

Thanksgiving in America: The voices of the hungry on the holiday

Our reporters

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WSWS reporters spoke with workers and youth who visited food pantries, as well as administrators of the programs, on the eve of the annual Thanksgiving holiday. Under conditions of soaring inflation, shortages and the winding up of pandemic relief programs, hunger and homelessness are on the rise across the US.

Washington D.C.

The Washington D.C. area is experiencing a crisis of families that have struggled to support themselves throughout the pandemic and especially over the past year.

“We will soon pass the peak of the pandemic,” said Charles Meng of the Arlington Food Assistance Center in a recent comment to a local CBS affiliate. According to the news outlet, the center, located in Arlington, a Northern Virginia suburb of the nation’s capital, served 17,000 people in 2020 and is now experiencing the highest levels of need in its 34-year history.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Bartemio, a day laborer in Northern Virginia, at the Springfield Garden Franconia Family Resources Center in Springfield, some 10 miles from Arlington.

“Things are very hard right now,” said Bartemio, one of many people in Springfield who rely on the services provided by the center. Bartemio said he was receiving “lots of help” from the facility, having recently struggled with a serious illness.

“I’m not working this year,” he said. “I may go and apply for a day laborer job once a week. When I work for companies, I will work for three days in a row before becoming too sick and needing to go home.”

He explained that he relied on his family, in addition to the center, to get by.

Kimberly Peña, the center’s program manager, told the WSWS that the field office was well known and accessible

to families throughout the region. She said it served roughly 60 to 70 working families, assisting them in areas such as “food distribution and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP, more generally known as food stamps], as well as applying for Medicaid and Medicare.”

She explained that due to language barriers within the immigrant community, many individuals relied on the center’s staff for help applying to receive aid and find employment. The field office also provided anti-gang programming, such as “after school services, nutrition and field trips” to help low income youth.

Peña said the service had seen a rise in need during the week of Thanksgiving, with the center giving out its weekly average of groceries in a single day.

“This is happening because of corporate greed,” said Kate, a local public school teacher who also spoke with WSWS reporters. “This is impacting my students,” she added, estimating that “35 percent of kids at my school are on free lunch.”

Speaking about her experiences as a teacher, she said, “We have a social worker that we split with another school. They recently reduced their workload. Before we had to split them with five different schools. When people [in government] make budgets, considerations for the social-emotional needs of children aren’t their highest concern.”

“The price of living impacts a lot of people because their jobs aren’t paying them enough,” said Jaden, a local high school student.

“With groceries being so expensive, we have significantly cut back on a lot of things, one of the main things being meat,” said Carly, a college student. “We now rely on a lot of produce and meat substitutions such as tofu, which is a lot cheaper.”

Carly went on to say, “We have applied for government assistance with food stamps, due to me working a minimum wage job while my partner is a full-time student and cannot be working.” While this helped for “the cost of food,” it did not help provide payment for other bills, including “things such as electricity and gas for my own car getting back and

forth from work and school.”

Chicago

In Chicago and the Midwest, food costs have surged. Food banks and pantries have been overwhelmed by demand for help while surging food costs have reduced the amount of donations coming in to pantries. Currently, at least one in six people in Illinois relies on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Willow Creek Care Center, a food pantry in the Chicago suburb of South Barrington, has reported a 54 percent increase in demand for food assistance. The facility reported giving 900 people groceries for a week, costing between \$150 and \$250.

Greg Trotter, a director at Nourishing Hope food pantries, reported that the number of people coming to their pantries increased by 42 percent from last year.

Carter, a worker at the Nourishing Hope facility in the Lakeview neighborhood, told the WSWS: “Our numbers have steadily increased and it is harder and harder to keep up with the demand. Every day our line gets longer and our food supplies diminish as well. We run out of meat, we run out of produce. We ran out of produce yesterday.

“We try not to ask about clients’ personal lives too much, but plenty of people who come in—we hear about their troubles. The sheer number of people we serve is proof of the impact of inflation on people’s lives.

“Our biggest day this year was Saturday, in the blistering cold. We served 231 households, with a total of 717 individuals, which is an insane number. We served more during the pandemic, but now we’re serving more food again. Then we didn’t have the choice option, which is the core of our food distribution, where clients get to choose what they want like a grocery store. It’s a bit more humane and feels like a grocery store.

“I hear a lot of our clients wouldn’t be able to get much food at all without our assistance. For plenty of people we don’t have an income limit. For some, it’s a supplementary thing. We also have a ready-to-eat option for our unhoused clients. Obviously, inflation has affected them the hardest. The one dollar you get from a passerby can’t afford you anything at all. It makes it pretty much impossible to live with inflation.”

Carter added, “I could go on for many hours about capitalism and its failures to provide any of the basic necessities for the population. It never really was able to.

“It’s a much more fundamental issue, just the fact that

people aren’t able to get food at all. Nobody needs a billion, let alone a million dollars. You can live on a lot less. The average salary of our clients is always below \$50,000, up to below the poverty line.”

Levar, a young worker, was one of many members of low income families lined up at the facility the day before Thanksgiving.

“I’ve been coming here to Lakeview Pantry for probably about six years,” he said. “I come here out of necessity for nourishment, for myself and my friends. I’m an artist and a mechanic. I build bikes for a living.

“Inflation has affected my cost of living pretty heavily. I come here to get food for me and my housemates. We make it stretch. Me personally, I try to get grains and veggies. We try to get healthy food. I take care of my friends, six people, many who are not able to function well in society. It’s my obligation as a human being to take care of the other person. That was me for many years.”

Brooklyn, New York

Jane, who picked up items from a food giveaway in Brooklyn and works cleaning apartments, told the WSWS: “The inflation is ridiculous, I can barely make ends meet. To rent an apartment is expensive. After rent, you barely have anything left to buy food, but we have to survive. I pay over \$1,000 for a one bedroom.

“We have had to cut down on a lot of things, can’t eat what we always ate before, can’t do as many things that we used to do before, just cutting down on everything.

“My work is not always stable. Each day I never know if someone is going to say, ‘Don’t come this week,’ and then I don’t have enough work to get by. Just last week, one of my clients lost her job so she could not afford to keep me on anymore... It happens all the time, so you never know how much you are going to go home with for the week.”

When asked about the billions spent on the war in Ukraine, Jane said, “It’s about time something changes. If they can spend all that money on war, you think they could build some apartments for us. Maybe even something we can own instead of having to pay rent.”



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