

2016

Review of *\$2.00 a Day: Living On Almost Nothing in America*.

Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer. Reviewed by Edward U. Murphy

Edward U. Murphy
Northeastern University, ed.murphy@neu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Murphy, Edward U. (2016) "Review of *\$2.00 a Day: Living On Almost Nothing in America*. Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer. Reviewed by Edward U. Murphy," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.4003>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol43/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



a wealth of information on the subject. In addition to its policy proposals, the author's mastery of the empirical complexities of defining and measuring poverty and inequality will be of interest to social policy scholars and other social scientists. His optimism is infectious and his proposals are persuasive. This engaging and informative book deserves to be widely read.

*James Midgley, School of Social Welfare,
University of California, Berkeley*

Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer. *\$2.00 a Day: Living On Almost Nothing in America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, (2015), 240 pages, \$28.00 (hardcover).

What happens to poor people when the federal safety net is ripped apart? That's the fundamental question addressed by Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer in *\$2.00 a Day*. In 1996, the U.S. Congress abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a New Deal-era cash assistance program, and replaced it with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). TANF is a block grant program that mandates work, imposes a five-year lifetime limit, and allows states considerable administrative discretion. Initial reports were mostly positive: employment by mothers previously on AFDC increased substantially, not only in the booming late 90s economy but on into the 2000s. Politicians trumpeted welfare reform as a resounding success.

Even before the financial meltdown of the late 2000s, signs had emerged that the picture was not as bright as advertised. Scholars found that a poor mother's transition from welfare to work hardly increased her family's well-being. Most available jobs simply paid too little and were too insecure. It was clear, however, that the mothers preferred to work and that the 1993 expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit had, in fact, provided a significant benefit to those finding formal employment. Yet, not everyone could find and keep jobs, and the Great Recession led to much suffering.

Two Dollars a Day provides a richly detailed, moving, and comprehensive picture of those left behind in the pitiless political and economic environment of the early 21st century. The

authors deploy both quantitative and qualitative methods to tell a complex story. Edin, who had researched the lives of poor people for many years, noticed in 2010 that some of the poor families she was interviewing had no income at all [Disclosure: Edin served as outside adviser for my doctoral thesis]. She then asked Shaefer, an expert on the national Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), to help her investigate this phenomenon. For the analysis they used the World Bank's \$2 a day standard for global poverty (less than one eighth of the U.S. poverty line for a family of three) and found, in 2011, that 1.5 million households—with 3 million children—had incomes below that threshold. The number of destitute households, half of whom were white, had doubled since TANF replaced AFDC fifteen years before. Not coincidentally, the number of poor families relying on cash assistance had fallen drastically. By 2014, just 3.8 million people received TANF—one quarter of the peak of 14.2 million on AFDC in 1994. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps) participation expanded, and most very poor families receive it, but in-kind benefits do not offer the flexibility and convenience of cash. In short, the safety net of last resort is failing.

In light of these disturbing findings, Edin and Shaefer sought to better understand the lives and struggles of those living on less than \$2 per day. In four urban and rural communities across the nation, they conducted in-depth ethnographic studies with desperately poor families. Their book provides startlingly intimate portraits of their suffering, hopes, and resilience. How does a family get by on nothing? Survival strategies included trading discounted food stamps for cash, trading sex for rent, redeeming bottle deposits, and selling plasma. Homeless families relied creatively on public libraries and private charities. Almost all of their informants had extensive work histories and wanted to work, but the low-wage job market treats employees as disposable, replaceable parts.

Be an exemplary retail cashier for years, lose track of twenty dollars once, and you're out of work. Take a Dickensian job cleaning foreclosed houses (no heat, no water) in the dead of winter, aggravate your asthma, miss work, and your hours are cut to next to nothing. Regarding the possibility of applying for welfare, most informants have heard that "they aren't

giving it out anymore." Edin and Shaefer vividly describe the dilapidated homes of their informants. In one of them, twenty two people subsist. Several of those interviewed have no teeth.

The fact that such destitution exists in the United States is alarming, and the book's compassionate portrayal of good people scrounging just to survive will stay with the reader for years. What to do? The authors offer detailed suggestions for subsidizing jobs for the poor, strengthening TANF, refining the EITC, raising the minimum wage, and inducing/requiring employers to offer predictable and stable work schedules, although the important role of labor unions in improving low-wage work is not discussed. *Two Dollars a Day* is a short, beautifully written book that will open the eyes and hearts of all readers, and one hopes its powerful punch will galvanize a public campaign that says simply: this is unacceptable.

Edward U. Murphy, Department of Global Studies
and International Relations, Northeastern University

Elaine Chase & Grace Bantebya-Kyomuhendo (Eds.). *Poverty and Shame: Global Experiences*. Oxford University Press (2015), 336 pages, \$90.00, (hardcover).

Poverty has consequences beyond material scarcity. As social creatures, human beings can and do experience a range of harmful social psychological effects of poverty. These effects are best encapsulated by the concept of shame, a state of feeling profoundly inadequate compounded by real or imagined negative social appraisal. As such, shame and poverty have a strong relationship. Adam Smith's attention to this is evident in his assertion that every person has the right to appear in public without the shame of visible poverty: a linen suit and leather shoes, standards of dress during his time. How is the shame of poverty produced and reproduced in everyday life, and what are the variances and consistencies across nations? These are the questions that Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo answer in *Poverty & Shame: Global Experiences*. Their examination of the "poverty/shame nexus" builds upon several overlapping literatures, including recent ethnographic work on the lived experiences of people who are poor, Amartya Sen's