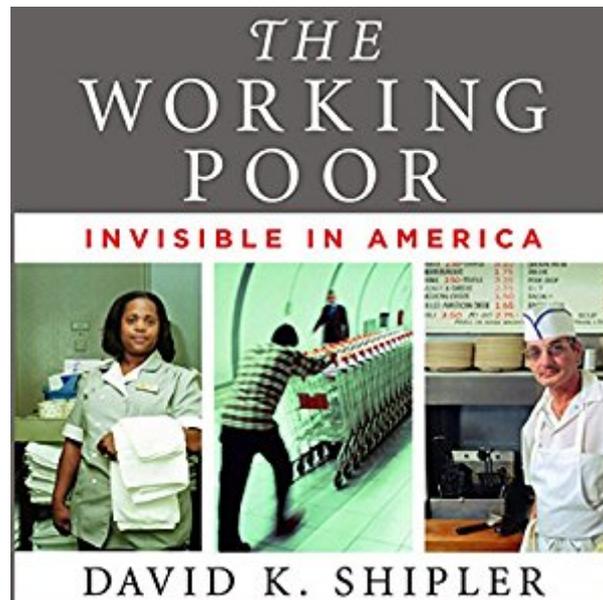


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# The Working Poor: Invisible In America



## Synopsis

Nobody who works hard should be poor in America, writes Pulitzer Prize-winner David Shipler. Clear-headed, rigorous, and compassionate, he journeys deeply into the lives of individual store clerks and factory workers, farm laborers and sweat-shop seamstresses, illegal immigrants in menial jobs, and Americans saddled with immense student loans and paltry wages. They are known as the working poor. They perform labor essential to America's comfort. They are white and black, Latino and Asian - men and women in small towns and city slums trapped near the poverty line, where the margins are so tight that even minor setbacks can cause devastating chain reactions. Shipler shows how liberals and conservatives are both partly right - that practically every life story contains failure by both the society and the individual. Braced by hard fact and personal testimony, he unravels the forces that confine people in the quagmire of low wages. And unlike most works on poverty, this book also offers compelling portraits of employers struggling against razor-thin profits and competition from abroad. With pointed recommendations for change that will challenge Republicans and Democrats alike, *The Working Poor* stands to make a difference.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Edit of 20 Dec 07 to state that this is a book of lasting value that must be kept in print, and to add links. This book complements Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Ehrenreich's is much easier to read and makes the same broader points. Where this book

excels is in the details that in turn lead to policy solutions. I will go so far as to say that if John Kerry and John Edwards do not get hold of an executive summary of this book, and integrate its findings into their campaign as a means of mobilizing the working poor in the forthcoming election, then they will have failed to both excite and serve what the author, David Shipler, calls the "invisible." Invisible indeed. How America treats its working poor--people working \*very\* hard and being kept in conditions that border on genocidal labor camps, is our greatest shame. The most important point made in this book, a point made over and over in relation to a wide variety of "case studies", is that one cannot break out of poverty unless the \*\*entire\*\* system works flawlessly. To hard work one must add public transportation, safe public housing, adequate schooling and child care, effective parenting, effective job training, fundamental budgeting and arithmetic skills, and honest banks, credit card companies and tax preparation brokers, as well as sympathetic or at least observant employers. The author is coherent and compelling in making the point that a break or flaw in any one of these key links in the chain can break a family.

A glance at the back dust cover is not promising. Yet Shipler's book deserves a read. The profiles are well written, informative, varied, exhaustive, complex and illustrative. Compassion for the subjects is elicited and deserved. Some subjects struggle and do get by, if barely, due more to informal charity and kinship than by government (anti-)poverty programs. Their stories are especially noteworthy. Shipler's meticulous candor supplants Ehrenreich's solipsistic book, "Nickled and dimed in America." Praised for its vicarious, first-hand account of other people's poverty, "Dimed" had no basis for useful insight. The life of poverty is no game, no short-term social experiment. Not pretending to be poor, Shipler is much more thorough; his first-hand journalistic research covers years, not months. He is objective and not judgmental yet his compassion shines through his words. Shipler uses Churchill's description of democracy as the worst form of government to explain why capitalism is the worst form of economic policy - except when compared to all others that have been tried from time to time. A wise analogy. Yet the final analysis and public policy recommendations are difficult to make or to decipher. Shipler acknowledges that the major cause of poverty can be attributed to a single source: bad personal choices. Of course, no one chooses to be poor (some journalists excepted), but people repeatedly make independent, self-serving or selfish, short-sighted, unfortunate choices, including walking away from the mother or father of their children, from their families, from educational opportunities, from their religious values, and from disciplined work habits. And they walk all too easily into a trap: teenage pregnancy, drug and domestic abuse, and endless hours in front of the television.

Let me start by saying what I liked and appreciated about this book before I go on to say what I didn't. First of all, it's great that most of the focus has been placed on individual families and circumstances. He's not just rattling off statistics; he's actually taking you to the living rooms and workplaces of real human beings and for the most part letting them tell their own story. It is also clear that Shipler does not have a political agenda; he acknowledges the failings of both the left and right to address this issue on pretty equal terms. The author is not blaming the individuals in question entirely for their situations, nor is he completely blaming society or "the system;" rather, he shows in an extraordinarily clear and sober manner the variety of circumstances which cause poverty and which continually leave those afflicted in its grasp. The main problem that I have with this book is that I feel it left out a lot of people and a lot of problems that could have easily been addressed. For one, most of the people in the book are urban minorities, and that seems to be where most of the focus lies. There's not a lot of emphasis on the rural poor (with the notable exception of migrant farm workers) among whom circumstances are quite different and in many ways even harder than those of the urban poor. In addition, Shipler is constantly noting the lack of education among poor people but doesn't ever mention the fact that ever-rising and insane tuition costs prevent many perfectly capable \*middle-class\* people of getting to college in the first place, thus rendering them just as poor as the people who started out that way.

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