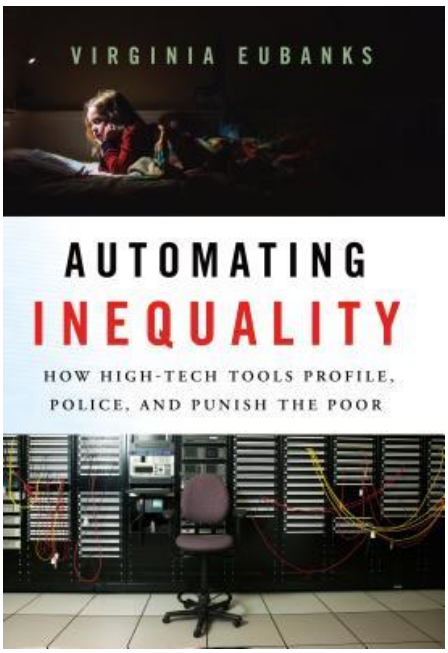


# Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor

*Virginia Eubanks*

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**Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor** Virginia Eubanks
A powerful investigative look at data-based discrimination—and how technology affects civil and human rights and economic equity

The State of Indiana denies one million applications for healthcare, foodstamps and cash benefits in three years—because a new computer system interprets any mistake as “failure to cooperate.” In Los Angeles, an algorithm calculates the comparative vulnerability of tens of thousands of homeless people in order to prioritize them for an inadequate pool of housing resources. In Pittsburgh, a child welfare agency uses a statistical model to try to predict which children might be future victims of abuse or neglect.

Since the dawn of the digital age, decision-making in finance, employment, politics, health and human services has undergone revolutionary change. Today, automated systems—rather than humans—control which neighborhoods get policed, which families attain needed resources, and who is investigated for fraud. While we all live under this new regime of data, the most invasive and punitive systems are aimed at the poor.

In Automating Inequality, Virginia Eubanks systematically investigates the impacts of data mining, policy algorithms, and predictive risk models on poor and working-class people in America. The book is full of heart-wrenching and eye-opening stories, from a woman in Indiana whose benefits are literally cut off as she lays dying to a family in Pennsylvania in daily fear of losing their daughter because they fit a certain statistical profile.

The U.S. has always used its most cutting-edge science and technology to contain, investigate, discipline and punish the destitute. Like the county poorhouse and scientific charity before them, digital tracking and automated decision-making hide poverty from the middle-class public and give the nation the ethical distance it needs to make inhumane choices: which families get food and which starve, who has housing and who remains homeless, and which families are broken up by the state. In the process, they weaken democracy and betray our most cherished national values.

This deeply researched and passionate book could not be more timely.

Naomi Klein: "This book is downright scary."

Ethan Zuckerman, MIT: "Should be required reading."

Dorothy Roberts, author of Killing the Black Body: "A must-read for everyone concerned about modern tools of inequality in America."

Astra Taylor, author of The People's Platform: "This is the single most important book about technology you will read this year."

## Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor Details

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# From Reader Review Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor for online ebook

## David Wineberg says

Target, track, punish. Repeat.

Notwithstanding what the French wrote on the Statue of Liberty, America hates its poor. It will spend billions to deny them help. In Automating Inequality, Virginia Eubanks says we manage the poor so we don't have to eradicate poverty. Instead, we have developed a Digital Poorhouse – high tech containment of the poor and recording of their every action, association and activity. The great innovation today is the prediction model, using the child, the parents, neighbors and even the neighborhood to predict when a child should be removed and given to foster care – before anything has happened.

America's war against its poor goes back some 200 years. It has put them in poorhouses and debtors' prisons, made it difficult or impossible for them to live freely and raise a family, denied them benefits set out in law, sterilized them, and contemplated encouraging them to just die. The latest iteration is high tech. Government tracks the movements, purchases, and habits of those unfortunate enough to seek its help. It's all automated. Decisions are made by algorithms, and undoing the ensuing mess is somewhere between exasperating and impossible. Eubanks explores three very different and widely separated approaches to managing, manipulating and controlling the poor in Indiana, the homeless in Los Angeles, and the child welfare in Pittsburgh.

