

I'm Ezra Klein, this is the Ezra Klein Show.
Books about poverty tend to be books about the poor.
Matthew Desmond writes that in his new book about poverty,
poverty by America.
But poverty by America is supposed
to be something a bit different.
It's a book about everyone who benefits from the poor,
their existence, their exploitation,
all the people more comfortable with the perpetuation
of poverty than with what would be demanded of them
for its abolition.
So this is a book, in other words, not so much about the poor
as it is about the rest of us.
Desmond is a sociologist of Princeton.
He's author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Evicted.
And Evicted, which was a book about housing markets,
particularly for the poor, it was a smash hit.
He's beloved by Desmond's fellow social scientists.
His new book has been a lot more controversial,
in part due to disagreements about the way
he reads the poverty data.
And so we talk about that.
There's a good wonky bit here about how to measure poverty.
But I also want to keep people focused
on the big picture here.
America has a lot of poverty.
It could, if it chose, have much, much less poverty.
So the question of why that choice isn't made year after year,
that is really a question worth asking.
As always, my email is reclinedshow at nytimes.com.
Matt Desmond, welcome to the show.
Oh, it's great to be here.
So I want to begin with you,
because something you say in the book,
which I didn't realize from past work,
is that you come out the subject
from really your own perspective.
Tell me a bit about your own history with poverty
and how it led you to this inquiry.
I grew up in a little railroad town in Arizona,
Northern Arizona, Winslow, which is an Eagle song.
And my dad was a pastor and we never had a lot of money.
Things were tight.
Our gas got turned off from time to time.

And then we lost our home when I was in college.
And I think that experience worked its way inside of me,
made me see how poverty diminishes and stresses a family.
And then I kind of took that to Milwaukee for my last book
and followed families getting evicted
and saw a level of poverty
that I've just never seen before or experienced.
I saw grandma's living out heat in the winter,
just piling under blankets.
I saw kids getting an evicted on a routine basis.
And I kind of saw a hard bottom layer of deprivation
that was just shocking and disturbing.
You mentioned losing your family's home
when you were in college.
And that brings up the book
that other people may know you for earlier, evicted.
But for people who aren't as familiar
with that dimension of your work,
tell me a bit about that book,
the nature of the research that led to it
and how in a large scale way it changed your thinking
on the structure of American poverty.
So for evicted, I moved into a mobile home park
on the south side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
And I lived there for about four or five months.
And then I moved into a rooming house
on the north side of the city.
It's the inner city of Milwaukee.
And I lived there for about 10 months.
And from those two neighborhoods,
followed families getting evicted
and went everywhere at those families,
followed them to eviction court
and to shelters, abandoned homes,
watched their kids slept on their floor,
ate from their table, went to a bunch of funerals,
went to a birth.
But I also recognize that if I wanted to understand
how the low income housing market worked,
I needed to get close to landlords too.
So I got just as close to landlords doing the evicting
as I did with tenants getting evicted.
And I helped them pass out eviction notices
and fix up their properties.

And I learned a bit more about what makes landlords tick
and what ticks them off.
And evicted is the result of that work.
And it's a way of saying,
look, if we're gonna understand any quality in America today,
we have to understand the human cost of the housing crisis.
And for me, seeing that toll on people,
seeing folks lose not only their homes,
but their neighborhoods, kids losing their schools,
families often lose all their stuff,
which is piled on the street by movers
or taken by neighbors.
It takes so much time and money to build up at a home
and eviction could just delete all that.
Eviction comes with a mark, a blemish.
It's a court order.
And that can prevent you from moving into a good neighborhood
and a good home because many landlords
see that blemish and say, no,
so we pushed those families into bad neighborhoods
and we pushed those families
into really degrading housing situations.
And on and on it goes.
And I think that my conclusion was that,
eviction isn't just a condition of poverty,
it's a cause of poverty, it's making things worse.
You can be easy, and I'm certainly guilty of this
at times to try to apprehend questions like eviction,
like poverty, by reading some big policy reports,
by looking at macro data,
by trying to follow the lines on the chart.
Do you do a bunch of that in this book
and you've done a bunch of that in your work?
And there is a dimension of work
that is quite quantitative.
But what do you think you see differently
when you actually immerse yourself in it?
What looks different from the ground
than from the appendix table?
I think that it means that I'm accountable to folks
that are struggling in a different way.
In the university, there's this old line
that you have to have some distance and some objectivity
to study a problem with rigor and truthfulness.

And distance is not the problem of the university.
We have plenty of distance.
And I think when you get proximate
to families that are enduring a level hardship
that so many of us can't even imagine,
it really washes over you.
It makes you accountable to the problem in a different way.
I think we can write about these issues
with conviction and rigor and truth
and about people who we love and care about deeply.
So in this new book, I write about my friends.
And I call them my friends.
I don't call them my research subjects because they're not.
They're people that I've done a lot of life with.
And I think that experience
not only is incredibly educational,
I learned so much from just being on the ground
with folks that are struggling,
but it's also this amazing reminder
how beautifully and elegantly and gracefully
people refuse to be reduced to their hardships,
how poverty has not stolen folks' humanity.
Tell me a bit about the scale
of the poverty problem in America today.
How would you describe it?
There's so much poverty in this rich land.
If you just look at the official metric of poverty,
there's 38 million of us that can't afford basic necessities,
which means if folks below the official poverty line
formed their own country,
that country would be bigger than Australia.
It would be bigger than Venezuela.
But the poverty line is very low.
And there's plenty of economic hardship
above the poverty line.
One in three people in America live in a home,
which is bringing in \$55,000 or less, one in three of us.
Now, many of those aren't officially counted among the poor,
but what else do you call trying to get by
on 55K or less and raising two kids in Portland or Miami?
But poverty is not just a line, right?
It's not just an income level.
Poverty is often pain and sickness.
It's living in degraded housing.

It's the fear of eviction.
It is eviction and the homelessness.
It's getting roughed up by the police sometimes.
It's schools that are just bursting at the seams.
It's neighborhoods where everyone around you
is also struggling.
It's death, death come early, death come often.
So for me, poverty isn't a line.
It's this tight knot of agonies and humiliations
and social problems.
And this is experienced by millions of us
in the richest country in the history of the world.
How's it changed over time?
So it depends what metric you use.
If you look at the official poverty line,
it hasn't changed a lot.
1973, 50 years ago, it was 11% poverty.
In 2018, 12%, not a lot of change.
But the official poverty measures is flawed.
It doesn't account for a lot of regional variation
in housing cost.
It doesn't count certain kind of government programs
like food stamps, housing assistance.
So in 2011, the census launched a new poverty measure,
the supplemental poverty measure.
And researchers at Columbia figured out a way
to take that new poverty line and stretch it out over time.
And when you do that, you kind of come to the same conclusion.
The supplemental poverty line, historically,
in 1973 was 15.1%.
In 2013, 40 years later, it was 15.5%.
In 2018, it was 13%, so it had dipped down a little bit.
That's just not a lot of progress.
In COVID, the supplemental poverty measure plunged,
plunged to historic lows because of this bold relief
that was issued by the federal government,
things like the child tax credit
and emergency rental assistance.
But over the long view, a lot of measures
are showing poverty being incredibly stubborn and stagnant.
One thing about the supplemental poverty line,
which I've seen really frustrating,
a lot of people work on the poverty issue
and I think are aligned with you on solutions,

