

EVICTED



This information is adapted from the National Building Museum's 2018 exhibition, *Evicted*, which focused specifically on court-ordered evictions in the private housing market.

Photos by Michael Kienitz. © National Building Museum 2019

Evicted Teaching Guide

Grades 6-12

E viction has become a crisis that affects every community across the country. The National Building Museum worked with sociologist and author **Matthew Desmond** to create an exhibition based on his book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, and share his research and the scale of the problem of eviction. This teacher guide, made in collaboration with the Interactivity Foundation, provides teachers with resources and a structure to analyze, discuss, and imagine solutions to the eviction crisis and similarly complex topics with their students.

HOW TO USE THE GUIDE

The purpose of a dialogue is for the participants to engage in open collaborative enquiry about a complex topic (in this case, eviction), to unearth and consider different perspectives about that topic, and to develop different ways to deal with it. It is not a debate. Participants are not trying to reach a consensus or find the one right answer. A good discussion will flow organically rather than marching through a set progression. For this reason, it is important to be flexible in adapting the following material. This dialogue format often is for small-group discussions of 10-12 participants, although it can be adapted to use with a large group or class facilitated by the instructor. The role of the teacher in this setting is to facilitate and help make connections between the students, not to lead the discussion or insert your own opinions and thoughts. Learn more about tips for facilitating a dialogue¹ on the Interactivity Foundation's website.

By raising awareness of the scale and prevalence of the issue of eviction, the National Building Museum aims to inspire people to raise their voices to address housing insecurity in their own neighborhoods and cities. Equipping our students with the ability to break down complex problems, discuss nuance, and integrate new information and opinions will lead to more informed citizens who can work to solve the growing separation between the built environments of the rich and the poor, along with other pressing societal challenges.

Heading into the discussion, be aware that some participants may have experienced the trauma of eviction and housing insecurity.

If possible, check with school social workers or guidance counselors to be as aware as possible of any concerns or issues students might face during this discussion. Trust that students want to share and process their experiences, but also understand that some might not want to talk about the topic or share personal information. By setting group norms and creating a safe environment to discuss and learn, you can help empower students and provide a space for them to give voice to their own lived experiences.

The background information and data visualizations are provided for you and your students to gain an understanding of the causes and effects of eviction.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE OUTLINE

- Explore background resources on the eviction crisis
- Set up group agreement (10 minutes)
- Warm-up (10 minutes)
- Exploring eviction (30-45 minutes)
- Generating possibilities (30-45 minutes)



Photos by Michael Kienitz.

1. <https://www.interactivityfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Tips-for-Participating-Facilitating-IF-discussions.pdf>

SET UP GROUP AGREEMENT 10 minutes

When students set up their own ground rules or basic agreements for a dialogue, they can take more ownership of the process. The Interactivity Foundation suggests the following elements for a successful dialogue:



- TAKE TURNS.
- STAY ON TRACK.
- LISTEN TO EACH OTHER.
- BE OPEN TO EACH OTHER'S IDEAS AND BUILD ON THEM.
- BE OURSELVES AND IMAGINE OTHER PERSPECTIVES, INCLUDING PEOPLE WHO AREN'T PRESENT.
- BE GENEROUS WITH EACH OTHER AND THE IDEAS THAT COME UP.
- HELP EACH OTHER EXPLORE OR CLARIFY IDEAS TO UNCOVER COMPLEXITY.
- SEPARATE THE IDEA FROM THE PERSON.
- BE BOLD AND GO DEEP INTO THE ISSUES.
- CONSIDER ALL IDEAS.
- BRING UP INNOVATIVE IDEAS, EVEN IF THEY SEEM IMPLAUSIBLE.
- QUESTION ASSUMPTIONS AND LOOK FOR ROOT CAUSES.



WARM-UP 10 minutes

What makes a home a home? What does “home” mean to you?

This question is intended to help a conversation get started and to create a sense of personal connection to the discussion topic. As students share, record their answers visibly so everyone can see.

EXPLORING EVICTION 30-45 minutes

Below are suggested questions to select for engaging in dialogue on different dimensions of eviction. Facilitators should not try to work through all of these questions. Some groups might only work through two or three; others might cover four to six. The questions the facilitators ask will arise from the curriculum connections they are making and might shift as the participants take the dialogue in the direction that interests them. As with the warm-up, record responses as you continue the dialogue.

Questions

QUESTIONS TO START THE DIALOGUE

- What questions do you have about eviction?
- What surprised you about the background information we researched? What are you wondering?
- Who are the people (or groups of people) involved in the system of eviction?
- What are some of the different factors that lead to people being evicted or losing their homes?