-During the financial crisis, when millions lost jobs and homes, Indiana actually reduced the percentage of the legally poor on welfare from 38% to 8. It hired IBM to centralize all activity, including document collection. Local caseworkers disappeared, becoming call center agents. They were measured on productivity – how little time they spent with applicants. The slightest error in the 30 document process meant instant automatic denial of benefits. Applicants received a notice of "Failure to co-operate" with no explanation whatsoever. This could include failure to answer the phone for an interview the system rescheduled without notice, failure sign in the numerous places required, and failure of the system to scan and enter the documents submitted. One woman was confined to a hospital bed when they called her home. She was immediately cut off from all benefits, including Medicaid for her cancer, free transport to medical appointments, and foods stamps. They day after she died, she won her appeal.

-Los Angeles has worked hard to gentrify Skid Row. Rather than allow renovation, it has actually removed more housing than there are homeless there. Rumors of the availability of a room can cause lineups for days. LA has spent $11 million collecting data on individuals, but almost all are still homeless. It has been an exercise in tracking and surveillance, with ever more intrusive questionnaires and interviews, mental health tests, and essentially no hope of permanent placement. But everyone goes through the process, often several times, providing intimate details to be used against them. Police apply huge pressure to get the poor out of there, adding to their life records. In 2006, they made 9000 arrests and 12,000 citations in an area with a population of maybe 15,000.

-Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) has a data warehouse of every contact anyone has ever had with public services, including data like the date, amount and location of every purchase with a welfare card. It's an average of 800 pieces of information per person. Algorithms decide if children are at risk of abuse or neglect. The error rate for both false positives and false negatives is high, putting children, and their parents, at risk. Naturally, an outsized percentage of cases involve those who are poor and black. But the reality is that most

of the children investigated are not physically or sexually abused. They are poor.

Eubanks rails against us looking the other way, being indifferent, fearing for our own status, and other such liberal guilt. It makes the book end badly. It detracts from the premise that big data is taking over entire lives, keeping people in their place and preventing the help lawmakers prescribe. The blame needs to stay at the top, even if the solution might come from the bottom.

The punchline in all these scenarios is that poverty costs more money than it's worth. President Nixon saw this in the late 60s. He proposed a national basic income. With money in bank accounts, the need for monitoring, surveillance, recordkeeping, data centers, courts and enforcement all but disappears. The system both pays for itself and improves lives. But America is at war with its poor, so "our vast and expensive public service bureaucracy primarily functions to investigate whether individuals' suffering might be their own fault."

David Wineberg

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### Christa says

I have never read anything more relevant to my career and work. brb, recommending to literally everyone

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### Peter Mcloughlin says

Digital technology which could help the strengthen the social safety net is used as a surveillance net to monitor, regulate, and scrutinize the poor who come in its gaze. It is not the technology that is the problem so much as the values of the administrators and politicians who weld it. They make algorithms to exclude funds and drive down costs and punish the poor. It goes back to the American attitude towards poverty as an aberration from the norm and a moral failing of the individual instead of a problem of the commonweal. We blame the poor for problems our society creates. We blame them instead of look at ourselves and our values. We use a wonderful technology to surveil, punish, and entrap them rather than help. Donald Trump calls certain country shitholes. Even Shitholes have elites and comfortable high flyers like Donald. What shitholes don't have is a decent life for people at the bottom. Maybe the well-healed jingoist cheer such comments should keep this in mind because by those standards we here in the US live could be called shithole and the people who nod to the Donald and politicians like him are the reason why.

