POVERTY, BY AMERICA

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We imagine that their sufferings are one thing and our life another.

—LEO TOLSTOY

PROLOGUE

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH poverty in America? I wrote this book because I needed an answer to that question. For most of my adult life, I have researched and reported on poverty. I have lived in very poor neighborhoods, spent time with people living in poverty around the country, pored over statistical studies and government reports, listened to and learned from community organizers and union reps, drafted public policy, read up on the history of the welfare state and city planning and American racism, and taught courses on inequality at two universities. But even after all that, I still felt that I lacked a fundamental theory of the problem, a clear and convincing case as to why there is so much hardship in this land of abundance.

I began paying attention to poverty when I was a child. The home in which I grew up cost $60,000. It sat a couple of miles outside Winslow, Arizona, a small Route 66 town east of Flagstaff. It was small and wood paneled, surrounded by hard-packed dirt sprouting with thorny weeds. I loved it: the woodburning stove, the Russian olive trees. We had moved in after my father accepted a position as pastor of the First Christian Church. Scraping a salary from the offering plate never amounted to much, and Dad always griped that the railroad men in town got paid more than he did. He could read ancient Greek, but they had a union.

We learned to fix things ourselves or do without. When I put a hole through a window with my Red Ryder BB gun, it stayed broken. But a family friend and I once replaced the engine in my first truck, having found the right parts at a junkyard. After my father lost his job, the bank took our home, before it was all the rage, and we learned to do without that, too.

Mostly I blamed Dad. But a part of me also wondered why this was our country's answer when a family fell on hard times.

I went to college, enrolling at Arizona State University (ASU) by applying for every scholarship and loan I could. And I worked: as a morning-shift barista at Starbucks, a telemarketer, you name it. In the summers, I decamped to a forest near my hometown and served as a wildland firefighter. When classes were in session, I began hanging out with homeless people around my campus—not serving them at soup kitchens or delivering socks, but just sitting with them, talking. I think it helped me process, in my own adolescent way, what I was seeing all around me, which was money. So much money. Back in Winslow, some families were better off than others, but not like this. My classmates were driving BMWs and convertible Mustangs. For most of college, I didn't have a car, and when I did, it was a 1978 Ford F-150 with that junkyard engine and decent-sized holes in the floorboard, allowing me to see the road rip past as I drove. My classmates were going out for sushi. I stocked canned sardines and saltine crackers in my dorm room. The town of Tempe, the Phoenix suburb where ASU's main campus sits, had spent hundreds of millions of dollars to construct a two-mile-long artificial lake in the middle of the desert, a giant puddle that loses two-thirds of its water to evaporation each year. A few blocks away, people were begging on the street. How could there be, I wondered, such bald scarcity amid such waste and opulence?

I began stalking this question in the classroom, enrolling in courses that I hoped would help me make sense of my country and its confounding, unblushing inequality. I kept it up in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin—the only program that accepted my application—where I focused on the housing crisis. To get as close as I could to that problem, I moved to Milwaukee, living in a mobile home park and then a rooming house. I befriended families who had been evicted, and I followed them for months and then years, sleeping on their floors, watching their children grow up, laughing and arguing with them, and, later, attending some of their funerals.

In Milwaukee, I met grandmothers living in trailers without heat. They spent the winter under blankets, praying that the space heaters didn't give out. I once saw an apartment full of kids, just kids, evicted on a rainy spring day. Their mother had died, and the children had chosen to go on living in the house until the sheriff came. In the years since, I have met poor Americans around the country striving for dignity and justice—or just plain survival, which can be hard enough: home health aides in New Jersey who belonged to the full-time working homeless, fast food workers in California fighting for a living wage, and undocumented immigrants in Minneapolis organizing for affordable housing, communicating with their neighbors through the Google Translate app.

