

New Jersey projected to face disproportionate growth in food insecurity

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New Jersey, the US state with the second-highest median income, is projected to experience a disproportionate growth in food insecurity because of the pandemic. The number of New Jersey residents facing food insecurity will increase by 56 percent this year, according to a report published by the Community Food Bank of New Jersey. If this prediction is confirmed, then the number of food-insecure residents will surpass 1.2 million, which represents a staggering 13.5 percent of the state's population.

New Jersey's projected increase in food insecurity will be 10 percentage points greater than that projected for the country overall, according to the report. It also will be 11 percentage points greater than the projected increases in Pennsylvania and New York and 15 percentage points greater than the projected increase in Delaware.

"In less than a year, COVID-19 is erasing nearly a decade of advancement towards food security in New Jersey and nationwide," Carlos Rodriguez, president and CEO of the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, said in a press release. "It's clear from the data presented in this report that no part of our state will be spared from the pandemic's effects on hunger."

Based on an analysis by Feeding America, a nonprofit network of food banks, the report provides further evidence of the complete inability of capitalism to protect workers from the health and economic effects of the pandemic. On the contrary, the Democrats and Republicans are pursuing a de facto herd immunity policy that will result in more infections and deaths.

The report defines food insecurity as "the lack of consistent access to adequate food to sustain an active, healthy life." Research indicates that the rate of food insecurity depends on income, poverty, unemployment and homeownership. Unemployment generally is a

leading indicator of food insecurity, and the report's projections about food insecurity in New Jersey are based on the unprecedented increase in unemployment that has resulted from the pandemic. In August, the most recent month for which data are available, the official unemployment rate for New Jersey was 10.9 percent, compared with 8.4 percent for the nation. Both rates are doubtless vast underestimations.

New Jersey's children will bear a disproportionate burden of food insecurity. The increase among the state's children will be 75 percent, according to the report, which is 14 percentage points higher than the projected increase among the country's children. For comparison, increases in neighboring states will range from 48 percent to 58 percent. An astounding 19.7 percent of children in New Jersey, or nearly one in five, will experience food insecurity this year, the report projects.

The rate of food insecurity varies among the state's counties and tends to be higher in the poorer southern counties. Atlantic County, for example, is projected to have the highest rate: 18.2 percent. The next highest will be the southern counties of Cape May (17.9 percent) and Cumberland (17.7 percent).

Essex County is projected to have 137,830 food-insecure residents, the highest number of any county. This county encompasses Newark, East Orange and Irvington, which are some of New Jersey's poorest cities. Hudson County, which encompasses the poor cities of Jersey City and Union City, is projected to have the second-highest number of food-insecure residents.

As at the state level, the county-level rates of child food insecurity are projected to be worse than the overall rates. Cape May County is projected to have the highest child food insecurity rate (an incredible 29.9

percent), followed by Atlantic County (29.7 percent) and Cumberland County (27.0 percent). But Essex County is projected to have the highest number of food insecure children: 44,790.

The pandemic has caused acute hardship for workers in the leisure, hospitality and service industries, who are especially vulnerable to food insecurity. Atlantic County, which is projected to have the highest rate of food insecurity among New Jersey's counties, includes Atlantic City, which relies heavily on its casinos and hotels for revenue. During the height of the first wave of the pandemic in April, food lines stretched for as long as a mile in that county.

Atlantic City has long-standing economic problems. Partly because of new competition from casinos in Connecticut and the Philadelphia area, tourism began declining in Atlantic City decades ago. Since 1990, five of the city's 15 casinos have closed, including four in 2014, causing a sharp decrease in tax revenues.

The state government seized upon this development as a pretext for a renewed, bipartisan assault on the working class. Despite voters' opposition, Republican then-Governor Chris Christie, backed by a legislature controlled by the Democrats, began a state takeover of Atlantic City's government in November 2016. The state assumed the right to overturn the city council's decisions, eliminate city agencies and seize and sell assets. The takeover also gave overseers the ability to fire workers, break union contracts and restructure the city's debt. Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, who campaigned on ending the takeover, announced in 2019 that he would leave it in place for its full five-year term, which ends in late 2021.

Although Atlantic County may experience it most acutely, food insecurity will affect the whole state to an unprecedented degree. During the Great Recession, New Jersey's highest level of food insecurity was 12.3 percent, which is lower than the 13.5 percent projected for 2020. Food insecurity did not peak in the state until two years after the Great Recession of 2008 began, and it did not return to pre-recession levels until nearly a decade after the recession ended. Hence, the long food lines of the past spring likely were a mere foretaste of what is to come.

This social disaster is not the inevitable result of the pandemic, but the shameful product of a government and social system that, at the state and federal levels,

subordinate human health and dignity to the interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy. Murphy, a multimillionaire and former leading executive at Goldman Sachs, represents the interests of finance capital—the same social layer of which President Donald Trump is particularly brutal and noxious expression.

Both the Democrats and Republicans, in Trenton and Washington alike, are united in insisting that big business be prioritized over the interests of the working class. Through its criminal response to the pandemic, letting the virus spread for the sake of an unscientific “herd immunity,” the ruling class has demonstrated that it has no right to exercise power. The working class must reorganize society along the lines of social need—including the need to contain and eradicate the pandemic—rather than private profit.



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