

¹No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City

Katherine S. Newman

Russell Sage Foundation (New York, 1999)

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Brief Summary

No Shame in My Game explores the lives of struggling young Harlem citizens who work for low wages at “Burger Barn”. Newman explores the workers’ living conditions, family situations, cultures and educational backgrounds and how these factors interplay with work. She also addresses the common problems and conundrums that inner city low wage workers encounter in their desperate attempts to make ends meet and to move up in the working world.

Facts and Findings

Newman works to dispel the stereotype that everyone who lives in Harlem does not want to work and is either on public assistance, selling drugs or both. Newman shows that while people who resist work and drug dealers do exist, including members of the workers’ families, there are plenty of working people in Harlem who share the same mainstream views and values, with regard to work, as the middle class. The workers Newman interviews in her study desire either higher education or the opportunity to acquire more skills through training so that they can earn higher wages in order to get themselves into a better neighborhood, support their families and live more comfortably. Moreover, most of the workers resent their family members if they do not work and instead rely solely on public assistance.

Newman introduces statistics that show that the largest group of poor in the United States is the working poor who lack access to public assistance, healthcare and food stamps.ⁱ Many of the workers she interviews reside with family members or relatives who receive government benefits, but the workers themselves, even if making just \$150 a week, generally earn too much money to receive benefits.

Newman addresses the conundrum of poor families and injuries and illness: poor families are more likely to experience chronic health problems such as asthma due to their poor living conditions and their lack of access to preventative medicine.ⁱⁱ Furthermore, the poor are more likely to engage in behavior that is linked to chronic disease, such as smoking.ⁱⁱⁱ Because of their lack of access to healthcare and childcare, the poor often have to stay home from school or work to care for their sick children, siblings or elderly relatives. As a result, many become poor students or even drop out of school, which, in the long run, perpetuates their low economic status, since with a limited education, they will only have access to low wage work. The working family members lose income or even their jobs, perpetuating their low economic status, as their lack of dependability at their jobs surely works against the prospect of any upward mobility.

Newman also explores the cultures of African American, Dominican, and Puerto Rican families and how it is a collective effort for the workers and their families to make ends meet. Her studies show that in order for the families to survive, all of the family members have to contribute money from their paychecks or public assistance in order to pay for rent, utilities, food and other living expenses. Virtually none of workers reside with only their nuclear families. It is impossible for individuals working low wage jobs and individuals receiving public assistance to survive on their own.

Many of the workers Newman surveys were brought up by single mothers or are themselves single mothers. The poverty rate of families supported by single mothers is four times higher than that of married couples with at least one worker.^{iv} The young working mothers Newman interviewed generally had family members who cared for their children while they were at work. Newman discusses the negative impact this has on their children, as most do not receive the same early instruction in colors or numbers or the alphabet that their middle class counterparts do. The mothers cannot afford daycare and do not have time to teach their children, or even to spend much time with them. Instead, in one of Newman's examples, those who watch over the children attempt to protect them by patrolling the housing project for potentially dangerous strangers and training the children to be wary of these people.

Newman also examines how it is more difficult for the poor to find work, because the labor market in poor neighborhoods is so saturated. In Long Island neighborhoods, Burger Barns always have "Hiring" signs and pay their workers three dollars above minimum wage, because "no one who has a choice" will take the job at Burger Barn.^v On the opposite side of the spectrum, workers in the inner city are struggling just to find jobs,

and those who are fortunate enough to get hired at Burger Barns earn minimum wage and often stay at minimum wage.

Recommendations and Implications

In her final chapter, Newman makes a series of recommendations for improving the lives of the working poor. She begins by stating that no one who works full time should live below the poverty line. With the current system in place, she states that employment alone will not solve the poverty problem, because the wages are too low. Newman suggests increasing minimum wage and granting government wage subsidies to firms who employ low wage workers. As a model, she cites employers who get near a fifty percent tax break for hiring rehabilitating criminals.^{vi} This, she believes, would act as an incentive and improve the high unemployment rates in Harlem. She also recommends expanding summer youth programs to connect more directly to private sector employment. Next, Newman praises what Earned Income Tax Credit has done already for the working poor: it provides a supplementary refund to parents who make very little money. She recommends expanding the program.

