

# Matthew Desmond's *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*

By Debra Watson  
13 September 2016

*Evicted* presents shocking but true accounts of the struggles waged by eight low-income families living in Milwaukee during 2008 and 2009 to keep a roof over their heads. For these low-income families, the specter of eviction is shown to be an ever-present reality.

The author, Harvard professor Matthew Desmond, also uses the book to examine broad national trends in the privately-owned housing sector. The impact of profiteering in the private sector on low-income families is demonstrated by the fact that evictions are now common in large- and medium-sized cities across the US.

Desmond's original research from surveys and court statistics in Milwaukee is an important contribution to the understanding of the depths of social inequality in the US.

The book also provides some context to explain the historical trends and socioeconomic factors responsible for the plight of the real-life subjects. Much of the statistical material is up-to-date and contemporaneous with the book's publication last fall. This is important because inequality has deepened considerably since he did his interviews with renters between 2008 and 2009.

The stories of these eight Milwaukee families, black, white and inter-racial, who face the specter of eviction and homelessness lurking around the corner every month, make up a substantial part of the book.

Early on in his work, Desmond defines the scope of the crisis by observing that during the Great Depression of the 1930s evictions in major American cities like Milwaukee were a fraction of what they are today.

The trials of one single mother, Arleen, and her family are recounted along with those of the other families over several chapters. The first hand accounts are interspersed with results of Desmond's academic research.

Arleen and her two boys, ages 13 and five, face constant domestic tension and disruption trying to make rent. They go from house to house, sometimes experiencing eviction because of the lack of a few hundred dollars, begging one landlord to stay at least through Christmas or living in a homeless shelter.

The evictions are almost inevitable. At one place big enough for the family the rent was \$550 a month, utilities excluded, which would take 88 percent of Arleen's \$628-a-month welfare check. He writes of her thoughts: "Maybe she could make it work. Maybe they could at least stay at least through winter, until crocuses and tulips stabbed through the thawed ground of spring, Arleen's favorite season."

"Eviction affects the old and the young, the sick and the able-bodied. But for poor women of color and their children, it has become ordinary," Desmond relates. Among Milwaukee renters, one in five black women report having been evicted in their adult life compared to one in 12 Hispanic women and one in 15 white women.

The description of what one father does to try to save his apartment for his boys, spending a week cleaning a filthy basement while moving around on the stubs of his amputated legs, is truly harrowing. In the end, the disabled man's landlord only credits him \$50 toward his rent for the work, and serves him an eviction notice anyway.

During Desmond's time in a trailer park on the south side of Milwaukee he met up with Pam and Ned, a white working class couple being evicted due to a job loss. They find quickly that it is not the bi-racial make up of Pam's children that is the biggest deterrent to finding a place to live after eviction—it is that they are *children*.

He explains from his original research: "The presence of children in the household almost triples a tenant's odds of receiving eviction judgment. The effect of living with children on receiving an eviction judgment was equivalent to falling four months behind in rent."

The book documents the basis of the social tensions in Milwaukee manifested in the explosive popular reaction to the recent police shooting of a young black worker. Thousands of children each year have their first close-up encounter with the police when a dedicated eviction unit based in the sheriff's office comes to throw their toys and the rest of the contents of their family home to the curb. The property of the landlord is sacrosanct and defended with guns and badges.

In fact, the tensions are worse now than they were when Desmond did his case studies. New laws in Wisconsin, the state where Milwaukee is located, eliminate the tenant's option to have their possessions go to storage after an eviction and direct the sheriff to put all household goods out on the street, just like during the Great Depression.

*Evicted*, because of its in-depth ethnographic studies and its original research on little-studied aspects of poverty in America is similar to the type of reporting on the ravages of inequality contained in Kathryn Edin's and H. Luke Shaefer's 2015 book called *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*.

*\$2.00 a Day* and *Evicted* are works on contemporary American

poverty that break ground in their respective areas. Edin set out to study the effects of deep poverty, families living on a fraction of the already derisory and grossly inadequate official poverty. Desmond set out to write the details of eviction in the private housing rental market.

Desmond says he was surprised to find that the problem, so common and so deadly to families, was little studied. He draws from the Milwaukee Area Renters Study, or MARS, conducted from 2009 to 2011, and his other work producing the Milwaukee Eviction Court Study.

