

One in eight Americans needs emergency food assistance

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One in eight Americans does not have enough to eat and requires emergency food assistance. This staggering number is revealed in a report released on Tuesday by Feeding America (FA), a network consisting of thousands of food pantries, soup kitchens and similar agencies serving 37 million people in the US. The report, entitled *Hunger in America 2010*, paints a devastating portrait of the social misery faced by millions of American working people.

In what is the largest single study of domestic emergency food assistance ever carried out, Feeding America conducted 61,000 face-to-face interviews and surveyed more than 37,000 charitable agencies in its network to assess the level of “food insecurity” among their clients. “Food insecurity” means, simply, that people are going hungry. Survey respondents classified as “insecure” stated they could not afford to buy more food once they had run out, that they had been forced to skip meals because they could not afford them, and that they had not been able to eat when they were hungry because they could not afford to do so.

The FA investigation revealed the organization now serves 37 million people annually, of which 14 million are children. This marks an alarming 46 percent increase in people seeking emergency hunger relief since 2006. Seventy-nine percent of the 14.5 million households served by FA have annual incomes below the official federal poverty line, an absurdly low threshold of \$22,025 for a family of four. Ten percent of the families surveyed are currently homeless; 60 percent do not have access to a car. More than one third of FA client households reported one or more adult family members were currently employed but still struggled to get enough to eat.

The report also revealed that increasing numbers of people are forced to choose between spending money on food and other basic necessities. The FA found that 46 percent of their clients reported having been forced to

choose between buying food for their families or paying for utility services, 40 percent had been forced to choose between food or paying for rent or mortgages, and 34 percent had to choose between food or paying for prescription drugs or other medical treatments. In all, more than one in three recipients of emergency hunger relief reported having to choose between food and other basic needs.

The FA report found that of the clients served by its charities, 78.5 percent of households with children under the age of 18 were “food insecure,” translating to 4.4 million households in all with children who don’t have enough to eat. In households where no children are present, 73.6 percent are also going hungry.

The rapid increase in need for hunger relief is a direct result of the hardships forced on American workers by the global economic crisis. Growing levels of unemployment are a major factor in the rising need for food assistance.

In a section titled “The 2008-2009 Recession: The context for Hunger in America 2010,” the FA report points out that “data collection for Hunger in America 2010 took place during the deepest recession the US has experienced since the 1930s.” It goes on to state that during the last Hunger in America investigation, in 2005, the national unemployment level was at 5.1 percent.

“By the time data collection for the 2010 study commenced in late winter 2009,” the report notes, “the recession was in full swing and the unemployment rate was rising rapidly, jumping from 4.9 percent at the start of the recession in December 2007 to 9.5 percent when client data collection was completed in June 2009.” The current national unemployment rate now stands at more than 10 percent.

The FA report on hunger was released on the same day that the US Labor Department reported a rise in unemployment in most cities and counties during December. During that time, jobs were cut in no less than

302 of 372 metro areas and unemployment levels rose to more than 10 percent in 138 metro areas.

January saw the highest level of planned layoffs in five months with 71,482 jobs slashed. This was a 59 percent increase since December. These figures guarantee a rise in the numbers of workers requiring assistance from food pantries, soup kitchens and other hunger relief organizations.

Food insecurity is especially prevalent in the southern United States. Among the southern states facing the highest levels of hunger is Kentucky, where one in seven people require emergency food assistance.

God's Pantry, a food bank located in Kentucky and a member of the FA network, released its own report on Tuesday in tandem with the FA's national study. God's Pantry currently serves 211,300 individuals in central and eastern Kentucky. Twelve of the counties serviced by God's Pantry are among the 25 poorest counties in the nation. In the 50 counties serviced by God's Pantry, 310,170 people are living in poverty.

Mandy Brajuha, a media representative for God's Pantry, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* on Wednesday. "The economy is taking its toll," said Brajuha, "the people we serve are already living at the margins."

When asked about the difficulty of meeting the rapid increase in those seeking food assistance, Brajuha said, "At this point we feel pretty secure, but when you see an increase in need of 32 percent in one year you have to grow a little bit concerned of how we're going to keep up." She added, "We're bracing ourselves."

Brajuha told the WSWS about encountering "people who've never needed food assistance before who don't know how to navigate to the social services system." She discussed one client in particular who stood out in her memory. Described by Brajuha as a "well educated, kind man," the client was a truck driver who had gone from "making \$60,000 last year, to eating at a soup kitchen in the next year." He had lost his home to foreclosure and was now staying at a homeless shelter. "His wife passed away in the last year," said Brajuha, and "he had lost his job because his company was downsizing." The client had told her, "Not a lot of people want to employ a truck driver in his 50s."

Responding to the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality, Brajuha pointed out that 27 percent of God's Pantry clients are employed, while a significant number of clients are children and senior citizens.

The Obama administration has done nothing to alleviate

the staggering level of suffering faced by millions of workers revealed in these reports. At every turn, Obama, who ran a cynical presidential campaign as the candidate of "change," has continued and expanded on the reactionary policies of the Bush administration and has consistently lined up on the side of big business at the expense of workers.

As corporations have sought to exploit the economic crisis by assaulting the living standards of workers in order to secure higher profits and productivity, they have done so either with the support of the Obama administration or by following its lead.

While Obama has spared no expense in bailing out the banks, funneling trillions of dollars from the national treasury into the coffers of Wall Street executives, workers are told to tighten their belts and accept new austerity measures, including a three-year freeze on segments of social spending.

With millions desperate for work, Obama's stimulus plan to "create or save" millions of jobs has proven a farce. The White House claimed in 2009 that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act would create 3.5 million jobs in two years. Even according to its own accounting, which is highly unreliable, only between 600,000 and 1.6 million jobs have been created or saved. Even if one were to accept the White House figures, this would be a paltry answer to a crisis that has seen 15 million Americans become jobless.

Though he is currently attempting to pass himself off as a populist, anti-Wall Street politician in reaction to the Democratic Party's defeat in the Massachusetts senatorial election, the reality of the true class interests defended by Obama have once again been laid bare by Feeding America's investigation into hunger in the United States. It is a devastating exposure of the level of suffering inflicted on working people at the expense of corporate profits.



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