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A file photo shows a homeless encampment in Washington.(OSV News/Tyler Orsburn)



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Why, asks Matthew Desmond — the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Poverty, By America" (Crown) and a professor of sociology at Princeton University — is there so much destitution in America?

Desmond — speaking Oct. 9 at Catholic Charities of Baltimore's second annual "Journey to Social Justice" symposium at Church of the Nativity in Timonium — offered a gathering of several hundred some answers, as well as hard truths, about the high cost of being poor in the United States.

In September 2024, the U.S. Census Bureau reported, "In 2023, the official poverty rate fell 0.4 percentage points to 11.1 percent. There were 36.8 million people in poverty in 2023, not statistically different from 2022."

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2024 Poverty Guidelines rank the poverty threshold for a single person household at $15,060; a two-person household, $20,440; a three-person household, $25,820; a four-person household, $31,200; and so on.

For context, Desmond noted that since more than 30 million Americans "are officially poor by government standards. … If America's poor founded a country, that country would have a bigger population than Australia."

Not for the only time during the evening, shocked noises issued from the audience.

"Think about when the War on Poverty was launched, in 1964," he invited his listeners. "This is when the Johnson administration rolled out these deep investments in the poorest families of America — made food aid permanent; invested in education; started Job Corps; started public assistance; started public health benefits. These were real investments in the poorest families in America."

And the return on those federal investments?

"Ten years after the War on Poverty was launched, the poverty rate was cut in half," Desmond said. "So the idea that the government can't do anything — that we fought the War on Poverty, and poverty won, as President Reagan famously said — is just empirically false."

Perhaps, it might be imagined, there simply isn't enough government assistance.

"The country hasn't gotten stingier over time, when it comes to fighting poverty. The opposite is true," reported Desmond. "And this makes our persistent poverty levels even more frustrating — because decade after decade after decade, poverty persists, even as the money we dedicate to it increases."

Indeed, Desmond said many of the country's poor avoid welfare.

Between tax deductions and programs — such as the earned income tax credit, food stamps, government health insurance, unemployment insurance and Supplemental Security Income — Desmond said "billions and billions of dollars are left on the table every year."

The estimated figure is $142 billion in uncollected assistance.

"That's not a picture of welfare dependency," declared Desmond. "I think that's a picture of us doing a pretty bad job of connecting families with programs that they really could use."

The loss of union influence is another factor of persistent poverty, said Desmond.

"When the Great Society War on Poverty was launched, unions were strong, and wages were climbing. But as unions lost power, worker wages started to stagnate," he explained. "Today, the average wage for a man without a college degree is less than it would have been 50 years ago, inflation adjusted."

Desmond compared poverty to illness. "When the economy was delivering for workers — even those workers at the bottom of the pay scale — anti-poverty programs were cures," he said. "Today, the job market has turned them into something like dialysis — a treatment to make poverty less lethal, but not make it disappear."

Ironically, it's also expensive to be poor.

"Consider that every year, $11 billion in overdraft fees, $1.6 billion in check cashing fees, $9.6 billion in payday loan fees, are pulled out of the pockets of the poor," Desmond emphasized. "That is $61 million in fines and fees charged to poor folks every single day."

To avoid admitting such harsh realities, Americans tend to formulate what Desmond terms "absolving theories of poverty" — in a word, excuses.

"The average family, in the bottom 20% of the income distribution — our poorest families — they receive about $26,000 dollars a year from the government," shared Desmond. "But our average family in the top 20% of income distribution — our richest families — they receive about $35,000 dollars a year from the government. That's like a 40% difference."

Desmond's frustration was palpable.

"We give the most to families that need it the least," he said, "and then we have the audacity — like the shamelessness — to then fabricate stories about poor people's dependency on government aid, and shoot down proposals to reduce their hardship because it costs too much."

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Affordable housing is another key poverty factor — one that is often resisted by affluent communities, despite the fact that "study after study shows that when affordable housing is well-built, well managed, it blends into the community and has no effect on property values — zero," said Desmond.

Home ownership by the poor is also low; in 2023, Desmond observed, 27% of all homes sold in America sold for under $100,000 — but only 23% were financed with a mortgage. The remainder were bought by speculators or future landlords.

"When you build communities of concentrated wealth — and we build a wall around that community, and we hoard opportunity behind that wall — there's a side effect," suggested Desmond. "Communities of concentrated desperation and poverty just outside of our wall."

Desmond's "Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City" (Crown) won him the Pulitzer Prize; as the principal investigator of Princeton's Eviction Lab, it's a topic with which he's always grappling.

So what if America actually decided to put an end to poverty?

"It would cost about $177 billion a year to bring everyone below the official poverty line above it," explained Desmond. "This is a really rough estimate, but it's a good starting point — it gives us something to know, like, what are we talking about when we're talking about ending poverty in America? Because what we're talking about is something totally obtainable; this is less than 1% of our GDP."

Tax structure also plays a role.

"Recent studies have shown that if the top 1% of income earners in America just paid all their federal income tax — not (get) taxed at a higher level, just paid their income tax — that we as a country could raise $175 billion dollars a year," said Desmond. "We could just about close the poverty gap, if the richest among us just paid what they owed."

Desmond began to conclude his talk with a summary.

"So that's the proposition," he said. "You lift the floor by re-balancing the safety net; you empower the poor by reigning in exploitation; and we finally turn away from segregation, and open up our neighborhoods. This is how we could end poverty in America."

Not that it would necessarily be easy, Desmond admitted.

"This is going to take new policies; it's going to take new social movements," he confirmed. "But it's also going to require that each one of us, in our own way, become poverty abolitionists. Like abolitionist movements against slavery, this one recognizes that profiting from someone else's pain corrupts all of us. And this abolitionist movement recognizes that poverty cannot be tolerated at all on these shores."

It is, Desmond proposed, a movement for everyone.

"If you're unemployed, or homeless; if you've been convicted, incarcerated, exploited, stepped upon — yeah, this is your fight," he said. "If you're a young

person, fed up not only with $100,000 dollar college degrees and impossibly expensive cities, but also just fed up with all our polite speeches for why things are the way they are, this is your fight."

"If you're one of those tens of millions of Americans floating in that space in-between poverty and security — cutting coupons, dreading bills — I think this is your fight," he added. "And if you've found prosperity, and wish the same for your neighbor — if all this hunger, and indignity, and desperation offends your sense of decency, and maybe your sense of Christianity — this is your fight too, I think."

If we avoid that fight, Desmond suggested, America is diminished.

"The end of poverty is something to stand for; it's something to sacrifice for. All this desperation offends any claim to our national greatness — and the people in the richest country on the planet can, and should, put an end to it," he said.

"We don't need to outsmart this problem," declared Desmond. "We just need to hate it more."