



Harvard sociologist Matthew Desmond, author of *“Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City,”* is a 2015 recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” grant. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MACARTHUR FOUNDATION, CC-BY

Our indefensible eviction problem

In his research for his best seller, ‘Evicted’ author Matthew Desmond spent time with tenants and landlords, chronicling the struggle to obtain and keep stable housing

BY WAYNE BRAVERMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The government has been telling people the economy is making a steady but slow recovery from the Great Recession. In the past few years, the unemployment rate has mostly suggested a rosy picture of job growth. GDP has slowly improved. The housing market has heated up. The Federal Reserve shows enough cautious confidence in economic growth that it has raised interest rates once and may do it again soon.

But for many people, the story of an improved economy may as well be a fairy tale. According to the Pew Research Center, for the first time in more than four decades, the middle class now consists of less than 50 percent of the American population. In 2015, 20 percent of American adults were in the lowest income tier, up from 16 percent in 1971, living at or below the poverty line.

Many people who have lost their jobs and have exhausted their unemployment benefits (often referred to as the “uncounted” in the distorted statistics) are forced to settle for low-paying jobs, many without benefits. Others have simply given up looking for work.

On top of all this, many people are still

losing their homes. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, 17.7 out of every 10,000 people were homeless in 2015. The Alliance reports that the number of households paying more than 50 percent of their income toward housing rose to 6.6 million in 2014 – a 2.1 percent increase from 2013.

Matthew Desmond, an associate professor of sociology at Harvard University, has brought to light one of the most alarming and least talked-about signs that many Americans are suffering economic hardship in his recently released book, *“Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City.”*

“Evicted” focuses on poverty and inequality in the United States through the eyes of eight low-income families and a couple of landlords in Milwaukee, Wisc.

This is more than a thoroughly researched study of the plight of housing for the poor. It is a compelling, vivid look into a sad, difficult world typically shoved out of the sight and minds of most Americans.

“We in America haven’t invested in decent, affordable housing for low-income families,” said Desmond, who points out evictions, which were once a rarity, are now “acute.”

Desmond, co-director of the Justice and Poverty Project at Harvard, has spent eight years looking at the many different aspects of evictions.

It’s a subject that is also personal. Money was tight in his own family growing up. His dad was a pastor, and his mom worked a variety of jobs to help bring in money. It was during his college days at Arizona State University that his family in Winslow, Ariz., lost their home to foreclosure.

Desmond wrote of his family’s hardship: “I remember being deeply sad and embarrassed. I didn’t know how to make sense of it.”

He continued in the book about coping with his family’s eviction: “Once back on campus, I found myself spending weekends helping my girlfriend build houses with Habitat for Humanity.”

Desmond also spent time with the many homeless people who congregate in the Mill Avenue area of Tempe, a city in Maricopa County, Ariz.

It was during his graduate school days at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, that Desmond’s attention turned to research to understand the link between housing and

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