

# Nickel and dimed and minimal wage

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Looking at whether or not individuals living in poverty are considered to be a minority group by our contemporary culture is an interesting scenario. I'm a social work major so of course I want to think, yes, individuals living in poverty are most definitely an oppressed group in society. Minimum wage is nowhere near to what could be classified as a living wage, and these positions often have little room for career advancement within the company. But I assume that what the question was getting at was whether or not those living in poverty are viewed as a minority group by America's contemporary culture. The answer to that I believe is a "no."

People who belong to the upper and middle classes often don't consider the fact that you can have a job yet still be living in poverty. A single parent may hold down two minimum-wage paying jobs, but still need a little help to make ends meet. And because they receive government assistance their hard work is ignored and they are simply viewed as lazy nuisances who are mooching off the middle classes' tax dollars, not an oppressed minority group. The American government has taken steps to show that it is more aware about the minority status of those living in poverty, and has taken some steps help people in that group.

Beginning with the civil rights act in 1964, discrimination based on race, religion, or sex was made illegal on a federal level and thereby beginning the first steps meeting the needs of poor individuals by combatting poverty through getting rid of housing codes, and racial redlining laws throughout the U. S. After the civil rights act a plethora of social justice programs were put into action. The Economic Opportunity act and The Economic Development

act began to earnestly work and provided more jobs to both rural and urban communities.

Medicare and Medicaid were developed to provide aid to the aging and poverty stricken communities, and multiple food programs were put into place for different types of people needing assistance. Special attention was paid to developing programs for America's children and youth. The Special Milk and the National School Lunch Programs were developed to feed children through their early childhoods as well as their school years. Grants and services were given to low-income and inner city schools and research was being put into how to deal with the social causes of delinquency and stop the emerging problems of youth gangs.

Many of these programs started in the 1960's have evolved into services we hear a lot about in social work today, such as AmeriCorps, TANF, and WIC. Although many of the programs above have helped to alleviate some of the pressures faced by those living in poverty, in our ever changing country new problems are always coming up. In modern day America, Homelessness, and the stereotypes associated with being homeless, is one of the larger problems social workers are working to help with. One of the bigger issues with being homeless is finding a stable job and source of income.

I remember in class when Dave talked about giving out cell phones to the people at his shelter so that if they had a job interview, they wouldn't have to put down the shelter's telephone number. The stereotypes that come with being homeless often discourage employers to consider hiring someone who is living in that condition. When I had my field placement my sophomore year at Refuge of Hope, I remember one of the first things the director of the <https://assignbuster.com/nickel-and-dimed-and-minimal-wage/>

shelter would do during an intake, was to give the new client a bus pass, so that when the client was job hunting he could say that he had a reliable source of transportation.

I think that a lot of these government programs are helpful in meeting some of the daily needs of those living in poverty, but I also think that one of the biggest needs that needs to be met is to stop the negative stereotypes and prejudices we have about those who are living in poverty, and I'm not sure I believe that's something a government run program can do. In our American Minorities course this semester we have defined prejudice and discrimination in the following ways; Prejudice is a negative attitude that rejects and entire group and discriminations is a behavior that deprives a group of certain rights or opportunities.

In other words, prejudice is how you feel towards a certain people group, and discrimination is the way you act towards that certain people group. One example of prejudice and discrimination that especially stood out to me in Nickel and Dimed was the way the hotel management in Key West would automatically have their Black and Hipic job applicants sent to work as housekeeping staff or busboys in the hotel restaurant. Similarly the white applicants were pressed to work as front desk staff or as waitresses in the hotel restaurant.

Obviously the Hotel management had conceived the idea that their Caucasian workers needed to be the ones interacting with the customers and guests, meanwhile the Black and Hipic workers where supposed to have jobs that were more " behind the scenes. Why was this happening? Well perhaps it is because the hotel 4 managers held the stereotype that people of color

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are lazy, and wanted them out of sight from their customers and guests and in positions where management could easily keep an eye on them and hold them accountable for any “ time theft.”

