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SUMMER '18 BOOK: EVICTED



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Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City



Meet and hear from author Matthew Desmond
in a one-night only community gathering

Tuesday October 23, 2018

Henninger High School

7:00 pm

FREE EVENT



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Prologue and Chapter 1 (Legal Services of Central New York)

This week we read about Arlene, the single mother of two young children, who was evicted after her 13 year old threw snowballs at a car and the angry driver broke her front door in retaliation. Following a 4 month stay in a homeless shelter, several weeks in an apartment that was ultimately deemed “unfit for human habitation”, and a year in an extremely unsafe neighborhood, Arleen and her two young sons move into a poorly maintained apartment in a slightly safer neighborhood. The new apartment costs Arlene 88% of her monthly income.

The new landlord is Shereena, a former teacher who is trying to run a business. Shereena has 36 rental units in the inner city and is constantly pulled into interactions with law enforcement, utility companies, social workers, and other agencies because of her tenants. She has learned that sympathy will cost her money and is especially frustrated when tenants report her to code enforcement.

Key Takeaways and Syracuse Facts:

Syracuse and Milwaukee are similar in that they have experienced significant population loss over the past 50+ years. Milwaukee has contracted from 740,000 to 600,000 residents while Syracuse has dropped from 220,000 to 143,000. This population loss increases vacancy, erodes the tax base, and creates low property values and poorly maintained housing.

Formal evictions through the courts are the tip of the iceberg in terms of what can force people from their homes. Forced moves can also occur for a variety of other reasons including informal landlord evictions, housing being condemned as unfit for habitation by code enforcement, and a decline in neighborhood safety. Eviction creates poverty and tears apart communities. Single mothers with young children are especially vulnerable to being evicted.

Housing is a tremendous cost to poor renting families. Arlene pays 88% of her monthly income on rent and the majority of poor renting families in America spend over half their income on housing. In Syracuse, 57% of renters have a housing cost burden (spend more than 30% of their income on housing).

Discussion Questions

- Have you or anyone you know experienced eviction? Describe their experience and/or imagine how your life would change if you had to leave your home and possessions?
- What would happen if your children played a prank like throwing snowballs at cars? Would the chain of consequences likely include your family being homeless?
- Would your landlord evict you if someone else damaged your home? Why or why not?
- What percentage of your income do you pay for housing? If you paid 88% of your monthly income for housing, how would that impact your life?
- What do you think of when you imagine a landlord? How does Shereena’s business model and responsibilities/challenges she encounters while managing her properties compare with your perception of a landlord?

Chapters 2 & 3 (City of Syracuse innovation Team)

Welcome to week 2 of the Syracuse Summer Book Club. The people we meet in Chapters 2 and 3 of *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, could easily be Syracuse residents instead of Milwaukee residents.

- Sherrrena, a landlord trying to run a business where having sympathy costs you money
- Lamar, a father whose home is the stable rock for his sons and their friends in an otherwise unconnected community
- Lorraine, an elderly woman trying to determine whether to pay the electricity bill or her rent
- Families living in broken down properties because they can't afford to go anywhere else

How Does This Relate to Syracuse?

The historical and social trends that put Shereena, Lamar, Lorraine, and other families in these situations are similar to those that happened and are happening in Syracuse.

We have a job market suffering from the loss of industry, with low skill jobs shifting from good-paying manufacturing jobs to low-paying service sector jobs. This job shift, both in Milwaukee and in Syracuse, disproportionately impacted unemployment rates for black residents. With low-income, housing costs can become untenable. In Syracuse, 57% of renters pay more than 30% of their household income on rent, a level of housing cost burden that begins to impact their ability to handle other expenses, like food, healthcare, and medical emergencies.

The professionalization of property management has increased the number of full-time landlords in both cities, particularly of absentee landlords who don't live in the same city as their properties. In addition to absentee landlords, Milwaukee and Syracuse both have significantly segregated and disparate communities. Milwaukee is one of the top cities in the country for segregation; Syracuse is number one for concentrated poverty among black and Hispanic residents.

All of these, coupled with population loss and the rising cost of housing that we learned about last week, make evictions and poor quality housing more and more prevalent.

