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First-Year and Common Reading Guide

Poverty, by America

By Matthew Desmond

Crown

Hardcover | 978-0-593-23991-9 | 304 pages | \$28.00

Also available in e-book and audio formats

Guide written by Rachael Zafer

ABOUT THE BOOK

The United States, the richest country on earth, has more poverty than any other advanced democracy. Why? Why does this land of plenty allow one in every eight of its children to go without basic necessities, permit scores of its citizens to live and die on the streets, and authorize its corporations to pay poverty wages?

In this landmark book, acclaimed sociologist Matthew Desmond draws on history, research, and original reporting to show how affluent Americans knowingly and unknowingly keep poor people poor. Those of us who are financially secure exploit the poor, driving down their wages while forcing them to overpay for housing and access to cash and credit. We prioritize the subsidization of our wealth over the alleviation of poverty, designing a welfare state that gives the most to those who need the least. And we stockpile opportunity in exclusive communities, creating zones of concentrated riches alongside those of concentrated despair. Some lives are made small so that others may grow.

Elegantly written and fiercely argued, this compassionate book gives us new ways of thinking about a morally urgent problem. It also helps us imagine solutions. Desmond builds a startlingly original and ambitious case for ending poverty. He calls on us all to become poverty abolitionists, engaged in a politics of collective belonging to usher in a new age of shared prosperity and, at last, true freedom.



POVERTY,
BY AMERICA

MATTHEW DESMOND

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF EVICTED

“[*Poverty, by America*] shows how wealthy and middle class Americans knowingly and unknowingly perpetuate a broken system that keeps poor people poor. It’s not an easy problem to fix, but through in-depth research and original reporting, the acclaimed sociologist offers solutions that would help spread America’s wealth and make everyone more prosperous.”

—*Time*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MATTHEW DESMOND is the Maurice P. Daring Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and the founding director of the Eviction Lab. His last book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the PEN/John Kenneth Galbraith Award, among others. The recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, Desmond is also a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the U.S. federal government measure poverty? How was the poverty line constructed? What is deep poverty? Is the poverty line an accurate measure of poverty in America? Why or why not?
2. How is poverty a loss of liberty? How does the U.S. prison system perpetuate poverty? What are some antifamily social policies that impact poverty? How does a lack of reproductive choices impact poverty?
3. How is poverty impacted by immigration? Why do undocumented workers contribute more in government taxes than they receive in federal benefits? How will you respond when you hear false statements that immigrants are driving down wages and pulling more people into poverty?
4. What are some of the benefits of labor unions? Who has historically benefited from unions and who was excluded from participation? How do low wages contribute to a loss of power? How have corporations and the rise of contract work depressed wages? How have corporate profits been bolstered by lobbying?
5. How do you benefit from the stock market? Were any of your recent purchases reliant upon cheap labor? How could prioritizing economic justice—including living wages, unions, and fair labor practices—change the nature of work in America?
6. What are some of the physical, mental, and psychological effects of poverty? How can a higher minimum wage decrease the chronic stress that accompanies poverty?
7. How are housing, banking, and labor markets bifurcated in the United States? How have recent policies failed to create more choices for poor people? How could more choices be created and protected?
8. What obstacles do poor families face when seeking better housing? How have Black communities historically been overcharged for housing? Why do so many landlords overcharge for rent in poor neighborhoods?
9. How has banking historically contributed to poverty? How do check-cashing outlets and payday loan stores take advantage of people in poverty? How could banks support upward mobility in predominantly Black neighborhoods?
10. How did the U.S. federal government prevent economic collapse during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic? What impact did this have on poverty? Why were many of these protective measures eliminated?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(CONTINUED)

11. How do federal benefits support wealthier, protected classes? How have you benefited from government aid? Consider how you and your family may have benefited from tax breaks, student loans, homeowner subsidies, retirement plans, and health insurance. Why do common narratives about government benefits fail to acknowledge that government benefits largely impact middle- and upper-class families?
12. How has the accumulation of wealth in the United States led to the erosion of public goods and services? What are some of the free resources, spaces, and benefits that exist in your community? How have you interacted with these spaces or services? What obstacles do people in need face when accessing these public goods and services?
13. How are poor people in the United States exploited? What impact could fair tax policies have on poverty in the United States? How can you help increase support for transformational policies?
14. How have exclusionary zoning policies historically created racial divisions? How did integration impact working-class white Americans? How does did this influence present-day political attitudes? What benefits could emerge from inclusionary zoning policies?
15. How do your individual decisions—about where you work and live, what you buy, how you vote, and how you spend your time—reduce or increase poverty? How can you leverage the influence you have on other people to shift norms around poverty? What can you do to change the way that people in your community apply for and receive aid?
16. Where have you seen narratives about scarcity and artificial resource shortages normalized? How can you help to cultivate and practice living in what ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer calls “an economy of abundance”?
17. How have community organizers created more labor, tenant, and human rights for Americans? What are some of the current movements that inspire you? What are some tangible commitments you can make to join movements in your community? How can you follow Deepak Bhargava’s advice to “get into relationship” with others?
18. Do your elected officials represent the needs of vulnerable people in your community? What actions can you take to encourage members of institutions, organizations, schools, and places of worship in your community to become poverty abolitionists? How can you actively divest from poverty?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**1. POVERTY IN AMERICA**

Before reading the book, have participants respond to the following questions:

- Why is there so much poverty in America?
- What does poverty look like in your community?

As a group, create a list of actions that could help to end poverty in your community. Have any of these actions been tried before? What are some new actions that could be created?

