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poverty.

Desmond searched for studies on evictions in our society. He wanted to know the demographics of eviction, the frequency and the consequences. He was also interested in what poor people were sacrificing when they had to spend so much money on housing.

As part of his dissertation fieldwork, he moved right into the heart of poverty in Milwaukee in 2008, living first in a trailer park and then later in a rooming house. He lived among those suffering economic and emotional hardship, struggling to get enough money to pay for food, clothing and a place to live.

He discovered that poverty is a relationship “involving poor and rich people alike,” he wrote. “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.”

Many people facing eviction, Desmond said, spend 70 to 80 percent of their income on “homes not fit for human habitation.”

Desmond found that the median monthly household income of tenants experiencing eviction in Milwaukee was \$935. The rent money owed by those facing eviction was “about that much.”

One in eight renters experience at least one forced move, Desmond said. In Milwaukee, 16,000 adults and children are evicted each year. He reports that 16 families are evicted through court proceedings daily.

Among the people we meet in “Evicted” are Lamar and his sons. Lamar is a double-amputee who lost his legs to frostbite while experiencing homelessness and crack addiction. While recovering from addiction, he lived in a two-bedroom apartment that had “maggots sprouting from unwashed dishes in the sink.”

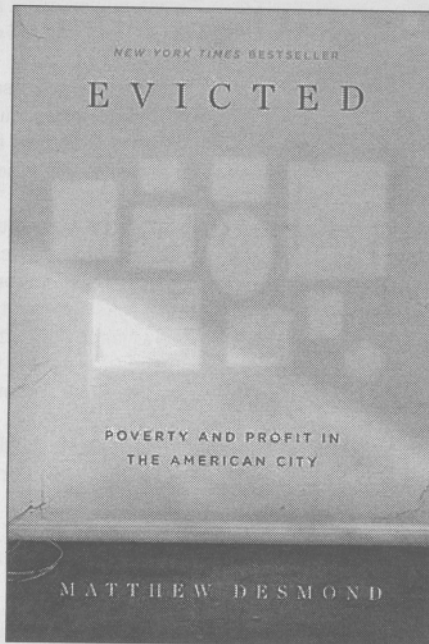
Lamar’s income doing handyman jobs was \$628 a month, \$550 of which was needed to pay his rent. He was left with \$2.19 a day for everything else his family needed to survive. Ultimately, like all the other tenants in this book, Lamar and his sons were evicted.

We also meet Crystal, a young evangelical Christian with bipolar disorder who turned to prostitution as a way to earn money to live.

Arlene is a mother of two children who is struggling to provide for her family on \$20 a month after rent. Her two sons are among the multitude of children suffering from the devastating effects of living in substandard housing and the transient, unstable life that eviction creates.

“Eviction creates deep and jagged scars to the next generation,” Desmond said. “It affects their opportunity to create meaningful relationships with peers and teachers.”

Desmond also wrote about a 54-year-old woman named Lorraine. She spent a month’s worth of food stamps on a meal of



“Evicted” by Matthew Desmond examines poverty through the eyes of eight families and a couple of landlords in Milwaukee.

COURTESY PHOTO

lobster tails, shrimp, crab, pie and Pepsi. At first, Desmond questioned why she would do that. He reasoned, “There was no amount of skipping and squandering that is going to get herself above the poverty line.”

Desmond noted, “We don’t live on bread alone – nor should we expect poor people to do that.” Lorraine was trying to treat herself as middle-class and affluent people treat themselves.

“It is not spending that makes her poor,” he added. “It is poverty that makes her sometimes throw money away.”

Once someone is living below the poverty line, many people feel there is very little amount of hope or help to get out, and the system typically perpetuates rather than helps solve the problem.

Desmond also spent time with Scott, who had been a nurse until his opioid addiction cost him his license and led to his eviction. Unlike the others Desmond writes about, Scott was one of the fortunate ones who put his life back together. He found sobriety and permanent housing and returned to nursing with his reinstated license.

Desmond also takes us to another side of the story: the world of the landlords.

Sherrrena Tarver is a former schoolteacher who turned slumlord as a means to make a lot of money. At times, she shows understanding and sympathy for her struggling tenants. At other times, she is ruthless, evicting Arleen and her sons a couple of days before Christmas.

“Love doesn’t pay bills,” Tarver said.

Another landlord is Tobin Charney, owner of a rundown trailer park – one of the worst in Milwaukee. As with Sherrrena, he can, at times, be sympathetic, but at other times, he can be merciless.

Desmond writes about how some landlords choose and deny tenants. For example, some landlords do not like

children living in their units. Children make noise and lead to concerns about lead poisoning. Landlords don’t want to draw attention to the horrid conditions they pass off as livable.

The temptation is to cast landlords as the evil, greedy villains. Desmond said that would be a simplification, pointing out the complexities of the landlord-tenant relationship.

These families and the landlords are a microcosm of life situations played out in cities and towns around the country. Desmond writes, “This study takes place in the heart of a major American city, not in an isolated Polish village or a brambly Montana town or on the moon.”

Desmond’s work on the poverty and housing problem is not done. More eviction data are needed from across the country. We need to see “just how big a problem this is,” he said.

“The number of evictions in Milwaukee is equivalent to the number in other cities, and the people summoned to housing court in Milwaukee look a lot like those summoned in Charleston and Brooklyn.”

It’s not just a growing problem in the United States; it also exists in cities such as London and Berlin.

To help understand and resolve the eviction problem, Desmond thinks we need to look at what cities do right and what needs to change. This is an ongoing process.

Last fall, the Portland City Council voted to impose a 90-day notice requirement to tenants before they receive a rate increase of 5 percent or more, and for no-cause evictions. These no-cause evictions make it legal for any landlord in Oregon to evict a tenant for no reason at all. It has been used to clear out entire buildings in Portland in order to replace them with higher-paying tenants, sometimes more than doubling in rent. It also means that the eviction does not go to court, with no violations to prove or recourse offered. It’s a done deal.

No-cause evictions have been noted as a priority for Portland Mayor-elect Ted Wheeler.

Desmond said in his book: “Whatever our way out of this mess, one thing is certain – this degree of inequality, this withdrawal of opportunity, this cold denial of basic need, 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.”

“We have a long ways to go,” he said. “We make slow leaps to equality.”

Courtesy of INSP.ngo / Spare Change News

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PHOTO BY MICHAEL KIENITZ

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