

Need for food assistance rising in US despite claims of recovery

Shannon Jones
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Demand is rising at US food banks despite a falling official unemployment rate and claims of an economic recovery.

According to a report in the Associated Press, the Feeding America food bank network expects to give away 4 billion pounds of food this year, twice the amount they gave away one decade ago. Feeding America distributed 3.8 billion pounds in 2014.

The decline in the unemployment rate obscures the fact that many people have dropped out of the work force and others are struggling to make ends meet with part-time work on poverty-level wages. The hunger crisis has been compounded by drastic cuts in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly referred to as food stamps. Both Republicans and Democrats have joined together to slash billions from SNAP over the last two years.

According to the US Department of Labor, wages and salaries only increased by 0.2 percent in the second quarter of 2015. It followed a tiny 0.7 percent increase in the first quarter.

Food banks all across the United States report rising demand. According to a report by CBS , Sacramento Food Bank gave out more than 11 million pounds of food to the local community in 2014, almost double the amount from the year before. “The numbers have gone up dramatically in the last few years,” spokesman Kelly Siefkin said. “We have been increased just in probably the last couple of years probably three-fold.”

The Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger reports that a survey of its 700 food providers found that nine out of 10 either ran out of food or had to provide less to clients during the past year. It reported that one out of four people in the area faced a time where they did not know where to find the next meal. “That’s startling,” said Tom Mahon, the group’s

communication director. “It just reinforced to us that we really can’t rely solely on food pantries and soup kitchens, and other charitable organizations, to bring an end to hunger in our region.”

In a press release, the coalition says it found 58 percent of the surveyed feeding programs see more people now than a year ago, while another 34 percent report a steady demand. Mahon says less than five percent report a drop in need.

Jim Conwell, communications director for the Illinois Hunger Coalition, told the WSWs, “What we have seen in Cook County (greater Chicago) is that need is not going down by any significant level. We reached a high in 2012-2013 and it has not receded. That is troubling to us.

“I think it is important for people to know that while things may appear to be better, the recession has not ended for the most vulnerable. A return to work is not necessarily a return to stability.

“The economic recovery hasn’t affected all families. Even those who have returned to work may not be working full-time or earning enough to make ends meet. The people we are seeing are making difficult choices between having food and paying for other necessities. Even a household that has a job, or multiple jobs, is making difficult choices in order to survive.

“We know anecdotally that the SNAP cuts were another big setback for struggling households.

“Children are being disproportionately affected by food insecurity. Overall one in six or one in seven face food insecurity while for children it is one in five. Child hunger is devastating for the individual child as well as the community.”

According to information supplied to the WSWs by the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, which serves residents of both Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Detroit, Michigan,

July was the busiest month in 16 years.

Colleen Crain, Capuchin's PR director, said, "5,100 families were served in July. We do not know if this is because of a larger demand or our new shoppers' choice format.

"Our Capuchin Community Services' food pantry numbers are up for 2015. Typically 1,400-1,600 individuals would be served in one month. Since February, those numbers are consistently up by approximately 300 per month with 1,800-1,900 people being served."

She noted that the organization's hot meal service always sees an increase in the summer months due to children being out of school and hence not receiving free or subsidized meals. "However, our executive director has noted that he has seen many new faces since May," she added.

A report, *Baby Boomers and Beyond: Facing Hunger after 50*, released this year by Feeding America, documents the struggles of older workers who seek charitable food assistance. According to the report, 13 million adults aged 50 and over use the Feeding America network. Each year 60 percent of client households say they face a trade-off between food and utilities and 63 percent say they face a trade-off between food and receiving medical care. The rate of household food insecurity among client households with a member aged 50 and older is 81 percent.

In an effort to deal with food insecurity, 77 percent of client households resort to buying cheap, unhealthy food, while 29 percent report selling or pawning personal property.

Two-thirds of respondents ages 50 to 64 had not been employed in the past year. 73 percent indicated poor health and disability as the reason. 28 percent reported searching for work in the past four weeks. Another 67 percent said they lived in a household with an annual income of less than \$20,000.



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