

# Food banks face supply and volunteer shortages as mass hunger rises in the US

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Food banks in the United States are facing a crisis of epic proportions as tens of millions of people across the country are finding themselves in need of aid from food pantries and soup kitchens to stave off hunger. The coronavirus pandemic has brought alongside it a staggering rise in joblessness and wage reductions, driving underfunded charitable food services to the brink due to the explosion in need.

In scenes that recall the long breadlines during the great depression of the 1930s, millions over the past month have been compelled to wait in massive line ups and drive-through food banks to seek emergency food assistance. Major cities such as San Antonio, Las Vegas and Cleveland are witnessing lines up to six miles long at pop-up distribution points, where thousands of recently furloughed and unemployed people are waiting hours for grocery boxes. Now, the shortening of food supplies in food banks is bringing a significant portion of the American population face to face with the very real prospect of starvation.

Demand for food aid is growing against the backdrop of an unprecedented economic and health care crisis. In the United States, the death toll from COVID-19 accounts for more than one-quarter of the global total, surpassing 61,000, and is poised to climb to more than 70,000 next week. US infections have now reached over 1 million, one-third of all infections worldwide.

Since late March, over 27 million people filed unemployment claims, on top of 7 million that had already been unemployed. This is a significant undercount of the number now out of work, with millions ineligible to file since they are independent contractors or undocumented immigrants.

The corporate and financial oligarchy, along with the media and political establishment is exploiting the widespread social suffering sparked by the virus' spread in a reckless effort to compel workers to risk their lives going back to work under conditions in which the pandemic is showing no signs of slowing down. Health experts have warned that a hasty return to work will result in a second wave, which could cause a return to nationwide lockdowns and business closures on an even greater scale, not to mention an acceleration of the already skyrocketing death toll.

Under the current conditions, Feeding America, which is one of the largest non-profit food bank organizations in the US, is already struggling to maintain its supplies. According to Chief Operating Officer Katie Fitzgerald, its food banks are seeing a 40 percent increase in demand. Officials for the organization are reporting that they are fielding double to quadruple the number of requests for assistance than they have normally had to deal with.

In an interview with CNN earlier this month, Fitzgerald said her

organization has suffered a "significant and fast plummet" of meal lending from their retail and supermarket partners. Its donations from food manufacturers total 580 million meals and their inventory has dropped by over half just this month. Due to the decline in donations, Feeding America and many other non-profits have turned to purchasing supplies directly from food manufacturers and distributors, but this may take up to four weeks to reach the hundreds of food banks in the organization's network.

Inventories for food banks depend mostly on donations from giant supermarket conglomerates such as Walmart and Kroger. But due to the rise of purchases from consumers, supplies for food banks are beginning to diminish rapidly as shelves in retail and grocery stores go empty. As a result, deliveries to food pantries have been vastly reduced, making it nearly impossible to accommodate the flood of newly unemployed clients

Fitzgerald raised concern over the possibility that food banks will not have enough in their stock to feed the growing surge of hunger-stricken people, some of whom are members of the middle class who have never had to use such services. According to one Pennsylvania-based distributor, which supplies more than 40 food banks in the state, the wholesale cost of rice alone has almost tripled and more will not be available until June.

Vast sections of the working population have sought meal assistance over the last two months. At pantries in Silicon Valley, home to 74 billionaires, the demand for food has increased by over 50 percent each week. First-timers at these services have ranged from security and cafeteria staff furloughed by tech companies, to teachers and restaurant workers, accounting for half of those needing food. Even more affluent individuals have been forced to seek relief. One operator of Nevada's Three Square food bank said, "when you see a Lexus in line at 4 a.m. prepared to wait six hours, you know there's a real need," in reference to drivers in luxury vehicles queueing for food boxes.

Earlier this month in San Antonio, Texas, a jaw-dropping 10,000 people showed up in their cars to a food distribution drive-through service. The center usually saw 400 people before the pandemic occurred. Much of the semi-truck loads of food were handed out to newly laid-off hospitality staff whose last paycheck had been exhausted, according to the president of the food bank.

On top of dwindling supplies, food banks are confronting a shortage of personnel. Food banks rely on roughly 2 million volunteers to assist in packing and distribution. Most of these individuals are elderly people who are especially vulnerable to getting sick due to coronavirus and have been forced to stay home. This has been the case for communities across the country that have been crushed by rising

demand but with minimal hands to process foods. Social distancing regulations have also made it even more difficult for volunteers to coordinate and distribute food to clients

In the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, the number of volunteers dropped dramatically at the initial outbreak, in large part because of statewide social distancing guidelines—which require that workers remain six feet apart—and regular staffers staying home either to self-quarantine or out of fear of contracting COVID-19.

