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## Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low-Wage Labor Market

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on the other hand, they dismantle the decades-old, grassroots-built regulatory safety net, taking workplace safety a giant step back to the nineteenth-century legal doctrine whereby the worker, rather than the employer, assumes the risks and costs of injury, illness, and death.

I am sorry to say that my own observations over the past 20 years validate the dark picture of workplace health and safety presented by this book. Yet, there is certainly hope. Just as preventing the recurrence of the workplace health and safety problems plaguing a specific workplace requires asking “Why?” over and over until the root causes are revealed, laying bare the causes, nature, and scope of the worldwide downward spiral in workplace safety and health is a vital step toward reversing it.

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*Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low-Wage Labor Market.* By Katherine S. Newman. Cambridge, Mass.: Russell Sage Foundation and Harvard University Press, 2006. 405 pp. ISBN 0-674-02336-6, \$35.00 (cloth).

CHUTES AND LADDERS is the game of rewards and consequences. As kids travel along the game path, they encounter situations that reward them for good deeds by letting them climb the ladders or punish them for misbehaving by sending them down chutes. All the while, they are learning to recognize numbers and count to 100.

—Milton Bradley Hasbro  
Board Games homepage

*Chutes and Ladders* is a popular children’s game of chance that provides the moniker for this book and a metaphor for the apparently random ups and downs in the lives of the inner-city working poor. In life, as in the board game, good luck and virtue (for example, hard work) are rewarded with upward mobility and economic success, while bad choices and bad luck are punished with a return to the starting gate or to the first rung of the job ladder. All the while, workers learn life’s basic lessons that better prepare them for the next challenge in an unforgiving, harsh, and rapidly changing low-wage job market.

The book—*Chutes and Ladders*—is Katherine Newman’s follow-up companion volume to her prize-winning qualitative study of the working poor in the fast-food industry in Harlem. In *No Shame in My Game*, published in 1999, Newman chronicled the lives of nearly 300 minority workers in a central Harlem neighborhood, some of whom were employed flipping burgers and dipping French fries for a major fast-food hamburger chain (“Burger Barn”) and some of whom were unsuccessful applicants for these jobs. Most of these minority interviewees were young high school dropouts. The analysis of subsequent job and earnings mobility, now chronicled in *Chutes and Ladders*, is based on 103 re-interviews in 1997 from respondents first sampled in 1993–94, from which another 40 were interviewed again in 2002. All respondents in 2002 were aged 23–35. Most were African American (60%), Dominican (15%), or Puerto Rican (10%).

The primary goal of this new book is to describe the real-life successes and failures of disadvantaged minorities in the low-wage labor market—the working poor who typically start at the bottom of the job hierarchy. Using the respondents’ own words from in-depth unstructured interviews, Newman provides a vivid and compelling account of how workers navigate the low-wage labor market, and how aspirations and dreams are reshaped by their experiences, good and bad.

This is an interesting read. More important, *Chutes and Ladders* provides considerable reason for optimism about the experiences of inner-city minority workers—at least among those interviewed in this study—who started their work careers in the low-wage food service industry during the early 1990s recession. By 2002, most of these workers were no longer in the food service industry. Only 15% were still in the same job they held in 1997. Although most workers had at least one spell of unemployment between 1997 and 2002, the good news is that nearly two-thirds received hourly wages of over \$10.31 in 2002. Indeed, substantial upward earnings mobility (as defined by hourly wage increases of over \$5) was far more common than might be expected for workers in a low-income inner-city neighborhood. Still, 12 of the 40 workers interviewed in 2002 were unemployed or not in the labor force.

To deal with the heterogeneous experiences of low-wage workers, Newman distinguishes among three groups of roughly equal size: “high flyers” (those earning at least \$15 an hour), a middle group characterized as “up but not out” (that is, those with lower wages and wage growth), and “low riders,” who apparently had fallen through the cracks since 1992. The high flyers’ success

could be attributed to finding a job with a growing firm, getting more education, or securing a union job. Newman then chronicles the many different pathways to success by highlighting the real life experiences of the workers who embraced the ethos of hard work, opportunity, and the American Dream and who apparently were rewarded for doing so. The “low riders,” on the other hand, were bogged down by low education and personal problems, and often ended up being chronically unemployed or underemployed. They also relied on welfare and their live-in partners, or on their families, for financial or emotional support. For them, the metaphor of the “chute” seems inappropriate. These low-wage workers were never able to climb high enough on the occupational ladder to reach a “chute” that could bring them downward mobility. Newman herself suggests that many “low-riders” were “bumping along the bottom” or were “down and out,” and this is “the group that welfare-reform skeptics were worried about, and with good reason” (p. 116).

There is a lot to like about this volume. It continues the unfinished story that first began with *No Shame in My Game*. It provides a largely sympathetic view of inner-city minority workers, who share most of the aspirations but few of the opportunities of their white, middle-class counterparts. *Chutes and Ladders* also paints a picture of resilience, perseverance, and optimism among poor minorities, despite the very real economic barriers they face. Indeed, Newman shows that most low-wage workers hold realistic and achievable aspirations or goals about work. Racism and discrimination are acknowledged as a fact of life, but one that is usually repressed or at least “set aside” in order to maintain a positive outlook. Newman also acknowledges the strong role of family and social networks in mobility processes. And she calls for the usual policy prescriptions, such as improving educational opportunities (for example, through Pell Grants), expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (especially at the state level), ensuring health care for everyone (but especially for poor children), and providing affordable child care.

The main limitation of the book is obvious: much of the analysis is based on a sample of only 40 mostly black and Hispanic workers drawn nonrandomly from a Harlem neighborhood. Is the generally optimistic story Newman tells generalizable to the food-service industry or to other low-wage workers nationally? And are the results describing upward mobility during the expansionary period of the mid- to late 1990s still applicable in the current period of slower job growth? To her credit, Newman addresses these

questions with supplementary national analyses of low-wage workers from the *Survey of Income and Program Participation*. Newman’s claim that her main qualitative conclusions are “confirmed in the national data set” is comforting, but also arguably eliminates the need for this study. To be sure, the workers’ own words provide useful insights about their harsh experiences in the work force, but those first-hand observations are used mostly in service to Newman’s optimistic quantitative results, which in the end will leave the most lasting impression.

Policy-makers and analysts also may be disappointed in the concluding chapter on specific policy prescriptions (for example, expanded EITC); it is mostly boilerplate and represents a particular political bent. This generic discussion arguably could have been written by any liberal or progressive policy center and without any of the rich qualitative analyses presented in this book. I had hoped for more discussion of family-strengthening provisions of the 1996 welfare reform bill and other state efforts to promote marriage, especially since Newman found that married workers did much better than their single counterparts over the study period. In any event, such discussion is probably moot from Newman’s perspective. The concluding chapter is not especially optimistic that these policies will be enacted anytime soon in light of America’s current anti-tax ethos, the drain on the nation’s resources from the war in Iraq, and growing income inequality. Newman worries instead that the “shredding” of America’s social safety net “will drag [us] back to the bad old days when those born poor stayed that way” (p. 288).

Clearly, the story that began with *No Shame in My Game* remains unfinished in *Chutes and Ladders*. The final chapter—yet unwritten—most probably will be one of intergenerational poverty and inequality. It will be revealed when the adult children of this sample of low-wage workers navigate work and family life themselves, and when they, like their parents, are exposed to the often random job chutes and ladders that either define failure or lead them safely into the middle class.

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