

Millions in US rely on food banks to meet basic needs

New studies document growing hunger

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Four recently issued reports document the growing number of individuals and families with children who rely on soup kitchens and food banks in an attempt to meet basic food needs. The reports also emphasize the inability of charity-based organizations to respond to the growing demand for food assistance.

Low wages, the high cost of housing and cuts in federally funded social programs have forced millions of people to turn to handouts in order to live.

The reports were issued by the US Conference of Mayors; Second Harvest, the nation's largest collection of food banks; the Catholic Charities, the nation's largest charity organization; and by Anti-Hunger Action, a collaboration of the Illinois Hunger Coalition and the Chicago Anti-Hunger Federation.

The US Conference of Mayors survey of 25 cities found that demand for food assistance is up an average of 17 percent over the past year. In 13 percent of cases, requests for food have gone unmet. Sixty-two percent of those requesting food were families with children and many people report depending upon food assistance as a steady source of nutrition over a long period of time. (*For a full analysis of the mayors' report see: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/dec2000/hung-d27.shtml>.*)

Second Harvest reports that in 2000 they distributed nearly 50 percent more food than they did in 1999, or 1.4 billion pounds. Despite this increase, they report that their affiliated food banks and soup kitchens are seeing a greater number of people and have had to turn away increasing numbers.

Catholic Charities reports a 32 percent jump in emergency food assistance from 1998 to 1999. They report that through their agencies they assisted nearly

10 million people in 1999. The Illinois Hunger Coalition found a 30 to 35 percent rise in the number of households needing emergency food assistance since federal welfare reform legislation was enacted in 1996. Overall, there are an estimated 31 million people nationwide living in households where having enough food is not a sure thing.

The enormous growth in people seeking private assistance is the result of low wages and government policies that have cut the federal welfare and Food Stamp programs. Since their high in 1994, welfare rolls have been cut in half as a result of changes in regulations enacted by Congress and signed into law in 1996 by the Clinton administration.

Of those who have left welfare, only about half are currently working and most are earning only slightly more than the benefits they received while on welfare. Of those still on benefits, federal five-year limits will begin to expire next year.

In addition, more than 8 million people have been cut from the federal Food Stamp program. While many are still eligible for the benefits, in a number of states policies have been enacted to deliberately make it more difficult for people to apply.

In California, for instance, a Second Harvest survey of the Food Stamp application process found that an applicant must comply with the following instructions: "If you are a non-citizen applying for Medi-Cal and you are not (a) LPR (an alien who is a lawful permanent resident of the U.S.), (b) an amnesty alien with a valid and current I-688, or (c) PRUCOL (an alien permanently residing in the U.S., under the color of law), please do not fill in the shaded box for 'Birthplace.'"

Not only is this question unintelligible for most people, it is just one of over 100 such questions that an applicant must respond to before being considered for benefits in California. Once completing the application, a person must sign a statement that threatens penalties of up to \$250,000 or 20 years in jail if responses to questions are found to be false.

While applications for Food Stamp eligibility average 12 pages, in the states of Minnesota and West Virginia they are 30 pages long. By contrast, a school bus driver's application is only 2 pages long, an application for a gun permit only 2 pages, a federal home mortgage form only 4 pages.

In addition, Food Stamp applicants must verify their income on a monthly basis to continue receiving benefits. This is especially difficult for the working poor, since it requires a trip to a government office, which can often take an entire working day.



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