



# EVICTED

## Poverty and Profit in the American City

By Matthew Desmond

“This is an extraordinary and crucial piece of work. Read it. Please, read it.”

--Adrian Nicole LeBlanc,  
author of *Random Family*

**From Harvard sociologist and 2015 MacArthur “Genius” award winner Matthew Desmond, a landmark work of scholarship and reportage that will forever change the way we look at poverty in America**

Today, poor families are facing one of the worst affordable housing crises in generations. Many are spending almost all they have to live in decrepit housing in our cities’ worst neighborhoods. What it means to be poor in America today is to be crushed by the high cost of housing and evicted when you inevitably fall behind.

In this groundbreaking book, Harvard sociologist and 2015 MacArthur “Genius” award winner Matthew Desmond takes us into Milwaukee to introduce us to **eight families on the edge of eviction**.

- Arleen is a single mother trying to raise two boys on \$628 a month. After falling behind on rent, Arleen receives eviction papers and sets off into the coldest Milwaukee winter on record to find her family a new home. Eighty-nine calls later, she’s still looking.
- Crystal, eighteen and fresh out of foster care, lets Arleen and her children stay with her even though she doesn’t “know them from Adam and Eve.” After repeatedly calling the police on behalf of a neighbor being abused by a boyfriend, Crystal and Arleen are both evicted. Crystal turns to prostitution to survive before turning back to her church family.
- Vanetta, a devoted mother of three with no criminal record, participates in a botched stickup after her hours are cut, sending her children into homelessness and Vanetta to prison.
- A gregarious single father who serves as taskmaster and confidant to adolescent neighborhood boys, Lamar tries to work off his rent by performing odd jobs for his landlord. A wheelchair bound double-amputee, he crawls through empty apartments, painting cracked walls and praying for strength. His story ends in tragedy.
- Doreen Hinkston and her desperately poor but tight-knit family prepare to welcome a new baby into a home so rundown and dirty they refer to it as the “rat hole.”
- Scott, a gentle night-shift nurse turned heroin addict, loses his license and middle-class lifestyle. He moves into one of Milwaukee’s worst trailer park, where getting drugs is as easy as asking for a cup of sugar. Scott hits rock bottom before trying to get clean.
- A grandmother who falls behind in rent after paying her gas bill because she wanted to take a hot shower, Lorraine is evicted by sheriff deputies and her things confiscated by movers.
- Pam and Ned are evicted from their trailer when Ned is on the run from the law and Pam is eight months pregnant.

**The fates of these families are in the hands of two landlords.**

- Sherrena Tarver, a former schoolteacher turned inner-city entrepreneur, evangelizes to her fellow landlords about the money that can be made on Milwaukee’s decaying North Side, saying “the ’hood is good.” She shows occasional kindnesses to her tenants, but says, “Love don’t pay the bills.”

- In his twelve years at College Mobile Home Park, Tobin Charney has learned how to pull profit out of 131 dilapidated trailers. He takes home more than \$400,000 a year running one of the poorest trailer parks in Milwaukee.

As Desmond lived alongside Arleen, Scott, and Lamar, he was also conducting a groundbreaking study that collected and analyzed years of novel statistical data about poverty, housing, and displacement. And what he found is that for the poorest families in America, **eviction has become routine, and its effects are devastating.**

- Even in the most desolate areas of American cities, evictions used to be rare. But today, millions of Americans are evicted every year because they can't make rent. In 2013, **1 in 8 poor renting families nationwide was unable to pay all of their rent**, and a similar number thought it was likely they would be evicted soon.
- Poor people's incomes have slumped, housing costs have risen, and federal policy has failed to bridge the gap. As a result, **today the majority of poor renting families in America spend over half of their income on housing, and at least one in four dedicates more than 70 percent to paying the rent and keeping the lights on.** Housing assistance does not come close to meeting the need. Three in four families who qualify for assistance receive nothing.
- Eviction affects the old and the young, the sick and able-bodied. But for poor women of color and their children, it has become ordinary. Among Milwaukee renters, **more than 1 in 5 black women report having been evicted in their adult life**, compared to 1 in 12 Hispanic women and 1 in 15 white women. **In poor black neighborhoods, what incarceration is to men, eviction is to women: a common yet consequential event that pushes families deeper into poverty. Poor black men are locked up; poor black women are locked out.**
- **Eviction is a cause, not just a condition, of poverty.** It can cause workers to lose their jobs, prevent tenants from benefitting from public housing, and push families into substandard housing in undesirable parts of the city. It can also drive people to depression—even two years after the event, evicted mothers experience significantly higher rates of depression than their peers—and, in extreme cases, even suicide.
- **Many landlords won't rent to families with children, and children themselves can provoke eviction.**
- **The poor risk eviction if they report housing problems to the city or even if they call 911**, especially when reporting domestic violence.
- Eviction affects the communities that displaced families leave behind. For example, Milwaukee **neighborhoods with high eviction rates have higher violent crime rates the following year**, even after controlling for past crime rates and other relevant factors.

**Fixing this problem won't be easy, but it is well within our nation's capacity.**

**Decent, affordable housing should be a basic right for everybody in this country.** The ability to work, get an education, provide for one's children, stay sober and healthy: it all requires stable shelter. We've affirmed provision in old age, twelve years of an education, and basic nutrition to be the right of every citizen. Housing should also be seen as a fundamental human need because without stable shelter, everything else falls apart.

Low-income families on the edge of eviction have no right to counsel. But when tenants have lawyers, their chances of keeping their home increase dramatically. **Establishing publicly funded legal services for low-income families in housing court** would be a cost-effective measure that would prevent homelessness, decrease evictions, and give poor families a fair shake.

Extending the right to counsel in housing court would not address the underlying source of America's eviction epidemic: the rapidly shrinking supply of affordable housing. A **universal**

**housing voucher program** would carve a middle path between the landlord's desire to make a living and the tenant's desire, simply, to live. Every family below a certain income level would be eligible for a housing voucher.

A universal voucher program would change the face of poverty in this country. Evictions would plummet and become rare occurrences. Homelessness would almost disappear. We have the money to fund such a program; we just choose not to. Each year, we spend three times what a universal housing voucher program would cost on homeowner tax breaks, which mainly benefit families with six-figure incomes.

Eviction encapsulates in a single, hard moment the depths of our nation's poverty, the brokenness of our housing policy, and the human costs of a crisis caused by low incomes and high rents. This moment, when the ramifications of the crisis are felt most acutely, also offers a window into extreme poverty, economic exploitation, and human perseverance. Look at eviction and you arrive at a bigger truth: the centrality of home, without which nothing else is possible.

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