

***\$2.00 A DAY* GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE**

This discussion guide is a free resource for groups interested in talking about the themes present in *\$2.00 a Day*. They might be useful for classroom or community small group discussion. Feel free to use the questions you like and discard or change others. If you develop questions you'd like to share, we would love to hear from you.

Chapter 1: Welfare is Dead

- 1) How did the 1996 welfare reform change conditions of the poor? How did poverty alleviation policies shift as a result of welfare reform?
- 2) Why is it that although as a country we are spending more on aid for the poor, Edin and Shaefer find that the level of extreme poverty has risen in the last decade?
- 3) Had you ever heard of TANF? Would you apply for it during a time of need? Why or why not?
- 4) Explain what's behind Modonna's contention that "they aren't giving that out anymore." Why is it that some people like Modonna who qualify for TANF don't apply?
- 5) Is there a person you can relate to most in this chapter, either Modonna or any of the people included in the history of welfare policy? What is it about them that you can relate to?
- 6) Why do so many Americans dislike programs labeled as welfare?
- 7) To what extent do you think the welfare system that was in place before 1996 needed to be reformed? What makes you think that?
- 8) If you were put in charge of creating a government system of aid for families like Modonna's what would it look like?
- 9) If Modonna or Susan Brown was put in charge of creating a government system of aid for families in need, what do you think it might look like?

Chapter 2: Perilous Work

- 1) Have you experienced unsafe work conditions, or had a job that made you ill?
- 2) What do you think Jennifer liked most about her job at Chicago City, before things went south?
- 3) Jennifer had her hours with Chicago City reduced because she started calling in sick after working in moldy houses. Have you ever seen your paycheck cut unexpectedly? If so, what was that like?
- 4) Edin and Shaefer argue that one of the reasons why subcontractors like Chicago City often pinch their workers is because in order to get contracts, they have to keep their costs incredibly low.
 - a. What do you think about Debra's position as a small business owner?
 - b. If we did something to help small businesses like Chicago City, how do you think it would affect someone in Jennifer's position?
- 5) Susan and Jennifer's job searches were likely hindered by the color of their skin. Have you ever felt that your appearance hurt your chances of getting a job or a promotion? What was that like?
- 6) What are some of the other obstacles Susan and Jennifer faced getting and maintaining a job?
- 7) Why did Rae like going to work so much? Have you ever felt like work was an "escape" from something else?
- 8) What was one of the techniques that Rae used to improve her performance at work? Have you ever found a trick like this that helped you with a job?
- 9) Does the government have a responsibility to help low-wage workers? Do you feel there is anything the government can do to improve working conditions for low-wage workers?
- 10) If you were put in charge of creating government rules to improve conditions for low-wage workers what would these policies look like?
- 11) If Jennifer or Rae was put in charge of creating government rules to improve conditions for low-wage workers what would these policies look like?

Chapter 3: A Room of One's Own

- 1) Have you ever had a job where you were asked to work extra or cover someone else's shift but did not receive extra compensation? Whether yes or no, imagine yourself in this position, what would you do? How would it make you feel about your job?
- 2) Why do you think Jennifer left her job at Catalina?
- 3) Given Rae's mental and physical ailments, she may qualify for SSI (Social Security Supplemental Income). In this chapter, she says she won't apply because she wants to support herself and her child and because she feels her father (who passed away) would be disappointed. Given her situation, do you think she should apply? If you were in her shoes, would you apply?
- 4) Has your family ever had to depend on someone else to pay rent, put food on the table, go/stay in school, or start a business?
 - a. If so, where did you turn, and what was it like to ask for help?
- 5) Have you ever had to double up with family or friends for any reason for any longer than a week or two? What was it like? Would you like to do it again? Would you do it if you needed to?
- 6) Edin and Shaefer argue that doubling up with family and friends brings with it a certain set of risks for the \$2-a-day poor. What are these? How do they play out for Jennifer and Rae?
- 7) If you had to change places with Jennifer or Rae at the end of the story, who would it be and why?
- 8) Did the information about the prevalence of adverse childhood events (ACEs) among American, such as physical and sexual abuse, surprise you? Why or why not? Without necessarily revealing their name, has anyone close to you or you yourself had such experiences? How have those affected this person's life?
- 9) Edin and Shaefer point to some causes of the affordable housing crisis. What are they?
- 10) What types of principles do you think should guide action—either by government or private charity—to try to improve housing options for families with low-incomes and especially in \$2-a-day poverty?

