Recession and welfare reform increase hunger in US

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Rising unemployment in the US has led to a corresponding increase in hunger. In 2000, 33 million people in the US, including 13 million children, were living in families that were hungry or living on the edge of hunger. James D. Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), commented on these figures, released in March by the Census Bureau and US Department of Agriculture (USDA): "If the number was 33 million persons in 2000, it likely is significantly higher today."

FRAC cited reports of increased need from food banks, religious agencies and cities and counties in the US. They reported that the drop in the percentage of low-income people receiving food stamps and the onset of the recession fueled the growth in need for aid from charity organizations.

Between 1996, the year then-president Bill Clinton signed federal welfare reform into law, and last year, welfare caseloads were cut in half. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) also forced millions off the USDA Food Stamp program.

The number of people receiving federal food assistance collapsed from 27.5 million on average each month in 1996 to 17.5 million in 2001, a decrease of 10 million. While the pool of low-income families remaining eligible for aid shrank, the number actually getting the benefits to which they were entitled also fell, dropping from 71 percent in 1994 down to just 59 percent in 1998.

As the recession deepened, food stamp and welfare rolls began to rise in most US states. Participation in the federally funded nutrition program for low-income individuals and families increased by 2 million between February 2001 and February of this year, to over 19 million people. Between September and October 2001 nearly 600,000 new individuals were enrolled. That increase was greater than any one-month increase recorded during the recession of the early 1990s.

Helen Kozlowski of the Oakland County Michigan Food Bank told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The economy right now is so awful that we are seeing huge increases at all the food banks. That includes cities in this area, which is more wealthy than a lot of places in the country."

Ms. Kozlowski said the food bank served over 75,000 people every month. "The biggest change we see is that people are now locked into the food distribution pantries," she said. "Going to food pantries to pick up groceries is part of their regular calculation for the family budget. They are using this type of program consistently, and not because of an occasional emergency like a layoff."

She continued: "As to the effect of the layoffs, for those folks it might take a couple months to see them start coming in. They use their small savings and then they start making calls to find out what's out there. One measure of the increased demand we have experienced is that in the past year we've increased our food distribution by one million pounds. We have gone from distributing two million pounds of food in 1996 to 6.3 million pounds this year."

Kozlowski reported the food bank had been able to expand donations in the area through new outreach efforts, including more donations from farmers. She commented on the causes for the rise in food distribution in Oakland County: "Part of the increased need is due to the cutoff of food stamps. But a great deal is due to the shallow type of work benefits in the jobs many of these folks found. They have to make big choices every month, especially in the high-rent urban areas. One person gets sick in the family and one prescription could wipe out the food budget for a week."

In the past week both houses of Congress passed a new farm bill that reauthorizes the federally funded food stamp program, and included about $22.5 billion yearly for nutrition assistance. This is substantially less than the annual expenditure for food assistance prior to welfare reform.

President Bush is expected to sign the legislation. He supported a limited restoration of benefits to immigrants that is included in the bill as part of a strategy to win votes for congressional candidates this fall in states with large immigrant populations. Central to his policy was an insistence on a waiting period of five years residence for immigrants.

The number of non-citizens receiving federally funded

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food stamps fell from 1.9 million in 1994 to less than 750,000 by 1999, according to figures from the USDA. Under PRWORA rules, low-income immigrant workers had to prove 10 years of work in the US before their families could receive food stamps. Under the 1996 legislation, most documented immigrants who were not citizens became ineligible for a whole range of federal benefits, including cash welfare (TANF) and Medicaid.

Such a sweeping reversal of previous government policy that had treated non-citizens the same as citizens for federally funded programs was challenged as a violation of the equal protection guarantee of the US Constitution. In every one of the several cases filed the courts upheld the government attack on immigrants. This included a March 2000 decision by the US Supreme Court to deny a review of one of the cases, a decision that effectively upheld the policy.

The new legislation grants food stamp authorization to all immigrant children in low-income families. Making them eligible for food stamps is expected to add about 300,000 more people to the pool of eligible persons. But the number actually getting help is expected to be much lower as many immigrants awaiting Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) decisions are reluctant to apply for benefits, even for their children.

Hundreds of thousands of immigrant US workers and hundreds of thousands more who enter the US illegally who experience hunger will still be excluded from food stamps even under the new provisions. The Urban Institute estimates that about a third of documented immigrants currently in the US entered after August 1996.

Systematic anti-immigrant policy in relation to social programs has resulted in substantially increased hardship for many workers and their families. The Urban Institute found that in New York City 22 percent of low-income immigrant families received food stamps and in Los Angeles only 13 percent received food stamps, compared to a 34 percent rate for low-income native citizen families in each state.

Bringing food stamp requirements in line with eligibility rules for other federal and state financed aid, as Bush has advocated, is designed to guarantee the restrictions on immigrants for Medicaid and cash welfare (TANF) when PRWORA comes up for renewal later this year.

The National Governors Association, dominated by Republican governors, supported Bush in reducing the length of time it takes for immigrant families to qualify for food stamps. Some states have been using their own funds to continue aid for immigrants disqualified under federal law and are unable to continue their programs as the recession has gutted state coffers.

The Bush administration had earlier responded to the governors' concerns that a 40-hour workweek for welfare recipients was unworkable. He proposed that government-sponsored programs to put welfare recipients to work could avoid violating minimum wage laws by including the value of their food stamps as wages paid. Twelve democratic senators subsequently joined Bush in endorsing the 40-hour work requirement for TANF recipients including Hillary Clinton of New York.

Work sanctions and five-year time limits on families receiving welfare cash have been used as a battering ram to force down wage levels of the poorest paid workers. Over half of all food stamp recipients are now employed, the result of the proliferation of part-time and poverty-wage jobs over the last decade. These workers' weekly pay is so low that going from welfare to work causes a decrease in income.

For those childless adults laid off who do not qualify for unemployment compensation (UI), and for those who have or will soon exhaust their UI, PRWORA provisions exclude them not only from cash assistance but also from food stamps. Such able-bodied adults who cannot find work after three months have their food stamps cut off unless they agree to work in state and city-sponsored work projects.

Once the total money allotted for food stamps in the farm bill runs out, the benefit is automatically cut for each household unless emergency funds are provided. In the 1991 recession, $1.5 billion in emergency funds were needed to stop cuts in grants to families.

The $6.4 billion projected increase over the post-welfare reform food assistance spending is dwarfed by the funding included in the farm bill for subsidies to agriculture, which are reported to increase by 70 percent and total well over $100 billion over six years. About 10 percent of the wealthiest farmers receive most of the subsidies.

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