

The Working Poor: Invisible in America
David K. Shipler
Alfred. K. Knopf (New York, 2004)

Reviewed by Rachel Jones
University at Buffalo Law School

Brief Summary

“The Working Poor: Invisible in America,” by David Shipler is an amazing piece of work that shows the numerous issues being faced by people in America who are stuck in low-wage jobs and poverty. He mixes true life stories with undisputable facts that combine to create a compelling and sometimes heart-wrenching picture. It would be impossible to read this book and walk away without a new understanding of the reality faced by so many here in the supposed land of dreams that is the United States.

Facts and Findings

There is not one factor that puts someone in the low wage job market: rather, the people who work in low wage jobs are incredibly diverse. Poverty runs through every race, every culture and every religion. For some people, like Wendy Waxler (146), it is a cycle that starts with childhood. She grew up in foster homes suffering from untold atrocities that led her down a path of anger, mistrust, failed attempts at higher education and a string of bad relationships. She worked hard to try to overcome the pains of the past. Other people may lose their support systems and fall into poverty while in adulthood. Either way, true solutions must address all of the compounded issues that put people where they are.

One important issue that Shipler raises is self-worth. He discusses it first with ex-convicts who are rehabilitated but are afraid to attempt self-sufficiency because they do not think they can succeed. He then tells the story of Peaches (151). Peaches was raised in an atmosphere where she was told that she was ugly and useless. That treatment shaped the person

she became and the value that she saw in herself. Finally, he discusses young children in bad schools (240). When teachers give up on children, they start to believe that they are not worth the effort. If someone does not feel they are important to a job or to the people around them, then they will not care about being present in society. Self-worth is just one of the many issues Shipler raises – each of which must be addressed in attacking poverty.

Recommendations and implications

Shipler argues that we need to stop looking at poverty as if it can be affected by addressing one issue. Poverty is compounded by things such as low wages, abuse, discrimination, lack of self-worth, lack of education, absence of support systems, and welfare regulations that demand we work while not addressing any issues that might make that work more meaningful. We often use band aids instead of facing the root problems. For example, your family does not have food; we go ahead and give you food without looking at why you can not afford food when you work hard at a job that is important to the American economy.

Consider the story of Kara and Tom (174). Kara grew up in poverty with alcoholics for parents who did not care what she did or how she was. She did not eat regular meals and she spent a lot of time alone. She went on to marry an abuser who treated her poorly until she met Tom. Their story is one of heartache, poverty and illness, but it is also a story of fierce pride, love, loyalty and family. They were crippled by low wage employment, but they still worked hard. Illness entered their lives and forced them to rely on the kindness of others. All the while they never took without giving. They did everything they could to pay it back or pay it forward. Then they dealt with sporadic employment, lay-offs and medical treatments. They lost their home and were blessed with another. They fought through alcohol abuse and depression and stood by each other. This is the most touching story in the book. It shows the life of proud, hardworking people who seem to get kicked in the teeth every five minutes. A story like this is impossible to ignore and contradicts the myth that people are poor because they will not work to improve their own situations. It is true that some people abuse the system, but Shipler's interactions in the community prove that those people are not the majority.

Shipler's work also combats the illusion that a lot of people have regarding who is poor, who works low wage jobs, who suffers abuse, and who needs the most help. So many people assume that certain problems only affect certain groups. Shipler discusses a study of sexual abuse and how a white reporter was surprised that most of the victims in the study were white children when he thought it was mostly a problem in the black culture (146). These types of assumptions run rampant through the

different issues surrounding poverty, but Shipler shows that poverty, low wage work, abuse and other problems know no color, culture or religion.

Analysis and Critique

Shipler manages to paint a complete picture of the reality of the working poor. So many authors pick a side and focus on that throughout their work, but this book goes to great lengths to show different angles. The reader is given the perspective of the impoverished person, the agency, the advocate, the employer and the friend. Furthermore, Shipler does not use one example to cover a whole group. In one breath you get the story of Leetha Butler, a grandmother who takes care of her three grandchildren with very little (30). She manages to get those children everything that they need and a lot of what they want by being economically smart. In the next breath you get the story of Sarah Goodell, who blames her childhood and depression for the fact that she cannot work (35). Also, she justifies the fact that her family wastes money on things that are not important because she needs them to feel better. She seems angry with everyone because she had a rough start, whereas Leetha accepts the realities that she has faced and still manages to do what needs to be done to survive. Poor America has many faces and manifestations.

While my favorite aspect of the book is the connections Shipler makes to real life situations, sometimes the information given can be overwhelming. Shipler jumps from one story to the next and it would be easy to confuse stories and names. This is especially a problem when he discusses a person, and then he or she reappears two chapters later, after you have already read about 15 other personal situations. Shipler might have done better to tell a smaller number of stories in greater depth, rather than including so many. That being said, there are a few stories that I do not think I will forget.

Another aspect of this book that can be overwhelming, if ultimately effective, is that it runs through so many issues faced by low waged workers: predatory business practices, migrant workers, involuntary servitude, sexual abuse, and so on. It is amazing how Shipler manages to identify so many of the obstacles faced by the impoverished. He gives detailed information and accounts of so many different issues, and they all tie into his central point that poverty should be looked at in the aggregate and addressed as being caused by many things.

This book was well researched and well written; it flowed and was easy to follow. There were a lot of different topics, and stories, but the end result was a picture of American poverty that can not be erased. In the last line of his book Shipler writes, "It is time to be ashamed." It is the perfect way to end a moving piece of work that takes poverty out of the abstract to

the heart of the situation -talking about people, not numbers. Yes, we should be ashamed.

Partnership for the Public Good
237 Main St., Suite 1200, Buffalo NY 14203
www.ppgbuffalo.org
