

Dorling, D. (2016) *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, by Matthew Desmond, *The Times Higher*, March 3rd, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/review-evicted-poverty-and-profit-in-the-american-city-matthew-desmond-allen-lane>

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

Danny Dorling on the US failure to provide housing for all its citizens

March 3, 2016



Evicted is a tale of tragedy. Sociologist Matthew Desmond argues that the tragedy can begin to be tempered only by bringing in better rent regulation and controlling the greed of landlords, by improving wages and providing decent benefits while reducing the huge tax subsidies handed out annually to the rich. The alternative, a public housing building programme, would not work. No one can build homes fast enough, he says.

Even in the US, the land of “Yes we can! Don’t take ‘no’ for an answer!”, they cannot build houses and apartments as fast as they need to for those without decent homes. Even if Bernie Sanders became president they couldn’t – or at least even the most progressive of Americans no longer believe that they can. As Desmond writes: “We can’t build our way out. Given mounting regulatory and construction costs, offering each low-income family the opportunity to live in public housing would be prohibitively expensive. Even if it weren’t, building that much public housing risks repeating the failures of the past, by drawing the nation’s poorest citizens under the same roof and contributing to racial segregation and concentrated poverty.”

The US’ housing policy is scarred by the stories it tells itself today of its past. In the 1930s, the US National Landlord Association lobbied for a rent certification programme whereby they, private landlords, would house the poor at the state’s expense. Federal authorities disagreed and later built public housing; but in a racist society that allowed economic inequality to grow to new heights, public building was declared a failure. Housing projects were demolished, and the voucher (housing benefit) programme then became “the nation’s largest housing subsidy program for low-income families. In policy circles, vouchers were known as a ‘public-private partnership’. In real estate circles, they were known as ‘a win’.” *Evicted* is the story of Milwaukee, and of US housing for the poor in general. Why did it get this bad? Put simply – wages halved.

In 1979 in Milwaukee, a machinist earned \$11.60 an hour. By 1987, a shopping centre clerk received \$5.23. By 1980, 28 per cent of black Milwaukeeans were living in poverty. That rose to 42 per cent in 1990. Half of African American working-age men now have no work. A disabled man in America, after paying \$550 a month in rent to a private landlord, has \$78 to live on if he is relying on benefits: \$2.19 a day for soap, toilet paper, a bus ticket – and a phone? Only food stamps and food kitchens prevent starvation.

The waiting list to secure a place in public housing in Milwaukee is frozen; you cannot add your name. In Washington DC, if you put your name down on the list when you have a child, your case might be reviewed when you become a grandmother, long after your own child has become a parent.

We, in Britain, are taking the US' path. Americans now argue that: "Expanding housing vouchers without stabilizing rent would be asking taxpayers to subsidize landlords' profits. Today, landlords overcharge voucher holders simply because they can." Sound familiar? For many years now, Americans in receipt of welfare have been "sanctioned" if they fail to make a single appointment with their caseworker. Where did Gordon Brown holiday every year for inspiration? From where do you think the UK coalition government of 2010 got the idea of sanctions? To where do you think the Conservative government of 2015 now looks for new ideas?

Americans know that their current state of affairs reduces to poverty people born for better things. We all know this, landlords know this and politicians know this. The sheriffs who carry out the evictions know this. They know it when a man they are evicting asks them to "give him a minute" to go inside to collect the last of his belongings, and he shuts the door and shoots himself in the head.

Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of geography, University of Oxford. He is author, most recently, of *A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier (2016)*.

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City
By Matthew Desmond
Allen Lane, 432pp, £20.00
ISBN 9780241260852
Published 1 March 2016