is that where you start those dials really ends up mattering.
So you look at 1967, you see poverty falling
from 25% then to about 8.4% in 2020.
It's all that stimulus spending.
I think this matters because there's real question
as to whether or not these government programs are effective.
You'll hear people on the right say constantly,
the great society did nothing.
You spend more money on poor people,
you get more poor people.
And the supplemental measure and some other measures
that measure consumption do seem to show
pretty sharp and significant drops over time.
So defend for me a little bit more of this idea
that there's not been real progress,
which is different than not enough progress.
Yeah, this is hard.
And I think that we should all confront the problem
of counting poor families with a lot of humility,
a lot of curiosity.
So one way to think about this is to say,
okay, if poverty has declined,
have other hardship measures also declined?
If we're seeing falling rates of poverty,
we should see falling rates of eviction.
We should see debt going down.
We should see homelessness going down.
But in recent years, we haven't seen that
since 2000, eviction filings have increased by about 22%.
Since 2000, the share of families who visit food pantries
have increased by almost 19%.
The number of homeless public school kids in America
has increased by over 74% since the Great Recession.
Since the late 1990s,
the number of families reporting no cash income
but drawing on food stamps has more than quadrupled.
These are really troubling signs on the horizon.
And it suggests that measures that are showing a decline
in poverty might be out of touch
with the lived experience of hardship in America today.
We can also like dig into those measures if you want to
and kind of look under the hood and say,
well, how can they show a decline and this other one doesn't?
Like what's going on?

I'm happy to go there if you want to.
Well, a little bit,
because one thing I do want to check in on there is
you can have problems that correlate,
but don't cause each other
or don't tell you as much as you want to know about each other.
And so this is a great book.
Homelessness is a housing problem.
And one of the points they make is that
you have a bunch of urban areas with very high rates of poverty
with very, very low rates of homelessness.
So Detroit, Philadelphia,
you have places with quite low poverty rates
or at least relatively so.
So Santa Clara County, San Francisco,
and they have really quite high rates of homelessness.
So that suggests to me
that when you're looking at homelessness,
which as you say has been quite on the rise recently,
you're dealing with a housing supply problem
and a housing prices problem
that might be distinct from a lot of the poverty problem.
The point is often made here in San Francisco
where I currently live that, you know, West Virginia,
it has very high poverty.
It has very high rates of the things people blame
for homelessness here,
like drug addiction and mental illness,
but it doesn't have the homelessness problem we do.
So rolling those all up into one set of social maladies
can obscure more than it's really revealing.
Yeah, I think there's something to that,
but it's not just homelessness, right?
That's going up.
Debt has gone up, bad debt.
Just the number of families reporting
that they are having a hard time
paying their mortgage or their rent
has grown amazingly enormously since 2000.
So I think there's a lot of things on the rise
and besides homelessness,
that do suggest that there is quite a lot of hardship
as experienced on the ground level.
And I hear you on the political ramifications of this debate.

You know, there's this text and the subtext, right?
And a lot of folks say, well, look,
if you don't believe that poverty has declined,
aren't you also saying that government spending doesn't work?
Because government spending on anti-poverty programs
has actually increased over the last 40 years.
So what's going on?
And I think that it's a complicated story,
but it's one we have to embrace.
There's a paradox here that's incredibly important.
On the political liability side,
there's liability on both sides, right?
So Reagan famously said, you know,
we fought the war on poverty and poverty won.
There's nothing we can do to address poverty in America.
And then you fast forward to the Trump administration.
And in 2018, the Trump Council for Economic Advisers
issued this report, enthusiastically embracing
work requirements for some welfare programs,
based on this claim that poverty has gone down so much,
we can stop, you know, fighting it.
So it's kind of like, Reagan's like,
we fought the war on poverty, poverty won.
And Trump was like, we fought the war on poverty and we won,
but they both had the same conclusion.
So I think there's political landmines
on both sides of the thing.
I think what's happening is that we're spending more
to stay in the same place,
because some of the fundamentals of American society,
the job market and the housing market
are not doing their job, basically,
to help reduce poverty in this country.
I want to hold on that for a second,
because I think that's very profound.
You talk a lot in the book,
and we're going to talk broadly
about this question of exploitation.
And one thing reading the book got me thinking about
is to take the housing market as one example,
the connection between exploitation and broken markets.
Now, I don't want to say that you can only exploit people
in a high housing market, because clearly that's not true.
But the more you shift power in a market to say landlords,

because maybe you have way too few housing units,
the more they can discriminate,
the more room they have to push really,
really high prices on people.
And so there's this kind of consistent problem,
I think, for progressives,
where we'll put a lot of money into something,
maybe it'll be housing or healthcare or whatever,
but we won't open up supply of that thing.
In some cases, we'll even constrict supply of that thing.
And like we do in San Francisco with housing.
And then when you do that,
you can give people all the money you want.
You can give people all the sectioned vouchers
in San Francisco you want.
You're not going to house all that many people,
because there aren't enough houses.
And so there is this way, I think,
in which on the one hand, I'm very big on the view
that you can solve poverty with money.
You could choose not to have poor people
by simply doing something like a negative income tax
that gave people the amount of money
they needed to be over the line.
But if you don't open up the markets of things they need,
then that money's just gonna get pocketed
by people who can charge them more and more
for goods they can afford, but can't get access.
That's absolutely the case.
And I think that is a real recipe for spending more
to stay in the same place.
And if you look at federal housing assistance,
look at the budget from 2001 to 2019,
federal housing assistance increased by 16% in real terms.
So like a deeper investment, a bigger investment.
So does that mean that the number of families served
by that program increased by that amount?
No, it doesn't.
In fact, it hasn't increased at all over that time.
That number served by federal housing assistance
has hovered around 4.5 million families,
4.5 million in 2001, 4.5 million in 2019.
So why, what's going on?
And it's for the reason you suggest,

because some of our biggest affordable housing programs are relationships with markets, right?
We're gonna give you a housing voucher,
you're gonna live on the private market
and we're gonna reduce your rent
or we're gonna subsidize private development.
And adjusting for inflation,
median rent is increased by 15% over that same time period.
So this is one way we can kind of like make deeper investments
and kind of stay in the same place.
It's kind of like if you're like a doctor
and your patient is stable
and you can kind of dose that patient a little bit
and bring them to health and let them leave.
But if that patient starts to decline,
you have to dose more and more and more
just to get them into this stable place.
And I think that's a story
of what's happened to poverty in the last 50 years
in our country.
This gets to something too that I think is kind of poisonous
in the way we talk about poverty policy,
which is that not all government programs are equal,
they're not the same, they don't work even similarly.
And while we were preparing for this interview with you,
my team talked to Luke Schaefer,
who's a great poverty scholar who you draw on
in some of your own work.
And he made this point that,
so we were talking earlier about how it really matters
what you're looking at to see if we've made progress
on poverty and one remarkable thing
is we made a lot of progress on poverty during the pandemic,
a point you make in your book as well.
And Schaefer's point was that you should think about
the pre-COVID welfare state,
the sort of welfare state we erected over the 25 years before
and then what we did in government programs in 2020 and 2021
as truly distinct areas of policymaking,
that it's not just all government programs more or less.
And in that break, we saw something pretty important
about what works and what doesn't.
So I'm curious, because you look at the story too,
how you tell the story of what was different

