

Social crisis in America: Thanksgiving 2011

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Millions of Americans face extraordinarily grim living conditions this Thanksgiving: hunger, homelessness, joblessness, ever deeper and more pervasive poverty, and lack of heat, all compounded by devastating budget cuts and the destruction of the social safety net.

Virtually every measure of social health bears evidence of a significant rise in economic distress. The poverty rate has soared over the past several years. Officially, 49 million people, more than 16 percent of the population, are living in poverty—set at little more than \$22,000 for a family of four. The federal government, compelled to acknowledge that its income threshold is unrealistically low, recently estimated that 98 million Americans were living at or just above the poverty line in 2010.

Young families have especially suffered from the many consequences of the economic crisis, and above all the worst job market since the Great Depression. The lack of job prospects, poor wages, high housing costs, lack of medical insurance, crushing debt burdens, discriminatory credit rating practices, and inflation in basic necessities including food and fuel compound the difficulties facing working class families.

The living conditions of children have substantially worsened as a result. New census data indicate an official child poverty rate of 21.6 percent, the highest rate the government has recorded since it began tracking the data in 2001. In several states, the child poverty rate is closer to one in three. As extreme as they are, all the official estimates understate the reality, that millions of American youth are deprived of health, quality education, and nurturing environments because they are poor.

Rising hunger

The ability of low-income families to afford adequate amounts of food has fallen. As a recent Gallup poll revealed, nearly one in five American workers are worried they will not be able to feed themselves or their families, a rate three times higher than among Chinese workers. The poll's results, analyzed by the Food Research and Action Center, showed a "food hardship" rate of 23.4 percent for families with children.

In five states, the number of food insecure families was greater than one in four. Even in sparsely populated North Dakota, the state with the lowest rate, 15.3 percent of households with children were suffering from food insecurity. A multitude of metropolitan areas had rates of one in three or more. Such statistics reflect food

insecurity on an epidemic scale.

One in four Americans depend on federal food assistance programs to make ends meet, according to the US Department of Agriculture. As need rises, food programs are being targeted for cuts at the federal and state levels.

Charities and food banks have been overwhelmed by families seeking help. According to food assistance organization Feeding America, emergency assistance is "becoming the 'new normal'" among the poor. "Pantries are now a part of households' long term strategy to supplement monthly shortfalls in food," a survey by the organization found, noting that 54 percent of food bank clients were "frequent" visitors, meaning they sought help on a monthly basis.

Food banks are increasingly being used as a "coping strategy" for families who receive inadequate assistance through the federal food stamp program (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP), as well as for elderly people who are unable to make ends meet on meager fixed incomes.

Feeding America reported in late September that it currently serves 37 million people each year, up by 46 percent from 2006. This suggests that more than one in ten Americans turned to food pantries for help last year. The rate may be far higher, since many charities such as church-run food banks and soup kitchens may not be included in the Feeding America count.

Several states, including in the hard-hit industrial states of the Midwest, are promoting hunting as a means of countering rising hunger. On Tuesday Pennsylvania, where 1.4 million people suffer hunger, announced a venison donation drive in order to stock barren food banks and soup kitchens.

The situation is poised to worsen dramatically in the coming year. "We can also see the beginning of the 'perfect storm,'" Feeding America warned. "Food prices are going up, food manufacturers are facing their own squeeze in the tough economy, and are responding as one would expect in the market, seeking greater efficiencies, which means fewer donations. Charitable contributions are also harder to come by as more Americans feel the economic squeeze. State and local governments are cutting back on social services."

Plummeting cash assistance

"Cash assistance benefits for the nation's poorest families with children fell again in purchasing power in 2011 and are now at

least 20 percent below their 1996 levels in 34 states, after adjusting for inflation,” the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) reported Monday.

Most states froze benefit levels in 2011 in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program; six states and the District of Columbia reduced benefits. The cuts affected over 700,000 poor families.

The budget cuts come on top of decades’ worth of declines. CBPP reported, “Between 1970 and 1996, cash assistance benefit levels for poor families with children fell by more than 40 percent in real terms in two-thirds of the states....Benefits fall below 50 percent of the poverty line in *all* states.”

There are no states in which the TANF benefit level for a family of three with no other income even meets the federally-defined Fair Market Rent rate for a small two-bedroom apartment. In most states, the benefits do not even rise to the level of *half* the rent rate. A family of three in Washington, D.C. receives only \$342 per month. Benefits work out to just *\$4,104 a year*, a fraction of the poverty line. Most states have benefit levels below 30 percent of poverty.

Because TANF ties emergency cash assistance to work, families battered by the jobs crisis and in the most dire need of aid are often disqualified from the program. Others are compelled to take minimum wage jobs are crippled by the new costs of child care, transportation, and other necessities.

Between 2007 and 2009, state TANF programs swelled by 13 percent. Although a substantial increase, the number of families in need is far greater than the program allows. According to the CBPP, among families that qualify for TANF, only 27 percent received any assistance. This is the outcome of a deliberate policy, initiated by then-President Bill Clinton, to dismantle welfare programs and create a large pool of desperate, low-wage workers. Although far from adequate, the previous welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, provided cash aid to 68 percent of those who qualified and was not tied to a time limit or employment.

Deeper cuts are already being proposed across the country in the 2012 fiscal year in response to the fact that Congress has extended funding only for the first quarter of federal fiscal year 2012. In Washington State, where TANF benefit levels were slashed by 15 percent last year, Democratic Governor Christine Gregoire has convened a special legislative session to prepare further reductions. In Michigan, tens of thousands—including 30,000 children—are being dumped off the rolls after a 48-month limit was imposed.

Child homelessness

Homelessness is spiraling upward, especially among young families headed by single parents. Nationally, the number of homeless public schoolchildren has risen by a staggering 41 percent over the past two years, according to the National Association for Education of Homeless Children. Iowa and Texas

led the nation, with two-year increases of nearly 140 percent. Only eight states recorded no increase.

The most recent figures from the Department of Education, from the 2008-2009 school year, indicate that one million students are homeless. In the years since, the crisis has swelled. In the city of Chicago alone, homeless agency Heartland Alliance estimates more than 10,000 youth are living alone on the streets, avoiding the overcrowded shelters out of fear.

In two of every three cases, NAEHC reports that “economic downturn (job loss, high cost of living, etc.)” is the reason given for youth homelessness. This suggests that the problem of homelessness among children will continue to widen for years to come.

At the same time, federal funding for assistance of homeless children has remained flat, at \$65 million, since 2006. This sum when divided among the 50 states, and thousands of school districts, represents next to nothing. While the entire state of Maryland, for example, receives \$1 million, less than one-third of transportation expenses for individual school districts in Baltimore where buses are a critical component of serving homeless children. And like every other critical social service, homeless youth aid is now being eyed for cuts.

With the end of last year’s public education “stimulus” fund and the slash-and-burn budget cuts to education in nearly every state, rising numbers of children who are in unstable situations at home are now being thrust into unstable situations at school. Many have no access to transportation, may miss meals, and are pushed into vastly overcrowded classrooms where their needs cannot be served. Youth advocates, despairing the endless rounds of budget cuts, have issued stark warnings of a “lost generation” among the public school population.

These conditions have compelled thousands of people to protest against social inequality this year. Masses of workers and youth, pushed to the wall by the ruling class and the system it defends, have begun to recognize that their poverty and deprivation have a direct connection to the wealth and excess at the other side of society.



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