America the hungry

Patrick Martin
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A front-page report in Sunday's *New York Times*, detailing the skyrocketing rise in food stamp use, provides a far different picture of America at the end of 2009 than the complacent assurances of economic "recovery" voiced by Wall Street and the Obama administration.

The *Times* conducted a statistical analysis of food stamp use by county, in an effort to present a more detailed social portrait of the 36 million people currently on the food stamp rolls. "They include single mothers and married couples, the newly jobless and the chronically poor, longtime recipients of welfare checks and workers whose reduced hours or slender wages leave pantries bare," the report noted.

Among the significant findings:

• In 239 counties, more than a quarter of the population receives food stamps.
• In more than 750 counties, at least one in three African-Americans receives food stamps.
• In more than 800 counties, more than one-third of all children depend on food stamps.
• In 62 counties, food stamp rolls have doubled over the past two years.
• In 205 counties, food stamp rolls are up by two-thirds.

The geographical dispersal of the mounting social need for food is staggering, from traditional centers of poverty such as rural Appalachia and inner-city urban ghettos to the suburbs built up in the Sunbelt in the last two decades. The map showing the counties where food stamp usage is growing most rapidly includes the affluent Atlanta suburbs, most of the state of Florida, most of Wisconsin, western and northern Ohio, and most of the Mountain West, including large swathes of Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado and Idaho.

While unemployment is the main trigger of rising food stamp usage, the immediate economic cause varies widely, from the collapse of the housing bubble in the southwestern states and Florida, to the collapse of the auto industry in the Great Lakes region, to the layoffs sweeping through white collar America as the recession worsens.

The *Times* notes the impact on affluent suburban areas, long dominated by the Republican Party, where food stamp usage has more than doubled since the official start of the slump in December 2007, such as Orange County, California and Forsyth County, Georgia. Food stamp use has grown more slowly, in percentage terms, in cities like Detroit, St. Louis and New Orleans, but only because so much of their populations were already living in poverty and receiving food assistance when the slump began.

All these figures significantly understate the level of social deprivation. An estimated 18 million people who are eligible for food stamps do not receive them, partly because of institutional barriers like inadequate outreach services, particularly to immigrant communities—the state of California reaches only half of those eligible—and partly because of the social stigma attached to receiving "welfare," especially in suburban areas where impoverishment has been a sudden and recent event.

According to a study by Thomas A. Hirschl of Cornell University and Mark R. Rank of Washington University in St. Louis, half the children in America will depend on food stamps at some point during their childhood. The figure rises to 90 percent for black children. The study was published this month in the

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Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

Since it is based on analyzing 29 years of data, the latter study gives a picture of the levels of social need during a period when unemployment averaged well below the 10.2 percent mark hit last month. A protracted period of double-digit unemployment—now widely predicted by business and government economists—will make more and more children dependent on federal aid to meet their basic nutritional needs.

The findings of both these studies confirm the conclusions of a US Department of Agriculture survey released November 16 that found 49 million Americans, including 17 million children, were not consistently getting enough food to eat in 2008. The vast majority of the 17 million families struggling to put food on the table had at least one employed worker in the household, but with wages too low to ensure basic necessities. The level of food insecurity was the highest since the USDA began keeping records in 1995.

These figures demonstrate that for American working people, the social reality today is the worst since the Great Depression. Some 30 million people are unemployed or underemployed. Nearly 50 million lack health insurance. Nearly 50 million have difficulty feeding themselves and their children. Some 40 million live below the official poverty line, and the figure would rise to 80 million if a realistic family budget were used as the yardstick.

Young people face the greatest challenge. According to a Pew Research Center report issued last week, 10 percent of adults under 35 have moved back with their parents due to the recession. More than half of men 18 to 24 were still living with their parents, and 48 percent of young women. The proportion of young people with jobs—46 percent—is the lowest since records began in 1948.

These figures are an indictment of American capitalism and its criminal sabotage of the productive forces of society. How is it possible that in a country whose agriculture is so productive that it can literally feed the world, tens of millions of people struggle to feed their children and themselves? It is because production and distribution take place on the basis of private profit, and feeding hungry children is far less profitable for the ruling elite than speculation in the financial markets.

These figures are also an indictment of the political representatives of big business in the Obama administration and the Democratic and Republican parties. Apparently hunger, like unemployment, is viewed by Obama merely as a "lagging indicator"—something that the American people simple have to endure, but not a crisis, not even a cause to lift a finger.

Having funneled trillions into the financial system, to ensure a return to profitability and seven-figure bonuses on Wall Street, and set his course for military escalation in Afghanistan at the cost of countless billions, Obama is now declaring that his top domestic priority is deficit reduction. After Wall Street and war, there will be little or nothing left over to meet the needs of hungry children—or their parents.

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