

# The Working Poor

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Labor Day is a time when the handkerchiefs, handbags, and harvests of the world should be given voice... when the journeys taken between oil tankers and your local gas station should be made plain, and the silence of service lifted. Tomorrow should be a time to not only rest from our labors, but to truly see all that is done to sustain and prettify the world we call our own.

In a world where the discomfort of injustice is often cause for apathy and alarmed disinterest, one man is fighting back by thrusting himself into the detailed depths of lives very different from his own. That man is David Shipler, a Pulitzer prize winning author who has taken on the task of provoking Americans to see where centuries of privilege have robbed us of sight. Shipler has written a new book entitled "The Working Poor: Invisible in America." In it he examines the plight of the working poor in our nation through a profound engagement with their stories and struggles.

As he writes, "This is the forgotten America. At the bottom of its working world, millions live in the shadow of prosperity, in the twilight between poverty and well-being. Whether you're rich, poor, or middle-class, you encounter them every day. They serve you Big Macs and help you find merchandise at Wal-Mart. They harvest your food, clean your offices, and sew your clothes. In a California factory, they package lights for your kids' bikes. In a New Hampshire plant, they assemble books of wallpaper samples to help you redecorate."

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The concept of the "working poor" sounds like a contradiction that has taken on a horrifying new life. Robert B. Reich has suggested that "the 'working poor' ought to be an oxymoron, because no one who works should be impoverished." Yet in our country that is far from the case. Our government has a very clear-cut definition of poverty. For a family where one adult is supporting three children, poverty was defined as earning less than \$18,392 in 2003.

This hard line definition is very misleading because the federal poverty line does not reflect what is actually needed to support a reasonable lifestyle. We are using the same basic formula today that was designed by the Social Security Administration in 1964, with only four tiny revisions in the last forty years. Basically the poverty level is set at triple the cost of a so-called "thrifty food basket." While that may have served based on spending patterns in the 60s, in today's economy a family only spends about one sixth of its income on food. In effect we are allowing for only half the resources needed in order to qualify for any sort of federal assistance. All those who fall just barely above that line are not even calculated in our annual percentages relating to poverty and people in need.

We may be celebrating the net creation of 144,000 new jobs in the month of August alone , but a working adult should not have to take on four of them just to survive.

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I don't want you to think that money is the sole challenge in this situation. Like any other form of oppression the injustices come in many forms and pile onto one another until the person whose body they land on can barely grind through the mill of everyday life. Yet it is not enough to say that the evils of government or the unfairness of our policies represent the entirety of this issue. According to David Shipler, "working poverty is a constellation of difficulties that magnify one another: not just low wages but also low education, not just dead-end jobs but also limited abilities, not just insufficient savings but also unwise spending, not just poor housing but also poor parenting, not just the lack of health insurance but also the lack of healthy households." As you can see Shipler is not the kind of writer who is content to lay all the blame in one place.

Still we cannot deny that there is something terribly wrong happening in our nation. "After all our economic achievements, the gap between rich and poor has only widened, with a median net worth of \$833,600 among the top 10 percent and just \$7,900 for the bottom 20 percent. Life expectancy in the United States is lower, and infant mortality higher, than in Japan, Hong Kong, Israel, Canada, and all the major nations of Western Europe."

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Is there a practical solution? Of course there is. As Shipler notes, "if there were more generous food stamps, if high-nutrition baby formula cost less, if inner-city stores stocked fresh fruits and vegetables, if all day-care centers provided decent meals and snacks, if families could afford varied foods for children with allergies, if new immigrants were not confused by junk-food advertising, if mothers could breast-feed instead of work, if children of working parents were not passed among multiple caregivers, if parents simply knew to sit youngsters down calmly to feed them, if there were less depression among those at the bottom of the economy, there would be less hunger."

There is a huge challenge to the vast array of practical solutions that have been suggested by those who have studied the failings of our economic system for decades. That challenge lives in us... lives in our own comfort and complacency... lives in the ease of shutting down our awareness instead of engaging and re-engaging with the everyday injustices that increase our own comfort and well being.

As David Shipler mentioned in an interview with Ray Suarez, "Folks who are in this position make the living standards for the more affluent Americans rather high. We can afford a lot of things that we could probably not afford if people were paid a living wage, a much higher wage." I do not want to assume that everyone sitting in this sanctuary finds themselves among the affluent few, or that many or even most of us are feeling economically secure in today's world. I do assume that we have room to increase our awareness of the vast and complex undercurrents of our economy and how our day to day choices help to sustain the lines of division scattered across this nation.

