

A record 49 million Americans faced hunger in 2008

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A yearly survey on hunger released Monday by the United States Department of Agriculture reported that a record 49.1 million Americans in 17 million households lacked dependable access to adequate food in 2008.

The government reported a sharp rise both in what it calls “food insecurity” and “very low food security,” i.e., outright hunger, noting that the rates recorded last year in both categories were the highest since the Agriculture Department began its annual surveys in 1995.

Those suffering food insecurity in 2008 made up 16.4 percent of the US population. Of these, 12.1 million adults and 5.2 million children lived in households with very low food security.

The report’s chief author, Mark Nord, pointed out that most families with a scarcity of food contain at least one adult with a full-time job. This is a reflection of the assault on both jobs and wages carried out by the American corporate elite in response to the financial crisis. Since the beginning of the financial crisis in the summer of 2007, big business has sought to place the burden of the financial breakdown on the working class, a process that has accelerated under the Obama administration.

Corporations, taking their lead from the Obama administration’s assault on auto workers at General Motors and Chrysler, have been systematically shedding jobs and slashing wages, benefits and work hours, utilizing the crisis precipitated by Wall Street to effect a permanent reduction in working class living standards and an intensification of the rate of exploitation of labor.

The result is a social catastrophe with no parallel since the Great Depression.

The Agriculture Department report pointed out that just half of the households in which food is scarce have incomes at or below the official poverty level, while most of the rest survive on something less than twice that level.

This only demonstrates the fraudulent nature of the official poverty level, which excludes tens of millions who live in poverty. The real poverty level in the US is likely double the

official estimate for 2008 of 13.2 percent, itself an increase from 12.5 percent in 2007. According to the US Census Bureau, there were 39.8 million people in the US in poverty in 2008, up from 37.3 million the previous year. The real figure is likely in the range of 70 million to 80 million, at least a quarter of the population.

The US Census Bureau announced last September that real median household income in the United States fell 3.6 percent between 2007 and 2008. That trend has undoubtedly accelerated this year.

The official jobless rate in December of 2008 was 7.2 percent. The rate for October of this year was 10.2 percent. This means the hunger epidemic reported on Monday significantly underestimates the current situation.

President Obama on Monday issued a perfunctory statement in response to the Agriculture Department report. Released from Beijing, where Obama is meeting with Chinese leaders, the statement called the report “unsettling.” It referred to “many communities across our nation where food stamp applications are surging and food pantry shelves are emptying.”

Obama focused his concern to the impact of growing hunger on children, noting that “there were more than 500,000 families in which a child experienced hunger multiple times over the course of the year.” He said nothing about adults who are suffering from inadequate nutrition.

In fact, the Agriculture Department report stated that nearly 17 million children—more than one in five across the US—were living in households where food ran short, up from slightly more than 12 million the year before. The report also noted that the number of children who experienced outright hunger rose from about 700,000 to nearly 1.1 million.

Obama placed the greatest emphasis not on the human tragedy of such levels of hunger, but rather on its implications for “our future competitiveness as a nation,” i.e., the global competitive position of American capitalism.

He made a pro forma reference to restoring “job growth,” and touted his administration’s sponsorship of a measure signed into law last month that “invests \$85 million in new

strategies to prevent children from experiencing hunger in the summer.” This paltry allocation goes toward maintaining school lunch programs during the summer vacation.

It is a drop in the bucket compared to the trillions of dollars—estimated by one government agency at up to \$23.7 trillion—which the government has made available to bail out the banks. And it pales in comparison to the tens of billions of dollars in bonuses that will be handed out to bank executives next month.

Obama concluded his brief remarks by reiterating that providing children with the “healthy meals they need to grow and succeed” is necessary to “keep America competitive in the decades to come.”

The Agriculture Department reported that among people of all ages, nearly 15 percent (17 million households) last year did not consistently have adequate food, compared with 11 percent in 2007. This is the greatest decline in access to food during a single year in the history of the annual survey.

Of this 15 percent, 5.7 percent (6.7 million households) experienced “very low food security”—meaning food intake of one or more family members was reduced and their eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year because the household lacked money. The figure for this category was up from 4.1 percent in 2007.

The report also noted that food insecurity had increased from 1999 to 2007, that is, during the bumper years on Wall Street before rampant speculation and fraud precipitated the near-meltdown of the US and world financial system.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack in a briefing to reporters said, “It’s no secret. Poverty, unemployment, these are all factors.” He acknowledged that “there could be additional increases” in the figures for 2009, due out a year from now.

The report indicated the inadequacy of existing government food programs. Just more than half of those surveyed who reported they had experienced food shortages said they had, in the previous month, participated in one of the government’s largest anti-hunger programs and nutrition programs—food stamps, subsidized school lunches, or WIC, the nutrition program for women with babies or young children.

In 2008, people in 4.8 million households used private food pantries, up from 3.9 million in 2007, an increase of 23 percent. Some 625,000 households resorted to soup kitchens, nearly 90,000 more than the previous year.

Food shortages are particularly common among women raising children alone. Last year, more than one in three single mothers reported struggling to provide food and more than one in seven said someone in their home had gone hungry. The report also found that African-Americans and Hispanics were more than twice as likely to report that food

in their home was inadequate.

On average, households reporting food scarcity had the problem seven months out of the year, while about one-fourth said the problem occurred almost every month. Among the questions asked in the survey were whether, in the past year, food sometimes ran out before they had money to buy more, whether they could not afford to eat nutritionally balanced meals, and whether adults in their family at times reduced the size of their meals, or skipped them, because of a lack of money.

Regionally, food insecurity was most prevalent in the South. Rates increased significantly in 13 states, with the largest increases in Nevada and West Virginia.

Monday’s report underscores the refusal of the Obama administration to take any serious measures to deal with the jobs crisis and the growth of poverty. As the report was released, Obama was reassuring the Chinese government, which holds some \$800 billion in US Treasury notes, that his administration would protect Beijing’s dollar assets and make good on its pledge to slash health care costs and impose major cuts in social programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

Growing hunger is one of the costs being borne by the American people for the single-minded determination of the Obama administration, Congress and both big business parties to empty the public treasury and slash working class living standards in order to protect the wealth of the American financial aristocracy.



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