

Study Guide: Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in North America Summer Reading 2004-2005

1. Early in her book *Nickel and Dimed*, author Barbara Ehrenreich admits that she has many advantages over "real" low-wage workers. What sets her apart from the average low-wage worker? In her desire to "experience poverty," what rules does she set for herself?
2. Minimum wage workers often report feeling invisible. Where do you encounter minimum wage workers? What sorts of services do they provide? Have you ever worked in a low-wage job? If so, what was your experience?
3. On page 27, Ehrenreich writes: "There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs." Describe some of these costs. How do the people in *Nickel and Dimed* deal with these costs?
4. Most of the low-income workers Ehrenreich encounters are women. Is there a connection between "women's work" and low wages? Explain some of the social and historical reasons for this situation.
5. The Poverty Guideline is issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services. In 2004, HHS found that for a family of four to live above the poverty line, they had to earn \$18,850. Describe life in your hometown for a family of four living just above the poverty line. Where would they live? Work? What would they eat? What daily challenges would they face?
6. Make a list privileges you experience as a person of your "class." Make a list of drawbacks. How would you characterize your relationship to the American Dream? Do your goals seem achievable?
7. As a reader, we get to know many of Ehrenreich's coworkers. Why does the author use personal narratives in *Nickel and Dimed*? Choose one person's story to examine. What about the story surprises you?
8. Ehrenreich reports at length about the sorts of physical ailments low-wage workers have to endure. What are they? How are they dealt with?
9. "It is common, among the nonpoor," writes Ehrenreich, "to think of poverty as a sustainable condition. They are 'always with us.' What is harder for the nonpoor to see is poverty as acute distress," due to poor nutrition, homelessness and lack of affordable housing, injuries, and little to no health insurance. Ehrenreich argues that far from being sustainable, poverty is a "state of emergency." Do you agree?
10. In the "Evaluation" chapter of *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich discusses the personal and social challenges of "achieving a decent fit between income and expenses." What are some of these challenges? What solutions would you propose?