

New York City: With hunger on the rise, food banks supplies running low

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In New York City, the capital of world capitalism and home to the greatest concentration of billionaires and multimillionaires on the planet, over 1.3 million people—including 400,000 children—go hungry during the course of the year. Moreover, the emergency food kitchens to which they are forced to turn are running low on supplies. These are the stark findings of a series of recently released reports.

With hunger on the rise throughout America, food banks across the country are running out of food. The deepening economic crisis has increased the need for food for many people under conditions in which government supplies and supermarket donations are greatly reduced compared to previous years. It appears that private donations are also declining, particularly from ordinary working people, who themselves face greater difficulty making ends meet.

Due to the tighter, and more profitable, market for agribusiness, fewer surpluses are being given to the federal government under the Agriculture Department's Bonus Commodity Program. Indeed, surplus food supplies have been steadily declining over the last few years. The government had \$67 million for food supplies last year compared to \$154.3 million in 2005, and \$233 million in 2004. This translates into 89 million pounds of food last year compared to 251 million pounds in 2003. It appears that one contributing factor is the recent rise in food prices, which places greater pressure on both the food banks and the people that they feed. (See: "Food prices rise, living standards fall for US families")

Last month, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAH), issued a report titled "Rising Food Lines, Sinking Economy: Increase in NYC Hunger is Early Proof of Economic Slow-Down." The coalition, which represents more than 1,200 nonprofit food banks in the city, reports that more than one million low-income New Yorkers are now compelled to rely on their services.

According to a recent federal study, in 2006, about 1.3 million people, which includes 400,000 children (one out of every six city residents), experienced food insecurity, meaning that they lacked the resources to obtain enough food to meet their basic needs. According to the NYCCAH, this increase in food insecurity is bound up with an increase in the number living in poverty in New York, which now stands at 1.54 million (about one in five city residents), an increase of 151,000 since the year 2000.

The coalition's report contrasts these increasingly desperate conditions to the fact that "over the past year, the total net worth of the wealthiest 64 New Yorkers rose from \$60.4 billion to \$224 billion—a 270 percent increase."

The Coalition's survey concludes that there has been a 20 percent increase in the use of food banks in 2007. This is on top of an 11 percent increase in the number seeking aid from the city's emergency

food programs in 2006 and 6 percent increase in 2005.

As a result of this unprecedented increase in the need for assistance and declining food supplies, the agency found that 59 percent of all the food programs lacked the resources to meet demand. Meanwhile more than half of the food banks saw their federal funding slashed last year.

Among the more disturbing findings of the NYCCAH survey is that approximately half of all who turn to food pantries or soup kitchens for aid are sent away hungry because of a lack of supplies and/or the limiting of the hours that they are open for assistance. Some food banks are deeply concerned that they will have to permanently close their doors to the hungry.

The Food Bank for New York City, the largest distributor of free food in the city reports that it is now able to distribute just 3 million pounds of food a month to food pantries and soup kitchens, instead of the 5.5 million pounds that it previously supplied.

According to the Food Bank's statistics, the number of people currently relying on New York City food banks increased to 1.3 million in 2006, from 1 million in 2004. The number of children requiring emergency food assistance grew at a far more rapid pace, climbing nearly 50 percent, from 269,000 in 2004 to the current total of 397,000.

Two representatives of the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in Chelsea, one of the best supplied food banks in Manhattan, spoke with the WSWs about their struggle to maintain services to the city's hungry under these crisis conditions.

Neville Hughes, the director of development, who is in charge of fundraising, explained that because of the fall-off in supplies from the Food Bank of New York, the soup kitchen recently had been compelled to buy food off the open market.

"We are now serving more hot meals than ever in our 25-year history," he said. "We serve more than 1,100 people every Monday through Friday. People come from all over, and a lot of them are homeless. We have been seeing more working people who can't afford both rent and food. We are also seeing more young men than ever before because they don't have the skills for a high-tech city like New York. Another reason our numbers are up is because people are being turned away from other soup kitchens that do not have sufficient supplies.

"Forty to fifty percent of our donations come from individuals in the metropolitan area, thirty to 35 percent come from foundations, and government and municipal donations account for less than 15 percent. We haven't missed a serving day yet, but fundraising is more difficult. One of our contributing foundations is planning on cutting back."

Elizabeth Maxwell of the Holy Apostles described the situation as “a triple whammy.” She told the WWSWS, “We have less food, more people to feed, and less funding.”

She added: “The soup kitchens are not the answer to the problem, but unfortunately a necessary factor to address the crisis. We wish we did not have to be here doing this. It is terrible, and it should not be that people are forced to stand in the cold to get a hot meal. What they really need is economic security and living-wage jobs.