in what we did during COVID and why it worked
versus what we've done before
to see less profound effects.
I think the dose was different, the dose was different
and the level of investment was so much deeper during COVID.
The expanded child tax credit was a much deeper investment.
And then in my world and housing affordability land,
you know, the rental housing assistance
that came after the eviction moratorium,
that was like the deepest investment
the federal government has made
in the lives of renting families
since the invention of public housing, basically.
The government spent \$46 billion,
which is basically a doubling of HUD's budget.
It kept evictions lowest that they've ever been on record,
months and months and months and months
after the eviction moratorium lifted.
There's this study by Thomas Blanchett,
Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zuckman.
And they estimate that after the great recession in 2008,
families in the bottom half of the income distribution
had to wait 10 years, 10 years,
for their incomes to return to pre-recession levels.
And after this recession,
those families waited just a year and a half.
It was just night and day difference
between these two hard moments.
One thing we did too,
and the child tax credit I think was a good example of this,
was we made these programs easy
at times even automatic to get.
And something you talk about in the book
is there's this widespread narrative
of government dependency,
that the poor are all lining up
at the local welfare office for a handout.
And you say, I wish people weren't dependent
on these programs than they are,
because take-up rates are incredibly low.
I think this is a pretty poorly known fact
about a lot of this policy work.
So could you talk a bit about what some of the numbers are
in terms of program usage,

among people who in theory would benefit from it
and should get it, and why you think that is?
So in the pandemic, we heard so much
about welfare dependency.
We heard this story over and over again,
that people were staying home
because we were paying them to stay home.
But the evidence really didn't bear that out.
When states got rid of some of the extra benefits,
like the extra unemployment insurance,
and other states didn't,
the states that removed the benefits
didn't suddenly see their job members jump up.
It was basically a tie between the states
that kept the benefits and the states that got rid of them.
And if you look in the data,
the much bigger problem is welfare avoidance.
The fact that there's families across the country
that are leaving like real serious money on the table
with respect to aid that they do not take advantage of.
And so one in five of poorly paid workers
who qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit,
this kind of one year bump
that lifts millions of folks out of poverty every year.
One in five do not take it.
They leave \$17 billion on the table every year.
Most elderly Americans who qualify for food stamps
do not sign up for them.
And on and on it goes.
And if you add up the money left on the table
in those kind of programs and folks that pass on
government health insurance and unemployment insurance
and supplemental security income, for example,
you realize every year over 140 billion,
like billion with a B,
dollars is left on the table by families
not getting connected to programs that they need and deserve.
So why? What's going on?
So we used to think it was stigma
that folks were too proud to apply for some of these programs.
And there is something to that.
If anyone has ever spent a day in a welfare office
where you've got to spend like half a day
for a 10 minute appointment,

there is a degradation ritual
that still is very much alive and well today.
But there's a lot of evidence that suggests stigma
isn't really the main story.
The take-up rates for food stamps, for example,
are very widely across state lines.
Almost everyone in Oregon
who qualifies for food stamps receives them,
but in California it's only about 63%.
So it's not that food stamps are more stigmatized
in California than Oregon,
something else is going on.
And the thing that's going on
is we've made these programs difficult to apply for.
We've made it painful.
We kick people off the rolls every year
if they don't apply right.
So that's the thing that's really driving it.
We haven't put enough effort
into making these programs accessible
and easy to apply for.
And to me, this is outrageous,
because if we know how to do one thing in America,
it's to market things to people
and to get things to those people.
And I just wish we dedicated as much time and effort
that we do getting us to buy potato chips and car tires
than we do getting folks connected
to these important resources.
But I think there's an important causal question there.
So my wife, Annie Lowry is a writer at the Atlantic
and she does a lot of coverage of poverty and social policy.
And she's done a lot of work
particularly on what she calls the time tax,
which is something we're describing here,
this way in which we make it incredibly hard
to sign up for things, to qualify for things,
to figure out what you're actually owed or eligible for.
But one of the big questions is, is that an accident?
Did we simply forget how to market things
as you're suggesting?
We know how to get you to buy toothpaste.
In theory, we should be able to get you to take free money.
Or is this a policy choice, right?

And there are different versions
of it potentially being a policy choice.
One version is we use complexity
because we don't want people to have things
either because we don't think they deserve them
or we think they should be humiliated in order to get them
or we think that it'll be better to keep the budget low
by keeping them from it.
Or sometimes you see, I think in blue states,
there's worries about fraud and defensibility.
So you put a lot of energy into fraud testing
and means testing because you're worried
about getting attacked on the right.
But however you slice that,
there's this I think pretty profound question is
about whether or not this is a policy mistake
or in the terms of the people who created it this way,
a policy success, it's doing exactly
what it is intended to do.
I think it's hard not to see this as intentional,
as by design.
And when you look at what happens to other welfare programs
where states have a lot of leeway
about how they spend their money,
they spend it in a lot of ways
that don't have much to do with helping poor folks, right?
So if you look at welfare spending,
the spending on TANF, we call it
the temporary assistance to needy families, cash welfare.
So states get that money through block grant,
which is just a wonky way of saying,
hey, states, here's some money, spend it as you wish.
And man, states have developed a lot of creative ways
to get that money out.
Maine spends welfare dollars on Christian summer camps.
There are states that spend it on abstinence only,
education, marriage counseling,
for every dollar budgeted in cash welfare,
only 22 cents ends up in the pockets of a family.
I think that's by design.
That's a very intentional move.
Some states are just not spending the money at all.
Tennessee, last time I checked,
was sitting on over \$700 million

in unspent cash welfare funds.
Hawaii was sitting on so much
that they could give every poor kid in their state \$10,000.
So you're right, it's not a red or a blue state issue,
but it is evidence of just our lack of moral urgency
and commitment to connecting families
with a that eases their hunger and gives them some breath.
There's also a particular way that complexity
and long lines and time and hoops to jump through
interact with poverty in a very specific way.
Can you talk about what gets called the bandwidth tax?
So the bandwidth tax is an idea
that comes from a book called Scare City,
which is by Sindal Melanathon and Eldar Shafir.
It's a wonderful book, highly recommend it.
And they do all these experiments,
compile all this behavioral, economic,
and social psychological evidence,
showing how poverty taxes your mind.
And the bandwidth tax is an idea
that a lot of us have experienced ourselves.
So if we've ever been incredibly late for a meeting
and are rushing through traffic or we've had an emergency,
our kid ends up in a hospital
and that's the only thing we can think about.
What they suggest is this mirrors poverty.
This is what poverty is like.
When you are just thinking,
how am I gonna pay the light bill?
I just lost my job.
I have the eviction notice.
That just captures your mind,
captures your intelligence really.
And that bandwidth tax can often result in bad decisions
that we wouldn't have made
if we had a bit more space and slack in our lives.
I had Sindal Melanathon on the show back when I was at Vox.
And first, I really think this is such an under reported on issue.
I mean, the way in which the thing you need to get out
of poverty is time and intentionality
and a kind of genius.
It's much harder to move up than to simply stay stable.
And the way in which poverty saps exactly that from you.
But there's a statistic here that you use too