Discussion Questions

- After Lamar pays his rent to Shereena, he has \$78 left for the rest of the month. How can people move out of poverty when they cannot afford to save and build assets?
- In Milwaukee, evictions spike in the summer and early fall and dip in November when the moratorium on winter utility disconnections begins. A similar trend could be seen in Syracuse. If you were forced to choose between paying rent or heat, which would you choose?
- Tobin lived 70 miles away from the trailer park he owned. How might this kind of distance benefit a landlord? What problems might it create?
- Both Milwaukee and Syracuse are extremely segregated cities. What impact does a lack of interaction between different walks of life create? How could this separation be changed or alleviated?

Chapter 4 & 5 Wrap-Up and Key Takeaways for Syracuse (Michael Collins, Executive Director, Syracuse Northeast Community Center)

Chapters 4 & 5 highlight the challenges of maintaining stable housing with limited means, and also of the business of renting unsubsidized housing to people with low income. In Chapter 4, College Mobile Home Park will rent to almost anyone, sometimes without even needing a security deposit for a “handyman’s special.” However, this means that a subset of the tenants have issues that bring regular complaints and police involvement, creating a concentration of such issues. 260 police calls occurred in the previous year, forcing local government to become more involved.

- Shutting down the park would eliminate the concentration of problems, and the complaints to elected officials; however, it would displace the residents of 131 mobile homes, most of whom have not been part of the issues. Locally, $\frac{1}{4}$ of Syracuse residents move every year, many out of necessity rather than choice.
- Due to the small amount of Federal emergency housing dollars flowing to Central New York, Syracuse and Onondaga County have scant resources to assist with security deposits for those that qualify. When unsuccessful in securing housing, it is necessary for individuals and families to find temporary shelter with a friend, relative, or homeless shelter. Personal property is lost when there is no way to move it or no immediate place to move it too. This loss of housing and personal property creates an oppressive economic vacuum that keeps people in poverty.
- Families and children experience tremendous upheaval due to housing instability. Children often must change schools due to a forced move, and the location of whatever emergency temporary shelter is found can make it impossible to navigate transportation to jobs, childcare, healthcare, and other basic needs and supports. Families can also experience the trauma of having to split-up into multiple temporary shelter options which leaves deep emotional wounds on both children and parents.

In Chapter 5, Sherrena deals with another tenant that simply doesn’t have enough money to make it through each month.

- Milwaukee mirrors the national trend of low-income tenants having such a high percentage of their income dedicated to housing that it is often unsustainable and prevents opportunity to provide for other basics of life. Syracuse is the same. Emergency housing assistance providers consistently see people try to make situations work with 80%, 90%, or even 100% of their income going towards rent and utilities in desperation to stay out of homeless shelters.
- Sherrena is willing to accept tenants when they can’t pay all costs up front, but then has expectations that they will pay the balance in a timeline that is not possible. Similar landlords operate on margins so thin that regular maintenance, let alone capital improvements, are often deferred or never done. In cities like Milwaukee and Syracuse, red lining and segregation has created areas of the city with flat and even negative growth in property value. This lowers the entry cost to become a landlord for investors, including those unprepared for the business of providing someone a home. It also limits the ability for property owners to borrow against the home to reinvest in necessary maintenance and improvements like a new roof or windows.

- On Syracuse's north side, properties are low-cost compared to similar size houses in the suburbs, and refugee resettlement has meant a steady influx of people in need of housing. This has led some landlords to expand their portfolio, reducing the number of vacant properties that negatively affect the neighborhood. Also, occupancy rates stay high, keeping cash flowing. External forces can change things quickly and this positive momentum could be negatively impacted by changes in Federal immigration policy.

