

# Hunger and homelessness on the rise in New York

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Hunger and homelessness among New York City's poor, already on the rise before September 11, have shot up markedly in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center. Details are provided in two reports issued last week.

"From Bad to Worse: World Trade Center Attack Further Accelerates New York City Hunger Growth," the annual report of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, was released on November 21, the day before the Thanksgiving holiday. Initially conducted before September 11, its survey of soup kitchens and food pantries showed that 71 percent of those who responded reported increased numbers of New Yorkers coming to their facilities to be fed during the first six months of 2001. This is consistent with a general rise in hunger in recent years. Seventy-three percent reported such increases for the full year 2000, as well as 60 percent in 1999.

The numbers show that hunger was increasing even as Wall Street continued its boom. This was a consequence of the shredding of the social safety net and increasing income inequality that went hand in hand with the stock market bubble. The growth of hunger accelerated in the months before September 11, as the economy tipped toward recession, and is now rising still faster. Many of the 79,000 jobs lost in New York City during October were among low-wage workers in the food service and tourist industries, where business is off dramatically.

Food programs have been finding it harder to keep up with the growth in demand. One third of those surveyed reported either no increase or an actual decrease in food donations, most of which come from government sources supplemented by nonprofit food banks and religious groups. Nearly two thirds reported no increase or a decrease in both their budgets and staffing levels,

including volunteers. Fifty-eight percent of the agencies reported staff members at times spending their own money to buy food for their clients.

The World Trade Center collapse has impacted the overburdened food programs in several ways. Just as the numbers of people needing food has grown, fundraising by these programs has become more difficult. The large funds raised for the families of immediate victims of the attacks have put a crimp in many other donations. At the same time, New York's main food bank, Food for Survival, reported a 50 percent spike in food requests from programs around the city in October, up to 6 million pounds.

The inability of the food programs surveyed to keep up with demand, even before September 11, forced them to turn away 48,397 people (including 18,305 children and 7,028 senior citizens) during the year 2000, with the number increasing to 38,384 (including 15,081 children and 5,553 elderly) for only the first six months of 2001. Since only 23 percent of the hard-pressed agencies—most of which have no paid staff—responded to the survey, the coalition estimates that a count of all 1,008 agencies would show that over 300,000 people citywide (including over 120,000 children) will end up being sent away hungry during 2001. By the coalition's conservative estimate, over 1,000,000 low-income New Yorkers seek food assistance every year.

Hunger is by no means limited to the long-term homeless and substance abusers. Of the 1,736,004 meals served by the survey respondents in 2000 and 1,133,271 served in the first half of 2001, 29.5 percent went to children under 18, and fully 25 percent went to people living in a household with at least one working member. About 45 percent of respondents indicated either a somewhat or greatly increased number of

working poor seeking meals during the first half of 2001, on top of 35 percent reporting similarly for all of 2000. These figures speak to the struggle of millions of low-wage workers to simply put food on the table.

While George W. Bush recently declared that “much of today’s poverty has more to do with troubled lives than a troubled economy,” the food providers demonstrate otherwise. They cite household expenses rising faster than income and cuts in government programs for the poor, particularly food stamps, as the top two reasons for hunger. Jobs that pay a living wage are named as the top need.

Concomitant with the rise in hunger has been a rise in homelessness, which reached record levels in New York City last month, according to a separate report released on November 19 by the Coalition for the Homeless. In October, municipal-run shelters and welfare hotels housed 29,498 people, exceeding the prior peak of 28,737 in May of 1987. These statistics, based strictly on city data, do not include the thousands of homeless people staying in churches and other nonprofit shelters, or the many additional thousands who sleep outdoors due to the conditions in the shelters, where they may be robbed or otherwise abused. It is estimated that there are approximately 100,000 homeless New Yorkers.

After declining in the early and mid-1990s, the homeless population has been steadily increasing since mid-1998. The rate of increase picked up dramatically starting in June 2000, as the economy began to sputter. Since then, homelessness has shot up nearly 28 percent.

Of particular note is the number of homeless families staying in the city shelter system, now up to 6,596, an increase of 52 percent over three years ago. These families include 12,414 children, an increase of 60 percent over three years ago. While the number of homeless families has been steadily increasing, the number placed in permanent housing has been steadily decreasing, from 4,695 in fiscal year 1996 to only 3,349 in fiscal year 2001, a drop of 39 percent.

As the effects of the September 11 events and the deepening recession continue to make themselves felt, the coming winter will no doubt see a record increase in the demand for beds in city shelters. However, city officials plan to increase these currently full shelters by only 233 beds this winter. The result will be to push even more homeless people out onto the streets to cope

with the cold on their own.



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