

E V I C T E D

M A T T H E W D E S M O N D

FAITH-BASED READING GROUP GUIDE

“Evicted offers a glimpse at the precariousness of life on the margins. Desmond wants to build relationships between rich and poor and show us that we are more connected than we think. If we believe in the God-given dignity of every human, then we cannot separate ourselves from brothers and sisters experiencing poverty and forced evictions. Nor can we ignore the dynamics that make their visions of ‘home sweet home’ feel like a cruel mirage.”

— CHRISTIANITY TODAY

*“Following in the footsteps of revelatory books like Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* . . . [Evicted] will inevitably be one of the most important books this year.”*

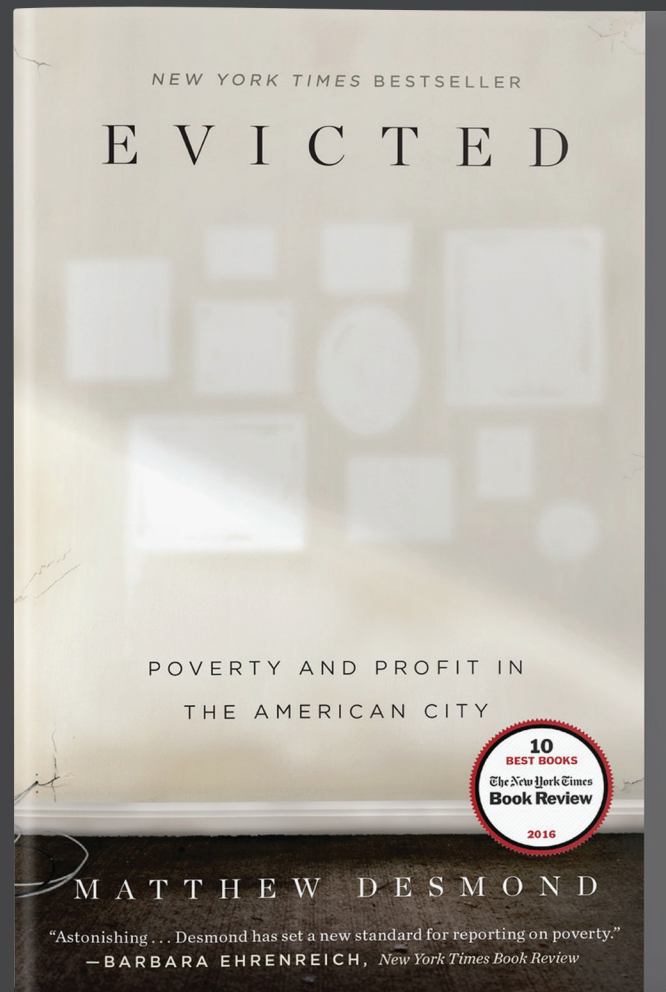
— RELEVANT

“Evicted is more than good journalism. While Desmond’s skill as a writer creates a narrative pull, his training as a sociologist forces him to ask why we haven’t had more data on perhaps our most pressing domestic crisis.”

— CHRISTIAN CENTURY

*“[A] masterful, heartbreaking book . . . The stories in *Evicted* are a haunting plea for us to do the right thing by families who ache for the simple routines that build a life—evening baths in a working tub for the kids, dinner cooked in one’s own kitchen, windows and doors that keep cold and danger out, a place to call home.”*

— SOJOURNER



E V I C T E D B O O K . C O M | @ J U S T _ S H E L T E R | # E V I C T E D | B \ D \ W \ Y

DEAR READER,

The church has long helped feed, clothe, and house the poor. As the son of a preacher, I grew up in the church and countless times saw members of my own congregation come alongside families who had fallen on hard times, offering material, emotional, and spiritual support. My mother opened our home to those without one, and my father (much to Mom's chagrin) had a habit of picking up hitchhikers.