Perhaps the reason is management viewed there Black and Hipic workers as less educated and sophisticated, and therefore didn't want them directly interacting with the hotel's middle and upper class clientele. Either way it's obvious that in this book the management held negative views of their Black and Hipic workers, and acted upon them by denying people of color certain jobs. Another example of prejudice in noted while I was reading Nickel and Dimed was how the owners of the houses Barb cleaned while working as a maid in Portland seemed to always be on their guard from the maids.

As evidenced by Eh Erenreich later in her book, you can see through the way hidden cameras are being sold to owners so they can spy on their maids or babysitters at home, there is a genuine distrust experienced by these home owners. It seemed like these homeowners are just waiting for one of their priceless heirlooms to disappear. I think that the main belief that Barbara Ehrenreich tried to explore in Nickel and Dimed is that, if anyone is living in poverty, than they can work their way out if they would only get a job.

Basically, it's the concept of the “ American Dream,” where you can be a homeless orphan, but if you work hard enough you can make your way up the ladder until you become the president, or anything else you desire to be. Throughout Ehrenreich's book, she proves this belief to essentially be a myth. If you are a healthy individual how can find at least two entry-level job positions run by companies who are willing to work around your schedule,

and you're also able to find affordable housing and transportation close to these job sites, then maybe it's possible to make a better life for yourself.

But finding and maintaining everything on this checklist is an extreme rarity in life. If even one of the things on this list doesn't come through for you, then you're probably using any extramoney you're making to cover up the gap that this missing thing costs. Ehrenreich combatted many myths about poverty in her book, and I think the first and biggest myth she debunked is the common belief that poor people are lazy. After reading her description about what it was like when she worked as a maid, cleaning houses top to bottom every day, I know I couldn't do the same.

I used to throw a fit when my mom made me dust and vacuum my room once every Saturday. Housekeeping, retail work, even waitressing are some of the most tiresome jobs in America, and the fact that you're paid minimum wage for these things is astounding. A myth I hear most commonly from my own friend's and family, is that they are pouring so much of their tax dollars into people in poverty, that they're basically getting a free ride through life.

In the book however, we saw Barb practically chasing her tail to try and get some food assistance, and after hours of phone calls she eventually ended up with a basket of what sounded like expired leftovers from Sam's Club, not anything the government actually paid for, or anything of real nutritional value. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she showed her readers that "minimum wage," is not equal to a "living wage." Even when Ehrenreich was successfully holding down two jobs in Maine, the money she was making wasn't enough to account for the small unexpected expenses she ran up against, let alone something like health insurance.

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In Nickel and Dimed, the concept of meritocracy is challenged in several ways by Ehrenreich. First we see that gaining employment at many of these entry-level jobs is in no way associated with intelligence. We see Barb take several "personality" tests that are in reality actually designed to see how well you'll be able to comply with the company's standards and employee ethics. It's also required several times for Barb to let the company test her for illegal drug use. These are the only two things every required before Barb is accepted into a job.

I think this sadly only goes to show that companies are not at all interested in having employees that will rise through the store ranks to eventually become managers, in fact, Barb's employers were often surprised to find that she hadn't quit after the first week. In sort of an odd way, I actually thoroughly enjoyed this book from start to finish. Barb met some individuals who had gone through or were going through truly horrible things, and while I didn't enjoy reading about those situations, I did enjoy the breath of honesty that was brought into this book through those people.

I think that perhaps the most stunning revelation I received while reading this book, was when Barb acknowledges that while she was struggling with the physical part of being a maid, she was a healthy person who had grown up exercising and getting three square meals a day. What could it possibly be like then, for someone who can only afford a bag of Doritos for lunch, and doesn't have the vitamins provided by fresh fruits and vegetables to help get them through the day?

It's unbelievable how much the system works against you when you're trying to make a living for yourself. If the government could start a program that

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could force everyone in America to read this book, that would be great, but I don't see that happening. I suppose that's why Advocacy is such an important part of social work. We're the ones who have the opportunity to help others see that a person living in poverty is oppressed by society, and we need to change the way we think about him or her.