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### Nils says

An excellent dissection of the largely unheralded construction of a "digital poorhouse" in the United States: the systematic collection and classification of data about the poor as a means to manage (and reduce the numbers of) people demanding social assistance. This data is then weaponized against the people who are being surveilled: Although sometimes framed as a way of ensuring more targeted delivery of benefits, Eubanks shows convincingly that the real purposes are about exercising social control over the poor, about furthering the stigma of poverty's as to "incentivize" people to get off the dole, and ultimately about segmenting the different categories of poverty and need so as to justify the progressive reduction of social

expenditure on the poor.

The core of the book are three case studies: public assistance programs in Indiana, homeless services in Los Angeles, and child welfare in Allegheny county. What she finds is, “stunning. Across the country, poor and working-class people are targeted buy new tools of digital poverty management and face life-threatening consequences as a result. Automated eligibility systems discourage them from claiming public resources they need to survive and thrive. Complex integrated databases collect their most personal information, with few safeguards for privacy or data security, while offering almost nothing in return. Predictive models and algorithms tag them as risky investments and problematic parents. Vast complexes of social service, law-enforcement, and neighborhood surveillance make their every move visible and offer up their behavior for government, Commercial, and public scrutiny.” (11)

The similarities to China’s much-maligned Social Credit System are striking: the combination of personal information and predictive analytics are used to rate people’s proclivities to need social support. But the differences are also important: whereas in China, no one escapes the Orwellian gaze of the Social Credit System, in America these surveillance and monitoring tools are directed only at the poor and provide a technical way to automate the measurement and the enforcement of the ethically dubious line between the deserving and supposedly undeserving poor, including predictions about who may need what kinds of assistance — which, in a context of moral opprobrium of leveled at the poor, is akin to predicting sin. This not only increases the stigma of poverty, but perversely may make poverty even harder to escape, since, “Under the new regime of prediction, you are impacted not only by your own actions, but by the actions of your lovers, housemates, relatives, and neighbors. Prediction, unlike classification, is intergenerational: Angel and Patrick’s actions today may limit Harriet’s future, and her children’s future.” (182)

A strength of this book is its historical awareness that the latest digital techniques for governing the poor in fact build on a long history that reaches back to the earliest days of the Republic and even to the colonial era, when the building of poorhouses was meant to prevent the undeserving poor from becoming “dependent” paupers, living high off the hog of outdoor relief. Eugenics programs in the late 19th and early 20th century America were above all about control over the poor. (Interestingly, poorhouses were also the first racially integrated institutions in America: even before prisons.)

The “digital poorhouse” that began to be constructed in the 1970s was a reaction to the political contestation in the wake of Great Society poverty relief programs. The aim of these technologies was “to quietly defuse the conflict between the political victories of the welfare rights movement and the professional middle-class revolt against public assistance. To accomplish this goal, new high-tech tools had to be seen as embodying simple administrative upgrades, not consequential political decisions.” (197) In other words, these tools were quite precisely parallel to what Ferguson calls the “anti-politics machine” of that other great administrative engine of anti-poverty, namely development agencies.

Eubanks ultimate concludes that, “The very existence of a social safety net is premised on an agreement to share the social cost of uncertainty. Welfare states distribute the consequences of bad luck more equally across society’s members. They acknowledge that we, as a society, share collective responsibility for creating a system that produces winners and losers, inequity and opportunity. But the moral calculus of the digital poorhouse individualizes risk and shreds social commitment.” (199) As Tim O’Reilly remarks, this book offers “a terrible reminder of the power of the digital systems we build and the urgency of infusing them with the right moral values.”

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### Willy Marz Thiessam says

Virginia Eubanks has done all of us a favor, and we should really appreciate how difficult this must have been. She looks at a large stretch of American history, in how it treats its poor and oppressed minority groups and uses technology to do so. This is not an easy or pleasant thing to come to grips with, but Ms. Eubanks does it with this very readable and succinct volume. She leaves nothing out and brings us to an overall understanding of what has occurred and the general direction.