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE COMPLEXITY OF EVICTION

- What values seem important to consider when thinking about housing and the loss of housing?
- What responsibilities are there when it comes to housing and eviction? Who has these responsibilities?
- What rights do people have, or should they have, when it comes to housing and eviction? Who has these rights?
- Whose interests or needs should be considered when thinking about eviction? What are some different perspectives to consider (tenants, landlords, business community, and government)?

QUESTIONS TO SYNTHESIZE POINTS OF VIEW

- What are some of the root causes (E.g., wages not growing) that we discussed or researched that we might have to address if we're going to solve eviction?
- What goals might we have as individuals, a community, or as a society when it comes to eviction and housing?
- What are the big questions about eviction and housing that we have to answer as a society/city/neighborhood/community?



Consider using other methods to break up the spoken conversation or to make the dialogue visible, such as sticky note reflections, personal journaling and sharing out, or collaborative mind maps (silent brainstorms), as a way to discuss and share with each other. This will allow less vocal participants the chance to respond and be engaged in the dialogue with their peers.

GENERATING POSSIBILITIES 30-45 minutes

The following dialogue and activity prompts present different ways to help students imagine alternative possibilities for addressing eviction on a societal, community, or personal level. These build on the previous dialogues and can help students imagine a positive way forward through the eviction crisis. Ideally there is time between the previous section of dialogue and this portion to allow students to reflect and digest what they discussed and heard. Facilitators do not need to complete all of these prompts.

Prompts

HISTORY OF THE FUTURE BRAINSTORMING

Imagine a future where the problem of eviction is “solved” or minimized (it’s up to your students to imagine what that might mean).

- What does society/ our city/ our neighborhood look like with little or no eviction? How do we handle issues surrounding economic insecurity and housing?
- How did we get to this situation? What steps occurred in history that led us to this new future from where we are now?
- What actions could be take right now to move our society/ city/ neighborhood towards that future?



USING METAPHORS TO ENVISION POSSIBILITIES

Generate different metaphors to express what housing means to your students: “Housing is…” or “Home is…”

- Write or make drawings of these metaphors. What values do these metaphors suggest that would shape how we deal with eviction? Example: “Home is a warm blanket on a cold day.”
- Take a metaphor for housing and try to build a policy or solution around it that could address the problem of eviction. Example: “If housing is a warm blanket on a cold day, then our policy should be to ensure that housing is easily available for the most vulnerable populations.”
- Discuss who would be involved in moving that solution forward (government, businesses, non-profits, activists, etc.) and what they would do.

PROVIDE ANSWERS TO PREVIOUSLY DISCUSSED QUESTIONS

Given the goals, values, rights, responsibilities, etc. that you discussed, what are some different ways we could address eviction?

- What would the goal of your solution be in our country/city/neighborhood/school?
- Who would do what (or who would have which responsibilities and rights)?
- What values would shape the solution or policy?
- In a nutshell, how would it work? How would this solution change our society/city/neighborhood/school?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Causes and Effects of Eviction

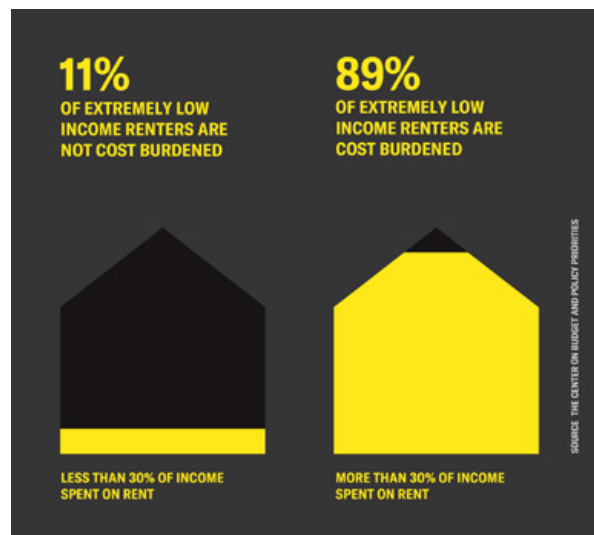
Eviction, the forced legal process of removing a tenant from a residence, has reached crisis levels in America. What once was a relatively rare occurrence now threatens more than 11 million Americans, with poor, renting families bearing the worst of it. The rise in evictions stems from three problems that have surfaced in the past 20–30 years.

