

# FLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: USA: BEING POOR IN THE WORLD'S RICHEST COUNTRY

September 29, 2026

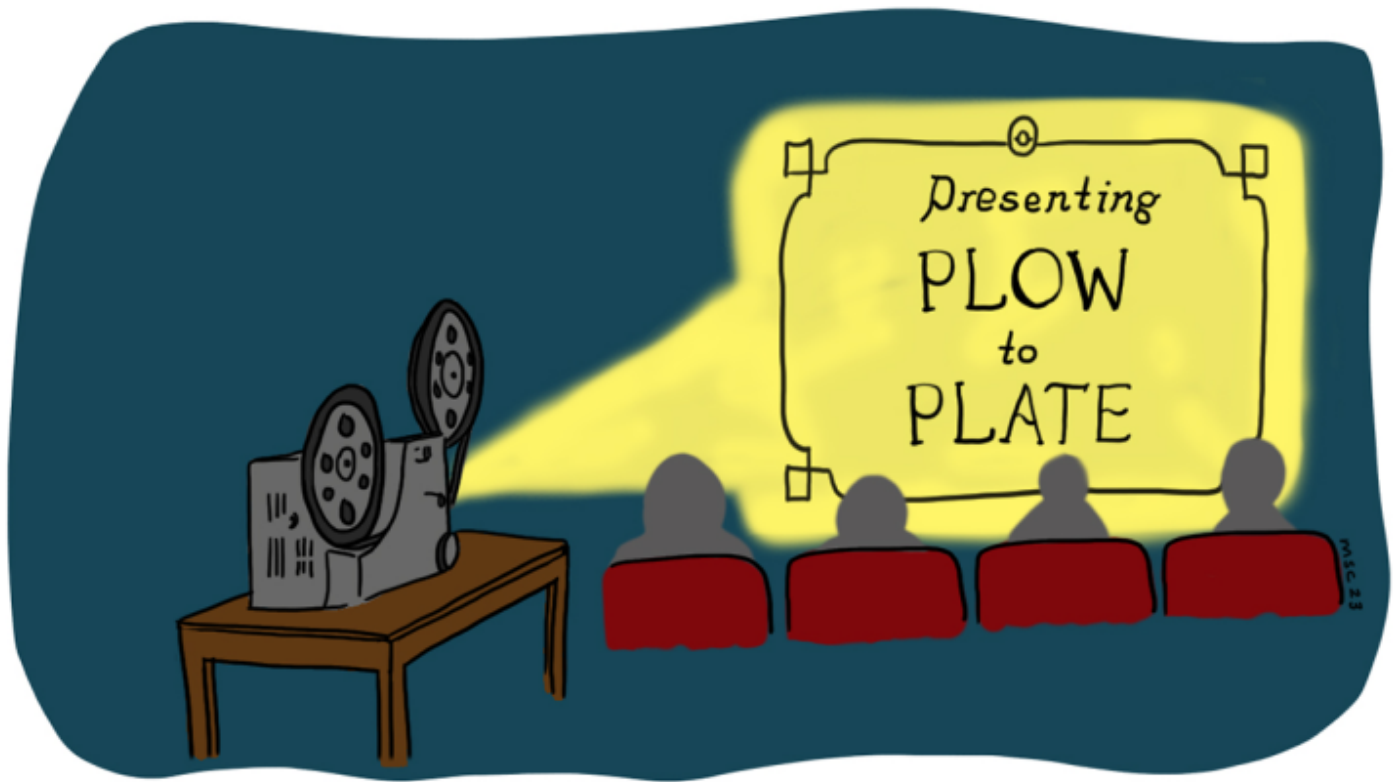


Illustration by Maggie Carson

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By Adam Rabiner

**F**rench film director Sebastien Gilles seems surprised by the horrendous conditions of impoverished Americans in his 2019 documentary *USA: Being Poor in the World's Richest Country*. "Aren't you being a bit harsh?" he asks a landlord evicting a tenant. The tenant herself is more phlegmatic. "You do what you have to do. I can go to a hotel." That modern American poverty can shock a European who hails from the land

that gave rise to the sans-culottes says a lot.

Gilles portrays several individuals throughout the country experiencing being poor. The first person is Maria, a 58-year-old housekeeper and caregiver living out of her car in San Diego, sharing a free public parking lot with 30 other people. The space is equipped with Porta-Potties, water and a communal kitchen. Maria became homeless after her husband divorced her and kicked her out of her comfortable home. She keeps a tidy bed in the back of her car, joins a gym so she can shower regularly, and dresses well. Overall, she is sanguine about the situation.

Eric, her neighbor in the lot, was a successful computer engineer who earned a decent salary, worked 50-hour weeks, but developed major health issues that caused him to go on unemployment and quickly burn through his savings. He worked out a deal with a local pizzeria which gives him slices for free which he shares with friends. When the lot's gates go down at 6 p.m. he prepares for the evening sleeping in the driver's seat of his cluttered car. Eric says the experience has taught him that homelessness can come suddenly and unexpectedly. As he's seen firsthand, oftentimes it's simply the result of a bad luck as opposed to things like laziness, drug addiction or mental illness.

Every day in the U.S. about 6,300 people are evicted from their homes. Gilles takes us to unforgiving, formerly industrial, Richmond, VA, which has a 25 percent poverty rate and 3,000 evictions per year. These numbers make it one of the highest poverty in the U.S.—25 times higher than the same number in Paris.

Landlords utilize a public database of those who have been formerly evicted to screen out potential high-risk renters. They can also begin the eviction process when rent is only five days late and within weeks the sheriff will serve notice with a yellow note to post on the door. Budget hotels pack the suburbs thriving on housing those who have lost their homes.

Hunger is another prevalent condition of poverty. In the rural Appalachian Mountains,

where the poorest counties in the U.S. are found, a supermarket cashier tells Gilles that at least half the people she rings up use food stamps to buy their groceries. In these largely white former coal mining communities, food itself is a precious and scarce commodity. In Roanoke, VA, the nonprofit Feeding Southwest Virginia operates a dedicated food truck through their program Cafe to Grow and hands out 200 free meals a day to kids who can no longer access school meals during the summer break from June to August.

Twenty-eight million Americans lack health insurance. Appalachian families must rely on volunteers and charities for medical care and dental treatment. Thousands arrive at night at a makeshift hospital resembling a refugee camp or M.A.S.H. unit which will open its doors at 6 a.m. to receive basic and specialized medicine on a first-come, first-served basis. A school gym is crowded with children and adults receiving preventive cleanings as well as tooth extractions that are the result of a system based on 19<sup>th</sup> century charity care models.

Gilles notes that 80 percent of this region vote Republican. A middle-aged man getting his hair cut observes that Trump keeps his family near him, puts his country first and keeps his promises. Cyrenia Collins, a 58-year-old marine veteran who is living in a mobile home, observes that “if people want to work, they can find a job.”

Gilles sympathizes with his subjects but casts an unforgiving light on the so-called American Dream. America has not been Made Great Again since this film came out and poverty in all its manifestations persists. While this might sadden Gilles, he would not be surprised.

USA: Being Poor in the World's Richest Country: Tuesday, October 13, 2026

To learn about future films, please subscribe to our newsletter through the “join us” page of our website, Plow to Plate Films.

## ABOUT US

“Plow to Plate,” presented by the Safe Food Committee of the Park Slope Food Coop, is a film series focused on food. Its goal is to educate the community about food-related topics and issues, such as how food is sustainably cultivated, harvested, distributed, as well as prepared and served. All screenings are FREE and open to the public.