Working While Homeless: In America, It's All Too Common

A new book by the journalist Brian Goldstone puts a spotlight on people who have jobs



Efficiency Lodge, an extended-stay hotel in Decatur, Ga. In nearby Atlanta, between 2010 and 2023, the median rent shot up by 76 percent, meaning that someone with a full-time job may still not be able to afford a home.

By Jennifer Szalai

Britt, a mother of two whose roots in Atlanta go back five generations, stared at the signboard near the road where she used to live. The previous year, her affordable housing complex, Gladstone Apartments, had been razed to make way for a new development called Empire Zephyr, whose digital rendering showed a mix of condos and townhouses "starting from the low $400s" and promised "lush greenery, budding culture, energy and soul." The construction site both impressed her and made her utterly despondent: "Wow, this will be really nice when it's done. But me and my kids? There's no place for us here."

The moment is wrenching. Before Britt finally secured a unit in Gladstone, she had been struggling to find a home. Her story is one of several that the journalist Brian Goldstone tells in "There Is No Place for Us," his powerful new book about "the working homeless" in the rapidly gentrifying city of Atlanta, where someone with a full-time job can still get priced out of a place to live. "The city's renaissance has exacted a heavy toll on its low-income residents," he writes, explaining that between 2010 and 2023 the median rent shot up by a staggering 76 percent.

The people in this book work a lot, and earn very little. Sleeping in cars, crashing with friends or paying for a decrepit room in an extended-stay hotel, they are "trapped in a sort of shadow realm." Politicians have been incentivized to define homelessness narrowly, including only people living in shelters or on the street. A true measure of homelessness in America would be six times the official figure, Goldstone writes,

pushing the number up to more than four million. “There Is No Place for Us” offers an immersive narrative of how five Atlanta families found themselves in the direst of straits yet statistically invisible: “They literally did not count.”

For some of Goldstone’s subjects, the precipitating event is a violent catastrophe. Britt left the father of her kids after he pulled a gun on her. Celeste moved to Efficiency Lodge, an extended-stay hotel, after an ex-boyfriend burned her house down.

The decline in Maurice and Natalia’s fortunes is more gradual, a slow slide into ruin. Having been priced out of their hometown, Washington, D.C., they moved to Atlanta in 2013, and lucked out with a rental they could afford. Then their landlady announced that she was selling the condo. The event plunged Maurice and Natalia into the city’s skyrocketing rental market. They have three children, one with autism, and they needed to live in a neighborhood with decent schools.

Thus began a vicious circle involving a co-signing service, a roach-infested apartment and a private equity firm that automated evictions with an algorithmic ruthlessness. When Natalia had a panic attack, a psychiatrist gave her bad advice, instructing her to cut her hours at the call center where she worked in order to qualify for paid leave, without offering an accurate picture of what such a move would entail. The ensuing scything of their income pushed the family over the edge: “Their leaky boat was now sinking.”

“There Is No Place for Us” is an exceptional feat of reporting, full of an immediacy that calls to mind Adrian Nicole LeBlanc’s “Random Family” and Matthew Desmond’s “Evicted.” Goldstone, who has a Ph.D. in anthropology, conducted interviews, sifted through court records, watched video footage and pored over diary entries in order to produce an intimate account of some of the most difficult years in his subjects’ lives. The entrepreneurial Celeste started a cooking service from her room at Efficiency that came to a halt when her abdominal pain and loss of appetite turned out to be symptoms of ovarian and breast cancer. She could not live in a family shelter because she had a 15-year-old son, and family shelters would not take boys older than 13. Despite being a cancer patient, she did not score high enough on the Vulnerability Index for assistance because she was not in a shelter or on the street.

Celeste kept a hot-pink composition notebook that she used as a journal. As the country started locking down during the early days of the pandemic, she lost her job at KFC. “God,” she wrote, “I know you say don’t worry but I’m human and the nature of my flesh is to do so. God, you know my heart and I know you promised to never leave nor forsake me.”

Given the demands of immediate survival, collective action is hard to marshal, and even harder to sustain. When a group called the Housing Justice League organizes protests at Efficiency to draw attention to cruel lockouts during the pandemic amid execrable living conditions — mold infestations, broken doors and sagging ceilings — momentum soon sputters out. As one community volunteer puts it during a meeting, gesturing at all the poster boards, “What’s the point of all of this if these families don’t have a place to live?”

And even if these families do eventually find a place to live, they often pay a premium for being poor. Maurice and Natalia were charged a “risk-management fee” for an apartment that effectively doubled their security deposit. But they figured their monthly rent would still be cheaper than what they were paying for their cramped room at Extended Stay America, which Maurice called their “expensive prison.”

Landlords, especially corporate ones, push up rents even when they don’t have to because they know how much power they wield in a captive market. Goldstone quotes the owner of one property management company spelling out his advantage in the starkest terms during the pandemic: “Where are people going to go? They can’t go anywhere.”