

Much to my personal dismay, middle and upper class Americans (which includes myself) rely on the working poor for doing much of the work that we aren't willing to do ourselves. We lie far from the grasp of poverty, but we create systems in which an increasing number of people stay below the poverty line working as part of this framework on which we comfortably reside. So what are the costs of this uneven spread of the workload, and what benefits may it have? Here are some of both, but understand that much of this is my own opinion based on my experiences and enhanced by Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, so take whatever pieces of this you want as truth.

I'll start by mentioning the stereotypical rich CEO perspective. I'm nowhere near this belief myself, but I feel that it is important to include. A CEO will have climbed some kind of company position ladder, and by the time they sit in their one-person huge office with a personal secretary they will be looking at their lowest employees (through middlemen no doubt) as tools. This alone is a cost. People have names and stories; we are not ants in a colony. For anyone to look at people as tools is one of the worst costs of this system, but it is sadly quite common. With this CEO also comes to the surface two of the largest benefits of this system: You have a group of employees willing to do the work you are not and the work can be accomplished on the cheap. Both are true, but likewise both are immoral benefits. So in a sense looking from this perspective there aren't any benefits.

My next window through which I intend to shed some light on this topic is my own, as a person not in the workforce yet, but living within the middle class and having read *Nickel and Dimed*. To me a benefit of this is the most basic fact of these blue-collar jobs: they are designed for entry-level job hunters and as the first steppingstone to higher and more desirable positions. This use of the working poor isn't immoral, but what's immoral is when the system traps most of these employees into that tier of jobs. These jobs should be an entry mechanism, not an internal circuit never releasing its electrons. A benefit of this, too, for me as purely a consumer is the pressure for lower prices it creates. However,

as I read *Nickel and Dimed* I began to see the real costs of the way we treat our working poor laid out clearly, and these costs outweigh the benefits. For example, many blue-collar jobs are physically hard. Everything from running around clearing up dressing rooms in Walmart to lifting a heavy vacuum cleaner and everything in between that Ehrenreich did is physically challenging. Likewise, as if the physical aspect wasn't enough, between management, hours, and wages we subject our working poor to a living nightmare. These major costs are not acceptable in modern society. How would you like to live on what you and maybe a partner make in hourly minimum wages? As Ehrenreich makes clear, it isn't a lifestyle of any constant stability, yet we are living a lifestyle that is constantly stable.

Many of us don't even notice our reliance on the working poor. We use countless items that have passed through the sweat of the working poor. However, we still don't admit to understanding that connection, and what it means. This lack of awareness, or unwillingness to see the real costs, can be interpreted as a core benefit of this system for everyone who is not poor. This system functions so autonomously that there is a cement wall keeping us away from a real relationship with the working poor. The working poor become a part of the underground glue holding our society and lifestyle together, but invisible to most of us. The aspect of their invisibility can be a benefit, if you have that opinion.

Sadly, taking a look at this situation from the standpoint of our upper-class existence, there are no costs and the benefits are everywhere. Who doesn't want low prices at a department store, grocery store, or convenience store? Lots of what makes the prices so low is tied into the class gap that separates us from the working poor and keeps them working. Who would rather buy the individual parts rather than a built product? In most cases it is the working poor that are creating these products under sweatshop labor. We are paying companies to hire cheap labor, which means hiring "tools" as their CEO would say to follow strict rules and regulations in order to create the product you just

bought. The working poor are the planks of wood that together form our floor. We are oblivious to the individuals, and are barely aware of the solid base they form.

Morally there are no benefits to such a divide, and to the system our society has either purposefully or inadvertently created. This entire paper has outlined just a few of the many costs, and the few benefits that exist if you choose to be oblivious to the unjust system that is in place. I understand that, as I have yet to be in the workforce, there is a good argument to ask what weight do my opinions carry? Seeing as my parents are both in pretty good standing on the work side how do I have my childhood to lend me credit? To some extent you'd be correct in your questioning. But on the other hand, between getting my eyes opened to this issue through both *Nickel and Dimed* and now also Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* I have a better understanding of these issues than many other people. These books have greatly informed my own opinions.