that always sticks in my mind,
which is that the effect of being poor on cognitive testing
is roughly the same as going without a night of sleep.
That the kind of distraction and exhaustion of it,
and we can measure this,
is roughly the same as going without a night of sleep.
Something I noticed in myself is that the more tired I am,
the more likely I am to make mistakes that are small
and mistakes that can be quite big.
I was tired not too long ago and I bashed up a rental car.
It was not great.
And if I was in worse shape,
like the cost of that would have been a huge, huge, huge setback for me.
You tell a story in the book that I think goes pretty far
in getting at this connection between poverty and exhaustion.
And I'd like to tell it,
but also talk a little bit about that more fundamental link.
Yeah, I think you're talking about Julio Pérez,
who was a gentleman I met a few years ago in the Bay Area.
And he was here on a work visa from Guatemala.
And he was working two jobs full-time.
He would work the midnight shift, the night shift at McDonald's
from, I think it was 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.
And then he'd have a couple hours to shower and rest.
And then he would go to a temp agency called Aerotech
and go anywhere they sent him from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.
And then he would get home, sleep as much as he could
and then back to McDonald's.
Each job paid minimum wage.
And he just didn't have life.
He was either working or sleeping.
He told me, I feel like a zombie.
And one day his younger brother, who was eight at the time,
went to Julio and was like,
how much for an hour of your time?
I want to buy an hour of your time so you can play with me.
And when he heard his brother say that, he just wept.
And not long after that, he collapsed from exhaustion
in the grocery aisle of a supermarket.
He was 24 years old.
And I think that looking really hard at a life like Julio's
requires looking just at the sheer brutality
of the labor market for so many Americans today.
And how he basically had to be superhuman

just to scrape by in the Bay Area.

And I think that we should want work to be rewarded in this country, but we shouldn't have to be superhuman to avoid poverty, especially in a country with this much abundance.

This opens into the broader argument your book is making, I think, which is that if you take the position that poverty is a choice that we could with roughly, you calculate \$177 billion a year end it.

And there are a lot of places you could find that money.

You got to also ask, then, why don't we?

And given that we don't, who do we really want to be?

And I think that's a good question.

And I think that's a good question.

Why don't we?

And given that we don't, who benefits?

Who benefits from poverty?

And so maybe take the example of Julio.

I mean, somebody is benefiting from that work.

Somebody is doing well off of that.

Whom?

So the way we like to answer this question is usually to point to the guy that's just a little richer than we are, like the guy just above us.

But I think that the honest answer is a lot of us, a lot of us are benefiting from poverty in America.

Some lives are made small, like Julio's, so that others may grow.

Many of us consume the cheap goods and services the working poor produce.

Many of us are invested in the stock market, indirectly, directly, you know, don't we benefit?

When we see our savings go up and up, even if those gains are often at the expense of someone like Julio.

Many of us like lavish tax breaks that we get, you know, tax breaks like the mortgage interest deduction, 529 savings, employment, health insurance savings, wealth transfer savings, and we protect those investments. The country does so much more to subsidize affluence than to alleviate poverty.

We starve anti-poverty spending

because we clutch on to those benefits.

And then many of us continue to be segregationists.

Now we live in segregated communities,
we build walls around our communities
in the form of laws, zoning restrictions,
and we hoard affluence behind those walls.
And our concentration of affluence has a side effect.
You know, it concentrates poverty outside of our walls.
So I think that for me,
there's so much poverty in America,
not in spite of our wealth, but because of it.
You know, many of us are connected to the problem,
which means we're connected to the solution.
I was thinking about how this plays out,
and it got me thinking about a piece I wrote back in 2021
called What the Rich Don't Want to Admit About the Poor.
And I think it gets at something here
about how this might work beyond a kind of mustache twirling.
Like, I love poverty and want people to suffer,
which is, that was a moment where you had in the pandemic,
and for reasons both policy-oriented and epidemiological,
this very weird labor market.
You had a huge amount of government support from people.
You had a lot of people not wanting to go to work
either because their work was dangerous
or because with enhanced unemployment benefits,
it was a little bit more possible not to do a job
that they hated or didn't pay them very well.
And one thing you saw right then was
putting aside how people feel about poverty
or how they feel abstractly about wages,
that when you begin to see the economic effects
of a sharp increase on worker power
at the lower end of the scale,
there's a lot of sensitivity to those problems.
So the news filled up with reports of businesses
and the small business owners saying,
people are just lazy, they won't come take my jobs.
Nobody will take a job for \$10, \$12 an hour anymore.
You get a lot of worry about inflation,
and of course inflation can be a real problem,
but we're very sensitive to it.
I remember reading a lot about how
Ubers were too expensive now
and Lifts were too expensive now.
And so it's not even that you have to ever think about

poverty to think about it,
it's that when costs start going up,
labor costs or good costs or service costs
for people of more means, we get really upset.
And then suddenly programs that might be building shut off.
I mean, we talked about the child tax credit,
which was expanded during the pandemic,
but it's only expanded for roughly a year.
And in part, I think due to inflation
and due to a bunch of these other concerns,
there was never political will to extend it.
And so this very powerful anti-poverty program died.
And I don't think people would say it died
because we love poverty, but there was a sense
it was part of the political milieu at that point,
but some is going wrong in the labor market
and you didn't wanna be adding a bunch more government support
to it at a time when prices were rising
and people weren't taking jobs.
And so there's this way in which you never have to talk
about poverty to end up talking about the conditions
that keep people under its boot.
The loss of the child tax credit,
the loss of emergency rental assistance,
this is so sad to me, it's so outrageous.
Congress should have been terrified
to take those programs away,
but there wasn't an outcry.
There wasn't a strong rally saying,
this is the new normal that we want.
Let's keep this, this is the America that I want.
And it was so crest-falling and you're right.
Part of the reason was because we fell
into these well-worn trails about how we talk
about these things in abstract ways
that really crush down on poor kids,
poor moms and dads today.
If we just look at the inflation rhetoric,
did we overheat the economy?
Is that the lesson from COVID?
Okay, we reduce poverty,
but is this the side effect that we have to learn from?
And so if you look at the data,
wages don't seem to be the thing driving inflation.

