

Thanksgiving in America: End of pandemic social programs fuels rising hunger

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Across the United States, every metric used to measure inequality has registered a sharp rise in the last few years, a consequence of the ruling class's drive to make the working class pay for the mounting crisis of American imperialism.

Food insecurity rates across the country are higher than they were during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families are living day to day without sufficient sustenance at a higher rate than over the previous three years. Food insecurity rates in rural areas have risen faster than in metropolitan regions.

While the capitalist press readily reported President Biden's arrival at a billionaire's Nantucket estate for his Thanksgiving holiday, the conditions of want among growing sections of the American population have been largely ignored.

The primary cause of the rise in food insecurity and hunger is soaring food prices, exacerbated by cuts in federal social programs that had been expanded as part of the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency, which Biden ended last spring with the support of both capitalist parties.

Preliminary data for 2023 indicate that one of the drivers in the rise of poverty is the end of expanded pandemic emergency benefits, including child tax credits, food stamp allotments and free school meals. Now that such benefits have been cut back, while food inflation remains painfully high, food banks across the US are reporting a sharp rise in the public demand for assistance.

In a front-page article headlined "Demand Surges at Food Banks," the *Detroit News* on Saturday quoted Kristin Sokul at Gleaners Community Food Bank (serving Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Livingston and Monroe counties in Michigan) as saying that Gleaners had seen a 30 percent increase in requests for support

for the past year. A 2022 report by Michigan's Food Security Council estimated that 1 million state residents (out of a population of 10.1 million) faced food insecurity.

Increases in federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, food stamp) benefits during the pandemic emergency ended last March. More than 1.3 million Michigan residents lost SNAP benefits that month, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

In Texas, program director at the Brazos Valley Food Bank, Shannon Avila, told local television station KBTX3 that traffic had risen across all of the organization's branches. "So, 2021-2022, our pantries saw about a 20 percent increase in overall visitors," Avila said. "From 2022-2023, as projected to be by the end of the year, we're seeing a 17 percent increase, and from 2021-2023 that's a 41 percent increase in visitors to our food pantries that they're seeing every month, every day, every week."

Beth Burrell, communications director of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that her organization distributed 6 percent more food over the past three months than it did during the same time last year and served more meals than it did during the peak of the pandemic.

"Everything that we've been seeing in southwestern Pennsylvania has indicated exactly what, unfortunately, the report is showing," she said. "In [fiscal year] 2020, we distributed 40 million meals and in [fiscal year] 2023, we ended up distributing 42 million. It just goes to show that the need really isn't decreasing or even returning back to what it was."

The number of people living in food insecure households has seen the largest one-year increase since 2008. A report by the US Department of Agriculture

(USDA) found that an additional 10 million people were living without consistent access to food in 2022 compared to the previous year. This represents a 31 percent jump for the entire population and 44 percent for children alone.

The USDA's analysis paints a sobering picture of the extent and severity of food insecurity. The survey asked households about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity, such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals, or being hungry because of too little money for food.

An estimated 17 million American households reported difficulty finding food last year, according to the USDA report released in October. That was up from 13.5 million in 2021. Just 17 of 50 states have food insecurity rates lower than the national average of 11.2 percent.

As a whole, the working class has seen its grocery bills inflate, with food prices rising 11 percent over the past two years. Many working class and poor families also face food shortages, including those who live in so-called "food deserts," where the absence of proper supermarkets makes it difficult to obtain fresh produce.

The cessation of several core aspects of the expanded pandemic emergency safety net, from extra food assistance to automatic re-enrollment in Medicaid, has inevitably produced hardship and confusion among workers. The Census Bureau reported last year that COVID-19 relief efforts had significantly reduced childhood poverty, but now these programs are gone.

A number of programs gave Americans a lifeline during the height of the pandemic: The child tax credit was increased; unemployment benefits and food assistance were expanded; and a federal moratorium on evictions kept families sheltered even if they were unable to afford rent.

During the pandemic, all SNAP recipients had their benefits boosted through an Emergency Allotment program. According to a study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the average family started receiving about \$90 less per month in food stamps in March after the emergency program ended, although some households saw a monthly drop of as much as \$250.

Prior to the pandemic, people would regularly be cut from Medicaid if they started making too much money to qualify for the program, gained healthcare coverage

through their employer or moved to a new state. However, the federal government prohibited states from kicking people off Medicaid during the pandemic, even if they were no longer eligible.

Since March, dozens of states have launched extensive reviews of their Medicaid recipients, removing those deemed ineligible. The process could take up to a year to complete, although some states are moving faster than others. Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oklahoma and West Virginia are among the states aiming to begin removing ineligible Medicaid recipients as early as May.

Childcare has also been impacted by the end of pandemic programs. During the pandemic emergency, federal subsidies kept many childcare providers afloat. According to a report from First Focus on Children, an advocacy group, federal spending on children fell 16 percent between fiscal years 2022 and 2023.

The Century Foundation estimates that roughly 70,000 childcare programs will likely close after losing federal pandemic aid, which could cost families around \$9 billion a year in lost income as a result of parents reducing their working hours or leaving their jobs altogether.



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