

# US hunger, homelessness soar amid cuts in social spending

## Half of Americans either poor or low-income

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Amid continuous attacks on social services in the United States, hunger and homelessness are growing at epidemic rates, according to a report released Thursday by the United States Conference of Mayors.

The group's annual survey of hunger and homelessness in its 29 member-cities states that requests for emergency food assistance grew by 15.5 percent in the past year. The number of homeless families grew by 16 percent. The survey covers the period between September 1, 2010 and August 31, 2011.

The mayors' report is but the latest in a string of recent studies documenting the growth of poverty and social inequality in the US. Two days earlier, the National Center on Family Homelessness reported a 38 percent increase in child homelessness between 2007 and 2010, with the result that one in 45 American children are homeless. (See: "US child homelessness soars").

The Associated Press, citing Census figures released last month, reported Thursday that half of the American population is either poor or low-income. With long-term unemployment at record levels, food pantries and homeless shelters are being overwhelmed by the growing ranks of the poor.

These grim statistics, which provide only a pale reflection of cascading human suffering and social distress, make a mockery of the claims of the Obama administration and the media that the US is in an economic "recovery." In recent days, Obama has hailed the November jobs report, which registered a 0.4 percent decline in the official unemployment rate to 8.6 percent, as evidence that his policies are working. He ignores the fact that the drop in the jobless rate was due

to the exodus of 315,000 discouraged job-seekers from the labor force.

Nor has Obama mentioned, in his stage-managed attempts to present himself as an advocate of "middle-class" workers, any of the recent reports documenting the social disaster fuelled by his pro-corporate policies.

The mayors' report cites cuts in federal commodities and funding as a factor in the diminishing ability of emergency kitchens and food pantries to keep up with surging demand. It notes that 27 percent of the people needing emergency food assistance did not receive it.

The amount of food distributed has failed to keep pace. While demand for food aid shot up by 15 percent, the amount of food given out by cities increased by only 10 percent.

The inadequacy of resources has had a tangible effect: 86 percent of cities surveyed said that food pantries and emergency kitchens have had to reduce the amount of food given out to visitors. Eighty two percent said they had been forced to turn people away from food kitchens, and 68 percent said they had to tighten rules on how often families could visit food pantries.

None of the 29 cities surveyed said they expected the demand for emergency food assistance to fall in the next year, while all but two expected the demand to increase.

Meanwhile, three quarters of the cities said they expected the amount of money available for aid to fall next year, and 41 percent said the decrease would be "substantial."

About half of those seeking emergency food assistance came as families. A quarter were employed. Eleven percent were homeless.

Sixty percent of the cities reported an increase in family homelessness. Among individuals, homelessness increased by 6 percent.

The mayors' survey found that an average of 18 percent of homeless people who requested assistance did not receive it. It also found that shelters in two thirds of the surveyed cities were forced to turn away homeless families with children, while 70 percent had to turn away individuals.

Sixty four percent of surveyed cities said they expected the number of homeless families to increase next year, while the same percentage of cities said they expected the amount of recourses available to help the homeless to decrease.

Individual cities paint an even bleaker picture of social distress. In Detroit, the number of requests for emergency food assistance grew by 30 percent in the past year, while in Salt Lake City, Utah the figure grew by 35 percent.

The mayors' report comes a month after the Census Bureau released its 2010 Supplemental Poverty Measure, which, employing different criteria than the official report, increased the number of Americans estimated to be in poverty from 46.2 million to 49 million and the poverty rate from 15.1 to 16 percent.

Buried within the Supplemental Poverty Measure report is perhaps its most shocking finding: the percentage of the population classified as "low-income," that is, making between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty rate, has nearly doubled. The official statistic puts the portion of families making between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty rate at 18.8 percent of the total population, while the new statistic puts it at 31.8 percent.

According to the supplemental Census report, there are 49.1 million people in poverty and an additional 97.3 million who are considered low-income. The two figures combined total 146.4 million out of a population of 300 million.

Alongside mass unemployment, falling wages play a critical role in the staggering growth of poverty in the US. Just over the past 12 months, wages have fallen by 1.7 percent in real terms.

This is the result of a coordinated and national corporate assault on workers' wages that was inaugurated with the Obama administration's forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler in 2009.

Obama insisted that government loans to the auto companies be contingent on a vast expansion of tier-two wages (\$14 an hour) for new-hires, and an overall reduction of labor costs to those at non-union foreign transplant auto factories.

Together with the collapse in home values, mass unemployment and wage-cutting have thrown even families with working adults into poverty. According to a study by the Working Poor Families Project released this month, the portion of employed families that classify as low-income grew from 27 percent in 2002 to 31.2 percent in 2010.

"Many of these families used to be solidly middle class but have seen their incomes drop below the low-income threshold because of a pay cut, a reduction in hours, or because a spouse lost their job," said Mark Mather, a co-author of the analysis.

In the face of this mounting social catastrophe, no section of the political establishment, Democratic or Republican, is proposing any measures to alleviate the crisis and create jobs. Rather, the entire framework of the official discussion revolves around savage austerity measures to make the working class pay for the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the banks. These measures include hundreds of billions of dollars in cuts to food stamps, home heating assistance, education and core social programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.



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