- **Incomes for renting families have fallen or stagnated.**

The eviction crisis has revealed a stunning lack of affordable housing across the country. In 2017, a full-time worker earning minimum wage could afford a one-bedroom apartment in only twelve U.S. counties. In other words, low-income Americans do not—and cannot—earn enough money to pay the rent in the vast majority of jurisdictions across the country. This leads poorer renters to housing further away from jobs and opportunities

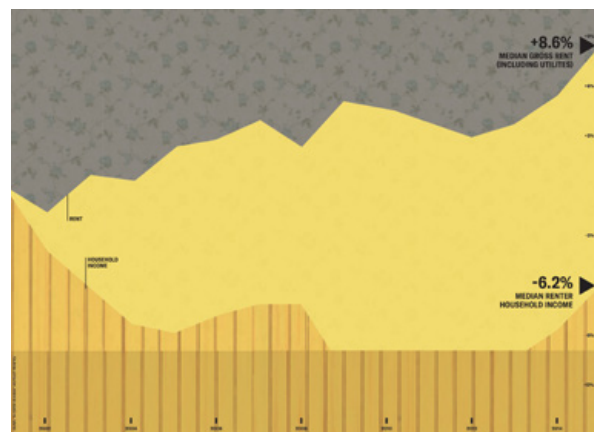
- **Housing costs, including utilities and rent, continue to rise.** Federal guidelines have indicated for more than 80 years that households should not spend more than 30% of their income on rent. Without government assistance, extremely low-income families end up paying far too much of their income on housing. Today, because of rising housing costs, the majority of poor families spend more than 50% of their income on rent. This leaves very little for school field trips, medicine, food, clothing, or emergencies.

- **The federal government has not stepped in to help fill the gap.** Current federal and state commitment to housing assistance does not begin to cover the millions of low-income Americans who need help paying for a place to live. In 2015 the federal government spent \$29.9 billion on Section 8, which gives vouchers for low income renters. This is less than half the amount spent on the mortgage interest deduction, for example, which benefits high-income households. Additionally an eviction can make tenants illegible for the very services and programs they need to secure housing.



CAN THEY STILL BUY FOOD AND NECESSARY MEDICATION, PAY UTILITY BILLS, MAINTAIN THEIR HOME, AND PAY FOR TRANSPORTATION?

—URBAN INSTITUTE



RENTS HAVE RISEN, INCOMES HAVE STAGNATED. AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS DO NOT FILL THE GAP.

—CENTER FOR BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES

Eviction can be a cause, rather than a result of poverty. Housing instability leads to problems at work and school, health issues, and community disengagement for children and families. Adults and children who have gone through an eviction are more likely to suffer from depression and other mental health challenges, and experience worse physical health than their counterparts with stable housing. In addition, frequent moves can wreak havoc on health plans and relationships with doctors for those with chronic illness. Changing schools means that students cannot develop relationships with counselors or teachers. They may struggle to keep up with different curricula, and lose out on opportunities to sustain friendships. Even if evicted students somehow avoid changing schools, they face higher stress levels. Job performance problems and even job loss can be traced directly to extreme stress caused by eviction, including hours lost to the legal process and finding a new place to live, and longer commute times to jobs from the next round of housing.

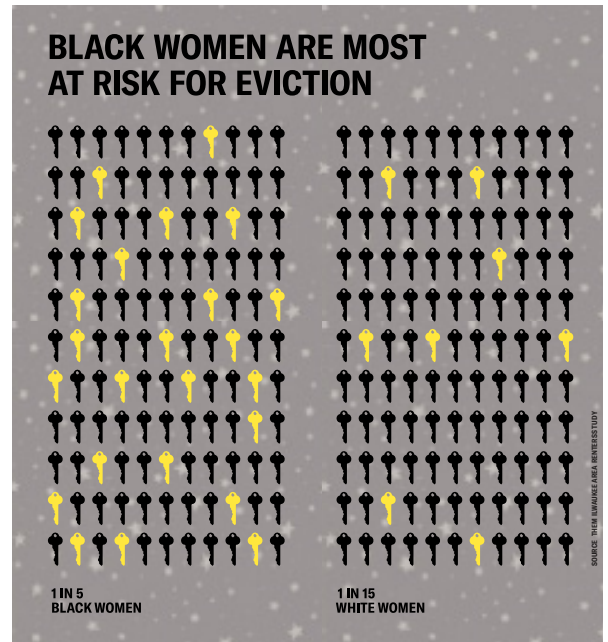
Who plays a role in eviction?

TENANTS

Many low-income renters are permanently in the rental market and will never own a home. The number of low-income renter households most at risk for eviction continues to grow. Once a family experiences hard times leading to an eviction, it can be difficult to find a landlord or rental company willing to rent to them, continuing a spiral of downward mobility. In 2017, almost 2.5 million American households faced court-ordered eviction. Even more people lived with the threat of being forcibly removed from their homes, but managed to find another living situation before the final knock on the door. Eviction is more common for African American single mothers than for all other groups. In fact, poor single mothers of all races are particularly at risk. Children often expose families to eviction instead of protecting them, as landlords often see youth as disruptive.

