

Eviction, segregation and prejudice in an American city

A Before you read

The article you are going to read is about an American city.

When you look at the words “eviction”, “segregation” and “prejudice”, which region of the USA do you think is being referred to? What makes you think that?

B Now read the text and discuss the questions.

One morning, you wake up to a loud and forceful knock on your door. You walk to the door barefooted and exhausted from the night shift you were working in order to pay back the rent money you owed your landlord from last month. You open the door, but you are not ready for what is behind your front door. The morning wind makes you cold, but you freeze when you see the sheriff handing you a pink slip. At that moment you know that none of your efforts have paid off, that the one single misstep separating you from losing everything has been taken. The only thought in your head: I can't.

That pink slip has taken away your family's safe haven. The pink slip is an eviction notice, which can be handed out to people of any income level at the discretion of the landlord, for example for non-payment of rent, illegal activity, or lease violations. This one was handed out in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a midwestern city of 595,000 inhabitants. In the state of Wisconsin (5.8 million people) there are an average of 41 evictions per day, while nearly 16 of these occur in the inner city of Milwaukee alone. Although people of all ages, races and ethnicities may experience eviction, it is more common for single African American mothers than for any other group.

And then the question: what is next? What comes after an apartment with a sagging ceiling in the bathroom due to a leak upstairs? Where do you go from a place that has a floor coated with a thin black film, cracked windows and holes in the wall, which you have somehow managed to turn into a home for your kids? What comes after a two-bedroom apartment with so many building code violations that it doesn't meet the basic habitability requirements anymore but still costs \$550 a month, utilities not included. On top of that, this apartment is situated in one of the worst neighborhoods in America's fourth poorest city and the rent takes 50% of your monthly income. You may have thought about calling a building inspector to pressure your landlord into repairing the code violations, but then you realized this could put you at risk of being evicted. Landlords don't like troublesome tenants. So, what comes after that?

Discussion question: How much of a person's income do you think should be used for housing?

Your first decision on eviction day is “truck or curb.” A team of movers that makes its money from evictions arrives and repeats the bad news that you can no longer stay in your home. For \$350, they tell you, they will take all your personal belongings in their truck and put them into storage. You will be able to get everything back or keep it in storage for a monthly fee. If you choose the second option, “curb,” your personal belongings will all be piled on the curb for everyone to see.



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The next step involves seeking a shelter, probably moving away from your neighborhood and sending your children to a new school. After you adapt to your new environment, you will have to find new friends and establish a support network. But this adaptation is not easy, considering the circumstances. Even as you try your best to hide your pain and worries, your kids will be aware of the situation your family is in, perhaps causing their school performance to suffer.



But while you are busy searching for new apartments, trying to apply for housing vouchers or other additional help, your work performance may suffer and then you are even likely to miss a day of work, which may lead to a dismissal. Eviction is not just about the loss of private space and possessions. It often leads to a spiral of hard times, causing a domino effect on everything from physical and mental health to job performance and job stability.

Discussion question: Imagine living in a homeless shelter. What difficulties do you think different family members might encounter there?

Now, it's time to apply for one apartment after the other. After being rejected from 82 apartments and accepted to none, you become reluctant to apply for any more apartments. You simply don't feel like getting rejected again. Even though Congress outlawed housing discrimination against children and families in 1988, it is still widespread. Families with children are turned away in seven out of ten housing searches. So now imagine being a single black mother with four children and an eviction from last month. Your chances of finding a halfway decent apartment are not high, since a very common reason for being rejected by a landlord is any eviction in the last three years. Even if that eviction happened because you placed three emergency 911 phone calls to the police the previous month to report domestic violence. Since black men are disproportionately incarcerated (38% of all inmates are black, though only 12% of the US population is of that race) and black women disproportionately evicted (over one in five black women compared with one in 15 white women), rejecting housing applicants with recent criminal or eviction records has a big impact on African Americans seeking housing.

Discussion question: What makes a good or bad tenant?

Now imagine in addition to losing your safe haven, your social environment and your job, your welfare case is also closed. You missed the first appointment because you were so preoccupied with finding a new apartment, a new job, and trying to keep an eye on your kids and their schoolwork that you simply forgot. You missed the following appointments because the letters had been mailed to the apartment that you were evicted from. Another missed meeting and another cancelled benefit were both consequences of an eviction that threw everything off course.

While you now also have to try to regain these benefits, you turn into a desperate tenant willing to overlook neglected repairs as long as the landlord is willing to overlook your eviction record.

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The neighborhoods in which you seek an apartment become poorer and more dangerous the longer you are forced to look and the more rejections you get. You are at a point at which anything would be enough, at which you are willing to lower your standards to a minimum and overlook almost any disrepair, no matter how severe – just to have a roof over your head. While you first hoped to find an apartment in a slightly better neighborhood or even escape the North Side, the apartment you now applied for is on one of the poorest blocks of the North Side.

Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the USA; the Menominee River Valley cuts through the middle of the city, dividing the predominantly black North Side from the predominantly white South Side. The poorest area of Milwaukee is located on the North Side and includes several neighborhoods. African Americans make up 97 percent of the area's residents. Only 36 percent of working-age males in the area are employed, 62 percent of adult black men are currently in prison or have served prison time, and the poverty rate for children is at 66 percent, suggesting that the median household income is extremely low. But this area full of crime, drugs and violence is your last resort, the area you will have to settle for it. The rents are comparably lower but the condition of the apartments is disastrous.

You have finally found a place and move in. You thought it was impossible to stoop any lower, but then you come to your new neighborhood, and your new apartment seems to be falling apart, as is the new school your kids are forced to attend in order to avoid a long daily commute. Substandard housing weighs hard on your mental health not only because the poor condition of the house causes depression but because of what living in such awful conditions tells you about yourself.

Living in degrading housing conditions is a constant reminder of your irrelevance to society. It sends a clear message of where people think you belong. People who are disgusted by their home and still have to give almost everything they have to pay for it think less of themselves, making it harder to get out of the never-ending downward spiral. And in many cases, sooner or later you hear the next knock on your door.

Discussion question: Do you think eviction is a cause or a consequence of poverty?

C Vocabulary

Write an explanation/definition in English and then the German word.

1. eviction:
2. landlord:
3. at someone's discretion:
4. curb:
5. incarcerated:
6. welfare:
7. tenant:
8. degrading:

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D Short answer

1. Find five reasons for eviction in the article.
2. Collect seven facts about the city of Milwaukee from the article.
3. Why would a tenant choose to not report building code violations?
4. Find five possible consequences of eviction.
5. Which reason for eviction do you think is the least fair?

E Conduct a case study

1. Find out what the minimum wage is in Wisconsin and calculate how much someone working 40/week at minimum wage would make before taxes.
2. Make a list of expenses (besides rent) for a typical family.
3. Estimate how much of their earnings should be spent on each category.
4. What percentage of their income is left for rent?
5. Check apartment rental listings for Milwaukee on the internet to see if a family with this budget could find a suitable place to live.

Calculations:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

F Opinion

Say how you agree or disagree with this statement:

A good home can serve as a sturdy foundation. When people have a decent and affordable place to live, they become better parents, workers and citizens.

A Before you read

Students might possibly name the southern US because this area is typically associated with prejudice due to its history.

C Vocabulary

1. when you are forced to leave the place where you have been living (*Zwangs-*)*Räumung*
2. the person who owns a piece of property and rents it to other people *Vermieter(in)*
3. based on someone's own opinion or decision *nach jmds. Ermessen*
4. between the sidewalk and the street *Bordstein, -kante*
5. in jail/prison *inhaftiert*
6. money that people with low incomes receive from the government *Sozialhilfe*
7. the person who pays rent to live somewhere *Mieter(in)*
8. something that is unpleasant and makes you lose your self-respect *entwürdigend*

D Short answer

1. Unpaid rent, three phone calls to police in 30 days, illegal activity, lease violations, at the discretion of the landlord
2. 16 evictions/day, 4th poorest US city, poorest areas on the North Side, 97% black, 36% of black men unemployed, 62% of black men in prison, poverty rate for children 66%
3. The landlord could use this as a reason for eviction. The phrase "at the discretion of the landlord" leaves room for interpretation.
4. Losing your belongings, moving to a shelter, kids changing schools, losing your job, effects on physical and mental health, losing welfare benefits, moving to a worse neighborhood/ apartment
5. I think the phone calls to the police are least fair. The people are probably calling about real emergencies like domestic violence and need help. But if they are afraid to call then they could suffer serious harm.
I think landlord discretion is the most unfair. It seems very subjective and could be used for trivial reasons.

E Case study

In 2019 the minimum wage in Wisconsin was \$7.25 (in comparison to upwards of \$12 in some other states).

The list of expenses could include e.g. childcare, food, transportation, health insurance, medical bills, clothing, utilities, school supplies.

As a general rule, no more than 30% of a person's or family's gross income should be spent on housing.

F Opinion

I agree. A stable home gives people psychological stability, school stability, work stability and community stability. If people can stay in the same place, they have fewer worries. They have the time, energy, will and money to improve not only their family's home but also their street, their neighborhood, their schools, their community.

I disagree. It takes a lot more than a good home to be successful. You still need a job and have to work hard at school. I think that education is the first step. This is what makes you a better parent, worker or citizen.

For more information on the topic of eviction in the United States, look at this website, which includes a teaching guide. The traveling exhibit is based on the book *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond. <https://www.nbm.org/exhibition/evicted/> 