Everyone will have their own point of view on this. Ms. Eubanks provides ample information both statistical and anecdotal for you to develop your own ideas as to how this menace must be confronted. For me the sheer waste of funds only used to create division and poverty is staggering. Simply treating people with dignity would save money and hardship for everyone. The system to provide assistance is used to control, oppress and perpetuate needless misery. We need people to have the money they need to survive and stop governments and the rich acting like childish bullies to those in greatest need.

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### Jessie Seagull says

is very good book,
so excelent and beautiful im like

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### Joseph says

Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor by Virginia Eubanks is a report on the use of technology in determining government assistance programs. Eubanks is the co-founder of Our Knowledge, Our Power (OKOP), a grassroots anti-poverty and welfare rights organization, and is Associate Professor in the Department of Women's Studies at the University at Albany, SUNY.

Public assistance programs are seen as a drag on the economy to many people. People work hard for their money don't want to see their tax dollars abused. Reagan exaggerated stories of welfare queens. The 1970s were filled with images of Caddilac's parked in front of welfare offices. Public assistance is typically seen as an abused system. The good that it does is under-reported when compared to the abuse.

Over seventy percent of full-time workers say they live paycheck to paycheck. The average American also has nearly $16,000 in credit card debt. For those seeking an education, student loan debt piles up faster than job opportunities. Many Americans are balancing on the edge of homelessness and bankruptcy.

Eubanks looks at three separate areas in three different parts of the country and examines what automation has done in determining benefits and the problems it causes. Poverty in America is real and a growing problem. We see it every day and do our best to block it out. Americans also have a history of moving away from poverty -- out of the cities and into the suburbs and back again.

The first area Eubanks describes is automation and privatization of public services to save money and limit

fraud (which is very small). Applications are done over the phone to a call center (which was problematic for the deaf) or online. In poor areas, libraries and librarians are overrun trying to provide internet service to patrons filing for benefits. In one case (years ago, I imagine) a woman added the food stamps phone number to her family and friends list because she spent so much time on the phone with them over benefits. When Indiana automated it was a disaster. Call centers and document centers did not follow through on paperwork many lost benefits for failure to cooperate when paperwork was lost. This was life-threatening to many on medication. Fixing problems was met with resistance, paperwork, and delays.

Skid Row in Los Angeles became the defacto homeless area. Keeping a defined area homelessness helped insulate the public from the homeless. Gentrification, however, pushed the homeless out of their "home." Arrests for sitting or laying on the sidewalk, confiscation of property, and basically criminalizing homelessness became the government's solution. In Pennsylvania, Child Services uses an algorithm to predict future behavior. Vendetta calls remain in the parent's/child's records. In both cases, algorithms have taken over for human interaction and understanding. Computers take certain answers but most of the time no matter what is being filled out "Other" is filled out especially when something as important as physical and mental health. Computers are poor interpreters of "other."

Automating Inequality demonstrates the problems of algorithms and automation and what it does identify the poor and many cases work to keep the poor poor. The system was intended to provide assistance for the short term and help people out of poverty has become a system to perpetuate poverty. An interesting report based on real-life examples and real-life workers.

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### Frederic Bush says

I wanted to like this book, but the author is not trustworthy -- claims without evidence that she was secretly investigated for insurance fraud, moves beyond the evidence on two of her case studies. While she does marshal evidence that automated welfare changes in Indiana were bungled to ruinous effect, for her other case studies she does not compare the effectiveness of algorithms with the effectiveness of people, and instead unfairly points out the faults of algorithms without pointing out the faults of humans.

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### Will Byrnes says

> **If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be … For the poor you will always have with you in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'** - (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)
>
> **The law, it its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.** -- Anatole France

*The poorhouse*. These days, it's common parlance for extreme financial misfortune. Someone who has had a particularly bad fiscal spell could be said to be *heading to the poorhouse*. These days, we do not have literal, brick and mortar poorhouses. Those were usually fetid places, ill-maintained, offering meager shelter and

food to the detritus of society, the poor, ill, elderly, and disabled, often requiring labor in return. These days, we have something new.