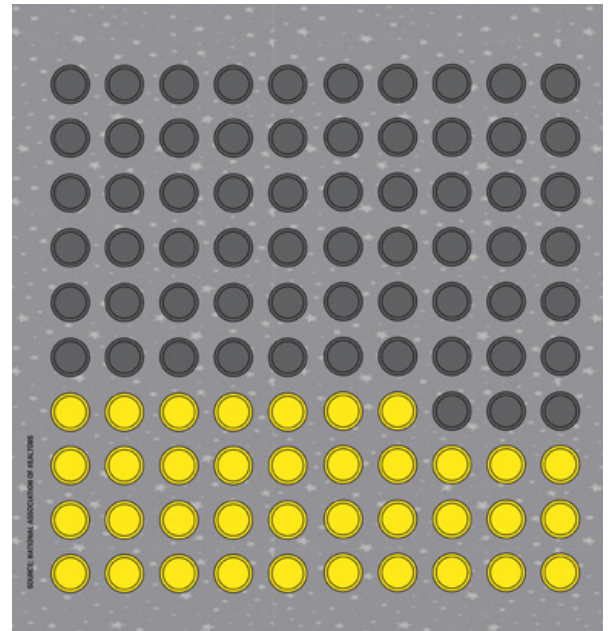
LANDLORDS

In 2016, 37% of homes were sold to buyers who did not occupy the property. Landlords are playing a new and significant role in the housing market. “Slumlords” in poor neighborhoods can often make more money than they could in more upscale markets. Sometimes they will raise rents in anticipation of incurring losses. They may also save by foregoing upkeep and maintenance.



**EVICTION IS NOT JUST A
CONDITION OF POVERTY.
IT IS A CAUSE OF POVERTY.**

—URBAN INSTITUTE



**IN 2016, 37% OF HOMES
WERE SOLD TO BUYERS
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THE PROPERTY**

COURT SYSTEM AND LAWYERS

The housing court system can be complicated. Unlike in a criminal case, tenants in eviction cases are not guaranteed legal representation. Most landlords can afford counsel, which gives them the advantage over tenants in navigating the court system. Judges gavel through cases with little time to consider individual circumstances. Taking time off work or the hassle of traveling to court often means that tenants are not even present when their case is decided.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Once an eviction starts, sheriffs or marshals are present to serve the eviction notice. Many low-income renters also risk eviction if they call the police to report a crime in their home. Nuisance ordinances, the law in many cities and states nationwide, allow — or even mandate — eviction when the police are called to the property too often.

MOVING COMPANIES AND STORAGE FACILITIES

Whether tenants are home or not during an eviction, their possessions will be removed from the house by a moving company. In some jurisdictions, tenants can choose to have their possessions brought to a storage facility, but that is often too expensive or time consuming to be practical.



