

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

Resources

- Author website: <https://www.evictedbook.com/>
- Interview with author: <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/qa-evicted-sociologist-matt-desmond>
- VTDigger Article by VHFA Executive Director Maura Collins about housing issues in VT: <https://vtdigger.org/2020/07/29/maura-collins-systemic-racism-in-the-housing-sector/>
- Resources to get involved:
 - By state: <https://justshelter.org/community-resources/>
 - National: <https://justshelter.org/national-resources/>

Data Resources for Context

- Vermont Housing Data (community profiles and town/county/state data on population, household, income, employment, homeownership, rental housing, housing needs, and more): <https://www.housingdata.org/>
- Vermont 2020-2025 Housing Needs Assessment (includes fact sheets on demographics, housing stock, race, homelessness, and more): <https://accd.vermont.gov/housing/plans-data-rules/needs-assessment>

Discussion Questions

(adapted from [publisher website](#) and 2016-2017 [University of Wisconsin-Madison Go Big Read](#))

- What was the experience of reading *Evicted* like for you? Were you surprised by what you learned? Were any particular scenes or characters especially impactful?
- Some people have codified perceptions of people who get evicted and people living in poverty, suspecting that they are largely responsible for their circumstances. Did you feel this way before reading *Evicted*? Why or why not? Did this book challenge or reaffirm your previously held beliefs about people living in poverty?
- After an eviction Arleen found an apartment where the rent, not including utilities, was 88% of her welfare check. What kind of sacrifices do you think families in this situation must make to cover rent, utilities, and all other expenses? If you were forced to choose between paying rent or heat, which would you choose?
- Why do you think agencies such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children seek to limit kin dependence?
- How do landlords like Sherrena and Tobin benefit financially from the Fair Market Rent set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development? How does this program bring large gains to landlords? How does it prevent gains in racial and economic integration?
- What responsibilities do landlords have when renting their property? What risks do they take? Do you sympathize with them?
- How did the high demand for low-cost housing impact Tobin's decisions about whether or not to repair property or forgive late payments? What incentives could be put in place to motivate landlords to maintain their properties? What risks do tenants take when filing a report with a building inspector?
- Although eviction is the central issue in *Evicted*, affordable housing interacts intimately with many other social issues. For example: Do parents who have trouble finding/providing safe housing for their children deserve to have their children taken away and put in foster care? Would affordable housing make it easier for addicts and recovering addicts (such as Scott) to enroll in programs that increase

chances of rehabilitation? What other major issues can you think of that eviction affects, whether in this book or in the world in general?

- How do sub-standard housing conditions contribute to physical, psychological, and emotional health issues? How are children, in particular, at risk? How do the landlords respond to these issues?
- How does the process of screening tenants lead to a “geography of advantage and disadvantage” (page 89)? How can landlord decisions impact neighborhood characteristics like schools, crime rates, and levels of civic engagement?
- How can a criminal background or history of past evictions impact a person’s ability to rent property? Do you think a tenant should have to disclose this information? Why or why not?
- Throughout *Evicted*, we learn how eviction essentially traps poor people in a cycle of poverty, makes securing future housing more difficult, can lead to a loss of a job, and have other damaging effects on families. Why are the poor disproportionately impacted by eviction?
- If you were unexpectedly evicted from your home, what would the fallout be? How might a sudden change like eviction affect your physical and mental well-being?
- What would you do if you were facing eviction and in need of legal assistance? Do you think attorneys should be provided to low-income tenants at no cost?
- Crystal was diagnosed with a wide range of mental illnesses. How might mental illness present additional challenges to a person already living in poverty? How might mental illness contribute to a person’s history of eviction? What protections do people with mental illnesses have?
- How does race factor into the types of struggles faced by the individuals profiled in *Evicted*? What about being a woman? Or a single parent?
- Landlords repeatedly turned down Pam and Ned’s rental applications because they have children. Why? Do you think families with children should have any protection when seeking housing? Why do you think families with children were not considered a protected class when Congress passed the Fair Housing Act in 1968? Do you think it is fair for landlords to charge tenants with children monthly surcharges and children-damage deposits? Why or why not?
- In Milwaukee, if 911 is called three or more times in 30 days the property is designated a nuisance (p. 190). The third most common nuisance activity is domestic violence and regardless of the reason for the call, landlords are encouraged to evict the tenant of a property designated a nuisance. What issue is the nuisance law trying to address and what is the impact of the law? Who benefits from the nuisance law?
- Desmond reflects that, “Poverty was a relationship, I thought, involving poor and rich people alike... This sent me searching for a process that bound poor and rich people together in mutual dependence and struggle. Eviction was such a process” (p. 317). How does eviction bind rich and poor people together? Does the relationship between rich and poor compare to the relationship between landlord and tenant? Are there organizations or government programs mentioned in *Evicted* that enforce or challenge this mutual dependence?
- Do you think housing should be a right in America?
- What solutions to the lack of affordable housing does Desmond propose? Do you have other ideas for how this issue could be addressed in your community?
- *Evicted* has been used in college “campus-wide” or “first-year” reads. Do you think it is important for college communities to engage with this topic?

General Questions for community housing discussions

Use these as part of your book discussion, or to frame other housing conversations.

- How inclusive is your community?
- What types of housing are in your community? Single-family homes, multi-family homes, mobile home parks, senior housing, group homes etc.? Are the majority rented or owner-occupied?
- Does your community have enough housing that is affordable, accessible, and right-sized?

- What groups of people are struggling and how does not having a safe, stable home impact their lives? Some groups that people may not immediately think of as having housing issues: college students, veterans, families with children, fully employed, seniors.
- What are the barriers to accessing safe and affordable housing in your community?
- How do you think local and state zoning policies have affected who lives in your community and where they live?
- Who participates in local decision-making about housing issues? Who is left out?
- Does your community have a local housing committee, housing trust fund, or community land trust? How do/could these structures help increase access to quality affordable homes for people who are traditionally marginalized and discriminated against?
- How can you get involved in addressing the housing issues in your community?