

US: 12 million children face hunger and food insecurity

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More than 12 million children are threatened with the risk of inadequate food and hunger in the US, according to a new report from the food bank advocacy Feeding America.

Significantly, the study found that more than 3.5 million children under the age of five face hunger. This figure amounts to fully 17 percent—one in every six—of American children age five and under.

“Child Food Insecurity in the United States: 2005-2007,” released May 7, is the first analysis focusing on the number of babies and young children living in food-insecure households by state.

Feeding America based its analysis on federal Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Census Bureau data from 2005 to 2007—classified officially as the peak of the last economic recovery period.

As with poverty, homelessness, bankruptcy figures, and many other measures, the rates of food insecurity documented by the study plainly reflect the deterioration of living standards working class households have seen over the past five years. In the years since the 2005-2007 period, food insecurity has rapidly widened along with unemployment and wage cuts.

Feeding America found that for the period preceding the onset of the economic crisis, in 11 states, more than 20 percent of young children were at risk for hunger. Louisiana, with 24.2 percent, had the highest rate of child food insecurity, followed closely by North Carolina, Ohio, Kentucky, Texas, New Mexico, Kansas, South Carolina, Tennessee, Idaho and Arkansas.

In California, the study found 1.6 million children were food-insecure on average in 2005-2007. Texas averaged 1.47 million food-insecure children for the

period.

No state had less than 10 percent of its child population exposed to hunger. Sparsely populated North Dakota registered the lowest rate, with 10.9 percent.

Families contending with food insecurity suffer immense stress. Many poor households are regularly forced to choose between paying for utilities or food. Families reduce food amounts at mealtimes, with parents sometimes skipping meals so that their children can eat.

Food insecurity among young children is especially concerning because of the risk of malnutrition and developmental delays. If children do not eat enough or receive only cheap “filler” foods, they are vulnerable to getting sick more often, performing poorly in school, developing diabetes, suffering cognitive delays and psychological distress. Many effects of malnutrition in young children are irreversible.

Hunger is a mounting problem in the US. As millions more working class families face job losses and poverty, the major federal safety net programs—including the food stamps and emergency cash assistance programs—are serving far fewer people than are eligible and in need.

By the latest USDA count, food stamp enrollment has swelled by 1 million people since last September, to a record 32.55 million Americans. The non-profit Food Research and Action Center estimates that 16 million more people are eligible to receive federal food assistance but are not enrolled.

An analysis by the *New York Times*, published May 9, found huge disparities in the way the food stamp program is administered from state to state. In California, for example, the newspaper noted that only half of those eligible for the program were enrolled. In

other states, such as Missouri, where enrollment by those eligible stands at 98 percent, the eligibility requirements are set so severely low that hundreds of thousands of working poor households cannot qualify. Moreover, millions of families enrolled in the program receive far less in aid each month than what is required to maintain a healthy diet.

As a result, rising numbers of families are turning to food pantries and other charity organizations, cutting back on food purchases, and relying more heavily on cheaper staple foods to try to make ends meet.



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