> **America's poor and working-class people have long been subject to invasive surveillance, midnight raids, and punitive public policy that increase the stigma and hardship of poverty. During the nineteenth century, they were quarantined in county poorhouses. During the twentieth century they were investigated by caseworkers, treated like criminals on trial. Today we have forged a digital poorhouse from databases, matched algorithms and statistical risk models. It promises to eclipse the reach and repercussions of everything that came before.**

The most famous poorhouse resident in literature is one Oliver Twist. In the novel of that name, Dickens intended to highlight the inhumanity of the Poor Law Act of 1834. The world of poverty he described was, while literarily thrilling, a horrifying exposé of man's cruelty to man. Poorhouses found a home in the USA as well. The first poorhouse in the city of my current residence was established in 1863. In my erstwhile lifelong home, New York, an 1824 law directed the counties of the state to erect poorhouses. Residents could be required to do whatever work the superintendent demanded. Any resistance resulted in being kicked out. Among other sources for the poorhouse population, children younger than 15 caught begging could be legally remanded there until the person in charge of the poorhouse let them out. There were certainly poorhouses in NY earlier than that. The first poorhouse in the USA was in Boston, in 1662.

**Virginia Eubanks** - from her Twitter page

Virginia Eubanks has been involved with economic justice movements for over twenty years. She is an associate Prof of Poli Sci at the SUNY Albany campus. Her writing about tech in social justice has appeared in *The American Prospect, The Nation, Harper's* and *Wired*. She is a founding member of the Our Data Bodies project, which looks at how the gathering and use of digital info by government impacts our rights. In *Automating Inequality*, Eubanks offers a bit of history on the poorhouse, noting, with particular relevance for the operation of today's prisons, and other bits of outsourcing of government welfare responsibilities, that privately run poorhouses led to the residents being particularly exploited and deprived of necessities in order to increase profits for the owners, not that the publicly run ones were any great shakes. Her central notion is that the physical poorhouse of the past has been replaced in the 21st century by a modern version.

> **For all their high-tech polish, our modern systems of poverty management—automated decision-making, data mining, and predictive analytics—retain a remarkable kinship with the poorhouses of the past. Our new digital tools spring from punitive, moralistic views of poverty and create a system of high-tech containment and investigation that I call the digital poorhouse. The digital poorhouse deters the poor from accessing public resources; polices their labor, spending, sexuality, and parenting; tries to predict their future behavior; and punishes and criminalizes those who do not comply with its dictates. In the process, it creates ever-finer moral distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, categorizations that rationalize our national failure to care for one another.**

She takes two approaches. First is tracking the history of how the poor have been treated, noting the Dickensian era preference for punishing the poor overtly, by shunting them into miserable institutions, if providing any aid at all, then a revolutionary approach called *Scientific Charity*, which employed caseworkers applying the methodology of police work in examining the merits of a person's application for aid,

> **As Mary Richmond wrote in Social Diagnosis, her 1917 textbook on casework procedures, "the reliability of the evidence on which [caseworkers] base their decisions should be no less rigidly scrutinized than is that of legal evidence by opposing counsel." Scientific charity treated the poor as criminal defendants by default.**

the reversal of reliance on private charity with the New Deal, the paring back of benefits in the 1970s, beginning the use of computer technology to exclude applicants, and sundry mechanisms being used today.

The second is to offer case studies, on-site looks at three locations. Homelessness is the focus in Los Angeles, the outsourcing of welfare systems in Indiana, and child custody issues at the Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) in Pittsburgh.

In short, Eubanks offers a history of US public policy on poverty, along with the mechanisms employed in various eras to manage, and limit public outlays to address it, a look at the mechanisms now in use that serve to exclude applicants rather than enhance service, and an analysis of how those systems impact people today. She very successfully bridges the gap between theory and reality with her field studies. This is what's going on. This is how it affects people.

