

Brian Goldstone's *There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America*: Working class families sliding gradually or dropping suddenly into homelessness

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There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America (2025, Crown)

In *There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America*, Brian Goldstone says of one of his subjects, Celeste, that "pride and dignity were luxuries she could no longer afford." These words sum up the devastating experience of being homeless, depicted in clear-eyed detail in this new work.

Goldstone's is hardly the first useful book to reveal the countless trap doors leading to homelessness or the virtually inescapable webs that hold millions of Americans in that condition once they are caught. But with *There Is No Place for Us*, Goldstone has added another valuable work to a tradition of exposures in American journalism that goes back to Ida Tarbell's revelations about the Standard Oil Company and Upton Sinclair's seismic exposé of the meat packing industry in *The Jungle*.

Goldstone's book focuses on the Atlanta area, a region experiencing both burgeoning growth and rapid gentrification. *There Is No Place for Us* registers this dynamic, exploring its brutal consequences.

The means by which Goldstone conveys his investigative work is a braid of narratives that follow the experiences of five working class families, all of whom, sliding gradually or dropping suddenly, fall into homelessness.

When we first meet Michelle, for instance, she is putting the finishing touches on a lavish Christmas dinner for her three young children and her boyfriend. The family is living in the Eastwyck Village apartment complex, a dilapidated site but acceptable as a temporary home for a woman on her way up.

But Michelle's story, like those of the book's other protagonists, provides a case study in the fragility of working class existence. In her case, all that is needed is the end of her relationship with her boyfriend Jacob, who had been supporting the family, to bring about disaster. Having developed a drug addiction, Jacob has burned through the family's meager savings, leaving Michelle unable to pay the rent on the apartment. Soon she and her children are living at the A2B Budget Hotel, where an acquaintance has found Michelle a job as the night clerk.

So begins Michelle's downward spiral that at least threatens most adult low-wage workers. A boss's demand that she take a position at another location conflicts with her childcare needs, and Michelle loses her job. Within a year she will sleep with her children on the floor of a basement storage room, beg on the street with her youngest daughter in her arms, consider prostitution, develop an alcohol and drug addiction and be separated from her children.

For Celeste, the spiral begins when the house she and her children have been living in is burned to the ground by a former boyfriend. Despite admirable ingenuity and pluck, Celeste's efforts at staying above water are sabotaged by a cancer diagnosis and the fact that the effects of chemotherapy leave her incapable of holding down two jobs. Britt, though she wins the lottery for a state housing voucher, learns that very few landlords will accept the vouchers due to the economic disincentives built into the system.

Homelessness is business

In effectively transparent prose, Goldstone constructs a damning brief. Though he limits his condemnation to the American housing system, the evidence he presents belies this limitation and makes an airtight case against capitalism itself.

In relating Britt's experience of searching for an apartment with her useless voucher, Goldstone explains that, despite the "30 percent rule," which warns against paying more than that proportion of one's earnings on rent plus utilities, the vast majority of low-income renters pay between 80 and 90 percent of their earnings to landlords. In such precarious circumstances, these workers see themselves as having little or no bargaining power versus the vampires who own the cut-rate apartment complexes, long-term hotels ("Stay a nite or stay forever" reads the menacing motto of one such establishment) and horrific rooming houses.

When Celeste, who is battling cancer, attempts to draw Social Security Insurance, she waits hours to speak with a representative at Gateway, the organization for all homeless aid intake in Atlanta. When she finally meets with the official, she is made to answer a short series of questions. However, because she lives with her children in a filthy long-term hotel and is neither in a shelter nor

on the street, Celeste is told, she does not qualify under HUD's (Housing and Urban Development) definition of homeless.

Such hotels constitute what the "guests"—the owners will not allow them to be tenants and thus enjoy tenant rights—call "the hotel trap," an exploitative business model preying on poorly paid workers. In this model, the principle is to "displace and replace," allowing residents who complain about appalling conditions (mold, broken windows, holes in walls, etc.) to find somewhere cheaper and canceling the stay of those who cannot meet their weekly bill.