“When I ran the numbers, I was shocked to discover that one in eight Milwaukee renters experienced at least one forced move—formal or informal eviction, landlord foreclosure, or building condemnation—in the two years prior to being surveyed,” he writes.

He points out that what separates those who have so little from major life disruption is often a relatively small amount. The median monthly household income of tenants in eviction court was \$935, and the median amount of back rent owed was about that much. Yet this sum is out of the reach of low-wage workers who don’t even get paid enough to survive paycheck to paycheck.

One of the most promising narratives remains undeveloped. The author addresses the complex problem of growing poverty with a short historical overview: “Between 1979 and 1983, Milwaukee’s manufacturing sector lost more jobs than during the Great Depression—about 56,000 of them.” He quotes University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee researchers in a 1988 report describing the impact even then on wages: “Machinists in the old Allis-Chalmers plant earned at least \$11.60 an hour; clerks in the shopping center that replaced much of the plant in 1987 earned \$5.23.”

“These economic transformations—which were happening in cities across America—devastated Milwaukee’s black workers, half of whom held manufacturing jobs. When plants closed, they tended to close in the inner city, where black Milwaukeeans lived. The black poverty rate rose to 28 percent in 1980. By 1990, it climbed to 42 percent. There used to be an American Motors plant on Richards and Capitol, on the city’s predominantly black North Side. It has been replaced by Walmart ... the Schlitz and Pabst breweries have been shuttered and one in two working age African-American men doesn’t have a job.”

He follows his brief history of Milwaukee with another observation that bears further examination. He says: “In the 1980s, Milwaukee was the epicenter of deindustrialization. In the 1990s, it would become ‘the epicenter of the anti-welfare crusade.’”

His latter reference to welfare reform led to his book being featured this past August in *The New York Times* as part of an article titled “The Millions of Americans Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton Barely Mention: The Poor.”

The article grossly understated the impact on the working class of then-President Bill Clinton’s reactionary welfare “reform.” The Clintons’ role in “ending welfare as we know it” opened the floodgates for austerity in America. It was the first wholesale destruction of an entitlement program in the US.

Then-First Lady Hillary Clinton famously spearheaded the effort to round up the votes in Congress to get the legislation passed. The current Democratic Party presidential candidate was thus crucial in

implementing a reactionary policy change that resulted in two decades of nightmarish deprivation among families, both working and unable to find work, at the bottom of the country’s income scale.

Desmond’s effective showcase of the plight of the poor is laudable. However, the book suffers from a lack of perspective in many of the most tantalizing areas the author touches on.

For example, at one point he explains: “I wanted to try to write a book about poverty that didn’t focus exclusively on poor people or poor places. Poverty was a relationship, I thought, involving poor and rich people alike. To understand poverty, I needed to understand that relationship. This sent me searching for a process that bound poor and rich people together in mutual dependence and struggle. Eviction was such a process.”

He lays most of the blame for the plight of the poor on Milwaukee landlords. Profiteering from want leads to inner-city landlords charging high rents based on scarcity. He also explains how holders of federally-funded vouchers are forced to pay more rent than the general market rate because landlords calculate they will reach deeper into their pockets for additional rent money.

He never addresses the multi-million-dollar profits of the big real estate, banking, hedge fund and Real Estate Investment Trusts. While the book was written before the presidential campaign of the billionaire real estate swindler Trump got underway, surely something has to be said about the insatiable appetite of the exploiters-in-chief.

In the chapter “Nobody Wants the North Side” we get an analysis very different from those that say Milwaukee is racially divided because whites are racist. But he does not directly take on race and identity politics as it is used by supporters of the Democratic Party to obscure issues of class.

He writes: “Most Milwaukeeans believed their city was racially segregated because people preferred it that way. But the ghetto had always been more a product of social design than desire.” His ensuing explanation of how Milwaukee became so segregated begins with the housing shifts beginning with towns in 16th century Europe, then on to America with a thumbnail sketch of housing patterns developed from Colonial times to the present.

The solutions Desmond presents are all thoroughly reformist. The working class is not presented as an actor, but merely a victim of exploitation. Nevertheless, he has chronicled much that is timely and important to developing an understanding of the components of the deepening housing crisis in the US.

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