

One Book, One Bakersfield, One High Poverty Rate:  
Responses to *\$2.00 a Day* from the Bakersfield Community

Faith Bradham

*\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*<sup>1</sup> presents the sociological research of Drs. Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer on those Americans surviving on virtually no cash income. Shockingly, this research shows that 4% of Americans with children, or about 1.5 million American households, are living on \$2 per person per day. The authors trace this issue to the death of welfare during Reaganomics and the Clinton administration—now that cash government assistance has been mostly eliminated, there is no safety net for families who are unable to maintain regular employment. This book also showcases the stories of several families living in debilitating poverty across America. It strives to uncover how these families get so poor and how they eke out a living with no cash income, and it presents a case for solutions to what the authors term “\$2.00 a day poverty.” It is essential reading for anyone who desires to understand the depth of poverty in America.

The genius of *\$2.00 a Day* lies in its interviews with those living in \$2.00 a day poverty. These interviews provide a troubling insight into the plight of those who are unable to maintain consistent employment, the strategies they must use to remain alive, and the moral and ethical dilemmas that arise when people are severely limited in their daily resources. By providing us with these interviews, Drs. Edin and Shaefer supply horrifying details about the way extreme poverty is treated in America. The interviews are interspersed with the history of welfare (and its death) in the United States and statistics on the current state of American poverty. The historical background of welfare and government assistance to the poor is an especially enlightening addition to this book. Those who were born on the more Millennial side of the 20th century neither lived through the Reagan administration and its vilification of the “welfare queen” nor had high school history textbooks that were updated to include Reaganomics. This makes the chronology of America’s treatment of its poorest citizens in the second half of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Edin, Kathryn J., & H. Luke Shaefer. *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

20th century quite helpful for any younger readers of the book, and it is a helpful refresher for those who did live through that era.

The final chapter of *\$2.00 a day* presents the authors' solutions for eradicating \$2.00 a day poverty in America. They envision an approach modeled after economist David Ellwood's proposed (and never implemented) antipoverty program in 1993. This approach is guided by three principles: that all deserve the opportunity to work, that parents should be able to raise their children in a place of their own, and that parent and children's well-being should be ensured regardless of whether the parents are working. While this approach is thoughtful and well-reasoned, many of the specific solutions that Drs. Edin and Shaefer propose seem unattainable. For example, they call for mass job creation in the spirit of The New Deal, for a higher minimum wage and lower housing costs across the country, and for retail employers to provide stable schedules several weeks in advance. The legislative challenges involved in implementing even one of these changes seem nearly insurmountable. Yet, despite the weaknesses of the authors' solutions, *\$2.00 a Day* is enlightening, powerful, and well-deserving of its place as the One Book One Bakersfield One Kern pick for 2017.

In the spirit of this book's place as the 2017 read for the One Book One Bakersfield One Kern program, I'd like to focus on the Bakersfield community's reaction to the book as part of this review. In this way, this review will show not only my perception of the book, but the perception of the greater Bakersfield community. In the following paragraphs, I will report the responses to the book at three specific One Book One Bakersfield One Kern events. These are: a panel at the BC Levan Center consisting of panelists from the BC community, the BC Humanities Book Discussion Group on this book, and a visit from the authors of the book to CSU Bakersfield.

The panel discussion at the Levan Center was moderated by Dr. Oliver Rosales (*Professor of History and Coordinator, Social Justice Institute at Bakersfield College*). The panelists were: Justin Bell, M.A. (*Adjunct Professor of English*); Faith Bradham, Master's of Library Science (*Reference Librarian*); Endee Grijalva (*Program Manager- Adult Education, Bakersfield College*); Mia Ocean, PhD (*Professor of Substance Abuse & Psychology*); James Tompkin (*"Free on the Outside" President, BCSGA Senator*). The panel began with the panelists' individual responses to the book. The overall reaction among the panelists was mixed, but the general consensus was that the panelists were happy that the book was able to bring a national spotlight to the dire issues it highlights. They also enjoyed its writing style, particularly the way it mixes statistics with vignettes so that readers can easily move between quantitative data and more nuanced qualitative information.

However, each panelist articulated frustration with the solutions presented at the end of the book. The panelists felt that, while the authors excelled at revealing the present state of deep

poverty in the United States, their solutions were far too broad and abstract to be put into place feasibly. In addition, both Dr. Ocean and Endee Grijalva felt as though this book toed the line of sensationalizing poverty—both panelists thought that the researchers could have done more to help their research subjects rather than simply paying them for interviews. Dr. Ocean suggested that the researchers could have turned the on-site research into part-time or full-time jobs for the research subjects by offering them work as research assistants or other positions as part of the research project. As it was, Dr. Ocean felt as though the book came too close to voyeurism of the suffering of the people used as research subjects for the book.

