

Missouri residents confront growing joblessness, hunger, evictions

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As throughout the United States, the coronavirus pandemic is ravaging the population of the state of Missouri. Hunger, unemployment and homelessness reached record levels in 2020, while the total wealth of US billionaires soared by over \$1 trillion in the first nine months of the year. The already threadbare social welfare system in the state is leaving thousands of people unable to receive needed assistance.

Food banks have been relying on CARES Act funds to be able to purchase food to serve their communities. For example, Douglass Community Services in Hannibal—a city in northeastern Missouri that was the boyhood home of famed author Mark Twain—received its last CARES Act check at the start of November. That month they were able to purchase about \$7,000 worth of food, only enough to feed area residents for one month. The food bank supplies individuals with three to five days of food at a time.

Stacey Nicholas, Douglass Community Services community outreach initiatives director, said that they have been forced to rely upon local donations. “We rely on those local funders because the heart of it is, we can’t wait for someone in Washington D.C. or Jefferson City to come to northeast Missouri and save us. We have to save ourselves.”

Indeed, help from the federal government is paltry. The recently passed \$900 billion coronavirus relief package will do little to address growing hunger in the United States. America is experiencing the worst levels of hunger since 1998, when the Census Bureau began compiling data about household food insecurity.

Missouri’s hunger statistics are damning. One in six children doesn’t get enough to eat each day, and over 1 million residents got help from a food bank or food pantry in 2019. The St. Louis Area Foodbank has distributed over 40 million meals since March 16, and reported a 46 percent increase in requests for assistance in 2020.

President and CEO of the food bank Meredith Knopp said that the organization conducted surveys that showed that 70 percent of people utilizing the food bank in 2020 were seeking help for the first time. Kansas City food bank Harvesters has reported a 40 percent increase in need this year.

In southeast Missouri, SEMO Food Bank reported that there has been a 40 percent increase of people in need this year. “So far this year, we’ve spent over twice as much as we’ve spent for all of 2019 in purchasing food so, we’re still seeing a number of families who are trying to recover, really, from that initial shock or that initial loss of jobs whenever the pandemic began,” said SEMO Food Bank Chief Advancement Officer Lisa Church.

Mass unemployment and the miserable levels of state aid available are sowing increasing devastation throughout the region. In the neighboring state of Kansas, the unemployed are having to wait weeks or months to receive unemployment benefits, according to a report in the Associated Press. The state government has blamed the slow distribution of funds on technology issues, pointing to its 40-year-old computer system that handles jobless aid. For Kansas workers, unemployment benefits received through three federal assistance programs—Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (PEUC), Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and the CARES Act—were cut off on December 26.

Unemployment levels are disastrous. The pandemic has set the Missouri economy back by 20 years in terms of growth of the workforce. October unemployment was at 2.98 million, a number not seen since October 2000.

Similar to the state unemployment system, Missouri’s maze-like food aid system is difficult to successfully navigate. After an initial application is filed, an applicant must be interviewed by a case worker. Due to the pandemic, these interviews have been moved from the Missouri Department of Social Services to a state call

center. People have reported being unable to get through to a case worker for weeks. The problem is pervasive enough that legal nonprofits are stepping in and advocating for clients to the call center. Katherine Holley, a lawyer who works with Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “We’ve been working on issues related to the call center for years. Since COVID, we’re seeing huge problems. ... Because of the sheer need, I don’t think it’s staffed enough to handle all the calls.”

Little in assistance for those who cannot afford to pay rent is being offered. In December, the Missouri Emergency Rental Arrears Program was announced. ERAP will only provide a one-time payment to landlords to cover rent for up to six months of lateness dating back to April 1, 2020. The ERAP covers rent only, not utilities or fees. The eviction moratorium in St. Louis City has been extended only through January 31.

Tenants at risk of eviction are often unable to present evidence of misconduct on the part of landlords in online eviction hearings, according to a report in the *Missouri Independent*. Courthouses aren’t allowing tenants to submit evidence exhibits in person, nor are they providing assistance if the tenant does not have video capabilities for hearings, leaving them at risk of being unable to defend themselves against being unfairly evicted. In general, many tenants are unable to acquire legal representation in eviction hearings. The National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel found that while 90 percent of landlords have legal aid access during the eviction process, only 1 percent of tenants do.

In Fenton, a St. Louis suburb, in December, Hannah McGee’s front door was illegally removed by her landlord after she fell two months behind on her rent due to losing her job. This behavior has become increasingly common in 2020.

Attorney Rob Swearingen told a local Fox News affiliate, “We try to call landlords and inform them that they’re violating the law by illegally evicting people. You can only be evicted by a court order and with the sheriff present executing an eviction and right now that can’t be done in St. Louis City and St. Louis County. The landlord needs to realize that the landlord has committed a tort and is liable for anything that happens to this tenant, it’s more than negligence, it’s intentional infliction of emotional distress, it’s a violation of Missouri statutes and its unlawful eviction.”

Jobs continue to hemorrhage through business closures and layoffs. Restaurants, particularly in the metro areas

where indoor dining bans have been enforced, are closing as they have received little or no federal assistance to stay in business. Recently announced Missouri layoffs include Butterball, the poultry products company, where 450 workers will be cut from its Carthage processing plant. Ninety-five employees (mainly emergency assistance vehicle drivers) for AAA Motor Club’s Hazelwood office, in the St. Louis suburbs, are set to be laid off. Insurance firm State Farm will close its Earth City office January 31, laying off 111 employees. Department store chain J.C. Penney will close its West Plains location by late March.

As elsewhere, the traumatic events of 2020 have taken a tragic toll on the most vulnerable among Missouri’s youth. In the space of two weeks in December in the Springfield area, two boys, one in middle school and one in high school, committed suicide. The middle school student, 13-year-old Jake Johnston, took his life inside the school building.

At the same time, more and more children and young people are slipping past whatever remains of the social safety net. An *Education Week* article exposed the fact that 1.5 million children have become homeless in the US in 2020, and 423,000 of them haven’t been accounted for by their schools.

According to Melissa Douglas, homeless liaison in Kansas City, Missouri, 350 of the 800 homeless students in her district have fallen out of contact. One hundred of these youth are unaccompanied, but Douglas was only able to locate 17 of that group. She told *Education Week*, “It’s super difficult. We’re just trying to see where families have landed because as a district, we are missing kids and they have not shown up electronically anywhere. So you’re trying to find out are they in a different district? Are they just not logging on? ‘Where are they?’ is just the question that’s being asked all the time.”



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