

20-MINUTE READ SUMMARY

There Is No Place for Us

Working and Homeless in America

There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America

by Brian Goldstone

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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction (2026) · One of the New York Times 10 Best Books of 2025 · One of the Atlantic's 10 Best Books of 2025 · One of Barack Obama's Favorite Books of 2025 · Winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize · Finalist for the Andrew Carnegie Medal

The Book in 60 Seconds

Picture a woman who mops the floors of a public hospital's psychiatric ward on double shifts, who dreams of starting her own cleaning business, and who sleeps at night in a motel room with her children. Picture a couple who both work full time — he at a car rental company, she at an insurance firm — and who cannot afford a car, let alone a home. Picture a warehouse worker undergoing treatment for ovarian cancer who loses everything in a house fire and discovers there is almost nothing left in her city she can afford to rent.

These are not people who have dropped out of the workforce. They are in the middle of it. And one by one, they join the ranks of what Brian Goldstone calls the working homeless: people with jobs who cannot keep a roof over their heads.

There Is No Place for Us follows five Black families in Atlanta over several years as each of them loses its footing in a booming, gentrifying city. Goldstone, a journalist with a doctorate in anthropology who lives in Atlanta, spent years embedded in their lives — reading their journals, listening to their phone recordings, sitting in eviction court with them, tracking the money as it came in and went out. The result is a book that won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction and landed on the year's best-books lists of the New York Times, the Atlantic, and Barack Obama.

Its central argument is simple and devastating. Hard work no longer guarantees housing, not when wages have been flat and rents have doubled. The official count of homelessness hides the crisis, because it does not count families in motel rooms, in cars, or doubled up on a relative's sofa. And the system is not failing — it is working, for the landlords, the private equity firms, and the motel owners who profit from the very precarity that is destroying these families.

The Story

Maurice and Natalia Taylor: the fresh start that wasn't

Maurice and Natalia moved to Atlanta from Washington, D.C., after rents in the capital priced them out. Atlanta has long carried the reputation of the "Black Mecca" — the city where Black families could build a middle-class life, start businesses, and hold political power. The Taylors came for that promise. Both of them worked full time: Maurice at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Natalia at State Farm. Two incomes, two jobs with recognizable employers, and they still could not afford a car of their own.

Their story is the book's opening shock, because it breaks the most basic assumption readers bring to the subject. These are not people on the margins of the labor market. They are the labor market. And the math does not work for them: wages against rents, against childcare, against the deposit and fees a landlord demands up front. The gap never closes.

Kara Thompson: double shifts, one dream

Kara is a single mother of three, pregnant with her fourth child, working double shifts cleaning the psychiatric ward of a public hospital. She dreams of starting her own cleaning business — of being her own boss, setting her own hours, building something that belongs to her. She is doing everything the advice columns tell you to do: work hard, save, build.

The book follows her through the slow grind of that arithmetic. Every dollar is spoken for before it arrives. There is no slack for a deposit, no slack for a missed shift, no slack for a child getting sick. Kara's story shows what it means to be one unexpected expense away from losing everything, for years at a time, while working harder than almost anyone you know.

Britt Wilkinson: the voucher that wasn't a way out

Britt is a single mother of two who worked as a line cook and lived with her children on a pullout sofa in her great-grandmother's apartment. Her story is the book's clearest window into the housing safety net — and into how that net actually functions when you touch it.

Britt scores a housing voucher, one of the most coveted things in the American housing system. For a moment, it looks like the way out. Then she discovers what a voucher is actually worth in a tight market. The wait for one can be years long. Once you have it, you typically have a short window — often around sixty days — to find a landlord willing to accept it, in a unit that passes inspection, at a rent the program will approve. Landlords can simply refuse, and in a market where they can rent to someone without a voucher, without the inspection, without the paperwork, most of them do.

Britt's story shows a system that is technically generous and practically almost unusable. And the geography of it matters: the apartments that do accept vouchers tend to be far from jobs, far from good schools, far from transit. Even when the voucher works, it can push a family into a neighborhood with fewer opportunities — and then we act surprised when the family struggles.

Michelle Simmons: training to help a system that is failing her

Michelle is in school to become a social worker, raising a young daughter and two teenage children from a previous marriage with her fiancé, Jacob. She is training to help other families navigate exactly the system that is failing her own family. Her story captures the book's quiet absurdity: the people who do the caring work of this country — cleaning hospitals, cooking food, studying to become social workers — are the people the housing market has no place for.

