

US mayors' report: Hunger and homelessness intensify in US cities

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The number of people hungry and homeless in US cities rose dramatically again in 2007, according to the annual report on hunger and homelessness from the US Conference of Mayors. The 23-city *Hunger and Homelessness Survey* was released in late December.

Requests for emergency food increased in four of every five cities. Among 15 cities with quantifying data, the median increase in requests for food was 10 percent and in some cities it was much higher. Detroit and some other cities reported seeing more working poor among those seeking food.

In Detroit, emergency food requests shot up 35 percent over the 12-month period ending in October. Officials there noted that “due to a lack of resources, emergency food assistance facilities have had to reduce the number of days and/or hours of operation.”

Thirteen of 19 survey cities reported they could not meet the demand for emergency food. Los Angeles was one of the major cities reporting difficulties in serving the growing need.

An official in LA said: “Emergency food assistance facilities have to turn away people. According to the LA Regional Foodbank, over 30 percent of their food pantries have had to turn clients away and pantries that don't turn clients away are providing less food.

“In 2002, a food pantry would provide an average of eight to ten different USDA commodities per distribution. This holiday season, food pantries are providing three USDA commodities. Food pantries are tasked to serve more clients with the same amount of resources they had six years ago. Twenty-one percent of overall demand for emergency food assistance goes unmet.”

Across all cities, an average of 15 percent of families with children looking for emergency food must be turned away. Nine in 10 of the cities sampled for details

on the urban hunger crisis say they expect increases in food requests next year.

City officials said specific factors exacerbating hunger over the past year were the foreclosure crisis, the high prices of food and gasoline, and the lack of affordable housing. Decreased social benefits such as public assistance and the eroding value of food stamps were also listed as particularly acute problems. Lack of donated food and commodities and insufficient funding were listed as the most important reason for turning away the hungry.

Economic issues such as unemployment and poverty along with high housing and medical costs were most cited by responding cities as the major causes of chronic hunger. Substance abuse and mental illness were the least cited.

In 20 of the cities included in the survey, 193,183 people had stays in emergency shelters and/or transitional housing in the past year. The average duration was six months for families and five months for individuals, down from eight months last year.

The mayors' survey statistics capture unduplicated stays in city temporary housing facilities, meaning if shelter was provided, a stay lasting weeks or months would be counted as just one unduplicated stay.

The survey found that nearly one in four unduplicated shelter stays were by members of family groups. The ratio of family members to singles was found to be roughly equal in homeless counts compiled elsewhere that document sheltered homeless on any given individual night.

In general, cities reported actual increases in households with children in their transitional or emergency housing over the past year. Nine in 10 cities said that more permanent housing was needed to mediate the problem of homelessness.

Thousands of beds to house the homeless were added in the surveyed cities, yet half the cities reported they turn people away some or all of the time. In Phoenix, 7,000 to 10,000 are homeless on any given night and 3,000 cannot be sheltered due to lack of beds.

Individual city profiles come from the broad range of US cities that participate in the report. They have widely different average per capita incomes and are located in various parts of the country. For example, Santa Monica, California, a city of 83,000 with a per capita income of \$58,000, reports 728 singles and 142 households with children were sheltered homeless in 2007. In contrast, Philadelphia, with a population of 1.4 million and a poverty rate of 23 percent, reports 8,103 individuals and 5,300 households with children in this category.

These profiles show only those individuals that find shelter. Miami, a city of 360,000, reported only 735 families and 365 individuals were in sheltered housing for some duration during the past year. Des Moines, a city half the size of Miami but in a much colder climate, reported 3,632 families and 2,436 individuals were sheltered homeless in 2007.

Twenty-three cities whose mayors are members of the US Conference of Mayors Task force on Hunger and Homelessness contributed in some form to the report for the year ending October 30.

The City Profiles section of the survey includes various reports of band-aid programs undertaken by city administrations that admittedly fall far short of need. More importantly, taken together, these local reports detailing city-by-city conditions are more valuable in providing some insight into the problems of hunger and homelessness that is largely absent from political discourse in the US. The statistics on hunger and homelessness are far more current when compared to official government reports that rely on much older data.

A section in the report entitled “Limitations of this Study” points to efforts under way this year or planned for the future to gather more precise data. This is apparently in response to right-wing critics who have impugned the value of the report in previous years, claiming it was not a representative sample and overstated the extent of poverty. This response by the study’s authors ignores the real reason for these critics’ discomfort—the desire to limit any light being shed on

the twin scourges of hunger and homelessness characteristic of the social landscape of US cities.

The study was first conceived by Democratic mayors as urban populations were hit by federal budget cuts under the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s. The year-to-year comparison chart at the end of the report has been a veritable misery index, right through the Clinton and the Bush years, showing double-digit increases almost every year in requests for emergency food and shelter. Yet for reasons not stated, the appendix with the 16-year historical chart comparing year-to-year survey results is omitted this year.

Another glaring omission shows one way the report *underestimates* the seriousness of the social crisis in America. New Orleans is not included in the survey, and data from that city has been left out of the report since Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005.



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