After reading the book, have participants revisit their list of actions. How could the list be revised or further developed?

2. BE A POVERTY ABOLITIONIST

Develop a personal definition of a poverty abolitionist. How can you adapt your life to be a poverty abolitionist? What must you give up? What actions must you take? What will you gain? Share your definition in pairs or small groups.

3. POVERTY IN MEDIA

Explore how poor people are depicted in media. Have participants make a list of the movies, television shows, newspapers, and magazines that they watch and read. In pairs or small groups, invite participants to share their lists and discuss the following questions:

- How is poverty characterized?
- Do any of the media outlets on your lists depict poor people in positive or neutral ways?
- What can you do to shift the narrative about who is impacted by poverty?

4. EXPLORE THE PERSONAL IMPACT OF SEGREGATION

Invite pairs or small groups to discuss the following questions:

- How has your life been impacted by segregation?
- Do you have more or less access to public goods, safety, and comfort because of segregation?
- How has anti-Black racism impacted your community?

5. A FORMULA FOR ENDING POVERTY

Desmond writes that we make people poor by: 1) exploiting them, 2) prioritizing the subsidization of affluence over the alleviation of poverty, and 3) by creating prosperous and exclusive communities. As a group, develop a formula that includes three steps that could end poverty in America.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES**1. POVERTY BY THE NUMBERS**

Investigate the current data on poverty in the United States. How many people are unhoused? How many children live in poverty? How many people do not have access to running water? How many people do not have access to medical care? How do these numbers compare to data for other rich countries, such as Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom?

2. THE BANDWIDTH TAX

Learn more about the bandwidth tax and the psychology of scarcity, studied by behavioral scientists Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir. How does the bandwidth tax impact families, students, and workers? What are some current approaches to address disparities in mental bandwidth? Choose one and identify ways that the bandwidth tax could be reduced in your community, school, or workplace.

3. UNCLAIMED AID

Research the distribution of federal aid in your state over the past five years. Can you identify the amount of aid that has been unclaimed in your state and county? What interventions could support the distribution of federal and state aid to the people who need it most? What policies and resources could support this distribution?

4. COVID-19 EVICTIONS

What rental assistance and support programs emerged in your community during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic? Do these resources still exist? Was there a reduction in evictions in your community in 2020? Have evictions increased since then? Are there programs in your community that prevent evictions and protect renters? What additional support is needed?

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community

1. SUPPORT TENANTS' RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Find a tenants' rights organization in your community working for housing justice. Learn more about the neighborhoods and blocks where organizers are focusing their energy. Join a protest, write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, and circulate campaigns that protect low-income tenants and advocate for low-income housing.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS (CONTINUED)

2. JOIN A MULTIRACIAL COALITION

Find a multiracial coalition in your community working for social justice. What issues does this coalition focus on? How do they work across differences in race, class, faith, and identity? What solutions do they propose for ending poverty in your community? Consider how you can volunteer your time and skills.

3. ADVOCATE FOR RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE

Learn more about the minimum wage in your state. Has the minimum wage changed in recent years? What individuals and organizations are using their platforms to support a living wage for all workers? What is their specific vision for implementing change? Volunteer your time to distribute information, phone bank, or speak with policymakers about labor justice.

4. TAKE ACTION TO END EXPLOITATIVE FINANCIAL SERVICES

Learn more about action campaigns led by Stop the Debt Trap Coalition (www.stophedebttrap.org). How is this coalition working to hold predatory lenders accountable? How can you support the Veterans and Consumers Fair Credit Act? Sign the “Principles for Responsible Consumer and Small Business Loans to Prevent Predatory Lending.”

5. ADVOCATE FOR REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE

Desmond writes, “When women exercise control over family planning, including the ability to seek an abortion, they expand their educational and economic possibilities. And when reproductive choice is constricted, women and their children are often cast into poverty.” Find an organization in your community advocating for reproductive choice and access to abortion. Volunteer to help raise funds, circulate information to community members, or be a clinic escort.

OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

1. Learn more about Matthew Desmond’s research: www.matthewdesmondbooks.com.
2. Become a poverty abolitionist: rhlink.com/povertyabolitionism.
3. Find an organization in your community working to preserve affordable housing, prevent eviction, and reduce family homelessness: www.justshelter.org.
4. Read “The Tenants Who Evicted Their Landlord” by Matthew Desmond in *The New York Times Magazine*: rhlink.com/desmondnyt1.
5. Read “The Moratorium Saved Us. It Really Did.” by Matthew Desmond in *The New York Times*: rhlink.com/desmondnyt2.

OTHER RESOURCES
FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS,
AND PROGRAMS
(CONTINUED)

6. Read “Eviction and Voter Turnout: The Political Consequences of Housing Instability” by Matthew Desmond and Gillian Slee in *Politics & Society*: rhlink.com/housinginstability.
7. Learn more about the Poor People’s Campaign and find your state committee: www.poorpeoplescampaign.org.
8. Learn more about People’s Action and sign up to receive updates from their “joyous rebellion”: peoplesaction.org.
9. Read “The Eviction Crisis Is Aiding the GOP’s Voter Suppression Schemes” by Laura Jeeded in *Truthout*: rhlink.com/evictioncrisis.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S WRITER

Rachael Zafer is a writer, community organizer, and social change consultant. Rachael provides creative and technical consulting to people and organizations across the United States. Rachael is the author of discussion guides for over 30 books, including *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond and *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee. You can view all of her discussion guides at www.rachaelzafer.com.



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Penguin Random House Education
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

www.commonreads.com

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