

# The working poor: invisible in america essay



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Regardless if we are aware of it or not, not many Americans live the supposed American Dream of having a nice car, big house, well paying job, and have a secure family. In the renowned novel *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* by David K. Shipler he captures those Americans who live invisible in America that work so hard to suffer from the psychological effects of poverty. Not only does Shipler do that but he also indirectly talks about the “ American Myth” and the “ American Anti Myth through the lives on these individuals.

” In *The Working Poor* Shipler goes on to explain both of the myths. Shipler states that the American Myth “ still supposes that any individual from the humblest origins can climb to well-being” (Shipler, pg. 5), but the thing is that is not true because, there are many people who are humble that work hard and don’t go from rag to riches. The American myth has a demanding standard for both the nation and every resident that the nation” has to strive to make itself the fabled land of opportunity; the resident must strive to use that opportunity” (Shipler, pg.

). Not only that but the American myth also provides a means for laying blame; “ if a person’s diligent work leads to prosperity(...) and anyone in society can attain prosperity through work, then the failure to do so is a fall from righteousness” (Shipler, pg. 6). George W. Bush also gave a voice to the myth whether he meant it or not that “ people who work hard and make the right decision in life can achieve anything they want in America” (Shipler, pg. ), but when we examine examples in this book there are many of those who work hard in America but are hit with the circumstances of life and they fail

or they are unable to achieve what they want in America; the land of prosperity for all.

To the American Myth there is an opposite extreme the American Anti Myth “ which holds the society largely responsible for the individual’s poverty” (Shipler, pg. 6). The ladder that is created in our society by racial discrimination and economic supremacy creates a condition of impoverished communities. As stated by Shipler “ in reality, people do not fit easily into myths or anti myths. It is just that the individuals in this novel are scattered along this spectrum of polar opposites, that each person’s life “ is the mixed product of bad choices and bad fortune, of roads taken and roads cut off” (Shipler, pg.

6). The debate on welfare and other social policies has been shaped by the question on “ how to define the individual’s role in his/her own poverty” (Shipler, pg. 7). The poor have less control over their private decisions; their personal mistakes have larger penalties, and their personal achievement only bring back a small reward.

What many people do not realize such as employers is that the poor lack “ hard skills” like the use of a computer and “ soft skills” like interacting with people and peers. In the novel there are many Americans that depict the “ American Myth,” for example Ann she was typical of the low wage working people ( Shipler, pg. 24-25), but the thing is Ann did not point fingers of blame at anyone, she excepted that she got herself into the situation that she is now. Even though she knew that the credit card companies rates were

high she made the option of using them, but that is not because she had a choice or not but only because she had to.

The lease on Ann truck was about to expire and her ex husband's child support of \$100 was about to stop because her daughter was about to turn 18. Ann only had one option left which was bankruptcy but then she found out that she was too poor to file, so Ann had last option was to stop paying her credit cards, and loans so she could save up to go bankruptcy. When we look at Ann's story and her struggle in life we see that Ann is an example of the Americans who are invisible in America. Ann tried to make her credit better by paying them off, but she eventually had to stop just so she could save up to file bankruptcy. Another individual in the novel that portrays the "American Myth" is Christie. She "did the job that this labor-hungry economy could not do without" (Shipler, pg.

39). Every morning she would drive her battered Volkswagen from public housing the child care center where she watched little children so their parents could go to work, but the ironic part about that was Christie "could not afford to put her own two children in the daycare center where she worked" (Shipler, pg. 9). Christie low income entitled here to food stamps and rental subsidy, "but whenever she get a little pay raise, government agencies reduced the benefits," (Shipler, pg. 40) and Christie felt punished for working because she already did not earn that much and the food stamps she received was not enough to feed her and her children.

So when the food stamps is reduced that is more money she has to take out of her little to nothing \$330 check. Unless employers can and will pay a good

deal to society's essential labor, " those working hard at the edge of poverty [like Christie] will stay there" (Shipler, pg 46). Work didn't work for Debra Hall either. Debra was one of the single mothers on welfare and everything seemed to change in her life except her material standard of living. Debra was hit by life circumstances after the birth of her daughter she was " launched [into] a twenty one year career of welfare checks and " under the table type jobs" as she put it," (Shipler, pg.

46) and she was unable to finish school. Being black Debra also felt herself on the wrong end of subtle racial strains, because she felt like the employers were more lenient on the Hispanics, when she packed 3 boxes of bread the Hispanic lady next to her only did one and instead of the manager talking to the Hispanic lady about it the manager raises hell with her because of that lady's lack of speaking English. Debra did not want to continue her family line of low wage jobs, but every time she would ask " supervisors about the salary at their level, they'd answer vaguely, " It varies" she couldn't get specific numbers" (Shipler, pg. 9).

This lowered Debra's confidence that she could ever move up in position and pay. Caroline Payne was a different version of the " American Myth. " Caroline had earned a college diploma, and she had gone from homeless shelters to owning her own home, even though it was owned mostly by the bank, but the only goal that she could not achieve was a well paying job. " Caroline was the forgotten story of prosperity in America" (Shipler, pg. 51).

She was not the victim of racial discrimination, and she was not lazy. She was very punctual and considered a nice lady by her coworker and managers at Wal-Mart. “ But she did not move up. She never moved up.

And that ceased to amaze her because it had been going on for so long” (Shipler, pg. 51). Caroline worked so hard trying to get ahead working different shifts whenever she could; she was always available. “ The people who got promotions tended to have something Caroline did not. They had teeth. Caroline did not have teeth (...) her teeth had succumbed to poverty, to the years she could not afford a dentist” (Shipler, pg 52).

Caroline was the face of the working poor, “ marked by poverty generated handicap more obvious than most deficiencies but not different” (Shipler, pg. 53). Caroline life resembled a fallen ladder if she had not been poor, maybe she would have her teeth, if she did not lose her teeth, and maybe she would have not remained poor. What David Shipler meant by invisible in America is for those Americans who do the jobs that no one usually pays attention to, for those Americans who get left behind in Americas economic prosperity, or unnoticed and unaccounted for in our society. They are the ones who work at the edge of poverty, and they are essential to America’s prosperity, “ but their well-being is not treated as an integral part of the whole” (Shipler, pg. 300).

Instead these individuals are forgotten and left behind to struggle. In conclusion, poverty is a peculiar menacing thing: “ a cause whose effects then cause the original cause or an effect whose causes are caused by the effect,” (Shipler, pg. 53) all depending on where the cycle begins. Through

this novel David Shipler makes it easier for us to see how the invisible in America are a bundle of these causes and effects.