

Hunger mounts in the US

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As the economic crisis deepens, its human toll is becoming more evident. A new survey of food charities in the United States has revealed a dramatic increase in hunger. Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief organization in the US, says that a growing number of families face difficulties in securing adequate nutrition. Meanwhile food banks have proven ill-equipped to meet the increased demand caused by layoffs and increased food costs, and many have collapsed or have restricted the allotments of food they make.

In a nationwide survey of 160 local food assistance programs, with operations covering virtually every county in the US, Feeding America found that there has been a 30 percent increase in requests for emergency food assistance, and that every food bank has seen an increase in demand for food relief. An opinion poll commissioned by the organization and released simultaneously found that a growing number of low-income families lack sufficient nutrition.

In a chilling statement on social conditions in the US, 72 percent of surveyed food charities said that they are unable to meet the current demands of local communities for assistance. In most cases, the charities have responded by offering smaller distributions to the hungry, and some have been forced to close down.

This is taking place in every region of the country. To cite a few examples, the Food Bank of New York City reported that organizations under its direction "have regularly reported over the past year that their shelves are bare and that they have had to turn people away due to their lack of food." The Cleveland Foodbank reported that the crisis "is moving at a pace so fast that our staff cannot catch a breath." The Food Bank of Corpus Christi, Texas, said that "our agencies are seeing such a drastic increase in new clients that they are having a hard time getting the money to acquire the food we need," while "other agencies are burning out

and we are seeing a number of agencies closing their doors." Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee reported that its agencies have asked that it not refer new clients "because they are running out of food."

In its survey of households, Feeding America found that nearly two thirds of low-income households—defined as having an income at less than 200 percent of the official poverty level—said that within the past year "their food didn't last and they could not afford to buy more." Forty percent "ate less than they felt they should," and 36 percent "cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food." A large majority of low-income respondents, 70 percent, said that they are reducing food spending, while 62 percent said they make multiple shopping trips for food "because they didn't have enough money to buy everything at one time." In New York City, in 2008, nearly 40 percent of all households said that they had faced difficulties in procuring sufficient food for their families, a sharp increase over figures from 2007.

Hunger is affecting ever-wider sections of the working class, including two-parent households and the gainfully employed. The survey of food banks found user increases of 99.4 percent among "first-time" users, 74 percent among unemployed workers, 59 percent of those with jobs, and 48 percent among families with children seeking assistance.

"When you hear someone say, 'I never thought that I would have to come to the pantry to get food,' or to have someone say, 'I used to donate to the pantry and now I am using it,' that's when you realize how tough things are," a representative of the Community Food Banks of South Dakota said.

A food charity in Bloomington, Indiana, reported that a food bank in what it called "a higher income per capita" area saw an increase from 60 visits per month

last year to 700 this year. A food bank in Long Island, New York, said that it has witnessed "increased need among middle class people making between \$40,000-\$70,000, who are recently unemployed, having health problems, having difficulties managing mortgage payments, and going to pantries and soup kitchens for emergency food assistance." A survey of New York City households found that even among the college-educated, 36 percent faced hardship in 2008 in buying needed food, an increase from 11 percent in 2003. A food assistance program in California reported that it is "seeing people coming to us who have never been a part of our system and who never thought that they would need food assistance."

"We are in a national crisis," said Vicki Escarra, the president and CEO of Feeding America. "We have some food banks reporting as high as a 65 percent increase in need. There are record numbers of new men, women and children, who never thought they would need food assistance."

Financial hardship forces many families to choose among necessities such as food, health care, and home heating. The survey of households revealed that 40 percent of low-income families had, in the past year, been forced to choose between eating and paying for utilities.

The economic crisis is at the root of the growth in hunger. Upwards of 90 percent of food banks attribute the increase in hunger to rising food prices and unemployment. Sixty percent also cite fuel costs, and 52 percent listed the inadequacy of state food stamp programs as a cause.

A press release by Feeding America calls on Congress "to pass economic recovery legislation that will offer desperately needed relief to both low-income Americans and the nation's food banks, as the recent surge in unemployment has pushed millions to the brink of hunger."

Estimates on the size of the "economic stimulus" package that President-elect Barack Obama will put in place have ranged from \$400 billion to \$900 billion. Democrats have hedged their bets, moreover, by asserting that its passage will depend upon minority Republican support. But whatever its final size and content, Obama's "stimulus" will prove woefully inadequate in the face of the deepest social crisis since the Great Depression. The sums being discussed

represent a small fraction of the more than \$8 trillion that has already been doled out to the largest financial institutions.

Meanwhile, in the 2009 Federal Budget, only \$62 billion has been appropriated for all food assistance programs, including food stamps and school lunches, which for many children provide the only substantial meal of the day.

More than 9 percent of all US households now rely on food stamps, the Supplemental Food Assistance Program, to help meet dietary needs. This is a sharp increase from 2001, when 6 percent used food stamps. But indications are that this number will rise sharply. A number of states, including Oregon and Washington in the Pacific Northwest, have seen record requests for food assistance. Food stamps function as vouchers that can be redeemed at grocery stores. Generally, they may be exchanged only for the cheapest items in stock, and only for staples such as milk, meat, and bread.

The program will not meet the level of hunger provoked by the crisis. In the Feeding America survey of households, one third of food stamp recipients said "their benefits only lasted for two weeks or less." Bureaucratic hurdles prevent a large number of eligible families from receiving aid. Undocumented immigrants, as well as immigrants who have been in the country legally for less than five years, are not eligible. Assistance is pegged to 130 percent of the official poverty level, meaning that large numbers of the so-called "working poor" are ineligible, including many of those surveyed by Feeding America.

Though they paint a grim portrait, the Feeding America surveys on hunger offer only a glimpse of the level of social misery to come. Significantly, the surveys were conducted at the end of November. Since then, layoffs have mounted precipitously.



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