SOURCE: THE NATIONAL LOW INCOME HOUSING COALITION

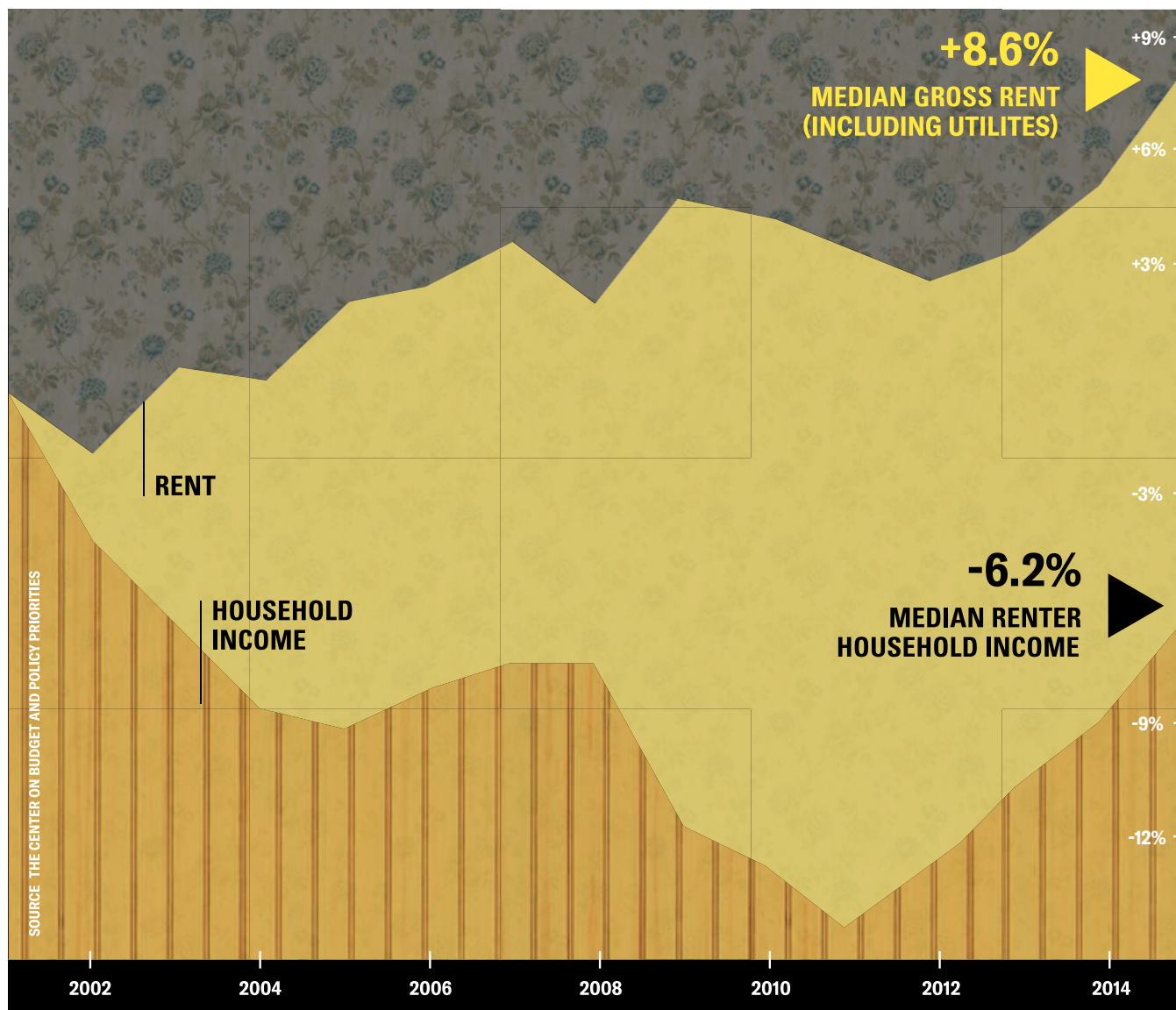
THE U.S. HAS A SHORTAGE OF 7.4 MILLION AFFORDABLE AND AVAILABLE RENTAL HOMES FOR EXTREMELY LOW INCOME RENTER HOUSEHOLDS, RESULTING IN 35 AFFORDABLE AND AVAILABLE UNITS FOR EVERY 100 OF THESE HOUSEHOLDS

OUR CITIES HAVE BECOME UNAFFORDABLE TO OUR POOREST FAMILIES, AND THIS PROBLEM IS LEAVING A DEEP AND JAGGED SCAR ON THE NEXT GENERATION.

—MATTHEW DESMOND, AUTHOR

RENTS HAVE RISEN, INCOMES HAVE STAGNATED. AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS DO NOT FILL THE GAP.

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THE CRISIS

The eviction crisis stems from three fundamental problems that have surfaced in the past 20–30 years. Incomes for poor, renting families have fallen or stagnated, while housing costs—including both utilities and rent—have risen. Meanwhile, the U.S. government has not made a significant investment in promoting affordable homes for all. This nationwide problem threatens extremely low-income renters—more than 11 million Americans. These workers do not make enough money to pay rent in most markets. Though they qualify for government housing aid, they do not receive it because there is not enough aid to meet the growing demand.

Data visualizations from the 2018 exhibition *Evicted* at the National Building Museum.