Newman also recommends moving people to jobs. She cites a Philadelphia project using subsidized transportation to transport the poor to job rich areas. She also suggests expanding the experimental “empowerment zones” program already in place. Through this program, Congress appropriated \$2.5 billion in tax breaks and \$1.3 billion in grants to help attract businesses in to six depressed urban areas, including Central Harlem, which Newman believes is showing some evidence of improvement as a result.^{vii} Finally, she suggests a government expansion of subsidized daycare and healthcare not just for children, but for adults too.

As alternatives to increased government contribution, Newman suggests increasing low-wage workers’ participations in unions. However, she acknowledges that organizing the low-wage labor market is very difficult. She also suggests that schools should play a larger role in connecting students to the working world. In Japan, teachers recommend their top students to employers and largely determine which students get jobs.^{viii} This provides more of an incentive for children to do well in school. In Germany, apprenticeship programs are very common and are available in many more fields than in the United States.^{ix}

As an example of linking the realms of work and school in the U.S., Newman discusses the benefits of the National Youth Apprenticeship Program, an experimental program developed by a group of employers in 1995 and tested in four Chicago high schools.^x In this private program that received minimal government funding, students were selected by lottery and their curriculums were changed to incorporate more real world

uses of school subjects. For instance, in math, students worked on problems where they forecasted the demand for hotel rooms, and in English they worked on communications skills, especially when dealing with customers. The students also met with participating employers who acted as their mentors and conducted mock interviews. All of the students were guaranteed summer job placement when they reached the age of sixteen and full time managerial track employment and support for community college when they reached eighteen. As a result, attendance among these students increased to 98 percent and promotion from one grade to the next increased 40 points to 99%. Test scores in math, English, and social studies all showed dramatic improvement. The incentive for the employers is they will have access to employees in a labor shortage; they save a great deal of money on training these employees, and enhancing employment opportunities for young people enhances their reputation. Newman calls this a win-win situation if private companies are willing to participate.

Analysis/Critique

This book was quite informative as it shed light on the working class poor who are often ignored in the media and by the government in favor of the non-working poor who rely solely on public assistance. Prior to reading this book, I had no idea that a weekly wage of just \$150 could be too much to receive most forms of public assistance. It made me realize that those who are working may be better off on welfare, and I developed an increased respect for their efforts and perseverance. Newman's poignant portrayal of the workers and their tenacity convinced me that no one who works full time should be living below the poverty line. Her case study made it quite apparent that living in poverty for these Harlem families could become a vicious circle: being impoverished contributed to the very conditions that prevented the workers from getting ahead. It was frustrating to read about the workers who have children and families to support but who just cannot seem to keep their head above water and about those who have the drive but do not have the means to get an education or to access training so that they can move up in the working world.

With regard to Newman's suggestions for correcting the poverty problem, while her ideas for increasing minimum wage and expanding health care and child care subsidies are plausible, some of her other suggestions, such as busing workers to jobs and increasing low wage workers' participation in unions, are hopeful, but unlikely, solutions. Newman's suggestion to increase the interconnectedness between work and school is excellent, especially in communities, like Harlem, where it is more likely that students will enter the working world rather than college at the end of their high school careers. Overall, the best and most obvious suggestion Newman made would be to increase minimum wage, because,

as she states, “[n]o who works full-time should live below the poverty line.”^{xi}

ⁱ Katherine Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* 40 (1999).

ⁱⁱ *Id.* at 205-08.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Id.* at 205.

^{iv} *Id.* at 43.

^v *Id.* at 272.

^{vi} *Id.* at 270.

^{vii} *Id.* at 273.

^{viii} *Id.* at 277-78.

^{ix} *Id.* at 277.

^x *Id.* at 279-282.

^{xi} *Id.* at 272.