What seems to be the thing driving inflation is corporate Marvel cups, corporate profits. A recent study out of the Kansas City Fed estimated that profit markups account for more than half of the inflation that took place in 2021. And that kind of price gouging is just not normal, actually. You know, if you look at the 40 years before COVID, labor costs were really the things that were driving price increases. Labor costs accounted for about 60% of price increases and corporate profits about 11%. But then since 2020, that trend reversed itself where labor costs now account for only 8% of the inflationary pressure and corporate profits are accounting for about 54%. So for me, you know, the lesson isn't, okay, the next time around, let's not do so much to help the American people or, you know, we can't make these deep investments without driving inflation. And the lesson for me is certainly not to clamp down on inflation. We have to ask middle and working class and poor families to take the hard medicine, you know? I think the lesson is that if we wanna get a handle on this problem, we have to get a handle on exploitation. So I like calls for like increasing taxes on excess corporate profits. The government can even take a page out of its playbook from the 1940s and consider price controls, you know? They have other tools in their toolbox, but the only thing we seem to be talking about is inflationary rates. So I wanna note that there's definitely a lot of disagreement on whether or not corporate profits are to blame for inflation. And without trying to parse it here, one thing that I think is kind of obviously true is that, let's say you just believe, and I think this is broadly believed at this point, that inflation is a demand problem, right? Most of the supply side kinks have come out of the economy and at this point you have demand issues. You can address demand issues in a lot of different ways.

I mean, something I've talked about before
is you could put down what's called
a progressive consumption tax.
It isn't in any way complex to make it costly
for richer people to spend more.
That would be a tax increase, but so in a very direct way
is removing the child tax credit,
a huge tax increase effectively on the poor
and the working class and the middle class.
And it's always interesting to me
that things like that, they never even get suggested.
I mean, economists are worried,
and I think they are worried for legitimate reasons
that you get a lot of weird effects
from things like price controls or corporate profit taxes.
But okay, if you wanna do something broad-based,
we know how to do progressive taxation.
You can slow spending among people who have more money
as opposed to slowing it among people who have less money.
But again and again and again,
the things we choose to do
are more among the people who have less money
and hit them hardest
as opposed to trying to concentrate the pain more.
One of the things I was saying is telling
is that there's always this question
of what kind of problem a society will and will not live with.
What kinds of problems are you willing to allow to persist?
And something I definitely see,
and I think it's reasonable to be worried about inflation,
but something I definitely see is
we are not willing to have high prices.
We are willing to have high poverty.
And I don't think those two things are a direct trade-off,
but there is just the alarm with which people
not wanting to take low-wage, crappy jobs treated
versus how accustomed the system is to poverty
and is willing to live with it year after year,
including child poverty.
It's really telling.
I mean, the rubber hits a road
on what you worry about when it happens
or when it's ongoing.
And we don't like prices racing for everybody.

We're much more willing to take deprivation among some.
That's right.
And there's a part of me that feels,
is this just who we are?
Are we stuck with us?
And there's a part of me that feels
there is a shift going on in the American public
where many of us don't want this deal anymore.
The recent polling on why poverty exists in America
I think is very encouraging.
It suggests that most Democrats and most Republicans
now see poverty as a result of a structural problem,
not a personal moral failing.
And it's like that old Gromsky line
where the old is dying, but the new hasn't been born yet.
And I think that one of the costs we pay though
for all this poverty in our midst is emotional.
It feels icky.
All this poverty and this profiting from other folks' pain
diminishes all of us.
And I do sense that we as a country
want to move to a different place.
But part of that work just means recognizing
how deeply implicated we are in this problem
and stop kicking the can down the road.
And saying, well, poverty is the result of structural forces
that no one is responsible for.
It's Congress's fault.
It's the super richest fault.
Or even, cruelly, it's the poorest fault.
But then you get to this question of why the child tax
credit wasn't sustained.
So you talk to the Biden administration about this.
And now they realize they misjudged.
But what they thought would happen
is if you put this giant tax credit that, by the way,
was a pretty universalist program.
Didn't go to everybody.
But it went to a lot of people.
I mean, you call in the book for programs
that are designed to yoke people together as opposed
to increasing resentment between classes.
And they did design it that way.
And they thought, no way is Congress

going to let this kind of broad-based credit expire,
because people are going to be too pissed.
It would be a disaster in the midterms if they did that.
And they did.
And things we saw were, one, the child tax credit
wasn't that popular.
I mean, when you pulled it, it was not
one of the most popular parts of their agenda.
And two, there weren't people out in the streets on it.
There wasn't an effect of mobilization on it.
So not even from the people who needed it the most.
Why?
What needs to be learned from that?
What do you make of it?
There are two lessons, I think.
First is the kind of spiritual poverty
among progressives, I think.
I quote the theologian Walter Bergman in my book.
And he says, liberals are really fluent in the language
of critique and bumbling in the language of repair
or celebration.
When I read that, I thought, man, he's onto something there.
I think that there is kind of a chic nihilism
or a criticality that many progressives or liberals,
just in general, are much more comfortable with
than saying, you know, this thing, this is working.
This is something we should celebrate.
This is something that we should be out on the streets for,
you know, with the emergency rental assistance.
You remember how frustrating it was
when that program was getting off the ground, right?
And there were all these distribution channels
that had to be created from scratch.
And when they were going on,
when that program was having trouble,
everyone was talking about it.
Everyone was tweeting about it.
Major news stories were writing about it and for good reason.
But once that program started working
and once eviction rates started plummeting,
we were quiet.
We were pretty quiet.
And I think that there is something
that we need to be reflexive about just in general

on the progressive side of America about that.
And the second take home I feel
is the poverty movement has to grow.
There is an active, nimble, exciting,
anti-poverty movement that's on the ground today.
You can find it in labor movement,
the new housing movement, poor people's campaign.
But that tent has to get a lot bigger
for it to have enough political power
to say to Congress, no, no, no,
you are not gonna take away this benefit
that is completely transformative
to so many kids around the country.
But I wanna push you on this
because why wasn't it enough then?
Your book is very much about exploitation
and it's very much about the ways
in which the rich take advantage of the poor,
people lack power, they lack power to do anything.
But this was a case where there weren't huge protests.
There was more that could have been done.
And it was, I know people who worked on
trying to mobilize here and it wasn't that easy.
The great longstanding conservative fear
about democracy, is it the obvious thing that will happen?
Is it the have-nots who are numerous
will unite against the haves,
which depending on how you define are smaller, right?
You can see this in a modern form
even in Mitt Romney's 47% comments.
But it goes all the way back, right?
It's all there with the founders, right?
The people are gonna band together
and vote to give themselves what everybody else has.
And it doesn't happen anywhere near the degree
to which clean theory I think would predict.
In fact, oftentimes the opposite happens.
So why?
Like what do the people who fear democracy's tendency
to devolve into populism,
what do they miss about what makes
that kind of populism so difficult to sustain?
That's a deep question.
I think one challenge that we have in America

