US Conference of Mayors report:

Recession drives up hunger, homelessness in US cities

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Over the course of the past year, urban areas in the US have seen the largest increase in demand for food assistance since 1991, as well as a sharp increase in family homelessness, according to a report issued Tuesday by the US Conference of Mayors.

The data, which was collected in 27 American cities between October 2008 and September 2009, provides a picture of the devastating human toll from the economic crisis and the growth of mass unemployment, foreclosures and evictions.

The report also points to a vast need for food and housing assistance, which city governments have no possibility of satisfying. The cities are being overwhelmed by demand, while receiving a relative pittance from the Obama administration.

The urban areas participating in the survey have a combined population of 20 million, and include Boston, Chicago, Charleston (South Carolina), Cleveland, Dallas, Detroit, Denver, Kansas City (Missouri), Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Seattle. These cities were "were nearly unanimous in reporting an increase in the need for emergency food assistance," the mayors' report states.

On average, the need for emergency food assistance increased by 26 percent. However, more than half of the cities reported increased demand of 30 percent or higher, including Des Moines, Iowa (35 percent), Chicago (35 percent), and metropolitan Minneapolis (49 percent), which saw the highest jump in the nation. In Portland, Oregon, which saw a 12 percent increase overall, some food pantries have reported increases as much as 75 percent.

Twenty-two cities reported an increase in the number of people requesting assistance for the first time, including Nashville, Tennessee, which saw a 74 percent increase in such requests. In Des Moines, 3,781 first-time families requested help last year.

Cities also reported an increase in food requests from formerly stable "middle class" households that might have donated to food pantries in the past, as well as an increase in the frequency of repeat requests from those needing help.

"Most disturbing is the fact that half of those who come in have children under 18," Joan Wadkins, a spokesperson for the hunger-relief organization Second Harvest Heartland in Minneapolis, told the WSWS. "The impact of the economic problems has escalated. Economic uncertainty is a large component of the increase in the number of hungry people."

Second Harvest Heartland, the Upper Midwest's largest food bank, has worked with 1,000 agencies to distribute 50 million pounds of food this year. Ms. Wadkins explained that the demographics of the hungry in Minneapolis and western Wisconsin, where her organization operates, were changing. "We have a lot of first-time visitors. After all, these are the worst conditions since the Great Depression. I would say that we're witnessing the greatest change in circumstances for a large part of the population *ever*. We see white-collar, blue-collar people. You probably saw the USDA [US Department of Agriculture] report less than a month ago, which showed that one in eight people in the US are hungry, a 31 percent increase. We are seeing that."

According to the mayors' report, 92 percent of officials said unemployment was the main cause of hunger in their cities, followed by high housing costs and low wages.

Provisions to feed the hungry chiefly come through donations—which have fallen—from grocery store chains and other large food suppliers, with federal programs accounting for only 24 percent. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) received some additional funds through the federal stimulus package, but its budget is only $400 million. This is under conditions in which 49 million people in the US, including nearly 17 million children, lived in households that were food-insecure in 2008, up from 36.2 million in 2007, according to the USDA.

Nineteen cities cited in the mayors' report (76 percent of

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the total) said food pantries and emergency kitchens had to make cutbacks this year. These included reducing the amount of food served per visit (16 cities), turning away people due to a lack of resources (13), and new restrictions on the number of times a household could visit food pantries each month (11).

"The overall demand for emergency food assistance that went unmet rose from 20 percent in 2008 to 25 percent in 2009," the report noted. "Los Angeles reported that 1.2 million people needed food assistance each month, but food banks served 250,000 people each month, meaning that 79 percent of those in need did not receive assistance." A similar situation held true in Philadelphia and Boston, where the gap between need and assistance was 45 and 25 percent, respectively, while the North Texas Food Bank in Dallas fell 29 million meals short.

When looking to 2010, cities anticipate having a difficult time meeting the high demand for food assistance in the future because of continuing high unemployment and the high cost of living, in addition to the impact of state and local budget cuts.

Homelessness

The growth of unemployment and poverty, coupled with a rise in foreclosures and the lack of affordable housing, has also driven up family homelessness, the mayors' report explained. Nineteen cities reported an increase in family homelessness, with the largest jumps in Dallas (20 percent), Boston and Kansas City (22 percent each), and Charleston (41 percent). San Francisco, Sacramento (California), Nashville and Dallas also reported double-digit increases in homelessness.

Charleston has seen the highest spike in the number of homeless families. According to a recent article in the *Post and Courier*, South Carolina, suffering through its highest level of unemployment in a quarter of century, has an estimated 7,000 homeless people on any given night, but has beds for only about 2,100 of them.

"Charleston County School District Homeless Education Coordinator Sonya Jones said the stereotype of homelessness is the raggedy-looking person pushing a shopping cart filled with his belongings. However, she said, there are people in our community who work every day but find themselves unable to pay the rent so they are forced to live with relatives."

Norfolk, Virginia, said the growth in family homelessness, which was 7 percent last year, started before the recession, when Ford closed its auto plant there in 2007.

There is also a vast unmet demand for shelter. Seventeen cities report that shelters consistently have "clients sleep on overflow cots, in chairs, in hallways, or other subpar sleeping arrangements," the report notes. More than half the cities reported that shelters had to turn away homeless people because of a lack of available beds. A survey of homeless people in Los Angeles revealed that just 13 percent of respondents had tried to access a shelter in the last 30 days, and of those 13 percent, 68 percent had been turned away because no beds were available.

In Portland, the report continues, all emergency shelters are operating at maximum capacity, and many maintain waiting lists of 8 to 10 weeks. In Sacramento, one shelter reports a waiting list of close to 300 persons in families.

Pointing to a phenomenon that recalls the Hoovervilles of the Great Depression, the mayors' report notes that new tent cities or other large homeless encampments have sprung up over the last year in Detroit, Los Angeles, Nashville, Charleston and Providence, Rhode Island, while existing camps have increased in size in Des Moines, Phoenix, Sacramento and Seattle. In an effort to find a silver lining, the mayors' report says, "17 cities reported that they did not have tent cities or other large homeless encampments."

The report—issued by the largely Democratic-controlled US Conference of Mayors—asserts that the Obama administration's Recovery Act has provided some measure of relief for the catastrophic situation. It points, for example, to the $1.5 billion in the stimulus package for the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program.

The trifle being spent on the homeless and hungry—or those losing their jobs and homes—only underscores the callousness and indifference of the Obama administration, which has handed over trillions to bail out Wall Street and fund its neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

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