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The Value of Low-Wage Jobs in American Society

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The background of the top half of the page is a collage of US dollar bills, including one-dollar and five-dollar bills, arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and movement. The bills are slightly tilted and overlapping, with some showing the portrait of George Washington and others showing the portrait of Abraham Lincoln. The colors are muted, with a focus on the green and grey tones of the currency.

MINIMUM WAGE

SURVIVING ON \$9.25 AN HOUR AS A SINGLE MOTHER IN WHATCOM COUNTY

OLIVIA CHARLES

IN **AMERICAN SOCIETY**, labor services were once considered to be honorable and respectable positions (Shulman, 2003). In the last few decades, these jobs have undergone a transformation. Low-wage jobs such as home health care aids, security guards, bank tellers, cashiers, and workers in industries such as manufacturing, agriculture, and food processing make up 30 million Americans (Shulman, 2003). In Beth Shulman's "The Betrayal of Work," they have been betrayed by American society. The main concept she illustrates in her book is how low-wage jobs are unable to provide workers in these positions with enough support for them to pay their bills and take care of their families. She also states that society keeps them at a disadvantage compared to high-wage earners, using examples from people who are working in low-wage jobs such as call centers, poultry plants, janitors and grocery store clerks. These 30 million Americans receive limited benefits, if any. The wages they receive, as well as the discrimination they face by working low-wage jobs, illustrates the difficulties these individuals face. In this paper, I will be discussing the impact these jobs have not just on Whatcom County, but the entire country, using the main concepts demonstrated in Shulman's book.



SCENARIO: A single mother of one child (who has a chronic health condition) has worked for five years at a local company in Whatcom County and earns \$9.25/hour.

This scenario exemplifies Shulman's matrix of challenges low-wage employees face. This hypothetical woman worked at a local company for five years earning \$9.25 an hour. She's been recently laid off. The odds that this company would offer or even have benefits for her are low due to the fact many employers do not offer benefits in low-wage employment. She may have Medicaid or a basic health care plan if she was employed full-time, but that plan will be discontinued soon after termination. As Shulman states: "Women with children face added barriers to getting better jobs."

She mentions that women in the labor force who have children "sacrifice pay and benefits and must work more non-standard hours" (p. 75). Thus, with the decrease in pay and benefits, this single mother may have to take jobs that do not allow her the time to care for her child, leaving her even more disadvantaged than how she was previously.

What challenges do laid-off workers face (specifically)? Which factors may most (or least) impact the woman in this scenario?

After being laid off in this scenario, there are many challenges for the single mother to overcome. Her chances of finding high-wage employment are slim since she must care for her child, thus she will be forced to seek out low-wage employment once more. While she

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may be able to find employment, given that the turnover rate is extremely high for such pay grades, she will most likely be searching for a job again within a couple years or be looking for a second job. The first job may not be sustainable for her family, or for herself. This is a factor she much consider in her search for employment. Shulman talks about how, “in 1995, more than twice the number of higher waged workers received benefits than low-wage workers, even though low-wage workers suffered twice the unemployment rate” (pg. 138). In 1995, the government released a report showing how low wage workers had a near-impossible chance of receiving benefits while unemployed, compared to high wage workers, and they had little to no protection when they became unemployed (Shulman, 2003).

Identify three support services you are eligible to access within Whatcom County to address your various needs. Be specific about what you would be able to access, how and where. What factors might get in the way? What are the limitations? Are any specific groups of individuals more or less advantaged in terms of what is available?

There are three support services the single mother has access to in Whatcom County. They are the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), Salvation Army, and the United Way of Whatcom County. The United Way of Whatcom County provides resources and services for unemployed people in order to support one's self and family. It provides “resources to survive the first month of unemployment,” as stated on its website. It lists resources with addresses, phone numbers, emails and websites with information on food programs, health, dental care, Thanksgiving and Christmas assistance and more. However, there are no guarantees of assistance after that one-month period, and the resources are only available to those who seek them out on their own time.

