

THE MISSING CLASS: PORTRAITS OF THE NEAR POOR IN AMERICA

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The Missing Class focuses on the struggles and challenges of America's working poor in trying to improve their own lives and the lives of their children. The issues of America's working poor are not unknown to those of us in economic and community development. The very foundations of our missions are to improve the economies of the places where we work in order to improve quality of life.

The Missing Class takes a different approach to examining the struggles of the working poor by actually following the lives of several families in the New York/New Jersey area over several years. As the book explains, "fifty-seven million Americans—including 21 percent of the nation's children—live a notch above the poverty line, and yet the challenges they face are largest ignored." (p. ix)

Government programs to assist those in poverty are designed to help only those at certain income thresholds. For the millions of Americans living just above that threshold, there are few if any places to turn to for help.

The book profiles the lives of several families and helps to shed light on some of the very same issues we deal with everyday in our own communities. One great example is the struggle of every community to improve public education and ensure students are prepared for the future.

Research shows that the schools that are the best performers and those where students are

succeeding have the involvement and support of parents. In *The Missing Class*, we meet a young student determined to succeed. Rasheea Fletcher is the granddaughter of John and Sondra Floyd. Her mother is a crack addict and hardly around. But, her grandparents are devoted to her, and her grandfather spends hours each week volunteering at Rasheea's school, getting to know her teachers, and understanding how to keep her motivated and focused on her school work.

It is a matter of common sense that involved parents lead to successful students, and no one seems to know this better than America's middle class. Working parents often pride themselves on their ability, even after a long day of work, to correct their children's homework, show up for school performances, and meet with teachers. And when they can't spend the time, these parents spend the money to hire capable tutors and buy intensive private school curricula and other forms of enrichment. Members of the "missing class," however, do not yet have the family coffers full enough to afford tutors or private schools. (p. 43)

Safiya, for example, is not yet old enough for kindergarten. When her older sibling was born, her mother made sure she spent time learning her colors and alphabet and was ready for school. Since that time, Safiya's mother has secured a full-time job. A good job, but it doesn't pay enough to afford professional day care. Safiya, instead,

spends all day at her grandmother's while her mother works, and her Grandmother Carla spends her day listening to Jerry Springer rather than teaching Safiya. When she enters school next fall, Safiya will be behind most of the other children and will struggle to keep up.

The missing class struggle in other ways, too. Even when they have succeeded in finding a better job, they still struggle to keep their heads above water. Rita Gervais has worked her way up to a \$60,000 a year job in a bank on Wall Street. But being a professional means no more shopping for clothes at Wal-Mart, so within a year Rita has worked her way up to seven credit cards and several thousands dollars of debt. Because the members of the missing class have often lived paycheck to paycheck and mostly with cash, when they do begin to succeed, they don't know how to manage their finances and fall prey to those who are able to take advantage of them, such as pay day lenders or other credit businesses.

The way to rise from the missing class to the middle class requires education—and the rising cost of college and higher education is becoming more out of reach for those on the edge of the middle class.

The missing class is barely out of reach of government subsidized programs. They have made it out of the lower class but are struggling day-to-day to keep ahead. One setback—the loss of a job, even temporarily, illness, legal issues—anything that will require money to spend on anything other than day-to-day living can send them spiraling down quickly into poverty once again.

The way out of poverty permanently often requires education, home ownership, and other means that many of us take for granted—but for the missing class, these means simply remain out of reach, and there is little of hoping of ever achieving them. *The Missing Class* helps to illustrate the struggles faced within our country and our

own communities. By personalizing the situations, the book helps to make these struggles more real and can help each of us in our own efforts at bettering our communities better understand what our citizens are up against as they go about their everyday lives.

For someone involved in public policy, reading *The Missing Class* makes sense, because it helps me to understand where government programs stop and who is really impacted. It also helps me, as an E.D. professional, to understand better how to evaluate proposed legislation or regulation.

For those of us involved in other areas of economic and community development, reading *The Missing Class* provides insight into who really are our demographics. We all know nationally that the gap is widening between the “haves” and the “have nots.” *The Missing Class* helps us to understand who is being left in the middle and hopefully also widens our understanding of why what we do each day is important. For those of us who sometimes have those days when we aren't sure if what we do is really impacting our community, read *The Missing Class*. It will give you a renewed sense of purpose.

The reviewer

Mary Graham is the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce's Senior Vice President for Public Policy and Regional Advancement. The Division works to maintain an active and positive dialogue with community leaders and public officials on the local, state and federal levels.

She was twice past chair of the Council for Community and Economic Research. The Council is a national organization promoting excellence in economic and community research. Graham is one of twenty-two Certified Community Researchers in the country. The CCR designation is from the

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In 2006, Graham was awarded the Certified Chamber Executive (CCE) designation by the American Chamber of Commerce Executives. The CCE is the only national certification for Chamber professionals. Since ACCE started the professional designation more than 40 years ago, there have been a total of 477 awarded. Graham is the only Chamber professional to hold both the CCR and CCE designations.

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