

Record number of Illinois families on food stamps

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A report released by the Illinois Department of Human Services on Tuesday revealed that over 785,000 Illinois households—more than 1,630,000 individuals—throughout the state receive food stamps through a program known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The total represents a nearly 12 percent increase from June 2009, and state officials expect those numbers to increase steadily over the next year, according to an August 3 report in the *Chicago Tribune*. The data also reflects a national trend, as recent Department of Agriculture reports indicate that national levels of food stamp assistance are at an all time high, exceeding over 40 million Americans.

Nearly every county in Illinois saw a sharp increase in food stamp use over the last year. According to the IDHS' Bureau of Research and Analysis, the southern counties of Saline, Williamson and Jackson saw their usage increase by 13.2 percent, 10.1 percent and 7.9 percent respectively. The hardest hit counties were to the north and west of Chicago, according to IDHS Director Jennifer Hrycyna.

The IDHS's report on SNAP data also belies a much greater crisis in hunger and its attenuating social despair. Even within the IDHS report, applications were up 27 percent over the last year, signifying that perhaps more than half of those who applied for assistance did not receive it.

The Food and Research Action Center published a report in February indicating that significant sections of people entitled to food assistance do not receive services, largely due to cuts in state social services and the corresponding rise in demand. According to the report, in 2007 nearly 142,000 Chicago residents did not receive food stamps even though they were eligible.

The threshold for SNAP qualification is also absurdly

low. For a family of three, a household cannot have more than \$1,984 in monthly income, or \$18,948 a year. The maximum monthly SNAP allowance for a family of three is \$526, but this week's IDHS report indicates that the average state payments are \$296 per household. The threshold for assistance for one person is that they make no more than \$1,174 per month.

Poor and working people often find themselves just outside of these SNAP thresholds. Typical, for instance, was an August 4 *Associated Press* report in which one woman, Alana Sykes from Rantoul, could not qualify for food stamps because her unemployment benefits put her just above the maximum threshold. Sykes, an unemployed schoolteacher and military veteran, indicated that she could no longer afford to feed herself and two children.

The problems associated with the food stamp program really only begin to paint a much bleaker picture of impending hunger epidemics and a growing social crisis throughout the state. A number of food agencies, independent of SNAP, have also reported sharp increases in demand and services. A recent study released by Feeding Illinois, an affiliate of the nation's largest emergency food service provider, Feeding America, revealed some ominous statistics:

- Feeding Illinois food banks provided service to 1.4 million Illinois residents in 2009, roughly 1 out of every 10 people in the state.
- The agency has seen a 50-percent increase in requests for food assistance in the last two years.
- Nearly 2 million Illinois children were enrolled in a federal free lunch program during the 2009-2010 school year.
- Nearly 500,000 children—roughly one out of every seven—throughout the state are considered “food insecure.”

- 50 percent of their clients report having to choose on a monthly basis between buying food or paying for utilities or heating fuel.

Studies done by other agencies reveal further hunger problems. According to the Northern Illinois Food Bank, demand for their emergency food services has increased by one-third since 2006, to around 678,000 people. The NIFB also reported that 43 percent of their clients included households where at least one adult was fully employed. The US Department of Agriculture has also released studies indicating the 11.1 percent of all Illinois households face food insecurity, and that nearly a third of the eligible “working poor” were not participating in any food stamp program.

The hunger crisis in Illinois is a reflection of the growing crisis of global capitalism, and is bound up with increasing state unemployment, rising poverty levels, and diminished or non-existent social services. Statewide official unemployment currently stands at 10.4 percent, higher than the national average. The north-central Counties of Winnebago and Boone stand well above either average at 14.7 percent and 15.1 percent respectively. Winnebago County media outlets reported that over 30,000 residents in the area were receiving SNAP assistance.

Poverty levels in Illinois, which are acutely reflected in growing hunger, have been rising steadily throughout the state. A recent study by the *Heartland Alliance* indicated that 12.2 percent of Illinois residents were living in poverty, and another 16 percent were living precariously close to the poverty line (See “Report finds deepening poverty in Illinois”).

Illinois also has one of the worst home foreclosure rates in the United States, increasing 23 percent—or roughly 18,000 homes—to total nearly 78,000 houses over the last year.

At a time when poor and working people suffer increasingly dire straits, staff and funds for vital health and human services are being cut in order to make up for record budget shortfalls.

Governor Pat Quinn, who cut \$1.4 billion in education and social services from the state budget on July 1, announced last week that he was cutting an additional \$891 million from both areas once again. (See “Illinois budget cuts gouge education, social services”).

These cuts come in addition to studies showing that

the state of Illinois has been underfunding social services for years. A report by the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability indicated, among other findings, that Illinois has underfunded human service providers by at least \$4.4 billion between fiscal years 2002 and 2010.

Within the last week, Chicago officials have announced a record fiscal year 2011 budget shortfall of \$654 million, exceeding last year’s record shortfall of roughly \$500 million. This news was shortly followed by the announcement that Chicago’s bond rating was downgraded by both Moody’s Investor’s Service and Fitch Rating, further limiting the city’s ability to borrow funds in order to pay for social services and outstanding bills. Both investors cited, among other reasons for the downgrade, growing concerns over the city’s “rapidly depleting reserves.” Mayor Richard Daley hinted in his recent “State of the City” speech that cuts to city services may be needed in order to make up for portions of the deficit.

It is worth noting that amidst the increasing hunger and social misery in Illinois, privileged elements of the city are enjoying tremendous wealth and growth. A recent study noted that in a city with record shortfalls and growing hunger, Chicago has the third most millionaires of any US city—counting among its wealthy residents multi-millionaire President Barack Obama, who holds property there.



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