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Section: OPINION
Commentary and Letters

THE SHAMEFUL TREATMENT OF AMERICA'S POOR
Millions of Americans work full time, year-round, for poverty-level wages. In 1998, I decided to join them. I was inspired in part by the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform, which promised that a job -- any job -- could be the ticket to a better life. But how does anyone survive, let alone prosper, on $6 to $7 an hour?

To find out, I moved from Florida to Maine to Minnesota, working as a waitress, hotel maid, cleaning woman, nursing-home aide, and Wal-Mart sales clerk. Very quickly, I discovered that even the lowliest occupations require exhausting mental and muscular effort. I also learned that one job is not enough; you need at least two if you intend to live indoors. More broadly, the experience gave me a tiny glimpse into the lives of the poor.

It is common, among the nonpoor, to think of poverty as a sustainable condition -- austere, perhaps, but the poor get by somehow, don't they? They are "always with us."

What is harder for the nonpoor to see is poverty as acute distress: the lunch that consists of Doritos or hot-dog rolls, leading to faintness before the end of the shift. The "home" that is also a car or a van. The illness or injury that must be "worked through," with gritted teeth, because there's no sick pay or health insurance and the loss of one day's pay will mean no groceries for the next.

These experiences are not part of a sustainable lifestyle, even a lifestyle of chronic deprivation and relentless low-level punishment. They are, by almost any standard of subsistence, emergency situations. And that is how we should see the poverty of so many millions of low-wage Americans -- as a state of emergency.

The Economic Policy Institute recently reviewed dozens of studies of what constitutes a "living wage" and came up with an average figure of $30,000 a year for a family of one adult and two children, which amounts to a wage of $14 an hour. This is not the very minimum such a family could live on; the budget includes health insurance, a telephone, and child care at a licensed center, for example, which are well beyond the reach of millions. But it does not include restaurant meals, video rentals, Internet access, wine and liquor, cigarettes and lottery tickets, or even very much meat.

The shocking thing is that the majority of American workers, about 60 percent, earn less than $14 an hour. Many of them get by by teaming up with another wage earner, a spouse or grown child. Some draw on government help in the form of food stamps, housing vouchers, the earned income tax credit, or -- for those coming off welfare in relatively generous states -- subsidized child care. But others -- single mothers, for example -- have nothing but their own wages to live on, no matter how many mouths there are to feed.

Some odd optical property of our highly polarized and unequal society makes the poor almost invisible to their economic superiors. The poor can see the affluent easily enough -- on television, for example, or on the covers of magazines. But the affluent rarely see the poor or, if they do catch sight of them in some public space, rarely know what they're seeing, since -- thanks to consignment stores and Wal-Mart --the poor are usually able to disguise themselves as members of the more comfortable classes.

Forty years ago the hot journalistic topic was the "discovery of the poor" in their inner-city and Appalachian "pockets of poverty." Today you are more likely to find commentary on their "disappearance," either as a supposed demographic reality or as a shortcoming of the middle-class imagination.

As public schools and other public services deteriorate, those who can afford to do so send their children to private schools and spend their off-hours in private spaces -- health clubs, for example, instead of the local park. They don't ride on public buses and subways. They withdraw from mixed neighborhoods into distant suburbs, gated communities, or guarded apartment towers; they shop in stores that, in line with the prevailing "market segmentation," are designed to appeal to the affluent alone.

Even the affluent young are increasingly unlikely to spend their summers learning how the "other half" lives, while working as lifeguards, waitresses, or housekeepers at resort hotels.

Welfare reform itself is a factor weighing against any close investigation of the conditions of the poor. Both parties heartily endorsed it, and to acknowledge that low-wage work doesn't lift people out of poverty would be to admit that it may have been, in human terms, a catastrophic mistake.

In fact, very little is known about the fate of former welfare recipients because the 1996 welfare-reform legislation blithely failed to include any provision for monitoring their post-welfare economic condition. Media accounts persistently bright-side the situation, highlighting the occasional success stories and playing down the acknowledged increase in hunger. National Journal magazine reports that the "good news" is that almost six million people have left the welfare rolls since 1996, while the "rest of the story" includes the problem that "these people sometimes don't have enough to eat."

You would have to read a great many newspapers very carefully, cover to cover, to see the signs of distress. You would find, for example, that the percentage of Wisconsin food-stamp families in "extreme poverty" --defined as less than 50 percent of the federal poverty line -- has tripled in the last decade to more than 30 percent.

You might discover that, nationwide, America's food banks are experiencing "a torrent of need which [they] cannot meet" and that, according to a survey conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, 67 percent of the adults requesting emergency food aid are people with jobs.

When unemployment causes poverty, we know how to state the problem --typically, "the economy isn't growing fast enough" -- and we know what the traditional liberal solution is -- "full employment." But when we have full or nearly full employment, when jobs are available to any job seeker who can get to them, then the problem goes deeper and begins to cut into that web of expectations that make up the "social contract."

I grew up hearing over and over, to the point of tedium, that "hard work" was the secret of success: "Work hard and you'll get ahead" or "It's hard work that got us where we are." No one ever said that you could work hard -- harder even than you ever thought possible -- and still find yourself sinking ever deeper into poverty and debt.

When poor single mothers had the option of remaining out of the labor force on welfare, the middle and upper-middle class tended to view them with a certain impatience, if not disgust. The welfare poor were excoriated for their laziness, their persistence in reproducing in unfavorable circumstances, their presumed addictions, and above all for their "dependency." Here they were, content to live off "government handouts" instead of seeking "self-sufficiency," like everyone else, through a job. They needed to get their act together, learn how to wind an alarm clock, get out there and get to work.

But now that government has largely withdrawn its "handouts," now that the overwhelming majority of the poor are out there toiling in Wal-Mart or Wendy's -- well, what are we to think of them? Disapproval and condescension no longer apply; what outlook makes sense?

Guilt, you may be thinking warily. Isn't that what we're supposed to feel?

But guilt doesn't go anywhere near far enough; the appropriate emotion is shame -- shame at our own dependency, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others.

When someone works for less pay than she can live on -- when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently -- then she has made a great sacrifice for you; she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life.

The "working poor," as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.

Someday of course they are bound to tire of getting so little in return and to demand to be paid what they're worth. There'll be a lot of anger when that day comes, and strikes and disruption.

But the sky will not fall, and we will all be better off for it in the end.

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By Barbara Ehrenreich

Barbara Ehrenreich is a journalist who lives in Key West, Fla. This article is adapted from her book, Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America, copyright 2001, published by Henry Holt and Company.

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