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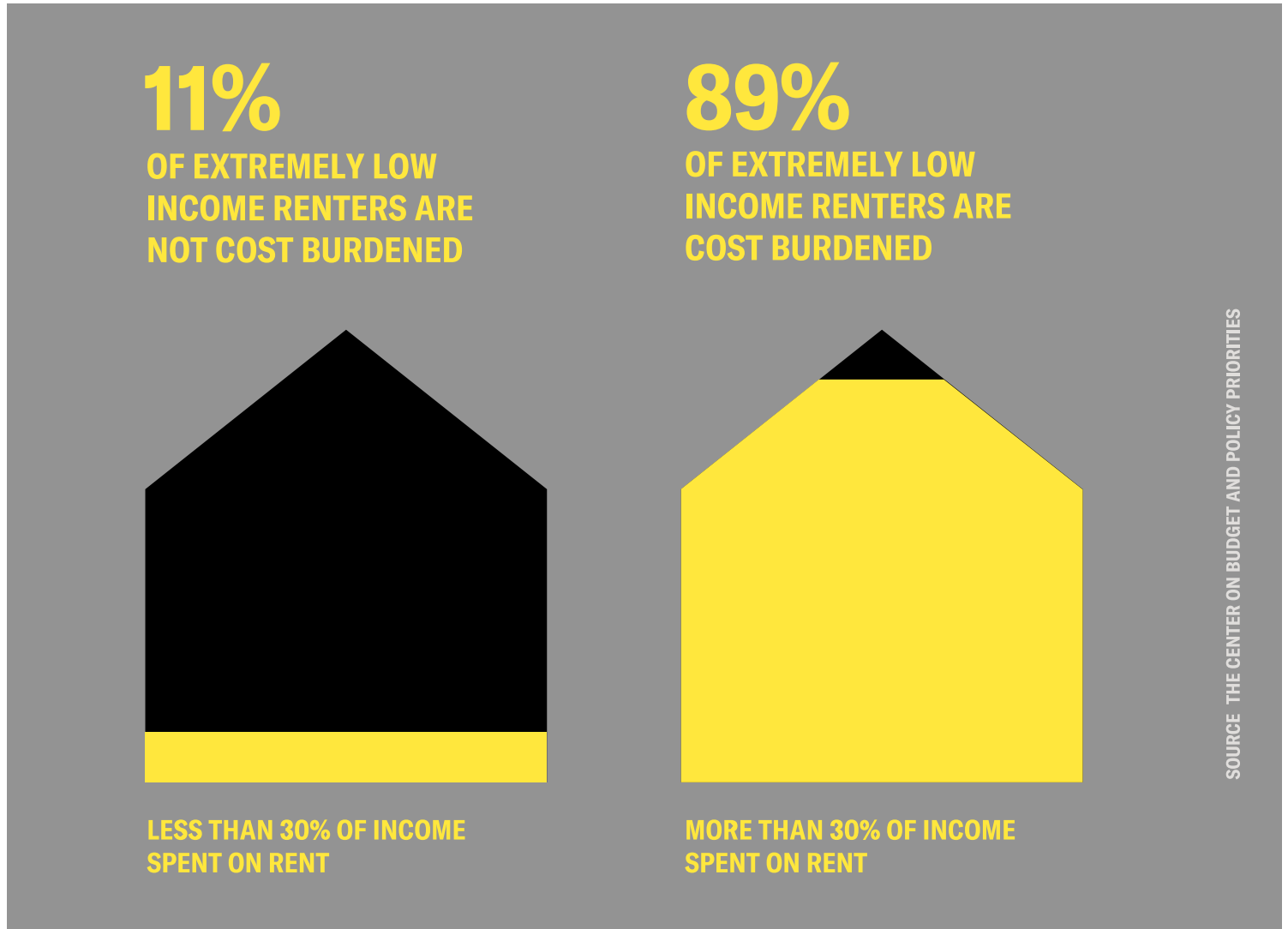
AFFORDABLE HOUSING SHORTAGE

The eviction crisis has revealed a stunning lack of sufficient and affordable housing across the entire country. In 2018, a full-time worker earning minimum wage could not afford to rent a 2-bedroom apartment anywhere in the country. In other words, low-income Americans do not—and cannot earn enough money to pay the rent in the vast majority of jurisdictions across the country.

On a small income, there are very few options. Even if rents are similar in different neighborhoods, the upfront costs, utilities, and security deposits, as well as rules about previous eviction records, can keep low-income renters out of most apartments and communities. Often, after a long and frustrating search, families are forced into increasingly dilapidated housing in neighborhoods far from work and opportunity. But even this insufficient, crowded housing, often without reliable hot water and heat, comes at a high cost.

Data visualizations from the 2018 exhibition *Evicted* at the National Building Museum.

