

The Working Poor: Invisible in America

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David Shipler, in *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, endeavors to show that, while the causes of poverty are complex, better solutions are possible. Given the wealth of this nation, Shipler argues that the U.S. could tackle the myriad causes of poverty in a more effective and holistic way, but that we are lacking the political will to do so. The book attempts to challenge conventional wisdom on both the political left and right, noting that “It is difficult to find someone whose poverty is not somehow related to his or her unwise behavior...[and] it is difficult to find behavior that is not somehow related to the inherited conditions of being poorly parented, poorly educated, [or] poorly housed...” (p. 6-7).

A Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Shipler began to interview working poor Americans in 1997, following their lives over several years in different settings across the country. He tells their stories, often in their own words, giving us a sense of the struggles faced by real people in America despite the economic boom of the late 1990s. The stories are both compelling and depressing, uplifting and frustrating. One cannot help be moved by the very human struggles to break addictions, to work hard without getting ahead, and by the all too frequent setbacks. And one is often frustrated, as Shipler seems to be, by the frequently self-destructive choices and decisions, even as Shipler tries to understand the context of these decisions.

The introductory chapter provides an excellent overview of the problem of poverty in the United States over the past decade. Shipler discusses the difficulty of defining poverty and the well known shortcomings of the official poverty measure. He takes on both the American myth of success attained through hard work despite humble beginnings, and also dissects the opposing view, what he calls the “American Anti-Myth.” The anti-myth claims that “society [is] largely responsible for the individual’s poverty (p. 6). Throughout the book he frequently returns to his theme that policy solutions to the problems of the working poor must address both individual behavior and structural economic factors as they are inherently intertwined.

The book is organized into eleven chapters, each focusing on a theme related to a major cause or effect of poverty. Many of the same families appear in multiple chapters, as Shipler illustrates how the problems caused by low-wage work, inadequate education, mental health issues, past debts and inferior housing are interrelated. Chapters 1 and 2 begin with the problems associated with low-wage work and debt. Low-wage jobs often don’t provide health insurance coverage, and past medical bills (due to the lack of insurance) often mean low-income families have a substantial debt burden. Chapter 3 describes the economic struggles of many recent immigrants to the U.S., both legal and undocumented. In Chapter 4 we meet several families of migrant farm workers as Shipler powerfully describes the inadequacy of housing, wages, and health care they endure. Other chapters use stories from the families’ lives to illustrate the long-term detrimental effects of childhood sexual abuse, the intergenerational effects of poor parenting, and the effects of hunger, depression and poor health care on child development. Shipler cites examples of successful interventions, such as when a doctor’s influence encourages a landlord to clean up cockroaches that aggravate a child’s asthma. But he also finds many examples of service providers, doctors, and employers who can’t or won’t look beyond their narrow scope to help address the family’s interrelated problems.

While Chapter 2 focuses on the difficulties in making ends meet with low-wage jobs, Chapter 5 focuses on the more emotional side of employment. Shipler cites examples of the stereotypes held by employers, often contradicted by the hard work and loyalty of their own employees. He quotes the fears and difficulties of low-wage workers in the workplace, due to both their own lack of skills and the limitations caused by the way jobs are structured. The real-life examples in this chapter provide a caution to those who advocate a low-wage job as the route off welfare. Yet despite Shipler’s frequent warnings against ‘simple solutions,’ he suggests that “...low-skilled workers can often be rescued by a low-cost gamble, a few minutes of attention and teaching...” (p. 138).

Shipler emphasizes the need for a holistic approach, as illustrated by Chapter 9 which focuses on public education, a part of the system often viewed as separate from poverty-related services yet an integral influence in the lives of poor children. Shipler is blunt in his indictment of the public education system in America, laying the blame for most of its shortcomings on the unfair and inadequate funding system. But throughout the book, he also finds fault with parents, who, for lack of parenting skills, depression or immaturity, fail to give their children the best start in life.

Chapter 10 detours to tell some success stories: working poor Americans who seem to have moved away from the precipice of poverty. But he is quick to point out the myriad of factors -- intensive and targeted job training, multiple wage-earners in a family, money-management and "soft" skills, and luck -- that, in combination, allow these families to handle the ups and downs in their personal and economic situations.

The book culminates with Chapter 11, entitled "Skill and Will," in which Shipler describes what he sees as solutions that work, problems we don't yet know how to solve, and the limitations of America's political will to solve these problems. Shipler emphasizes the need for holistic solutions, programs that address all of the problems at once, not just the proximate cause. He gives examples of programs that work by creating "connections of services" at hospitals, clinics, schools, welfare offices, and housing authorities "at intersections through which working poor families are likely to travel" (p. 286). Shipler is confident that we have remedies for certain problems, amongst which he includes substance abuse and mental health treatment, early intervention and Head Start, and job training, if only we would provide more of these services to those who need them.

Shipler's solutions for the problem of low-wage work are less convincing. He suggests increases in the minimum wage, in the earned income tax credit, and expanded living wage laws. But he admits that low-wage jobs are not going to disappear, and are vital to the overall success of the U.S. economy. Thus he also proposes more access to improved job training, vocational education, and apprenticeship programs. While promotion and upward mobility are critical to raising wages, there is also evidence (which Shipler doesn't mention) that job ladders are fast disappearing for workers in many low and mid-range jobs. Tax breaks and other incentives for employers to improve the productivity (and thus wages) of their own workers may not be sufficient. Shipler attempts to provide solutions that both the right and left will agree to, but

he clearly finds limitations in the ability of the private sector to address these complex social issues.

The detailed telling of the everyday struggles of working Americans is the strength of the book, but also its limitation. Shipler admits to no attempt to ensure that the lives he describes are representative (though in broad demographic terms, they are), so we do not know whether these stories are common or atypical. What is apparent, however, is how the complexity of each story is the complexity of real lives, and that individual behavior and systemic barriers combine to make the lives of Americans at or below the poverty line a tenuous struggle. One of his objectives is to make the working poor more visible to the rest of America, and, by telling the stories of their lives, he does so. But by not framing the lives of individuals in a larger setting, that is, by not indicating how representative they are, the book loses some of its ability to make them less invisible. It is too easy to view these stories as unusual or out of the ordinary if we do not know that millions of Americans live lives like these.

The Working Poor provides a compelling look at the lives of working poor Americans whose daily struggles support the prosperity and growth of the U.S. economy. As Shipler argues, making the invisible more visible may help to increase the political will to adequately fund the safety net and to develop better solutions to the complex set of causes that sustain poverty in this wealthy nation. Shipler's solutions are not particularly new, but his combination of the true life experiences of Americans with a broad look at solutions may help to move forward the debate on poverty.