Instead of being shunted to three-dimensional concrete buildings, today's poor are far too frequently denied public services, while the state, in addition, often erects barricades to the poor finding a way out of their situation by making it more difficult for them to get a job. Apparently biblical predictions were not considered adequate to the task, so we appear to be committed, as a society, to keeping the poor poor. We apparently prefer for them to remain that way. Hating the poor has been a national addiction since the invasion of North America by religious extremists. We are so addicted to hating on the poor that we have managed, with very few exceptions in our national history, to define poverty at such an insanely low level of income that the majority of poor people are denied even the dubious comfort of fitting the official definition. For example, the US Census Bureau defines its poverty threshold as $12,331 for a single person. So, if *you* are a single person, earning, say, $12,500 a year, you are not considered poor. Congratulations! And if you are over 65, that line drops to $11,367. I guess we seniors must eat less. Right, whatever.

I am no stranger to such topics, and while the broad strokes of her Bruegelesque depiction of our welfare system might not be all that surprising, as with the painting, there is much to be appreciated by looking at the details. There were pieces of information in here that were surprising. Did you know that the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal era) imposed a cap of 10% black recruits during the Depression, despite the dramatically higher unemployment rate they experienced? Or that half of us spend at least some portion of our lives in poverty?

Eubanks offers many instances of Kafkaesque, sometimes deadly results of how people are treated by welfare systems. It is amazing to me that there have not been thousands of incidents of people so frustrated by this mean-spirited, cruel system that they go postal on social service agencies across the nation. Probably because they can't afford the hardware. God knows it's easy enough to buy.

When you are poor you surrender your rights as a citizen, hell, as a human being. Innocent until proven guilty? Not once you apply for any sort of public assistance. The right to parent your own child? The right to confront your accusers? Not if a hostile neighbor calls in an anonymous false report accusing you of neglecting your kid. The right to choose your sexual partners? Not if the welfare agency deems that person inappropriate. The right to counsel? Nope. You are on your own, with the entire resources of the state aligned against you. Offer any resistance to or question the caseworkers who are assigned your case and you are denied benefits. It's yes, Massa, no, Massa, or you are out on the street, and in many places you can be

fined and/or put in jail for being homeless.

While I am a senior citizen, retired, with only Social Security for my personal income, I am blessed with a spouse who remains employed full time. But I have had my share of interactions with the welfare and legal systems. When I was 18 years old, I had my own apartment. But after a significant industrial accident, (I was working at a large Postal Service facility in Manhattan) I was unable to work for a long time, several months of which was spent in hospitals. I was covered by worker's comp, but it took so long for benefits to begin that I lost my apartment. Thanks, guys. At least I had a fallback, however unpleasant that may have seemed at the time. I have had just loads of fun dealing with unemployment, having endured that most American of experiences, the layoff, more than once. After one particularly frustrating interaction at an unemployment office, I ripped a large piece of hardware off the wall of the men's bathroom. (Statute of limitations is passed for that one, right?) In another I was denied benefits, because I made a typo (press 1 to be insulted, press 2 to be denied, press 3 to be put on permanent hold) in an interactive system that would not allow human contact. While out of work for most of four years, and being held responsible for child support (while having joint custody) based on what I had earned in my highest earnings year ever, I had my driver's license suspended by the state of New York, because I was unable, not unwilling, unable to pay the considerable monthly sum. Not a small thing, as many of the companies that hired people with my skill set were located in suburbia. Way to help. It took several years before the court accepted the fact (helped along by the reams of documentation I produced) that I had been unable to get work in systems, and had taken a shit-paying job as a security guard because it was the only thing I could get. The support arrears that accumulated during this period helped force me into dire financial straits. So, while I am decidedly middle-class by education and inclination, I have first-hand knowledge of how systems that at least purport to be helpful can do their best to make a bad situation worse, permanent even. I live in dread of the day when I have to face these systems again. (It will almost certainly come) And *I* am doing ok. The people Eubanks writes of are, mostly, not.