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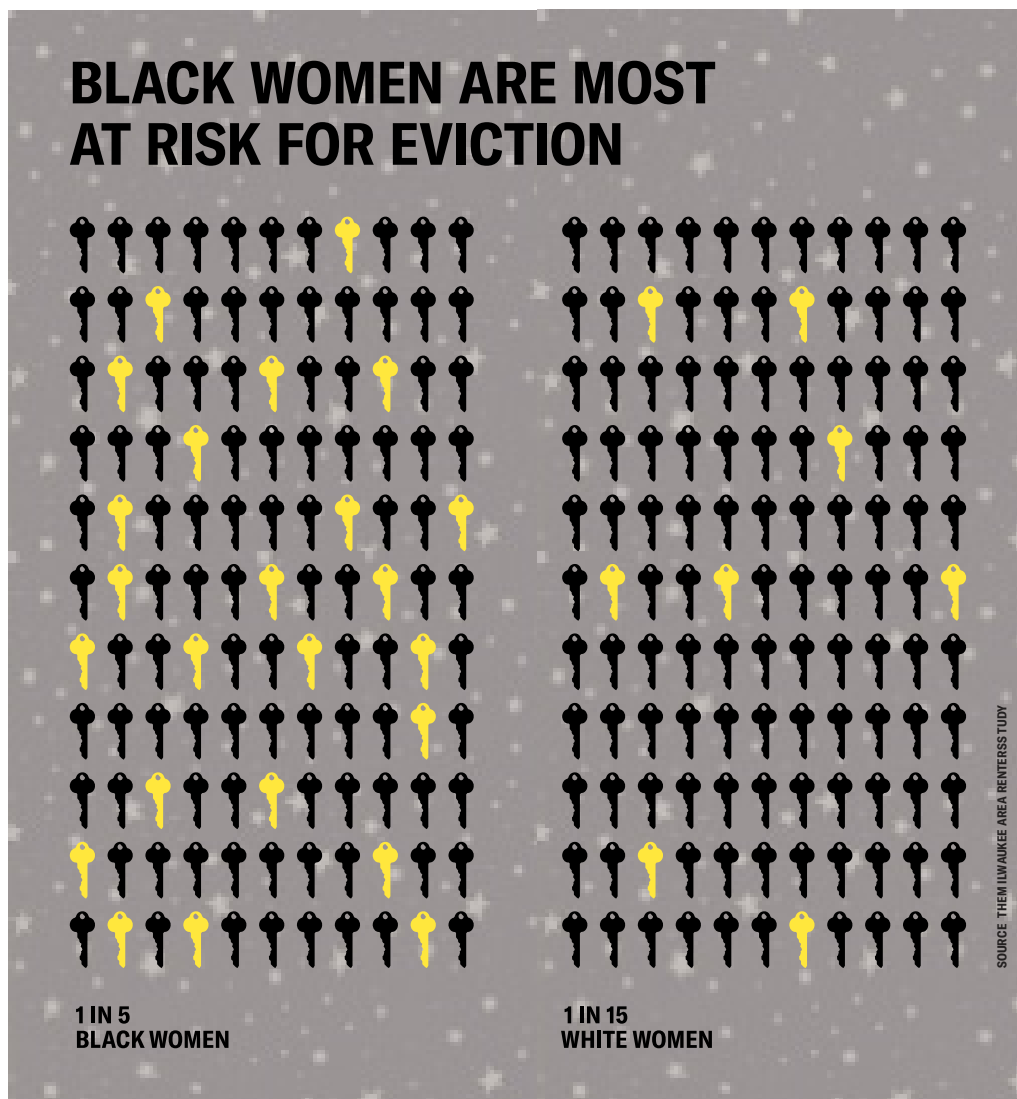


SPENDING TOO MUCH ON RENT

Federal guidelines have indicated for more than 80 years that households should not spend more than 30% of their income on rent. This is increasingly impossible. Without government assistance, extremely low-income families (with an income under the poverty line) end up paying far too much money on housing. Today, because of rising housing costs, the majority of poor families—over eight million people—are severely cost burdened, which means they spend more than 50% of their income on rent. Some even more. This presents major problems for families who then have little funds left for medicine, food, clothing, transportation, or emergencies, let alone entertainment. Because the rent eats first.

Data visualizations from the 2018 exhibition *Evicted* at the National Building Museum.

