

One in nine Americans uses food stamps

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One in nine Americans relied on food stamps in May, the highest proportion ever, according to recently released data from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). In all, 34.4 million people used the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a federal program that provides assistance to low-income people, an increase of more than 2 percent from the previous month, and a staggering increase of 6 million over the past year.

May's increase was the sixth consecutive month that set a new record in food stamp use. Government food assistance increased in every state, with Florida registering the sharpest gain at 4.2 percent.

The year-over-year percentage increase in food stamp use is more striking, with 13 states, representing every region of the country, registering a spike of more than 25 percent. These were Utah (45.5 percent), Nevada (39 percent), Idaho (36.3 percent), Washington (34.5 percent), Florida (34.2 percent), Vermont (33.6 percent), Wisconsin (31.3 percent), Arizona (29.7 percent), Colorado (28.9 percent), Georgia (28.3 percent), Maryland (27.2 percent), Massachusetts (25.3 percent), and Oregon (25 percent).

"Food stamp enrollment is rising because the economy is having a devastating impact on low-income families and they need this program to eat," said Stacy Dean of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities said. "Every single state has been affected."

The food stamp program is largely funded by the federal government and administered by the states. Historically, recipients could redeem stamps or coupons for food assistance at grocery stores, but in recent years paper stamps have been phased out in favor of a debit card system called Electronic Benefit Transfer.

The program aims to assist the desperately poor. According to the USDA, the average gross monthly income of food stamp-receiving households was \$640, with nearly 80 percent of all benefits going to households with children.

The program provides an average of \$133 monthly per person requesting food assistance. By way of comparison, according to the USDA's own estimates, a "low-cost" monthly nutritional scheme for a single teenage boy requires a minimum of \$220 spending on food per month.

Federal food assistance for the poor was a Great Society measure created during the the Lyndon Johnson administration (1963-1969). Since the late 1970s, it has weathered round after round of cuts at the hands of both Democratic and Republican administrations and congresses, who claimed to be creating a "culture of responsibility" among the poor.

The most savage of these cuts came in 1996, through Bill Clinton's "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act," which eliminated eligibility for legal immigrants (these restrictions have since been only slightly relaxed), limited stamp use for "able bodied" adults without dependents to three months during a 36-month period, and substantially reduced maximum food benefits.

The result is a food stamp program that, even in more favorable economic conditions, fails to meet basic nutritional needs and shuts out the vast majority of the working class from any assistance whatsoever. The economic crisis has laid bare the woefully inadequate character of the program and the "social safety net" as a whole.

In Texas, demand is such that in July the state was delinquent in processing nearly 40 percent of new requests. Rachel Cavazos, who has four children, is jobless, and is in the midst of a divorce, applied for food stamps in April and has not yet heard back on her request. "It's very hurtful, especially when somebody doesn't give you the benefit of the doubt," the 32-year-old Houston native recently told the *Houston and Texas News*. "The help is not for me. It's for my babies. I don't want my children to suffer."

Recently at a Dallas, Texas, food stamp office, a line of the desperate and hungry formed before 5 a.m. "I got a four, a five and a 15-year-old. And right now I got \$2.27.

So we're going to have some Ramen noodles tonight," Kenyadda Momanyi told a local news station. A class action lawsuit has been filed against the state of Texas to force it to process applications more swiftly.

Mickey Warren, food director of Christian Life Food Pantry in Knox County, Kentucky, recently went before the local Chamber of Commerce in a desperate bid for charitable contributions. "It's toward the end of the month and people are starting to look for more and more food, because by now the ones that draw food stamps, they're gone, the kids are hungry," he said.

"Warren recalled [recently watching] a small girl rip open a whole pound cake package in the pantry parking lot, grasping it with both hands and eating it like a candy bar, because she had been hungry," the local *TimesTribune.com* reported.

In Wichita, Kansas, a grandmother summed up her plight in a word. "The most simple word would be we're hungry," Kathi Boggs told a local news station, as she sat with her 6-year-old grandson, Alex, at a soup kitchen. "At the end of the day there's not enough for food."

"People are desperate," said Gary Madden, a charity worker who assists people in gaining access to food stamps in San Bernardino County, California. "People calling now are saying things like 'I've never asked for help in my life. I don't know what I'm going to do. I've lost my job and I'm about to lose my home.' More men are calling. Families are doubling up in homes."

"Callers are saying, 'bank bailouts, auto company bailouts, where's my bailout?'," Madden told *BlackVoiceNews.com*.



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