Discussion Questions

- How is life disrupted for individuals at work and children at school while dealing with the stress of forced relocation?
- How does someone facing forced relocation save for a security deposit and first month's rent, often in a very short amount of time, if they struggle to make it from one check to the next?
- What does forced relocation do to the emotional health of a mother and child? How does could a classroom teacher and school support a child who is experiencing housing insecurity?
- How do you make choices with money when there isn't enough? Arleen cares deeply about Jafaris and Jori's education, and Jori's asthma, and works hard to make the apartment a nice home, but must also deal with choices that put family against housing. What does this stress do to a mother?
- What is the effect on a community of tenants living in substandard housing, and on an owner not having the capital to remedy the situation?
- Current Federal immigration policy has virtually eliminated the annual flow of approximately 1,000 new immigrants moving into Syracuse's North Side. What effect is this having on property values, occupancy rates, and management? How will this in turn affect those who call these apartments and houses home?

Wrap Up and Discussion: Chapters 6 and 7 (Jonnell Robinson, Associate Professor, Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Fellow at City of Syracuse I-Team)

Chapters 6 and 7 of *Evicted* delve further into the causes and consequences of eviction. In chapter 6, we get to know the Hinkston family. Doreen Hinkston, the family matriarch, grudgingly rents a substandard apartment because it's all she can find on short notice after she's evicted from her long term, single-family rental. To make matters worse, Doreen's adult daughter Patrice's hours are cut back at her minimum wage job and she and her children are evicted. As a result, three generations of Hinkstons – three adults and five children – end up crowded into a dingy, two-bedroom apartment in inner city Milwaukee. Because too many people occupy the apartment, they're violating the terms of their lease which gives them no leverage with Sherrrena to fix problems in the apartment.

In chapter 7, we learn about Scott and Teddy, unlikely roommates who meet at a homeless shelter and rent a dilapidated trailer together. Scott was once a successful nurse with a solidly middleclass lifestyle until he got hooked on the painkillers he was prescribed after injuring his back at work. His escalating opioid addiction costs him his job and eventually lands him in a homeless shelter. Teddy and Scott mostly pay their rent on time and don't cause problems for Tobin, the trailer park owner, but when they take in their recently evicted and addicted neighbors, Pam and Ned, the resentful trailer park owner serves them an eviction notice for unpaid rent. Both Sherrrena and Tobin have the upper hand with their cash strapped tenants. Since most of their tenants can barely afford rent, they aren't compelled to maintain their properties and they can evict them at any time. It's cheaper to bear the cost of perpetually evicting tenants than to maintain their properties, so the business model becomes collecting as much rent as they can while investing as little as they can.

Key Takeaways

- When evictions occur, poor people often end up in substandard conditions because they have little time and money to find suitable accommodations. Thus, eviction can cause two moves – the forced move and a subsequent move into more suitable housing. Too often, the second move can take a long time to execute because folks need to recuperate financially and mentally from the first move.
- Many poor families live in overcrowded conditions because they need to pool their income and public benefits to make rent. Overcrowding puts stress on the inhabitants as well as the dwelling.
- A high concentration of eviction in low-income neighborhoods erodes social capital—the relationships, trust and shared norms—that are critical ingredients of safe, healthy neighborhoods. In Syracuse, neighborhoods with higher rates of eviction also experience higher crime rates.
- In cities like Syracuse, the poor often pay similar rents as middle income renters but for far worse living conditions. When I lived on Westcott Street, my immigrant neighbors rented a dilapidated house with a history of housing code violations and criminal activity for \$1200/month while my family paid \$1100/month for a mortgage on a fully renovated home. When my neighbors learned that they paid more for less, they were outraged.

- Mental illness, drug addiction and housing instability are often interconnected. As the opioid epidemic engulfs the country, housing instability will likely increase.

Discussion Questions

- In chapter 7, we learn about a landlord training program that Tobin is mandated to attend. Do you think landlord training should be mandatory? Why or why not? What topics do you think should be covered in landlord training?
 - Do you think tenants should be required to attend renter training? Why or why not? What might tenant training entail?
 - In Milwaukee, property managers like Lenny have access to a website that provides information about a prospective tenants' prior evictions, criminal convictions, child support disputes, and more, even if cases were dismissed. Do you think landlords in Syracuse should have access to tenants' criminal and civil records? Why or why not?
 - Neither Milwaukee nor Syracuse maintain a website that consolidates information about landlords' eviction, code violation, lead poisoning, or property tax payment histories. Should tenants be provided access to information about landlords and their properties?
 - Retaliatory eviction – evicting a tenant for reporting housing problems – is illegal. Some tenants, especially those in month to month leases, or who are violating their lease for one reason or another, or who are behind in rent, are fearful that they will be evicted if they report unsafe and unsanitary housing code violations to the city. What would you do if you were evicted, or threatened with eviction, for reporting unsafe or unhealthy living conditions?