“The government, on all levels, has assumed that we will always be here, but if we were not here, I do not know what those in need would do. Government support is about 13 percent, which is sadly not very much. One of the large foundations has changed its priorities and will no longer be contributing. They have been donating about \$200,000 a year, which is a lot of money.

“People don’t know what to do on a larger systemic level, but on a human level, ordinary people understand that nobody should be starving.”

The conditions described by these soup kitchen volunteers corroborate the statistics compiled in both studies. Indeed, the Food Bank study concluded that the number of city residents who experienced some difficulty in obtaining food went from two million in 2003 to almost 3 million in 2006—a 48 percent increase.

It further found that a large percentage of this increase resulted from a significant growth in the number of middle-income people (defined as those receiving an annual income of between \$25,000 and \$49,000) who had experienced a need for emergency food. This layer, which accounted for 21 percent of those seeking food aid in 2003, climbed to 39 percent in 2006. This is attributable to a fall in real income in a city that boasts one of the highest costs of living in the country, and, in particular, the sharp increase in food prices.

In 2006, approximately one quarter of those turning to soup kitchens had a college education, compared to 15 percent in 2004. Twenty-one percent are employed and amongst this group, 57 percent are working full time.

The majority of recipients are extremely poor, with 29 percent having annual incomes of less than \$5,000 and 59 percent earning less than \$10,000 per year. Thirty-one percent of the recipients are disabled, while 11 percent are homeless.

The Food Bank NYC study also demonstrated that the difficulty in obtaining adequate food went hand-in-hand with serious health problems. It found, for example, that 19 percent of the children seeking food assistance suffer from asthma, while 34 percent of the elderly have diabetes, and 10 percent have heart disease. More than one fifth of these recipients do not have any kind of health insurance. (See foodbanknyc.org)

At the Park Slope Christian Help, Inc., a soup kitchen in Brooklyn, the WWSWS spoke to a number of people who came one day last month in search of a meal.

Angel Perez, 57, explained that he was unemployed, received no money from welfare, and came because he did not have money to eat. “It’s very hard for me to survive,” he explained.

“I’ve been working all my life as a maintenance worker,” Angel said. “I once worked for a company for 15 years before they closed down; another for ten years and then another for five years.

“Right now I can’t get a steady job. They look at me and see my white hair. I’m not like a young kid. My bones and my teeth hurt—maybe because of the weather. I don’t know. I hope to go on Medicaid

“I am lucky to be able to rent a room for \$60 a week from a friend.

However, I am a week behind.”

Joey Delio, a former train operator for the New York City Transit Authority, also showed up at the Brooklyn soup kitchen.

“I was working for the transit authority for almost ten years,” he said. “However I injured a vertebra after I fell on the job. The authority’s doctor said I couldn’t work and placed me on involuntary sick leave. After one year, they fired me, which is what they do to every worker who is sick or disabled for that length of time.

“Afterwards, in 1993 I got an injury to my knee and I became bedridden. I was in a lot of pain, and I still have some pain. I had enough savings to support my family although we were below the poverty line. I also used a \$100,000 line of credit which has placed me in enormous debt. Right now, I am destitute.

“The year 2000 was the first time that I could walk around. Right now, my sister is taking care of me.”

David, 42, said that he had been fired six months earlier after being injured and had not been able to find work since.

“Welfare provides me with my own room in an apartment, which is more like a dump,” he said. “They would like for me to work for my welfare check, but since my injury, I have been unable to work.

“I have been working all my life before my injury. I used to work in a factory around here that put advertising on a wide variety of different products. I was a good worker and was basically running my department. They wanted us to work for a minimum wage even though the company was making a fortune.

“I see an increase in the number of people who come to the food pantries. I see some of the same people every day, people who are very poor, people who would be starving if they could not come here. Some are homeless, and sometimes there are whole families that come in here for food.”

Testifying before the New York City Council last November, Joel Berg, executive director of the NYCCAH, cited figures showing that, while poverty has increased in the city, the number of people receiving public assistance has declined. In Brooklyn, the borough with the highest poverty rate, the number of poor people has increased by 85,000 from 2000 to 2006, while the welfare rolls have been slashed by 241,388.

What becomes of these working people deprived of both jobs and income? This is a subject that few politicians and virtually no section of the mass media care to examine. At least a partial answer is to be found in the lines of hungry people standing in the cold outside of food kitchens that are running out of supplies. These lines, in a city where Wall Street speculators pull in Christmas bonuses ranging in the millions of dollars, are a damning indictment of a grossly unequal and irrational social order.



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