This is who we are: the richest country on earth, with more poverty than any other advanced democracy. If America's poor founded a country, that country would have a bigger population than Australia or Venezuela. Almost one in nine Americans—including one in eight children—live in poverty. There are more than 38 million people living in the United States who cannot afford basic necessities, and more than 108 million getting by on $55,000 a year or less, many stuck in that space between poverty and security.[1]

More than a million of our public schoolchildren are homeless, living in motels, cars, shelters, and abandoned buildings. After arriving in prison, many incarcerated Americans suddenly find that their health improves because the conditions they faced as free (but impoverished) citizens were worse. More than 2 million Americans don't have running water or a flushing toilet at home. West Virginians drink from polluted streams, while families on the Navajo Nation drive hours to fill water barrels. Tropical diseases long considered eradicated, like hookworm, have reemerged in rural America's poorest communities, often the result of broken sanitation systems that expose children to raw sewage.[2]

The United States annually produces $5.3 trillion more in goods and services than China. Our gross domestic product is larger than the combined economies of Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, India, France, and

Italy, which are the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth richest countries in the world. California alone has a bigger economy than Canada does; New York State's economy surpasses South Korea's.[3] America's poverty is not for lack of resources. We lack something else.

Books about poverty tend to be books about the poor. It's been this way for more than a hundred years. In 1890, Jacob Riis wrote about "how the other half lives," documenting the horrid conditions of New York tenements and photographing filthy children asleep in alleyways. A decade later, Jane Addams wrote about the sorry state of Chicago's immigrant workforce: a thirteen-year-old girl from Russia who committed suicide because she couldn't repay a $3 loan; a new mother forced to work so many hours that her breast milk soaked through her shirt. The Depression-era reportage of James Agee and Walker Evans, and the photojournalism of Dorothea Lange, seared images of dusty, kicked-down sharecroppers into our collective memory. In 1962, Michael Harrington published *The Other America,* a book intended to make visible "tens of millions of human beings" who had "dropped out of sight and out of mind." Two years later, Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson paid a visit to Appalachia and sat on the rough-hewn porch of a jobless sawmill worker surrounded by children with small clothes and big teeth.[4]

Bearing witness, these kinds of books help us understand the nature of poverty. They are vital. But they do not—and in fact cannot—answer the most fundamental question, which is: *Why?* Why all this American poverty? I've learned that this question requires a different approach. To understand the causes of poverty, we must look beyond the poor. Those of us living lives of privilege and plenty must examine ourselves. Are we—we the secure, the insured, the housed, the college educated, the protected, the lucky—connected to all this needless suffering? This book is my attempt to answer that question, addressed to that "we." Which makes this a book about poverty that is not just about the poor. Instead, it's a book about how the *other* other half lives, about how some lives are made small so that others may grow.

Drawing on years of my own research and reporting, as well as studies from across the social sciences, I lay out why there is so much poverty in America and make a case for how to eliminate it. Ending poverty will require new policies and renewed political movements, to be sure. But it will also require that each of us, in our own way, become *poverty abolitionists,* unwinding ourselves from our neighbors' deprivation and refusing to live as unwitting enemies of the poor.

CHAPTER 1

THE KIND OF PROBLEM POVERTY IS

I RECENTLY SPENT A DAY ON the tenth floor of Newark's courthouse, the floor where the state decides child welfare cases. There I met a fifty-five-year-old father who had stayed up all night working at his warehouse job by the port. He told me his body felt heavy. Sometimes when pulling a double shift, he would snort a speedball—cocaine mixed with benzodiazepine and morphine, sometimes heroin—to stay awake or dull his pain. Its ugly recipe was laid bare in the authorities' toxicology reports, making him look like a career junkie and not what he was: an exhausted member of America's working poor. The authorities didn't think the father could care for his three children alone, and their mother, who had a serious mental illness and was using PCP, wasn't an option either. So the father gambled, surrendering his two older children to his stepmother and hoping the authorities would allow him to raise the youngest. They did. Outside the courtroom, he hugged his public defender, who considered what had happened a real victory. This is what winning looks like on the tenth floor of Newark's courthouse: giving up two of your children so you have a chance to raise the third alone and in poverty.