Celeste Walker: fire, illness, and the Efficiency Lodge

Celeste works in a warehouse while undergoing treatment for ovarian cancer. Her home burns in a fire, and she loses almost everything she owns — everything except her car, a phone, and a few hampers of dirty clothes. She discovers that since she moved into her last home, rental prices across Atlanta have soared so far that there is almost nothing left she can afford.

She ends up at the Efficiency Lodge, a dilapidated extended-stay hotel, with her three children. Her home, the one that burned, was owned by the Prager Group, an Atlanta-based real estate investment, management, and private equity firm that owns approximately 3,000 homes across the city. That number matters. At that scale, eviction is not a personal decision made by a landlord who knows your name. It is a workflow.

Celeste's story takes a turn that few readers will expect. The residents of the Efficiency Lodge sued — and won — setting a legal precedent in Georgia that grants long-term hotel residents the rights of tenants. It is one of the few moments in the book that feels like a victory. Goldstone is careful not to oversell it: a court ruling does not build housing, and it does not lower rents. But it says something important, which is that these people were not transients passing through. They were residents. They were home, in the only home they could get.

The Central Argument

Goldstone's argument builds in three layers.

First, employment no longer protects you from homelessness. The old formula — get a job and you will be fine — is broken. Wages have been flat while rents have doubled in many American cities, and no amount of individual effort closes a gap that large. The phrase "working homeless" sounds like a contradiction only if you still believe the old formula. The book's five families are the proof that it no longer holds.

Second, the crisis is much bigger than the official numbers say. America's official homelessness count comes from a survey called the point-in-time count, conducted on a single night in January. Volunteers count people in shelters and on the streets. It does not count families in motel rooms. It does not count families doubled up in a relative's apartment. It does not count families sleeping in their cars. So a mother can work double shifts, sleep in a motel room with her children, and officially, she does not exist as a homeless person. Goldstone's point is that this is not just incomplete measurement — it shapes policy. If the official number says homelessness is mostly single adults on the street, then the policy response is shelters and outreach for single adults on the street. If the real number includes families in motels and doubled-up apartments, then the response has to be housing, at a scale nobody wants to talk about.

Third, the system is not failing. It is working — for someone else. The motel owners, the private equity firms, the landlords filing evictions by the thousand — they are making money from the very precarity that is destroying these families. Homelessness, Goldstone argues, has become big business.

The Key Ideas

The motel trap: poverty is expensive

One of the book's most quietly devastating insights is about arithmetic. A weekly rate at an extended-stay motel can work out to well over a thousand dollars a month — sometimes far more — for a single room with a hot plate and a mini-fridge. That is often more per month than an apartment would cost. There is no lease, no deposit building equity, no stability — and because there is no lease, there is also little or no tenant protection, until the Efficiency Lodge lawsuit changed the rules in Georgia.

The families are paying more for less, month after month, and the gap between what they pay and what they would need for a deposit on a real apartment never closes. It widens, because the motel eats the savings. This is what economists mean when they say the poor pay more for basic goods. It is not a metaphor. It is a line item.

And the trap is structural, not personal. Extended Stay America, where some of Goldstone's subjects live, was acquired by Blackstone and Starwood Capital in 2004 for more than $3.1 billion. The business model is simple: charge by the week, charge more per month than an apartment, offer no lease, and serve customers who cannot leave because they cannot save for a deposit while paying weekly rates. It is a trap with a neon sign.

The eviction machine

Atlanta, according to data from Princeton University's Eviction Lab that Goldstone cites, records more evictions than New York City, despite having roughly a quarter of the renters. That is not a city with a few bad landlords. That is a machine.

Goldstone takes the reader inside eviction court, a world most people have never seen. Hearings can last minutes. Tenants often show up without a lawyer, because they cannot afford one, while landlords show up with one as a matter of routine. A missed payment, a fee the tenant did not know about, a repair the landlord never made — and suddenly there is a judgment. A judgment becomes an eviction record, and an eviction record becomes a scarlet letter that follows a family to every future rental application. A single filing, even one that never results in a family being put out, can make the next apartment impossible to get. The record itself becomes the punishment.

In Georgia, landlords do not even have to serve an eviction notice in person. They can tack it to the door. A family can come home to find a piece of paper that starts a legal clock they did not know was running. The friction that slows eviction down in other states barely exists there.

