

Hunger in America: 25 million depend on emergency food aid

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9 March 2006

The brutal impact of social polarization and the protracted assault on the living standards of broad masses of working people was reflected in two recent reports documenting the deepening crisis of hunger in America.

According to the February 23 report, “Hunger in America 2006,” a study commissioned by America’s Second Harvest Network, an organization representing some 200 food banks and food rescue groups, more than 25 million people, or about 9 percent of all Americans, receive food assistance on an emergency basis. This growing army of poor and hungry includes nearly 9 million children and 3 million seniors. The overall number of those seeking help at food banks and soup lines has swelled by 8 percent since 2001, and 18 percent since 1997. The study was based on 52,000 interviews with people requiring emergency food and on a survey of 30,000 local emergency hunger-relief agencies.

The report found that about 66 percent of those needing food are living below the official poverty line—\$15,670 per year for a family of three. The average annual household income of those individuals and families seeking food assistance is only \$10,320. However, 10 percent of all adults had no income at all, which is a 37 percent increase in this category since 2001.

Another large share of those seeking assistance is drawn from what is commonly referred to as the working poor. About one third of the adults between the ages of 18 and 65 needing emergency food aid are employed. Thirty-six percent of all families seeking assistance reported that at least one family member was working. One fourth of all households reported that a job was their primary source of income, followed by 20 percent who reported that Social Security was their primary source of income. Half of all the households reported annual incomes of less than \$10,000.

The report examined the lack of resources for those seeking emergency food. Twelve percent are homeless,

which is a 28 percent increase over 2001. Almost one half do not have access to a car, and about one third obtain food stamps, which on average last only 2.5 weeks per month.

Seventy percent of those seeking assistance are classified as food insecure—that is, not knowing when they will get their next meal—while 30 percent are experiencing hunger because they have no way of obtaining food. The individuals who seek emergency food are constantly making choices between buying food or paying for utilities or heat (41 percent), buying food and paying their rent or mortgage (35 percent), or buying food and paying medical bills (32 percent).

Children and seniors are the two most vulnerable groups among those facing hunger. Many studies have demonstrated that children suffering from malnutrition experience stunted physical growth and brain development. There are 13 million children, or almost 18 percent of all Americans, who are poor. The elderly, who are less mobile, are also vulnerable to serious health problems stemming from hunger. With fixed and low incomes, 3.4 million seniors, or about 10 percent of that population, are poor. In addition, 46 percent of all the adults interviewed described their health as fair to poor.

Those forced to turn to emergency food assistance are drawn from all ethnic groups, according to the report, which said that 39 percent of the recipients are white, 38 percent black, and 17 percent Hispanic. However, the number of black people seeking assistance is highly disproportionate in relation to their total percentage of the American population (13 percent).

The study’s findings are consistent with those of the federal government’s own research. For example, the US Department of Agriculture has estimated that in 2004, 38.2 million Americans, including 13.9 million children, faced hunger or a lack of sufficient food. According to the department’s findings, the number of people needing

emergency food aid has steadily increased each year for the last five years.

The growth of hunger at one pole of society goes hand-in-hand with the unprecedented accumulation of personal wealth at the other. Nowhere is this truer than in New York City, the capital of US and world finance capital, which is the focus of the second recent report. While the city boasts of perhaps the greatest concentration of multi-millionaires and billionaires on the planet, currently, more than 1.7 million people in New York live below the federal poverty line.

These conditions are reflected in the annual report on hunger in the city released by the New York City Coalition against Hunger late last year. It found that more than 1.2 million New Yorkers, or 14.6 percent of the city's population, faced hunger—up from 12.59 percent five years ago. One statistic confirming that there was a significant increase in food insecurity over last year is that in the first eight months of 2005, the City's Human Resource Administration (HRA) helped fund 6,988,218 emergency meals, which is 19,695 more than during the same period in 2004.

In the Coalition's survey of nearly 1,100 agencies that provide emergency food, 73 percent of them said that need for emergency food had increased in the last 12 months, with 39 percent having reported that need had increased greatly.

These food pantries and soup kitchens reported that their need had increased about 40 percent in the last four years alone. Sixty-one percent of the respondents reported an increased number of families with children, while 57 percent indicated a growth in the number of seniors seeking food. Due to limited resources, 47 percent of the respondents reported having to turn away hungry people in 2005, an increase from 44 percent in the same time period in 2004.

Joel Berg, the Coalition's executive director, cited a number of factors that explain the growth of hunger in New York City. First, there is mounting unemployment. According to a report issued by the Community Service Society (CSS), the share of workers aged 18 to 64 who have been unemployed for more than a year has increased from 27.6 percent in 1999-2000 to 30.6 percent in 2003-2004—a huge share of the population that finds no reflection in the official 5.9 percent unemployment rate. Also, this official statistic does not take into account workers who are compelled to work less hours.

Secondly, the CSS report showed that the lowest paid third of New Yorkers experienced a reduction in annual

wages from \$10,693 in 1999-2000 to \$10,133 in 2003-2004, with hourly wages declining in the same period from \$7.71 to \$7.22. Thirdly, the cost of housing has increased dramatically. For example, Manhattan apartment prices have increased 175 percent since 1995. Fourthly, there are bureaucratic roadblocks created by the city that makes it unnecessarily hard for people to obtain Food Stamps. There are 379,866 New Yorkers who receive food stamps, 26 less than the number of people who received the benefit in 1995.

According to a recent report issued by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, the real income of New Yorkers has declined in four out the five boroughs. While real income increased 5.4 percent in the borough of Manhattan, it has declined by 2.9 percent in the rest of the city. The consumer price index grew 27.6 percent in the city of New York from 1996 to 2005, significantly higher than the nationwide rate of 24 percent for the same period.

The difference between Manhattan and the rest is a geographical expression of the immense social polarization in the city. The borough is home to the luxury multi-million-dollar apartments of the rich. According to the BLS study, the number of people earning more than \$200,000 a year in Manhattan rose almost 20 percent from 2002 to 2004.

Meanwhile, the administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg has boasted that “the number of New Yorkers receiving public assistance fell by over 80,000 from Fiscal 2001 to fiscal 2005, a drop of 16 percent.” However, according to Joel Berg, of the New York Coalition Against Hunger, the number of welfare recipients who were able to get jobs actually declined by more than a third in those same four years.

This raises the obvious question of what happens to those individuals who are forced off of public assistance yet unable to find a job. The answer is to be found on the lengthening lines outside the city's soup kitchens and food pantries.



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