Technically, a person is considered "poor" when they can't afford life's necessities, like food and housing. The architect of the Official Poverty Measure—the poverty line—was a bureaucrat working at the Social Security Administration named Mollie Orshansky. Orshansky figured that if poverty

was fundamentally about a lack of income that could cover the basics, and if nothing was more basic than food, then you could calculate poverty with two pieces of information: the cost of food in a given year and the share of a family's budget dedicated to it. Orshansky determined that bare-bones food expenditures accounted for roughly a third of an American family's budget. If a family of four needed, say, $1,000 a year in 1965 to feed themselves, then any family making less than $3,000 a year (or around $27,000 at the beginning of 2022) would be considered poor because they would be devoting more than a third of their income to food, forgoing other necessities. Orshansky published her findings in January of that year, writing, "There is thus a total of 50 million persons—of whom 22 million are young children—who live within the bleak circle of poverty or at least hover around its edge." It was a number that shocked affluent Americans.[1]

Today's Official Poverty Measure is still based on Orshansky's calculation, annually updated for inflation. In 2022, the poverty line was drawn at $13,590 a year for a single person and $27,750 a year for a family of four.

As I've said, we can't hope to understand why there is so much poverty in America solely by considering the lives of the poor. But we need to start there, to better understand the kind of problem poverty is—and grasp the stakes—because poverty is not simply a matter of small incomes. In the words of the poet Layli Long Soldier, that's just "the oil at the surface."[2]

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I MET CRYSTAL MAYBERRY when I was living in Milwaukee and researching my last book, on eviction and the American housing crisis. Crystal was born prematurely on a spring day in 1990, shortly after her pregnant mother was stabbed eleven times in the back while being robbed. The attack induced labor. Both mother and daughter survived. It was not the first time Crystal's mother had been stabbed. For as far back as Crystal can remember, her

father beat her mother. He smoked crack cocaine, and so did her mother; so did her mother's mother.[3]

Crystal's mother found a way to leave her father, and soon after, he began a lengthy prison stint. Crystal and her mother moved in with another man and his parents. That man's father began molesting Crystal. She told her mother, and her mother called her a liar. Not long after Crystal began kindergarten, Child Protective Services, the branch of government tasked with safeguarding children from maltreatment, stepped in. At five, Crystal was placed in foster care.

Crystal bounced around between dozens of group homes and sets of foster parents. She lived with her aunt for five years. Then her aunt returned her. After that, the longest Crystal lived anywhere was eight months. When she reached adolescence, Crystal fought with the other girls in the group homes. She picked up assault charges and a scar across her right cheekbone. People and their houses, pets, furniture, dishes—these came and went. Food was more stable, and Crystal began taking refuge in it. She put on weight. Because of her weight, she developed sleep apnea.

When Crystal was sixteen, she stopped going to high school. At seventeen, she was examined by a clinical psychologist, who diagnosed her with, among other things, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, reactive attachment disorder, and borderline intellectual functioning. When she turned eighteen, she aged out of foster care. By that time Crystal had passed through more than twenty-five foster placements. Because of her mental illness, she had been approved for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a government income subsidy for low-income people who are old, blind, or who have a disability. She would receive $754 a month, or a little over $9,000 a year.

Crystal was barred from low-income housing for two years because of an assault charge she received for fighting in the group home. Even if she had not been barred, she would still have found herself at the bottom of a waiting list that was six years long. Crystal secured her first apartment in the private market: a run-down two-bedroom unit. The apartment was located in a

majority-Black neighborhood that ranked among the city's poorest, but Crystal herself was Black and had been turned down for apartments in the Hispanic and white areas of town. Crystal's rent took 73 percent of her income, and it wasn't long before she fell behind. A few months after moving in, she experienced her first official eviction, which went on her record, making it likely that her application for housing assistance would be denied. After her eviction, Crystal met a woman at a homeless shelter and secured another apartment with her new friend. Then Crystal put that new friend's friend through a window, and the landlord told Crystal to leave.

Crystal spent nights in shelters, with friends, and with members of her church. She learned how to live on the streets, walking them at night and sleeping on the bus or in hospital waiting rooms during the day. She learned to survive by relying on strangers. She met a woman at a bus stop and ended up living with her for a month. People were attracted to Crystal. She was gregarious and funny, with an endearing habit of slapping her hands together and laughing at herself. She sang in public, gospel mostly.

