

Hunger, poverty on the rise in Chicago area

Kristina Betinis
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The effects of the economic crisis on working people in Illinois have been devastating. Those who are particularly vulnerable—the unemployed, the under-employed, the elderly and the disabled—are in desperate need. As unemployment rises and the state of Illinois experiences yet another budget crisis, a growing number of working people are falling into poverty.

The Heartland Alliance recently released its 2009 reports on poverty in the Chicago area and in the state of Illinois.

The reports directly correlate the swelling ranks of poor in the region with the recent spike in unemployment.

The Heartland Alliance's Illinois report found that poverty was worsening in many areas in the state even before the current economic crisis officially began, rising in 58 of 102 counties. In 2007, nearly 12 percent of Illinois residents, or 1.5 million people, were living in poverty.

The reports note that since the current US Census statistics are from 2007, before the economic crisis began, they do not accurately reflect economic realities. According to the 2007 Census data, in the years between 2000 and 2007 median household incomes in the area fell dramatically, with declines ranging from \$5,000 to \$11,000.

Since 2007, an estimated 405,000 Illinois residents have become poor, and two million more risk falling into poverty. Additionally, 160,000 have become extremely poor. In 2009, the federal government's definition of poor for a family of four is an income of less than \$22,050. A family of four that is extremely poor has an income less than \$11,025.

In February 2009, Chicago's unemployment rate reached 9.7 percent, with unemployment claims in Chicago increasing nearly 30 percent from 2008. It is estimated that 253,000 more Chicago residents have become poor since 2007, bringing Chicago's impoverished population to 11.3 percent.

The number of Chicago-area elderly people entering the

workforce increased by almost 15 percent between 2000 and 2007. This number will continue rise as a result of the financial industry's profit-taking from retirement fund investments, among other factors. As corporations seek to protect profits by slashing pensions and benefits, the incomes of the elderly are quickly drained to cover housing costs, food costs and medical expenses no longer covered by health insurance.

The Heartland Alliance report estimates that 87,000 children in Chicago have become poor since 2007. Last year, the situation was already dire. In 2008 over 10,600 Chicago Public School students were homeless, an increase of 35 percent over five years.

The *Chicago Tribune* recently reported that 84 percent of the 405,000 Chicago public school students receive free or subsidized meals at school. It concluded that 342,000 are not receiving free or subsidized meals during this year's summer break.

The Obama administration's commitment to aiding the finance industry while refusing to bail out states in crisis reflects the class orientation of the administration toward many of those who supported him in his home state.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team recently spoke with visitors to the Lakeview West Food Pantry, an emergency food distribution center located in an affluent neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. Virtually all were critical of the Obama administration's economic policies.

Lynette Hampton spoke in no uncertain terms. When asked her opinion of the Obama administration's response to the crisis, she told the WSW, "It sucks."

Hampton relies on the pantry and other food distribution centers to supplement the paltry \$10 in food stamps she receives to help care for herself and a grandchild. She told the WSW she has had to rely on pantries much more since last year.

She said, "I've been coming now a lot. At first I would be coming maybe once a month. Now I leave this one and

try to find another one, and leave that one and try to find another one, so my food can last for the whole month for me and my grandbaby.”

Offering her opinion of the Obama administration's bailout of Wall Street, she said, “I don't think that's fair at all.”

CJ, a young man whose mother recently lost her job as a secretary, explained his family's situation. “My mom, she lost her job. That's the reason why we're here. And it's just me and my mom.”

A reserved Miles John told the WWSWS, “A lot of people [are] losing homes right now. Most people I talk to are just trying to hold on right now. There's no money for anything.”

Carrie McCormack is the coordinator of the Lakeview pantry. She has worked at the pantry for over seven years and is concerned about the 20 percent rise in need the pantry has seen this year. Last year, the Lakeview pantry saw a 15 percent rise in need from 2007. She explained that new people have been coming in, while longer-standing clients have to come more frequently as they struggle to stretch ever-dwindling resources.

McCormack said, “There's been an increase in the number of new people, and they are confused and don't know what to expect. They're afraid they'll be treated poorly.”

Remarking on the seriousness of the economic crisis, she said of the pantry, “We can't fix the problems, the difficulties. We try to make it a little less hard.”

The increase reported at Lakeview West is modest compared to the increase in demand for emergency food aid across the city. The Greater Chicago Food Depository (GCFD), a county-wide network of emergency food providers that served almost half a million people in the Chicago area in 2005, reported a 36 percent increase in food pantry use just this year. Over 9 percent of Illinois households face food insecurity, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

The GCFD reports that almost 40 percent of households relying on emergency food services in Chicago include at least one employed adult. This is explained by the fact that, from 2000 to 2007, average weekly wages have fallen in seven of the eleven job sectors in Illinois, while housing, energy, education, food and medical care costs have risen dramatically.

Housing and food costs rose by about 14 percent. In 2008, the number of renters spending over half their income on housing rose by 42 percent. In the same period, medical care costs rose by 31 percent and energy costs soared by 60 percent. At this time last year, 100,000 homes in Cook County were without heating and/or cooling capability.

Alarming increases in poverty and hunger have been seen in Chicago's suburbs. The University of Illinois at Chicago published a report in March 2009, “Uneven Capacity and Delivery of Human Services in the Chicago Suburbs,” which calls attention to the unprecedented 16 percent rise in hardship in Chicago's suburbs and townships, including homelessness, unemployment, hunger and poverty.

Many residents have been forced into the outlying areas around Chicago in search of cheaper rents, often as a consequence of the lucrative downtown gentrification projects that took place during the real estate boom immediately preceding the current crisis. Others have been forced out by closures of public housing facilities.

The University of Illinois report finds that only 20 to 30 percent of suburban areas are able to meet some portion of the present need for basic services to low-income families, youth, senior citizens and the disabled, while nearly 16 percent of areas report taking steps recently to reduce or eliminate services. Since township revenue is typically drawn from property taxes, rising foreclosures and dwindling property tax values threaten the townships' ability to address the increasing demand for services. Some townships are simply insolvent.

The Midwest has already been hit very hard by the economic crisis, losing over 676,000 jobs in mass layoffs last year, according to CNN. Of those jobs, 127,000 were related to vehicle manufacturing. Already last year, the Midwest had a poverty rate of 12.3 percent and is home to nine of the 20 poorest cities in the United States.



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