has to do with how stigmatized poverty is.
You know, there's no flag for poor rights.
There's no identity politics really around ending poverty.
There's no button, there's no sticker,
there's no sign you can put in your lawn.
And the stigmatization of poverty
really forces movements often to organize around families,
around tenants, around workers,
but not around ending poverty.
That poses a real political vulnerability
where we haven't developed the language yet
in this country around ending poverty,
including from the Democratic Party,
who are much more comfortable in the language of
the middle class than in the language
of really addressing the problem of poverty.
But as Michael Tubbs, the former mayor of Stockton,
once put it to me, like you can't solve a problem
that we don't name.
And I just don't think we're naming this problem
as much and owning it and embracing it as a country
to give it the political power it needs and deserves.
So one of the calls in the book is for all of us,
no matter our station in life,
to become poverty abolitionists,
to commit ourselves to ending poverty
in this country once and for all.
How do you think about the relationship here
between work and poverty?
You mentioned a minute ago,
the Democratic Party is more comfortable
with the idea of the middle class.
I think that's true.
But when you're talking about poverty,
what they're really comfortable with
is the idea of the working class.
And what they have found,
I mean, the reason they talk like this is it does pull better.
It pulls better to means test programs.
Work requirements are oftentimes pretty popular.
We were talking about poverty data earlier
and one theory some people have
of why you see some measures of deprivation,
like people with no cash income going up,

even as I think some of the stronger poverty measures
do suggest we've made some progress
is because the way we make progress
has been focusing more of our attention
on this more sympathetic working poor.
I remember that Bernie Sanders used to have a banner
that would show up on his campaign website.
This is something like,
nobody should work 40 hours a week
and be poor in this country.
And so then we'll pass policies
that are pretty good if you're working 40 hours a week.
But if you're not and a lot of the poor either can't
or for some reason don't or they're elderly
or they're children, very hard for children
to work 40 hours a week,
you can get into issues with extreme poverty.
They require very different kinds of solutions
we're not that comfortable with.
So how do you think a bit about this question
of our approach to poverty as a spur to work
and our frustration at people
we think should be working who aren't?
So on the one hand, the welfare state in America
has really shifted to being in a welfare state
that does a lot more to support workers
than to support folks that aren't working
for whatever reason.
So the work by Robert Moffat,
an economist at Johns Hopkins,
has shown this really incredible upward shift
where much more money and government spending
is going to families right around the poverty level
and much less is going to families
in this deep poverty situation.
And so I do think that we have designed a welfare state
to supplement and encourage work,
but we haven't done this other thing,
which is to give workers power,
to make sure worker wages are increasing
and to give them a seat at the table.
And this I think is key.
So the way that we've subsidized work in this country
is mainly through a program called

the Earned Income Tax Credit.

It's a benefit for workers that are poorly paid, often families, and it's a big program.

It's about \$61 billion a year.

It helps a lot.

It lists a lot of folks out of poverty, but it doesn't confront the underlying issue.

The fact that so many worker wages today are low and they're falling, and this is really key.

This is an answer to the puzzle of how we could spend more and stay in the same place.

When the great society and the war on poverty were launched in the 1960s, wages were climbing.

Unions were strong, but as unions lost power, wages started to fall, American jobs got a lot worse.

And for non-college educated men, real wages today are lower now than they were 50 years ago.

So I would like to see us address not just the symptoms,

but treat the disease, really go after exploitation in the labor market, which means not only subsidies

like the EITC, which kind of help now, short-term subsidies, but also getting deeper,

making sure workers have power, improving collective bargaining strategies, these kinds of things.

So we can make sure wages increase, a spinning increases, and that's the way to really bring folks out of poverty.

In that section of the book, you bring up one of my favorite policy ideas, particularly for labor, which is sectoral bargaining.

You talk a bit about how we fractured workplaces, you have all these contractors,

it's much harder to organize things like giga workers,

but there are other countries that do bargaining very differently than we do.

So can you talk a bit about the way the economy has changed in ways that disadvantage unions and advantage exploitation or make exploitation easier?

And then you talk about what sectoral bargaining is, where it's used, how it works, and what we've seen from it.

Sure. So it's incredibly hard to organize a workplace these days.

Not only have unions lost their traditional labor base because we moved from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, but unions also shot themselves in the foot when they were at their full power.

Many unions were a white man's refuge,
and they completely blocked black and Latinx workers from their ranks,
kind of self-defeating racism really helped contribute
to the weakening of union power.

And then they were attacked, right?

There was just massive political adversaries against unions
that drove worker power down.

So today, if you want to organize like a Starbucks,
you got to organize that Starbucks, you know?

And it's incredibly hard.

The National Labor Board shows that in about 40% of cases,
corporations actually violate union rules saying,
you know, we'll close up shop if you vote yes,
or firing people that try to organize.

And even if you're successful, right, you organize that Starbucks,
there's thousands of other Starbucks
that you got to go around and organize.

And so the idea of secretory bargaining is it says,
look, let's not go shop to shop.

Let's organize entire economic sectors instead.

And this has been successful in Europe, especially.

And this is how it works.

If enough workers in a certain sector,
like food and hospitality, voted for the measure,
it would activate the secretary of labor.

The secretary of labor would organize
a collective bargaining panel made up of worker representatives
and corporate representatives,
and they would negotiate terms.

And the end result of that would be
a collective bargaining agreement
that would cover the entire sector,
all the food and hospitality workers in the country.

And this is a way to organize all those Starbucks in one go.

I should say this isn't an idea without controversy,
including from some unions.

Some unions think like, wait a minute,
is that gonna wipe out gains that we've made on the ground?

And I think those concerns are valid.

But I do think the larger concern is that most workers
in the private sector want a union and aren't in one.

And so this is one way to kind of speed up that process.

There's also this view looking at places like Germany,
where people feel this kind of policy

leads to more cooperative, less antagonistic relationships
between labor and business,
because when you're dealing with the entire sector,
there's a little bit more alignment of interest.
And it gets to something I think
that you're describing a bit throughout the book,
which is that if you could end some of the ways
that people benefit from poverty,
that they benefit from worker weakness,
you'd have a lot of knock-on benefits.
Some of them are spiritual
about what it's like to be in a place.
I think that some of the very weird reactionary politics
of San Francisco have, in addition to doing
with real problems, we have here have to do
with very rich people, seeing very poor people,
and feeling very uncomfortable about it constantly.
I'm not just talking about homelessness here.
I think that there's a kind of political sickness
that emerges in places this unequal,
because people know something is unstable in it.
But also you have a lot less antagonism.
You have reasons people can cooperate
as opposed to their interest being so misaligned.
You talked about ending poverty
as a way of making people in poverty
and out of poverty free.
Tell me a bit about that idea of freedom
and sort of the related ideas of community that you develop.
Well, for folks below the poverty line,
for folks scraping and cutting coupons and struggling,
the end of poverty is a whole new life.
It's breath, it's freedom.
It's a chance to realize your dreams.
I'm really bowled over by this Raj Chetty study
that just shows how many inventors poverty
kind of steals from us.
And it's just true, just how many diplomats
and nurses and scientists as poverty denied us.
So for folks that are below the line, folks in poverty,
it's just another life.
But for all of us, I think the end of poverty
brings a better nation.
I think it brings a safer nation.

