

One in seven Americans on food stamps

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A record one in seven Americans relied on government food stamps to help feed themselves in 2010, according to the latest data from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Last year 43.6 million people turned to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—a 67 percent increase over the 26 million who received food stamps in 2007, the year before the economic crisis erupted. All but 14 states saw double-digit percentage increases in food stamp use in 2010. Nearly half of all SNAP recipients are children.

Sharp increases in food stamp use took place across the country. The Rocky Mountain state of Idaho saw the sharpest increase, at 28 percent. Other states that saw increases in food stamp use of 20 percent or above include: Nevada (27 percent); Delaware (25.4 percent); Utah (24.9 percent); Florida (23.2 percent); Maryland (22.1 percent); New Jersey (22 percent); Texas (21.6 percent); and Rhode Island (21.4 percent).

There are nine states plus the District of Columbia in which about one fifth of the population (18.4 percent to 23 percent) relied on food stamps in 2010. They include Mississippi, Tennessee, New Mexico, Oregon, Louisiana, Michigan, West Virginia, Kentucky, and South Carolina.

A separate survey of USDA data by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), released in January, found that in 22 large urban areas food stamp participation rates increased by an average of 18.6 percent from May 2009 to May 2010.

The average monthly benefit through SNAP, which now allows purchases of food through debit cards rather than with coupons or “stamps,” is woefully inadequate: \$154 for a household of four. Advocates say that most SNAP recipients exhaust their benefits within days of the start of the month.

Nationally, about two thirds of all eligible households receive food stamps, but there is great variation among the states. In Texas and California, for example, less than half of eligible households receive SNAP benefits. Even though the program is funded in full—except for administrative costs—by the federal government, California vindictively requires those seeking food assistance submit to fingerprinting and a 13-page application.

Only about one third of the nation’s 7 million food stamp-eligible senior citizens receive assistance. Many of the remainder may be unaware of the program or confused about how it works.

“A lot of people aren’t aware that they are eligible, particularly the elderly,” Barb Rupert of Commission on Economic Opportunity in Luzerne and Wyoming counties in Northeast Pennsylvania told the *Hazleton Standard Speaker*. In Luzerne County, an old coal-mining region, food stamp use is up 12.1 percent in two years.

State and federal governments throw up other roadblocks to using the program. A household of four that earns more than \$2,389 in gross monthly income, less than \$30,000 gross annually, is ineligible. Having more than \$2,000 in savings or other financial resources—including second vehicles—precludes access to SNAP. Immigrants are barred from the program until they have been legal residents for five years, and undocumented workers and their children are ineligible.

Behind the 28 percent surge in Idaho’s SNAP enrollment is the rapid growth of unemployment, which has increased to 9.5 percent, threefold since 2007. Stateline.org, citing Kathy D. Gardner of the Idaho Hunger Relief Task Force, notes that the increase in the state is remarkable because Idaho provides no outreach or advertisement of the program. While applications can be found on-line, they must be delivered in person.

In Minnesota, SNAP participation increased by 16.6

percent in one year. Lorie Kratchmer of the state's Emergency Food Shelf Network told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the increase in food stamp use was part of a dramatic growth in those seeking food assistance. Visits to food charities in the 31 counties overseen by the group have increased by 60 percent since 2008, "and there's no sign it's slowing down," Kratchmer said.

"The face of hunger has changed so much in recent years," she said. "Much of the growth has been in suburban areas. The person who is hungry could be your neighbor two doors down, or someone sitting at the end of the church pew." Kratchmer attributes the growth of hunger to financially-strapped families choosing to pay for their utilities or their mortgages ahead of food.

In Oregon, food stamp usage increased by 11.5 percent to just under 750,000 people in 2010, or 20 percent of the state's population. Oregon's official unemployment rate has been at or above 10.5 percent for fourteen months, and the broader U-6 measure puts the jobless rate at over 20 percent.

In Illinois, food stamp use spiked by 12.7 percent in one year. Significantly, the counties with the greatest increases were wealthy suburban counties of Chicago—DuPage, Kendall, Kane, and McHenry.

"Since the fall of '08, we've had an increase practically every month" in food stamp enrollment, state SNAP director Jan Freeman told the *Chicago Sun Times*. "We're not seeing it go down yet."

The high level of hunger indicated by spiraling food stamp use in metropolitan Chicago has been corroborated by a consortium of 650 area food charities, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, which reports a 65-70 percent increase in the number of individuals served at its pantries since 2007.

"More people turned to the pantries in our community in November than in any month in our 32-year history," said the group's head, Kate Maehr.



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