

# Hunger and homelessness grow across US cities

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Both the number of homeless and the demand for emergency food assistance have increased substantially in US cities, according to the findings of the most recent survey from the US Conference of Mayors Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness.

Available resources are severely strained due the economic crisis, while demand for food assistance has increased by 18 percent over the past year.

The *Hunger and Homelessness Survey* was released on December 12 and is based on a survey of 25 cities that provided information on food and homeless assistance for the period from October 1, 2007 to September 30, 2008. Given the increasing economic slowdown, one can safely conclude that the figures provided in the survey have only continued to grow worse.

The findings of the survey paint a grim picture of increasing social hardship in the United States. "At this time of significant economic downturn, the issues of hunger and homelessness in America are more prevalent than ever," stated the Miami Mayor and Conference President Manny Diaz in a press release.

The 25 cities include Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Kansas City, Seattle, Cleveland, and Los Angeles, among others. More revealing, however, are the cities not included in this report. New Orleans, for example, has not been included in the survey since it was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Detroit, the biggest poor city in America, was also left out, even though it was included in the task force's 2007 report.

While a majority (68 percent) of the cities increased their funding for emergency food assistance in 2008, this growth was generally outpaced by increases in demand. The largest gaps between supply and demand were found in Philadelphia, where demand increased by 23 percent, but supply decreased by 26 percent, and Phoenix, which saw demand increase by 35 percent, but supply decrease by 13 percent.

One cause of the growing gap between supply and demand for food assistance can be found in the changing sources of food donations. Large grocery chains and other food suppliers provide, on average, half of all food donations. "This dependence has become problematic as improvements in quality control and supply chain management have reduced the quantity of excess or slightly imperfect food products that food banks receive from large grocery chains and national food companies," the report notes.

Of the 21 cities that responded to the question, 20 stated that requests for emergency food assistance had increased in 2008. Much of this increase has resulted from a rise in first-time requests for assistance, particularly among working families affected by the economic downturn and rising food prices. The survey showed that 59 percent requesting food assistance are in families, 41 percent are employed, 15 percent are elderly, and 11 percent are homeless.

The ominous nature of these developments is highlighted by an answer from Cleveland, which noted, "Some agencies report that they are seeing families requesting assistance who were formerly donors to the pantry."

Because demand for food assistance has largely not been met by supply, many kitchens and pantries have had to reduce the quantity of food handed out (80 percent of cities), turn people away (60 percent), limit the number of times a person can visit, and restrict services to neighborhood residents.

The surveyed cities were also asked to list the top three causes of hunger in their city. Poverty was cited by 83 percent of the cities, followed by unemployment (74 percent), high housing costs (57 percent), and increases in food prices (39 percent).

Looking at rates of homelessness, the report states that 19 of the 25 cities (83 percent) reported that homelessness had increased over the past year. "On average, cities reported a 12 percent increase in homelessness in 2008." This includes family homelessness, which 16 of the cities reported increased.

Four cities—Portland, Oregon; Providence, Rhode Island; Gastonia, North Carolina; and San Francisco, California—report that homelessness has increased by more than 30 percent over the past year.

When asked if the number of employed homeless persons had increased, 11 of the 19 cities that collected this data showed an increase, while only one city reported a decrease, and seven reported no change. Homelessness has also been exacerbated by the foreclosure crisis, with 12 cities reporting that it has contributed to an increase in homelessness.

As with emergency food assistance, the demand for shelter on certain nights is greater than the capacity that most cities can provide. This has led cities to adapt by providing cots in hallways or opening shelters earlier than scheduled. However, cities still have to turn away individuals and families.

For example, in Los Angeles, 31 percent of individuals seeking shelter had to be turned away due to a lack of beds, according to a 2007 survey. Des Moines reports that "shelter providers regularly report that 'turn-aways' are a routine occurrence."

The report finds that the mentally ill are particularly

vulnerable, with 26 percent of the persons experiencing homelessness also suffering from a severe mental illness.

The survey notes that there are a number of limitations to the study. For example, the cities selected for the survey do not constitute a representative sample of US cities. Furthermore, the averages among the 25 cities used by the report, which vary in size and location, are not weighted by differences in the populations of the cities.

However, despite these and other drawbacks, the survey still provides valuable information on the dismal social decay that characterizes the urban centers in the United States.

*The full report is available here [PDF].*



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