This sudden explosion in need comes under conditions where hunger was already a persistent problem for Americans. A Department of Agriculture report released last year found that 37 million people in the United States were affected by hunger issues at some point in 2018. Households with children are also more likely to experience food insecurity and these households rely heavily on food banks and similar hunger-relief institutions. In 2019, an estimated 40 million Americans received free meals or groceries through a network of 200 food banks and 60,000 pantries, schools, soup kitchens and shelters, according to Feeding America. The majority of these meals were typically given to the working poor, elderly and disabled.

Even as the need grows, food banks across the country have started to close down because of the decrease in volunteer staffing, or they are incapable of acquiring sufficient cleaning supplies to keep work conditions safe. Nearly a third of food pantries nationally have closed in recent weeks, according to the New York City Mission Society. Small food banks in New York City, which has over 162,000 cases of COVID-19 and 12,000 deaths, have closed due to shortages of both volunteers and food.

California, New Jersey, Texas and Washington, DC have seen their food banks shuttered in response to insufficient donations. In Washington, Capital Area Food Bank saw a decrease of 75 percent in donations after just one week. CEO of the organization, Radha Muthiah, told CNBC that the speed of the virus' spread did not give the non-profit enough time to anticipate the dramatic rise of needy clients. "What typically would take us eight to 12 days once we placed an order for a truckload of food can take up to eight weeks for our food supply to arrive," Muthiah reported.

In New Jersey, Community Food Bank, the state's largest nonprofit, lost about 800,000 pounds of bulk food donations in March and April. In Pennsylvania, food banks are spending an extra \$1 million a week but are still turning hungry families away. As a testament to the anarchy of capitalist production, food shortages through non-profits have occurred while dairy farms and producers are dumping millions of dollars' worth of milk into the ground due to the collapse of traditional dairy markets, and poultry farmers are euthanizing chickens and smashing eggs by the tens of thousands.

Grace Klein Community, which operates a pantry service in Birmingham, Alabama, is reporting that it projects to go \$3.6 million over budget by August as food clientele and utility costs—electricity, cleaning materials, boxes and overtime—have tripled. Lisa Scales, president of a Pittsburgh food bank, indicated the money spent on food alone has tripled, warning "with so many businesses shutting, we're concerned community donations won't sustain this level."

Fifty-five out of the 550 feeding programs to which Second Harvest, a food bank based in Central Florida, provides food have already shut down due to staffing shortages. In Florida, coronavirus cases have now surpassed 32,000, making it the eighth largest hotspot in the country. The number of Floridians needing assistance has ballooned over the past month as a result of increasing joblessness and the particular difficulty which workers in the state face in getting access

to unemployment payments. Second Harvest's local interactive map that shows food locations is now getting 1,200 clicks a day, which is up from 35 before the pandemic began.

While hundreds of thousands have submitted jobless claims in the state, a large percentage has still yet to see either a stimulus check or unemployment benefits, forcing many into food banks. The Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) released data showing that, as of last Friday, one in four jobless Florida workers got their claim denied by the state. By Sunday, that number had increased to 40.3 percent. As of Sunday evening, more than 263,000 Florida residents had their claims ruled "ineligible" by the DEO. This is the reality for millions all across the US left without any form of income and still waiting for their much hyped \$1,200 stimulus check.

Second Harvest food bank, which is based in Orlando, has been forced to double its meal distributions to 280,000 a day. Donations from local retailers to the organization have dropped to near zero and have forced the non-profit to purchase \$350,000 worth of groceries instead of \$85,000 for a three-week supply. Organizations like Second Harvest have had to rely on the infusion of supplies from the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program. The federal program, which provides aid to organizations throughout the US, has received just \$850 million in two recent congressional stimulus packages, a pittance compared to the trillion-dollar bailouts for the major corporations and banks.

Many food banks, including Second Harvest, have yet to receive any emergency funding authorized by the EFAP, which has caused major alarm that food supplies may begin to drastically diminish in the next few weeks. After noting that some pantries have been forced to turn away hungry and desperate people, the CEO of Second Harvest, Dave Krepcho, told CNN "my concern is that we will see food and funding dwindle" and that the "level of service would diminish considerably." He warned that tens of thousands of people in the Central Florida area will be placed in a situation where they will have no access to food.

In Louisiana, which has been another major hotspot of the pandemic's spread, at least one in three people are at risk of hunger, compared with one in five before this crisis, according to Natalie Jayroe, president of South Harvest food bank. "We think it will conservatively cost us \$15m for six months," she revealed in an interview with the *Guardian*. "In south Louisiana, we've been through our share of disasters but this is different."



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