

US mayors report increasing hunger and homelessness in American cities

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A report issued this month by the United States Conference of Mayors concludes that requests for emergency food assistance and emergency shelter increased dramatically in American cities in the year 2000.

“A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities,” the result of a 25-city survey tracking the use of food banks, shelters and other services by those in need, declares that 83 percent of the cities surveyed registered a rise in requests for emergency food assistance, with an overall increase of 17 percent. Requests for emergency shelter in the surveyed cities rose by an average of 15 percent, with 76 percent of cities reporting an increase.

While the mayors' group draws no political conclusions from its own report, the picture it presents says a great deal about the much-vaunted economic boom of the past decade. Far more than in previous post-war periods of business growth, the benefits of the current expansion have gone overwhelmingly to the top five or ten percent of the population, while the majority have seen their living standards stagnate or decline, and a significant sector of the population has fallen into destitution.

The mayors' report is all the more ominous, given that its release coincides with a wave of job cuts in auto and other industries, a slowdown in economic growth, declining share prices and numerous additional signs of an economic downturn or outright recession. If the longest sustained economic expansion in US history has been accompanied by a steady increase in the ranks of the hungry and homeless, it follows that the inevitable end of the business boom—which has been driven in large measure by speculation—will plunge far wider sections of the working class into conditions of social distress and poverty.

According to the mayors' conference, hunger and homelessness are already increasingly affecting the working poor and families with children. Thirteen cities—including Burlington, Vermont; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Charlotte, North Carolina; Portland, Oregon; and San Antonio, Texas—cited low-paying jobs as one of the main causes of hunger.

Other factors contributing to hunger included: high housing costs, unemployment and other employment-related problems, poverty or lack of income, substance abuse, changes in the federal food stamp program, high utility rates, costs and unavailability of transportation, welfare “reform,” daycare costs, and mental and physical disabilities.

Lack of affordable housing is cited by city officials as the leading cause of homelessness. Other causes include low-paying jobs, substance abuse and the lack of treatment, untreated mental illness, domestic violence, poverty and cuts in public assistance. Single men comprise 44 percent of the homeless population, families with children make up 36 percent, single women account for 13 percent and unaccompanied minors comprise 7 percent. More than one-fifth of homeless people in these cities are mentally ill.

The report provided the following profile of a homeless family from Denver, Colorado:

“Antonio is 25 years old. He recently visited a medical clinic in Denver because of stress-related medical problems that included nervousness and abdominal pain. Antonio, his wife Ali, and their two young children are homeless. Antonio earns \$7.90 per hour working in a garage and is paying daily for a motel room to keep a roof over their heads. The family has applied for a variety of housing programs but the waiting lists are several years long. Most housing authorities are not accepting applications because of the long waiting lists. Antonio earns approximately \$288 per week after taxes. With a modest car payment, expenses for food, and diapers, Antonio cannot afford an apartment in the area. He feels trapped in the motel because he cannot save enough for rent and deposit. He feels helpless and depressed because he feels that he cannot adequately care for his family.”

Comments from city officials on requests for emergency food assistance show that social inequality, combined with the inability of social services to keep up with demand, are creating conditions of increasing hunger in many American cities. On average, 13 percent of requests for emergency food assistance are estimated to have gone unmet during the

last year. Emergency food assistance facilities in 46 percent of the cities surveyed report turning people away due to lack of resources. Seventy-six percent of cities have either decreased the amount or frequency of food distribution. Only slightly more than half—52 percent—of cities report that the food provided is nutritionally balanced.

Many of those seeking emergency food assistance are employed, but are unable to provide adequate food for themselves and their families because they are earning poverty wages. City officials report the following conditions:

Charlotte, North Carolina: “Charlotte is seeing a large influx of people who are attracted to our strong economy. Unfortunately, many of these people have to accept less than living wages.”

Denver, Colorado: “More working poor families are relying on food banks to subsidize their food stamps and the food they can afford to buy.”

Philadelphia: “Requests for emergency food assistance have increased due to the following factors: welfare reform; part-time work with no benefits; people are not paid a living wage; grandparents raising their grandchildren on their small social security checks.”

Salt Lake City: “Job market good, but expenses high for people earning \$5.50 to \$7/hr.”

Detroit: “Unemployment, low wages, and other employment-related problems have caused families to move in together to enhance their limited resources.”

Those seeking emergency food assistance include increasing numbers of families with children, with 83 percent of surveyed cities reporting a rise in this category. Hunger among the elderly is also growing, with 75 percent of the cities reporting an increase in seniors seeking emergency food assistance.

The case studies of homeless families and individuals provided by the report show the wide variety of people in America who find themselves without a place to live and sleep. These include the working poor, the mentally ill and those afflicted with HIV/AIDS and other medical problems. The following are representative of the examples provided by the report:

St. Louis, Missouri: “This individual is an African-American female aged 38 with two children. Her children are in foster care. She has been homeless for about six months and has a history of mental illness.... She is currently residing in emergency shelter, but wants desperately to regain custody of her children. Though not quite prepared for the move into transitional housing, according to her mental health counselor, her need for assisted living where she can provide family life for herself and her children is paramount. There is no housing available.”

Boston: “John is a homeless man in his mid-forties with chronic substance abuse, mental illness, and is HIV positive. John has used many of the emergency shelter services in the city over the last several years, as well as a program specifically for HIV positive homeless persons. John's behavior is such that he has been barred at many programs for his inability to follow basic rules. His volatility while intoxicated makes him a problematic client. Although he is well known, he is treatment resistant and often stays on the streets.”

Philadelphia: “Ms. C is a 42-year-old Caucasian female, mother of three children, and a divorcee. Two of her children are adults. Ms. C. has been in a shelter with her 13-year-old son since March 2000.... Ms. C is a high school graduate, attended college for one year, and has limited work history, which includes factory work. Ms. C entered the OESS shelter system because she got behind in her mortgage payments and was evicted from her property by the sheriff. She is a victim of domestic violence and she obtained her divorce in May 2000, along with a protection order for one year. Ms. C ... receives treatment for a bi-polar disorder. In addition, she has been diagnosed with several medical problems. Among them are hypertension, irritable bowel syndrome, heart palpitations, and migraine headaches. Her 13-year-old son has been diagnosed with ADHA and a bi-polar disorder.”

The demands for emergency food assistance and shelter are expected to increase over the next year. Officials in three-quarters of the responding cities expect requests for food assistance for families with children to rise during 2001. Officials in 72 percent of cities expect an increase in demand for emergency shelter during this period as well. A number of cities report that despite the strong economy in recent years, conditions have deteriorated. In particular, rising housing costs have led to an increased lack of affordable housing.

The Clinton administration and the Republican Congressional leadership agreed last week to shelve a proposed dollar-an-hour increase in the \$5.15/hour minimum wage. At the same time they agreed to grant \$25 billion in tax subsidies to companies employing cheap labor in the poorest urban and rural areas.



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