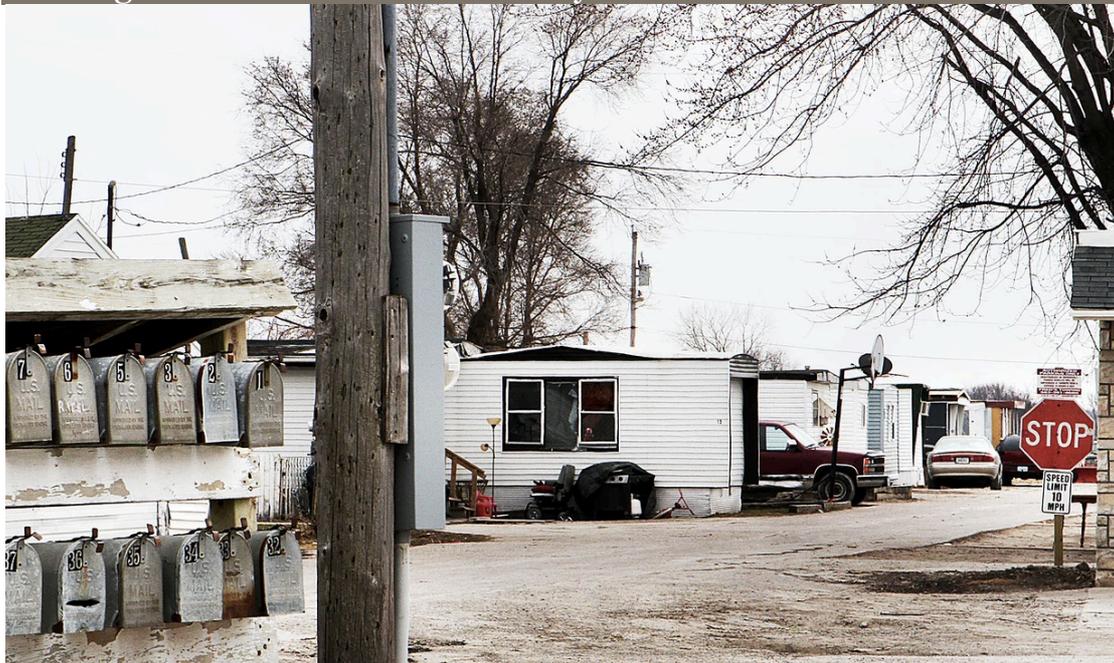


Dorling, D. (2016) Society Book of the day - Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City by Matthew Desmond – review, The Guardian, March 7th, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/07/evicted-poverty-and-profit-in-the-american-city-matthew-desmond-review>

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City by Matthew Desmond – review

This first-hand account of the harsh realities of the American rental housing market is bleak and salutary



A trailer park in Davenport, Iowa: 'Who has time to protest against inequality when you are trying to get the rotten spot in your floorboard patched.'

Photograph: Alamy

Danny Dorling

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There used to be a moratorium on eviction at Christmas in America. They did away with that in 1991. A landlord convinced the [Civil Liberties Union](#) that the practice was unfair, because it privileged a religious celebration over profit.

So, in the snow at Christmas, after the movers have piled your possessions on to the sidewalk, after your children have stopped asking what happens next, you find a quiet corner. Inwardly you scream. Outwardly you just look like another madwoman, punching the wall.

Someone always has it worse, and when you have it worse, the other person's place looks like heaven. Compared with the hell that is housing for so many in America, we in Britain live in nirvana. We appear to have a system of housing benefits that ensures, as Matthew Desmond puts it, that "paying the rent does not plunge a family into poverty". Or at least we did until very recently.

The Netherlands has also "been remarkably successful at housing the country's poorest citizens". It is to Europe that the US now looks for dreams of a promised land, but Americans do not know how to get here, and they do not know how much they have tainted the UK with their beliefs. Our politicians, including New Labour, looked west to America for models of what we could be.

An American slum landlord, a slumlord, brings in an annual income from rent 10 times that of their tenants. Matthew Desmond spent a lot of time with a slumlord to whom he gave the pseudonym Sherrena and grew to like her. He lived in a trailer park where the annual income of the owner was 55 times higher than that of the tenants, those who relied on welfare. Most of their welfare ended up in just one person's pocket – the landlord's. A fifth of all renters in America (not just those who are the poorest) lose most of their income each week to their landlord.