I think it brings a happier nation, a freer nation.
It brings a nation where we don't feel this complicity
and connection to all this deprivation around us.
San Francisco is kind of a microcosm
for this larger problem of private opulence
amongst public poverty, right?
Where we let the public sector diminish,
even as sometimes our personal fortunes grow.
And that actually pulls us all down in a way.
So I do think a nation without poverty
is something that will require some sacrifice
from those of us.
But I think that what we're gonna get in the end
is something much better, more enticing.
My wife sent me this quote, and I'm gonna butcher it,
but it's something like,
if you want folks to build a ship,
you don't assemble a team on the shore
and you don't gather the wood,
you make them long for the end of the sea.
And I think that something that I'm trying to do in the book
is to convince all of us that this is a country
that I think we'd be happier in.
I wanna talk through a couple of the other ideas.
And the big one that I wouldn't say you fully develop
as a policy, but as a thought experiment.
You write in 2020, the gap separating everyone in America
below the poverty line and the poverty line itself
amounted to \$177 billion.
And you say that's a little bit of a rough calculation.
It's also a lot of money,
but it's also not that much money,
and you could get it from a lot of different places.
So before we talk about the where you could get it question,
I wanna talk about the what would you do with it question.
One reason I don't like using the official poverty measure
is if you got \$200 billion a year
and you send it out in checks,
my understanding of the way the poverty measure
is calculated, is it wouldn't change poverty at all?
But in theory, it really would, and you could do it.
Is that what you're suggesting?
We should basically have what gets called a,
some kind of a basic income or a negative income tax.

We should just give people the money
so they're no longer poor.
I think that's an amazing first step.
Like if you were to ask me,
if there was a single thing we can do,
just one thing you could do
that Congress could implement today,
I would suggest this kind of investment,
this kind of guaranteed basic investment
in families in America.
I think we could reinstate the child tax credit
that did so much to reduce child poverty in COVID.
And I think we could also invest
in stable affordable housing.
I think those are my two kind of big issues
that I would use that money for.
Tell me a bit about the stable affordable housing,
something that you discuss in the book
that I think will be a bit of a surprise
is you make an argument for much more public housing.
And the reputation in public housing is pretty bad.
And I think it's widely considered
that an example of a government has tried to do
and cannot do.
And you suggest maybe that has changed over the years.
Tell me a bit about the more modern versions of that policy.
So most families that qualify
for any kind of affordable housing program don't get it.
Only about one in four families who qualify get it.
So like I've got two young kids,
if I applied for public housing today,
like in Washington, DC,
I would be a grandfather probably
by the time my application came out for review.
That's kind of our state.
That's our state of investment in affordable housing.
And that means that most poor renting families today
live unassisted in the private market
and give at least half of their income
to their landlord and utility company.
That's the state of America today.
So how should we change that?
How should we address this?
And one thing that I think we can do

is build out our public housing infrastructure
to build permanent stable affordable housing.
And you're right, public housing has such a stigma
and kind of a bad rap, if you will.
And it's because the way we did public housing,
building these giant Soviet style complexes
in Chicago and Atlanta and St. Louis
and in incredible segregated way was not only cruel,
we did that and then we defunded it.
Reagan cut HUD's budget by 70% almost, 70%.
And pretty soon those buildings fell
into complete disrepair, the elevators stopped working,
trash can get picked up.
And then it got so bad, we dynamited them
on public television and that sounded like a kindness.
But we've learned from our sense, I think.
And if you look at the modern public housing
that are in cities all over the country today,
this is not your father's public housing.
This is public housing that blends into the community
that looks pretty, that is not segregated.
And often you'll drive by and not even notice
that it's public housing.
And I think building out that infrastructure
is one way to develop an approach to housing exploitation,
to basically give low income families more choice
about where they live,
so they don't have to accept this one bad option
because it's the only option available.
So somebody might hear this and say,
yeah, \$177 billion a year,
more on top of that for child tax credits
and public housing and the rest of the agenda.
We don't have that kind of money.
Money is scarce, there are a lot of needs.
We don't live in this world where everybody gets a pony.
You don't have a lot of patience for that in the book.
Tell me why.
A study published a few years ago
showed that if the top 1% of Americans
just paid the taxes they owed,
just stopped evading taxes,
not got taxed at a higher rate,
that we as a country could raise

an additional \$175 billion a year for the public purse.
So we could just about fill the poverty gap
if the top 1% of us paid what they owed.
And that's just one step in that direction.
And so for me, it drives me crazy
when our elected officials look at the price tag
of a policy idea that would cut child poverty
or ensure that everybody in the country
affords a doctor and they look at the bottom of the policy
and they say, boy, how can we afford it?
How can we afford it?
For me, that question is so dishonest really
and even sinful.
We could afford it if the richest among us
took less from the government.
We could afford it if we funded the IRS to do their jobs.
We could afford it if we did so much more
to fight poverty than to guard our fortunes.
You write that the fundamental lesson
that emerges from this debate
is if we want to abolish poverty,
we need to embrace policies that foster goodwill
and be suspicious of those that kindle resentment.
And that's a big sentence, I think, in this
because when you think about that \$177 billion, for instance,
and you think about telling somebody
making \$75,000 a year outside of Austin with three kids,
that they're not gonna get anything.
They're not poor, but they're cousin
and you do often hear this, if you do poverty reporting,
they're cousin who's a layabout
and hasn't worked as hard as them
and hasn't made the good choices they've made.
He's all of a sudden or she's all of a sudden
gonna get this check that somehow or another
is maybe on this person's back
or at least could have gone to them and things they need
and that pisses them off.
So then you get into things like universal basic income
that's much more expensive
than the math does get harder.
But so tell me a bit about that question
of how you do this without kindling resentment.
I've really liked this idea

of what might be called bigger tent targeting.
It's kind of like a sweet spot
between targeted programs like food stamps,
which are cost efficient, but you're right.
If you make \$1 over the limit, you're cut out.
And it's a sweet spot between targeted programs like that
and universal programs that reach everyone
but are very expensive sometimes.
And a bigger tent targeting kind of recognizes
that the poverty line is too low
that there are quite a lot of Americans
like that family making 75K in Austin
who are struggling too.
And so how to kind of expand these programs
not only to reach families that are desperate
for them at the bottom,
but also families that belong to the working class
and even middle income families.
And the child tax credit in COVID,
I think was a good example of this.
It was a big program and it reached a lot of folks.
And I don't think it was a divisive program because of that.
So I think to do this though,
we really have to reject the scarcity mindset.
This idea that the country is a country of scarce resources
and we really have to ration.
And I would have a lot more patience
for that kind of argument
if we did a much better job collecting taxes
from the top 20% and if our welfare state
wasn't so imbalanced where we had so many tax breaks
accruing to families that have plenty already.
So I think we have to push against scarcity
and we have to design these programs that are bigger tent.
Something you're pretty straightforward about in the book
is that the idea that everything benefits everybody is wrong.
You talked about this in terms of rhetoric from Biden and others
that there's this tendency to try to make everything
into a positive sum action.
And that if this stuff were so great for the rich,
they would already do it.
But that goes on down the income ladders too.
And you talk about the way people show up at neighborhood
meetings to try to keep affordable housing

