

***Poverty, By America* Book Talk & Discussion**
American Library Association, Social Responsibilities Round Table
Rachel Rosekind
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I want to welcome you to our discussion of Matthew Desmond’s timely and provocative new book, *Poverty, By America*. From tenacious narratives of American exceptionalism, rugged individualism, and rags to riches to pervasive ideologies of bootstrapping and meritocracy, our country is steeped in rhetoric and iconography that somehow both explains *and* confounds the sheer fact that we have ***so many people*** living in poverty—and deep poverty at that: 1 in 18 people, including 5 million children, Desmond tells us.

In 1968 the Kerner Commission concluded that “What white Americans have never fully understood but the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” And, just as that same commission reported that despite substantial expenditures, federal investments in education, housing, and other social welfare assisted only a fraction of those in need...55 years later, we’ve massively scaled up and are still falling woefully short, to the tune of \$177 BILLION, according to Desmond’s estimation. ***And*** the entrenched racial disparities are still glaring. It is no accident that this book tracks with the uptick in discussions about African American reparations around the country.

Desmond’s catalog of social ills and statistical casualties is eye-popping, bringing into sharp focus some of the phenomena that define our present but stem from the long tail of history and the arc of policy design and implementation: astronomical rates of income inequality; a penchant for mass incarceration and the prison system’s imbrication with racial oppression, social isolation, and economic inequality; unconscionable numbers of people without homes; persistent racial wealth *and* health gaps; higher rents and lower-paying jobs; and the massive complicity and profiteering that fuels this slow-motion cataclysm and abject moral failure.

Poverty intersects with structural racism, overpolicing, underfunded public schools, persistent vulnerability, endemic violence, gender inequity, labor exploitation, and a perverse tax system. It manufactures and reproduces social inequalities, individual trauma, and generational harms. Looking soberly and purposefully at these lineages and interconnections demands bifocal lenses that recognize how past informs present and *peripheral* vision that affirms our shared humanity. As Bryan Stevenson says, “The opposite of poverty is not wealth. The opposite of poverty is Justice.”

During today’s discussion, we’ll dig into the paradox, problem, and purpose of “Poverty, by America” to explore how it intersects with our personal, public, and professional lives and the well-being of our communities. Marshall McLuhan said that “There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.” I hope today we will be able to contemplate what is happening so that we can collectively work to abolish poverty.