

# US Department of Agriculture report shows 10.5 million households without adequate food

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The number of people going hungry in the US increased by 16 percent in 1998, reversing a downward trend over the previous two years. This was the finding of a report entitled "Measuring Food Security in the United States" released in mid-October by US Department of Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman.

The USDA estimates that 10.5 million US households did not have enough food to meet their basic needs in 1998. This adds up to about 31 million people, including 19 million adults and 12 million children. Among these, 6.1 million adults and 3.3 million children lived in households suffering from acute hunger in 1998.

Rates of food insecurity—defined as households forced to skip meals or reduce the size of meals because they do not have money to buy food—fell between 1995 to 1997, from 10.3 percent of all households in 1995 to 8.7 percent in 1997. However, from 1997 to 1998 there was a sharp increase in hunger and food insecurity—3 million more adults and 2 million more children.

The USDA secretary noted the paradox between the growth of hunger and the supposed booming economy. "We have the strongest economy in a generation," said Glickman, "and millions of Americans have left the welfare rolls. Yet, while the number of families on food stamps has declined over the last five years, the number of families who experience hunger has not changed."

In 1996 Congress passed and Clinton signed into law sweeping changes in welfare benefits for the poor. The stated aim of welfare "reform" was to end the entitlement status of welfare benefits and get recipients into the workforce. The food stamp program was also ended as an entitlement and cut by over \$4 billion a year.

Glickman said one of the major causes of the increase in welfare was that millions of Americans who

continue to be eligible for food stamps are not receiving them. The Government Accounting Office estimates that 7 million eligible people are not receiving food stamps.

Several studies show that changes in the welfare laws have been used by state government to intentionally deny food stamps to recipients. Officials in New York state, which has 10 percent of its households listed as experiencing hunger or food insecurity, have instructed social service workers to tell all new clients that before they can receive any benefits, including food stamps, they must first look for work.

In other cases, people who leave welfare because they have found employment or because they have run out of benefits are led to believe that they are also no longer eligible for food stamps even though their wages are low enough to qualify.

Jim Ohls, a senior fellow with Mathematica Policy Research Inc., the research group that conducted the study for the USDA, estimates that for every 100 people leaving welfare, about 55 of them are working. Of those, one-third are eligible for food stamps but not getting them and one-third are no longer eligible.

Of the 45 people not working, he estimates that only 15 are still getting food stamps. Ten are eligible but not receiving food stamps and 20 are not eligible.

In addition to the above-mentioned 7 million people, another large group of people were cut off of food stamps by bipartisan welfare changes. These include those the government terms able-bodied adults without dependent children, between the ages of 18 and 50. People falling into this category can only receive three months of food stamps in any three-year period.

Furthermore, all food stamps to non-citizens were cut off. This provision was later amended to grant some food stamps to the elderly and disabled who had been

living in the US prior to the enactment of the bill. However, surveys of non-citizens show that many who were cut off from welfare and food stamps in 1997, and who might now be eligible, have not reapplied out of fear of harassment from the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Moreover, the USDA report acknowledged that even if poor households did receive food stamps this was no guarantee against hunger. The study found that nearly half of those who are hungry also receive food stamps.

In Pennsylvania, both welfare and food stamps rolls have declined since the implementation of the state's welfare reform in March 1997. In September 1999, 102,141 families were receiving welfare benefits, down 40 percent from 169,850 families in February 1997. During the same period 145,679 fewer people received Food Stamps. In Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) the number of welfare recipients dropped by 21,920 people, from 52,117 to 30,197, and food stamp recipients dropped 24,120, from 111,522 to 87,402, during the same period.

In the state as a whole more than a quarter of a million people went without a meal, or were forced to reduce the size of their meals, because they did not have food or enough money to buy it. Another 574,000 people lack access at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life.

Still, Pennsylvania is better off than most states, with 7 percent of its population experiencing hunger or food insecurity. Nationally food insecurity ranged from 4.6 percent of households in North Dakota to 15.1 percent of households in New Mexico.

Those leaving welfare and finding work in Pittsburgh earn on average \$6.24 an hour. This is less than half of the \$14.84 an hour that a mother with two children would have to earn to meet basic family needs such as food, housing, transportation, utilities and medical care.

Bill Carter, 48, of McKeesport, is not eligible because of the cuts in welfare enacted by Congress three years ago. Carter was one of more than 100 people lined up outside the Intersection soup kitchen in McKeesport Thanksgiving morning to receive a free meal. Martin worked at the US Steel mill for 18 years until it was closed down in 1986. He is only eligible for food stamps three months every three years.

"I don't receive any benefits," Carter said. "The welfare office says that I am an able bodied adult. I am

willing to work but there aren't any jobs for a person like me. After working in a steel mill I can't go into an office where I sell people satellite TVs over the phone for minimum wage. Even when I was receiving food stamps they would only last me two or three days. Now I live at the YMCA and come to soup kitchens every day to eat. What do you think that does to a person's pride?"

Troy Petroski was also in line for a Thanksgiving dinner. He said, "I have to come to soup kitchens two, maybe three, times a week. I don't get any cash benefits. All I get is food stamps and they don't last the whole month. The government is cutting everything. There are no jobs to go to. I used to work hauling bricks for a company but then they ran out of money and I lost my job. Now I go to a temporary place and I do the same work for just \$30 a day. \$30 a day is not enough to pay rent and buy food. How do they expect you to live on something like that?"

Advocates for the hungry point to people like Carter and Petroski as examples of how welfare reform has led to the growth in hunger.

Joyce Rothermel, executive director of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, said, "To me the issue is a living wage. There are a lot of jobs out there and the Department of Welfare is forcing people to take jobs so they can meet their quota. But for most of the people they are not getting enough to pay for child care, meet all their bills and raise their family."

The food bank provides food through local soup kitchens and food pantries to more than 85,000 people each month in Allegheny County. Their own survey of food bank users found that 74 percent live in households with incomes less than \$10,000 a year.

"To me this is the most devastating fact," Rothermel said. "This is up from 54 percent in 1994. This means to me that thousands of people are being cut from welfare and food stamps but with no place to go."



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