

Study reports that New Yorkers struggle to put food on the table

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Millions of people in the largest and wealthiest city in the US struggled to afford food last year, according to a report released last month by the Food Bank for New York City.

The Food Bank is New York's major hunger-relief organization, which coordinates a network of more than 1,000 community organizations that collectively distribute up to 400,000 free meals daily. Its report reveals that working people across the city made painful sacrifices last year to put food on the table, and that food insecurity also rose among city residents with relatively higher incomes. These findings show that while the recession was officially declared over two-and-a-half years ago, working people are plagued by a deepening social crisis with no end in sight.

Entitled "NYC Hunger Experience 2011: Sacrifice and Support," the report is based on analysis of data from an annual opinion poll conducted in collaboration with the Marist Institute for Public Opinion.

The report begins by noting the impact of the recession in New York City and across the country. "Although the recession was declared over in June 2009, its end did not put more money in everyone's pockets," it declares. In 2011, the official unemployment rate in the city remained well above the pre-recession rate of 4.7 percent, and the length of time before workers obtained new jobs continued to rise.

The average length of time an American worker remained unemployed rose from 16.6 weeks in December 2007 to 24.1 weeks in June 2009, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. The report notes that in October 2011, the average duration of unemployment reached 40.9 weeks, the highest level recorded in more than sixty years of record-keeping.

"Longer periods of unemployment mean that an ever-increasing portion of the unemployed are no longer receiving unemployment benefits, thereby increasing need," the report explains. Moreover, many of those returning to work had to take lower-paying jobs, while food prices and other living costs continued to spiral.

Approximately 2.9 million New Yorkers (35 percent) experienced difficulty in paying for food needed by their

families last year, including 34 percent of Brooklyn residents and 36 percent in Queens. Residents of the Bronx experienced the worst conditions, with 41 percent having had trouble meeting their families' food needs in 2011.

New York City residents with annual household incomes of less than \$25,000 had the biggest problems, with 50 percent reporting difficulty. While the poorest sections of the population obviously faced the most serious dangers of hunger, those with better incomes also reported increased difficulty in meeting the costs of food. One in four residents with college degrees reported such problems last year.

Middle-income New Yorkers who have trouble affording food are less likely to apply for food assistance. Many seek assistance only to discover they are ineligible for food stamps and other nutritional assistance programs due to their income level.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Rev. Dominick Reyes of A New Beginning International Ministry in upper Manhattan, who described how growing numbers have been visiting the ministry's food bank for assistance. "We have people walking through our doors who are higher income and have higher education levels," Reyes said. "Everyone gets hungry."

"Right now I am seeing more families come in for food. They say they used to work at this or that place. They are unemployed. But many people say they are working.

"I like to say it is the quality of the food we distribute, but it is because the income people are making is not reaching the amount necessary to pay all their bills and to eat. I have a doctor who takes Medicare patients. He comes in regularly every Tuesday and Thursday. I have other ministers who come in as well. I don't have registrations. I think it is a shame when people go hungry. When people are hungry they should be able to eat, and I try to do that here.

"People don't think the recession has ended at all," Reyes continued. "There was an increase in the need for food at our church last year.

"In a few years, there will be the soldiers coming in from Iraq who will be emotionally scarred and hungry. I see a few

of them now. Some come in when they are back, but still on tour [active duty]. I don't know if the country is prepared to take care of them when they come back, as much as I want to see them back. There are not enough adequate social programs."

While the percentage of city residents facing hunger has dropped since the height of the recession in 2008, the percentage in 2011 was significantly higher than in 2003, when the Food Bank first began conducting the survey. 25 percent of New Yorkers had trouble affording food that year.

A recent decline in what is called food insecurity has been attributed in part to an increase in the number of New Yorkers participating in the food stamp program. There were 1.83 million city residents receiving food stamps as of October 2011, a 62 percent increase from the 1.12 million at the beginning of the recession in December 2007, and up 2 percent from the 1.79 million receiving assistance in October 2010. Food stamp participation rates increased nationwide in the same period.

In recent years, large numbers of New Yorkers contending with food insecurity have turned to emergency food programs like soup kitchens. According to the report, the increasing demand for emergency food programs, which many rely on when their food stamps are unavailable or run out, has forced soup kitchens and food pantries across the city to turn away potential participants or temporarily shut down.

"Our food pantry has not been open for a month because we don't have enough food for it," Cordella Jackson, who runs the soup kitchen and food pantry at Bethel Holy Church in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan, explained to the WSWS. "We have had the food pantry and soup kitchen feeding people here for twenty years. This is the first time we haven't had enough food for the food pantry.

"I can tell you that last year we got more people coming in for food. It varies from week to week of course, but we had more come in over the year," Jackson added. "We have enough food for the Soup Kitchen where we feed 65 to 75 people or more every Tuesday. But we haven't had enough for a month to give out to the people who come to the food pantry every other Wednesday. I don't know what people will do without the food we give out at the pantry. We have not gotten an explanation for this. I just called again yesterday and got no answer."

Another element of the crisis is the sacrifices in quantity and quality made by workers in order to feed their families. Nearly two in five city residents purchased less food last year in order to save food or money, according to the report. One in three ate smaller meals, and 21 percent reported skipping meals altogether. More than a third reported buying less meat, poultry and fish. Twenty-seven percent reported

buying less fresh fruits and vegetables, and fewer dairy products.

Other strategies used by residents to save money included eating meals at relatives' or friends' homes (26 percent), serving fewer family members at mealtime (18 percent), and eliminating holiday meals or Sunday dinners (11 percent).

Many also reported having to make financial trade-offs. These included paying for utilities instead of food (20 percent), paying for rent instead of food (18 percent), and paying for transportation instead of food (17 percent).

The report concludes by warning that if governments cut food assistance programs, the health of millions of people could be in jeopardy. Food stamp benefit levels have not increased since 2008, with the average monthly food stamp benefit at just \$287 in 2010. And in cities across the country, various bureaucratic hurdles have been set up to ensure that many people who are eligible for the program will be discouraged from participating.

For example, food stamp recipients in New York City are required to undergo fingerprinting. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has defended the practice on many occasions in recent weeks. The requirement prevents people from "gaming the system," declares the billionaire mayor.

While the Food Bank says its recent findings show that cuts to nutritional assistance programs are "insupportable," both the Democratic and Republican parties have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to implement draconian austerity measures as they work to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on the working class. Seeking to outflank his Republican rivals from the right, President Obama has called for massive spending cuts, including cuts in Social Security and drastic reductions in Medicare and Medicaid spending. In December, Obama signed a bill that included sweeping cuts in food stamps, home-heating assistance and public housing.



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