Financialization: housing as an asset class

The book's most important structural argument is about a word that sounds like jargon but means something simple: financialization. Housing used to be, mostly, a place to live, bought and sold by people who lived in it or rented it out locally. Financialization means housing has become an asset class — something investors buy not to live in but to extract returns from, the way they would buy a bond or a share of stock.

When a private equity firm owns 3,000 houses in one city, it is not managing homes. It is managing a portfolio. And a portfolio has to perform. Rents go up, maintenance gets squeezed, evictions get systematized, because that is what the model demands.

Goldstone traces this shift to the Great Recession, when investors bought up foreclosed homes in bulk — whole neighborhoods at a time — and turned them into rental portfolios. What started as a crisis response became a permanent feature of the market. It is a history most of us lived through without noticing, because we were not the ones being foreclosed on.

Gentrification as a plan, not an accident

Atlanta is one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, and Goldstone's version of gentrification is not the coffee-shop version. It is planned. The city's urban renewal policies, the redevelopment of whole neighborhoods, the stadiums, the BeltLine trail and park project, and the rising land values — these were choices, made by people with power, and they displaced low-income communities that had lived in those neighborhoods for generations.

The BeltLine was supposed to connect the city. It also raised property values along its path, and the affordable housing promised alongside it never arrived in anything like the quantities pledged. Goldstone does not write about it as a villain. He writes about it as a set of choices about who a city is for. His argument is that the displacement was not a side effect. It was the plan working as designed.

The children pay compound interest

The book never lets the reader forget that this is a story about children growing up inside a crisis they did not create. Children doing homework on a motel bed. Children changing schools every few months because the family had to move again. Children learning, very young, to be quiet about where they live, because they know the other kids will judge them.

These are small losses, and they compound, year after year, into a life much harder than it had to be. A child who changes schools three times in a year falls behind — not because she is not smart, but because every new school has a different curriculum, different teachers, different friends. A child with no quiet place to concentrate, no desk, no reliable internet, starts to disappear from the things that would have carried her forward.

Housing instability is not just a housing problem. It is an education problem, a health problem, and a life-chances problem, all at once. That is the book's deepest argument, and it is the one that makes the stakes feel highest.

The method: years, not weeks

Goldstone spent years with these families — not weeks, years. He sifted through personal journals, phone recordings, and court records. He interviewed family members, case workers, and the people who serve Atlanta's homeless population. This is ethnography as much as journalism, and the texture shows: he knows what is in their refrigerators, and he has watched the money come in and go out.

That is why the book is so hard to argue with. When Goldstone says a family cannot save for a deposit, he has seen the numbers. When he says the voucher system does not work, he has watched someone live inside its failure. The data is woven through the narrative rather than lectured from above it, and the families carry the argument.

How to Approach It

Read it in order, and let the five stories braid together the way Goldstone arranged them. He cuts between families the way a novelist would, and the parallels build quietly. Do not skip the chapters that feel like data — they are where the individual stories become a system.

Give yourself permission to read it slowly. At around 448 pages, it is a substantial book, and it is emotionally demanding. This is not a book to binge in a weekend if you can help it. Read a family at a time, and sit with each one.

The audiobook, read by Dion Graham and Goldstone himself, is excellent — Graham is one of the best narrators working — and the scenes are so vivid that the book translates very well to audio. Just be warned: you will find yourself sitting in the driveway, unwilling to turn the engine off, more than once.

A note on content: the book deals with child death, physical and sexual violence, illness, substance use, and mental illness. Goldstone does not look away from any of it. But he also does not turn his subjects into symbols. They are funny, stubborn, ambitious, flawed, loving people, and the book respects them enough to show all of that.

Memorable Lines

Goldstone's prose is plain and precise rather than aphoristic, so the lines that stay with you tend to be sentences of quiet summary rather than slogans. A few that capture the book's argument:

- On the core paradox: the working homeless are people with full-time jobs who cannot keep a roof over their heads — a phrase that sounds like a contradiction until the book shows you it is a description.
- On invisibility: a mother can work double shifts cleaning a hospital ward, sleep in a motel room with her children, and officially not exist as a homeless person — because the count was designed not to see her.
- On the title's meaning: "there is no place for us" is not an angry sentence. It is a tired one — the verdict of families who asked only for a stable address, a door that locks, a kitchen, and a school their children could stay in for a whole year.

