

New report details depth of hunger crisis in the United States

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A new study by the non-profit agency Feeding America reveals the extent and depth of the hunger crisis in the United States.

According to the report, "Hunger in America 2014," about one in seven in the US, 46 million people, rely on food banks in order to feed themselves and their families. The number includes 12 million children and 7 million senior citizens. The findings are based on responses from a survey of 60,000 recipients of food aid from the 200 food banks that are affiliated with Feeding America.

The survey was conducted between April and August 2013 and thus does not reflect the impact of more recent cuts carried out by the Obama administration to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly referred to as food stamps. In February Obama signed legislation slashing \$8.7 billion over ten years from the federal food stamp program. It followed cuts in November that slashed food assistance by \$319 per year for a typical family of three.

Last year the US government reported that a record number of Americans, more than 47 million, were relying on food stamp benefits. According to Feeding America only 55 percent of those receiving aid through its affiliated food banks are also enrolled in the SNAP program.

The persistence of high levels of food insecurity, more than five years after the economic crash of 2008-2009, demonstrates that talk of an economic recovery is a fraud. In fact hardship is growing among wide layers of the population, including those who are working and attending school.

The numbers presented by the survey suggest that the problem of hunger in America is broader than suggested by the numbers for food stamp enrollment alone, and could embrace as much as 20 percent of the

US population.

The Feeding America survey revealed a number of startling facts. According to the report 69 percent of respondents said they have to choose between food and paying utility bills, and 66 percent said they have to choose between food and medical care. Another 31 percent said they had to choose between food and education.

Among those who are having difficulty getting enough food to eat, one of the most common coping strategies is to purchase less healthy, cheaper foods in order to stretch dollars. Such foods, which often contain high levels of sugar and sodium, can contribute to a multitude of health problems including obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

The survey noted the high incidence of individuals with health problems among those seeking food assistance. Nearly 47 percent of those responding said they had fair or poor health. It found that 58 percent of households had a member with high blood pressure and 38 percent had a member with diabetes. Some 29 percent of households reported that no member had access to health insurance, including Medicare and Medicaid.

According to the survey 39 percent of respondent households include at least one child, a higher rate than the general population (32 percent). Six percent reported both children and seniors living in the same household.

Significantly, the study found that 54 percent of households had at least one member who was employed in the past year. The rate is even higher for households with children, 71 percent. In addition, many households reported members with education beyond high school, including some with two- and four-year college degrees. About 21 percent reported attending or

graduating from college.

Some 43 percent of Feeding American clients are white. Twenty-six percent are African American and 20 percent Latino. Nearly 15 percent of client households are multi-racial.

Requests for food assistance are up even for those serving in the US military, the employer of last resort for many working-class youth. The study found that almost 620,000 households enrolled in Feeding America programs had at least one family member currently in the US military. That figure amounts to 25 percent of all US military households.

Another striking statistic contained in the report relates to the large numbers of college students seeking food assistance. According to report, 10 percent of adult aid recipients are students, including two million full-time and one million part-time students. About two million Feeding America clients are students attending school full-time.

Burdened with crushing loads of student debt and unable to find decent paying work, many college students are turning to food pantries. In fact more and more colleges and universities have opened food pantries in response to growing problem of food insecurity among students.

Hunger inhibits learning in many ways, by reducing concentration and inhibiting the ability to retain material. Some students even have to forego purchasing course textbooks in order to pay for food.

According to researchers at Oregon State University, 59 percent of the students at Western Oregon University, a liberal arts college located in Monmouth, Oregon, are food insecure. A 2011 survey at the City University of New York found that 39.2 percent of the system's 250,000 undergraduates had experienced food insecurity at some time in the past year.

Between 2007 and 2011 the number of food stamp recipients holding doctoral degrees tripled, according to a report in the 2012 *Chronicle of Higher Education*. At Michigan State University the on-campus food pantry reports that more than 50 percent of its clients are graduate students.

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