Landlords and tenants: their fates are bound and their interests opposed. This is no private market. State intervention defends

landlords' rights to charge as much as they desire. The state subsidises landlords to build and to send in its armed officers to evict tenants. The state "records and publicises evictions, as a service to landlords and debt collection agencies". This exploitation causes poverty to persist. A fortune can be made from the poor. Debt recovery agencies advertise themselves as "the largest and most aggressive".

Trailer park owners are in America's highest 1% of earners, but their tenants don't complain because who has time to protest against inequality when you are trying to get the rotten spot in your floorboard patched before your daughter puts her foot through it again? Who cares what the landlord is making as long as he is willing to work with you until you get back on your feet? There is always something worse than the trailer park, always room to drop lower.

The lowest slum homes in America are the firetraps. *Evicted* details how eight-month-old babies die in the flames and how their families react. You don't complain about the conditions: complain and you are evicted. The repairs are never done, permanent churning areas are created; this book explains why and how through the eyes and ears of those there.

You don't call the police when there is trouble because the police then threaten to fine the landlord, leading to your eviction. In Milwaukee, the home city of this book, at least one woman is murdered every week. In a press conference called to explain the murder rate, the police chief responsible for the town fails to reveal that he offers battered women "a devil's bargain: keep quiet and face abuse or call the police and face eviction".

The poorest women subtract children when approaching landlords and asking to be housed. They try to hide how many they have because many landlords prefer not to house families, certainly not those relying on the welfare cheque. Thus the poorest and neediest are housed in the worst neighbourhoods, paying up to 80% of their income for the privilege, unable to feed or clothe their children properly, and they are evicted and moved on again and again.

Today in America, large parts of the police force work solely on enforcing evictions. In Milwaukee, 100,000 households rent privately and landlords evict 16,000 adults and children every year, mostly for failing to pay the rent. It is much worse than the 1930s. One woman in 17 in the poorest black neighbourhoods is evicted each year: “Poor black men are locked up. Poor black women are locked out.”

America shows us where Britain is heading. In 2014-15, 15,509 families in London were issued with a court summons for not paying the rent, twice the 7,283 count of 2013-14. That number would have to double again and again, four times over, for London to become as bad as Milwaukee. But already there are echoes in Britain of what is now commonplace in America.

The repeatedly evicted never imagine that they “could settle down in one neighbourhood and enrol their children in one school, providing them with the opportunity to form long-lasting relationships with friends, role models and teachers. They could start a savings account to buy their children toys and books, perhaps even a home computer”.

A home computer is no longer a luxury. The poor don't want a small life. No one wants to spend their short time on Earth scratching out an existence, filling in benefit forms and begging from the state.

From the shores of America, the Statue of Liberty gazes back at what is now a better place. Will Americans rise up? The [tired and the poor, the huddled masses](#) yearning to breathe free. Will the country's most wretched register and vote in their own interest for once? Much of Europe lifts a lamp beside the golden door, showing that houses can be homes and homelessness can be rare. No longer do we Europeans live in ancient lands of storied pomp, but places where the torch of hope remains lit, back across the Atlantic ocean.

Progressive Americans look to Europe. They know the US has the money, but that they have made the wrong choices over how to spend it. Tax relief on housing costs for American homeowners amounts to \$171bn a year. Annual housing assistance for the poor is less than a quarter of that. Mortgage interest, tax relief and capital gains exclusions cost the US three times more than the entire cost of universal housing provision.

Matthew Desmond's own parents were evicted. He helped them move out. He spent month after month living among the evicted. He shadowed landlords, befriending those who owned trailer parks. This book was written while attending court cases, watching, taking notes, and listening. With luck America will now listen to him. *Evicted* ends: "This degree of inequality, this withdrawal of opportunity, this cold denial of basic needs, this endorsement of pointless suffering – by no American value is this situation justified. No moral code or ethical principle, no piece of scripture or holy teaching, can be summoned to defend what we have allowed our country to become."

*Danny Dorling's new book, [A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier](#), is published by the London Publishing Partnership on 20 March. *Evicted* is published by Allen Lane (£20).*