as "Mrs. C," relates how the students under her tutelage were constantly late, not motivated and rowdy in class due to never getting attention at home. They received poor grades because of these issues, possibly depriving themselves of decent futures in already difficult circumstances. Parents who fail to help their children with homework or who don't convey the importance of education hinder the prospects of their offspring, according to Shipler. Oftentimes these parents had miserable experiences when attending school themselves. Teachers interviewed in the book discuss how they are rudely treated by certain parents and students alike -- one said she feared for her life. Conversely, many parents fail to communicate with teachers at all, skipping parent-teacher conferences no matter how poorly their son or daughter may be doing academically or behaviorally. In students' defense, many poor ones are malnourished and must deal with issues

at home that would make learning at school very hard. Shipler found some teachers in low-income schools who were subpar, simply not good at relating information to students. Others covered material too fast, leaving many students in the class befuddled and blank. The last few chapters have stories of help, hope and success. The formula for achievement is given, though the author admits it's often elusive: a close family with two wage earners; self-confidence and the ability to find and hold a job; and strength when things go off course. Shipler says a major issue like poverty should be attacked all at once, not piecemeal. Figuring it out will take lots of sacrifice, political will and a willingness to redistribute money. He encourages poor people to vote, saying it would make a huge difference in who is elected and by what margins, but he knows many at this income level are disinterested in and disillusioned by politics. This book was written in 2004, so it would be interesting to know how much of the policy discussed within it has changed, and whether poverty in the U.S. has increased or decreased in succeeding years. It's obviously not a feel-good book, but it definitely makes you think about helping those in need.

This book was "recommended reading" for my Teaching In A Diverse Society course at Palomar College. The book arrived in perfect condition, so the price just added to my list of pro's, making it a STEAL! Even if you aren't in college I truly recommend this book to everyone. It taught me valuable life lessons about how often we take things for granted. It tells some inspiring stories that you'll never forget. Even if you open up the book in the middle, you'll still be able to follow along and immediately be hooked. Shipping was also quick and easy. I'll definitely be buying from this seller again!

Before you get deep into the details recorded in this book -- and the book is ALL about the details -- there are some important points you need to keep in mind. The author mentions them in the beginning but then they seem to get dropped as the details of people's live keep emerging: 1) What we call "poverty" in the United States equates to a very wealthy lifestyle in many other nations. 2) Human beings are free agents and they are capable of making choices. However limited our choices may be by circumstances or experience, we CAN still choose. 3) Part of the premise of this book is that "perception is reality." While our poor are not poor by standards of other countries, they and the American culture perceive them as poor and that is the problem. If you keep those ideas fresh in your mind while you allow yourself to become immersed in the VOLUMES of touching personal examples the author records in this book, I think you will gain a great deal from reading it. It's quite obvious that poverty is not one single condition that we can solve by throwing money at it.

and providing opportunities and benefits to the poor. How impoverished people use those benefits and how they are accustomed to dealing with their conditions IS based on myriads of factors including but not limited to: immigrant status, family and culture, education, intelligence, emotional abuse, addictions -- anything from smoking and junk food to heroin, physical illness, choices, et cetera, et cetera. The author makes this very clear and he takes you through countless stories -- one after the other -- of impoverished people who apparently cannot rise above their circumstances in part because these kinds of factors. Another thing he continually re-emphasizes is that rising above poverty usually means getting into a "perfect storm" kind of situation. All the important elements -- financial, emotional, intellectual, job opportunity and LUCK (of having no major tragedies happening to interfere) need to be there. I agree with his assessment here. The kind of economy we have right now does not make it easy for one of the working poor to make it, Horatio Alger style, on just determination and hard work alone. It's wrong for anyone to assume that if only a person pulls themselves up by their bootstraps they can make it, because America is the Land of Opportunity. We need to quit falling back on this myth. That being said, I found myself going through an entire range of emotions because of the human examples in the book. I felt literally EVERY emotion -- anger, sadness, joy, disgust, horror, empathy, sympathy. A lot of the time I was frustrated, because so often an objective observer can see things that the people inside the situations themselves cannot see. Get used to feeling frustrated because that was the one unifying theme throughout. This is not a book with a lot of easy answers. Although I suspect the author is a liberal in his political leanings, he has been an accurate reporter in this book and an honest seeker. He's shown all sides of the question of the working poor and he's revealed that it's an enormously complicated web of problems, not easily resolved either by left or right style solutions. Sometimes, the author can be a bit inconsistent if it's opinions you are looking for. For example, he defends the need for television access. He states that this is often the only affordable and accessible entertainment available for poor families, so even if it does cost a couple hundred dollars a month for them to keep it, he thinks it's a worthwhile investment. At another point in the book, he blames television advertising for creating the consumer culture that induces poor people to waste the little money they have on things they don't need. While this somewhat contradictory position is consistent with reality, I think it might be better for the poor to turn OFF the TV and find other avenues for amusement -- ones that don't involve exposure to multiple advertisements and fictional cultural expectations. The reader needs to be able to think about these stories, read between the lines, remember that often the people are speaking for themselves and what you are getting is what they will tell an interested interviewer about their situation. What people report about their situation,

or what they perceive about it, is not necessarily the truth. The reader needs to sift, be objective and then be able to apply their own judgment. Otherwise you're in danger of being sunk in the emotions. The main thing I got out of this book (perhaps NOT the author's intent!) is that, in Jesus' words "the poor will always be with us."

Phenomenal look into the lives of "forgotten Americans." This is captivating, eye-opening and makes one re-evaluate their own troubles. It is books like these that we need to see to bring the voices of the underserved to the forefront. Capitalism requires that we keep these people at the bottom, but this book looks directly into their eyes. Each voice is unique and each story is compelling and captivating. I read this book as part of a vocational counseling course, but would highly recommend it to anyone.

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