EVICTED IS NOT JUST A CONDITION OF POVERTY. IT IS A CAUSE OF POVERTY. —MATTHEW DESMOND, AUTHOR



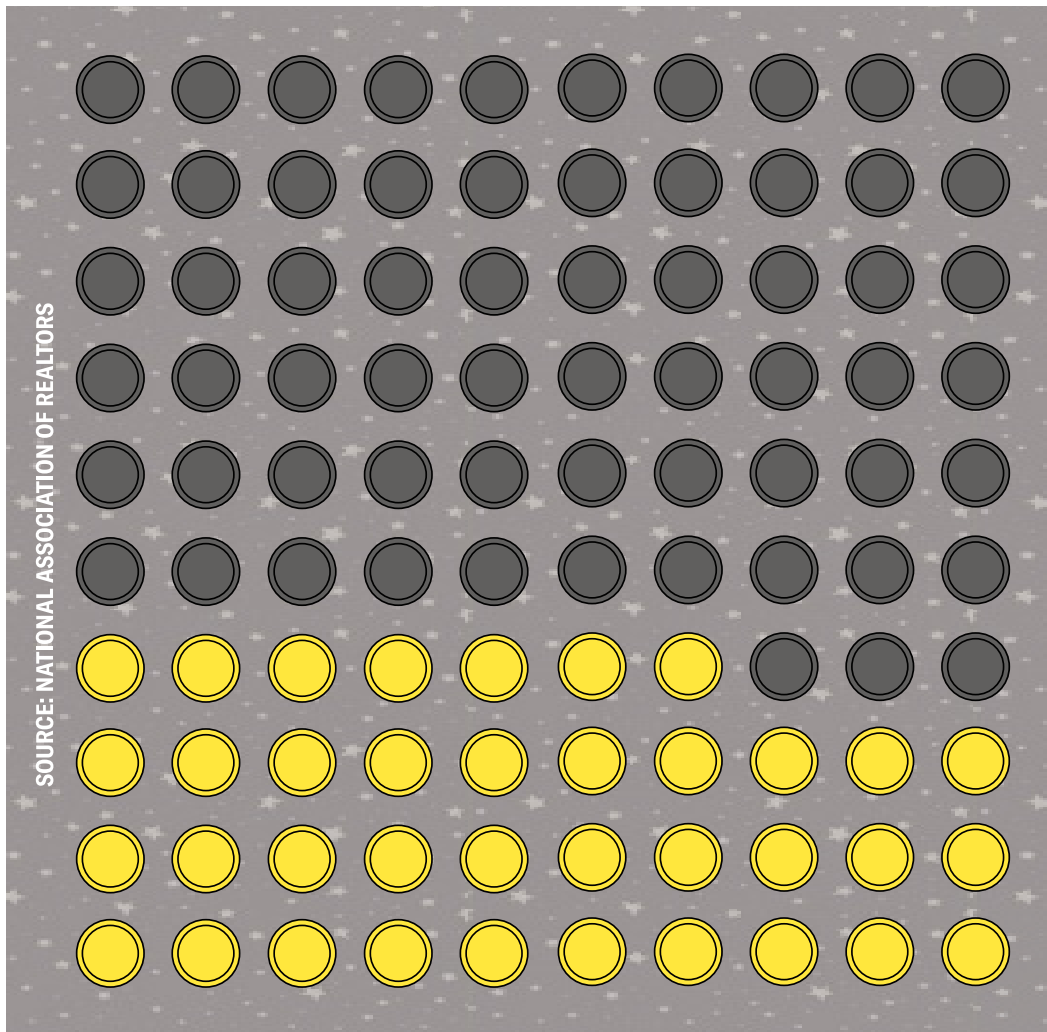
WHO GETS EVICTED?

People of all ages, races, and ethnicities experience eviction.

Any family living on the edge may need only one thing to go wrong for rent to lapse. However, eviction is more common for African American single mothers than any other group. In general, families with children can have trouble finding new places to live, as landlords are wary of renting to them. Other heavily impacted groups include poor women of color, poor single mothers of all races, and domestic violence victims. The cycle of being evicted, then struggling to find new housing, and ending up in worse housing in more dangerous neighborhoods than before, can bring families without a safety net into poverty.

Data visualizations from the 2018 exhibition *Evicted* at the National Building Museum.

IN 2016, 37% OF HOMES WERE SOLD TO BUYERS WHO DID NOT OCCUPY THE PROPERTY



LANDLORDS

In 2016, 37% of homes were sold to buyers who did not occupy the property. Landlords are playing a new significant roles in the housing market and may no longer have the personal relationship many renters once had with their landlords. Landlords in poor neighborhoods can often make more money than they could in more upscale markets. Sometimes they will raise rents in anticipation of incurring losses. They may also save by foregoing upkeep and maintenance. “Slumlord” is a derogatory term used to describe a landlord who does not provide basic repairs and services to an apartment, while still demanding rent payment. These landlords know their tenants have few options and many not complain about housing quality for fear of risking eviction.

Landlords need the rent in order to pay the mortgage. If tenants fall behind, finding solutions—property maintenance, mediation, extra time—that do not involve court evictions may help.

Data visualizations from the 2018 exhibition *Evicted* at the National Building Museum.



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The National Building Museum is located in a historic landmark structure at 401 F Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001.

Acknowledgements

The **National Building Museum** inspires curiosity about the world we design and build. We believe that understanding the history and impact of architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, construction, and design is important for all ages. Through exhibitions and educational programs, we show how the built world has power to shape our lives, communities, and futures.

The **Interactivity Foundation** is a nonpartisan nonprofit devoted to the practice of small group collaborative discussions to explore diverse perspectives and to generate alternative possibilities for complex topics. The Foundation aims to strengthen democracy by enhancing the practice of public discourse. Visit www.interactivityfoundation.org to learn more.

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