I'm writing today to ask you to raise your eyes to a new challenge facing millions of American families of moderate means—the lack of affordable housing. Please prayerfully consider the role the church and faith community can play in helping to address this rapidly growing crisis. Faith leaders are beginning to recognize the clear and urgent connection between this issue and hunger and homelessness, on which people of faith have long led by action.

Today, the majority of poor renting families spend at least half of their income on housing, and one in four are spending over 70 percent on rent and utilities alone. The most vulnerable in our society are most impacted, including more than two million seniors on fixed incomes and eight million children. The high cost of housing is pushing families into poverty, and eviction is running through the American city like an epidemic, destabilizing homes, schools, and communities.

If we want to get serious about confronting poverty in our communities, we have to find a way to provide families with a safe and affordable place to life. Without stable shelter, everything else falls apart.

I'm sure you've seen this in your own congregation: a retired member on a fixed income tells you that her rent was raised again; a young family asks for help when a breadwinner loses a job. I saw it too. As a sociologist of poverty, I spent years conducting fieldwork among low-income families and their landlords, documenting the human cost of our nation's eviction epidemic. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* tells the stories of eight families swept up in the process of eviction. Their stories reveal how hard it is for some families to keep a roof overhead—and their stories should spur us to act.

Today, a mother is choosing between paying her rent and feeding her children. Today, a family in your city has been evicted, their things piled high on the sidewalk. There is no piece of scripture or holy teaching that can be summoned to defend what we have allowed our country to become for our most vulnerable neighbors. We can, and must, do better.

I urge you to think about ways your congregation can help. If you would like to learn about community organizations in your area working to prevent family homelessness, preserve affordable housing, and drive down evictions, please visit www.justshelter.org.

Thank you for your leadership, vision, and work.

Sincerely yours,

MATT DESMOND

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Evicted* is an ethnography, the study of people or a culture in which the researcher observes from the point of view of the subject. Desmond, in essence, learns by walking a mile in his subjects' shoes. Was this an effective way to tell the story? Did the author create empathy or understanding of the problem and those experiencing it?
2. The author had a past experience with eviction in his family. Have you ever been evicted or know anyone who has been evicted? How did that event change you or those around you?
3. There seems to be a connected community of people that benefit from evictions as well: the moving companies, the landlords, and the management company at the trailer park. Do they have any spiritual responsibility to the people in the neighborhoods where they work, or are they simply supporting their livelihood? A good example is when Sherrena explains that the "hood is good." Do you agree with her approach?
4. Faith-based organizations have traditionally had a special responsibility to help the poor. For some people, the less fortunate can offer a unique opportunity to demonstrate the power of their beliefs. Do you believe that your organization can provide support—whether financially, spiritually, or socially—to those facing eviction in your community?
5. Does the author create a call to action in the book? Where did you feel that call to action the most? What do you personally plan to do about it?
6. On page 97, as Lorraine waits at eviction court, the author describes the scene, which includes a painting of Moses with the Ten Commandments and a sign that reads PRAY FOR US. How do these subtle religious references create a common thread of existence for all people?
7. On page 180, Desmond writes, "No one thought the poor more undeserving than the poor themselves." Churches have a unique opportunity to uplift their congregations. How can the power of prayer and faith help someone who does not think they are deserving of help, help themselves?
8. The eviction cycle that Scott faces was in part brought on by his drug addiction. He went from living a privileged life to one of limited choices. Discuss the role that drug addiction plays in the rise in evictions.
9. Cardinal Roger Mahony once said, "Any society, any nation, is judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members—the last, the least, the littlest." Do you believe this philosophy? And if so, does it create a responsibility for faith-based organizations to take a more active role in uplifting all people?
10. After Lorraine's food stamps are reinstated, she makes a surprising purchase of a lobster, shrimp, and crab dinner. What do you think of her choices and her defense that tomorrow she will still live in poverty, so she should live for now?
11. On page 300, Desmond asks, "Do we believe that the right to a decent home is part of what it means to be an American?" Do you think that decent affordable housing should be a basic right for everyone?
12. Crystal displays a more cynical view of faith. When she is asked her favorite bible passage, she says, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust him." How does that phrase relate to the choices she makes and her ultimate acceptance of her station in life?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