In contrast, the student reaction during the panel was mostly positive. Students were appreciative that the book emphasized issues that many of them had experienced or had had close family members or friends experience. In a lively Q&A session after the panelists had finished speaking, students pointed out which of the issues raised in the book were applicable to Bakersfield. They were particularly drawn to its discussion of housing insecurity and solutions for affordable housing and homelessness. Many in the audience brought up the issue of homelessness in Bakersfield, and expressed frustration that the city and Bakersfield institutions were not doing enough to help the homeless population and keep housing prices low. This led to panelist James Tompkin providing the audience members with information about the work BC is doing to help with homelessness in Bakersfield and how BC students themselves could help.

Sponsored by BC's Levan Center, the humanities book discussion group is a semesterly tradition on BC's campus. *\$2.00 a day* was chosen as the Fall 2017 pick so that the BC faculty could join in the community-wide discussion on this book. About a dozen past and present BC faculty members attended the discussion group for an animated conversation. The conversation first touched on the book's discussion of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the continued health impacts of traumatic experiences in childhood well into adulthood. Several faculty members emphasized that even though the ACEs detailed in the book are so horrific as to sound almost fictional, many BC students have experienced ACEs very similar to these and have come from horrible situations just like the ones described in the book. As a result, the book works as a reminder of the lived experiences of BC students and how those experiences might affect our students in the classroom and in their academic careers.

Just as in the panel discussion, this discussion group also found fault with the book's conclusions and future plans. Some members of the group felt as though the book's argument simplified very complex issues and didn't include enough hard data. There were also concerns of elitism on the part of the authors—faculty members felt as though the authors had approached these issues from a place of privilege and hadn't treated the research subjects with enough respect in the process of research and in writing the book.

However, other faculty members brought up the audience of the book. They felt that this book was written to bring awareness of the issue of deep poverty to a broad audience. These faculty members did not think that the average layperson would want to read a dense book full of statistics. Rather, the book's brilliance lies in its ability to balance statistics with compelling storytelling. The discussion concluded with the acknowledgement that, while the book does a stellar job of showcasing the falsehood of the bootstrap myth in American society, there is a danger in focusing so much on the "scrappiness" of the research subjects. It is true that the research subjects shown in the book were unfailingly hard-working and innovative in their struggle to rise up from \$2.00 a day poverty, but there should be an acknowledgement that not everyone has the same response to poverty and hardship. Otherwise, a tendency could arise to punish or penalize those whose reaction to deep poverty is not be "scrappy" but to become overwhelmed.

As the culmination of the 2017 One Book events, authors Dr. Kathryn J. Edin and Dr. H. Luke Shaefer visited Bakersfield for a lecture and book signing at CSU Bakersfield. The event was well-attended by a mix of students and faculty from BC, CSUB, and several high schools in the area as well as other members of the Bakersfield community. Drs. Edin and Shaefer spoke on their backgrounds in sociology and their particular drives to research poverty and welfare. Both have impressive resumes of work in these areas. They stated that their aim for this book was "to tell the story of extreme poverty in a respectful and enlightening way."

One interesting piece of information they presented was that the American Family Act, which would dramatically expand the child tax credit for those families without significant earnings, has been introduced to congress this year. This piece of legislation is directly related to the authors' solutions to deep poverty as outlined in *\$2.00 a day*. It was heartening to hear that, even though many at BC and in Bakersfield felt as though the authors' solutions to poverty were impractical, Drs. Edin and Schaefer have succeeded in beginning to put some of these solutions into place.

During the Q&A with the audience, both college, university, and high school students asked questions regarding working with the research subjects, housing instability, and the process of becoming a sociological researcher. Many students were curious about the researchers' relationships with their subjects—they wanted to know how the researchers managed to remain neutral or impartial, and how they could hear such terrible stories without breaking down. Dr. Edin responded that following the subjects and hearing their stories was "the hardest thing I've done as a researcher" and that the realities of their stories "were uglier than what we wrote." She shared that their book editors had them remove several details from the stories that they felt were too ugly for the typical American to be able to stomach because the editors were concerned that Americans wouldn't buy the book if all of the original details

were included. Another recurring question was about how the authors became researchers and how the students could find that same path. Many students felt the stories of the book strike close to home and expressed a desire to become authors of a similar book that would tell the story of poverty in Kern County and California.

Although certain aspects of this book are flawed, and there are some questions regarding the treatment of the research subjects by the researchers, Bakersfield responded quite positively to *\$2.00 a day* and the awareness it raises of deep poverty. As part of a county with a poverty rate of nearly 22%<sup>2</sup>, Bakersfield feels several of these issues quite keenly, such as homelessness and persistent difficulty maintaining full-time employment. By choosing *\$2.00 a day* for this year's One Book One Bakersfield One Kern program, the Bakersfield community was able to address the struggles of our own community members with poverty and to think of our own solutions for the issues that affect our community the most.

---

<sup>2</sup> "Kern County, CA." *Data USA*, 2017. Retrieved from [datausa.io/profile/geo/kern-county-ca/](https://datausa.io/profile/geo/kern-county-ca/).