

US mayors' report: Hunger and homelessness rise as aid programs are cut

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A new report on hunger and homelessness paints a devastating picture of the conditions facing millions of workers and poor people in America. The new US Conference of Mayors' Task Force annual survey highlights the extent and causes of hunger and homelessness in 25 cities for the year between September 1, 2012 and August 31, 2013.

The report finds that 83 percent of the cities surveyed reported an increase in requests for emergency food assistance over the past year, and 52 percent saw an increase in the total number of people experiencing homelessness. Despite this growing need, mayors in the surveyed cities expect assistance for the hungry and homeless to decrease in the coming year.

This social catastrophe is unfolding as the federal government prepares deeper cuts to the food stamp program, now known as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and Congress allows federal extended jobless benefits for 1.3 million long-term unemployed to expire after Christmas.

Helene Schneider, Task Force co-chair and mayor of Santa Barbara, California, stated, "At a time when our cities are bracing for greater demands on emergency providers, most foresee a cut, not an increase, in the resources at their disposal."

She added, "Nearly three-fourths of the cities expect that resources to provide emergency food assistance will decrease over the next year, and more than one-fourth expect that decrease will be substantial."

All but four of the surveyed cities reported a rise in emergency food assistance requests, and across all cities this need increased by an average of 7 percent. Among those seeking assistance, 58 percent were persons in families, 21 percent were elderly, and 9 percent were homeless. The working poor made up 43 percent of those requesting food assistance.

The surveyed cities listed unemployment as the leading driver of hunger, followed by low wages, poverty and high housing costs. With unemployment insurance claims jumping to 368,000 in the week that ended December 7, from 300,000 the week before, and the Obama administration and Congress prepared to cut jobless benefits, the need for food assistance is certain to rise even further.

While cities reported a 7 percent average increase in the amount of food distributed during the past year, budgets for emergency food purchases increased by less than 1 percent. As a result, more than one-fifth of those needing emergency food assistance—21 percent—did not receive it.

In all of the 25 cities surveyed, food pantries were forced to reduce the quantity of food people could receive at each visit, and emergency kitchens had to cut back on the amount of food offered per meal. In two-thirds of the cities, people were turned away due to a lack of resources. All but one city expect requests for emergency food assistance to increase over the next year, with 12 cities expecting this increase to be substantial.

After job-creation, city officials point to increasing SNAP benefits as key to reducing hunger. This call for aid was cruelly answered in the negative on November 1, when the federal government began implementing \$11 billion in cuts over three years to the food stamp program. This across-the-board cutback is estimated to have reduced benefits to less than \$1.40 per person per meal.

Even deeper cuts to SNAP are threatened over the next decade. A Republican proposal to slash \$39 billion will be reconciled with a Democratic proposal to cut \$4 billion, resulting in a cutback that will inevitably cause increased hunger. The Congressional Budget Office

estimates that a \$39 billion cut would deny benefits to approximately 3.8 million people in 2014.

City officials in the Mayors' Task Force Survey were asked to describe the potential impact of such a massive cutback. Some of the responses included:

Charlotte, North Carolina: "Food costs are up eight to 15 percent over the same time last year. Already, 40 percent of the families in our area must choose between paying rent or buying food."

Dallas, Texas: "The proposed cuts would force over 18,000 Dallas County residents out of the [Texas Food Bank Network] program and eliminate 51.3 million meals provided with SNAP assistance."

Providence, Rhode Island: If \$39 billion is cut, "14,000 people will be terminated from the [SNAP] program statewide, including approximately 10,000 in Providence."

Cleveland, Ohio: "There is no way that the charitable food system can make up for cuts of this magnitude."

mentally ill, 19 percent were employed, 17 percent were physically disabled, 16 percent were victims of domestic violence, 13 percent were veterans, and 3 percent were HIV Positive.

Seventeen of the 25 cities surveyed reported that emergency shelters had to turn away families with children experiencing homelessness because there were no beds available, while two-thirds of the cities were forced to turn away homeless unaccompanied individuals. The unmet need for emergency shelter ranged from 25 percent to 50 percent in eight cities. Fully half of those seeking shelter in Des Moines, Iowa were turned away, while in Phoenix, Arizona, 45 percent of the need for homeless accommodation was not met.



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The extent of homelessness

Based on a single-night count in 3,000 US cities and counties, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that more than 610,000 people were homeless across the US on any given night last year. Of these, 65 percent were living in emergency shelters or transitional housing, while 35 percent were living in unsheltered locations such as under bridges, in cars, or in abandoned buildings. Individuals comprise 64 percent of those experiencing homelessness, while families make up 36 percent.

The number of homeless families increased in 64 percent of the cities included in the mayors' report. Sixty-eight percent of cities cited poverty as the main cause of homelessness among families, followed by lack of affordable housing (60 percent), unemployment (54 percent), eviction (32 percent), family disputes (28 percent), and domestic violence and low-paying jobs (12 percent each).

The surveyed cities were also asked to provide information on the characteristics of their adult homeless populations. The cities reported that, on average, 30 percent of homeless adults were severely