13. On page 127, Pastor Daryl is torn. While he believes that caring for the poor is “pure Christianity,” he also believes that much of the hardship he has seen has been self-inflicted through poor decision making. He ultimately decides not to help Lorraine with her latest financial crisis. Do you agree with his actions?
14. The author suggests that the government should offer housing vouchers. Do you agree, and is this a stand-alone solution? And if so, how can churches or local community organizations create even more support for the poor in their neighborhoods?
15. Desmond says when people have a place to live, they become better parents, workers, and citizens. After Malik was born, Patrice and Doreen Hinkston moved to Tennessee, and Patrice earned her GED and enrolled in community college. How do these stories renew hope in people rising above unimaginable hardships? What do these stories teach us about redemption and faith?
16. On page 98, Desmond writes, “If incarceration had come to define the lives of men from impoverished black neighborhoods, eviction was shaping the lives of women. Poor black men were locked up. Poor black women were locked out.” Given the crisis among women and, in turn, their children, what kinds of solutions would help alleviate the demands put on single-parent homes?
17. In Chapter 12, titled “Disposable Ties,” the author talks about the bonds that people make that are often fleeting and brittle. What actions can be taken to create connections with people that have been disenfranchised for so long?
18. Pam is looking for housing and is turned away twice because she has two children, a practice that is illegal (see p. 229). Given the transient nature of the eviction cycle which causes families to be constantly uprooted from homes and children from schools, should families with children be treated differently?
19. On page 161, Carol Stack says that asking for handouts from family “did little to lift these families out of poverty, but it was enough to keep them afloat.” Discuss the difference between “keeping afloat” and “being lifted out of poverty.”

SUMMARY OF FAITH THEMES

There are some very uplifting moments in *Evicted* in which poor people are shown as being generous. When Crystal and a friend see a boy eating table scraps at McDonald's they pool coins to buy him a meal, even though they are homeless themselves. What does this say about the capacity of people to help one another even when they are in the most dire of circumstances?

Can the church practice true forgiveness without judgment in its treatment of the evicted community? The book portrays families that have limited options, which often results in poor decision making. Is it possible to release judgment and practice forgiveness in order to create an environment where true change can take place?

Doreen Hinkston, her four kids, and three grandchildren were neighborhood fixtures on a block where they lived for seven years. Doreen was a porch sitter who knew everyone and kept her eyes on the street. When an eviction notice forced them to move in a hurry, they quickly settled for a run-down house on a block where they knew no one and kept inside. How can individuals and organizations become a presence in a neighborhood to foster more connection and fellowship?

Desmond writes, "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." What do you think the responsibility of organizations, churches, and individuals should be to help the less fortunate in our communities? Discuss the following Bible passage from Matthew (25:40): "In that you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me."

All of the families in the book suffer losses, not only of their homes, but of their possessions and, in some cases, their jobs. But eviction also causes a loss of spirit and hope. How can families that have been caught in this cycle overcome these hardships and believe in a better future?



WAYS TO HELP

LEND YOUR VOICE

Consider how your church can create awareness of this problem by speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Create an awareness campaign by planning activities that will inspire action among your members.

LEND YOUR EAR

Review the ways your church currently supports the poorest in your communities or nearby communities. Start a listening campaign with those suffering in your community. Actively listening will encourage people to have faith: faith in you, faith in themselves, and faith in the church.

LEND YOUR EXPERTISE

Create opportunities in which your group members can do more than just donate money or give away clothing and food. Show people that they deserve your time and attention, not just your dollars. This will help instill not only help, but also hope.