Wrap Up and Discussion: Chapters 8 & 9 (Stephanie Pasquale, Commissioner for Neighborhood and Business Development, City of Syracuse)

This week in Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* finds us at the cusp of ending Part I: Rent and entering into Part II: Out. In Chapter 8, we get a detailed look inside the court process and follow Arleen's fate with Sherrena. We also learn of the challenges facing tenants who are unable to represent themselves in court, where they are summarily evicted if they don't appear in court, and the financial scars that follow even after eviction occurs.

In Chapter 9, we gain insight into the day of eviction, through the eyes of the owners and staff of "Eagle Moving and Storage" as well as the sheriffs who accompany them to each location. Cases range from homes already being vacant, to families who are caught off guard by the immediacy of what lies ahead - you have just minutes to pull your things together and decide if you would like your belongings placed on the curb or in (costly) storage.

The imagery is powerful throughout both chapters, as tenants and landlords navigate the court system through the holidays and face next steps post eviction with the marshal (and movers) at the door. Themes of denial and disbelief, racial inequity, failed second (and third) chances, tenant desperation, landlord exasperation, loss, and how demeaning and intimidating the process can be for tenants are woven through.

Some salient statistics are revealed related to eviction trends in Milwaukee:

- Nearly 70% of tenants brought to eviction court did not attend or have representation; it is estimated that as low as 10% attend proceedings (p. 96). An intimidating process, lack of childcare, and/or work commitments prevent many from attending.
- The majority of eviction cases (92%) were due to missed rental payments; most families facing eviction are paying more than 50% of their income on rent, with one-third paying 80% or more (p. 97)
- Most cases involve the eviction of black women - 75% of attendees were observed to be black, with 75% of these tenants women (p. 97) With high incarceration rates among black men, the author draws the following parallel in Milwaukee where, "Poor black men were locked up. Poor black women were locked out."

Many families try to arrange prepayment "deals" with landlords right up to being called in court, with varying levels of success. Landlords are able to assess late fees and interest (up to 12%) to balances owed, creating larger holes to dig out of for short-term relief from eviction. At the trailer park, professional management moves in, often providing even less flexibility on repayment plans that were unevenly doled out to begin with by the owners.

Key Takeaways

- Eviction disrupts people's lives. Being evicted often requires people to come up with significant financial resources (first, last, security, and replacing their belongings) and forces them to move into locations where they do not have friends, family, or support systems.

- Forced moves take an emotional toll on families and children in particular - high levels of stress, financial upheaval, missing school days and changing schools are just a few ways there are negative consequences.
- Housing quality (or lack thereof) is a consistent theme throughout Evicted. There are approximately 5,074 occupied, two-family homes in Syracuse where more than 95% were built before 1980. The overwhelming majority of these properties have housing quality issues.
- Most of the families portrayed in Evicted end up facing eviction with large financial debts owed over several months, resulting in long-term and debilitating credit issues. Landlords and banks (for those who faced foreclosure) are able to add debt as judgements that follow individuals for many years after the eviction has occurred.

Discussion Questions

- How can people who have been evicted dig out when starting at such a large financial (and likely emotional) deficit? What would need to be in place to prevent a recurrence? Is there anything that could be improved to give families more time to transition to their next home? How would that work?
- Chronic absenteeism continues to serve as a barrier to learning in Syracuse schools. Should tenants with young and school-aged children be given a priority for eviction prevention assistance? Is this fair or unfair? How could a program like this be implemented?
- Given that the average two-family home in Syracuse's low-income neighborhoods is valued at \$50,679 - and many are in need of sizeable repairs and maintenance - would making the repairs be "worth" the investment? Should landlords know what they are getting into when buying a property? Should landlord training be required for new landlords?
- Should rent recovery or mortgage collection be allowed post-eviction? Should credit repair courses be taken to improve credit standing? how could we help tenants overcome these significant financial hurdles?
- If we could develop an "early warning system" that would give tenants (and landlords) a source for help at the very beginning of falling behind with rent (i.e., 5 days late versus waiting for tenants to amass larger debts), how would it work? How could we establish this type of program and let those most at risk know it was available? Would this make a difference in stemming forced mobility?