Crystal had always believed that her SSI was secure. You couldn't get fired from SSI, and your hours couldn't get cut. "SSI always come," she said. Until one day it didn't. Crystal had been approved for SSI as a minor, but her adult reevaluation found her ineligible. Now her only source of income was food stamps. She tried donating plasma, but her veins were too small. She burned through the remaining ties she had from church and her foster families. When her SSI was not reinstated after several months, she descended into street homelessness and prostitution. Crystal had never been an early riser, but she learned that mornings were the best time to turn tricks, catching men on their way to work.

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FOR CRYSTAL AND PEOPLE in similar situations, poverty is about money, of course, but it is also a relentless piling on of problems.

Poverty is pain, physical pain. It is in the backaches of home health aides and certified nursing assistants, who bend their bodies to hoist the old and sick out of beds and off toilets; it is in the feet and knees of cashiers made to stand while taking our orders and ringing up our items; it is in the skin rashes and migraines of maids who clean our office buildings, homes, and hotel rooms with products containing ammonia and triclosan.

In America's meatpacking plants, two amputations occur each week: A band saw lops off someone's finger or hand. Pickers in Amazon warehouses have access to vending machines dispensing free Advil and Tylenol. Slum housing spreads asthma, its mold and cockroach allergens seeping into young lungs and airways, and it poisons children with lead, causing irreversible damage to their tiny central nervous systems and brains. Poverty is the cancer that forms in the cells of those who live near petrochemical plants and waste incinerators. Roughly one in four children living in poverty have untreated cavities, which can morph into tooth decay, causing sharp pain and spreading infection to their faces and even brains. With public insurance reimbursing only a fraction of dental care costs, many families simply cannot afford regular trips to the dentist. Thirty million Americans remain completely uninsured a decade after the passage of the Affordable Care Act.[4]

Poverty is the colostomy bag and wheelchair, the night terrors and bullets that maimed but didn't finish their cunning work. In Chicago, gun violence killed 722 people in 2020 and injured another 3,339. By some estimates, eight in ten gunshot victims nationwide survive the attack, often forced to live out their days in pain. The lives of the poor are often marked by violence, including violence experienced as children. Among a sample of men and women released from prison in Massachusetts, over 40 percent had witnessed a murder as children. Among a sample of parents who had been investigated by Child Protective Services in New Jersey, over 34 percent grew up with violence in their homes, and 17 percent were victims of sexual abuse.[5]

Poverty is traumatic, and since society isn't investing in its treatment, poor people often have their own ways of coping with their pain. My friend Scott was sexually abused as a child. As an adult, he found pills, then fentanyl. He bought peace for $20 at a time. In his forties, he got sober and stayed that way for several years before relapsing and dying alone in a hotel room. My former roommate Kimball, or Woo, as everyone knew him, never did drugs and drank only on rare occasions. But he stepped on a nail one day in a run-down duplex apartment we used to share in Milwaukee, ignored the injury because he couldn't afford to pay it any mind, and lost his lower leg when the infection, accelerated by his diabetes, threatened to take all of him. [6]

On top of the pain, poverty is instability. Over the past twenty years, rents have soared while incomes have fallen for renters; yet the federal government provides housing assistance to only one in four of the families who qualify for it. Most renting families below the poverty line now spend at least half of their income on housing, with one in four spending more than 70 percent on rent and utility costs alone. These combined factors have transformed the United States into a nation where eviction is commonplace among low-income renters. Churn has become the status quo. More than 3.6 million eviction filings are taped to doors or handed to occupants in an average year in America, which is roughly equivalent to the number of foreclosures initiated at the height of the financial crisis in 2010. Eviction movers, flanked by armed marshals and watched by the family, do a quick business. They take everything—the shower curtain, the mattresses on the floor, the meat cuts in the freezer and bread in the cupboard—and either lock it away in storage (usually to be hauled to the dump after missed payments) or pile it high on the curb. People start over as best they can.[7]