LEND SUPPORT

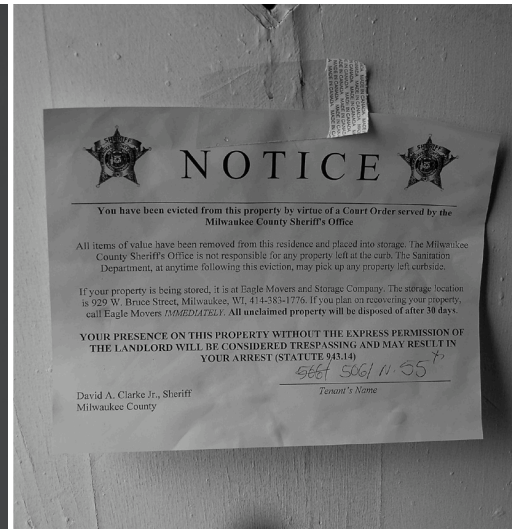
Consider how to help the children in the community by creating a mentoring program that will make children aware of their worth and value their education.

LEND A HAND

For families that lose their belongings through eviction, consider creative ways to break the endless cycle of storing and paying for the same basic household goods over and over again. Are there ways to help these families keep their belongings, find better storage solutions, or provide basic supplies on an ongoing basis?

LEND RESOURCES

While money is certainly a need for most, other resources can make the difference in lifting these families out of poverty. Pool the talents of your membership: financial advisers, legal counselors, social workers, and life coaches can all provide much needed support.



ONLINE RESOURCES

justshelter.org

Just Shelter was founded by Matthew Desmond and Tessa Lowinske Desmond to raise awareness of the human cost of the lack of affordable housing in America and to amplify the work of community organizations working to preserve affordable housing, prevent eviction, and reduce family homelessness.

evictedbook.com

Information about Matthew Desmond, media and interviews, eviction photos, and upcoming author events

scholar.harvard.edu/mdesmond

Publications by Matthew Desmond, current research projects, and information about the Milwaukee Area Renters Study (MARS)

[“Kicked Out in America!”](#)

The New York Review of Books review of *Evicted*

[The Diane Rehm Show](#)

Radio interview with Matthew Desmond and Vanetta

[“Having Kids Makes You More Likely to Be Evicted”](#)

Mother Jones article about *Evicted*

[“A Harvard Sociologist on Watching Families Lose Their Homes”](#)

New York Times review of *Evicted*

[“Black Women Evicted at Higher Rates”](#)

National Public Radio interview with Matthew Desmond, February 2010

nlihc.org

The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) is dedicated solely to achieving socially just public policy that assures people with the lowest incomes in the United States have affordable and decent homes.

nhlp.org

The National Housing Law Project (NHLP) is a nonprofit national housing and legal advocacy center established in 1968.

urban.org

The Urban Institute’s mission is to open minds, shape decisions, and offer solutions through economic and social policy research.

civilrighttocounsel.org

The National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel’s (NCCRC) mission is to encourage, support, and coordinate advocacy to expand recognition and implementation of a right to counsel for low-income people in civil cases that involve basic human needs.

OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America by Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer

Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood by Jay MacLeod

All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community by Carol Stack

All You Can Eat: How Hungry Is America? by Joel Berg

American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare by Jason DeParle

At Home on the Street: People, Poverty, and a Hidden Culture of Homelessness by Jason Adam Wasserman and Jeffrey Michael Clair

Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity by Katherine Boo

Changing Poverty, Changing Policies edited by Maria Cancian and Sheldon Danziger

Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City by Elijah Anderson

Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America by Linda Tirado

How the Other Half Lives by Jacob Riis

Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By in America by Barbara Ehrenreich

Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America by Jonathan Kozol

Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

So Rich, So Poor: Why It's So Hard to End Poverty in America by Peter Edelman

The American Way of Poverty: How the Other Half Still Lives by Sasha Abramsky

The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner City Neighborhood by David Simon and Edward Burns

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander

The Other America: Poverty in the United States by Michael Harrington

The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future by Joseph E. Stiglitz

The Working Poor: Invisible in America by David Shipler

There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America by Alex Kotlowitz

When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor by William Julius Wilson