We are living in a culture that from its inception has judged worth and well being by the mythology of hard work and the idea of the American Dream. Our country was literally built by waves of people who were drawn to the 'Land of Opportunity'... to the promise of a chance to earn a better life for themselves and their children. For those who had the luxury of choice, who were not brought here as slaves against their will, the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave offered dreams beyond imagining. That legacy is seen in our immigrant populations to this day. As Shipler writes, "Luxury is produced by humble hands... For a paltry wage, albeit one far greater than at home, they feed and clothe and comfort the Americans they wish to emulate."

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And how do we as Americans respond to this offering? Too often what we return is based on a deeply ingrained sense of entitlement; on judgment reaching out across the centuries from the founders of the day. Shipler points out that "In the Puritan legacy, hard work is not merely practical but also moral; its absence suggests an ethical lapse. A harsh logic dictates a hard judgment: If a person's diligent work leads to prosperity, if work is a moral virtue, and if anyone in the society can attain prosperity through work, then the failure to do so is a fall from righteousness. The marketplace is the fair and final judge; a low wage is somehow the worker's fault, for it simply reflects the low value of his labor. In the American atmosphere, poverty has always carried a whiff of sinfulness."

I am hoping that we will choose to take another bite from that mythic apple which conveys the knowledge of good and evil - that we can somehow lift the veil of contentedness from our eyes and lessen the invisibility of millions of working Americans. Because the truth is that we model and pass on this culture of entitlement. And while our instinctive attitudes and responses have been shaped by the media, our schooling, our parents, and our upbringing we will pass on the very same values unless we choose to interrupt this pattern of ease.

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Shipler discovered that our values really did shape salaries and opportunities for low income workers. He interviewed several employers about their hiring practices and wage scales. Reflecting on the decisions that many cities and states have made to increase the minimum wage in their local area, he inquired about what prevented employers from raising wages for their lower paying jobs. He found that "Employers echoed the conviction that there was a 'right' wage for a job, and that if they raised their manual laborers' pay, they would have to do the same for their foremen, accountants, and executives to maintain a substantial distance between salaries. In other words, the national ethic is ambivalent, decrying the disparity on the one hand (as some CEOs get five hundred times their workers' lowest wage) and, on the other, embracing the differences as virtuous. It is somehow morally wrong not to pay an accountant more than a secretary."

When the morality of a nation or a people gets warped, it takes inner transformation and awareness to secure stable and ongoing change. If consumers in our country felt outrage every time they found goods or services offered at prices that can only be sustained by underpaying workers... we would be closer to sustainable change. If consumers in our country paused to give thanks for their food, remembering the laborers

who planted, and tended, and harvested, and packaged... we would be closer to sustainable change. If each one of us gracing this sanctuary committed a bit of our lives as people of faith to a practice of intentional mindfulness, of awareness, of truly seeing the journey of each handkerchief, harvest, and handbag... we would be promoting sustainable change.

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I have the privilege of knowing most of you, of hearing your stories, and sharing in some of your greatest hopes. I know that this community longs for an easing of the bitterness and inequality that surrounds us. Our greatest challenge is not ignorance, or carelessness. It is not hard-heartedness or greed. Our greatest challenge lies in believing that we can actually make a difference - in believing that small things can make a dent in the often overwhelming wrongness that we witness everyday.

Shipler pays heed to this power. He writes, "To appraise a society, examine its ability to be self-correcting. When grievous wrongs are done or endemic suffering exposed, when injustice is discovered or opportunity denied, watch the institutions of government and business and charity. Their response is an index of a nation's health and of a people's strength."

We are stronger than we know. And we make change one person at a time.

Don't fear the outrage. Don't silence the inner authority and voice that knows true compassion and the ways of being in right relationship in the world. I want to invite you to be uncomfortable with me. To move through the everyday world with that inner knowing a little bit closer to the center of your awareness. To hold onto the discomfort because of all that it can teach you - because of all that it might motivate you to do.

Shipler's closing words are harsh. He reminds us that "workers at the edge of poverty are essential to America's prosperity, but their well-being is not treated as an integral part of the whole. Instead, the forgotten wage a daily struggle to keep themselves from falling over the cliff. It is time to be ashamed."

May it be so.

Amen, Ashe, and Blessed Be.

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