The next program is the SNAP program. The online site offers testing to see what programs one may be eligible for, and links to applications for such programs

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as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and Working Connections Childcare (Home Site, 2013). The benefits and rewards for these programs depend on family size and income.

The final resource I've selected is the Salvation Army, which has family service programs to "help families and needy individuals with emergency food, housing, utility assistance, and other temporal needs" (Housing and Homeless Service, 2013). They also offer youth camps people can send their children to a safe place while either looking for work or while working. The website for the Salvation Army does not list details of the services it offers, so the single mother will need to go to one of the locations and find out more detailed information about the programs for eligibility or exclusion.

Based on the information in the book, what is the likelihood that your job provided benefits? How would these benefits affect you in terms of your current situation?

Shulman divides work in society in several ways, such as its impact on the worker's health, families, the amount of work they receive, safety, their self-worth in society, and their security. She compared low-wage jobs and higher wage jobs in three separate aspects: flexibility, length of employment, and risk.

"Low wage jobs provide fewer and more unpredictable hours than higher paid positions" (Shulman, pg. 32), which describes the inflexibility of low-wage work. "Low wage jobs use more temporary workers than higher paid positions" (Shulman, p. 33), such as the retail sector where they hire people for the holiday season and release them after the season is over; retainment after the holiday season is low. "While higher wage jobs have

become safer over the past 20 years, low wage have become increasingly more dangerous" (Shulman, p. 37). The Department of Labor stated that 4,609 workers were killed while on the job in 2011, the majority of them in low-wage employment (Labor, 2012).

Here, the characteristics of low-wage jobs are of a much lower standard than higher-wage jobs. People who worked in low-wage jobs are unable to attain sufficient resources in order to pay bills or purchase enough food. There are fewer benefits offered compared to higher waged jobs. If you are injured on the job, the majority of employers do not offer health insurance to low-wage employees. These workers deal with contemptuous, and in some cases, abusive employers (Shulman, 2003). These are the points that Shulman uses to define the reality of low-wage employment.

Identify two specific legislative acts that have empowered or disempowered low wage workers during the last 75 years. How did the legislation impact these workers specifically?

One item of legislation that Shulman discusses is the Family and Medical Leave Act passed in 1993. Prior to this policy, there was no national maternity leave policy. After published findings in the late 1980s and early 1990s showed that women were increasingly joining the labor force along with their partners, the government developed this act. Its stated purpose was to

“...balance the demands of the workplace with the needs of families, to promote the stability and economic security of families, and to promote national interests in preserving family integrity and to entitle employees to take reasonable leave for medical reasons, for the birth or adoption of a child, and for the care of a child, spouse, or parent who has a serious health condition” (1993).

This gave benefits to working families based on medical factors that were never considered before, improving the health of these families. Another piece of legislation Shulman points out is the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited business and schools from discriminating in hiring and

enrollment. However, Shulman reveals that “while women and minorities made significant advances in the past generation with the creation of equal pay and equal opportunity, legislation in the sixties and seventies, discrimination persists” (p. 71). The stratification of minorities and women still exists because employers and workers allow it to continue. The act may have empowered minority and women workers when it was first implemented, but there should be additions to the act in order to break the stratification. Making higher-wage positions more accessible to these groups would be one way that could eliminate this stratification.

What proportion of jobs within Whatcom County fall within or under \$9.25 per hour pay rate?

The majority of jobs in Whatcom County fall under the \$9.25 per hour pay rate. The state minimum wage is \$9.19. After researching online and contacting the Washington Labor Department, no information or data could be found on jobs that pay within or above that rate, leaving this hypothetical woman to have to take employment that would pay less than her previous job.

What might a sociologist who studies work and occupations conclude about the situation of low wages workers in Whatcom County, using Shulman’s book as a reference point?

Based on the fact that Washington state has the highest minimum wage in the nation, Shulman would say that out of the entire country, this state honors work the most and provides more resources, rewards, and benefits to those workers. If a person loses his or her low-wage job, the accessibility and programs that assist unemployed people to sustain their families while searching for work, will prove to be very valuable. ●



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