Wrap Up and Discussion: Chapters 10 & 11 (Julie Morse, Staff Attorney for Legal Services of Central New York)

In Chapter 10, "Hypes for Hire", we glimpse Sherrena's labor force. Like many of Sherrena's tenants, Lamar is doing work for her in an effort to keep his home. Chris, the boyfriend of tenant Trish, derives his sole income from Sherrena. Similarly, Tiny frequently works for them. In addition, Sherrena's brother "who had a crack habit" and Quentin's uncle "a gummy faced alcoholic happy to log hours for beer money" are available for work. Sherrena also has a "crew of hypes on call" and Quentin recruits men off the street when necessary. Sherrena and Quentin pay the workers in cash, at artificially low rates, and accept shoddy work when it is advantageous to them. As Quentin says, "It's good enough for a tenant to move in."

In Chapter 11, "The 'Hood Is Good", Sherrena and Quentin come back to Milwaukee from an eight day vacation in Jamaica, making sure they are back in time for the first of the month. The Hinkston's social worker, Tabatha, asks for repairs to the dire and unsanitary plumbing situation in their unit and Sherrena becomes irate. When Tabatha mentions that Doreen Hinkston is looking for another place to move Sherrena files an eviction, intentionally making it harder for the Hinkston's to be approved for a new home. As Sherrena and Quentin visit tenants to collect rent, they often resort to cajoling and threats, and sometimes still only receive partial payment; however, they typically net \$10,000/month after expenses and often are able to purchase properties with cash. Sherrena also offers credit repair counseling to improve tenants' credit scores so they can be approved for mortgage financing of rent-to-own options on her properties (at purchase prices that are often double what she paid). As Sherrena says, "The 'hood is good. There's a lot of money there." Another landlord states, "...if you do low-income you get a steady monthly income. You don't buy properties for their appreciative value. You're not in it for the future, but for now."

Key Takeaways

- Like Sherrena and Quentin, many urban landlords are able to access a significant cash-paid labor force. Quality standards are lax, and prices are low.
- As we see in Ladona's beautiful new place and in the renovated unit upstairs from the Hinkston's unsafe and unsanitary unit, tenants often have the most leverage before they move in. Once they are living in the home, landlord's have no incentive to spend money on repairs.
- Housing voucher programs often pay above market rate and come with additional inspections and restrictions, theoretically resulting in better quality housing for tenants. But as we see, landlords like Sherrena and Quentin typically do not rent to tenants with vouchers as they prefer to avoid the hassle of inspections and restrictions.
- The business model of Sherrena and Quentin, like many inner city landlords, emphasizes short-term gains at the expense of long-term value and vitality. Profit can be found in purchasing and flipping foreclosed properties (often to purchasers who can ill afford them, resulting in yet another foreclosure) and in investing as little as possible in repairs to realize as much as possible in monthly rent.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think of Sherrena and Quentin's tactic of offering tenants work in exchange for rent but then claiming the work was substandard and refusing to credit the tenant's rental amount?
- Desmond explains how landlords overcharge voucher holders at the expense of taxpayers. Is it fair of Desmond to say landlords are overcharging tenants considering that landlords must comply with higher housing standards in order to rent to people with vouchers? Does having a voucher seem to improve the quality of the housing?
- Sherrena makes a lot of money on rent to own schemes and helps clients improve their credit, many times in order to qualify to rent to own a home from her. Is Sherrena helping? Does this improved credit score truly help people in the long run?

Wrap-Up and Our Thoughts: Chapters 12 & 13 (Palmer Harvey and Jaime Howley from Southside TNT)

This book is devastating for us. We live on the Southside and see the reality of eviction. We know this is real and see the impact of eviction in Syracuse.