The first blow workers receive, however, often comes in the form of gentrification, the jump in property values in areas receiving investment from predatory developers. As property values rise, so do rents, until lower-income workers can no longer afford to live in neighborhoods where their families may have lived for generations. Telling of the willingness of new homeowners in one Atlanta-area community to watch low-rent housing disappear from their newly upper middle-class neighborhoods, Goldstone neatly crystallizes the class issues at work in the phenomenon of gentrification:

The Chosewood Park Neighborhood Association (CPNA), composed almost entirely of homeowners, made no complaints, formally or informally, regarding the removal of Gladstone's residents from their homes. This was largely because they didn't see these low-income renters—many of whom had been living in the neighborhood for more than a decade—as part of the community.

Paul McMurray, the association's vice president at the time, recalled that most of his neighbors' qualms about Empire's redevelopment plan concerned the threat to the area's old-growth tree canopy. ... Another member, lamenting the "displacement" of local wildlife, posted a photo of a deer wandering the neighborhood.

Gentrification is not simply lucrative for investors due to the newly valuable property. The homelessness it triggers is itself an industry. In fact, the long-term hotels, Goldstone reveals, are many times under the hidden ownership of Wall Street investment firms. For example, in 2020 Blackstone and Starwood Capital Group partnered to purchase the predatory hotel chain Extended Stay America, which in that economically bleak year raked in \$96 million in profits.

The very fabric of Goldstone's narratives is the thousand and one injustices suffered by the working poor from employers, landlords, and state agencies and their representatives. There is one instance of collaborative rebellion in *There Is No Place for Us* that must be mentioned. Led by a remarkable volunteer, who works tirelessly to provide what she can for Atlanta's homeless, Celeste and a score of other tenants who have been evicted at gunpoint from an extended-stay hotel organize their talents and resources—and fight back.

Though they are initially buoyed by enthusiasm and gain some

valuable press coverage, before long the relentless demands of their personal lives and the fatigue that comes with protracted struggle act as a centrifugal force on the group, and they scatter leaving a wake of acrimony and petty jealousies. Nevertheless, the reader finds this section of the book invigorating and senses that the tenants are on the right track.

The liberal fog

Goldstone has produced a powerful and valuable document with *There Is No Place for Us*. It is necessary, however, to indicate the book's limitations.

The Introduction asks the reader to accept that Goldstone, a seasoned journalist, was surprised to learn that people with jobs can actually live in their cars or in long-term hotels. After all, he says, the term "the working homeless" seems "counterintuitive, an oxymoron. In a country where hard work and determination are supposed to lead to success—or at least stability—there is something scandalous about the very concept."

While Goldstone may be feigning disbelief here to make a case, his readers are presumably aware that the US national minimum wage has stagnated at a derisory, provocative \$7.25 for over fifteen years and no state minimum has kept up with sharp increases in the cost of living.

However unfamiliar with the American working class Goldstone may have been at the start of his project, in the book's Epilogue, and elsewhere in the work, he evinces a naivete that reveals him to be ensconced in the fog of liberalism. The crux of that naivete—again, genuine or feigned—is found in his use of the word "we."

Rightly calling for housing to be a universal right, Goldstone says, "If we are serious about ending this country's epidemic of homelessness and housing insecurity, then we must confront it head on and commit to a guiding principle: everybody in America should and can have a home." Such an aspiration, however, remains utopian as long as it relies, as Goldstone does, on the notion that the country is guided by some idealistic "we" that, we are to suppose, will turn its dreams into realities through the alchemy of elections. For this to be the case, we would have to live in a world where electoral politics is not controlled by the same oligarchy that profits off both gentrification and the misery it produces.

"But this new American homelessness is a choice—one we have collectively made as a society," Goldstone scolds. This is not true at all. No one has chosen the nation's homelessness epidemic, now affecting an estimated 4 million, but the financial parasites who profit from it.

"We" are not to blame for the plight of the homeless. The blame rests squarely with the ruling elite.

Despite this liberal shortcoming, Goldstone's book is a valuable work and should be read.



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