Chapter 4: By Any Means Necessary

- 1) Have you ever donated plasma? What was it like? If you haven't, to what extent would it be a big deal for you?
- 2) Which of the survival strategies described in this book would you utilize first if you felt like you had no other options? Which would you utilize last?
- 3) As you think about the strategies for help described in this chapter, what are some of the risks that come with each of the strategies?
- 4) Have you ever benefited from the assistance of a charitable organization? What role did this play in helping you sustain your family or overcome an obstacle?
- 5) Has utilizing public spaces such as parks and libraries played a significant role in helping support your family (not necessarily financially but rather by providing children and families with experiences they otherwise they may not have had)?
- 6) If you were offered a job and could take:
 - a. \$55,000 cash; or
 - b. \$53,000 in cash plus \$4,000 in SNAP (for a total of \$57,000) which would you choose and why?
- 7) Many of the families talked about in *\$2.00 a Day* have sold their SNAP (food stamps). What do you think about this?
- 8) What are your thoughts on the potential maximum penalty for selling SNAP (\$250,000 fine and up to 20 years in prison)? Is the punishment warranted or is it too severe? Why?
- 9) How should we think about the work effort of people like Jessica Compton, Jennifer Hernandez, or Paul Heckewelder as described in this chapter? What words would you use to describe their effort?

Chapter 5: A World Apart

- 1) What did you know about the Mississippi Delta before reading this chapter? Did anything in this chapter surprise you?
- 2) Edin and Shaefer name this chapter, “A World Apart.” Why do you think they chose this title?
- 3) Given the dominant agricultural economy in the deep south, how has 1) history and 2) technological advancements shaped the work opportunities available to poor adults in this region?
- 4) What are the biggest barriers that someone like Tabitha faces in her life? What do you think she would need in order to get to college like she wants to?
- 5) Alva Mae has “sold” her children’s social security numbers to secure much needed cash, which is illegal. What are your thoughts on this?
- 6) What does this chapter tell you about the existence of racism in the 21st Century? Were there things that surprised you in this regard?
- 7) Edin and Shaefer argue that part of the reason why it is so difficult for poor families to escape poverty in places like Percy is because (1) they are often unable to join the formal job market and (2) those who run schools and other institutions are not held accountable, and formal businesses sometimes cheat customers and turn a blind eye to illicit activity from which they benefit. What is your reaction to this explanation?
- 8) Teachers like Mr. Patten can play an integral role in the lives of children, especially those who are poor. If not for Mr. Patten helping Tabitha apply for a scholarship to a boarding school, she may still find herself homeless. Yet, teachers and administrators often find themselves restrained by a lack of resources, especially in places where it is common for children to go hungry. Should we do more to help teachers combat poverty? If so, what should we do?
- 9) Edin and Shaefer argue that Percy and Jefferson may be very different places from much of the rest of the country, but perhaps on the other hand they are not. What do they mean by this, and what are your thoughts?

Conclusion: Where, Then, from Here?

- 1) Despite the abuse and the trauma the \$2 a day poor are often subjected to, the families profiled in this book find joy, hope, and a sense of perseverance in their children. During difficult times, what or who has given you the strength to move on?
- 2) After getting to know all of the families in the book, to whom do you relate the most? Whom would you want to have dinner or coffee with?
- 3) What does David Ellwood argue about the characteristics of a successful program to support poor families? What does he, as well as Edin and Shaefer, argue about the American people's willingness to support programs for struggling families?
- 4) Do you think the federal government should play a more substantive role in creating and improving the quality of jobs than it currently does?
- 5) What are your thoughts on implementing a jobs program with support services? Given the unique obstacles that the \$2 a day poor face on a daily basis, do you think the provision of support services such as mental health counseling, child care resources, and legal advocacy can help families like those profiled in this book find and maintain jobs?
- 6) Work opportunities for people who have physical limitations but don't qualify for disability benefits are limited. As such, people like Martha find themselves joining the informal economy. Other than the small business incubator idea suggested by the authors, what are other creative ways to incorporate people like Martha into the formal economy?
- 7) Finding affordable housing has become increasingly difficult in the United States. The authors propose increasing the minimum wage and expanding government housing subsidies as ways to help poor families close the gap between income and rent. Do you agree with the potential effectiveness of these policy prescriptions? Do you suggest any other policies that can help close the gap between income and rent?
- 8) Do you think we need a program that can provide a cash cushion for families in cases when work fails? How should this program work? Should we reform TANF, or create a new program?
- 9) In the end, Edin and Shaefer think social inclusion/social incorporation should be the guiding principle of aid to families who are poor. Why do they think this is so important, and do you agree?