7.8 million people in America are considered working poor, having an income below the poverty level despite having been engaged in the labor force for at least 27 weeks, according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics\(^1\). While it should be noted that this statistic includes those who are actively seeking work among the category of the employed, the number remains as startling while pointing to a social issue of which everyone should be aware.

While working full-time decreases one’s chances of existing among the working poor, a current 58.4% of the working poor are employed full time\(^2\) and still living in poverty. Considering this and that 48% of all minimum-wage earners are described as the chief earner in their household\(^3\), it raises the concern that a family could, in fact, make ends meet on such a standard. With the poverty line in America currently resting at $20,614 for a family of four\(^4\), it stands to reason that most could not succeed in affording the current cost of decent housing along with food, utilities, and child care.

In 1998, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich set out to test this predicament by conducting an experiment that would be related in her 2001 expose *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* of which an earlier version appeared in Harper’s Magazine in January of 1999. For the experiment, Ehrenreich abandoned her career and, perhaps more importantly, her bank account to explore the dynamics of the “low-wage workforce” and discern whether or not it is possible to successfully make the leap from welfare to work. Acting under the guise of an unskilled everywoman, Ehrenreich delves into the food service industry in Key West, Florida, only to take up a second job as a housekeeper in a hotel chain. Thus she chronicles her struggles to maintain a $500/month rent, a forty-minute commute, and to still have money left over for food and the most minimal of daily expenses. Discovering less-than-pleasant working environments, the strain of physical labor, and a wealth of low-wage characters to analyze, the experiment concludes that even working $6 to $10 dollars an hour still dooms her and her co-workers to an uphill battle for housing. Even with roommates, most are forced to live in trailers or in many cases to rent hotel rooms by the day or week. Ultimately, Ehrenreich concludes that she “couldn’t hold two jobs and (she) couldn’t make enough money to live on with one. And (she) had advantages unthinkable to many of the long-term poor – health, stamina, a working car, and no children to care for and support.”

It is with this example that the statistics of the working poor become starkly realistic to the outsider in that it is evident that, even with a raise to $5.25 an hour, the minimum wage is not even close to the minimum income necessary to live. Certainly by this account, the 7.8 million Americans working hard to remain poor become much more than a number that everyone should know but undeniably a reality of society that should be ever-present in the American consciousness.

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\(^1\) Taken from US Department of Labor and Bureau of Labor and Statistics “A Profile of the Working Poor, 2004” [http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpswp2004.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpswp2004.pdf) Note: No more current statistics could be found from a reputable source at this time.


\(^3\) Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “A $7.25 Minimum Wage Would Be a Useful Step in Helping Working Families Escape Poverty” Jason Furman and Sharon Parrott [http://www.cbpp.org/1-5-07mw.htm](http://www.cbpp.org/1-5-07mw.htm)

\(^4\) US Census Bureau [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh06.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh06.html)