What stood out to me [Jaime] was the disparity between the notion of “home sweet home” vs the reality of poor inner city families. Home is supposed to be that base that makes everything we can do with our lives possible and without which life becomes ever more difficult. Unstable housing makes people vulnerable to more than homelessness.

As we see with Arleen and Crystal, being poor and on the edge of losing the roof over your head means juggling bills--trying to keep the lights on, food on the table, shoes on children’s feet--and scrambling to put together enough funds to keep going until the next crisis. A sick child, a day missed at a minimum wage job, a colder winter/higher fuel bills, a bus that doesn't run on schedule, these can all create a crisis situation resulting in eviction. As you circle the drain, the crises come faster and faster, one after another. You are in desperate circumstances, and through these crises you need to be vigilant to keep even the most basic public assistance for necessities of life like food and shelter. There are intake visits, forms, recertifications, and a variety of other required paperwork and appointments. If you miss even one, you can lose your vital benefits (like Crystal). If you are fortunate enough to have secured employment, often your job does not have any flexibility. Through it all, transportation is a constant struggle.

Wherever you go, the oppressive stigma of your poverty is present, 24/7, weighing you down, cutting into every option. The stress of poverty is overwhelming. When you are poor, you live with PTSD everyday. I [Palmer] wonder if some people need therapy after being evicted because it seems to be an emotional spiral long after the eviction has taken place. It is traumatic to lose your home, especially in the eviction process where your belongings are thrown out on the street and you are left homeless or scrambling to find what is often an even worse housing situation for your family.

It takes a village to raise a child, and to nurture each other, but who is the village when the community itself has fallen apart? Others have family, friends, and connections that can help. When you are poor, often you have fewer connections, they are less able to help, and they are frequently asking you for help. When Crystal ran out of connections who could help her, she stayed for a month with a woman she met on a bus! When Crystal sees Arleen (and Arleen’s furniture, TV, and microwave) being evicted, she allows Arleen and her sons to stay even though they are strangers. Crystal helps Arleen in the short-term, but they have no relationship to help smooth things over when Crystal feels disrespected by Jori.

The conversation needs to be about housing conditions as well as stability. What poor people pay for bad housing with broken plumbing, broken windows, non-working doors, no insulation, cockroaches, bedbugs, rodents, mold, lead paint, lack of water and plumbing, and more issues is horrendous. In addition to fighting eviction, we need to improve housing conditions, so that homes are safe, well maintained, and free of lead paint.

Discussion Questions

- Should communities of faith be there for people during their worst times, even if the person made unwise or destructive choices to get to that point?
- What crises and stressors do you have in your life? What crises and stressors do Arleen and Lorraine have in their lives? What helps you get through crises? Are those supports and options available to Arleen and Lorraine?
- What impact has unstable and unsafe housing had on Jori and Jafaris?
- What do you think of Tobin's "owner occupied" "handyman's special" option where tenants are responsible for the upkeep of their trailers? Does this help the tenants? Does this help Tobin?

Wrap-Up and Discussion: Chapter 14 & 15 (Mary Traynor, Staff Attorney for Legal Services of Central New York)

In Chapter 14 Scott, the former nurse, was served with eviction papers for not paying rent. He didn't go to court – he knew he was unable to pay the arrears so he decided to focus entirely on finding the next place to live. A friend put in a good word with a landlord who rented to Scott without doing a background check. The new apartment was small, and also came with a roommate, the friend's nephew, but Scott took it because it was his only choice.

Scott returns to the trailer park to buy his drugs. He believes his former neighbors there, Pam and Ned, “deserved” their eviction. His dealer shares his belief that using money for drugs instead of rent is the cause of eviction. Scott knows there is a more sympathetic view, but sees that as naivete “voiced from a certain distance by the callow middle classes.”

Desmond presents the view of trailer park residents that eviction is a deserved result of individual failure. He notes that residents “rarely raised a fuss” over an eviction, and poignantly states that “[n]o one thought the poor more undeserving than the poor themselves.” Desmond contrasts the contemporary lack of oppositional culture among poor people with earlier social movements of tenants acting in solidarity, for example with rent strikes, based on shared interests and goals. But, he also describes the strong “community support” system in disadvantaged neighborhoods which is essential to survival.

