US mayors' report chronicles rising hunger and homelessness

Debra Watson
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A record number of citizens in US cities were forced to look for emergency food and shelter this year, according to the United States Conference of Mayors. Their annual report, "The Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities," was released December 18 in Washington DC. It shows an increasing percentage of the population of US cities are unable to afford either shelter or adequate food.

In cities across America in 2002, according to the mayors' report, the demand for emergency shelter jumped 19 percent, the biggest rise since 1990. In 2001 and 2002 the demand for emergency food increased by 23 percent and 19 percent respectively, the highest increases since the recession of the early 1990s.

The demand for emergency food and shelter has increased by double-digit amounts nearly every year since 1987. The report chronicles the two-decade campaign on the part of big business and their representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties to reduce a substantial section of the working class in the United States to penury.

This year, for the first time, every city participating in the survey reported an increased demand for emergency food. In every city, emergency food assistance facilities were relied upon by families and individuals both in emergencies and as a steady source of food over long periods of time. Families with children made up 54 percent of those requesting food assistance in Miami, 95 percent in Charlotte, North Carolina, and 70 and 80 percent, respectively, of emergency food applicants in Los Angeles on the West Coast, and Philadelphia in the east. Miami had a 50 percent increase in demand for emergency food and a 50 percent increase in demand by families for food assistance in 2002.

Requests for food from pantries, which comprise the bulk of charity and non-federal food assistance, are up throughout the country. In Minnesota, food banks served 892,285 individuals in 300,000 households in 2001. By the third quarter of 2002, 982,000 individuals in 325,000 households had been served.

However, the pounds of food distributed—about 21 million—remained nearly the same. Food banks have been forced to reduce the amount of food in emergency boxes in many US cities this year, due to a combination of increased need, decreased government funding and/or decreased private donations. According to the mayors' report, in one-third of cities surveyed, food assistance facilities turned people away due to lack of resources.

Besides the general slowdown in the economy leading to decreased donations, Nashville reports a major cause in the loss of food donations, noted by other cites in last year's report. The city noted: "Second Harvest [a food bank] reports that although volunteers have increased, the agency has lost approximately 2 million pounds of food; this loss is a result in a shift in management at a major grocery chain, which has typically donated food to Second Harvest, but is now selling to the secondary market." Second Harvest had to shelve plans to open two new food distribution sites because of falling donations.

It is remarkable that over the last decade the percent of the homeless population consisting of families with children has climbed from 32 percent to more than 40 percent. Two thirds of the US homeless population consists of families with children or single women and unaccompanied youth. More than one in five of the homeless are working, many in full-time jobs that do not pay enough to rent an apartment. People remain homeless an average of six months, and four out of five of the cities surveyed said the length of time people are homeless increased in the last year.

Construction of new public and affordable housing has been neglected for decades. In two thirds of cities surveyed, waiting lists for public housing are a year or longer. The wait is three years in Los Angeles and seven years in Miami. Public housing and rent certificates and vouchers meet less than half of low-income housing needs in every city but three of those surveyed.

An extraordinary memorial service was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota on December 19, the day after the mayors' report was released. Advocates for the homeless, community members, and homeless people themselves

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gathered to remember 94 homeless people who died in Minnesota in 2002.

The 2002 deaths surpassed the record of 85 in 2001. In the recession of the early 1990s aid workers estimate about a dozen homeless people died in the state. The causes for the deaths this year ranged from childhood disease to the ailments of old age (a baby and an elderly man in St. Paul, Minnesota), several homicides and some who froze to death in the winter elements. The life expectancy of a homeless man is estimated at about 47 years.

The number of homeless in the state of Minnesota has doubled since the last recession. At the same time, emergency money the state used for homeless for the past three years is being cut back, reducing state funding to 1999 levels. That year the homeless numbered about 5,000. In 2002 the number is estimated to be 7,000 on a typical night. Livestock and dogs are not expected to survive a cold Northern Minnesota night out-of-doors, but on a typical night about a thousand human beings are turned away from shelters in the state due to lack of space.

The mayors' report included no similar count of homeless deaths for the nation as a whole. And while there is ongoing controversy over the actual number of homeless in the US, some idea of the extent of the problem can be gleaned from the tally of shelter beds and other temporary housing arrangements included in the report.

A few examples: Chicago, with a population of 2.9 million, has 6,500 shelter beds and 3,500 family shelter beds. Phoenix, population 1.3 million, has 1,500 shelter beds, 880 family shelter beds, 3,500 transitional units and 2,200 family transitional units. St. Paul, Minnesota, with a population of 290,000, has 313 shelter beds, 91 family shelter beds, 200 transitional units and 245 family transitional units. In addition, there are 300 single room occupancy units (SROs) in the city.

The Mayors' Report for 2002 finds that in more than half of cities surveyed homeless people are regularly turned away from existing shelters. In the US on average 30 percent of emergency housing needs went unmet in 2002.

The 2002 report does not address the issue of city and state funding, which makes up a sizable portion of funds for the homeless. With budget shortfalls projected in almost every state this year, there is little likelihood that additional, much less sufficient, funds will be forthcoming.

The primary reference to public funding for hunger and homeless assistance in the report is in an appeal for more help from the federal government. But before the new year has even begun, President Bush has cut home heating assistance, citing the need for sacrifice to pay for the "war on terror" and the military buildup.

In 2000 the mayors were split over whether "the strong economy would help the homelessness and hunger problem, leading to improved conditions." Two years later every city surveyed expected the demand for emergency food and shelter to increase next year.

City officials completing the survey cited high housing costs most frequently as a major cause of hunger. It is not unusual for a low-income family to spend half its income on housing, leaving little money for food, medical care and other necessities. The next most frequent cause was low paying jobs, which had topped the list in 2001 as the most frequently cited cause of hunger in cities.

The list of causes for hunger also included unemployment and other employment-related problems, economic downturn or weakening of the economy, medical or health costs, homelessness, poverty or lack of income, substance abuse, reduced public benefits, childcare costs, mental health problems and limited life skills. Changes and reductions in federal Food Stamp benefits were included in the list in 2000 and 2001.

Lack of affordable housing led the list of causes of homelessness in 2002. Other causes cited, in order of frequency, included mental illness and the lack of needed services, substance abuse and the lack of needed services, low paying jobs, domestic violence, unemployment, poverty, prison release, downturn in the economy, limited life skills, and changes and cuts in public assistance programs.

Reports from the different cities describing the causes of hunger and homelessness add up to a catalog of social ills resulting from two decades of falling wages for workers, rising social inequality, and sweeping attacks on welfare and other social programs.

Despite official insistence that the recession is over, the unemployment rate in every city surveyed was higher than it had been in October 2000, reflecting the breadth and persistence of the current downturn. In Cleveland, Miami and Trenton, New Jersey the unemployment rate was recorded at over 10 percent in October 2002, when the "The Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities" was being compiled.

Not included in the mayors' list of the causes of hunger and homelessness, but also not an unlikely result of an imminent war in Iraq, is a spike in prices of gas, heat and food. Any rise in the cost of such necessities will drive tens of thousands more who are already in a precarious financial situation into the ranks of the destitute.

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