Dealing with welfare agencies, with or without their associated, gun-toting uniformed sorts, or their legal enforcers, is horrifying enough. With the expansion of data collection, and monitoring, real and potential, with the widespread sharing of collected information (privacy rights? You're kidding, right?) with a vast array of other government entities (and private entities too, where service provision or data collection is outsourced) as well as any law enforcement agency that asks for it, Big Brother has become more like the entire Manson Family. They are watching, and any mis-step, real or imagined, any spark of resistance, real or imagined, any error on your part, real or imagined, can get you cut off whatever public benefit you are on, thus increasing your poverty, reducing your life expectancy and increasing your risk of being incarcerated in what has become that contemporary replacement for the poorhouse of old, jail. There are even systems in place that look at *projected* behavior, that put one darkly in mind of the film (and story) Minority Report.

Virginia Eubanks has written a piercing appraisal of how the new technology of the digital age has given the state unimaginable power over the lives of any who are forced into contact with it. The needs of the poor are not different from the needs of the middle class. But the latter, with the means to take care of those needs in the private market, can minimize contact with the beast that is the welfare/legal system. Once one comes into contact with that beast, a person is marked, indelibly, for decades or forever.

What can be done? As is often the case, big problems do not lend themselves to simple fixes. Eubanks offers an array of actions that might be taken to help in the Dismantling of the Data Poorhouse. She has highlighted truths we should be aware of, and notes groups that should be targeted for a bit of consciousness raising. Mostly the proposed remedies sound sane, but unlikely, not a rare thing in books about sociopolitical ills.

The strengths of this book are many. I was reminded very much of Barbara Ehrenreich's perceptive writings on diverse important matters of public policy. Eubanks has dug deeply into the underlying realities of being

poor in America and filled in a lot of the blanks. (BTW, it make a perfect companion to the excellent book White Trash), and should find a natural home in college and graduate school classes on poverty and public policy. People who are poor already know a lot of what is in here, although even the reader of meager means will still find fascinating information. The middle class, or wealthy reader will, hopefully, have their eyes opened (dare we say their consciousness raised?), finding serial unsuspected revelations in *Automating Inequality*. But the most significant group of readers who should read this are those who, like me, have lived at least a bit in both worlds, particularly those who, currently not a part of the public welfare/legal system, expect they never will be, and disparage those who are as lazy or morally suspect.

> **poverty is not an island; it is a borderland. There's quite a lot of movement in the economic fringes, especially across the fuzzy boundary between the poor and the working class. Those who live in the economic borderlands are pitted against one another by policy that squeezes every possible dime from the wallets of the working class at the same time that it cuts social programs for the poor and absolves the professional middle class and wealthy of their social obligations.** - [see recent tax cuts for the 1%]

As the powers in Washington, and in many of our states, seek to dim the lights of our shining city on a hill, it will be up to those who are not wealthy or connected, those who work for low wages, those who are jobless, those who earn, while knowing that a layoff could happen any day, those who can see through the porous barriers between the middle class, the working poor, and the distraught, to comprehend and act on the need to join forces in order to rekindle that flame. As Eubanks points out, and as you probably already know, in your heart of hearts

> **…systems designed for the poor will eventually be used on everyone.**

It's enough to enrage and/or depress Dickens.

Review posted – January 19, 2018

Publication date – January 16, 2018

==========**EXTRA STUFF**

Links to the author's personal, and Twitter pages

A sample of the book

The Our Data Bodies project

> **Based in marginalized neighborhoods in Charlotte, North Carolina, Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California, we look at digital data collection and our human rights, work with local communities, community organizations, and social support networks, and show how different data systems impact re-entry, fair housing, public assistance, and community development.**

HISTORY OF 19th CENTURY AMERICAN POORHOUSES

Poorhouse records by state

January 1, 2018 – NY Times - A.I. and Big Data Could Power a New War on Poverty - by Elisabeth A. Mason
This piece posits that AI could better match people with jobs, and improve computer-based education. In the article, she cites the creation of a *Commission on Evidence-Based Policy Making*, from legislation sponsored by Dem Patty Murray and Rep Paul Ryan. The commission expired in September 2017, but made recommendations

