

Millions hungry in US

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A new study by America's Second Harvest reports that 23.3 million people in the US were forced to rely on charities for food in the past year, a 9 percent increase since 1997.

The *Hunger in America 2001* study also reports that more needy people are receiving assistance from private food banks and charities than from the government-funded Food Stamp program.

The report confirms that the number of hungry people in the US continued to rise even as the US economy experienced the longest expansion in postwar history. One reason is that government food assistance for the poor plummeted after the US Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) or "welfare reform" in 1996. From 1997 to 2001, Food Stamp Program participation declined more than 33 percent to an average of 17 million persons each month.

America's Second Harvest is a network of food banks involving 80 percent of all private food banks in US. Nearly 6,000 soup kitchens, 4,000 homeless and other emergency shelters and 26,000 food pantries across the country rely on the network for well over a billion pounds of food annually. The 2001 survey is the most comprehensive study of domestic hunger ever undertaken, according to the report's authors. It is the third the network has conducted since 1993.

Once again, the organization reports seeing more and more people who are hungry or at risk for hunger. Of the agencies which depend on the network of food banks, 60 percent reported increased demand for their services since 1997. A 1999 review of several municipal, state and national studies found a range of increased demand from 14 percent (in Oregon) to 38 percent (at the sites managed by Catholic Charities) since 1996.

A survey of clients showed that the faces of the hungry they serve have changed dramatically over the past decade. The summary report notes: "Based on the findings of this study, the millions of needy people served by thousands of food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters do not meet the stereotypical profile of the hungry in

America."

Nearly three-fourths of the people served by America's Second Harvest were "food insecure," which the organization defines as having limited or uncertain access to nutritious, safe foods necessary to lead a healthy lifestyle. Households that experience food insecurity have reduced quality or variety of meals and may have irregular food intake.

Nearly 40 percent of individuals and 40 percent of households with children were food insecure with hunger, meaning they are missing meals because they are unable to afford them. Two-thirds of those surveyed reported they could not afford balanced meals and one in four households did not eat for entire days because they couldn't afford food.

Significantly, the agency noted that a household that is closer to the poverty level is more likely to be at risk for hunger than one that is very poor.

The vast majority of food bank clients turn out to be people living seemingly normal lives in modest neighborhoods all over the country. One in three emergency food recipients live in the suburbs, and about one in six live in rural areas. Forty-five percent of recipients are white and 35 percent black. One-quarter of those surveyed are homeowners. While soup kitchens and homeless shelters served two million people in 2001, 10 times as many people use food pantries to get canned goods, perishables and other food to cook at home.

Women with children made up the majority of food bank recipients in 2001. Nearly two-thirds of the adults served by agencies were women and 40 percent of the households served included children, 9.3 million overall, including 2.1 million young children aged from newborn to five years old. This represents more than one in ten of all children in America and nearly three-fourths of all children in poverty. One in four people in a soup kitchen line is likely to be a child, and more than one in three households served by the food pantries include children.

The Census Bureau previously reported 31.1 million were food insecure in 1999, including 12 million children.

Ten million people experienced food insecurity with hunger. America's Second Harvest notes: "Numerous studies indicate that even mild under-nutrition, and certainly severe hunger, suffered by children for even just brief periods of time can have long-term negative effects on the cognitive, psychological, social and physical development of children."

One of the biggest changes apparent in this year's report was a rise in the number of the so-called working poor utilizing food banks over the past four years. Approximately one in four food pantry clients were employed, up from about one in five in 1997 and in 1993. Forty percent of households served had at least one adult working and 7 percent had two adults in the household working. Nevertheless the average monthly income of recipients was 20 percent less than the federal poverty level. Nearly three-quarters of emergency food recipients had monthly household incomes of less than \$1,000.

In fact, income from employment was most frequently cited as the primary source of household income and the most frequent response to source of income (31.1 percent). Only 8 percent collected General Assistance, a small monthly stipend to support childless adults provided by some states. Ten percent of recipients were homeless. Just 6 percent were on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

The elderly and disabled with income derived from federal entitlement programs such as Social Security (retirement) or Workers Compensation made up half of all food bank recipients in 2001. As income inequality increased in the US, the cost of housing, prescription drugs and other necessities skyrocketed, leaving vulnerable populations unable to meet the increased costs.

About 10 percent of the population over 65 lives in poverty, but 20 percent or 2.5 million of those served by America's Second Harvest were elderly. More than half were food insecure, a number significantly higher than the rate of food insecurity of seniors in the general population (1.8 percent). The study's authors noted that like childhood hunger, insufficient nutrient intake by seniors adversely impacts the effect of prescription drugs and other medical treatment, reducing the quality and longevity of life.

Private charities have only one-tenth the food resources the federal nutritional programs have at their disposal. The largest component of that government safety net is the US Department of Agriculture's Food Stamp Program. America's Second Harvest noted that Food Stamp Program participation from 1977 to 1996 roughly

matched US economic cycles, but plummeted after welfare reform was signed by Clinton in 1996.

While there were roughly 3 million fewer Americans living in poverty between 1997 and 2001, there were 8 million fewer Americans receiving government assistance in the form of food stamps or welfare. Though most food bank clients are eligible for food stamps, onerous paperwork and tighter restrictions under welfare reform led to this drop in recipients, not a decline in actual need. The Food Stamp Program has been singled out for attack by free-market advocates in the US Congress, who pushed through a \$26 billion cut in the program at the time of welfare reform.

Though the vast majority of food bank recipients qualify, only 30 percent are currently receiving Food Stamps, though over twice that many applied at some time for the program. Federal food programs administered by schools had a higher participation rate. Sixty percent of the households with school-age children participated in school lunch programs and about half in school breakfast programs. In households with pre-school age children, about half received food through the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.

The results of the 2001 survey again underscore the fact that while the wealthy experienced huge income increases in the last decade, millions of people in the US were falling into the grip of poverty and hunger. The onset of the recession and the wave of job losses this year have already increased the number of laid-off workers seeking help at food pantries and soup kitchens.

Gleaners Community Food Bank in Detroit reports a 57 percent increase in food distribution from last year. The food bank is expecting another large increase within the next six months resulting from mass layoffs in the area. The New York City Coalition Against Hunger released a report showing a sharp rise in demand for food assistance as far back as January of 2001. Last year some pantries ran out of food and this year they expect they will have to turn away close to a third of the people who need food.



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