Desmond states that social change requires two things – the belief that the status quo is unjust, and the belief that it can be changed. The belief that eviction results from personal failure frames the social phenomena of eviction as a just, or at least not unjust, event. Desmond explains that the perception of oneself and one's neighborhood as highly traumatized destroys the belief that one and one's neighbors have the political capacity to act. That is, apparent apathy is a reasonable response when all around a person sees victimization, isolation, and a high “level of concentrated suffering.” If all you see is pain, you cannot also see potential.

The chapter ends on an emblematic note – Scott makes the decision to go to rehab and gets on line at the county office an hour before they open. He's too late. That day there are 5 spots for over twenty people. He leaves and binges for the next three days.

In Chapter 15, Crystal hears her upstairs neighbor Trisha being beaten by her boyfriend. Crystal calls Shereena the landlord who doesn't answer, and then calls 911. Arleen, a former tenant in the building, was evicted by Shereena, but Crystal let Arleen move in with her. After the police arrest the boyfriend, Arleen angrily tells Crystal “you must want to lose your house.” The next day the police called Shereena and threatened her with fines and jail for violating Milwaukee's nuisance ordinance, which then included arrests for domestic violence as a nuisance. The police dropped their threat only after Shereena sent them a copy of an eviction notice she served on Trisha. Crystal had called 911 several times for Trisha, but she had also called 911 about Arleen. Angry and “embarrassed” by having to deal with the police about her property, Shereena also served an eviction notice on Arleen.

Milwaukee's nuisance ordinance stated that activity would be deemed a nuisance if police were called three times within 30 days. Desmond describes how nuisance ordinances have an extremely disproportionate impact on black people and poor people – one of 16 eligible cases in a black

neighborhood being is cited, compared to only one of 41 in a white neighborhood. He also points out the absence of judicial involvement when the criminal justice system offloads law enforcement to citizens – “third party enforcement.” Here, the actors are the police and the landlord, while punishment falls on the tenant. Guilt and innocence are irrelevant. Crystal set the nuisance ordinance in motion – after first calling Shereena, she called the police when she heard her neighbor being viciously beaten. She certainly didn’t want to lose her house, but that’s exactly what happened. Desmond also discusses how in Milwaukee a very high percentage of nuisance citations are for domestic violence. He recounts how in Wisconsin more than one victim of domestic violence is murdered every week, and police “puzzle over the fact” that many such murder victims had never contacted the police.

The chapter ends with Arleen declaring she is “sick of getting hurt.” She and Crystal share a story of shared trauma. Crystal urges Arleen to let people who want to help her give that help, and they seem to share comfort and empathy through sharing their pain.

Key Takeaways

Eviction is a social phenomena affecting neighborhoods, cities and populations as whole by preventing the development of social cohesion, destroying political identity, and blighting the physical landscape. But, it is experienced one person at a time, and for that person it is but one of many daily traumas and crises.

The punitive consequences of nuisance ordinances fall on those most unable to defend themselves. Calling the police for aid is a punishable act, depending on who you are. These ordinances do not touch people with property – homeowners.

More Info on Nuisance Laws

Syracuse municipal code § 45-2 is our nuisance ordinance; it defines “nuisance” as three arrests at a location within 24 months. It exempts assault arrests associated with domestic violence from “nuisance”; however, it is not clear whether arrests for stalking or disorderly conduct (or similar offences other than assault associated with domestic violence) are similarly exempted.

Discussion Questions

- Desmond describes the disempowering effect of internalized oppression, high degree of trauma, and perceived lack of political capacity experienced by people living with poverty. 66% of Syracuse residents are tenants, at least a quarter of whom move every year. Given all of this, how can tenants best organize around shared interests and goals?
- What impact could a city-wide tenant association have in empowering tenants to effectively assert rights to decent, safe and affordable housing?
- How could an ordinance permitting eviction "for a just cause only" help our city?
- What do you think should be included in a nuisance ordinance? And how would that help make neighborhoods safer and more stable, while protecting the rights of victims?