The job market asks us to start over more and more these days, as well. Half of all new positions are eliminated within the first year. Jobs that used to come with some guarantees, even union membership, have been transformed into gigs. Temp workers are not just found driving Ubers; they are in hospitals and universities and insurance companies. The

manufacturing sector—still widely mistaken as the fount of good, sturdy, hard-hat jobs—now employs more than a million temp workers. Long-term employment has declined steadily in the private sector, particularly for men, and temp jobs are expected to grow faster than all others over the next several years. Income volatility, the extent to which paychecks grow or shrink over short periods of time, has doubled since 1970. For scores of American workers, wages are now wobbly, fluctuating wildly not only year to year but month to month, even week to week. America has welcomed the rise of bad jobs at the bottom of the market—jobs offering low pay, no benefits, and few guarantees. Some industries such as retail, leisure and hospitality, and construction see more than half of their workforce turn over each year. Workers quickly learn they are expendable, easily replaced, while young people are graduating into an economy characterized by deep uncertainty.[8]

Poverty is the constant fear that it will get even worse. A third of Americans live without much economic security, working as bus drivers, farmers, teachers, cashiers, cooks, nurses, security guards, social workers. Many are not officially counted among the "poor," but what then is the term for trying to raise two kids on $50,000 a year in Miami or Portland? What do you call it when you don't qualify for a housing voucher but can't get a mortgage either? When the rent takes half your paycheck, and your student loan debt takes another quarter? When you dip below the poverty line one month then rise a bit above it the next without ever feeling a sense of stability? As a lived reality, there is plenty of poverty above the poverty line.[9]

And plenty far, far below it. In the land of the free, you can drop all the way down, joining the ranks of the *lumpenproletariat* (literally the "ragged proletariat").[10] According to the latest national data, one in eighteen people in the United States lives in "deep poverty," a subterranean level of scarcity. Take the poverty line and cut it in half: Anything below that is considered deep poverty. The deep poverty line in 2020 was $6,380 annually for a single person and $13,100 for a family of four. That year, almost 18 million people in America survived under these conditions. The United States allows

a much higher proportion of its children—over 5 million of them—to endure deep poverty than any of its peer nations.[11]

Economists have estimated that a person needs roughly $4 a day to afford the bare minimum of basic necessities in the United States, a figure meant to correspond to the $1.90-a-day poverty line the World Bank uses to identify the poorest people in countries like India or Bangladesh, which have lower costs of living. Using this threshold, the Nobel laureate Angus Deaton reported in 2018 that 5.3 million Americans were "absolutely poor by global standards," getting by on $4 a day or less. "There are millions of Americans," Deaton wrote, "whose suffering, through material poverty and poor health, is as bad or worse than that of the people in Africa or in Asia."[12] In the years following the end of guaranteed cash welfare, the United States has witnessed a shocking rise in extreme poverty, one that tracks with other grim indicators. Between 1995 and 2018, the number of households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (food stamps) but reporting no cash income increased from roughly 289,000 to 1.2 million, amounting to roughly one in fifty Americans. The number of homeless children, as reported by the nation's public schools, rose from 794,617 in 2007 to 1.3 million in 2018.[13] There is growing evidence that America harbors a hard bottom layer of deprivation, a kind of extreme poverty once thought to exist only in faraway places of bare feet and swollen bellies.

Poverty is the loss of liberty. The American prison system has no equal in any other country or any other epoch. Almost 2 million people sit in our prisons and jails each day. Another 3.7 million are on probation or parole. Hidden behind the system's vague abstractions—justice, law and order—is the fact that the overwhelming majority of America's current and former prisoners are very poor. By the time they reach their mid-thirties, almost seven in ten Black men who didn't finish high school will have spent a portion of their life in a cage. Prison robs people of the prime of their life, taking not only the sleepy, slow years at the end but also the pulsing, hot years in the middle. In prisons, of course, they will remain poor, earning in their prison jobs between 14 cents and $1.41 an hour on average, depending