> **This provides one more indication of the promise of A.I. and big data in the service of positive, purposeful public good. Before we dismiss these new technologies as nothing more than agents of chaos and disruption, we ought to consider their potential to work to society's advantage.**

Yeah, sure. Or another tool the state can use to exclude assistance applicants. Well, you didn't take that job 150 miles from home that our system indicated would be a perfect fit, so sorry, your application is rejected. Don't blame me, blame the computer.

Dcember 12, 2017 – The Business Insider – on another automated approach to poverty - Robots are being used to deter the homeless from setting up camp in San Francisco - by Melia Robinson

February 3, 2018 - NY Times - Who's Able-Bodied Anyway? by Emily Badger and Margot Sanger-Katz - a familiar extra-legal method for keeping people from getting needed benefits

In case you missed the link in the review, White Trash

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### Anne says

Dynamite subject! How big data impacts, and is impacted by, the way we serve the poor is a topic that is under-addressed, increasingly important, and poorly understood. However, I struggled through this book due to redundancy, more telling than showing, and a too-often tenuous connection between the (worthwhile) arguments advanced and the examples put forward. Oh well.

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### Vipassana says

> *Policing is broader than law enforcement: it includes all the process by which we maintain order, regulate lives, and press young people into boxes so they will fit our unjust society*

These processes are the algorithms and meaningless indexes that are automating public assistance delivery in the US. With three case studies: the automation of Indiana's welfare eligibility, an index that decides which homeless person deserves the LA's attention and predictive tool for child protection services to determine which Pennsylvanian children are at risk of negligence from their caregivers. As a result of these algorithms, people with life-long disabilities lose their medicaid, homeless people are judged as neither too desolate for long term housing nor with the skills necessary to benefit from temporary housing, and parents subject to

having their children taken away simply because they or their parents received services from child protection. These victims of these systems trade their most private selves, mental history, relationship status, health, etc in the hope that it might get them the resources they need. These algorithms are proof that our society doesn't believe that those who seek public assistance, have a right to privacy and dignity.

These rigid algorithms don't deliver justice. Equity in public assistance requires *the passion that understands the pulse of life beneath the official version of events*. Instead these algorithms exacerbate the racism and bias of society. With the help of these three cases, she demonstrates the problem with automated decision making systems, and that the solutions will not come from better algorithms but a reassessment of our values.

> *The very existance of a social safety net is premised on an agreement to share the social costs of uncertainity*

Eubanks challenges the paradigm where a right to public assistance is determined by whether we should or should not feel sorry for the individual who gets it.

In her most pessimistic moment, Eubanks says that *we are winning the fight against mass incarceration at just the historic moment when the digital poorhouse has makes the physical institution of the prison less necessary*. However, the time for, at least, skepticism has come. We have shown unsubstantiated belief in technology as a panacea to social ills. A must read for everyone in this age of automated decision making.

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### Jocelyn says

2.5 stars. I'd been really excited about the book, so I think my rating is lower than it would have been since it didn't live up to my expectations, mostly because many of the arguments were structured around anecdotes.

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### Carlos Castillo says

**Read before creating your machine learning models**

If you're a researcher or practitioner who wants to create new methods for evaluating risks, prioritizing benefits, or similar applications, read this first. It is a great analysis grounded on the study of three key cases in the US, but from which you can draw general conclusions and guidelines.

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### Sam says

Anyone who has ever claimed that technological development is linked to social progress must read this book. I was blown away.

I want to give a special mention to the “Oath of Non-Harm for an Age of Big Data”. Everyone working in government, technology, or really anywhere should have a copy of this sitting on their desk.

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### Andrei Barbu says

A terrifying view into a dystopian future that we're blindly walking into.

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