

More than 50 million face hunger in the US

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7 September 2012

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported Wednesday that 14.9 percent of Americans faced food insecurity in 2011. This means that one in six people lives in a household that is at risk of hunger. Of the more than 50 million people in the US for whom hunger is a reality, nearly 17 million are children.

In 2011, 5.7 percent of US households, or 6.9 million households, had what the USDA terms “very low food security.” This means that the food intake of some household members was reduced or the normal eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year due to limited resources.

The number of very low food security households rose significantly in 2011, up from 5.4 percent in 2010, as the number returned to the 5.7 percent levels of 2008 and 2009. This means that despite government claims that the recession ended in mid-2009, millions of American families face the threat of hunger on a regular basis.

Very low food security has increased dramatically over the past decade, rising from 3.3 percent of households in 2001 to 5.7 percent in 2011—a jump of more than 72 percent.

Ten percent of households with children—13.9 million households—were unable at times during 2011 to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children. One percent of households with children (374,000 households) experienced instances of very low food security.

Poverty was the over-arching factor driving food insecurity. Among those households living at or below the official federal poverty level (FPL)—a miserly \$22,350 for a family of four—17.9 percent suffered from very low food security. Families headed by a single woman or man, as well as African-American and Hispanic households, were substantially more likely to face food insecurity. Food insecurity was more

common in large cities and rural areas than in suburban areas.

The USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) report is based on annual statistics gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau. More than 43,000 households comprising a representative sample of the 119 million civilian households in the US were surveyed in December 2011.

Respondents were asked a series of questions, such as:

- “In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry, but didn’t eat, because there wasn’t enough money for food?”

- “In the last 12 months, did you lose weight because there wasn’t enough money for food?”

- “In the last 12 months did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food?”

Households with children were asked questions including:

- “In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of any of the children’s meals because there wasn’t enough money for food?”

- “In the last 12 months, did any of the children ever skip a meal because there wasn’t enough money for food?”

The food security status of households was determined on the basis of the number of food-insecure conditions reported. The 6.9 million households that faced very low food security reported many of the same experiences as they struggled to provide adequate nutrition for their families:

- Ninety-nine percent worried that their food would run out before they had the money to buy more.

- Ninety-five percent said they could not afford to purchase food to provide balanced meals.

- Ninety-seven percent reported an adult had cut the size of meals or skipped meals.

Nearly half of the very low food secure households reported a family member losing weight due to lack of money to purchase food. More than a quarter reported that at some point an adult did not eat for an entire day because there was not enough money for food.

More than a quarter of households headed by a female with no spouse faced low food security; 11.5 percent of these households were very low food secure. Nearly 18 percent of Hispanic households were food insecure, while 14.6 percent of African-American households faced food insecurity.

Food insecurity was highest in the Southern states, including in Alabama (18.2 percent of households), Georgia (17.4 percent), Mississippi (19.2 percent), Arkansas (19.2 percent), North Carolina (17.1 percent), and Texas (18.5 percent).

The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers 15 domestic food and nutrition programs. The three largest are SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly called the Food Stamp Program), the National School Lunch Program, and WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children).

About 57 percent of food-insecure households reported receiving benefits from one or more of these main food assistance programs during the month prior to the December 2011 food security survey. This means that the aid from these programs is woefully inadequate to meet the needs of families struggling to put food on the table.

Another government report released this week showed the number of Americans using food stamps to purchase groceries is at all all-time high. More than 46 million people—15 percent of the US population—received SNAP benefits in June. With the jobless rate remaining above 8 percent, long-term unemployment persisting, and unemployment benefits slashed, families are turning to this benefit in record numbers.



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