

US mayors' survey: Food insecurity, homelessness rising across the country

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This month, the United States Conference of Mayors' Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness released its yearly survey, which documented a sharp rise in the two social ills throughout the country.

The report was based on data collected between September 1, 2011 and August 31, 2012, with cooperation from emergency food services in 25 major cities across the US, including Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Nashville, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, San Francisco and Washington, DC.

Emergency food assistance requests increased by an average of 22 percent, and the number of such requests rose in all but four of the cities. Some 51 percent of the demand for assistance came from members of families.

Perhaps most tellingly, the report also documented that over a third (37 percent) of those in need of emergency food assistance were employed. Overall, one in seven Americans are classified as being food insecure. As of 2011, nearly 47 million people received food stamps, an increase of 1.3 million over 2010.

Despite the increased demand, the various agencies reported an average increase of just 0.2 percent in the number of pounds of food distributed during the 12-month period in question. Moreover, the survey reported: "In 95 percent of the survey cities, emergency kitchens and food pantries had to reduce the quantity of food persons can receive at each food pantry visit or the amount of food offered per meal at emergency kitchens. In 89 percent of the cities these facilities had to turn people away because of lack of resources. In 81 percent of the cities they had to reduce the number of times a person or family can visit a food pantry each month."

The various city officials, not surprisingly, cited joblessness and the lack of affordable housing as the

central driving forces of the rise in hunger in the US, along with general poverty and low wages. The increase in need combined with diminishing resources available was cited as the largest difficulty facing community groups attempting to stem the tide of hunger in the cities surveyed.

As was the case in earlier findings, the primary sources for feeding those in need are grocery stores who donate food. The stores' donations now represent over half of the total food obtained by emergency services. Government contributions have fallen sharply.

Roughly three-fourths of the cities expected to see an increase in the demand for assistance, with over half expecting to see a moderate increase in total need. Of those surveyed, *none* expected to see any decrease in demand in 2013.

In concluding the section on hunger in its executive summary, the task force commented: "Among their [city officials'] concerns are cuts in federal commodities and funding, declining food donations, and the negative impact of the nation's continuing economic problems on their ability to meet food assistance needs."

Homelessness

Sixty-percent of the surveyed US cities reported a growth in homelessness, with the average increase calculated at seven percent. As with hunger, the majority of cities saw an increase in homelessness in families, with over 70 percent of cities reporting a growth in this category. Shelters reported cases of severe mental illness in nearly one-third of all homeless

adults.

In regard to families, 60 percent of the cities expected that homelessness would continue to rise in the coming year, with a nearly identical percentage anticipating a similar increase among single individuals.

Primarily faulted for this expected increase was the diminishing quantity of affordable housing in each region. The vast majority of city officials suggested that the rise in homelessness could be curbed by investment in cheaper housing and housing assistance, as well as better paying employment activities. The recommendations are entirely *pro forma*, as there is no possibility of such measures being taken by the Obama administration and Congress or any state government, all of whom are presently considering how to slash existing social programs.

Indeed, the building up or restoration of the basic social safety net cuts across the general trend in American society. In Washington D.C., one of the cities under review in the survey, a recent D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute study found that nearly half of the city's core public housing budget had been slashed, from over \$120 million in 2004, to a little over \$60 million in 2010.

An article in the *Washington Post* in November indicated that the Capitol Area Food Bank, which feeds over 700 food pantries and non-profits in the District of Columbia, has seen a 38 percent drop in food rations the government has donated this year. Of particular worry in the District are children on winter break who during the school year rely upon free lunches. The report notes that 47,000 children, roughly a quarter of the District's student population, qualify for such assistance. (See, " Widening social inequality in US capital")

A number of large cities, including New York and Detroit, were not included in the 2012 Conference of Mayors' study. According to a report released in August by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in Detroit—the most impoverished big city in the country—nearly three-quarters of all children live in official poverty. (See, " Nearly three-quarters of Detroit children living in poverty")

Likewise, a spot survey of 100 food-aid centers in New York City revealed that demand for assistance had risen by five percent this year, while Hurricane Sandy had caused more than a third of all of the city's food

pantries to report a loss in the quantity of goods available.



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