Fair Criticisms

Scope. This is five families in one city. Atlanta is a particular place, with particular laws, history, and politics. How much of this generalizes? Goldstone's answer, built into the book, is that the same forces — rents, wages, private-equity landlords, extended-stay motels, eviction courts — are at work in cities across America. Atlanta is the case study, not the exception. But a fair-minded reader should still ask how much of the Atlanta story is Atlanta, and how much is America. The book makes its case through depth rather than breadth, and that is a real trade-off.

Solutions. Goldstone is devastating on diagnosis and thinner on prescription. The book gestures toward what would help — more housing vouchers, stronger tenant protections, more affordable housing construction, limits on the financialization of housing — but it does not lay out a detailed policy program. That is a fair observation, though it slightly misses what the book is trying to do. This is a work of witness, not a white paper. Its job is to make you see something you were not seeing, and to make it impossible to unsee.

The frame of work. The book's moral force comes from the fact that these people work full time and still cannot get housed. That is powerful — but it risks implying, accidentally, that the deserving homeless are the working homeless, and that people who cannot work matter less. Goldstone does not say that; his subjects include people dealing with illness, disability, and trauma. But the frame invites the question. The right to a stable home should not depend on employment status. The book uses work as a wedge to break open a conversation, and the conversation, once open, has to include everyone.

Why It's on the List

There Is No Place for Us was one of the New York Times' 10 Best Books of 2025, one of the Atlantic's 10 best, and one of Barack Obama's favorite books of the year. It won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, was a finalist for the Andrew Carnegie Medal, and won the 2026 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, with the jury calling it "a feat of reportage, analysis and storytelling" about a national crisis of family homelessness among the working poor.

That sweep — across critics, prize juries, and a former president's reading list — tells you the book works on two levels at once. It is rigorous enough for the prizes and readable enough for a commute. It is angry and fair. It is specific and universal. It reframes homelessness from a story about personal failure into a story about a market outcome — and once you have seen that reframing, it is hard to unsee it in your own city.

What Would Actually Help

Goldstone is careful here, and so should any reader be: there is no single fix. But the book points in a few clear directions.

Build more housing where people live and work. Not only on the far edges of the city, where land is cheap and jobs are distant, but in the neighborhoods where the demand actually is. The affordable housing promised alongside projects like the BeltLine has to arrive in the quantities pledged, not as a rounding error.

Make vouchers work the way they are supposed to work. Give families more time to use them, and limit landlords' ability to refuse them outright. A voucher that cannot be spent is not assistance; it is a lottery ticket with an expiration date.

Give tenants real protections. That includes legal representation in eviction court, because a five-minute hearing against a landlord's lawyer is not a fair fight. It also includes the basic procedural protections Georgia currently lacks, like requiring eviction notices to be served in person rather than tacked to a door.

Treat long-term motel residents as tenants. The Efficiency Lodge ruling in Georgia did exactly this, granting residents the rights of tenants — notice, due process, protection from being locked out on a whim. That principle should not depend on a lawsuit.

Confront the financialization question directly. Ask whether firms should be able to own thousands of single-family homes in one city at all, and what happens to a housing market when the largest landlords are portfolios rather than people.

None of these is easy. All of them are harder than looking away. And for readers wondering what they can do, the book's answer is mostly about attention: pay attention to the housing debates in your own city. When a new development is proposed, ask who it is for. When your council debates tenant protections, show up. When you drive past an extended-stay motel, remember who is inside. The families in this book did not need charity. They needed a housing market that had a place for them.

What to Read Next

- **Evicted, by Matthew Desmond** — the closest companion to this book. Desmond's Pulitzer-winning account of eviction in Milwaukee gives you the eviction court to Goldstone's motel room. Together, the two books trace the full arc of the crisis. Desmond's *Poverty, by America* is the argumentative sequel, laying out the policy case.
- **Nomadland, by Jessica Bruder** — older Americans living in vehicles and working seasonal jobs. A different population, the same broken formula.
- **The Working Poor, by David Shipler** — older now but still sharp, widening the frame beyond housing to the whole economy of low-wage work.
- **$2.00 a Day, by Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer** — on the poorest Americans, living on almost nothing, and what the safety net actually delivers.

There Is No Place for Us is, finally, a book about attention. Goldstone spent years watching what most of us drive past without seeing — the motel with the weekly rates, the family doubled up in a relative's apartment, the parent coming home from a full day of work to a room that was never meant to be a home. Once you have seen it through his eyes, you cannot unsee it. That is what great reporting does: it does not just inform you, it rewires what you notice.