

# Hunger and homelessness plague US working families

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The leading cause of hunger in American cities is low-paying jobs, according to a report from the US Conference of Mayors released in January. For the second year in a row poverty level wages were cited as a major cause for the rise in hunger and homelessness in US cities. The 1998 survey of 30 major cities found that 37 percent of adults requesting food assistance were employed and 61 percent of those requesting food assistance were parents and their children.

"The city officials report that the strong economy has had very little positive impact on hunger and homelessness," according to the survey summary. "In many cities, conditions are likely to decline further next year. Low-paying jobs that cannot support a household continue to be a very troublesome problem. Many cities report that welfare reform has had a negative impact on hunger and homelessness. Moreover, several cities expect a downturn in the economy which will further increase the number of homeless and requests for food."

It was a little over two years ago, in 1996, that the federal government ended a 60-year-old guarantee to provide assistance to the long-term unemployed. The new welfare laws were enacted with the support of the Clinton administration. The effect of pushing over 1.5 million people off welfare has been to depress wages, which has had a particularly devastating impact on the most poorly paid workers.

The mayors' summary on hunger and homelessness paints a stark picture of social conditions in US cities in 1998:

- Twenty-two percent of the homeless were employed, and families with children now comprise 38 percent of the homeless population. In half of the cities families must spend daytime hours outside of the shelter they use at night and more than 50 percent of families may have to break up in order to obtain shelter at all. Children comprise one out of every four homeless people in America.

- Low-income households spent nearly half their income on housing, yet only 27 percent of eligible income households are currently served by assisted housing

programs. Waiting lists of 24 to 34 months are common for public housing and Section 8 assistance for housing. Seventy-six percent of the cities have stopped accepting applications for at least one assisted housing program due to the excessive length of the waiting list.

- In 92 percent of cities, emergency food assistance facilities were relied on by families and individuals as a steady source of food over long periods of time, as well as for emergencies.

- During the past year requests for emergency food assistance have increased by an average of 14 percent, including requests for food assistance by families with children. For families alone, 18 percent of requests for food assistance go unmet.

- In nearly half of the cities, people were turned away due to lack of resources. In 60 percent of the cities facilities had to decrease the number of bags of food provided or the number of times people could receive food.

- Requests for emergency food are expected to increase in 1999 in nearly all of the cities surveyed. Ninety-three percent of cities expect requests for emergency shelter will increase; 88 percent expect such requests by homeless families will increase.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Helen Kozlowski, Oakland County Food Bank executive director (suburban Detroit). She said that the welfare-to-work movement has led to a dramatic increase in requests for food aid. Of the 70,000 people receiving food donations in Oakland County, 74 percent are either working, 18 years old and younger, or over 65.

"Our board supports the welfare movement. But it is important to stress that as more and more people are going off of welfare and going to work, they are just not earning enough to make it through the month. For at least a week out of every month they are running flat. They are going to food

pantries to get through that last week. Those pantries are not traditionally prepared to serve these people.

The pantries and so forth come to our food bank and say 'now we want more food and more free food.' The pantries themselves do not have the funds to take care of the increase. They don't know where they're going to get the money. For a long time things stayed pretty much the same. The number of single mothers and children and homeless didn't change that much. Even at the beginning of this movement to employment, there wasn't much of a change. This was so even into 1997. Then all of a sudden there was an explosion."

Kozlowski said the need for food donations increased dramatically in 1998. In 1997 the organization served 2.7 million pounds of food to those in need, a yearly total that had remained relatively stable since 1992. This skyrocketed to 3.8 million pounds in 1998. "In one year we saw our food budget increase by over a million pounds. I don't know if anyone out there is tracking this, but this is incredible," she said.

Another 1998 survey of 500 community institutions reported that a large number of families who showed up at their doors requesting aid had one or more parents working. This survey, which was conducted in 56 different Michigan counties, was compiled as part of a special project sponsored by the Oakland County Welfare Rights Organization, the Michigan Fair Budget Action Coalition, the Catholic Caucus of Southeast Michigan, and Groundwork for a Just World, another religious organization.

Sixty percent of the service organizations that took part in the survey between March and May of 1998 report that they serve more than 100 families a month. The agencies listed social services--such as emergency and food services and preschool and healthcare services--most frequently as the services they provide.

One in four agencies reported that a significant majority of the parents in their service system were employed. In rural areas and small cities one out of three agencies said a significant majority of their clients were families with working parents. Altogether nearly one in three of the agencies saw mostly employed workers and their families.

Assembly/manufacturing and fast-food services were the largest job categories for the employed clients of the social service agencies. Healthcare workers and waitpersons made up the next largest category.

The project also took a second survey of individual families with responses from 371 households in rural areas and 1,271 households located in Michigan cities and suburbs. Local assemblies and statewide networks of organizations regularly in contact with low-income families distributed the questionnaires.

Most individual respondents were women, in their late 20s or 30s, who were single parents raising an average of two children. Of the roughly 50 percent currently with a working head of household, only 1 in 10 of all respondents made more than \$10 an hour, and this was concentrated among longer-term workers. Three in five employed respondents earned less than \$7 an hour.

Four out of five respondents had worked in the past 36 months, holding an average of 2.1 jobs in that period. Over 40 percent of those who worked in the past three years had to leave their jobs because of lack of transportation or to care for a sick child or family member.

Only half of those surveyed who were currently employed thought they had a possibility of getting a raise. Almost one in three were working fewer than 30 hours a week. Of the individual respondents who indicated that the family head is currently working, one in four were not making a sufficient wage to be free of public assistance and required a supplement to augment their low wages.

The huge cuts in welfare benefits have not only exerted downward pressure on wage levels. Fifty-seven percent of the employed received no job-related benefits, and less than one in five were awarded sick time. According to responding agencies in the Michigan Assemblies Project survey, a sizable number of families in their service systems lacked any form of health coverage. Agencies responded that for those still covered by Medicaid, the potential loss of this program is a major threat.

According to the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIP), the state's welfare department, cases have dropped over 58 percent since their peak of 226,863 in March 1994. Welfare cases without earned income decreased from 179,731 in September 1992 to 57,186 in November 1998. In December 1998 the FIP caseload totaled 96,461, the lowest caseload since October 1970.

The complete report on the findings of the Michigan Assemblies Project are available from Groundwork for a Just World, which can be reached in the US by phone at 313-822-2055.



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