

Book Review



Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City

By Matthew Desmond

Reviewed by Alen Fejzic

Desmond, M. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2016. 432 pp. \$28.00 paperback.

In his most recent book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond recounts the events he witnessed while conducting ethnographic research in Milwaukee from early 2008 to late 2009. The purpose of the book is to provide a better understanding of poverty and inequality in the United States. What makes Desmond's approach unique is that he focuses on the effects of housing, especially eviction, on individuals and society. Desmond provides three categories of perspectives: the perspective of landlords, the perspective of poor Black citizens living in Milwaukee, and the perspective of poor White citizens living in Milwaukee in each of the three sections of the book: Rent, Out, and After.

The first section of the book address the issue of rent from the perspectives of both tenants and landlords. Desmond describes the various methods tenants utilize to pay their rent such as forgo paying their utility bills, borrowing money from friends and family, asking for help from organizations such as churches or charities, and trying to work out a deal with the landlords by working off the difference. Desmond provides various methods used by landlords to collect overdue rent such as through the legal system.

The second section of the book deals with the eviction process and some causes for eviction. Desmond describes nuisance laws that have a negative impact on tenants who must call 9-1-1 for assistance.

The third section of the addresses the difficulty of finding new housing after being evicted. Desmond provides several factors that make this process much harder for individuals. These include previous evictions, needing a significant amount of capital (social capita; in the form of references and financial capita; in the form of cash for the first month's rent, deposit, and last month's rent) to get approved for an apartment, and having children (landlords prefer tenants without children because they believe children

would be loud and are more likely to damage the property). Some other factors include an individual's criminal history (landlords prefer tenants with no felonies or violent misdemeanors on their record) and race (landlords prefer to rent to White tenants).

Throughout the entire book, Desmond offers statistics about certain welfare programs, various legislation having an impact on people living in poverty as well as on landlords, the costs of housing, and the effects of the Great Recession on people, especially racial minorities and individuals in poverty. Desmond notes that the price of housing on the north side of Milwaukee is about the same price as in other parts of the city, even though the housing on the north side is in much worse condition. Desmond demonstrates how landlords abuse the housing voucher program, a piece of legislation that was intended to help low-income individuals by having the individual contribute 30 percent of their monthly income towards rent and the government making up the difference, by charging more for their units than they are worth because they know that the government will pay most of the rent.

Desmond highlights the negative effects of not having good, stable housing on individuals. The overall message of this book can be summarized in the following quotation by Desmond, ". . . [A] good home can serve as the sturdiest of footholds. When people have a place to live, they become better parents, workers, and citizens" (295).

This book has numerous strong points that should be mentioned. Desmond provides the reader with much more than examples of hardships faced by tenants and landlords. Along with the examples, Desmond discusses various pieces of legislation that have impacted people living in poverty, mostly in negative ways. Legislation that requires welfare recipients to spend a bulk of their time in meetings or lines causes the recipients to lose their jobs, makes it harder to find a job, and/or spend less time with their children.

The way Desmond presents the information makes it very easy for non-academics to understand the issues faced by people living in poverty. The book is written in plain, everyday language rather than with academic jargon, which people outside of the discipline would not understand. In doing so, Desmond's book has a much wider audience than just academic sociologists. Also, as with all ethnographic work, the examples given by Desmond are of real people and of real events. Being exposed to the actual hardships faced by people brings to light the urgency of the current system in the United States. After reading the book, the victims of poverty will no longer remain faceless to the reader, because Desmond gives them a face through the stories of Arleen, Jori, Lamar, and other individuals whose stories have been told in this book.

However, there were a few issues with this book. The first issue is its organization. The book could have been better organized if the information about the project had been placed at the front of the book rather than at the end. This would allow the reader

to understand how the data were collected from the start rather than learning about it at the end of the book. However, this is not a major problem because the information is available to the reader. Instead of separating the book into three sections and having the stories of the various individuals and families clumped together, the book would have worked better if it was organized by individual or family. Desmond could then have divide the various individual or family sections into the three sections he has used for the whole book.

The second issue that I had with the book is with the authors view that stable housing "serves as the sturdiest of footholds" (295). I agree that affordable housing is an important problem faced by individuals, but having affordable housing will not solve the greater problem faced by people living in poverty and the problem of inequality in the country. Essentially, housing is a symptom of the greater problem. Eliminating the symptom will not get rid of the problem. It is the equivalent to putting a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound.

This book would be useful to anyone, academics as well as non-academics, wanting a better understanding of the eviction process and the detrimental effects it has on individuals. This book could easily be used in an upper-level sociological theory course or a graduate level course where students must apply a theory or perspective to better understand the issues raised in the book. Another potential use for this book would be for political activists as well as lawmakers. They could use this book to address the problems faced by individuals who are hurt by the vary programs that are supposed to help them.