from being built in their neighborhood.
And that's not only really rich people.
And you talk a bit about how there are a huge number
of these tax breaks all throughout the system.
The mortgage interest deduction and the 529 program
and on and on and on and on that middle class people like,
upper middle class people like,
and these aren't people you think of as really rich,
but there's a lot of money in them.
And any attempt to touch those sets off a political firestorm.
So I'd be curious to hear you talk a bit about this question of,
if not sacrifice and at least a question of loss and change,
and not just in terms of taxation,
but in terms of who's in our communities,
who has what kind of political power,
what maybe we can pay or get cheaply, right?
Going back to this question of cheap goods and cheap Uber
rides and cheap stuff imported from China.
How do you think about this question of having sacrifice
without resentment?
I think this is really where this call for poverty abolitionism
comes in.
This is a political project, but it's a personal one too.
It's me committing to this belief that poverty is an abomination
and committing to this kind of commitment
to unwind myself from poverty in my everyday life.
And so that does mean viewing things like tax breaks or zoning laws.
It's not just abstract principles that are out there,
but things that I can actively try to shift the common sense on.
So tax season's upon us.
And so what if instead of complaining about taxes,
which is something that everyone does left, right, and center,
what if the next time someone in your office or over your fence
line says, oh my god, there's taxes, you say, look, in 2020,
we spent \$190 billion on homeowner tax subsidies
and only \$53 billion on direct housing assistance to needy.
And I feel that's kind of crazy because most of that benefit,
those homeowner tax subsidies went to families with six figure
incomes.
That just seems wrong when we have an eviction crisis.
And I get that thing.
I get the mortgage introduction.
That's crazy.
I think I'm going to write my congressperson and wind it down.

And what if we did that by the hundreds and by the thousands
and by the tens of thousands?

I think that's a way to shift the kind of aperture
and the conversation about what's considered normal.

And I do think that will take some sacrifice.

But I do think the end product ultimately
is a country that is something that we all
want to seek about, a country that actually puts the money
where its mouth is when it comes to expanding
economic opportunity and with segregation and zoning.

This is also very personal.

You're right.

The folks that are going down on a Tuesday night
in the zoning board meetings and yelling at the Alderman
and coming up the process and forming petitions
and suing cities, they're active.

They're active defenders of the wall.

And I think those of us that are seeking
a more open, inclusive community,
we've got to put in that work, too.

We've got to go down to that Tuesday night zoning board
meeting and stand up and be like, look,

I refuse to deny other kids benefits my kids have had.

Living here, let's build this thing.

And that's going to be awkward.

And that's going to be challenging.

But I think that's what this requires.

And all of us have a role to play in this, I think,
whether we come from abundance or we're struggling today.

There's a connection you're drawing at the end of the book
that is clearly there and is also a little fuzzy.

And I want to get you to try to explain more
of what you're saying here, because you talk about this
question of poverty and community.

And you write about your family moving from a place
in Wisconsin to East Arlington, a suburb of Boston,
and noticing that this new community you're living in,
which is richer, houses are bigger,
that something is also missing.

You talk about far fewer issues and far less joy
in your new community.

You talk about the snow falling and neighbors clearing
only their own walks, not each other's.

And I think there's one way to read this, which is a bit

of a cliché, there's not much money down there,
but everybody's together.
But I take you as saying something about a connection
between the sort of values and almost spiritual way
of being in the world that comes from trying
to protect what is yours and what's possible
when you open up, that there's some kind
of ineffable community that is possible from equality
that isn't possible amidst inequality.
And I was hoping before we wrap up that you could talk
about what you're saying there, what you're predicting there,
what you're suggesting about this possible world
we could live in and gain that isn't monetary in value,
but that even the rich don't necessarily
know what they're missing.
Yeah, I think that there is a spiritual poverty
that's gripping a lot of communities in America.
And look, I've lived in some very poor neighborhoods,
and I'm not romantic about that.
But I haven't experienced the kind of generosity
and just like sheer neighborliness
that I did in those neighborhoods,
in affluent neighborhoods that I've lived in.
And I'm thinking about that group in Minneapolis
that we talked about earlier, you know,
and I remember speaking to a woman named Chloe Jackson
who when she started getting involved
in that tenants rights movement,
she was working at, you know, a store in the airport
making \$15.69 an hour.
She wasn't politicized, you know, she was just,
you know, she was a single mom just trying to make it.
And she more and more got involved in the movement.
And the movement meant going to a eviction court
when one person did, everyone would show up,
bring tamales, bring pizza.
And she told me like, look, before we were just neighbors,
but now we're a family.
And I think there's something to that.
I think there's some spiritual violence we do to our lives
when we live apart from each other,
when we're segregated from each other.
And when we kind of clutch onto money
is our only security in America

that we have the kind of like a stingy frightened affluence,
I think, today.
So I do think that there is, you know,
this is a part of the book that's fuzzy
because I feel challenged, you know,
writing about things, you know, beyond the data in a way.
It just, it really pushes me.
It gets me out of my comfort zone.
But at least in my experience, you know,
there's real happiness.
There's real joy in binding your lives
to folks that are quite different from you.
Yeah, and I wanted to try to get that across
in the book a little bit.
I think it's a good place to end.
So always our final question.
What are three books you'd recommend to the audience?
I recommend What Then Must We Do by Leo Tolstoy.
He wrote it in 1886.
It's a weird book, but I kind of love it
because the great writer is really wrestling
with the same question this book is wrestling with.
Why is there so much poverty around me?
And you see him go through the motions.
Does it work?
No, the poor are working all the time.
What is it?
What is it?
And he finally ends on this answer that I kind of end on.
You know, it's me, you know, he says, Tolstoy says.
And so he kind of cuts through the abstractions
and the excuses.
And I think there's just a beautiful spiritual clarity
about that book.
I really loved Race for Profit by Keanga Yamada Taylor.
This is a historical work.
And it's looking at what happens
when we kind of do policy halfway, you know?
And it looks at how the real estate business
incorporated and marketed itself to black families
after 1968 and shows how this government program
led to all this exploitation and all these foreclosures
for these families.
And she comes up with this powerful phrase

about predatory inclusion,
which I think is very applicable
to so many other policy realms today.
And my third book is Random Family,
the classic investigative journalism
by Adrienne Nicola Blanc.
She spent over 10 years living
and working and reporting alongside poor families
in the South Bronx.
We see kids grow up.
This is a book where I remember exactly where I was.
When I read it, I was in a garage in Minnesota
and how beautifully she wrote about people
in their full complexity
that were experiencing hardship running from the law
and how gracefully she shows folks
not reduced to their hardships.
Matt Desmond, thank you very much.

Thanks, Ezra.

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