

Poverty in Germany: Food banks count 2 million people seeking help

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22 July 2022

Social inequality in Germany continues to rise at an alarming rate. As a result of the pandemic, war and high inflation, the official poverty rate climbed to 16.6 percent last year, which corresponds to 13.8 million people living in poverty. This means that for ever more people—the unemployed, single parents, low-wage workers, poor pensioners—they no longer have the resources to live on.

This is further expressed in the record numbers of people lining up at the food banks for donations.

Last Thursday, July 14, the chairman of the federal food bank umbrella organization Tafel Deutschland, Jochen Brühl, warned that the food banks would soon no longer be able to cope with the onslaught. As a result of inflation, the pandemic and, since the beginning of the year, the effects of war, demand from people in need has skyrocketed. The number of customers has increased by half and reached a new record high, he said. According to Brühl, well over 2 million people affected by poverty are now taking advantage of free food services, more than ever before.

“The food banks are at their limit and report to us that many people are coming to them who have previously managed to make ends meet and need help for the first time,” Brühl said. Since the food banks can barely, or no longer can, meet the demand, every third food bank has had to stop accepting entrants, according to his data. There is a shortage of food and volunteers to help everyone who asks for support.

Tafel Deutschland surveyed 962 of its member food banks in June and July, 603 of which responded. According to the results, 60 percent of the food banks have seen their customer load increase by up to 50 percent since the beginning of the year. Just under a quarter (22.6 percent) of respondents said they were now supporting 50 to 100 percent more people than

before. At 16 percent of the food banks, the number of people seeking help had doubled or more than doubled.

Food banks are a voluntary service and Tafel Deutschland is a non-profit association. The food banks originally came into being with the aim of countering food waste and supporting people affected by poverty by distributing food free, or almost free, of charge. The money thus saved was intended to enable them to afford other urgently needed items. In order to receive support from a food bank, one must register and prove one’s need, for example by a receipt of social assistance (Hartz IV).

As poverty in Germany has increased over the past 15 to 20 years, the number of food banks has also risen. The Hartz reforms of the 1998–2005 coalition government—Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens—provided a particularly strong impetus for this development. They ensured the introduction and expansion of a huge low-wage sector with the introduction of Hartz IV as a subsistence minimum, which in reality was never sufficient and came with a sanctions scheme to put unemployed people under pressure. Both Hartz IV recipients and low-wage workers often have to resort to the food banks to get by.

The dramatic rise in inflation has exacerbated this development and plunged countless working households into poverty and hardship. The “profits before lives” policy of all governments in the coronavirus pandemic, which has already caused millions of deaths worldwide, has accelerated this misery. Inflation is the result of trillion-dollar government giveaways to banks and corporations and the NATO offensive against Russia. At the same time, the vast sums spent on armaments and war are being recouped through cuts in education, health and social services.

Since the beginning of the US/NATO proxy war against Russia, Ukrainian refugees are also increasingly approaching food banks. In this context, the food bank association criticizes the state authorities for passing off their own tasks to the food banks. “It is irresponsible when authorities send people to a food bank without even inquiring whether the food bank can accept new customers,” Brühl said. “That all people in Germany have enough to eat and drink must be guaranteed by the state, not by volunteers.”

But the principle that the state should care for people in need has not applied in Germany for a long time. This fall, millions of people will not be able to afford the doubling and tripling of heating and electricity bills. This will result in many people having their electricity and heating cut and being threatened with the loss of their homes because they can no longer afford to pay rent and utilities.

The Federal Statistical Office recently presented data for the first time for a subset of homeless people in Germany who live in emergency and shared shelters or temporary quarters. The office counted 178,000 of them. Tagesschau.de reported on July 14 that more than one-third of these people are “younger than 25, just under 5 percent 65 or older.” “Families or single parents with children make up 46 percent of the cases.”

Not included in these statistics are “homeless people staying with friends, families or acquaintances, and homeless people living on the streets. Cases of refugees were only included if they had been granted asylum and were accommodated through the emergency housing assistance system.”

The German National Association for Homeless Assistance estimates the number of homeless people in Germany at about 233,000, a figure that in reality could be many times higher.

The *Berliner Zeitung* reported on June 21 the enormous rush on food banks of those in need. Just in Berlin there are 47 distribution points of Laib und Seele, a partner association of the Berlin Food Bank. One of their distribution points is located in front of the fan club of the Union Berlin soccer team. People lining up for food arrive in the mornings, some even in the early morning hours.

The report quotes a customer who has the number 90 and has been standing in the parking lot since around 10 a.m. “If I’m lucky, I’ll be home by 4 p.m.,” he

says. Another with health problems brought a stool because he can’t stand that long. An image shows people lining up in multiple rows to receive food for a contribution of €1.50 and proof of poverty.



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